

There is lots going on in and through our church this Summer, and as many of your rhythms change, I want to invite you both to prayer and to one of our Summer Serve opportunities. You've just heard about our kids camps, and I also want to let you know about our volunteer needs in our Sunday children's ministry.

A number of our children's ministry volunteers are taking a well-deserved break over the Summer, and if you add up our different Sunday classroom needs, we have close to 60 serving opportunities still available, with a particular need in our nursery and preschool. I told Pastor Linda that she could sign me up for 3-4 spots; it's one of my favourite serving opportunities all year. Let me encourage you to sign up today. You can connect with Linda this morning, or by phone and email this week, or, you can sign up on the Summer schedule Linda has posted downstairs.

Over the last 7 weeks, we've focussed our teaching around some of the symbols, rituals, and practices that define our life in Christian community—we've talked about baptism, financial giving, membership, and the Lord's Supper. This morning I want to conclude our series by talking about something that is central to Christian life and practice, namely worship.

God created humanity for worship—it is the reason we exist. God didn't create humanity because He was lonely—from eternity past God has existed in perfect relationship as Father, Son, and Spirit. God didn't create humanity because He required help to fulfill His

plans—God has wisdom, strength, and resources to spare. There wasn't any need or deficiency in God that made creation necessary. God created out of His abundance and generosity. God's beauty, His wisdom, His love, and His glory are things to be shared and enjoyed. God created humanity so that we might know and enjoy Him.

The Westminster Confession states that the primary purpose of humanity is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.¹ John Piper—a pastor writing about the importance of mission—had the following to say about the priority of worship:

“Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Missions exists because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more.”² Worship is central because God stands at the centre.

In Revelation 4 and 5, we are given a small window into the worship that is happening right now, in the unseen heavenly realm. The apostle John was given a vision in which he saw God seated upon a throne and surrounding His throne were angels, leaders, and multitudes of people singing common songs of worship. The first song is found in Revelation 4:8, “*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.*”

¹ **worship:** Ps. 86:9; Isa. 60:21; Rom. 11:36; I Cor. 6:20; 10:31; Rev. 4:11; **enjoyment:** Ps. 16:5-11; 144:15; Isa. 12:2; Phil. 4:4; Rev. 21:3-4.

² John Piper, *Let The Nations Be Glad*, 15.

In Revelation 5, Jesus is front and centre—He is honoured and adored as the Lamb of God, the One who laid down His life in death, that we might be rescued and restored to the Father. Verse 12 says, *“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!”*

In Revelation 7, John was transported into another worship setting and he wrote the following in verses 9-12: *“9 After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb...10 And they cried out in a loud voice: ‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb...Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!’”*

Worship is central because God stands at the centre.

Let’s think together for a moment about the group John describes—there are representatives from every country, every ethnicity, every people group, every language; it’s a group so large that it cannot be counted. The longer I contemplate this gathering, the more I am astounded not by the size, but by the diversity. Groups like this don’t naturally come together or stick together; there are too many forces keeping them apart: geography, ethnicity, language, culture, values, beliefs, and preferences.

Revelation 7 offers a vision of our future; this is a glimpse of the people of God as we will one day be—a united, diverse, multitude of worshippers, centred around God.

So let me ask, *if God stands at the centre, and worship is a centering practice of the Christian community, then why do so many people disagree and divide over issues in worship?*

We can see this reality from the very beginning. Four chapters into the opening book of the Bible, two brothers divided over worship issues—Cain’s anger led to violence and he killed his brother Abel.

As you study church history, you find this same divisive tendency repeating itself throughout the centuries. But what you find is that most of the earlier worship wars had more to do with theology than music. The first great church split happened in 1054—the Eastern church and Western church divided. They sharply disagreed about whether the Father had sent the Holy Spirit (Eastern), or, whether the Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit (Western). Further, the Eastern church didn’t like the Western insistence that the Bishop of Rome was infallible, or, that his authority should supersede the authority of all other bishops.

In 1517, Martin Luther, a young German priest and professor, wrote out his concerns over corruption in the Catholic church—by the time he was finished, his list contained 95 abuses. Luther nailed his list to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, hoping to begin a discussion. Among other things, Luther suggested that forgiveness for sins could not be bought and sold as a fund raising strategy for the church. Four years later, Luther was excommunicated and the Church divided into Catholics and Protestants.

But division didn’t end there. Like a small crack on your windshield, once division begins, it spreads in every direction. Some members of the Protestant movement began to rethink the way baptism was being

practiced. They noticed in the narrative sections of the New Testament, that those being baptized weren't infants, they were believers who were old enough to be able to make their own confession of faith in Christ.

When they changed their practice to reflect this reality, they were branded as heretics and given the name “Anabaptists”—*one who baptizes over again*. Many Anabaptists were rounded up and forced to recant, or be killed, often by drowning—*if you like baptism by immersion so much, then we'll keep you under until you stop breathing*.

In England, churches split over who was allowed to teach and preach the Scriptures. The Church of England declared that unless you were ordained by the church, you were not allowed to publicly preach and teach. John Bunyan, the writer and preacher—not to be confused with Paul Bunyan the Lumberjack—was not ordained, and his public preaching landed him in jail for 12 long years.

Division continues today over worship issues, and while some of the division continues to revolve around theology, much of the division today has to do with matters of culture or preference. Some churches have split over whether you can only sing Scripture (Psalms), or whether songs can be written that are based on Scripture and theology. Some churches have split over whether worship songs are allowed to be sung with instrumental accompaniment or not; other churches have split over the kind of musical instruments that are allowed to be used.

illus: In my first year of Bible school, I can remember listening to a professor talk about worship wars in the church. He read to us a

letter, written to a Board from a congregant, regarding the worship music. The congregant levelled their complaint—the church's worship did not honour God because an unnamed musical instrument was being used in the church service.

After reading the letter, the professor asked us to guess when this letter had been written, and to name the instrument in question. It turned out the letter was written to a church in Ontario, in the early 1900's. The congregant in question was distraught over the church's decision to use an organ to accompany the singing: *doesn't everyone know that the organ is the devil's instrument?* At the time, organs were being played in Bars and Public Houses, and so by association, the instrument itself was evil and to be avoided.

It seems a little silly doesn't it? An instrument is just that—an instrument—neither good nor bad. Unfortunately, we rarely learn from our history. 60 or 70 years later, many of the people who grew up loving the organ began to make the very same worship arguments, but this time different instruments were in focus: drums and guitars. *How can instruments used in rock music be used to bring honour and glory to God?*

Why have I told you all these stories about division? My point is not to paint Christians as the most disagreeable people on the planet. Division is a problem for Christians, but it is not a uniquely Christian problem—division is a human problem.

Let me take you back to John's vision of heavenly worship: a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, centred around Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and

together they are expressing adoration, honour, and praise to the God who has rescued them.

None of us can create this kind of unity in diversity—humanity left to itself will divide and go its own way. This kind of unity is something that only exists in God, something we can choose to embrace and enter into, or, to reject. What’s at stake goes far beyond unity; God’s glory in the church is at stake—worship is at stake.

In the time remaining, I want to encourage you to turn with me to Ephesians 4:1-6. The Apostle Paul is writing to a church as diverse as the heavenly gathering we just read about: young and old, male and female, rich and poor, slave and free, Jew, Greek, and Roman. In today’s day and age, church growth specialists would tell us to pick a target audience—design a church for young or old, rich or poor, Asian or Iranian or Caucasian.

Paul wasn’t blind to the differences in language, culture, gender, or economics but his attention was fixed elsewhere. The church is the masterpiece of God’s grace—the collection of people who have been rescued, reconciled, and restored regardless of gender, language, or culture. These former distinctions must all be filtered through the cross of Jesus Christ.

Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we have been united to God and to one another.³ And so, while there will always be differences in age, gender, culture, and preference, our new identity as the one people of God trumps every former distinction. What unites us is Christ, what we enter into is the oneness that exists in

God—this is what captures Paul’s attention. Let me read Ephesians 4:1-6.

*“As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. 2 Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. 3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one **Spirit**, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; 5 one **Lord**, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and **Father** of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”*

Let me offer 3 observations: **(1) First, unity begins in God.** We aren’t asked to create unity, we are invited to enter into it. Verse 3 tells us that we enter into, and participate in, the unity of the Spirit. And this unity of the Spirit is the unity that exists between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Notice the triadic patterning in vs. 4-6; Paul may not offer a full-blown theology of the Trinity, but he lays the ground work for this theology in every letter he writes. One Spirit, one Lord Jesus Christ, one God and Father of all—God is three and yet one—caught up in His very being is unity in diversity. The internal life of God is intended to be the pattern of our life together. Lets move on to the second observation.

(2) Second, unity may begin in God, but it must be preserved by us. Ephesians 4:3 says, *“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”*

³ F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistles To The Colossians, To Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 331.

Unity does exist in God, it's not something we create, but the ongoing experience of unity requires effort on our part. Paul tells us to "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit". He's really saying two things. First, he's saying, "*make unity a priority, be eager for it.*" And second, he's saying, "*unity is something that needs to be kept, preserved, guarded, and fought for.*"

My dear people, the unity of the Spirit is both precious and fragile. If it weren't so precious, he wouldn't tell us to make every effort to keep it. And if it weren't so fragile, it wouldn't require us to be transformed. We make every effort to keep this unity—as individuals and as a community—when we invite the Holy Spirit to cultivate three essential character qualities: humility, gentleness, and patience. Verse 2 says, "*Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.*"

We cultivate *humility* by renouncing self-centredness. Philippians 2 reminds us that Jesus, though He was God, didn't use His status to His own advantage or to get ahead. This is the quintessence of humility—Jesus used His power and influence to serve others.

We cultivate *gentleness* by renouncing harshness and oppression. Proverbs 15:1 says, "*A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.*" Being gentle doesn't mean spineless or weak, but it does mean dealing mercifully with those who criticize or disagree with us—it does mean defending the reputation of others and letting God defend our own reputation.

⁴ Klyne Snodgrass, *The NIV Application Commentary: Ephesians*, 218-219.

⁵ Snodgrass, 219.

We cultivate *patience* by renouncing our agendas.⁴ God gives us no guarantee that when we live humbly and gently before others, that we will be treated with love and respect. The call to patience is a call to journey with people who think differently than we do, and to bear with them in love. This patient, persevering, love, gives others room to "fail, learn, and develop."⁵

Let us not seek our own good—let us seek the unity of the Spirit and the good of one another. When it comes to worship, let us let go of small-mindedness...even a small sample of church history reveals that worship of the one God can have many different expressions.

Let's commit to cultivating humility, gentleness, and patient, persevering, love. The Holy Spirit seeks to cultivate these character qualities in every disciple of Jesus, and, in every church—where these qualities abound, the unity of the Spirit is kept and preserved. Let me offer a third and final observation:

(3) Third, what we hold is common is far more substantial than what separates us. When you look at vs. 4-6, which word is repeated seven times? *One*.

Throughout the New Testament, Paul uses the image of the human body to convey spiritual realities. "*Jesus is the head,*" says Paul, "*and the church is His body.*" Jesus only has one body—there may be many different churches, in many different locations, but together they form one body.

There is only one hope, one baptism, one faith, and one common future that awaits everyone who puts their trust in Jesus. And if we're all following the same Person, and will end up at the same destination, isn't wise to minimize petty differences that exist between us?

God is not divided—there is only one Spirit, one Lord Jesus Christ, and one Father. I don't have the corner on the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, neither do you, neither does our church, the church down the street, or any church in the history of the world. God doesn't belong to any individual.

One author writes, "*Christianity is a shared faith...Christians must maintain the unity of the Spirit because everything they hold of any significance they hold with other people.*"⁶ We are a part of the universal church, the one people of God, the people that are being shaped in the present for our collective life in the future.

One day we will be a part of the most diverse community ever assembled—every country, people group, language, culture, and preference represented in the same place. And here's the most incredible part, we're going to love it! Whatever differences remain won't have any dividing effect. We will enjoy the company of people who are very different than us, and together we will glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

Conclusion: As I conclude this morning, I want to share a few of the values that continue to shape our worship culture here at North Shore Alliance.

- We value both a rootedness in the Scriptures, and a responsiveness to the Holy Spirit. We are people of the Spirit and people of the Word—Christian worship requires both.
- We value prayer in its many different forms. All of life is prayer, in the sense that all of life is a response to what God has said, done, and revealed. We want to provide opportunities for people to respond to what God is saying and doing every time we gather.
- We value a spirit of anticipation and expectation. Whenever we gather as God's people, one thing is guaranteed: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit dwell in our midst. Since God is living, active, and present, every time we gather we can expect Him to offer direction, to teach us, to pour out His love, His forgiveness, His healing. God is present in love and power.
- We value an environment characterized by honesty and authenticity. If you're looking for the perfect church, you won't find it here. We're a community of broken people, seeking God for our healing and wholeness.
- We value participation. In worship, God is the audience—we are the singers, players, and pray-ors—but we are not performers, we are participants in the worship that has been going on since the dawn of creation.
- We value the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. God has given these two gifts to the church, so that through them, we might participate in the life of God.
- We value telling stories of God's work in our midst. Every time I hear a story about God at work in your life, my heart is encouraged, and my faith grows. We want to be a church of a thousand stories.

⁶ Snodgrass, 198.

I could keep going, but I'll end there.

Once we were not a people, we were alienated from God and one another because of our sin. But because of God's great mercy, He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves—through Jesus we have been forgiven and restored. And as a sign that we belong to God, that we are His people, He has sent His Holy Spirit as a guarantee of our coming inheritance: life without end, life together, life without division.

May the Lord fill us with His patient, persevering, love, that we might share these gifts with one another, as we await our blessed future.

Worship