

A Critical Question for Corporate Prayer **From Pastor Chris, March 3 2019**

“Why do you have two services?”

This is the question I asked the search team the first time I saw Groveton’s attendance numbers and the size of the sanctuary. I was not yet the final candidate for the Senior Pastor position, so my question was out of sheer curiosity.

This is also the question I hear from visitors to our church. They notice the empty space in the sanctuary and wonder why we have two services when everyone could comfortably worship as one.

This is the question Pastor Charles Roesel asked me when he came to preach in November. When, during our Q&A time I asked Pastor Charles what he would change if he became the Senior Pastor at Groveton, his first answer was “Move to a single service.”

Pastor Charles’ challenge caused to me pray through a different question: Why have I not raised this possibility with our congregation? The more I prayed about it, the more I realized that my inactivity on this matter stems from convenience rather than conviction. I am comfortable with our current setup. However, I do not want my comfort level to prevent us from a change that could lead us to a new place of unity, health, and growth.

So I am calling us to a season of prayer around this question: “Why do we have two services?” We may emerge from this time with a strong corporate sense of why we have two services and leave Sunday morning untouched. Or we may sense God leading us to shift to a single service.

Our highest calling—“Magnify God’s Reputation”—transcends how many services we have. We know God is calling us to make much of him. So the discussion about one or two services should not be determined by preference but about what brings God the most glory as we gather to adore him (worship), speak gospel truth into one another’s lives (nurture), and share the news about Jesus’ death and resurrection with our neighbors (mission).

In the space below, I will share a bit of history and the pros and cons of having two services. Please read through it carefully and prayerfully as we seek God on this issue.

A Little History

Twenty years ago this Easter, the “First Praise” 8:30 AM service was created to attract younger families and those who might prefer contemporary worship music to traditional. Toward the end of his tenure, Pastor Phil Bush incorporated some of the praise music from the 8:30 service into the 11:00 service. Interim Pastor Wellford Tiller continued this blended approach, and that is what I inherited and continued.

For what it’s worth, I enjoy both styles. I grew up singing hymns out of the 1975 Baptist Hymnal and, thanks to my dad’s strong voice and frequent nudges when I fell silent, learned all the bass parts by heart. So I love singing the hymns as much as I love singing the newest praise songs. For me, the issue of style is secondary to the issue of staying power. There are plenty of hymns that were great in their day but are worn out. There are plenty of praise songs that inspire for a season then need to be replaced. So I worked with Dallis and Deborah to develop a list of classic hymns that we want to keep in the diet of both services at Groveton. While my predecessors worked to blend the 11:00 service with newer songs, I pushed to blend the 8:30 service with more long-lasting hymns.

Benefits of having two services

There are practical benefits to having two services. A handful of folks who attend the early service do so for scheduling reasons, whether they be obligations at work or at home. Some enjoy having the rest of their Sunday free after Adult Bible Fellowship. Many choose the service they attend because of the style of music.

Beyond obvious differences of style, there is a character that each service has developed. The 8:30 service has a beautiful freedom about it, as many raise their hands and move freely to express their joy in God. The 11:00 service has a reverent feel to it, honoring the majesty of God. These are not contradictory. They are simply different expressions of the same encounter with our God who is both high in the heavens and as near as our heartbeat, or as the hymn puts it, both merciful and mighty.

Challenges to having two services

The biggest challenge of having two service is that we are not gathered together as one church family each Sunday. When we had a single service for six weeks during the summer of 2017, a number of people said, “Oh, I didn’t realize he/she is part of our church!”

Currently the sanctuary is about 20% full at the 8:30 service and 30% full at the 11:00 service. At one level, those numbers should not matter. If you show up to worship God Almighty and hear the gospel of Jesus, it shouldn't matter if you are sitting in a pew by yourself or crammed in to a full house.

But the reality is that it does matter to visitors. Pastor Charles told us during the Q&A that when a visitor comes into a service that is sparsely filled, their first question will be, "What is wrong with this church?" I mentioned this to a newer family in our church and they said that describes their experience precisely. The concern was enough that they took a few months to visit other churches before coming back to Groveton. They plan to join but they had to get over the "What's wrong?" question. Much of this relates to the energy that is in a room when it is fuller, when you can hear the voices of others singing praises to God.

Another challenge of our current schedule is the time constraint. While the 8:30 service has a glorious freedom about it, it is also the service where I feel most constrained by time. Admittedly, it is often my fault for preaching too long. But I find myself looking at the clock during the invitation, knowing that Sunday School will start soon. Likewise, I know that our Spanish-language sister church needs to set up following the 11:00 service so we have to honor that commitment.

What might a single service look like?

I hesitate to get too specific in mapping out what a single service might look like, because that is not the question on the table. The question is, "Why do we have two services?" The congregation may decide that there are good enough answers to that question that there is no reason to change. Or we may decide that we need to change. That is the congregation's decision.

Let me offer three broad strokes of what a single service would look like if that is the direction the congregation wants to move.

+ It would be a new service.

We would not "get rid of" the 8:30 or 11:00 service. Rather, we would merge the two into a single service that brings the strengths of both into one gathering: freedom and reverence, contemporary and classic, Praise Team and Choir.

+ It would be a service with more breathing room.

The new service would meet at a new time that gives us more freedom to seek God together. I have no desire to preach longer sermons than I currently do (let the people say “Amen!”). Rather, the time would be used for extended prayer for those who need to bring their burdens to the Lord. We could also set aside more time for members to testify about God’s work in their lives or opportunities they’ve had to share the gospel with unbelievers. This time shift would mean our Sunday School and Adult Bible Fellowship would meet at a new time, with the possibility of more time for those gatherings as well.

+ It would be a service that requires everyone to adjust

When Pastor Charles challenged us to consider a single service, he gave this warning of why such a move could be difficult: Everyone would have to make an adjustment. We would all have changes to get used to, elements of comfort to leave behind. But such a service could bring the best of Groveton together every week.

A call to prayer

What’s next? We pray.

Let me challenge each of you to spend time waiting on God as you pray about this. I’m sure by now you have an opinion about the question of why we have two services. Some of you think moving to one service is a fantastic idea while others think it is a terrible idea. Please set those opinions aside and begin your prayers in the way Jesus taught us: “Your Name...Your kingdom...Your will.” Our hearts are to be centered on magnifying God’s reputation, so our prayer to him is, “God what would bring the most glory to you?”

My timeline for coming to a corporate decision about this question is “As long as it takes.” We will take at least two months to pray about it. If we feel unsure we may take much, much longer. Again, the goal is to magnify God’s reputation, and we want his unity, his wisdom, and his love to be magnified in how we approach this question.

In the next two months we will have specific prayer times devoted to this issue. We will also have designated discussion times to share how we believe God is leading in our corporate worship. As we seek God together, may he reveal more of himself to us, humble our hearts before him, and—whatever the result—bring us into a new season of glad adoration and thanksgiving in his presence.