

CORPORATE WORSHIP PRIORITIES AND PRINCIPLES
A Statement by the Elders on the Shared Values Guiding Corporate Worship
at First Evangelical Church

The mission statement of our church states that *First Evangelical Church exists to communicate the Word of God to produce faithful followers of Jesus Christ who love, worship and serve Him for the glory of God.** After a concentrated season of study and reflection, the following statement, adopted by the Session on October 12, 2009, articulates in brief our elder community's most basic convictions concerning worship at First Evan.

Although our statement is specific to the corporate gatherings of God's people, we recognize that worship is also an individual response to God, encompassing all of life. We also recognize legitimate diversities of preference and conscience in the practice of worship among our church members, and even among ourselves as congregational leaders. The Bible makes it clear that God is more concerned about the heart of His worshippers than the form with which they express that worship (1 Sam. 16:7; Ps. 69:30-31; Mark 12:33; John 4:23-24); and the New Testament especially emphasizes worship function more than worship form (John 4:23-24; Heb. 10:22). We therefore call our church to unify around our common mission rather than a particular style of worship.

Worship Priorities

The Bible holds forth two great priorities governing the corporate worship gatherings of God's people: **to glorify God** (2 Cor. 1:20) and **to edify His people** (1 Cor. 14:26; Col. 3:16). In other words, our worship is rendered to an audience of One within a gathering of many. Biblically informed worship of God by His church involves both vertical and horizontal axes.

To glorify God in corporate expression includes:

- exalting Him in His holy transcendence (Isa. 6:1-5) and exulting in His gracious immanence (Ps. 23:1; 63:1).
- reverencing His Word proclaimed in gospel-centered preaching (2 Tim. 4:1-2).
- robustly singing His praise and reflectively listening to the same (Ps. 98; Eph. 5:19).
- petitioning the mercies of our triune God in pastoral and personal prayers (1 Tim. 2:1-2).
- responding to His abundant provisions through freewill giving in keeping with each church member's resources (2 Cor. 9:6-8).

To edify His people in corporate expression includes:

- encouraging one another to mutual love and good works (Heb. 10:24-25)
- educating one another in the most fruitful ways to exemplify the gospel of Jesus and engage the world with it (Col. 3:16; Heb. 13:16).
- building up the body of Christ through preaching, singing, praying, and giving toward the end of presenting everyone mature in Him (Col. 1:28-29).
- emphasizing our peace with God through the mediation of Jesus the Righteous, which is also the basis of our peace with one another, for in Christ that which otherwise divides people is obliterated (Eph. 2:11-22).

Worship Principles

Two principles complement these two priorities governing the corporate worship gatherings of God's people: **the principle of unity in diversity** and **the principle of biblical faithfulness**.

The principle of **unity in diversity** recognizes that First Evan's membership includes a diversity of ecclesial backgrounds. We are a denominationally independent church committed to evangelical orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Our congregational unity in glorifying God and edifying His people does not require uniformity of expression in every worship service at First Evan. Because the Bible permits variety in worship form ("*psalms and hymns and spiritual songs*"), we put the emphasis on worship content, that it should reflect and strengthen "*the word of Christ dwelling richly within*" (Col. 3:16).

A commitment to integrity in worship means we steadfastly reject both "cold religion" (overly formal and impersonal worship) and "casual religion" (overly informal and shallow worship) as unworthy offerings to the King of Glory, as neither inspires the excellence He is due (Ps. 2:11). Our standard for assessing worship integrity is whether the content of a service faithfully reflects the priorities of glorifying God and edifying His people.

All worshippers maintain personal preferences, desires, and expectations, and so unanimity concerning style and form in corporate worship is not a realistic goal. We recognize the tension between the concerns for reverence (1 Cor. 14:40) and for freedom in worship expression (2 Cor. 3:17; Ps. 2:11). Exclamatory praise need not be irreverent (Ps. 89:15-16; 100:1); neither does quiet contemplation signal a lack of freedom (Ps. 131). A healthy church will seek to be balanced and to avoid extremes (1 Cor. 14:40), establishing no unbiblical dichotomy between celebration and consecration.

The principle of **biblical faithfulness** recognizes that God will be glorified and His people edified only as worship reflects and instills biblical truth. (This is true not just for believers in Jesus, but also those in our midst who are unbelievers, 1 Cor. 14:24-25.)

Preaching should center in the Word of God, as the Scriptures are the means through which God the Spirit speaks (2 Tim. 3:16-17). The preacher should not water down his messages, but endeavor to be clear as well as insightful.

Music selections and congregational singing should enlist mind, heart, emotions and body to “*proclaim the excellencies of Him*” (1 Peter 2:9) whom the Scriptures reveal. We are not in favor of song lyrics that sentimentalize or trivialize our faith, but instead desire content (in songs old and new) that reinforces biblical emphases. Lyrical repetition and economy do not in themselves trivialize a song (Ps. 136), nor do newer arrangements of older hymns.

Prayers and benedictions should follow biblical patterns found in the recorded prayers and benedictions in both the Old and New Testaments.

Conclusion

We gratefully acknowledge the privilege and blessing of drawing near to God together through our Lord Jesus, our Savior, Mediator and High Priest (Heb. 10:19-22). “To Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (Eph. 3:21).

*At the time the elders studied worship, First Evan was utilizing this mission statement. The statement is now “To glorify Jesus Christ and magnify His gospel in all of life until He comes.”