

Worship – Position Paper

This Paper is written to bring some definition to our position on corporate worship in Central. This position on music and sung praise is not haphazard, pragmatic or accidental, but is rooted theologically. We will use the term *worship* in this Paper to refer to our sung praise with the understanding that the concept of *worship* is bigger than music and singing and is a whole life response to the grace of God which includes music and singing but extends way beyond such a confine.

Trinity - We are all affected and shaped by our wider culture. This is to be expected. Our culture is (generally) western, stems in large part from the Enlightenment, and is very individualistic. In any human culture there will be helpful and unhelpful elements. God's 'culture' in Trinity is different. It is holy, communal, self-giving and loving. Wherever God is at work by the Holy Spirit, there will be a replication, to some degree, of that holy and trinitarian 'culture'. This was the prayer of Jesus to his father, "*Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one.*" (John 17v11) It follows that whatever position we take on a particular theme – in this case worship – that position needs to be shaped primarily by our theology (ie our understanding of God) before any cultural considerations.

Christ and the Cross - The core of Christian theology centres upon the person and work of Jesus Christ. The cross is the ultimate expression of the nature of God in Trinity as Christ moves in self giving love to redeem that which was alienated. The atonement has vertical and horizontal components; the vertical component in bringing us to God (Col 1 V21, 22), and the horizontal component in making us one together in Christ (Eph 2.) Any position that acts against the *direction* of the atonement in driving us apart cannot be sustained from scripture.

Community - It is worth noting that in the life and times of God's ancient people Israel, their deepest unity (in what could be a fractious tribal confederation) was found in the worship and service of Yahweh. "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!" (Psalm 133) It was as Israel came to sacrifice and worship in Jerusalem that this Psalm was written, and thereafter pilgrims would sing it as they went to the place (temple) that prefigured the ultimate sacrifice for sin that would bring them (and us) to God and to one another. In short, we must grasp the essence of what we do in worship before we consider the style. When this happens the essence is the *driver* and not any secondary considerations.

What we have in Central in the range of ages is precious. It is more precious than musical style. It is more fully the *ecclesia*, the church, than *youth church* or *senior church*. It is profoundly counter cultural and rooted in the atonement which brings us together with God and with others who are different in age, stage or culture. This is profoundly counter cultural, has its source in Trinity, and is brought to pass by the atoning work of the Son of God and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Mission. Given that God's purpose is to draw others to himself in community through the ministry of his church in communicating the Gospel, we also need to think about how we communicate God's word in our culture. We need to think culturally. How

do we appear to those coming amongst us? Are we throwback to a bygone age? Or are we making those necessary cultural connections?

The Core - Given the profound core of Christian worship it ought to be obvious that worship should be *truth led* and not *feelings led*. The feelings should follow as a response to the impact of the truth. Style should never triumph over substance. The music must be the servant of the word. Music is a gift of God and God's people have historically been a singing people! But like any good gift, along with money, sex, etc, it can be subtly elevated and become a snare. We want our excellent music ministry to continue to be grounded and filled with good theology so that our responses are deeply wedded to the substance and not to the style. Such is the fallenness of our hearts that we are all natural born idol makers. Praise without theology at the core can become a 'Me' event and miss the point. 'Worship' then becomes good or bad in relation to the emotional impact. Emotion in worship is important, but we need to keep God's word at the core otherwise we may end up worshipping our needs, or a construct of our minds, and not the God of scripture.

There will inevitably be competing currents of thought in a church like ours with regard to musical styles. We need therefore to keep a strong theology of worship at the centre of our thinking and have an agreed approach. In one student publication musical style is described as traditional, contemporary or blended. *Our position would be blended with a bias towards the contemporary.* Why? Because this position allows us to draw from the wealth of hymnody that we have inherited, with the *bias* keeping us leaning forward into a fast changing culture. In affirming this position we have to recognise that we are committing ourselves to live in the tension that will inevitably occur. Sometimes we will get the balance right – at other times not. But to remain culturally relevant we must keep moving forward in a balanced and biblical way and allowing those who lead in worship to develop and innovate.

The organ continues to play a part in our corporate worship, but the pool of organists is reducing. Our key aim is not to maintain one instrument, but to maintain a breadth of worship into the future. This will require our pastors and musicians to continue developing a *blended with a bias* approach.

Here are some questions that might help those who shape our corporate worship;

- What is the core theology (understanding of God) that underpins this song?
- Am I leading in such a way that points people to the essence of worship?
- As I look at the shape and content of the sung praise on a particular Sunday; Am I serving my own tastes/likes? Am I bending too much in response to particular pressures? Or serving the whole church family?
- Is there a *blended with a bias* approach that will give us a sense of community and a cutting edge culturally?

This paper has been discussed by the pastors and deacons and shared with those who serve us in music ministry. Its purpose is to provide some definition to what we do and some guidance as to how we will develop.

We are blessed by the skilled and godly musicians that God has given us. We ought to take to heart the sense of joy and freedom expressed in Psalm 33 which deftly combines the word in worship and summarises what we are trying to communicate, "Praise the LORD with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre. Sing to

him a new song; *play skillfully, and shout for joy*. For the word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does".