

The Essentials of Worship

I am in search of guidelines in the selection and use of music in Worship. It will help if we begin with a definition of Worship. Many excellent books have been written on the subject. Three of them lying on my desk at the moment are "Worship, Rediscovering the Missing Jewel" by Allen and Borrer; "The Worship Maze" by Basden and "A Royal 'Waste' of Time" by Marva Dawn. The word "worship" means to acknowledge the worth (literally, the weight, the importance of) someone or something. Christian Worship is acknowledging the worth, the supreme importance of the Triune God of the Bible. This is done primarily by offering sacrifices to Him. A "sacrifice" is surrendering, giving up, forfeiting [an animal or other item] to God something we value to demonstrate how highly we esteem Him. Such an act, all worship, is a direct response to the grace or works or Word of God. It is not necessarily for atonement, to secure forgiveness of sins. It can be to express thanksgiving, gratitude or to signify honor and devotion or loyalty.

1 Peter 2:5 you yourselves, as living stones, are being built into a spiritual house for a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Phil 4:18 But I have received everything in full, and I have an abundance. I am fully supplied, having received...what you provided-a fragrant offering, a welcome sacrifice, pleasing to God.

The ultimate sacrifice to God is our whole selves- all that we have in His Service. That is the highest form of worship

Rom 12:1 Therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your spiritual worship.

But on a day-by-day basis, our response to God's grace includes offering sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving. Our response to God also includes prayers of various types. These, too, are sacrifices.

Heb 13:15 Therefore, through Him let us continually offer up to God a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of our lips that confess His name.

This is the purpose of corporate worship throughout the Bible, beginning with the family of Adam in Genesis. It is vertical, God-directed, rather than horizontal, other directed. And it is not self-directed or inner directed. However, in the New Testament, the Apostles teach that the church should also assemble for the horizontal purpose of edifying or building up Believers in the faith and equipping them for ministry outside the Assembly. In fact, the only command in the New Testament directing Believers to assemble gives this as the purpose for doing it. This

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purpose of edifying Believers is the focus in other verses in the NT on Worship.

Heb 10:25 not staying away from our meetings, as some habitually do, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

1 Cor 14:1 Pursue love and desire spiritual gifts, and above all that you may prophesy. 2 For the person who speaks in [another] language is not speaking to men but to God, since no one understands him; however, he speaks mysteries in the Spirit. 3 For the person who speaks in [another] language is not speaking to men but to God, since no one understands him; however, he speaks mysteries in the Spirit. 4 The person who speaks in [another] language builds himself up, but he who prophesies builds up the church. 5 I wish all of you spoke in other languages, but even more that you prophesied. The person who prophesies is greater than the person who speaks in languages, unless he interprets so that the church may be built up.

1 Cor 14:26 How is it then, brothers? Whenever you come together, each one has a psalm, a teaching, a revelation, another language ["tongues"], or an interpretation [of what was spoken in tongues]. All things must be done for edification.

Eph 4:11 And He personally gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, 12 for the training of the saints in the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ, 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God's Son, [growing] into a mature man with a stature measured by Christ's fullness. 14 Then we will no longer be little children, tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching, by human cunning with cleverness in the techniques of deceit. 15 But speaking the truth in love, let us grow in every way into Him who is the head-Christ. 16 From Him the whole body, fitted and knit together by every supporting ligament, promotes the growth of the body for building up itself in love by the proper working of each individual part.

How do we reconcile assembling for Worship of God (vertical) and assembling for edification of Believers (horizontal). Contemporary and emerging Services tend to emphasize the horizontal, while traditional Services primarily focus on the vertical. This is a mistake.

Other directed Services are the primary occasion in which Believers use the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but such Services can become very emotional, subjective and "Christianity-lite". Churches that are primarily God-directed are far more likely to be Christianity-heavy and more intellectually satisfying. This is the kind of Service most favored by Reformed Calvinists, but often they are spiritually dormant, with the members uninvolved.

I am convinced that the neglect of one purpose for the other has led to the diminution of the content and effectiveness of each kind of Service and is at the root of much of the confusion and controversy about corporate "Worship" and the weakness of many churches today. Both the vertical and horizontal are essential and scriptural.

Heb 13:15 Therefore, through Him let us continually offer up to God a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of our lips that confess His name. [AND] 16 Don't neglect to do good and to share, for God is pleased with such sacrifices.

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There is evidence in the New Testament for progressive development in Church Practice and Polity. Notice this in the above passages about edification. The Corinthian church, small and meeting in houses, was rather free form and egalitarian and very charismatic in its assemblies. In spite of the growing popularity of this Model and an increasing anti-clerical, anti-institutional attitude among many evangelicals, there is no Scriptural or necessary reason why churches today must imitate this model. In fact, it is wrong. When Paul penned the letter to the Ephesian church we see a structure has emerged, with men called to be responsible for leading the congregation in its meetings both for Worship and for edification.

Eph 4:11 [Christ] personally gave some to some to be ... pastors and teachers, 12 for the training of the saints in the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ The open participation, free-flowing, egalitarian Corinthian or Acts 2 Model of is not functional in Ephesus The church is now under the authority of settled Pastor-Teachers [hyphenated]. Paul addresses these Leaders as the Elders of the local church with responsibility to oversee the work [the word for "overseer" is our word, "Bishop.

Acts 20:17 Now from Miletus, [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church. [He said to them] 22 "And now I am on my way to Jerusalem, bound in my spirit, not knowing what I will encounter there, 25 "...I know that none of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will ever see my face again. 27 I did not shrink back from declaring to you the whole plan of God. 28 Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among whom the Holy Spirit has appointed you as overseers, to shepherd the church ...

The Elders [an honorific title given to certain older men in the congregation chosen for this work- Titus 1:5-9], 1 Tim.3:1-7] are to function as "overseers". Our word, "bishop" comes from the Greek word for overseer ["episkopous"]. Originally, Bishops were the Elders of local congregations and this title indicated one of their major functions- they were to go around town to literally "look at" or visit the members of the church] The Elders were to shepherd the flock. The word "to shepherd" [Grk-"poimainein"] means to pastor or literally "feed" or tend to the sheep. Elders were responsible for the oversight and spiritual nurturing of the local church. The word translated as "elders" is "presbyters" [Grk, presbuteros] and over time, this title would become "priests"] The churches the Apostle Peter worked with also had this structure.

1 Peter 5:1 ... I exhort the elders among you. 2 shepherd God's flock among you, not overseeing out of compulsion but freely, according to God's [will]; not for the money but eagerly; 3 not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

Hebrews 13:7 Remember your leaders [ēgoumenōn" = those who are in command (with official authority); have the rule over] who have spoken God's word to you. As you carefully observe the outcome of their lives, imitate their faith. 17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account, so that they can do this with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.

Notice that these Elders were worthy of, and entitled to being, financially supported to free them to do their work.

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1 Timothy 5:17 Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. *18* For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages."

While many Believers like to hold up the earliest church (in Jerusalem) and the Corinthian church as models to be imitated today, the New Testament reveals that Model was replaced and by the time the letters to Timothy and Titus were penned, an entirely different institutional, hierarchical structure has emerged, one that is progressing toward the "Catholic" Model [but still very different than what we see today in that Model]. What I am trying to show is that by the end of the New Testament, both the vertical worship of God and the horizontal edification of Believers are part of one church Service, under the leadership of Elders [or Clergy].

Thus, the essentials of corporate Worship come to include preaching and teaching (the Word) by Pastors through which God edifies His People, as well as the celebration (administration) of Holy Communion (and Baptism), again conducted by Clergy, also for the edification and the building up of the Body of Christ.

All can agree that Worship is both to glorify God and to edify the Believers. This is the most fundamental test or guideline for judging any Worship Service, including the Music used in it: does it glorify God and edify the Believers? All churches can also agree the basic elements of Worship are Hymns of Praise and Thanksgiving, Prayers, Confession of Faith and renewal of Covenant vows, Reading and Preaching of the Word and celebration of Sacraments. These are all mandated and expected by God. There is no controversy here.

The Regulative and Normative Principles

The differences among us are in how we define and practice these essentials; particularly, the divisions come when deciding what matters are secondary! The spiritual descendents of the 16th Century Reformers, John Calvin, Martin Luther, Thomas Cranmer, Ulrich Zwingli and Meno Simons strongly disagreed with each other over this. Two further guidelines, yardsticks, have been adopted: The Regulative Principle (RP) and the Normative Principle (NP).

Reformed Calvinists are adamant about following the "Regulative Principle" (RP). That name was first used in the 19th Century, but the idea comes from the Confession of 1646 Chap XXI (which includes many Scripture verses to support it).

The popular capsule of the RP idea is that God has regulated or ordered exactly what He wants in a Service of Worship. The converse is that what is not so regulated is forbidden. Reformed Lutherans and Anglicans and most evangelical churches follow the Normative Principle (NP). What is not commanded by God in worship is acceptable as long as it does not contradict or replace what is commanded (which, they agree, must be done). Another version of the Normative Principle says that we may worship God in any way we chose as long as it is not

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specifically forbidden. I do not find any warrant for this version of the NP at all.

Deuteronomy 4:2 is often quoted in support of the RP, "Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you." That sounds plain and simple enough, but, in fact, many elements of Worship that are considered by Reformed Calvinists to be mandated by God are actually inferences from Scripture or are drawn from historical examples rather than any specific command. Knowing this is crucial. The simplistic slogan, "right if commanded and wrong if not" is not the true RP. The Westminster Confession makes this clear, although many Reformed Calvinists overlook it.

WC, Chap 1, Section VI. The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, ...either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word:[13] and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.

Notice how "command" is qualified in this common definition of the RP-

In regard to worship "whatever is commanded in Scripture by command, precept or example, or which can be deduced by good and necessary consequence from Scripture is required, and that whatever is not commanded or cannot be deduced by good and necessary consequence from the Scripture is prohibited"

This is probably the major sticking point in the debate between Regulative and Normative Worship. The debate is not about plain commands, it is about the authority of inferences from those commands and the authority of precedent and historical example. On what authority do matters that are deduced from Scripture become essentials and as binding as direct commands. To say "some circumstances concerning the worship of God, common to human actions and societies and ordered by the light of nature and prudence are to be observed" opens the door to the acceptance of many practices that Lutherans and Anglicans value which are not commanded and are rejected or condemned by Reformed Calvinists on the alleged basis of the Westminster Confession. Thus, the debate.

I believe most Protestant churches follow the RP. Certainly the majority agree on what the basic essentials of Worship are. The debate really comes when deciding what are secondary matters.

Much of what Reformed Calvinists insist is commanded and assumed to be essential is not mentioned in Scripture at all. Every one who says, for example, that Communion is essential also has a set idea or assumption what the practice of Communion involves (above and beyond debate over the theological meaning of the essential nature of the Ordinance itself): whether it should be observed every week or once a month or quarter; seated in pews or kneeling at a railing, one cup or many, wine or grape juice, one loaf of bread or unleavened wafers? Should

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the Clergy wear a robe or street clothes? If Laypeople (men only?) serve, should they sit together on the front pew or behind the Table before and after they serve? Should music be played or should there be silence? Can the invitation, prayers and responses be written and read or must they be spontaneous? To many, such details are non-essentials, while to others they are essential and very important even though there is no specific command (or even clear precedent) about such details, only assumptions and man-made traditions. At the very least, knowing that such details are non-essentials should lead to humility and mutual respect for our diverse practice in such matters.