

Toward a Theology of Worship

Stephen M. Davis
Missionary in Oradea, Romania

One of the great debates and areas of controversy in our day concerns worship. The introduction of new forms and/or the return to old forms has proved disturbing to many. Anyone familiar with the works of Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, for instance, will recognize their genius and the impact they have had on succeeding generations in the area of worship. The contribution of free church movements in this domain may be less recognizable and debated; yet the fact remains that many relatively recent independent movements have little historical precedent from which to draw in formulating a theology of worship. Often the fact that a theology of worship has never been developed has resulted in traditions being followed for tradition's sake or attacking anything new with the pejorative appellation "contemporary." "Contemporary" might be defined as "marked by characteristics of the present period."¹ All tradition was once contemporary. While this does not allow an uncritical acceptance of our present period and its influence on worship, it does suggest caution in making broad generalizations criticizing that which we call contemporary. Some of what we now call contemporary will one day be called tradition by others. At the same time those who seek to be uncritically contemporary may reflect more the spirit of this age than that "worship in spirit and in truth" to which God calls us.

¹Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Co.), 1973.

Tradition plays a great role in how we understand worship and how we engage in worship. Tradition must neither be ignored nor easily discarded. At the same time it must not be enshrined in such a way as to not allow for further and fuller development and integration with new traditions. It may be helpful to remind ourselves that much that is considered tradition may be only short-lived and not tradition at all. Hughes Old points out that a “tradition which gets radically changed every generation is not really a tradition. For tradition to be tradition it must have a considerable amount of permanence and changelessness Tradition cannot be invented. It can be discovered or recovered, but it must be received from someone else.”² For others, worship has not been clearly defined and has been limited to the discussion of certain elements or circumstances of worship.

The current controversy surrounding music in many of our churches is a case in point. Much of the discussion has revolved around preference, taste and opinion, which, while legitimate components of the discussion, have tended to obscure some weightier issues and have neglected the overall picture of what our corporate worship should look like based on a well-defined theology of worship.³ While musicians must contribute to the discussion, it needs to be done in submission to theology. An exposition of Scripture will accomplish far more than esoteric lectures that treat melody, harmony, rhythm, and syncopation in a

²Hughes Oliphant Old, Guides to the Reformed Tradition: Worship (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), 162-163.

³A book by Tim Fisher, entitled The Battle for Church Music (Greenville, SC: Sacred Music Ministries, 1992), tries to rise above the subjectivity so prevalent in some circles. How well he succeeds in presenting his case cannot be treated here. Suffice it to say that the book presents a needed caveat and good reasons for exercising discernment in the area of contemporary Christian music. Curiously, this same alarm is being sounded by some proponents of CCM. See Jim Long, “Can’t Buy Me Ministry” *Christianity Today* 40 (20 May 1996): 20-28.

language understood only by the initiated. We all can profit from study in these areas but will not achieve the level of competence of those musically gifted.

Sometimes there has been an unwillingness to frankly address relevant issues and a lack of flexibility with those with whom one disagrees. Controversy and schisms have been the fruit of the failure of Christians to grant liberty in those areas which should be open for discussion and with room for divergent views. This does not argue for the acceptance of relativism, certainly not concerning doctrine, and neither in the area of worship and the music. The lines will be drawn yet may never be as precise as we may desire. Yet how many church splits could be avoided if a theology of worship based on the Word of God was developed, taught and understood by our churches! To agree to disagree would be a marvelous first step for many of us. At times we may and must disagree heartily but should refrain from doing so heatedly. Our disagreements in certain areas must be subsumed to revealed and redemptive truth concerning Christ, His Church and our mission.

Some may be wondering where this will all lead. Be assured that the dumping of all forms of current patterns and practices of worship in our churches will not be advocated. Forms can be discussed only after a scriptural groundwork has been laid. As a proposal for discussion there is neither the arrogance of finality or the pretension that all controversy will now end. If some are stimulated to plow deeper and develop more lucidly some of these propositions, then progress has been made. Neither will the recommendation be made to hire a band to liven things up in an otherwise stale but supposedly dignified church atmosphere. Human artifices that seek to create an atmosphere through questionable methods are not the solution.

Yet have we not at times sensed that something needs to change in our expression and experience of worship? While personal satisfaction should not be the chief end of our worship, don't we seek a real experience with God? Something has either

been lost or never possessed. Whichever it may be, something may be missing in our worship. We may curse the tide for coming in just as we bemoan the fact that people flock to churches seeking, but not always finding, something that had long been absent in their community worship. We may say (and it is so) that many churches have become centers of entertainment where people go to see a spectacle, churches that may be so seeker-friendly that they are unfaithful to the spirit of the Gospel. The ebb and flow of cultural changes must not dictate adjustments in practices that God's Word does not authorize. Capitulation and accommodation to cultural mores are not acceptable options. But that does not excuse the fact that many Christians do not leave the assembled body of Christ sensing that they have met with the Almighty. They leave with their thirst unquenched, their lives untouched by God's presence. One cause of this may be their unfaithfulness in personal worship. However, the problem may lie elsewhere, in the failure of the church to provide the instruction and the opportunity for a richer worship experience.

In shaping a theology of worship there are a number of considerations. Among them should be included the following: the *formulation*, the *foundation*, the *focus*, the *facets* and the *form* of worship. Considering these points may lead to welcome changes in what we do once we understand what God desires. Some may be encouraged to begin to examine what they do and realize that an opening prayer, two or three songs, announcements and offering, special music, message, invitation and closing prayer, do not necessarily indicate that worship has taken place, especially if done mechanically week after week. These are all acceptable elements of a worship service, and certainly God commends decency and order in our services. It will not do to overthrow those structures that help us make sense of what we do. It will not do simply to change the order of what takes place, to list or not list in a bulletin the order of service, to have a formal or casual atmosphere. Something will first take place in our hearts as we

Toward a Theology of Worship

draw nigh to God in Spirit and in truth and become those true worshippers which the Father seeks (John 4:24).

Formulation of Worship

What is worship? To ask the question seems to ignore the fact that everyone knows what it is until they are asked to define it. We know what it is not. It is not the hollow and vain worship of lips that is unrelated to a heart aflame for God (Matt. 15:8). How often are we warned that God does not accept the very sacrifices He prescribes if they are not offered from the heart, from a life lived in conformity with His holy precepts (Isa. 1:14-15; Amos 5:21-23)! God loathes religious hypocrisy and the substitution of human rites for divine institutions. The sobering fact that He knows and searches the hearts remains a constant reminder that when we come before Him nothing can be hidden.

Etymology provides a clue as to what worship is. Both the Hebrew (*shachah*) and Greek (*proskuneo*) word normally translated "worship" indicate that honor is offered to a superior, to a sovereign. Among the basic meanings of the word *proskuneo* are found the idea both "to kiss" and "to bow down."⁴ This reminds us of our duty to render homage, not to an Oriental monarch with outstretched hand, but to the Lord of the universe who deigned to become a man and stretches out His nail-pierced hands. As the Psalmist reminds us: "Kiss the Son, lest He be angry!" (Ps.2:12). Clowney says that "worship is the response of the creature to the revealed glory of the Creator."⁵ The child of God enters into the presence of God filled with awe and stands in wonder of the redemption that has allowed us this privilege to approach the Almighty. When we worship, we understand that

⁴Colin Brown, ed., Dictionary of New Testament Theology, vol. II (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 875-876.

⁵Edmund P. Clowney, The Church: Contours of Christian Theology (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 119.

“we worship for his pleasure foremost and find our greatest pleasure in pleasing him.”⁶

Foundation of Worship

The Scriptures alone are our source to discover what pleases God in worship. History has seen this principle expressed primarily in two ways. The Reformers held that what was not commanded in Scripture was forbidden. Lutherans and Roman Catholics held that what was not forbidden is permitted.⁷ While the latter may seem to provide for more liberty in worship, the danger exists that man decides what is acceptable and permits the addition of rites and rituals that in effect become substitutes for true worship. The former principle provides sound limits to what can and what cannot be acceptable worship to God. This principle asserts the sufficiency of Scripture to positively inform us of what God deems as suitable. God has given directives in Scripture concerning what to do and what not to do. This principle also recognizes the difference between elements of worship and circumstances of worship.⁸ Simply put, God has told us what to do in worship (elements or aspects) but has given us liberty in application while we remain faithful to those commands.

For example, God tells us to “preach the Word” while we can choose the text for next Sunday’s message and use our own words to expound the truth. God tells us to praise Him in song; yet whether the accompaniment is by an organ, piano, or guitar or other musical instruments is not specified in Scripture. Within some confessions, there are those who would argue that no musical instruments are appropriate, that instruments were used

⁶John Frame, Worship in Spirit and Truth (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1996), 4.

⁷Ibid., 38-39.

⁸Edmund Clowney uses the terms “elements” and “circumstances” (p. 126) while John Frame prefers “aspects” and “applications” (pp. 41, 54) in their above mentioned books.

in Old Testament worship, which was but a shadow of the reality we now have in light of Christ's coming, and that instruments distract from the simplicity of New Testament worship. We are told to observe the Lord's Supper, but churches decide when and how often, even though it appears that this element of worship may have been practiced every time that believers met in the early church.

The question has often been raised concerning what is normative for Christian worship, especially as it relates to other cultures. The Reformed principle (also called the "regulative principle") and its distinction between elements and circumstances helps us to understand and accept a wholesome diversity as the multi-faceted divine splendor is celebrated in different worship languages.⁹ God forbid that we judge other cultural expressions of worship in light of our own cultural experiences and not in the light of Scripture! From a missiological vantage point, it can be affirmed that just as no two languages are exactly the same, differing in their syntax, grammar, vocabulary, and modes of expression, so worship, while sharing common elements, will look and sound different. This affirmation doesn't even remotely allow for religious syncretism practiced in the name of diversity nor for traditions to usurp biblical authority. Neither does it allow us to cater to culture and human whim when truth is at stake.

Scripture alone must be our foundation for worship. To go beyond that in imposing our culture on others or denying others their God-given liberty to worship God in their 'language' (which includes more than speech) would be cultural arrogance. To deny others the right to worship in what may seem to be non-conventional ways, including the clapping of hands (Ps. 47:1),

⁹A personal aside may be permitted here to illustrate this. Recently I heard an American missionary boasting that if Americans were to attend the church which he is planting in Romania they would think they were in the States. I thought how terrible that must be when people are forced to accept American worship forms as if they alone were proper expressions of true worship.

raising hands (Pss. 63:4; 134:2), or dancing (Exod.15:20; I Sam. 21:11; Pss. 30:11; 150:4), would deprive them of genuine joy that they experience in worshipping God. The appropriateness of these and other practices must be weighed against the baggage of connotations and associations that should be avoided. Obviously we will want to examine, but not eliminate, all outward expressions of worship through our biblical and cultural filters in order not to adopt the degenerative elements of pagan worship whether borrowed from the discotheque or ungodly cultural practices. Yet they cannot all be dismissed out of hand because of our comfort level and/or learned behavioral worship patterns.

Focus of Worship

Perhaps little needs to be said as to the focus of worship. Hughes Old states it well, saying that "worship is the work of the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ to the glory of God."¹⁰ While this may also serve as a definition of worship, it helps us realize that our worship is God-directed and God-centered. Worship exists, not primarily for our good, but for the glory of God. Corporate worship, when we gather as the body of Christ, seeks to praise and honor the Redeemer. When we assume that an experience must be sought and that we assemble as the church to feel something and when we leave the assembly asking what we received rather than what we have offered, then we have missed the purpose of worship. Worship is and should be a wonderful experience that brings great joy to our oft impoverished souls. The maxim tacitly espoused that "if we enjoy worship then we must be doing something wrong" misunderstands the reason for our gathering; i.e., the joy of Christ's victory over death that causes us to celebrate. Worship is and should be edifying as we fellowship with those who are joint heirs with Christ. Worship is and should be evangelistic as those who enter our gathering fall

¹⁰Old, Guides to the Reformed Tradition: Worship, 8.

on their faces and confess that “God is in you of a truth” (I Cor. 14:25). Yet above all, our worship is God-ward. God is the audience as He receives the fruit of our lips in praise.

Three times in Ephesians chapter 1, Paul reveals God’s purpose in redeeming us unto Himself. God saved us for the “praise of His glory” (vv. 6, 12, 14). History marches on inexorably toward the accomplishment of God’s eternal plan. He will be glorified in all the earth. Throughout all eternity we will enjoy His presence. Yet presently, in the Church, we can glimpse a foretaste of that glory, and with our stammering lips we praise Him. True “in Spirit and in truth” worship will not then be first and foremost preoccupied with the externals but with praise, being understood as “the sense of awe and wonder which we have when we enter into God’s presence.”¹¹

Facets of Worship

By facets of worship we understand those elements (or aspects) of worship primarily in their corporate sense. There are different lists as to what composes worship; but there is general agreement that prayer, proclamation, and praise must be included and in some ways are inseparable. While preaching remains central in our worship services, and rightly so, other elements are also proclamation of the Word.

More public reading of Scripture would have a salutary effect on our lives (I Tim. 4:13). At least when God’s Word is read we will not be led into error. Perhaps we ought to allow God to speak more through Bible reading. This also entails using language that communicates clearly. Do we not risk losing or at least confusing people with archaic language. Some may be led to reconsider the version they use.¹²

¹¹Ibid., 40.

¹²The translation controversy is not endemic to the United States. Having had the opportunity to minister in both France and Romania, I’ve heard firsthand the same arguments for retaining

More attention to prayer would remind us of our dependence upon God and draw us closer to Him. Our “prayer meetings” risk becoming only a condensed format of other services with a time of prayer added at the end. Few would suggest the return to written prayers being read although the spiritual impact of a well prepared prayer cannot be denied. Occasionally reciting the Lord’s Prayer from the Sermon on the Mount would not be out of place. For those who delight in telling us that the traditional Lord’s Prayer is only a model and that the real Lord’s Prayer is found in John 17, they can recite the latter.

Singing can be prayer, proclamation and praise. Our choice of songs, hymns and spiritual songs should be prepared in advance to blend with the theme of the message in accordance with an overall theme for worship. Many churches now use a worship leader or worship team who prayerfully and thoughtfully plan the order of service, choose hymns according to the theme of the message, and seek to encourage the people to participate in worship. The danger may be, if these individuals are not Spirit-filled Christians, that they become cheerleaders and seek to create an atmosphere by manipulation. Yet a gifted individual who points others to Christ and doesn’t seek personal glory can be a gift of God to the church.

To these might be added, greetings, creedal recitation, benedictions, vows, ordinances and offerings. Although creedal recitation has been frowned upon as too formal or too catholic, many believers might benefit from being grounded in basic doctrines that are enumerated in some historic church creeds or in their original or modified form. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are often spoken of as taking place after the service, as an appendix, and disconnected from the worship service itself. Sometimes we may want to call the people to worship in a more

traditional versions that no longer clearly communicate. A basic understanding of linguistics and of translation principles/difficulties would go a long way in lowering the tone of a sometimes acrimonious debate that detracts from more urgent priorities.

Toward a Theology of Worship

formal way and dismiss them with a scriptural benediction rather than using the traditional welcome and closing formula that signals people to put on their coats because they have heard the same thing week after week. We spend less and less time in God's house, which makes it all the more important to have this time well-planned.

At the same time there should not be such a rigidity that does not allow for spontaneity, for personal testimonies, for extended seasons of prayer, etc. None of our planning will guarantee a satisfying worship time for everyone. That is not to be our primary goal. Our desire is that God be honored through our expression of these facets of worship. Every aspect of worship may not necessarily be included in every service. Yet we should want to do justice to all that God has commanded.

Forms of Worship

The diversity that God created in the universe and the diversity that is demonstrated in our multicultural world lead us to expect that, while the same worship elements will be found wherever the Gospel is preached and churches are planted, worship expressions will not be uniform. By now it may be evident that some of our forms of worship may be culturally conditioned, which is not all bad. Living and worshiping in another language and in another culture will convince most Christians of this observation. Biblical principles are supracultural, and the Gospel communicates in every culture the sufficient and necessary truths for salvation. Yet we do not want to be guilty of ethnocentrism, believing in the superiority of our group, our practices, our traditions. Bernard Adeney states that "the theological and cultural traditions that shape our study of the Bible are a treasure To be free of our tradition is neither possible or desirable. As we become aware of the historical

‘conditionedness’ of our own thought, we are humbled by the partialness of our understanding.”¹³

Form and Tradition

Our traditions need not be jettisoned while at the same time they should not be considered normative for every people, every nation and for all time. This allows for greater freedom in worship while avoiding syncretistic practices. The implications of this will be far reaching as we develop a coherent theology of worship. No longer does one need to cross the ocean to interact with other cultures. Going across the street or to another neighborhood will accomplish the same thing. Laws may be passed that English will be the official language of the United States, and those who have come to the States from other cultures would do well to learn English, but an American worship language will never be imposed on all people. Some people will cluster in their own worship language group where they can find full expression of their heart language. Others will learn to appreciate and celebrate a biblical diversity.

Form and Culture

Just as the Gospel must be contextualized without being compromised, so worship will take on different forms or styles in different cultures and contexts. Contextualization in a Christian sense “can be thought of as the attempt to communicate the message of the person, works, Word, and will of God in a way that is faithful to God’s revelation . . . and that is meaningful to

¹³Bernard T. Adeney, Strange Virtues: Ethics in a Multicultural World (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 64.

respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts.”¹⁴ To take this a step further, we observe that even among a relatively homogeneous people, there will be many differences reflected in worship preferences. Differences of upbringing, education, experiences and age all affect one’s worship experience (or circumstances) even while observing the same elements. Some might view a more formal setting and fixed liturgy to be aesthetically superior and more appropriate to worshipping a transcendent, awe-inspiring God. Others may prefer a more casual or informal setting with an emphasis on the immanence of God, His presence with us in an intimate way. Some may prefer more classically oriented music, others more contemporary styles.

This does not suggest that there are no objective criteria to evaluate appropriateness. The rampant dangers of subjectivism, extreme individualism and relativism have long found root in the Christian consciousness. Our minds, our ways and our values can easily become substitutes for the mind of God. Our traditions and our practices can all too easily be mistaken for the true worship of God. Our only and sure criterion is the Word of God which allows for flexibility and freedom, not in the observance of commands which are normative, but in their specific application.

If we are serious in our worship, recognize that God is the primary audience, that both edification (Col. 3:16) and evangelism (1 Cor. 14:24-25) are worthy objectives, then our worship will in some way be contemporary. God will be honored, Christians will be edified and sinners will be brought into a worshipful relationship with God through faith in Christ. “God is glorified precisely when we are satisfied in him—when we delight in His presence, when we like to be around Him, when we treasure His fellowship.”¹⁵

¹⁴David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 200.

¹⁵John Piper, Let the Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 27.

Form and Communication

Based in part on the teaching of I Corinthians 14, Frame asserts that “worship should be intelligible, . . . understandable to the worshipers, and even to non-Christian visitors; . . . intelligibility requires contemporaneity.”¹⁶ To insist on traditional or outdated modes of worship as being binding on all cultures at all times would be equivalent to the Roman Catholic Church observing the Mass in Latin. Of course everyone could learn Latin, but in reality the “worshipers” remain in darkness. To expect that everyone would learn to appreciate classical music if they took the time (a worthy goal in itself), fails to realize that the demands of earning a living as well, as other demands, don’t always permit that luxury. To insist on the usage of archaic worship language that no longer clearly communicates God’s revelation of Himself, prevents many of God’s people from growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus.

Form and History

Cultures, languages, and civilizations change, for better or for worse. Forms of worship have developed throughout the history of the Christian Church. We may appreciate Gregorian chants which seem to be experiencing a revival today, but do we want to return to their exclusive usage in our worship services? For centuries only trained choirs were permitted to sing. Congregational singing was unheard of. Do we want to turn back to tradition? And if so, to whose traditions? Frame believes that “there is no reason why the church cannot attain both historicity and contemporaneity. Most of the historical practices of the church are quite intelligible today and can be stated in contemporary language. But we should avoid slavish imitation of

¹⁶Frame, *Worship in Spirit and in Truth*, 67.

older practices without attention to the matter of communication.”¹⁷

History testifies to the fact that change is never easy. Periods of revival which produced a great outpouring of new music were often accompanied by sharp criticism. The music of the evangelical awakening of the 1700's (Wesley) and the prolific late-nineteenth century (Fanny Crosby, Ira Sankey, Philip Bliss, etc.) was roundly criticized for being “too popular, too subjective, doctrinally imprecise, impoverished, or worse.”¹⁸ This sounds strangely like the criticisms of much contemporary music. These criticisms may be well-founded and much of what is being produced today will not stand the test of time. We have all heard sermons that we would rather not have heard and which won't be recorded for posterity. So it is with music. Much of it will run its course, and that which is of lasting value will survive for the good of future generations.

Form and Deference

We might wish that no generation gap existed between young people and more mature saints, especially in the area of music. Although worship in song is only an aspect of worship, it has the potential for creating more disharmony than any other issue. With different enemy levels and a different “language” there will inevitably be some pain and friction. We must neither uncritically accept all calls for change nor turn a deaf ear to those who voice the need for change. A spirit of humility and attitude of deference will go a long way in avoiding some of the unnecessary quibbling in which we engage.

Young people, out of respect for those with more years in the faith, should seek and listen to wise counsel from those who have seen the years pass with its fads and fashion. They should be

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid., 116.

open to learn the “language” of their elders, appreciate tradition that might seem stale and dull yet vital to their parents’ mature expressions of worship, and worship together.

Those less young, out of a desire to raise a godly seed, should listen to the voice of change and seeming discontent, and themselves be willing to learn and to bend in those areas that are open for honest discussion. This should be done not from a motive to please rebels or encourage rebellion, but to recognize that God desires worship based upon His commands—worship that allows for diversity of expression and unity of the Spirit.

Form and Reform

Whether minor or radical surgery is needed, only God knows. He calls us to worship Him. All our disagreements, how petty or weighty they may seem, must not distract our gaze from the One we worship and the One who has entrusted us with a mission to bring others into a worshiping relationship with God. It has been said that “missions exist because worship doesn’t.”¹⁹ If our chief end is to glorify God, then we will reject all that distracts from that end. We will be guardians of truth, not of tradition. We will be worshipers in “spirit and in truth” and allow that to determine the externals of our worship. We will reject that which masks itself in a cloak of deceit, which masquerades as Christian in pagan garb. We will be both faithful and free, faithful to God’s Word and free to worship Him according to the fullness of the outworking of His Spirit in us.

Conclusion

Whatever form or order our worship will take, we must not forget that we worship on the first day of the week to celebrate the resurrection of our Savior, and one essential ingredient will be

¹⁹Piper, *Let the Nations be Glad*, 40.

joy. This does not exclude reverence or confession of sin, but joy and reverence are not mutually exclusive (Ps. 2:11), and confession of sin does not imply a morbid introspection. If we grant the same liberty to others that we expect for ourselves and exercise deference, respecting our differences while retaining our preferences, all the while learning to appreciate that which may seem strange or new to us, then our worship will be alive and joyful. Anyone who has ever worshiped in another language will admit how strange and unintelligible it was at the beginning, yet how fulfilling it became once that language was learned and used. Just as many have learned to communicate in a language other than their native one, so we might profit from learning the worship language of others. Our expression and experience in worship will in no way be impoverished but enriched. In addition, we will be better able to carry out the church's mission.

Piper affirms that "the goal of missions is the gladness of the peoples in the greatness of God."²⁰ If that is so, then worship both precedes and equips us for mission. When we are filled with the magnificence of the God of our salvation, then we will be stirred to bring others to bow before Him. A theology of worship is essential for exalting our Savior, for edifying believers and for effective evangelism. When our formulation, foundation, focus and facets are in order, then our forms, varied though they may be, will be thoroughly Christ honoring without being monolithic.

²⁰Ibid., 11.