

IN THE BEAUTY OF HOLINESS: THE ART OF BIBLICAL WORSHIP



A STUDY ON WORSHIP FOUNDATIONS

LESSON 1: THE CENTRAL IMPORTANCE OF WORSHIP

INTRODUCTION

In the year 1296, the foundation stone for a new cathedral was laid in the city of Florence, Italy. For many years, the design of the building had been debated. Church and community leaders finally chose a plan that was nothing less than spectacular, and completely unique in history. The building itself was impressive enough. But they also planned to build the church with a dome 143 feet in diameter.

Just to give that some scale, the dome of the U.S. Capitol is only 95 feet in diameter. It would be the largest dome built human history, even to the present day. There was just one problem. No one knew how to build it. They knew that the dome would stand once it was built, but the technology and engineering did not exist to actually construct it. But the planners and architects were sure that this was the right design. They believed that God would provide a way to build it. But their fear was that future generations of builders (for the construction would take well over a century), would give up on their design and abandon it for something easier. So once a year, for over a century, as the work went on and on, the cathedrals foremen and architects were required to stand in front of a large scale model of the cathedral, the pattern decided for them, and swear an oath that they would build the church exactly as the model portrayed. Even though the technology to build the dome did not exist, the church leaders wanted to build it right, waiting for the day when the work could be completed as planned. It took over one hundred years to build the rest of the church, and they were at last ready to begin work on the dome. And it was built according to plan. (see the book Brunelleschi's Dome: How A Renaissance Genius Reinvented Architecture for the fascinating story of how this was done).

Jesus Christ is building His church. He has a pattern, a design for her and is forming His people into a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (I Peter 2:5). His design is to take the living stones of His people, and form a mighty temple for the eternal worship of the Triune God. His perfect design will one day be complete, and we will stand in awe at the glory of His work. This study is about God's design for worship. More specifically, it is about the vision we have for worship at Christ Covenant Church, that we may have a greater understanding of what we are doing as a worshipping community. It is also our hope that our Lord will use this study to clarify for other Christians the importance and place of the worship of God among the priesthood of believers.

THE CENTRAL IMPORTANCE OF WORSHIP

Worship is the most important thing we do. In Jesus' evangelistic appeal to the woman at the well, He said: "true worshippers will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him" (John 4:23). He invites her to become a worshipper of His Father, which is essentially what the gospel invitation is. The church is to call all nations to worship the Father through Jesus Christ, His only Son (Revelation 5:9-14, 15:3-4).

Worship is central to the existence of man. God created the first man and woman to worship Him. But Adam and Eve fell from this lofty calling and were expelled from the garden sanctuary because of their sin in breaking God's law. Immediately however, God revealed His plan for a new Adam to come, to restore the broken fellowship and redeem a new humanity that would fulfill God's purpose for man as those who would worship Him (Genesis 3:15, 4:4, 25). Man as a new creation in Christ is to offer himself to God as a living sacrifice of worship (Romans 12:1). As Christians, when we worship the Lord together in the assembly of the saints, we are fulfilling God's highest purpose for humanity.

Worship defines you but it also shapes you and changes you. Romans 12:1 tells us to "present your bodies a living sacrifice...which is your reasonable service", comparing believers with the sacrificial animals offered in Old Testament worship. Paul shows us that renewal of the mind is produced by more than just study and intellectual development. It is intimately related to what we do as well; specifically to what we do as a living sacrifice, offering our priestly service to God in worship ("be transformed by the renewing of your mind" Romans 12:2). As we serve God in worship, our minds are renewed. Scripture tells us that even unbelievers are identified by the false gods that they worship, for those who worship idols will become like their idols (Psalm 115:8). This is a plain biblical principle: you become like what you worship.

If all this is true - that worship defines and shapes the people of God, then worship is the most important activity that we can perform. It is the reason why God has sovereignly called us to Himself (John 4:23). We must also say that to stay away from the worship of God on the Lord's Day is abominable to Him. To ignore His call to worship Him is to show utter contempt for the Lord. God does not say that it would be nice if we worshipped Him. Rather, He commands our participation in the corporate worship of the church (Psalm 100, Hebrews 10:24-25). You cannot be a faithful Christian without worshipping the Lord in the assembly of the saints.

READ & DISCUSS

1 Peter 2:5; John 4:23; Revelation 5:9-14, 15:3-4; Genesis 3:15, 4:4, 25; Romans 12:1-2; Psalm 115:8; John 4:23; Psalm 100; Hebrews 10:24-25.

LESSON 2

HOW ARE WE TO WORSHIP?

HOW ARE WE TO WORSHIP?

The Word of God says much about the way in which God is to be approached in worship. Hebrews 12:27 says that as the church gathers to worship on the Lord's Day: "Let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire."

The evangelical church today would be well served by carefully meditating on this text. Our activity of worship says much about Who we are worshipping. In our prayers, our songs, the sermons that are preached, and all the other actions of the service; is God seen as one whom we are approaching "with reverence and godly fear?" Regrettably, this simply does not get factored into the way that many American evangelical churches plan and carry out their Lord's Day services. The music, the actions of worship, the tone that is set is often done with very different purposes in mind. It may be to appeal to visitors or to generate positive and upbeat feelings in the participants. Often times in evangelical services, the purpose of worship often seems to be to get everyone excited about being there and to keep their interest with entertainment oriented music or dramatic performances. This is not appropriate as the goal of the worship service. It is not consistent with the necessity of approaching God with reverence and godly fear. Worship is to be done for the glory of God, not the praise of men. We glorify God by giving Him what He desires, by approaching His throne with due reverence following the pattern that He has set down in His Word. The nightclub or theater atmosphere so common in many churches, which seeks the comfort and excitement of the "audience" is hardly appropriate to an attitude of "reverence and godly fear."

Much of the rationale for a casual and comfortable worship is that the service is then made into a more relaxed environment for the unbelievers who may be in attendance. But this is an attempt to force the worship of God's people into a role for which it is not intended. There are six days a week that we have to evangelize our neighbors, but the Lord's Day service is for the covenant people of God to draw near to Him. As one author put it, worship is "family time" for God and His children." This does not mean that unbelievers may not be present. We should be welcoming and friendly to them before and after the service. But their presence should never dictate to God's people what sorts of things we should or should not do in worship. To be quite blunt about it, unbelievers should have no say in these matters.

Their desires or tastes should not be considered when we offer our worship to God. How would they know what pleases God? Worship is for Him; it is directed toward Him, for His glory. The church is to look to the Word of God to determine what the service should be like. In doing this, the church will be blessed because of her obedience. Actually, any unbelievers present will also be well served. For they will come to realize by watching us worship, that they are not in covenant with God, and if God permits, will be convicted by their sin and brought to repentance and faith. Helping the unbeliever to think He can be cozy in the presence of the holy and righteous God of the Scriptures is not ministering to him, it is just deceiving him about the nature of God and about his own condition before God (I Corinthians 14:24-25).

The entertainment model that is so fashionable in churches today is not fitting for the honor of the unchanging God of Scripture, who shakes heaven and earth (Hebrews 12:18ff). The desire to make everyone comfortable is not the purpose of Biblical worship. Who in the Scripture was ever comfortable at being in the presence of God? Was Moses? Isaiah? Ezekiel? Daniel? Paul? John? In too many evangelical churches "it's almost as if the pastor invites us into his living room, instead of God welcoming us into His presence."

The only "audience" in our worship is God. We pray to Him. We sing our Psalms and hymns to Him. We kneel before Him. He is the one who is to receive all glory and honor -- not the pastor, the worship team, the band, or the pianist. This should be obvious. Do we really believe that God is present in our worship services? And if we do, shouldn't our worship also be organized in such a way as to make this clear?

READ & DISCUSS

Hebrews 12: 18,21,27; 1 Corinthians 14:24-25; Ezekiel 1:28; Daniel 10:1-11; Acts 9:3-6, Revelation 1:9-18

LESSON 3

IS WORSHIP SUPPOSED TO BE HAPPY?

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Many Christians are under the mistaken impression that worship is to be a happy time. Many churches seem to be preoccupied with the concern to keep things "positive and upbeat." Where does the Scripture ever tell us that this is to be the norm? One simply has to look at the Psalms to see that worship is not meant to be a time where we just slap a smiley face on everything. The Psalms teach us that in worship there will be times of remorse as we confess our sins. There will be times of overwhelming joy as we hear of the mercy and forgiveness we have in Christ. Every range of human emotion is there. The reality of the Christian life in the struggles of the believer against temptation, suffering, and persecution need to be taken into account in our worship. This is one reason why our church (along with the majority of God's people through history) makes use of the Psalms; and not just in reading, but in singing as well. The Psalms were written to be sung in worship and they capture the full range of human response to being in the presence of God. Mystery and awe, fear and trembling, confusion and questioning, exuberance and joy, stillness and contentment, remorse and sorrow, gratitude and dependence are just some of the human responses and emotions expressed by the inspired writers of the Psalms. And as the Psalms are inspired Scripture, we are called to make the experiences of the Psalmists our own. We are to do this corporately in song, prayer, and confession; not individualistically wrapping ourselves in an emotional cocoon.

The drive to keep everything upbeat is not only unbiblical, it also does real damage to God's people. Worship becomes artificial, contrived, and impoverished. In all honesty, no one will really take it seriously. It encourages the Christians present to think there is something wrong with them if they aren't happy and smiling all the time. Thoughtful unbelievers who are present will reject it as infantile; and many times, they are right.

After leading a worship service several years ago, one of the parishioners came up to me and complained that one of the hymns we sang sounded like a funeral dirge; "mournful and depressing" he called it. I admitted to him that the hymn did sound a bit like a dirge, it was mournful (although, it was not depressing). But, as I explained to him, there was a good reason for it -- we were singing about the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ!

The type of music and the mournful tone of the worship at that time was appropriate for us who are united to Christ in His sufferings! The bitter and innocent suffering of Christ in enduring the cross for those He loves was expressed in a moving way by the very appropriate music and lyrics of the hymn we were using. When the church can no longer incorporate these elements into its worship, we have become shallow; we have forgotten the true human condition and the grace of the incarnation of Christ as He shares in the suffering of sinful humanity.

READ & DISCUSS

Psalm 1, Psalm 3, Psalm 8, Psalm 11, Psalm 27, Psalm 51, Psalm 66, Psalm 72, Psalm 95, Psalm 109, Psalm 119, Psalm 140, Psalm 148.

LESSON 4

FORMALITY & STRUCTURE...OR NOT?

FORMALITY AND STRUCTURE -- OR NOT?

Worship is for God. He is the audience. For this reason our worship at Christ Covenant Church has a very definite structure and formality to it. This is because Biblical worship is formal and structured. There are, of course, many who would take exception to this statement. Spontaneity in worship is often the desire of evangelical Christians. This is thought to be evidence that we are being "led by the Spirit." But this is a point worth examining -- does being led by the Spirit mean that there will be less formality and order? Does the working of the Spirit produce a free flowing impulsiveness to our worship? The apostle Paul told the Corinthian church (in the context of rebuking them for their disorderliness in worship), "let all things be done decently and in order" (I Corinthians 14:40). Writing to the Colossians, Paul rejoiced "to see your good order" (Colossians 2:5). The word "order" in the New Testament is a military term meaning "regimentation", "disciplined order." Order in a regimented sense is to be sought in our worship, not avoided. When the troops are well ordered and disciplined, the Captain of our Salvation is glorified. The worship of God's people is not dead if there is structure and order. Rather, it is evidence that the Spirit is working. Of course, the church could be dead for other reasons. But the Spirit clearly requires order in worship.

The worship of heaven, into which we are shown a glimpse in the book of Revelation, is also highly structured and formal: The four living creatures do not rest day or night, saying: Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come! Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying: "You are worthy, O Lord, To receive glory and honor and power; For You created all things, And by Your will they exist and were created." (Revelation 4:8-11) Notice that there is order here. Each participant in the heavenly service has his role and he knows what that role is. The living creatures know what to say and when to say it. They speak and sing in unison. The 24 elders know their cue and when to fall before the throne. Likewise, they know what to say and when. This is found all throughout Revelation as the worship immediately surrounding the throne of our God is opened to us. Each of the choirs knows what to say (Revelation 5:9-13). They sing and respond in turn or in unison. We should not miss the point here; there is NO spontaneity in the worship of heaven! None of the angels and saints dares to do what they feel like or what comes spontaneously to them.

They do what they have prepared to do and all are involved in fulfilling their appropriate roles. Neither should we be surprised to find that they are joyful in doing this. Their worship is not separated from their heart.

This is orderly, biblical worship, as God Himself desires it. Jesus said in Matthew 6:9-10: "Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." It is the will of Christ that what we do on earth reflects what goes on in heaven. This is certainly true of our worship. In fact, it should be true of our worship first and foremost, where God's Name is explicitly hallowed here on earth; the pattern we are to follow is in heaven.

This also explains our practice at Christ Covenant Church of making use of corporate prayers, readings, and confessions. We simply desire to reflect the worship of heaven as we all participate together with one voice. By carefully planning these things, God's people are enabled to take a more active part in our worship. Notice that in the worship of heaven, everyone is participating; no one is just sitting there. In our worship, you can't just sit in a motionless stupor: you will be standing, sitting, kneeling, eating, drinking, praying, singing, and speaking. In fact, by the end of our worship time, you may be just plain worn out! But in this way the whole congregation, young and old, are able to take part.

By planning in advance using a particular order, we also are expressing our love for God. Order is not opposite of grace and mercy, but is an expression of it. If you invite a group of people to your home but you haven't bothered to provide any food for them, haven't cleaned up the place, and then let them sit alone while you go do something else; are you not really showing contempt for them? You haven't taken time to plan a nice meal and get things in order. You haven't taken into consideration what they might like nor have you shown any interest in serving them. Of course, you would make the proper preparations because it shows love and a desire to honor them as your guests. In a similar way, a planned worship service is by no means a dead service. It shows that we care enough about meeting with the living God to prepare for that very special time. If we just do things off the top of our heads in worship with little or no preparation it truly does reflect badly on the purpose for which the church has gathered.

READ & DISCUSS

1 Corinthians 14:40; Colossians 2:5; Revelation 4:8-11, 5:9-13; Matthew 6:9-10

LESSON 5

COVENANT RENEWAL WORSHIP ~ PART 1

COVENANT RENEWAL WORSHIP

We describe our worship at Christ Covenant Church as "covenant renewal." This simply expresses our belief that the covenant of grace between God and His people is expressed and remembered in the worship service. The covenant that God has established with His people, through the Mediator, Jesus Christ, defines the character of our relationship with the Father. When we say that Christians have a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ, we should understand it is a specific kind of relationship that we are talking about -- a defined relationship. It is not like the relationship we have with our best friend or next-door neighbor. Those relationships are non-binding. Our covenant relationship with the Lord is in many ways like marriage, which is also a covenant (Ephesians 5:22-33). I entered into a covenant with my wife when we took vows to one another and to God. But it is important for me to renew those vows. When I tell my wife I love her, I am renewing the covenant in a sense. I am reminding myself and her of our vows to one another. When I sin against my wife, I ask her forgiveness and renew my commitment and love for her. In covenant with God, the bride of Christ, His Church, also has times set aside when God renews the covenant with us. This is what happens in our Lords Day worship. He expresses to us again, through the Word and the sacraments, that He loves His people, that He forgives our sins, that He remembers us for the sake of His own Son, Jesus Christ. In response to God's actions on our behalf the church responds by confessing her sins, offering thanks and praise to God for His grace, remembering His mercy and favor, and seeking His strength to continue to live and grow in covenant obedience to Him.

Further, Scripture tells us that the covenant with God is renewed by sacrifice (Genesis 18:8-18, Exodus 24:4-11, I Kings 3:6, 11-15, Psalm 50:5, Luke 22:20, Hebrews 12:22-24). We are to offer ourselves as "living sacrifices" to God (Romans 12:1). Jesus death abolished all animal sacrifice (Hebrews 10:4) but it did not abolish all sacrifice. Because of Christ's once for all atoning sacrifice, we can worship the Lord as spiritual sacrifices through Him (II Corinthians 9:12, Philippians 4:18, Hebrews 13:9-17). Covenant renewal by sacrifice follows a definite pattern in the Bible as well. The sacrifices of the Old Testament not only point forward to the atoning work of Christ on the cross, they also point forward to our worship as living sacrifices. According to this sacrificial pattern there was a certain order to the worship that was offered that we can discern in the Scriptures.

There were three major sacrifices and they appear in covenant renewal worship in the following order: First the Sin Offering, followed by the Burnt Offering (or literally, the "Ascension" offering), and lastly came the Peace Offering. This is the order of sacrifice in the worship services described in Leviticus 9. Other examples can be found in Leviticus 8 and II Chronicles 29. These passages and others give the specific, identifiable steps in the process of covenant renewal worship, which we identify by these headings in our liturgy:

CALL TO WORSHIP:

Although this element is not associated with a sacrifice, it expresses the truth that none of us can approach God unless God first approaches us. We can only worship the Lord because He has called us. On the Lord's Day we are to heed the voice of God to come before Him.

CONFESSION OF SIN:

At the very beginning of the service, the sin offerings were brought (Leviticus 9:7-11). God's people had to deal with their sin before they could go any further in the service. This corresponds to our practice of confession of sins. We must always acknowledge our need for the grace of God in Christ. Though we are saints we are yet struggling with sin and stand in constant need of forgiveness and strength to overcome. Without confession of sin, worship simply becomes hypocrisy and presumption. We are saying by our silence that we have nothing to confess and we are fine just as we are. This is not what Scripture teaches. God will not hear the prayers or regard the worship of those who are out of fellowship with Him and each other, because of their sin (Psalm 24:3-5, I Peter 3:7). At this point in our service we hear from the Scriptures of our need for forgiveness, after which we confess our sins corporately and individually.

READ & DISCUSS

Ephesians 5:22-33; Genesis 8:8-18, Exodus 24:4-11; I Kings 3:6, 11-15; Psalm 50:5; Luke 22:20; Hebrews 12:22-24; II Corinthians 9:12; Philippians 4:18; Hebrews 13:9-17; Leviticus 8 & 9; II Chronicles 29.

LESSON 6

COVENANT RENEWAL WORSHIP ~ PART 2

CONSECRATION:

The burnt, or more accurately, the ascension offering was offered following the sin offering (Leviticus 9:12-14). In the ascension offering the sacrificed animal ascended into heaven in the form of smoke, into the glory cloud of God stretched over the tabernacle. This represents the ascension of the believer into the presence of God, where through the shed blood of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit, our worship takes place before the throne of God (Hebrews 10:19-22). We receive God's declaration of forgiveness and are reminded of our responsibilities as those who have received His grace. In this sacrifice the whole animal was burned, in contrast to the other sacrifices. In this way the ascension offering shows that we belong wholly to the Lord. At this point in the service, we hear the Law of God that teaches us what is pleasing to Him, we offer ourselves in prayer and praise to God, and we hear the sermon as the Lord speaks through His appointed minister for our edification.

COMMUNION:

The peace offering was then brought after the ascension (Leviticus 9:18-21). Part of the animal was burned, part of it was waved before the Lord and then given to the worshipper to eat (Leviticus 7:11-21). The portion that was burned was called the Lord's food (Leviticus 3:11). This offering was unique in that it was the only one of the offerings in which the worshipper was permitted to eat a portion. In the Bible, eating with another is an expression of covenant fellowship (i.e. Exodus 24:9-11). In the peace offering, the worshipper ate with God as an expression of deep love, trust, and fellowship. Around the table of the Lord there is peace and assurance of His love for us. So it is that the covenant memorial of the Lords Supper is offered to us by Christ, our peace offering, and He communes with us through it (I Corinthians 10:16). As part of the regular Lords Day worship, God gives us the privilege of sharing a covenant meal with Him.

COMMISSION:

Aaron and Moses concluded the service by blessing the people with Gods benediction (Leviticus 9:22-24). There is blessing in worshipping God according to His will and for His glory. As we leave the assembly of the saints, we need to know that we are not leaving God behind. He goes with us to protect us and enable us to live as His Word has instructed us. God blesses those who honor Him by obeying the call to worship Him on the Lords Day.

The steps in the service that we have just reviewed are what we call the liturgy of the worship service. Liturgy sounds like a bad word to many Protestants, but it is not. It is derived from a Biblical word meaning "service" or "ministry" (leitourgia in Greek). The word is often used of the ministry or service, which is rendered to the Lord; in other words, worship (Luke 1:23, Acts 13:2, Philippians 2:17, Hebrews 10:11). Our liturgy describes the way that we serve God in worship and as we have seen, has a definite order and pattern. As Dr. Robert Rayburn explains, every church has a liturgy, whether they call it that or not:

"...it is disregard for the importance of what is done in the worship of God and the order or logic with which it is done that has led to the common pejorative use of the words 'liturgy' and 'liturgical' This is a mistake in more ways than one. Every church service is a liturgy, if it has various elements in some arrangement. That is what liturgy is. Liturgical churches are churches that have thought about those elements and their proper order. Non-liturgical churches are those which have not. It is no compliment to say that a church is a non-liturgical church. It is the same thing as saying it is a church that gives little thought to how it worships God. Because our worship is held in such importance by the Lord, we must study, meditate, and carefully prepare what we come to do in carrying out our liturgy, our Sunday service. Liturgical worship is often thought of as boring and ritualistic. Well, there is no reason to believe that rituals are automatically boring. There are many rituals which most of us expect and appreciate. I have a ritual of eating three meals a day, which I quite enjoy. I ritualistically shower and brush my teeth every day (which I can assure you, those closest to me very much appreciate). To ask whether these things are boring completely misses the point. God ritualistically causes the sun to rise and set each day; is He bored by this? If we think about it, rituals form a huge part of our lives. If God desires that we do something in a certain way, then we must do it that way. Even the angels of heaven "do not rest day or night, saying; Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty..." (Rev. 4:8). As to whether liturgical worship is boring, that depends a great deal on us. Of course, rituals can be done badly, in a sterile and bland sort of way, if the minister and congregation are just going through the motions. But if there is a true love for God and a zeal to serve and honor Him by saints who are filled with the Holy Spirit, good liturgy will enable them to do so most effectively. Just as my four year old daughter wants me to read the same book over and over because she is so fascinated by it, we should desire to worship our Creator over and over in the way He has prescribed."

READ & DISCUSS

Leviticus 9:12-14; Hebrews 10:19-22; Leviticus 9:18-21, 7:11-21, 3:11; Exodus 24:9-11; I Corinthians 10:16; Leviticus 9:22-24.

LESSON 7

WORSHIP MUSIC

WORSHIP MUSIC

Music has a central place in the worship of the Triune God. Music is a gift that God has given us to enjoy, and to exalt Him. If you have worshipped with us, you will notice that we do not use what is often called "contemporary" worship or praise music. This is because we believe that most of this music is not appropriate for the worship of God. Please don't get offended; allow me to explain what I mean. Some people do get offended by this and often respond with something like: "show me in the Bible where it says we should use that tune or we shouldn't use this tune for worship." Well, this issue of music is not an issue of laws or commands, but it is more of a wisdom issue. It is a question of what sort of music is fitting and appropriate, not necessarily what sort of music is lawful for the church's worship.

The church has a long heritage of worship music. A few decades ago, this tradition was rejected in favor of pop forms. It was thought that popular music is what really moves people, so the church should use this music to attract a wider audience. But as we have already seen, "attracting an audience" should not be a factor in how we plan our worship. And is it really wise for the church to throw off almost 2,000 years worth of music as it has developed within the context of the church's worship, only to settle for contemporary pop music? I ask the question because this is exactly what has happened. There is nothing wrong with pop music per se. It has its place. Listening to some of it on the radio or in the background at a restaurant can be quite enjoyable. However, this doesn't mean that it belongs in the assembly of God's people when we approach the mighty throne of the Lord. One parishioner may like marching bands; another prefers New Orleans jazz. They are certainly free to enjoy these musical styles. But does this mean that we should incorporate them into the service?

Why do we think that just because we like a certain kind of music, we need to bring it into the Lords Day service? It just doesn't follow. The real issue is not whether or not I can ever listen to pop Christian music or any other kind of pop music. The issue is whether or not the music is fitting for the purpose of approaching a holy God in reverence and awe. Music does communicate. We need to make sure that our music is not communicating the wrong thing about who God is or what worship is. So am I arguing for "traditional" worship versus "contemporary" worship? Not really. I don't care for the use of these labels because they are not accurate.

Most churches that describe themselves as contemporary are usually describing their style of music. Generally, however, they are not using a strictly contemporary style of music. They use a style that baby-boomers are comfortable with. It's the soft pop sound you can find on any number of classic or light rock radio stations. But it is definitely not contemporary. It is in a style peculiar to a specific time period (70s and early 80s). And many middle class to upper middle class Americans happen to like that style. I happen to like some of it as well. But that doesn't mean that it is appropriate for worship.

Likewise, I reject the labeling of our worship as "traditional." It is true that at Christ Covenant Church we use many old hymns. We also make use of the Psalms, which are the oldest hymns of all (God Himself wrote them). We do not despise contemporary music, in fact we could use some contemporary tunes that are appropriate for the purpose of worship. But we do recognize that we live in a time in which the past is despised. We live in a time when contemporary Americans (and yes, Christians too), do not think that we have anything to learn from those who lived in ages before ours. We, along with our entire culture, are infatuated with the new and up to date. As Christians, who follow a faith that is based on God's acts in history and the doctrine of God's providential working in all of history, there is no excuse for this. The corporate worship of the church has a unique atmosphere and is a unique event. For centuries, Christians have thoughtfully composed music and lyrics to use for the glory of God and for the expression of Biblical praise. A real Christian musical culture was developed over time. Is it wise for us to simply dismiss this? Is it not simply foolish to insist that what is new is necessarily better? Let's be clear; we don't reject much of the modern church music simply because it is new. We reject much of this "praise and worship" music, because it is itself a rejection of the forms and modes of musical expression that were so effectively used in the past; substituting in its place music derived from pop culture and commercial jingles.

We shouldn't worship tradition; however, we shouldn't dismiss it out of hand either. Our desire is to see the church build on this tradition, not dump it. I really believe that many of the best of the church's hymns and music are yet to be composed. But because of our present ignorance of our Christian musical tradition, our duty at this point in history is to re-educate ourselves in what our fathers in the faith accomplished musically so that we may rejoin the conversation and begin to build on the foundation left to us. Our culture's infatuation with pop music has us building a foundation on sand. It is one that will not last and that we cannot pass on to our children and grandchildren because pop music, by definition, is temporary; it is what is "popular." Our goal in selecting and offering music and song to the Lord is to use that which most effectively expresses what we are doing in worship. Do the music and the words express reverence and godly fear? Or do the lyrics simply express our feelings about worshipping God, how happy we are, or how much fun we were having? Too often, the latter is precisely what is expressed, even if it is unintentional.

LESSON 8

WORSHIP & EVANGELISM

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Despite the fact that the corporate worship is not primarily for unbelievers, there is a close connection between the corporate worship of the church and reaching out to the unbeliever in evangelism. But they are connected in a way that is not generally considered. I believe that one of the best evangelistic tracts you could give out (with explanation, of course) is the bulletin containing our liturgy. This may sound strange to you. But is this not what the Lord Jesus did when He spoke to the woman at the well? He called her to be one who would "worship God in Spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). In essence, evangelism is calling people to be worshippers of their Lord and Creator. And of course they cannot do so, because their sin has cut them off from fellowship with God. They must believe on Christ, confessing their sins. They will then be taught by the Word of God how they must live and believe, they will receive spiritual nourishment from the Lord, and be blessed as they go out and live in this world to His glory. That is what evangelism should be and the covenant renewal worship service reenacts this each and every week. The covenant renewal service, despite the fact that one must be a covenant member to participate, is the most evangelistic kind of service that there is. By using the headings of the liturgy and explaining them, we show the unbeliever the good news:

CALL TO WORSHIP -- God calls all His creatures (including you) to worship Him and to submit to His rule.

CONFESSION OF SIN -- You cannot worship the righteous and holy God because you are a sinner deserving eternal punishment. In Christ you may find forgiveness and new life as you repent of your sins and trust in the good news of His death, burial and resurrection.

CONSECRATION -- As a new man or woman in Christ, God requires you to obey His Word as it is taught and preached. You will be sanctified and transformed by that Word, becoming more like Christ Himself.

COMMUNION -- In Christ you are no longer an enemy of God, but have peace with Him. You will have the privilege of table fellowship, eating and drinking bread and wine that the Lord may show that he loves you and has established you as a member of His covenant household forever.

COMMISSION -- As a worshipper of the Lord, He promises to bless you, to be with you wherever you go, to never leave nor forsake you for all eternity.

Pastor Eric Sauder write, “several years ago I was leading worship at the church I served, and I noticed that a young woman in the congregation, a first time visitor, was weeping after we confessed our sins at the beginning of the service. As we went through the service she continued to weep silently. All through the sermon and until the end of the service I saw her weeping. After the benediction she immediately left to compose herself. I later learned that though she had grown up attending many different churches, she had never repented and confessed her sins to the Lord! That day in our church was the first time she had ever done so! That day, she trusted in the gospel of Christ for the forgiveness of her sins. We had no altar call, no invitation to come to the front, no prayer with every head bowed and every eye closed. It wasn’t because of a great evangelistic sermon that I preached. It was because God’s covenant through Jesus Christ was shown to her in the service as well as her awareness that she was a covenant breaker needing to repent of her sin. God was pleased to use the worship of His people to open her heart that day.”

CONCLUSION

At Christ Covenant Church we by no means think that we have “arrived” in terms of our worship. We know that we still have much to learn in this area (and in every other area as well) and we trust that the Lord will continue to reform us and give us an even greater love for His worship. This is not a project that could be accomplished in one lifetime or even many. Worship defines us as the people of God, and the way we approach Him, over time, effects what we believe and say about Him. It will effect what our children believe as well. We desire to be faithful in a way that future generations will be able to learn from us and build upon what we have done. Author and pastor Jeffrey Meyers writes: “The way we now worship, the way we pray, the way we approach God in corporate worship in our churches will determine what our spiritual grandchildren one day will believe, teach, and confess.” God is building His spiritual temple for His worship, according to His perfect design.

For further study:

Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

James B. Jordan, *Theses On Worship* (Niceville, Florida: Transfiguration Press, 1998).

Jeffrey J. Meyers, *The Lord’s Service: The Grace of Covenant Renewal Worship* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2003).

Robert S. Rayburn, “Worship From The Whole Bible” (The Theology and Music of Reformed Worship, un- published lecture notes).

T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can’t Sing Hymns: How Pop Culture Rewrote the Hymnal* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2010).

This study was adapted from an article by Rev. Eric Sauder (with his permission) for use by:

Christ Covenant Church

67 Scudder Avenue Copiague, NY 11726 (631) 594-1377

Worship: 10am (the Lord’s Supper is celebrated each Sunday)

Fellowship Coffee/Bagel break follows the service

Sunday School Class: 12:15-1:00pm

www.christcovenantchurch.weebly.com