

“Taking God Seriously”

Colossians 3:16-17, John 4:23-24

Dr. Jerry Nelson

www.soundliving.org

Psalm 100

“Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth.

Worship the LORD with gladness;

come before him with joyful songs.

Know that the LORD is God.

It is he who made us, and we are his;

we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving

and his courts with praise;

give thanks to him and praise his name.

For the LORD is good and his love endures forever;

his faithfulness continues through all generations.”

Notice that the Psalmist knows **why** he worships the Lord:

Know that the LORD is God.

It is he who made us, and we are his;

we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

And

For the LORD is good and his love endures forever;

his faithfulness continues through all generations.”

I want you to compare that with an older chorus that many of us have sung often:

I Will Enter His Gates

“I will enter his gates with thanksgiving in my heart,

I will enter his courts with praise.

I will say this is the day that the Lord has made,

I will rejoice for He has made me glad.

He has made me glad,

He has made me glad.

I will rejoice for he has made me glad.

He has made me glad,

He has made me glad.

I will rejoice for he has made me glad.”

What reasons does this chorus give us for worshipping the Lord?

The Lord made the day and he has made me glad.

Catchy, memorable, tune but it's quite anemic compared to the Psalm.

I want you to think with me today about worship.

I have seen the procession of thousands walking to the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City.

Far out of the city small bands of people walk together as they gather from nearby villages. And then as you get closer to the city those small bands join with others until it is a stream of people walking, singing, praying, and flying banners on their way to the Shrine.

I can only imagine what the Israelite's expectations were, three thousand years ago, as they walked for days to join the great procession leading into Jerusalem for the holy day festivals.

We arrive at our church in our cars at approximately the same time and individually or in family groups of 2 or more we merge with the larger group entering the place of worship.

What do we expect? Why are we here?

The best answer would be that we are here to worship our God together.

But do we?

I know from personal experience how hard it is to keep focused on Sunday morning.

- My mind wanders when others are leading me in prayer, my thoughts flit from one thing to another even as I sing familiar hymns, songs or choruses.
- I find it hard not to think about other things whenever the speaker isn't telling a compelling story.
- I even find it easy to recite creeds and read passages of scripture without even thinking about the words or the God they point me to.

This sermon on worship is part of a plan to speak for the next several weeks on the broader subject of our mission as a church.

Our mission, taken from Matthew 28 is “helping men and women become faithful followers of Jesus Christ.”

But that objective needs specificity if we are going to know more exactly what to do to accomplish it.

And so in these next weeks I wish to set forth an agenda for this church for the balance of this year and the next.

I am calling it “Gables, the Kingdom and 2005”

While there is much I won’t speak to, I wish to speak to several areas of ministry wherein I hope we can see great strides taken in these next months.

Today I am addressing the issue of worship and how worship is exercised in our public gatherings.

I am today setting before you a proposal that by the end of 2005 the preaching, Scripture, prayers **and music** be the same in all our services of worship.

The proposal is that there no longer be two or more so-called “styles” of worship at Southern Gables.

I am further proposing that we return to two worship services and only go to three again when we absolutely can’t fit anymore into the worship center.

These may not be the most savvy “church growth” moves to make but there are higher values than simply a larger attendance.

As much as possible, I wish for us to have enough in common as a people that we think and act as one church.

I neither wish to nor can make these changes arbitrarily.

These ideas will need the wisdom of the Elders and the cooperation of the staff and congregation but I want to open the dialog today.

If we made such a change and our services of worship were alike:

- What would worship look like? Would I like it?
- What songs would we sing? Hymns or choruses?
- What style would the music be? Traditional or Contemporary?

And my answer would be “yes!”

As you will hear in the next few minutes, I believe our worship is anemic if it is not built on at least two things:

- First of all, it must be built on the best of what has been learned and expressed in the past – the great hymns, and creeds and traditions of the church – the best of the best, distilled through generations of scrutiny and use.
- Secondly, our worship becomes anemic unless it is also built on fresh applications and expressions of God’s Word from the present.

I believe our worship is impoverished if we reject nearly everything not created in the last five years; if our worship is driven by what the contemporary Christian music industry says is the latest and greatest.

But I also believe our worship is impoverished if we reject everything created since 1870 or 1970.

What criteria do we use to make decisions about worship?

I wish to suggest several:

1st As self-evident as it is, it must still be said, “Worship services are primarily for worship – the worship of God.”

Some, even many, in our day push for church services to be more “seeker” friendly or even “seeker” driven.

They think of Sunday services as primarily “soul-saving” opportunities and are quite disturbed when the focus of the services is not evangelism.

But the model for Sunday morning gatherings is not a Billy Graham evangelistic rally (as important as those are) but the model for our Sunday time together is Acts 2:42 “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ **teaching** and to the **fellowship**, to **the breaking of bread** and to **prayer**.”

And yes, I do believe Sunday is the right day for worship.

It seems quite evident from the NT that the first day of the week, in celebration of the resurrection of our Lord, became the day of corporate Christian worship.

But back to the point, our Sunday gathering is not first of all an evangelistic service but a worship service.

I do mean that worship is contrary to evangelism because I know that authentic worship is a powerful witness.

The key however is, “authentic worship!”

Worship services are primarily about– the worship of God.”

2nd A second principle follows: In our worship, we will not target any audience but God himself.

For several years there has been a trend to tailor worship to meet the expectations of various age groups.

But I am arguing today for a principle that says worship will not be about Builders, Boomers, Busters or Millenials but about the people of God, of all ages, called Southern Gables.

Our worship will not be driven by what music or style or loudness or softness we like best, but it will be about what pleases our God.

Mark Horst wrote, *“As soon as we come to worship looking for and expecting an experience, we have violated the most basic principle of (worship). We easily become religious aesthetes capable of judging the entertainment value of a church service while remaining unaware of the reality it can open us to.*

Unfortunately for us, when our worship becomes self-conscious rather than God-conscious, it points not to God’s reality but (only to) our own.” (Mark Horst as quoted in Anderson p76)

One of my friends said, *“There are few places where our self-indulgence is more obviously seen than in our attitudes and words about public worship.”*

We want what we want when we want it in worship because the focus of our worship has become us rather than God.

We think of worship mostly or solely in terms of how it impacts us rather than how it impacts God.

I believe I was party to a strategic error in the direction of our worship 10 years ago.

It was **not** an error to attempt to bring change to our worship.

But I do believe it was an error to start a service that intentionally sought to cater to one or another particular age group.

I know there are good arguments for starting services tailored for Builders and other services for the young Millennials and still others for Boomers or Busters, but **I fear there is a message that comes through so loudly and clearly that it overrides all other considerations.**

Multiple styles of worship in the same church SHOUT that worship is about me – what I like, what fits me.

But worship is not about us, it is about God.

3rd A third principle is really a corollary of the second: The test of good worship is not how I feel but how God feels.

We live in an era that demands that WE must experience something or it isn't worship.

We come to church demanding that it make us feel something.

This is unfortunately true even when the demand is that "I want to feel something about God."

Worship in our popular evangelical sub-culture is sometimes expressed in ways that suggests it is some kind of mystical, out-of-body experience.

We think of worship in terms of what it does to us or what we are supposed to be feeling.

I remember too well the days of the song leader who used to tell us to sing louder, by leaning toward the audience and saying with a cheesy grin, "I can't hear you!"

I feel the same manipulation when it isn't called worship unless I close my eyes and sway to the music with my hands in the air.

Singing loudly, closing one's eyes, and/or swaying with one's hands in the air are not wrong, but they are not the essence of worship.

Dr. Don Carson of our own seminary wrote, *“If you seek the experience of worship you will not find it; if you seek to worship the living God, you will experience Him.”*

What does that mean?

It means we aren't trying to work people up into some kind of experience.

We want people to see God – to see him as he has revealed himself, to think about him, and then the response will be authentic and it will be as varied as we are.

Some suggest that just about anything goes in worship, that the Bible hasn't given us a prescription for worship.

But God takes worship very seriously.

The first four commandments are about the worship of God.

I. You shall have no other gods before me.

II. You shall not make for yourself an idol...

III. You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God...

IV. Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.

God warned of serious consequences to those who violated worship.

We often think of false worship only in terms of the idols of Hinduism or Paganism.

But the Israelites didn't think they were worshipping a different God when they made the golden calf and bowed to it.

They thought they were simply being creative in their worship of God. (Exodus 32; Cf. Lev 10 and 2 Chronicles 26)

The New Covenant, likewise, says that worship is serious business:

Hebrews 12:28-29 “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so **worship God acceptably with reverence and awe**, for our “God is a consuming fire.”

John Calvin wrote, “To debate about the mode in which men obtain salvation and say nothing about the mode in which God may be duly worshipped is to absurd.” (Selected

Works of John Calvin 3, 260)

We aren't worshipping worship, we are worshipping God and therefore we must know **that God** in order to worship him properly.

Kinzer wrote, "Worship is directed toward **Someone**... In order to know how to worship (God), we need to understand our relationship with him. We must understand who he is - his holiness, his greatness, his glory, his steadfast love and compassion... Therefore the key to better worship in a congregation is not necessarily more teaching on worship but clearer proclamation of who God is and what he has done for us in Christ... In scripture worship is **something** expressed, given, or shown." It is something quite specific expressed to a very specific God. (Kinzer: (in October 87 Pastoral Renewal)

Again I quote from John Calvin, "It is not very sound theology to confine a man's thoughts so much to himself, and not to set before him, as the prime motive of his existence, **zeal to illustrate the glory of God.** For we are born first of all for God, and not for ourselves." (John Calvin, Reply to Sadoletto , 58)

Worship that merely says over and over again, "I love you," "I worship you," or "I magnify you," without saying why is not worship.

I think Psalm 150:2 summarizes it well, "Praise him for **his acts of power**; praise him for **his surpassing greatness.**

The true test of worship is not how it makes us feel but how God feels – does he consider it worship that is worthy of who he is?

4th The fourth principle guiding our worship services will be that Preaching of the Word will be central.

And such preaching will be thoughtful exposition and explication of the word.

Paul wrote to Pastor Timothy, 2 Timothy 4:2-5 "**Preach the Word**; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage--with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.

In Nehemiah's day we read, Nehemiah 8:8 "They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read."

It is true that sermons should be true, clear, interesting and relevant but they must also be substantive.

We will not cater to the idea that people today cannot listen to intelligent speech, cannot understand the English language, cannot learn except through pictures or movies, and that everything must be a felt experience.

Kent Hughes in his book Disciplines of a Godly Man, which many of you have read, writes, "The unspoken but increasingly common assumption of today's Christendom is that worship is primarily for us – to meet our needs. Such worship services are entertainment focused, and the worshipers are uncommitted spectators who are silently grading the performance. From this perspective, preaching becomes a homiletics of consensus – preaching to felt needs – man's conscious agenda instead of God's. Such preaching is always topical and never textual. Biblical information is minimized, and the sermons are short and full of stories. Anything and everything that is suspected of making the marginal attendee uncomfortable is removed from the service, whether it be a registration card or a 'mere' creed. Taken to the nth degree, this philosophy instills a tragic self-centeredness. That is, everything is judged by how it affects (the person). This terribly corrupts one's theology." (Kent Hughes, Disciplines of a Godly Man, 106)

In biblical worship, preaching of the Word is central.

5th We will read significant portions of the Holy Scriptures as part of our worship.

This first text is descriptive.

Nehemiah 8:2- "Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly... (and) He read it aloud from daybreak till noon...in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law."

This second text is prescriptive.

1 Timothy 4:13 “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.

We will not succumb to a sound-byte culture.

Just as in a **pre-literate** culture the Bible had to be read aloud to meet the needs of the people, so in a **post-literate** culture, when people no longer are willing to read, the Bible needs to be read aloud so that we hear the Word of God.

6th We will continue to give our offerings as part of our corporate worship.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, 1 Corinthians 16:2 “On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income...”

We want to give opportunity for God’s people to publicly express their gratitude for God’s grace by giving sacrificially from God has given us.

7th We will pray as a significant part of our worship

In 1 Timothy 2:1 we read, “I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone-- ² for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.

Prayers will not be kept short to accommodate the short attention spans of people **nor** will they be inordinately long just to prove a point and lap over into vain repetitions.

Such prayers will often include adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication or petition.

8th We will learn from God’s people of the past through the creeds, confessions, hymns and writings that have enriched the church for centuries.

The Apostles used such material in the very writing of the New Testament.

We find them in several places such as Philippians 2 and 2 Timothy 2:11-13 “Here is a trustworthy saying:

If we died with him,
we will also live with him;
if we endure,
we will also reign with him.

If we disown him,
 he will also disown us;
 if we are faithless,
 he will remain faithful,
 for he cannot disown himself.

9th We will celebrate the Lord's Supper more frequently not as an add-on to what else is happening but as a central expression of the Gospel message on which our lives depend and for which our praise is greatest.

Luke 22:19 ""This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." Cf 1 Corinthians 11

A preacher cannot preach all the important themes and texts of the Bible over time and still fully address the cross and resurrection in every sermon.

Therefore, by celebrating communion more often we can more often focus our attention on that great central theme - the gospel.

10th Our songs will both teach doctrine and allow us to express our heartfelt emotion toward our God.

Any song will be judged not by how it makes us feel but by how well it expresses the great truths about our God **and** how well it allows us to thank our God for them.

I think the NASB translation of Colossians 3:16-17 captures an idea that is expressed throughout the rest of the Bible that **our music should do two things**, it should **teach** us and it should allow us to express our heartfelt **emotion** to God.

Colossians 3:16-17 NASB

"Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom **teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.** And whatever you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father."

Paul confirms this in 1 Corinthians 14:26 “When you come together, everyone has **a hymn**, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.”

In A.D. 111-112 the younger Pliny reported to Emperor Trajan that the Christians gathered and “recited an antiphonal **hymn to Christ as God.**” (In F.F. Bruce NICNT Colossians 158)

Tertullian, eighty years later, described the Christian gathering this way, “after water for the hands...each was invited to sing to God in the presence of others from **what he knows of the Holy Scriptures** or from his own heart.” (In F.F. Bruce NICNT Colossians 158)

It seems that the Psalms and the other songs of the Bible are at least a model for us of what our songs should be.

Singing was to be a means of teaching us about God **and** our response **to** him.

I could not find one Psalm of praise (with the possible exception of Psalm 150) that did not spell out specifically what it was **about God** that caused the praise.

Not every song can convey everything about God **but every song should convey something** – something that will elevate our understanding of God’s person or work.

Jesus touches on the same idea when he says to the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:23-24 “... a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and truth.”

The “spirit” here is not the human spirit but the Holy Spirit.

“Spirit and truth” is one inseparable concept.

It is worship empowered by the Spirit and **informed** by truth, the Revelation of God himself. (See Don Carson, John, 225 et al)

But as I said, our songs should not only teach us **about God**, they should allow us to express our emotion to God.

Again see Colossians 3:16 NASB

“Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms *and* hymns *and* spiritual songs, **singing with thankfulness in your hearts** to God.”

Worship is heartfelt!

I don't mean it must necessarily be showy but it must be authentic.

Praise is not so much an action as a reaction.

Just as we pity those who are in love with love, so we would pity those who are enthralled with praise.

I want us to encounter God, he will enthrall us and we will respond.

And the great thing about worshipping together (corporate worship) is that we share the experience thus making it even better.

Have you ever seen an awesome sunset and lamented that you had no one to share it with you?

I've even gone so far as to speak to complete strangers asking them to enjoy it with me.

So it is when we think of our God – the praise isn't complete until we can share that praise with others – they join in our expression of praise.

Having said all the above, I don't think we want the contemporary Christian music industry and its cohorts in Christian radio dictating what songs we will use in the worship of our God.

D. G. Hart in an article entitled, “Post-Modern Evangelical Worship”

“Indeed, contemporary worship – and church life for that matter – depends increasingly on the products of pop culture... Rather than growing up and adopting the broader range of experience that characterizes adulthood, evangelicals...want to recover and perpetuate the experiences of adolescence.” (D. G. Hart “Post-

Modern Evangelical Worship” in Calvin Theological Journal 3- (1995) 454)

Now before any of us get too excited about that, please understand that I don't think that just because a song was written over 100 years

ago and is in a hymnal that it is good and if it was written in the past 5 years and appears on a projection screen it's bad.

We're going to further develop a repertoire of worship songs that teach us about our God and enable us to express our praise to Him.

The criteria for selection of those songs will include at least the following:

1st Does the song convey enough truth about God to be worth memorizing and singing both privately as well as publicly?

Here's one that from my perspective doesn't accomplish that:

LET MY WORDS BE FEW

You are God in heaven
 And here am I on earth
 So I'll let my words be few
 Jesus I am so in love with You
 And I'll stand in awe of You
 Yes I'll stand in awe of You
 And I'll let my words be few
 Jesus I am so in love with You
 The simplest of all love songs
 I want to bring to You
 So I'll let my words be few
 Jesus I am so in love with You
 (Chorus)(Chorus)
 And I'll let my words be few
 Jesus, I am so in love with You.

At its best, it is all heart with no content.

Here's another one I'm glad we don't sing:

Draw Me Close

Draw me close to you, never let me go,
 I lay it all down again,
 To hear You say that I'm Your friend.
 You are my desire, no one else will do,
 'Cause no one else can take Your place,

To feel the warmth of Your embrace
 Help me find the way, bring me back to you.
 You're all I want,
 You're all I've ever needed,
 You're all I want,
 Help me know You are near.
 (repeated several times)

Who are we talking about, God or some lost lover?

What I have discovered is that many praise choruses are only response.

They put response into words but they don't tell us what we are responding to – they don't tell us much about our God.

My contention is that we won't have to tell people as much how to respond if we show them God.

The words of a worship song should follow the biblical pattern that praises God **for** something – for his character and his works.

Here is one that combines traditional and contemporary flavors and still includes both content and response.

O Worship the King

O worship the King, all glorious above
 O gratefully sing His wonderful love
 Our Shield and Defender, the Ancient of Days
 Pavilioned in splendor, and girded with praise

You alone are the matchless King
 To You alone be all majesty
 Your glories and wonder, what tongue can recite?
 You breathe in the air, You shine in the light

O measureless might, ineffable love
 While angels delight to worship above
 Thy mercies how tender, how firm to the end
 Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend.

Let me show you two other songs that illustrate the greatest difference between songs that say something and those that don't.

WHAT A FRIEND I'VE FOUND

What a friend I've found,
 Closer than a brother;
 I have felt Your touch,
 More intimate than lovers.
 Jesus, Jesus,
 Jesus, friend forever.
 What a hope I've found,
 More faithful than a mother;
 It would break my heart,
 To ever lose each other.
 (chorus)(verse 1-instrumental)
 (chorus)(chorus)(chorus)
 What a friend I've found,
 Closer than a brother.
 (chorus)

Our Great Savior

Jesus! What a friend for sinners
 Jesus! Lover of my soul
 Friends may fail me, foes assail me,
 He, my Savior makes me whole.

Jesus! What a strength in weakness!
 Let me hide myself in Him;
 Tempted, tried, and sometimes failing,
 He, my strength, my victory wins.

Jesus! What a help in sorrow!
 While the billows o'er me roll,
 Even when my heart is breaking,
 He, my comfort, helps my soul

2nd The second criterion for selecting the songs we sing is that they should reflect the fullness of our God's person and work.

Not on any one Sunday but over many weeks, the songs should reflect the breadth of our God's character and grace.

Robert Godfrey wrote, “Joy **and** reverence reflect the character of God, who is just **and** merciful, holy **and** loving. Worship that is only joyful serves a God stripped of half his attributes... It severs Law from Gospel and repentance from faith.” (W. Robert Godfrey “The Reformation of Worship” in [Here We Stand](#) by Boice and Sasse, 1996)

3rd The third criterion for selecting songs is, does the music fit the content of the song?

There are songs whose music is incongruous with the words. Not every song can match the music to the words as well as the “Hallelujah Chorus” or “A Mighty Fortress is our God,” but it should attempt to.

4th Fourthly, are the music and lyrics sing-able?

It does not help the congregation to worship if the music cannot be rather easily learned.

But don’t blame the musicians for supposedly un-sing-able songs if you are only here every few weeks and don’t learn the new ones with us.

5th Are the music and lyrics easily remembered?

What songs will our children know from memory in the years to come?

What songs will inform their thoughts and be the basis of their private worship?

I want our worship to become unself-conscious.

C.S.Lewis wrote, “As long as you notice and have to count the steps, you are not yet dancing but only learning to dance. A good shoe is a shoe you don’t have to notice. Good reading becomes possible when you need not consciously think about ...print or spelling. The perfect church service would be one we were almost unaware of; our attention would have been on God.” ([Letter to Malcolm](#), 4)

I want to conclude with a note of appreciation for our worship pastor, Craig Allen, who thinks carefully about these issues and attempts to set the table for us in ways that will lead us into the presence of God, **to see God in his greatness** and grace **AND respond in heart-felt worship** .

Colossians 3:16-17 NASB“Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom **teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,** **singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God**. And whatever you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.”