

WHY DO WE WORSHIP THE WAY WE DO?

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The Content Of Worship

In the second commandment God tells His people how not to worship Him – we are not to make images or idols to represent Him, or anything He created, in order to worship Him through them. Instead His blessing rests on those “who love me and keep my commandments.” The second commandment gives us what has come to be called the “Regulative Principle of Worship” which is that we are to worship God only as He commands. The Heidelberg Catechism states it this way: “What does God require in the second Commandment? That we in no way make any image of God, nor worship Him in any other way than He has commanded us in His Word (Q&A96).

That principle underlies God’s warning to Israel not to copy the worship practices of the nations around them, “You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way.” Instead, “Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it.” Deuteronomy 12:31,32. On two important occasions, God struck down men who had violated God’s commands for worship in seemingly insignificant ways (Leviticus 10:1-2 and 1 Chronicles 13:7-10). Jesus also condemned those who substituted the traditions of men for the commands of God in worship, “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” Mark 7:6-7.

Since Christ fulfilled the ceremonies of the law that pertained to Temple worship, New Testament worship is characterized by its simplicity in comparison. Although no one passage sets forth God’s will concerning New Testament worship, yet by principle, precept and example, a clear pattern of worship is discernable for Christ’s church today. The Heidelberg Catechism does not give an exhaustive list of the elements of worship but it summarizes the content of worship by describing four purposes for worship: “to learn what God’s Word teaches, to participate in the Sacraments, to pray to God publicly and to bring Christian offerings for the poor” (Q&A 103). In addition to the reading and preaching of God’s Word, sacraments, prayer and offerings, the New Testament commands that we worship God in song (1 Corinthians 14:26 and Colossians 3:16).

Christian fellowship is vital to the body of Christ but nowhere in the Bible is fellowship described as an act of corporate worship. Therefore we do not include greeting one another or passing the peace in our worship services. Christ has commanded the use of only three symbols in worship: the water of baptism and the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper. Therefore we do not add other symbols such as crosses, advent wreaths, candles, national flags or religious pictures and banners.

The Structure Of Worship

Worship is a meeting with God. The many calls to worship found in the Bible are calls to come into the presence of God. In the Old Testament, the tabernacle was called the tent of meeting. God said, “There I will meet with them” Exodus 29:43. In the New Testament God’s people are His Temple. In 1 Corinthians 3:16, Paul writes, “God’s temple is sacred and you (plural) are that temple (singular).” Therefore, when the church gathers together, God is in the midst of the church. He is with His people in worship. In Hebrews 12:22-24, our worship is also described as ascending to the heavenly Jerusalem where God and Christ are gathered in sacred assembly with the holy angels.

Because worship is meeting with God, worship has two basic parts: God speaks and we respond. Worship is dialogical. It is a dialogue between God and His people. He speaks to us in the call to

worship, the salutation, the law, an assurance of pardon, the Scripture reading, the sermon and in the benediction. We respond with hymns, prayers, a confession of our dependence upon Him, the confession of our faith and with our offerings.

In worship you are either listening to God or replying to God and doing *both* is worshiping. Some have the idea that to *participate* in the worship service, one has to have a leadership role. But in a conversation, listening is just as important a role as speaking. There can be no conversation with only one of the two parts.

Because worship is a dialogue between God and His people, worship should not include entertainment, where some members entertain the rest of the group with their musical or vocal talents. It should not include unnecessary announcements (prayer concerns are appropriate), or speeches promoting church functions or mission causes. In general we try to avoid dialogue were we talk to each other – a horizontal dialogue. Instead we engage in a vertical dialogue, were God speaks to us through His Word and we respond, either together (in song and with our gifts) or through a representative ordained for that purpose (as in the congregational prayer led by a pastor or an elder).

Music In Worship

God loves good music. He receives praise through the use of the musical gifts He gives to His people. We are commanded to praise Him with music, “Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! Praise him with sounding cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals!” Psalm 150:3-5. But the worship of the church is corporate worship. What we do in worship, we should do together. In the centuries just prior to the Protestant Reformation, only the choirs sang God’s praises, not the congregation. The reformers corrected that abuse and taught the whole congregation to sing together. There is a place for everything and everything is good in its proper place. The proper place for displaying the special musical talents of the few is the concert hall, not the worship service. Therefore we do not have soloists, vocal groups, instrumentalists or choirs perform during the worship service, that is, between the call to worship and the benediction.

The instrumental music that we do have is to support congregational singing, or, in the case of the offertory, to remind the congregation of familiar hymns so that together we may meditate on the words of those hymns. We try to avoid music that draws more attention to itself or the talent of the musician than to the words of the song. The 18th century composer, J. S. Bach, composed his chorale preludes and other pieces to be played as liturgical organ solos with the goal that the congregation would recognize the Psalter or hymn melody used, recall the words, and meditate on the text as the organ expanded its musical development of the basic melody. That is what our policy strives for also.

Our emotions should be stirred in worship. The knowledge of our sin should fill us with sorrow and grief (a “godly grief” that leads to life – 2 Corinthians 7:10). The good news of Christ’s death and resurrection on our behalf should enable us to “rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory” (1 Peter 1:8). Although emotions play a major role in true spirituality, we must be careful not to try to excite our emotions by non spiritual stimuli – particularly by music which can bypass the cognitive center of the brain and stir the emotions of believers and unbelievers alike, without any conscious thought. John Calvin warned that like strong wine, the tunes of some songs can intoxicate the singers. We must be careful that the melodies we use do not draw more attention to themselves than the words they are meant to support. In keeping with this, one of our synodical committees, working on a new Psalter hymnal, has adopted as a guideline, “The melodies and harmonies of church music must be suitable for congregational singing, avoiding complicated rhythms, excessive syncopation, and a wide range of pitch.” There are many contemporary Christians songs that are well loved because the melodies are so powerful in

producing pleasing emotions. It is not wrong for Christians to enjoy powerful melodies, but it is that very quality (the intoxication effect) that makes those melodies inappropriate for corporate worship where our emotions should be stirred by our understanding of God's Word, not by musical stimuli that could easily confuse both the believer and the unbeliever that the emotions they feel are from the Spirit of God when in reality it's just a powerful melody that affects nearly everyone the same.

Reverence In Worship

Our God is a holy God, great and glorious who is high and lifted up, but who, in love, has also stooped down to us in our need and come near. When we come into His presence we must do so humbly and with reverence and respect. Hebrews 12:28-29 says, "let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire." If we were invited to meet with the president of the United States, we would prepare ourselves with great care, both with regard to our appearance and with regard to what we planned to say or do. How much more ought we to prepare for worship in a way that shows reverence and awe, as well as heart felt joy and gratitude for His amazing grace shown to undeserving sinners like us. Because of who our God is, we avoid informality, levity or frivolity in worship.

Church is not the place for flamboyant, gaudy or immodest clothing that says, "Hey, look at me" (1 Peter 3:3-4). However, God's people should show patience and love for those who join them for worship who conform to the world's standards.

In Conclusion

Paul warned, "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth." 2 Timothy 4:3-4. Every age has seen church leaders willing to sell their integrity to gain fame or fortune by giving people what they want, whether entertainment, humor, flattery or teaching that will not offend anyone. We live in a time where, through television, radio and multiple churches in almost every community, there is a smorgasbord of worship styles and doctrinal content available to all. Churches are competing with each other, trying new methods to attract larger crowds. Often church members will visit another church and see a worship practice that has proven successful in attracting young people or in bringing in new families and they wonder, "Why don't we try that method? After all it works!" Our priority is not to find what works but to do what God commands. We strive to be faithful (recognizing the need yet for greater faithfulness) and we trust that God will bless our faithfulness when and how He pleases.