

Worship Style?

Presbyterian worship. Attitudes about worship range from ambivalence, to conviction, and in many of today's Presbyterian churches there is no telling what kind of worship service one might encounter. Is this a topic about which we should be concerned? Are important principles at stake, or is worship just a matter of personal style and taste?

Paul said, "Whether, then, you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). Yet, the church in the Old and New Testaments also set aside a special, sacred time in which they worshiped God in a formal, corporate fashion. In the Bible these sacred services took place in the tabernacle, then the temple, the synagogues, and finally moved into the homes of believers. In the NT these sacred services are referred to as the "breaking of bread," and as the time of "assembling together" on the first day of the week (also called "the Lord's day") whereupon they devoted themselves to fellowship, prayer, singing, God's Word, and the Lord's Supper.

Presbyterians believe sacred worship is regulated by God's Word in such a way that the Bible must prescribe each part of the service. The worship service is thereby kept free from man made innovations. This is called the Regulative Principle.

This principle is expressed throughout the OT wherein God directs how he wants to be worshiped, and forbids

human invention. At the end of an exposition of the 2nd commandment, in Deut. 12:32 God says, "Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to nor take away from it." Nadab and Abihu violated this principle in Lev. 10 and were consumed by fire as punishment. While NT worship is different than OT worship in many ways, this principle remains the same. God tells man how to properly worship.

This principle is likely to sound repressive to many Christians today who favor the cultivation of personal style, and the freedom to express themselves without the constraints of formality. But during the Protestant Reformation attitudes were different. This principle was liberating, because it freed Christians from all of the man-made ceremony and tradition to which the Roman Catholic Church had tied their members. The Protestants were freed from "commandments of men" (Col. 2:22). No longer would the church force people to participate in ceremonies, which had no Biblical origin.

The Regulative Principle is the Reformation doctrine of Sola Scriptura (meaning "Bible Alone") applied to the worship service. The Protestant Reformers believed the doctrine, worship, and government of the church (all of which had become messed up by Roman Catholicism) were bound in check by the Bible. Therefore, in the same way that the church's doctrine must be rooted and grounded in Scripture, so must the church's worship (and form of government).

The Scottish Presbyterians who settled in America had a peculiar way of practicing communion. They would only do it once a year. When the time came they would set aside a whole week devoted to preaching services. On the last service they would celebrate the Lord's Supper. When brought into America this communion week became transformed into the system of revival meetings which most of us are familiar with. But the emphasis was changed from communion to evangelism, and the Lord's Supper was replaced by some type of invitation (like the altar call). These services became very formulated and governed by pragmatic techniques (especially during the Second Great Awakening under the influence of Charles Finney). As these revival services became the standard fare, two mutually opposed philosophies of worship were in the church: the old regulative principle approach which sought to affect God in ways prescribed by God, and the new pragmatic approach which sought to affect man in ways devised by man. This new system of worship, which was first and foremost evangelistic, driven by whatever techniques best accomplished this end numerically speaking, became known as the "New Measures." It was a significant move away from the older understanding of worship. The old God-centered worship service had been replaced by the new man-centered evangelistic meeting.

Little has changed since then. What has come to be known as the "seeker sensitive" model of worship is nothing more than an advancement of the "New Measures" philosophy.

Other principles are also important. The centrality of God is a principle derived from the 1st commandment. God is the one who is worshiped, and nothing must distract from giving him the worshipers' full attention. God's Word is also central. It is read, preached, sung and even seen (the sacraments). Adding to this, worship is dialogical. This means that worship is an interaction between God and man, whereby God addresses his worshipers through his Word, and they respond through prayer and song. Worship is also simple and spiritual. With the passing of the OT, and with the entrance of Christ into the heavenly Holy of Holies, there are very few visible supports. NT worship is "in spirit and in truth." Worship is to be reverent (Ps. 2:11; Heb. 12:28). And worship is to be orderly (1 Cor. 14:40). Other principles might be added, but the point being made is that the worship service is under God's influence, not man's.

-Pastor Ferry