

EMBRACING THE PRESENCE IN OUR MIDST

A User-Friendly Introduction to the Quaker Practice of Unprogrammed Worship



The Presence in the Midst by J. Doyle Penrose (1916)



EVANGELICAL FRIENDS CHURCH • MID AMERICA

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“Where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”

- Jesus, Matthew 18:20

Unprogrammed worship (also known as “open worship” or “communion in the manner of Friends”) is a special time set aside for the sole purpose of attending to the “still, small voice” of God. At the center of unprogrammed worship is the core conviction that our risen Lord, Jesus Christ, is a “present teacher.” This means that we believe that Jesus is a very real and living “presence in the midst” of his people when we gather in his name.

As with any other public assembly of God’s people, unprogrammed worship is a communal exercise rather than an individual experience. This means that the depth and quality of our corporate worship experience will be directly dependent upon the level of personal investment and participation of each person who is in attendance, and their willingness to remain open and receptive to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Although there is no set structure, unprogrammed worship tends to move through four general stages. As each worshipper learns to be increasingly sensitive to the ebb and flow that typically accompanies these gatherings, it provides a greater awareness of Jesus’ presence among us and enhances one’s receptivity to his leading.

Stage One: Center (Focus on the Presence of Christ)

Most of us come to worship with a lot on our minds, so it is natural that during periods of extended silence we may be easily distracted by any number of personal concerns. To “center” means to focus our awareness upon the presence of Jesus Christ, clearing the clutter by allowing distractions to slip into the background while thoughts and impressions of Jesus are allowed to fill our minds. Many find that silent prayer, reading from God’s Word, or reading a hymn from the hymnal at the beginning of this time helps them to “take every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). It is often helpful to repeat a familiar centering prayer as we enter into unprogrammed worship, such as “Come, Lord Jesus,” or “Lord Jesus, have mercy,” or “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” Some also find it helpful to take several deep breaths or open their hands as they offer these prayers as a way of inviting our bodies to be fully present in worship as well, remaining mindful of the biblical admonition to “offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship” (Romans 12:1).

Stage Two: Connect (Awareness of the Body of Christ)

Unprogrammed worship allows us to have a sense of being connected with others and to be centered with them in a common awareness of Christ's presence. Being a part of a gathered community also brings a heightened sense of spiritual unity with the body of Christ. When a meeting is connected there is a common sense of direction and order, and a genuine desire to practice mutual submission and edification. We cooperate in the process of connecting by having an awareness of the other people joining in worship, taking note of how they are focusing on Jesus, and praying for ways to cooperate with them in the adventure of corporate worship.

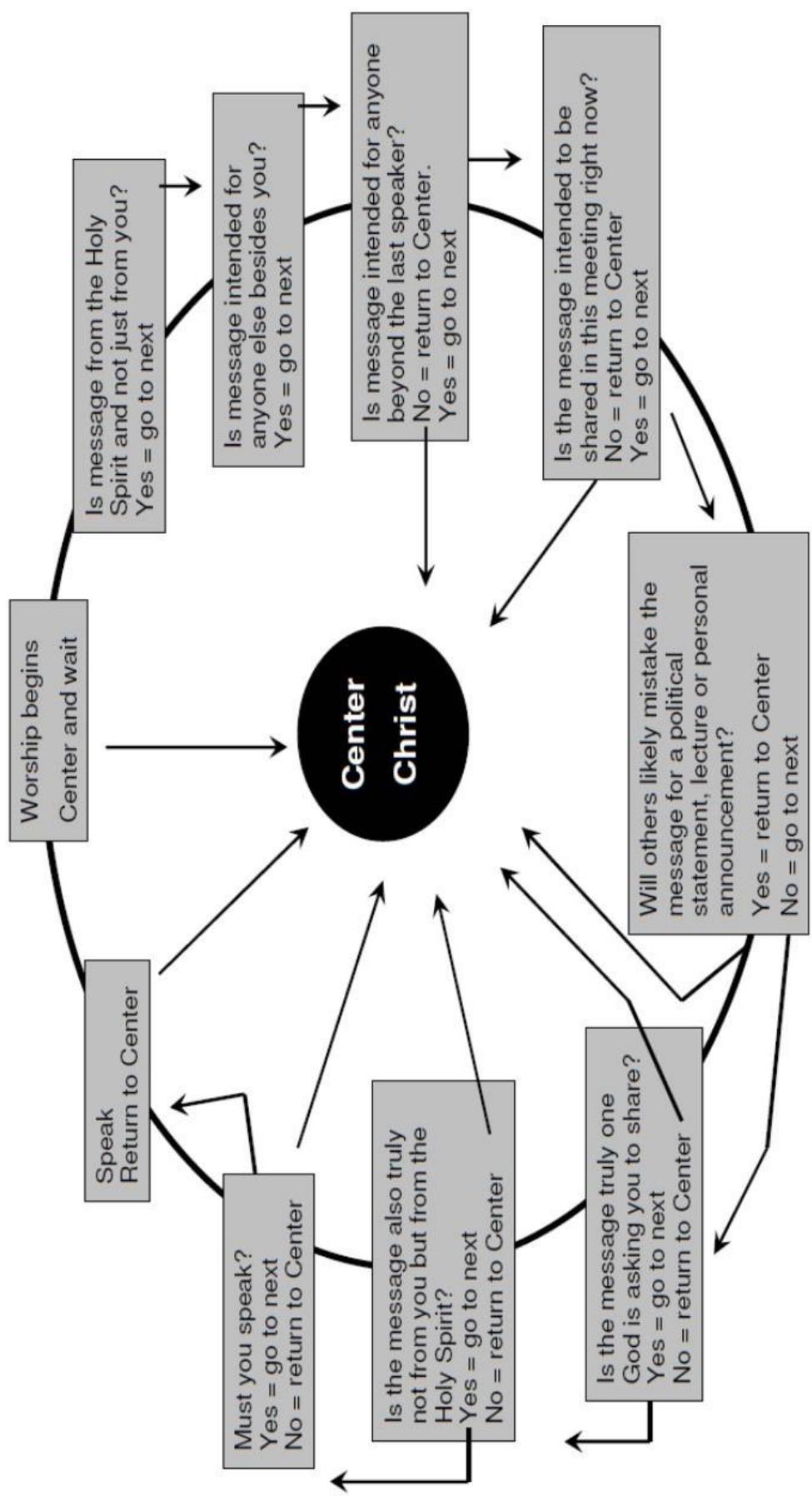
Stage Three: Communicate (Response to the Spirit of Christ)

Silence during unprogrammed worship can be empty or full, depending on our level of personal investment and participation. As we wait upon the Lord, we may be prompted to break the silence by standing and speaking in the power of the Holy Spirit. Ideally, this communication will explain, enlarge or illustrate a core truth that the Holy Spirit has revealed through others. This kind of communication can be extremely helpful to others when it is in harmony with the Spirit-led direction one senses in worship. Occasionally this vocal communication may seem to clash with the overall sense of the meeting. If so, we must learn to put such things aside and refocus on the inward presence of Christ.

Stage Four: Commit (Obedience to the Voice of Christ)

Often there will be a message from the Holy Spirit, whether vocal or inward, that will connect with our own spirit, drawing us to some act of obedience. This obedience might take the form of repentance of sin, a deeper commitment to Christ, or the acceptance of a new calling. Such ministry can be experienced individually or by the whole group. The fruit of worship is made manifest when we give our full attention to the call of Christ. It is only when we are willing to respond to the voice of the Good Shepherd in faithful obedience that our lives are genuinely transformed.

Even the most experienced worshippers often find it difficult to discern whether or not they should speak out of the silence during unprogrammed worship. The chart on the next page is meant to give guidance in deciding whether to speak or remain silent. Above all, each worshipper is encouraged to "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21).



Worship begins
Center and wait

**Center
Christ**

Speak
Return to Center

Is message from the Holy Spirit and not just from you?
Yes = go to next

Is message intended for anyone else besides you?
Yes = go to next

Is message intended for anyone beyond the last speaker?
No = return to Center.
Yes = go to next

Is the message intended to be shared in this meeting right now?
No = return to Center
Yes = go to next

Will others likely mistake the message for a political statement, lecture or personal announcement?
Yes = return to Center
No = go to next

Is the message truly one God is asking you to share?
Yes = go to next
No = return to Center

Is the message also truly not from you but from the Holy Spirit?
Yes = go to next
No = return to Center

Must you speak?
Yes = go to next
No = return to Center