

Why We Worship The Way We Do

By: Pastor David Holt

INTRODUCTION

If you are new to First Evangelical Free Church, we hope that one of the first things you notice is our high value on worshipping our great God. We love Jesus and desire to express that love through meaningful praise and worship. Our purpose as a church is to be a people committed to **"Christ-centered worship**, biblical teaching, and people-oriented ministries."

This tract is to help you understand the biblical basis for what takes place in our worship services, especially for those of you who are not accustomed to a service like ours. We as a church are far from perfect, but we do desire that our worship please the Lord and honor His Word.

"SO, WHAT IS WORSHIP ANYWAY?"

*"I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service of **worship**." Romans 12:1¹*

Worship is surrendering to the absolute claims of Jesus Christ upon our lives, by living a life that is characterized by holiness, love, obedience, thanks, and praise. Worship is much more than singing songs of praise on a Sunday morning. The highest form of worship is a life completely yielded to God. **When we are living under the lordship of Christ, everything we do is an act of worship.** God is more concerned about how we live Monday through Saturday than how we look and "worship" on Sunday. Sunday morning should be the culmination of how we have lived the rest of the week. When God's people have been living for Jesus all week and then come together on Sundays, there will be a sincere celebration.

When God's people do gather for collective worship on Sundays, what does God's Word say concerning how we should worship?

"HOW SHOULD I WORSHIP?"

1. SINCERELY

*"Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord? And who may stand in His holy place? He who has **clean hands and a pure heart** ..." Psalm 24:3-4a*

When it comes to worship, the heart (inward person) is the most important issue. "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). If our hearts are not right with God, then it doesn't matter what we are outwardly doing; God is not pleased. Before you read any further, please get this point firmly entrenched in your mind, because when we examine the outward expressions of praise, it is imperative that we understand that true worship begins with the heart. **Any outward expression must come from a heart that is truly submitted to Jesus or else it is mere show!**

Jesus said that true worship is that which is in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). Worship in spirit is worship that is from the spirit (our innermost being), and worship in truth is worship that is filled with truth (about God and about ourselves).

2. REVERENTLY

"Come, let us worship and **bow down**; let us kneel before the Lord our Maker. For He is our God." Psalm 95:6-7a

To revere God means that we respect God and His character. It means that we acknowledge that He is God and we are not. It means that we do not come before Him flippantly nor carelessly. During Old Testament times, much preparation went into the building of the temple. The High Priest had to be very careful before entering the Holy of Holies (where the presence of God was). This shows us today that we should prepare for corporate worship and not just come into a service like we would an ordinary meeting. We are coming to meet with the Creator of the universe, the Lord God. We should pray and prepare our hearts

before coming to the service. One way to do this is by developing a habit of praying and singing in your car as you drive to the service.

It is important to note that reverence is not necessarily synonymous with quietness. Many Christians today participate in very quiet worship services, and yet due to their heart condition, their worship is not reverent at all. At the same time, many of the more expressive and jubilant worship services in which Christians participate may be equally as irreverent. The noise level, or lack thereof, is not the chief issue. Once again, the condition of our hearts is the central issue.

Another aspect of reverential worship is concentration. It is easy to become distracted or be thinking about other things in the middle of a service. We need to discipline ourselves to concentrate on what is taking place in the service, whether singing, reciting, praying, or listening. We should not give lip service to something that is not from our heart. To revere God means that we remain focused on Him during a service.

3. PRAYERFULLY

*"Therefore I want the men in every place to **pray** ..." 1 Timothy 2:8a
*"And He said to them, 'it is written, My house shall be called a house of **prayer**' ..." Matthew 21:13a**

Prayer is simply talking with God. Verbally expressing our thanks, praise, and concerns to God in prayer is an important part of worship. We try to incorporate prayer into our service in various ways. Sometimes we allow time for private prayer. Other times people pray together in small groups. At the close of and after the service, people on the "ministry team" are available to pray with anyone who may have a need. We should never feel embarrassed to come forward for prayer. God has made us to need each other. We are to "bear one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:2). We desire to be a caring church that prays for one another.

4. JOYFULLY

"O come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving; let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms. For the Lord is a great God."
Psalm 95:1-3a

Most of the praise and worship in the Bible is described as being full of joy. Joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). When one experiences the joy of the Lord, he/she cannot help but offer verbal praise and worship unto the One who gave this joy. If people get excited in corporate worship, it should be because they are overflowing with the joy of knowing Jesus Christ.

5. EXPRESSIVELY

I am amazed that people go to football games, clap and shout with excitement over touchdowns that have no eternal value; yet, these same people may be critical towards the worship of Almighty God that at times may contain similar forms of expression. Is it not appropriate that we get excited over what God has done for us in Jesus Christ? A.W. Tozer said that "genuine worship involves feelings."² God's Word is filled with examples of worship that is quite expressive. Let's examine some of the major forms of expression in praise and worship.

A. CLAPPING

"O clap your hands, all peoples; shout to God with the voice of joy. For the Lord Most High is to be feared..."
Psalm 47:1-2a

In this passage we are exhorted to clap unto the Lord in worship. It is interesting that the reason given in this passage for clapping has to do with fearing (revering) God. Remember what I said earlier about reverential worship not having to be quiet? Clapping can be reverent worship.

In our services people will often break out into spontaneous clapping after a section of praise. It is as if we are giving God applause. At other times we clap to the beat of a joyful song. This is an appropriate way of expressing joy. In the above passage, clapping is done in the context of joyful praise.

B. RAISING HANDS

"Because Thy lovingkindness is better than life, my lips will praise Thee. So I will bless Thee as long as I live; I will

lift up my hands in Thy name."
Psalm 63:3-4

"Therefore, I want the men in every place to pray, lift up holy hands, without wrath and dissension."
1 Timothy 2:8

Lifting hands in praise and worship is one way to express surrender and love to God. If a policeman arrests someone by sticking a gun to their back, that person will lift his/her hands up as a sign of surrender. When we lift our hands up to God, it is a way of saying "Lord, I surrender all to You. I am Yours." I like the way the above passage says lifting "holy hands." This reinforces what I said earlier about expression coming from a life that is submitted to Jesus.

Lifting hands can also be a sign of reaching out to our "Abba, Daddy" (see Romans 8:15). I love it when my children lift up their hands for me to hold and hug them. Sometimes in worship I love to reach out my hands and say to God: "I need a hug from you, Lord. I am reaching out to embrace You and crawl up in Your lap."

Unfortunately, for many evangelicals, the lifting of hands in praise is looked upon as a "charismatic" gesture. We need to get away from such labels and the fears that often come with such labels. **When it comes to lifting hands in praise, this is not a charismatic issue. Rather, it is a biblical issue.** If you are not comfortable lifting your hands, that is fine. You are not less spiritual for not lifting them. At the same time, though, let's be sure we always give freedom to those who do like to praise God in this manner. If you do enjoy lifting your hands during our worship service, we just ask that you do so in a manner that is sensitive to those around you. Do not lift your hands in a way that will draw attention to yourself or distract others in their worship.

C. SHOUTING

"Let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation ... let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms." Psalm 95:1-2

Shouting is another form of biblical worship that most of us are not accustomed to. In most passages it is done in the context of joyful praise. It should occur when a worshiping Christian becomes so overjoyed that he/she shouts out a praise to God.

Like lifting hands to the Lord, if shouting is done, it should not distract another's worship. Most of my shouting to the Lord is private. However, I have been in worship where during applause to God, I shouted out praises to God. I do not think it distracted others because they were clapping to the Lord and the environment was one of loud praise.

D. VARIETY OF INSTRUMENTATION

"Praise Him with trumpet sound ... harp and lyre ... timbrel ... stringed instruments and pipe ... loud cymbals ... resounding cymbals ... Let everything that has breath praise the Lord." Psalm 150:3-6

Isn't it great that God has created so many different musical sounds? And isn't it great that He has blessed our church with many gifted musicians? Music is such a wonderful way to express praise to God, and God strongly encourages us to use it all for His glory. As God raises up gifted and anointed musicians, the worship at First Free will continue to grow in musical diversity. If you have gifts in this area that you want to use for God, please contact our worship coordinator.

E. VARIETY OF TEMPO

"O come let us sing for joy to the Lord ... come let us worship and bow down." Psalm 95:1, 6

The picture I get from these verses is that the first part is upbeat and joyful, while the second part is more quiet and reflective. Neither is more sacred nor reverent. Both are needed. This is why we desire to maintain diversity in the tempo of our songs. Often in our services we begin with the more upbeat and joyful praise and then move into the more quiet and reflective worship. Furthermore, on the Sundays that we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we often experience worship that is more quiet and reflective as we sing some of the great hymns of faith that focus on the cross and the blood of Jesus.

I often tell newcomers to our church, "If you didn't like the worship today, come back next week. It will probably be different." We want to work hard at keeping the worship fresh and full of variety. There are so many different ways to praise God, and we are a fellowship with diverse musical preferences. More important than

music style is the content of the songs and the heart that sings the songs. **Worship is attributing worth to God, and can be done in a variety of ways.**

F. VARIETY OF PARTICIPATION

"When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification." 1 Corinthians 14:26

Every Christian can contribute something significant to the worship service. We seek to live out this verse by occasionally having times of "body life" in the service. Body life provides anyone who wishes the opportunity to share something with the entire congregation, whether it be a praise, prayer request, Scripture or something they feel is a word from the Lord. We believe God wants to speak to us in the service through a variety of people and not merely through me as the Senior Pastor. If you ever feel that God wants you to share something with our church body, please let me know. I want us as God's people to hear from God when we gather. I don't care who God uses to speak, as long as we hear from Him.

G. NEW MUSIC

"Sing to the Lord a new song, sing to the Lord all the earth." Psalm 96:1

The Bible encourages us to sing a new song to the Lord. Yet, in so many churches today the same old songs are sung week after week. I am not against maintaining good traditions (we will continue to sing the good old songs), but I am for having worship that is fresh and new. Many of the new worship songs today are filled with God's anointing. These songs are bringing fresh life and joy to God's people. At the same time, we don't want to do so much new music that people can't properly participate.

When you hear new music, work hard to learn it. Concentrate on the lyrics so as to use it to worship Jesus. We also desire for people in our church to write new music. If you have an original song to submit, please talk to our worship coordinator.

Singing a new song to the Lord can also mean singing a familiar song with new meaning. As our relationship with Christ deepens, we will worship with new depth. "Amazing Grace" is a hymn that could be sung over and over, with deeper meaning each time.

H. DANCING

"And David was dancing before the Lord with all his might." 2 Samuel 6:14a

"Praise Him with timbrel and dancing." Psalm 150:4a

Some of you may now be thinking, "Oh no, Pastor David has really gone off the deep end now. If I see dancing in this church, I'm leaving." Before you leave, let me tell you that of all the areas I have mentioned thus far, this one is the most uncomfortable for me. However, as I stated earlier, the bottom line is: what does the Bible say? At this point in this tract, I am having to heed my own challenge. The reason I am uncomfortable with dancing is I think it can easily be distracting to others. Another concern I have is for men in our culture. For some men, seeing a woman dance in a service would cause him to focus on her body instead of the Lord. Therefore, I am still unsure how dancing could be done in a way that is orderly (see 1 Corinthians 14:40) and doesn't cause others to stumble (see 1 Corinthians 8:13). One idea would be for those who desire to dance to do so in the back of the auditorium. Any suggestions?

I. ORDERLINESS

"But let all things be done properly and in an orderly manner." 1 Corinthians 14:40

When God's people gather together corporately, it is important that we be sensitive to those around us. We gather to focus on Jesus and worship Him, while at the same time recognizing that the way we individually worship will affect others. Therefore, some things that a Christian may do privately may have to be done moderately when in public worship.

For example, the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:27-28 that if you speak in tongues but do not have an interpreter, *"let him keep silent in the church."* The tongues' speaker can use that gift all he/she wants privately at home, but it must be exercised differently in a public gathering. After extensively studying 1 Corinthians 14, we do not believe it is appropriate to ever speak or sing in tongues unless there is interpretation.

There should never be times when everyone prays or sings in tongues at the same time, because Paul said

"if anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and let one interpret" (1 Corinthians 14:27). Without interpretation the entire body is not blessed.

Does order quench the Holy Spirit? Not necessarily. To have proper order in a worship service in no way quenches the Holy Spirit. In fact, proper order allows the Holy Spirit greater freedom to minister to more people.

In addition, the principle of *"not causing your brother to stumble"* (1 Corinthians 8:13) applies to many areas of public worship as well. For example, shouting is a biblical form of worship that I discussed earlier, but if it is done at inappropriate times, it could distract others or cause them to stumble.

Finally, if you anticipate leaving the service for some reason, please sit in the back so as to disturb as few people as possible. If you have small children, please adequately prepare them by taking them to the restroom before the service and helping them to participate in the service as they are able. **Let's be increasingly sensitive to how our actions affect others in worship.**

"BUT WHAT IF I'M A LITTLE UNCOMFORTABLE WITH YOUR WORSHIP?"

Perhaps after reading this you are still a bit uncomfortable with our worship. That is OK as long as you remain teachable and go back to God's Word to see what it says about worship. We are by no means saying that our way of worship is superior to other churches. We fall short of what God would want from us, but we are seeking to grow and learn. Will you join us in this journey?

One of the main things we learn when we study God's Word is that worship is not to please us. Rather, **worship is to please God.** The ultimate issue with worship is not what we prefer, nor is it what we are comfortable with. Instead, the bottom line with worship is what pleases and honors God. We all need to come on Sunday mornings for the purpose of blessing God (see Psalm 103:1), ministering to God, and giving to God. Unfortunately, most Christians gather to be blessed, to be ministered to, and to receive. When

we come to bless God, it may mean we do things for Him that are not the easiest nor the most comfortable for us.

I attended a church in college that had this slogan: **"If only one person comes away from this service with a blessing, then everything is OK as long as that one person is the Lord Jesus Christ."** May Jesus Christ receive a huge blessing by what happens at First Free each week!

"WHY IS SO MUCH TIME GIVEN TO WORSHIP?"

One aspect of our worship service that is the most uncomfortable for some is the length of our worship time and the number of songs we sing. We understand that for those who are accustomed to church services where only two or three songs are sung during the entire service, our format might be a bit of a stretch, at first.

We devote extra time for worship for several reasons. First of all, we believe it takes time to get into worship. It takes time to get over our hectic morning and the distractions of the day. It takes us time to get our focus off of ourselves and onto the Lord. This is often difficult without an extended period of time in song and praise and prayer. Secondly, by singing one song after another (medley) it helps create a flow that is uninterrupted and aids our spirit in entering into the presence of God. Thirdly, and most important, Jesus Christ is worthy of quality and quantity of praise and worship. **Since Jesus has given His total self for us, is it too much for us to give Him 30-45 minutes of praise and worship when we come together?** I do not think so! Remember, worship is not for us but rather for God.

Many times you may not feel like giving this much time to God in worship. This is when you can apply Hebrews 13:15, *"let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name."* A sacrifice means that we do something that is not easy.

"HOW CAN I IMPROVE MY WORSHIP?"

We all need to grow in our personal and corporate experience of worship. Here are some suggestions:

1. Study worship. Take time to study what the Bible says about worship. Read some good books on worship like Exploring Worship by Bob Sorge; Worship: Rediscovering the Missing Jewel by Ron Allen; Worship His Majesty by Jack Hayford; and Whatever Happened to Worship? by A. W. Tozer.

2. Prepare for Sunday worship on Saturday night. Take time as an individual or as a family to pray for the service and for your own heart to be prepared. Pray that the worship will be led by the Spirit and that God's Word will go forth with power. Pray for all the leaders in the service. Parents, lay out your children's clothes on Saturday night so as to minimize the Sunday hassles of getting everyone ready. Be sure to get to bed early on Saturday night and wake up early enough on Sundays so as to avoid rushing. You cannot soar with the eagles if you hoot with the owls!

3. Use the drive to church to prepare. Someone once said, **"Don't come to church to worship; come already worshipping."** Think how powerful our service would be if everyone came already worshipping. Begin to pray and sing to the Lord even while driving to the service.

4. Plan your Sundays to be a day of worship and rest. Keep other activities to a minimum so that you are not hurried to leave or distracted with thoughts about the rest of the day. Use this day to especially concentrate on the Lord. *"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8).* Holy means set apart for a divine purpose. Our Sundays should be set apart as a day different from other days.

5. Get to the service early. Come early enough to pray and seek God before the service officially begins. When people come late, it can be distracting and disruptive to those already in the service. How hungry are we to meet with God? Let's get serious about meeting with God each week. Let's pray for revival and a mighty outpouring of His Spirit in our services.

CONCLUSION

I hope this tract has been helpful. If you have any questions or ideas on ways we can improve the quality of our worship, please let me know. If you desire to be involved in our worship, please talk to me or our worship coordinator.

"Enter His gates with thanksgiving, and His courts with praise. Give thanks to Him; bless His name. For the Lord is good; His lovingkindness is everlasting, and His faithfulness to all generations." Psalm 100:4-5

¹All biblical quotations are from the New American Standard translation, and all emphases are mine.

²A.W. Tozer, *Whatever Happened To Worship* (Camp Hill, Pennsylvania: Christian Publications, 1985), p. 81.

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