I. Welcome/Prayer - Introduction

One of the beautiful aspects of God’s work in saving his church is that he calls all kinds of people into fellowship together. People from formal and traditional backgrounds, and people with a more casual bent. People who grew up listening to Bach, or Brazilian Samba, or the Beatles, or Biggie – all of them united to Jesus.

This can make for some challenges when we gather together to worship. Let me ask you: *How does corporate worship affect our unity?*

It’s not only today that worship has the potential to be divisive. When Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well in John chapter 4, she invited him into a debate on worship -- should God’s people worship in Jerusalem or at the twin mountains Gerizim and Ebal in Samaria? Jesus responds by teaching her about what worship is. He says God is seeking *worshippers* who will worship him *in Spirit* and *in truth* (vv. 23-24).

So, what’s our goal this morning? We can’t tackle everything there is to say about worship. But as we near the end of a course on our life together as a church and the importance of our unity, we should consider how we can help each other toward this ultimate goal of worshipping Christ. In many ways, God-glorifying worship is one of the sweetest and most valuable fruits of the unity we’ve been discussing. And at the same time, true worship will naturally foster unity.

We’ll begin by defining worship and corporate worship, and then we’ll look at four ways that corporate worship has a unique role to play in our life as a congregation.

**II. Definition of Worship**

So, first, a definition of worship. Worship is a rich concept in the Bible – there’s no one main Greek word that corresponds to our English word “worship,” but there are lots of different terms. As we look through the New Testament in particular, it becomes clear that worship extends far beyond what goes on in a church on a Sunday morning—certainly far beyond praise in the form of song. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, “Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” (10:31) To the Romans, he writes “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship” (12:1). Christ, the perfect lamb, is the one sufficient sacrifice for us. So the sacrifices we offer in the new covenant aren’t burnt offerings, like in the Old Testement, but submission of every aspect of our lives to the glory and praise of God.

So, then how might we define worship? D.A. Carson has a paragraph-long definition of worship, which is on the back of your handout. That would be helpful to read later, but for now, let’s take David Peterson’s less detailed definition: Worship is “engaging with God on the terms that he proposes and in the way that he alone makes possible.” That includes all of life worship – our affections, our actions, our obedience, our relationships – and it includes corporate worship – our times of praising God and edifying one another together.

Worship is **God-centered**. It’s a proper response to the majesty of God’s character—a God who is worthy of our praise. Worship goes beyond simply knowing intellectually what God is like and takes *delight* in the perfection of his attributes.

Worship is **Christ-centered**. Our worship of God is only possible because of Christ’s death and resurrection. Without Jesus sacrifice on our behalf we will not be able to enter God’s presence, and therefore not hope for the image we have of heaven in the bible. We see this Christ-centered worship very clearly in Revelation 5. God is sitting on the throne, holding a scroll that is sealed. Only the Lion of the tribe of Judah, who is also the Lamb, can open that scroll; only He is worthy. And we read that He (Christ) “stands in the very center of the throne,” one with God himself (v.6). *Christ* is then praised as the one who was slain, who is worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals. From that point on in the book of Revelation, worship is addressed to “him who sits on the throne *and to the Lamb*.”

And worship is **Spirit-empowered**. Before he teaches us to sing to one another, to give thanks in our hearts to God, Paul calls us in Eph 5:18 to be filled with the Spirit. Jesus teaches that the Spirit’s ministry among us is one that brings Jesus glory – John 16:14, “[The Spirit] will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.”

So what is a Biblical understanding of worship? Let me suggest three things in summary:

1. It is a proper response to God himself. Worship is something that is commanded of all—and it’s a natural and right reaction to the glory of God.
2. It encompasses our entire lives. It’s not simply the singing of praise to God. It involves both adoration and action. Worship doesn’t end with what we say, but includes what we do.
3. It is a delight in the beauty of God and of Christ. It is not a delight in the experience of worship. In our evangelical culture, *worship* too often refers to the emotions that we experience as we (perhaps) close our eyes and sing about God—and we can be more caught up in that experience than in the God who is supposed to be the origin of that experience. We should instead focus our hearts and minds on God and Christ in our worship. So, if worship has lots of passion, but no genuine thought the that’s not true worship. The converse is also true: if worship is only thinking right things, with no intent to stir affections toward God, it too is false.

**III. Definition of Corporate Worship**

So, that’s some of what is and is not *worship*. What about corporate worship -- the time when we gather together as a congregation publicly for the purpose of praising God? Based on what I’ve just described as worship, you might think that our church picnic constitutes corporate worship— after all, we are doing things for the glory of God, and we are doing them together as a congregation. But clearly there’s something more to corporate worship than just that.

Fortunately, God has given us guidance through scripture about what happens when a congregation gathers publicly for the purpose of worshipping God. In the New Testament, we see commands for the church to pray (Col 4:2-4, 1 Tim 2:1-2), to read Scripture publicly (1 Tim. 4:13; Col. 4:15, 16), to listen to preaching and teaching (Acts 2:42; 1 Tim. 4:13), to baptize believers (Matt 28:19) and share the Lord’s supper (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 11); to encourage each other and praise God in song (Eph. 5:19, Heb 13:15), and to give of their finances (1 Cor 16:1-2). 1 Cor 14:26 is clear: every one of these things that we do together, must be done “for the strengthening of the church”

These are things that the New Testament instructs us to do when we gather, either by command or by example. But what about other things? You might find that going on a long hike in the mountains can be a great way to excite your heart and mind toward praising God. What if every other week we decided as a church to go hiking on Sunday morning rather than to meet in this building? We would be assembling together, as is commanded of us in Hebrews 10 (v. 25). And we would be worshipping God. But would that be corporate worship? It certainly wouldn’t fit the normal pattern of what the Bible lays out to define what a church does together in the unique time when we meet for worship.

This leads us to an important theme in scripture that is worth mentioning: God has defined how we should approach him corporately, and so it is possible to offer wrong worship.

God is infinite, all-wise, omniscient; we are finite and sinfully self-interested in our own glory. We can’t know him unless he reveals himself to us, and we can’t understand what worship will be pleasing to him unless he reveals that to us.

And so the Bible makes very clear how we should worship God -- particularly when we worship him together in public. For example, in the second commandment (Exodus 20:4), God prohibits worship through images -- making it clear that he alone regulates how he will be served. The consequences of this principle become clear when the people build and worship the golden calf -- probably intended as a representation of God – but obviously not pleasing to the Lord. And later, when Nadab and Abihu offer up “unauthorized fire” to the Lord, a type of devotion “contrary to his command,” God strikes them dead (Leviticus 10:1-3). Jesus rejected the worship of the Pharisees, quoting from Isaiah that “They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.” (Mark 7:7)

Scripture is clear on the ways that we are to approach him when we gather publicly. God has done this so that our worship won’t be confused with other religions and gods; he does it so that we will be blessed, as he knows what is best for us.

All this to say, when we consider corporate worship, we must understand that the Bible doesn’t leave us free to improvise, but regulates the elements of worship and the content of our worship. Of course, the *forms* of those elements of worship may change over time; in one generation we may sing a cappella; in another we may sing with a guitar and an overhead projector. One other item of note: corporate worship is public worship. It is time for the entire church to gather together when outsiders are invited and welcome to learn about the true God as we see in 1 Cor. 14. Through their corporate worship, a congregation proclaims God to the watching world.

So, to sum up, corporate worship is: gathering publicly as a church to engage with God according to his instructions in scripture.

One key implication of this is that at the center of our corporate worship is expositional preaching. Why? Because God’s word, and understanding what it says, is the apex of engaging with God as he reveals himself to his people. Singing is, of course, part of our worship and is helpful in focusing our thoughts and engage our emotions. But the exposition of God’s Word is the centerpiece of the church gathering.

**IV. Unity in Corporate Worship**

Having defined corporate worship, let’s move to IV and consider this question: How do we maintain unity in corporate worship in spite of our diversity of preferences? Philippians 2:2 tells us that as a church we are to be “like minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.” (Phil 2:2). But one of the things that gives real bang to the church’s witness is its diversity: the fact that different sinners from different backgrounds choose to love each other because of the power of God at work within us. And we know that different people will find different styles of corporate worship to be more or less emotionally and intellectually engaging.

So, how do we approach corporate worship when, each one of us has our preferences, likes and dislikes with regard to forms of corporate worship like music, or the style of the service? Well, continuing on in Philippians 2, we read, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interest of others.” (v.3-4). We are called to submit to each other for the sake of Christ—to love each other and serve each other in this way, even as we do in so many other aspects of church life.

The reason I’m emphasizing this point is because so often today, we encounter a strange contradiction. Corporate worship is the one time when we are most self-consciously focusing our attention as a body on the glory of God. And yet so often, corporate worship is the aspect of a church’s life that prompts the most selfishness.

That shouldn’t be the case! If we thought of corporate worship as something that involves just me and Jesus, then we’ll certainly be disappointed if it’s not our preferred style. We need to think of corporate worship as something that we do together as a family—in love for each other and for God. How do we learn to think that way?

One thing that can help is approaching Sunday morning with a sense of our desperate need for Him. Worship isn’t fundamentally about me; it’s about seeing and savoring God together with the community of faith. Let’s not come hungry to have our personal preferences meet, but hungry for a deeper connection to our church community and understanding of our great God.

Four thoughts of what this might look like:

1. First, **sacrifice.** Corporate worship is glorifying to God because we do it *together*—and this involves sacrifice, like so many other areas of our life as a church.
2. Second, **growth.** We need to remember that in love, we can learn to use worship styles and traditions that at first might seem foreign and to grow in our appreciation for them.
3. Third, **being considerate.** We should keep in mind the importance of not doing things that would distract others in the congregation from worshiping. That involves everything from what we wear to how we talk about the songs with others. It means not making fun of songs in a way that would hinder others from using them to worship; it also means that those that select the music should be careful not to pick songs that are easy to make fun of!
4. Fourth, **honesty.** It can only help our unity if we’re honest about a couple things. For one, our church does have a particular culture. You can’t escape that. We worship in English, so many of our hymns are American, English, or European. We’ve tried to prioritize simple accompaniment so the sound of people’s voices is the most prominent thing. We value songs with good words from many different centuries, so much of our music feels dated to some. It’s good to be honest about that. It’s also good to honestly recognize that this means that some people are going to have a harder time than others adjusting to the way we worship here. For some it feels comfortable, like Grandma’s church; but for others it feels like church on Mars. We love each other well if we’re aware that some people may have to sacrifice their preferences more, and if we listen to them as they deal with that and pray for them in that.

**[Questions]**

**V. Corporate Worship as a Platform for Unity**

We’ve talked about how we can work toward unity in our corporate worship; with the remainder of our time, I’d like to discuss four ways that our corporate worship helps our unity and our witness.

***1. Corporate worship displays our God-glorifying unity***

First, corporate worship is an opportunity to display the unity that we have in Christ. It’s wonderful when we can sit on our own in the morning and praise God for some facet of his character during our devotional times. But there’s something special in gathering publicly and praising God together! As Peter reminds us, that’s one of the reasons God has brought Jew and Gentile together into the church: now, he says, “You are a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pet 2:9).

This is why Jesus is so insistent that we deal with areas of disunity before worship. He says in the Sermon on the Mount, “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.” (Matthew 5:23-24).

Paul echoes this teaching when he discusses the Lord’s Supper. He says: “For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.” (I Cor. 11:29) What does it mean to not recognize the body of the Lord? Well, Paul has been talking about how the Corinthians celebrate the Lord’s Supper in disunity, humiliating the poor among them. The body of Christ he refers to is the church. Unity must be present if we are to offer a pleasing sacrifice of praise to God; and when unity is present, corporate worship is a beautiful outpouring of God’s glory. So, then, we should regularly -- not just in preparation of the Lord’s Supper -- examine our relationships with each other as well as with God.

***2. We help each other to worship***

One of the great advantages we have as we worship together as a church is that we can help each other to grasp the glorious beauty of our God—and help each other express our response, in joyful praise and thanksgiving. Corporate worship, then, provides a platform on which we can serve one another.

This happens in the structure of our worship services, as we bring musicians together to help us sing; as men who have studied hard to prepare a message on God’s word preach; and as our voices and expressions encourage each other throughout the service. The author of Hebrews tells us to “consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” (Heb. 10:24). That certainly includes helping each other to worship.

Now, aside from what I just mentioned, what are ways in which we can help each other worship God when we gather together as a congregation? I’ll put that to you as a question. *How do you help others worship?*

Some potential answers to consider:

* We can discuss the sermon text with others in preparation for Sunday morning.
* Sing loudly and joyfully
* We can regularly attend the Lord’s supper; and take it seriously
* We can discuss the sermon and the service as a whole after church
* We can express joy to each other during the service. “Amen”
* We can welcome those around us who are unfamiliar
* We can foster a culture of prayerfulness by reflecting on the prayers on Sunday morning with others just like we would for the sermon.
* Turn your phone off, don’t have loud conversations during the service, sit in the middle of the pew and toward the front, come early, leave late, listen to the parking attendants, thank the folks who volunteer during the service itself…. etc

***3. Corporate worship is edifying***

Third, corporate worship is an opportunity for us to edify each other. You might be somewhat surprised to discover in Scripture that God isn’t the only one we address during times of corporate worship. Paul writes to the Ephesians, for example, “Speak to *one another* with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the *Lord*” (Eph. 5:19).

When we sing on Sunday morning, or read Scripture, or pray—we’re communicating not only to God but also to one another. Why is that important? Because we need to be reminded of so many of the great truths in scripture, themes that we often return to in our times of corporate worship—that God created us, that He is perfectly just, that we have sinned against Him, and that Jesus died as our substitute on the cross. We hear these truths from the sermon, but it helps our hearts to hear them also from the singing voices and engaged faces of our brothers and sisters around us.

So, let me share a few suggestions particularly in the area of singing on how we can use our songs to edify one another:

1. Meditate on the meaning of the words as you sing, and think about not only how those truths apply to you, but apply to others in the church.
2. In ways that are natural and comfortable for you and not distracting to others, consider how your body language can help encourage others while you sing – perhaps smiling at certain sections, looking around from time to time.
3. Sing loud so we can hear one another.
4. Strive to sing as part of the whole – even if you’re not musical, listen to how others are singing, and blend your voice to theirs. Listening to others is a great way to learn the songs and to improve in your own singing.
5. If you are able, sing in parts. The richness and fullness of the music comes out when the different parts, which are printed in the bulletin, are sung. And who knows you might be standing next to someone who has never been bold enough to sing a part and you will help them take that step.

***4. Corporate worship offers a taste of heaven***

Finally, corporate worship offers us a taste of what heaven will be like. Heaven is the place where the full community of God’s people will dwell with him forever, praising his name and delighting in his glory. Corporate worship, then, is a snapshot of that experience that we can appreciate in this life. The author of Hebrews paints a beautiful picture in chapter 12. “But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant.” (12:22-24)

When we come together in worship on Sunday morning, we catch a glimpse of the glory of that final congregation in heaven. That’s when heaven feels most real, and we esteem the things of God as most valuable. We need the picture that corporate worship paints of heaven because, despite the brokenness of this world, heaven is our true home. In heaven, we will be perfectly united with Christ. So the unity we experience while we worship corporately in this life points us forward to the ultimate unity we will know in Him on that day.