

# INTRODUCING WORSHIP THEMES

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## OVERVIEW

One of the distinctive practices of Northwest Valley Baptist Church from its founding has been its purposeful approach to planning and executing its weekly worship services. For each worship service a theme is chosen which centers on a particular aspect of the Triune God's character; that theme is summarized in a title for Him (e.g., "Redeemer," "Holy God," "Cornerstone") and explicitly defined and presented early in the worship service.

Almost all elements of the service—congregational hymns, prepared music, Scripture reading, and more—are chosen to feature and develop that theme. This approach lends focus and understanding to our worship services and naturally restrains any one service element or servant from taking undue prominence above the Person of God Himself. He is the functional centerpiece of the worship service.

## SHAPING THEMES

1. **Name each theme as a title for God.** This is an important technicality: we do not worship *grace* but rather our "Gracious God." We worship the "Justifier," not *justification*.
2. **Worship the *Triune* God.** The Scriptures encourage worship of all Persons of the Trinity. In our themes we worship Father, Son, and Spirit. Often our themes present attributes of God reflected in each Person of the Trinity or the Triune God as a whole.
3. **Let themes rise from both biblical and systematic theology.** Here are some ways both approaches to Scriptural truth affect worship theme development.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY	SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY
What names of God and patterns of His working do we encounter in the narratives and books of Scripture?	What do we know to be true about God from the Bible? What all does Scripture say about that aspect of Him?

4. **Relate themes to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.** Jesus' righteous life, atoning death, and resurrection are the basis of our relationship with God and the means by which we can approach God in worship. No worship service should fail to acknowledge this, no matter its theme. Such Christ-centered-ness in worship is not forced, since the attributes of the Triune God come to full expression in the Person, work, and gospel of Jesus Christ.

## UNIQUE ELEMENTS

The key piece of our service-order puzzle that this approach requires is what we call the **theme introduction**. At a moment early in the worship service, we present the worship theme for two to three minutes. We say what the theme is, explain what it means, and try to engage people’s imaginations and affections for God about it.

We also project a **title image** of the theme on our screen throughout the service. This image displays between projected hymn and other music texts as a visual means of keeping our focus on the theme.

## PLANNING & PRACTICE

Of course, all of requires planning. Below is an outline of our planning process. We have regular prepared music that is rehearsed four weeks in advance of each service, so our lead time is longer. This timetable could compress considerably without prepared music.

PHASE	DEADLINE	ACTIVITY
<b>Worship Planning</b>	2 months before	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Worship Director</b> (a) assigns themes to each Sunday of one month and (b) prepares each theme’s title, Scriptures, and definition.</li><li><b>Worship Planning Team</b> (includes senior pastor) meets to discuss and determine the “angle” we will take to introduce each theme for that month. Team also selects from the congregation those who will present the theme in the worship service.</li><li><b>Worship Secretary</b> (volunteer) summarizes each theme discussion from the meeting in a briefing paragraph. This paragraph serves as the basis for worship scheduling and service ordering (below).</li></ol>
<b>Worship Scheduling</b>	1 month before	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Worship Director</b> selects service elements (Scripture reading and prepared music) to fit and feature the worship themes for that month.</li><li><b>Worship Secretary</b> recruits worship personnel.</li></ol>
<b>Service Ordering</b>	1 week before	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Worship Director</b> fills in congregational hymns, specific stanzas, and loose “script” notes for himself, to bind the service verbally to the theme.</li></ol>

## BENEFITS

1. **We worship genuinely, with understanding.** Centering your service on an aspect of God does not automatically make everyone worship, but it does give everyone a clear “worship target”: to respond to God’s character and works by acclaiming His glories together. We have found that having a lens (an aspect of God’s character) encourages attention in worship. The natural response to prolonged meditation on God’s character is a genuine response (“in spirit”) to the revelation of God about Himself (“in truth”).
2. **We focus less on the music and musicians.** Without a central theme connecting individual service elements (specifically, hymns and prepared music), it is easier to start “scoring” each hymn (“Do I like it?”), choral anthem (“They did great today!”), vocal solo (“I don’t like his voice.”) or offertory (“I love the violin!”). A central theme turns attention away from the people to the God they are presenting in music.
3. **We learn theology.** One of the pleasant byproducts of this approach is that our congregation deepens their understanding of God and His Word. Our two-year cycle of worship themes produces over time a theologically rooted congregation. Yet they learn this theology in a context of heartfelt, personal, and corporate response to that truth, not mere factual knowledge.

## AN INVITATION

Churches will apply the Bible’s teaching about worship differently. That is fine. But every faithful church, in whatever context, should use tangible means and methods to lend theological focus and facilitate genuine participation in our worship services!

In our efforts to avoid the supposed dangers of more liturgical approaches to worship, many independent-Baptist-like churches have opted out of purposeful worship altogether. What drives our services in this vacuum is a mix of service-order tradition, artistic novelty, and pragmatism.

We wholeheartedly ask you to **consider implementing this method** for practicing biblical worship. Furthermore, we invite you to **coordinate a visit** to join us for a Sunday morning worship service; there is no substitute for seeing this method first-hand. We believe worship themes are worth a try for any church!



**NORTHWEST VALLEY BAPTIST CHURCH**

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