

FROM HERE TO ETERNITY: A PHILOSOPHY OF WORSHIP FOR APC

Adopted by the APC Session, 2008

Introduction

In March of 2007, Pastor Tom Ferrell authored a document titled *Thoughts on Worship Planning*. The intent of that piece was to assist APC's lay leadership in the planning of corporate worship during the forthcoming period of transition. Much of what Tom wrote in that piece was practical and provided guidelines for the structure of worship planning; he also offered some specific suggestions on various elements. In many ways, this present document draws on those earlier thoughts about worship, but it also goes beyond and seeks to be more comprehensive.

The term "philosophy of worship" might be a bit misleading because it seems to only address the big picture without giving thought to specifics. A philosophy of worship should address not only *why* we worship, but also the great diversity in *how* we worship. We desire to do both, address some general principles of worship and then make some specific applications about worship at APC.

Why We Worship

A great definition of worship was coined by John Piper, Pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, MN. He wrote, "*worship is gloriously reflecting back to God the radiance of His worth.*" Worship is the natural response and the greatest delight of people who have experienced God through His Son, Jesus Christ. Worship must not be relegated to a weekly service or a stale ritual. The corporate worship services of APC will only be as rich as the individual worship in the lives of her members. Thus, worship is both private and corporate. Concerning corporate worship, there are three primary motivations:

1. The Lord has commanded corporate worship (John 4:23)
2. The natural response to individual lives of worship is corporate overflow (Matt. 12:34)
3. As a confessional church we are keeping with the tradition and custom of Reformed public worship (WCF 21)

How We Worship

Worship and the Regulative Principle

Whenever worship is discussed in a Reformed/Presbyterian setting there is always the accompanying discussion of the regulative principle of worship (RPW). The RPW simply means that the Bible alone must regulate how we worship God. We are not meant to worship God in ways that are novel or not provided for in scripture. Having said that, the Bible is quite broad in its approach to worship, specifically in relation to various elements and style.

Because Reformed/Presbyterian churches have always held to some form of the RPW, most Reformed worship has been similar in its structure. That overarching structure is taken from Isaiah 6. In Isaiah 6 we see the following:

1. Recognition and reverence for God
2. Recognition of our sin and the need for a Savior
3. Impartation of the Good News
4. Embracing the Good News with all of its implications

From the Isaiah 6 structure we can also make the following observations:

1. Worship is theocentric (God is the object of our worship)
2. Worship is Christ-exalting
3. Worship is Gospel-focused
4. Worship is doxological (saturated with praise to God)
5. Worship is dialogical (involves us speaking to God, God speaking to us, and us speaking to one another)
6. Worship is communal (incorporates the body of Christ rather than just the individual)
7. Worship is missional (it should lead to a response of Gospel proclamation and living)

As you can see, the overarching structure of worship is relatively simple and relatively open-ended concerning the specific elements used to accomplish worship. From Isaiah 6 we can develop a broad biblical pattern for worship, but how should we take the broad biblical pattern and incorporate specific elements and applications? What are the historic elements and applications used in the Reformed tradition that seek to be biblical in their structure?

The following are the most common elements of Reformed worship:

1. Invocation
2. Call to Worship
3. Various Prayers (Adoration, Illumination, Thanksgiving, Confession, Intercession, Praise)
4. Confession of Faith
5. Confession of Sin
6. Assurance of Pardoning Grace
7. Scripture Reading (Old Testament, Psalter, New Testament)
8. Singing of Songs, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs
9. Preaching
10. Sacraments
11. Benediction

The aforementioned are the central elements of historic Reformed worship. Other elements have been incorporated over time to include:

1. Offering
2. Testimony
3. Drama
4. Special Music

With all of the traditional and non-traditional elements used in Reformed worship, the question arises: *what degree can a Presbyterian church be faithful to scripture and their confessional identity while incorporating these elements and must they be present in order to accomplish worship?* Taking cues from Isaiah 6, the Session of APC believes the spirit of biblical fidelity and confessional integrity remains intact when we seek, over time, to incorporate each of these elements. We do not believe it is necessary or beneficial to structure corporate worship service with each of these elements or more on a weekly basis. If worship is structured with Isaiah 6 in mind, utilizing even a subset of the 15 elements, then we believe it is pleasing to the Lord and beneficial to the worshipers.

Worship in the Context of APC

Worship should be contextualized

The cookie cutter approach to church program for worship is insufficient because it does not account for the unique blend of persons or the historical and social context of a church. APC is not located in Southern California, upstate New York, the Cities of Dallas, or remote Ethiopia.

Worship should value content over construct

“Worship wars” often begin in relation to the construction of worship, relative to a certain style. This is unfortunate and unnecessary. All corporate worship will have a certain “style” or “flavor” due to contextualization, but we should never substitute construction for content. Thus, the questions we must ask are “*does our worship model an Isaiah 6 pattern; is the content biblical and rich; is it planned in the context of our unique local body; does it promote the participation of the body?*” If the answer to those questions is “yes” then the construct or style becomes secondary to the content. The planning and participation in worship becomes much more freeing because we are no longer trying to fit a mold. We can use historic readings or contemporary ones, we can use written prayers or extemporaneous ones, we can sing historic hymns as well as modern music, we can use limited instrumentation or full instrumentation.

Specific Worship Elements

Centrality of Preaching

Ephesians 2, as well as numerous Gospel accounts, indicates that Jesus came to *preach* peace and Good News. Romans 10 says that faith, initial and formative, is produced as God uses the *preached* Word of God. Chief among Paul’s instruction to the young pastor Timothy was to *preach* the Word.

While it is true that John Calvin desired to institute the weekly celebration of the Lord’s Supper in Geneva, he desired to institute daily preaching of God’s Word. Thus, Calvin’s understanding was that the priority of preaching superseded the priority of the sacraments. Preaching must be given priority in corporate worship. The structure of the worship services at APC must allow for and promote the priority and centrality of preaching.

Worshipful Singing

In some way, God has created singing and music to be an emotive, resonating element in worship. Singing has a way of eliciting a heartfelt response even more than recitations or meditation. King David was a singer; his primary way of worship was through song. Thus, singing must also have an elevated place in worship.

Concerning the songs we sing, we believe that content is key. Whether the song was written thousands of years ago, two hundred years ago, or a

mere two days ago; if the content is biblical and in keeping with true worship then the church should be free to use it.

In our singing we must also account for the contextualization factor. To quote Tim Bayly of Church of the Good Shepherd (PCA), “*It’s a hindrance to the gospel if we require that our neighbor step back in time a hundred or so years in order to understand our worship language, and so we try where we can to translate the past into the idioms of our day without sacrificing the integrity of the message. This is a difficult but vital work, similar to the Reformers translating the Scriptures from Latin into modern languages—what they called putting things into the ‘vulgar tongue.’*” This does not preclude using ancient texts and ancient songs, but it does not mandate them solely. We also must think critically about the ways we present and participate in the songs we sing; for example, many worshipers have no idea what they are saying when they sing, “*Here I raise mine Ebenezer.*” Thus, explanations and perhaps alternatives should be utilized.

Worshipful Accompaniment

The Bible lists all manner of instruments being used to praise and worship God. Some would resonate better with ancient worship than the instruments of choice today, while many contemporary instruments better serve modern music. Our approach to instrumentation must be biblical; if an instrument can be used in a way that enhances the music and adds to worship then the church should be free to use it. We should not be limited in our range of musical instruments to an arbitrary period of church history or individual preference. As with every element of worship, the goal should not be on performance but on participation.

Conclusion

At APC we have developed a wonderfully blended worship service. We maintain a connection with the historic Reformed church while utilizing appropriate contextualization to our time and setting. Our services seek to be Christ-exalting and Gospel-centered. Our mixture of ancient and modern forms in readings, prayers, and music resonates with the vast majority of our people. Thus, the session believes that this philosophy of worship represents our broad ideals and common desires.

We commend this philosophy to the people of and pray that God would continue to move among and make us worshipers from here to eternity.