Worship Guidelines
North Valley Baptist Church

Adopted August 2004*

The Essence and Nature of Worship

Worship is the proper response of all personal beings to God, ascribing all honor and worth to their glorious, sovereign Creator-God because he is worthy. This is the proper response of Christians to the gracious provisions of redemption which God has made through the crosswork of Jesus Christ. Enabled by the Holy Spirit, this response affects all of life as a result of our Gospel-restored relationship with both God and our fellow worshippers. It is expressed both in an attitude of adoration and in action by individual believers and by corporate groups of believers in the local church. The first act of worship for an unbeliever must be to accept God's gracious provision.

In both the Old and New Testaments worship is repeatedly enjoined on all those people who are in covenant relationship with God; worship is therefore an act of obedience and requires that Christians seek to understand what God expects of them under the new covenant. Our goal in worship is not to find, feel, create, or experience worship, but to learn to delight in and worship God himself. We must therefore be continually expanding our understanding (and that of those to whom we as a church minister) of the great majesty of God's person and his works. This can only be accomplished corporately by the consistent exposure of God's people to God's Word through Scripture reading, teaching, preaching, and the use of music with substantial biblical content.

As those who now serve and worship under the new covenant, we must realize that many of the forms of worship under the old covenant have been eliminated or substantially modified: there is no longer a particular priesthood, a required ritual of sacrifice, a prescribed liturgical calendar, or a special sanctuary. Although the New Testament often used terminology and verbal pictures drawn from this earlier stage of worship, they are all transformed into a new mode of worship that impacts all of life in a much less centralized way under the terms of the new covenant. This comes as a result of the crosswork of Jesus Christ and the present ministry of the Holy Spirit.

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* These guidelines are just that—guidelines; they are not set in stone, nor are they constitutionally mandated. They do, however, express the intent of the leadership team and are designed to "set the course" and the tone for the ministry of the North Valley Baptist Church. Some sections of this statement draw from D. A. Carson, "Worship Under the Word," ch. 1 of Worship by the Book, ed. D. A. Carson, 11–63 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002). Some other sections have been incorporated and adapted (by permission) from "Biblical Principles of Music in Worship" by Alan Ingalls <http://faculty.bbc.edu/aingalls/WorshipMusic.pdf>. In most cases no attempt has been made to document from Scripture the summary given here. Those desiring a full biblical exposition of worship which is generally in accord with this statement are referred to Carson's essay referenced here.

Our priorities in worship involve all of life—indeed, work itself is part of our worship as we express our understanding of and appreciation for our great God by the very way in which we conduct the affairs of daily life whether at work or at home. As those who have been redeemed, we offer our time, energy, work—all of our lives to God as a means of loving him with all our heart, mind, and strength, seeking to do all to the glory of God.

Worship is not just an individual action. By gathering with God's people in a local assembly we acknowledge that our worship is part of something much larger than ourselves and even larger than our local church. Both individually and corporately we are part of the body of Christ and thus vitally connected with our fellow Christians—both those presently living around the world, but also those who have confessed their Savior over the past several millennia and those who will yet do so in the future until our Lord returns. In corporate assembly we seek both to express our collective appreciation for our God and also to encourage our fellow Christians in doing the same—and in turn to be encouraged by them.

In this corporate setting we worship by engaging in corporate prayer, praise, confession, Scripture reading, exposition/preaching/teaching of the Word, fellowshipping together at common meals, singing together, receiving and administering financial gifts (including giving to the needy), making public confession of our faith, giving of thanks, and by observing the ordinances (baptism and the Lord's Table). In all these various forms we seek to be authentically and transparently faithful to the Word of God, making it central as our only means of knowing the God whom we worship.

Guidelines for the Use of Music in Worship

The primary purpose of music employed as one facet of corporate worship is the mutual teaching of truth. In Col. 3:16 Paul admonishes: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (ESV; see also Eph. 5:19).

These are the only two NT passages which directly address the issue of music for the New Testament church. Since both of these texts designate the purpose of congregational music as instructional, all other purposes, such as emotional expression or entertainment, must be subsidiary. (Music by its very nature produces emotional responses, but the goal of music in worship is not to effect a sensation.) The reference to singing in 1 Cor. 14:15 supports this understanding, for there Paul insists that singing be comprehensible as well as "spiritual." The Old Testament confirms this picture for God is not pictured there as an egomaniac who needs our praise, but as One who desires public praise as an instrument to bring the unbelieving world to faith (Ps. 67) and to build up the faith of the downcast (Ps. 22:22–26). It is true that God is the "audience" of our worship, but the audience and intended purpose of worship also includes an observing/listening humanity.

The preceding biblical principles form the basis for the following guidelines for the use of

music in worship. They seek to emphasize worship and deemphasize subordinate aspects and auxiliary roles. In all worship, God must be central and everything done in corporate worship must serve to focus attention on him. Those privileged to serve in such worship should strive not to draw attention to themselves, either by what they do or how they do it.

According to the biblical picture of worship, if there is no revelatory truth-content (which comes only from Scripture), there is no worship. Consequently, lyrics which are unbiblical, frivolous, or disrespectful must not constitute any part of biblical worship. Lyrics which lack substantial, meaningful content must be used sparingly if at all and then only with the greatest caution. The excessive repetition of lines or words, especially those with little content, aimed primarily at producing an emotional response, would fall under the same stricture.

Any musical accompaniment which impedes congregational participation or understanding, or which dominates the lyrics or renders them unintelligible is unacceptable. This may be done by excessive accompaniment volume or the misuse of any individual instrument or kind of instrument (e.g., strumming a guitar so hard that the congregation cannot hear the chords). Since the purpose of accompaniment is to enable the congregation to follow the tune (and often the harmony as well), instruments which do not facilitate or accomplish that purpose (e.g., percussion) are to be used only in conjunction with other instruments and in such a way that they do not overpower or obscure the tune.

Accompaniment instruments should not be located or employed in such a way as to draw attention to either the instrument or the accompanist. The role of the accompanists is that of service to the worshippers; they are not performers focusing attention on themselves. A song leader, although also a servant, must be visible (if actually conducting the music and setting the time), but should not draw attention to himself by his style, deportment, or comments.

Congregational music is a biblical priority and should comprise the majority of music at most services. “Special music,” whether by an individual or small group, should be offered as a means of directing the congregation’s attention to God and should never focus attention on the singer/s personally (whether their physical appearance or their musical abilities). Factors to consider in each such instance include the physical location, the dress (which should be modest), deportment, and the musical style of the singer/s. Conversely, applause by the congregation is not an appropriate response to special music since it implies a performance.

Some music, which may be appropriate as “special music,” may be very difficult for a congregation to sing. If the content of such songs is biblical and substantial, these may certainly be used as special music if presented appropriately. Music intended for congregational use, however, must consider the abilities of the typical worshipper (not just the proficient musician). Those responsible for such selection should seek to facilitate worship by all (including children, teens, adults, and seniors), not frustrate such attempts by those with lesser abilities.