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Reformation  
& Revival



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A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

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# *Reformation & Revival Journal*

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**A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership**

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1. To encourage *reformation* in the local Christian churches worldwide,
2. To promote the cause of *revival* and spiritual awakening through prayer and the provision of resources to aid Christian leaders.

## Information

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**The conviction of the staff and editors** of the *Reformation & Revival Journal* is that awakening, of the kind seen in the First Great Awakening in this country, wedded to the doctrinal concerns of the historic Protestant Reformation as expressed in the terms *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, and *sola fide* is needed in our generation.

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## *How Should We Then Worship?*

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John Armstrong

**I**n 1976 the late Francis Schaeffer wrote a little book titled, *How Should We Then Live?* It was an earnest attempt on his part to address the key moments in Western history which have shaped present culture, and the thinking of people who brought these moments to pass. He then sought to show, in the light of his observations, how Christian man should live in the late twentieth century.

In this issue of the *Journal* we address some current trends and movements in the church which affect how we do or do not worship God. It is the opinion of the editorial staff that any genuine reformation in our time must be one which recovers the highest priority of the church both in heaven and on earth, the worship of God!

The modern church seems to lean quite heavily in the direction of a worship experience which is anthropocentric. (It must be admitted that this is, in its essence, oxymoronic, for true worship is never anthropocentric!) Reformers and biblical Christians of other eras have always adopted an approach to worship which is entirely theocentric! Worship at high times in the life of the church has never been concerned with, "What will make me feel better?" Or, "What will attract the unchurched to come to our worship service?" It has been concerned, in such times, with "What glorifies God and what does the Word require of me?"

Modern anthropocentrism begins with the needs of man. It is fed by this view, often gained through surveys and the reading and analysis of popular culture. It produces what a friend of mine calls, "MacWorshippers." The distinctive of such an approach is to take everything that is offensive to the unchurched and remove it. In such an atmosphere hymns are out. So is liturgy of any type. Theological language must not be used, and important concepts of truth must be restated in ways that make them almost beyond recognition to serious students of the Bible. Entertainment becomes the order of the day and applause is a regular feature of the

public service.

The preaching, if it can even be called preaching, which is inherent in this approach is directed at what are called "felt needs." This leads, inevitably, to the homiletics of consensus. R. Kent Hughes has said that the four distinctives of this kind of preaching are: sermons which are never information laden; sermons which are necessarily topical and not textual or expository; sermons which are necessarily very brief in most cases; and sermons which are filled with stories, personal anecdotes and illustrations.

The question which drives this approach seems to be, "What did the congregation get out of it?"

Several years ago a denominational magazine of one leading evangelical group committed to growing new churches and planting contemporary congregations did a feature titled: "Contemporary Services: What Makes Them Work?" This article was based on an interview with men and women who were leaders in this burgeoning movement. Some of their responses to several questions reveal concerns which are raised by this approach.

The editor asked, "How do you define the contemporary worship service?"

The reply was:

*It's more than singing choruses. It's a service designed for meeting the needs of contemporary people. It may not even be so much worship-oriented, as we know it. It's more a need-oriented service (italics mine).*

The editor responded by asking this same respondent, "You begin with people rather than with God?"

The reply from the same pastor was, "Yes, we *begin with felt needs*, and then get to the real need" (italics mine).

When asked, "What are the parts of a contemporary service?" another pastor replied:

It depends on whom you are trying to reach. We start off with a praise time of worship which includes handclapping and upbeat, up-tempo songs. Then we transition to praise time with a slower music. We sometimes use drama and multimedia pieces to reinforce the direction of the service.

In contrast to this widely accepted contemporary approach, the theocentric and historic approach begins with an august, holy God who is to be adored. The numinous is central. Mystery is accepted, indeed welcomed. In this approach God's glory is the motivating cause and the worship itself is far more objective, as opposed to the subjective approach of the modern trend cited above.

This historic and biblical approach does not see public worship as focusing on man's cleverness or creativity, but rather on God's holiness. It is not primarily concerned with what will this do for those who attend but rather, "Will this please God, and do we truly have biblical warrant for giving this as an offering to God?" The truth which most informs such an approach to God is holiness. The theme of Leviticus, a book which tells Israel how to worship under the Old Covenant, is the holiness of God. When Isaiah saw God in an overwhelming vision in chapter six of his prophecy he saw Him as preeminently holy! If we are to worship God in our time, then we too must begin here. God-centered worship is *God-centered*, which means it must be *centered* in God's holiness!

Worship is not primarily instruction. Nor is it evangelism. It is *intentionally* glorifying a holy God. It may very well include elements which instruct; indeed, true preaching will always do this. It will also be used of God to bring sinners to conviction and salvation. But it will not aim, primarily, at instruction or evangelism. The ultimate test of any worship experience should be whether it is worship offered in both spirit and in truth (cf. John 4:23-24).

**What Then Is Worship?**

The late J. Vernon McGee once wrote:

Attempting to define worship is a problem much the same as that of the soldier stationed on the West Coast, when his mother, a native of Kansas, wrote, saying, "When you come home, please bring a souvenir that will tell me something of the Pacific Ocean which I have heard so much about." So when he went home he took her a bottle of sea water. Now that bottle of sea water may have said something about the ocean, but it told nothing of its vastness, of the breakers along the shore, nothing of the beauty of the sunlight on the whitecaps. It told nothing of the things of the deep, of the breeze that gently hovers. Neither can mere words adequately define the subject before us: worship.

The word worship actually goes back to an old Anglo-Saxon word which had in its root form the idea of ascribing *worth* to someone or something. One dictionary defines it as "courtesy or reverence that is paid to worth."

Worship is reverence which is paid to someone of worth!  
The Psalmist captures this in Psalm 96:5-8:

For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens. Splendor and majesty are before Him; strength and glory are in His sanctuary. Ascribe to the Lord, O families of nations, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name; bring an offering and come into His courts.

This Psalm was composed by King David when he brought the ark of the covenant into the sanctuary in Zion. It is a great Psalm of public praise and adoration of Jehovah.

When Psalms like this are joined, as inevitably they must be, to the doctrine contained in the first two commandments,

we begin to see how totally preoccupied God is with proper worship. God will have no competitor! He alone is worthy of worship. He alone is to be praised. And because He alone is worthy He is a jealous God, not willing to share this glory and praise in any manner.

One has written that worship is giving attention to the most important thing in your life. As true as this kind of statement is, it is inherently misleading at a certain level. Some say, further, that they worship everywhere, or "I worship all the time!" These statements are true, after a manner of speaking, but dangerously misleading if they mean there is not a place and a proper manner in which we are to worship the Lord. If all of life is worship, then in a certain sense there can be no such thing as a worship service, or an assembly gathered to worship God! (The argument is the same regarding time, when someone says, "All time is holy!" If this is true in an absolute sense, then there will be no "holy" time and no "holy" gathering for worship either!)

Keeping this in proper perspective, we can agree with Warren Wiersbe, who writes: "We do not go to church to worship, because worship ought to be the constant activity and attitude of the dedicated believer. We go to church to worship publicly and corporately."

William Temple, at one time archbishop of Canterbury, wrote one of the best broad definitions of worship I have come across. Said Temple:

For to worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God; to feed the mind with the truth of God; to purge the imagination by the beauty of God; to open up the heart to the love of God; to devote the will to the purpose of God.

**What Is the Objective of Worship?**

Since worship, as we have defined it biblically, is concerned

with God, not how I feel or want to feel, it must always begin with God. We read in Scripture: “My heart says of You, ‘Seek His face!’ Your face, Lord, I will seek” (Ps. 27:8). The true worshiper will begin with God. Our very response to God is never an activity of our own merit in any way. We do not earn, in other words, favor via worship. Jesus said, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:44).

Worship is an offering to God (Ps. 96). And it always involves the work of priests. Peter says, “You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5). By this he understands that New Covenant believers make up a collective, corporate priesthood, distinct from the separated priesthood of the Old Covenant. This priesthood, of which every Christian forms a vital part, together offers *spiritual sacrifices* in corporate worship! The writer of Hebrews underscores this truth and defines it more openly for us when he adds:

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess His name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased (Heb. 13:15-16).

All this means that we do not attend the worship of the church assembly on the Lord’s Day primarily to receive, but to give. In this case the principle our Lord taught is plainly revealed to be true week by week, for “it is more blessed to give than to receive.” The church’s priority is to gather on the Lord’s Day, by New Covenant appointment and example, in order to offer to God true worship!

In this context we hear the Word of God. In it, the Word read and preached, God speaks!

Several years ago a little girl in Texas saw a sign which

said, “Worship at the Church of Your Choice!” She asked her father, “Daddy, what is worship?” The Baptist layman could not have answered more incorrectly when he said, “Worship is going to the church and hearing the preacher preach his sermon!” I am afraid, quite candidly, that this is the view of many evangelicals who attend church week after week. This is not what I have in mind when I speak of *hearing God* in worship!

Another contemporary has well said, “The true purpose of preaching in worship is not to explain a subject but to achieve an object.” Writes Warren Wiersbe, “We are so wrapped up in content that we have forgotten intent.” For most who attend evangelical churches which do not feature carefully written liturgy this is at the heart of why they seem to go to public services. This leads to the classroom service. We build long, classroom-type buildings and we take notes, with little powerful impression made upon our hearts by the event of preaching itself.

How much better the reflections of the late A.J. Gossip, an Englishman, who wrote:

Since He is here, and speaking to us face to face, it is for us, in a hush of spirit, to listen for, and to, His voice, reproving, counseling, encouraging, revealing His most blessed will for us; and, with diligence, to set about immediate obedience. This and this, upon which He has laid His hand, must go; and this and this, to which He calls us, must be at once begun. And here and now I start to do it!

Wiersbe again captures the sense of what I mean by writing: “Scientific or theological facts give some people a big head, but truths give to the reverent saint a burning heart, a thrilling encounter with God.”

We must enter the sanctuary with an anticipative spirit. (The use of the term “auditorium” to describe where we



gather to worship reflects a very distorted conception of what is to take place in public worship!) A heart ready to hear and to obey God, who will speak to us through His appointed means. We must come believing that something in fact will happen to us *because* God is here. Expectancy is essential in anything genuinely spiritual and useful.

For this reason I am wary of any kind of reformation or revival that does not restore preaching to its critical place in the corporate worship experience. It is not liturgy we should oppose, for all services incorporate *some* liturgy. It is the kind of liturgy, or movement, that promises what God intended the preached Word to accomplish in the gathering of the church. Books, films, tapes, and study groups all have their place in the life of a contemporary church; however, the great need, as always, is for live, lively, Spirit-filled preaching!

Dr. J.I. Packer, surely not an opponent of form in worship, wrote in an essay on preaching:

... the need for preaching "live" remains as great as it was 19 centuries ago. . . . The preaching of the Bible is the mainspring of this worship. . . . This is the first reason why preaching should be regarded as the climax of congregational worship. From this flows the second reason, namely, that congregations never honour God more than by reverently listening to His Word with a full purpose of praising and obeying Him once they see what they are called to do.

True worship will involve the whole person, both body and soul. The New Testament word for worship, *leitourgia*, is the same word used for service. God's revelation, then, is never one merely of presence, but always one of purpose. We are not building evangelical monasteries, but worshiping congregations which will serve the living and true God as a direct result of worship. And since we are human beings,

both body and soul, we are completely involved when we worship. We must prepare our bodies for worship, use our bodies in the activities of worship, and engage our bodies in service after we have worshiped. The New Testament knows no Greek division between body and soul that allows us to worship God without the whole human person engaged.

New Covenant worship must also be understood to be a "household" event, i.e., it is for all the people of God, young and old. The hymns are for the congregation. This most can accept. But the sermon is for the whole congregation as well. As good a case as can be made for taking children out of public worship, a much better case can be made for leaving them in the service if we read the Scriptures carefully. If we do take them out of the public service, perhaps before the sermon, then I believe it is imperative that we give them something more like a sermon and a continuation of the event of worship so they learn to worship God by actually doing worship. In far too many contexts children are removed simply so moms and dads can cease to interact with their family regarding the worship itself and so the pastor and others do not have to address them in any direct manner.

Public prayer is a form of expression in worship as well. Through public prayer we communicate *corporately* with God. For this reason intelligibility, scriptural content, and a clear focus are needed. Passionless prayers, no matter who offers them, will kill worship. This is the danger in reading prayers, though it is not necessary if reading them is done properly. This is also the danger in praying as if we are merely "talking to our friend." Search the prayers of the Bible and you will never see this kind of prayer—folksy, irreverent and casual! The style and mode of great prayer throughout the history of the church has always been an expression not made in casual, everyday speech.

I believe four experiences summarize what worship involves: seeking, finding, enjoying, and sharing. We seek

God, hungering and thirsting for Him with our whole person. The mind is fully engaged with our affections, and we sing to God, pray to God and listen for God's Word to our hearts. By these we find God. Then we enter into the enjoyment of God. The "joy of the Lord" becomes our strength through real worship! We do not come to drop our cares and get a psychological fix, but as we seek and find Him we enjoy His presence with us. Having enjoyed God we never selfishly stop with our joy, but go out to serve and to share!

#### **What Governs Worship?**

By this question I mean, quite simply, is worship governed or regulated in any manner? Do we offer to God whatever we sincerely think He would appreciate, whatever that is? Are we free to bring sacrifices of our own imagination, as long as they are not contrary to anything we see in Scripture, or are we to bring only what is regulated by God's expressed will and by the clear precepts of the New Testament?

Many readers will readily recognize that herein lies a major debate that came to the forefront of the Protestant Reformation. Calvin and Luther expressed differing views of this matter.

What is clear, in the light of much historic disagreement, is that any period of reformation has always included serious reflection on this matter of "What does God require of us in public worship?" As noted earlier, a careful reading of the first two commandments, coupled with consideration of the Old Testament pattern of Israel's worship and the developments of the New Covenant community under the better covenant sealed through the blood of Christ, plainly has much to say in answer to this question. What is appalling to me is the way in which almost no leading evangelical voice for church renewal and reformation in our day calls for any attention to this question.

In traditions where only the Psalms are sung, or where

instrumental accompaniment in worship is debated, one finds some concern for the matter of regulating public worship according to the Scriptures. Have we fallen so far from the authority of the Word of God that we do not think the church still needs to be "continually reforming" in the most central area of its public witness and work? In listening to modern church growth experts tell how to construct services for the unchurched, or in hearing countless workshops on worship over the past 20 years, I have seldom heard this matter addressed.

The New Testament knows three areas of concern when it comes to discovering clear precepts regarding public worship: all explicit commands of Christ Himself; all explicit commands of the apostles; and all apostolic traditions that are given to the church for her practice.

Some of the elements revealed as central to public worship and regulated by the Word of God are: the singing of Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs; preaching doctrine; the practice of the two sacraments of the church, baptism and the Lord's Supper; public reading of the Word of God; prayer for various needs, especially for those in authority; and offerings taken as an act of corporate sharing and stewardship.

What place does music occupy in worship? Are we in danger of "proxy" worship with so much stress placed on solo singing and chorales? (This does not, necessarily, rule them out of public worship, but it should cause any tradition which uses these to reflect seriously on what it does in terms of a New Testament model.) What about instruments? Whole traditions have argued against them, and these arguments need to be weighed. If a church believes instrumentation is proper, then how is it best used in the light of clear principles revealed in Scripture? Spurgeon actually said, "Take those organs and fill the pipes with concrete," because he saw the organ as destroying the harmonization and effectiveness of congregational singing.

(It is hard for the organ to be a “servant” instrument when it is played improperly!)

In summary, the worship of God is never a matter of indifference for the Christian or church serious about reformation and revival. The first division of mankind after the fall came as a result of what was acceptable to God in worship (cf. Genesis 4 and the story of Cain and Abel). Traditionalism, subjectivism and pragmatism are not a biblical basis for our worship. We cannot trust our feelings, or even the way we have always done it. We need to inquire again, “What saith the Scriptures?”

The Protestant Reformation was grounded in the *sola scriptura* principle. Any recovery in our time must be grounded in the same principle again. I feel sure, having studied the history of this debate to some extent, that we will not fully agree on what exactly is regulated in terms of public worship, but we should at least begin to get serious again about trying to search the Scriptures in this regard. Reformation demands nothing less.

My friend Tom Wells, a contributor to this issue, writes:

Worship stands as the goal toward which reformation and revival look. Why do we seek to reform the understanding of the church? So that she will worship more fully and accurately. Why do we ask God to revive His work among us? So that His activity will produce true worshipers. Worship is the goal of all the activity that created persons in the universe experience. Hell itself, with its fiery testimony to the righteous judgment of God, exists to point up the grandeur of God's moral character. If there is any activity that is not directly concerned with worship, it must lie deep in intertrinitarian relations of which we know and experience nothing.

It must be a daunting task to think or write about worship,

encompassing as it does, every other subject under heaven. Like every other subject, however, we may approach worship as we do wholesome food, taking nourishing bites without consuming the entire feast by ourselves.

May wholesome food nourish your heart as you earnestly ponder this grand theme for all ages! And may you be involved in stirring up many to reformation in this day as we plead for God to send “showers of blessing” upon the dry parched ground of contemporary, man-centered Christianity.

*John H. Armstrong*