

Worship: Contemporary or Traditional?

Previously we looked at the question, “What is the purpose of worship?” We saw that the purpose of worship is to ascribe worth to God – to serve and adore him. We saw, too, that when we worship God properly, we find personal fulfillment.

Many churches today have divided over the issue of proper worship. The controversy often erupts in the area of worship style: *should worship be “contemporary” or “traditional”?*

The question is more important than it may at first appear. *Why?* Because the Bible teaches that God is very specific about the way he is worshiped. *How do we know this?*

Firstly, God gave very specific details about the construction and operation of the first public *house of worship* – the tabernacle. The book of Exodus devotes six whole chapters to the design of the tabernacle and the regulation for its priests. God spells out in *exact detail* how the tabernacle is to be constructed – from its dimensions, to its furniture, even down to the materials used for its hooks (Ex 25-30). A bit later it devotes almost another six whole chapters to describe how the tabernacle was built and set up according to this exact plan (Ex 35-40)!

Following these twelve chapters in the book of Exodus, God then devotes the first ten chapters of the book of Leviticus to teaching his people about the proper way to *offer sacrifices* to him (Lev 1-10). The last of these gives us a very sobering account. In the first public worship service at the new tabernacle, two of the priests decided to exercise a bit of “stylistic liberty.” The Bible tells us what happened:

Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them. And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.
(Leviticus 10:1-2)

Nadab and Abihu attempted to worship God in a way “which he had not commanded them.” The result? God struck them dead.

We should pay attention to this. *Why?* Because it teaches us that, regardless of good intentions, God rejects all worship which he himself has not commanded. The logical implication of this is clear: the only acceptable way to worship God is the way he tells us to worship him.

If we think about it, this only makes sense. The Bible teaches that God is an infinite spirit, and that we are finite creatures. How could finite creatures ever know how to worship an infinite spirit, unless he told us? Only God can bridge this gap.

Moreover, there is the problem of sin. The Bible tells us that because of sin, even the human mind is corrupt. If God had left us to ourselves, we would all have long ago eagerly “exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator,” (Rom 1:25). Even Christians are not immune from this corruption of mind (Rom 7:15-23).

These two factors – the radical difference between God and humanity, and the radical corruption of human sin – have important implications for worship. The first shows us that *our only hope for proper worship is to worship God in the way he reveals to us*. The second shows us that *if we attempt to worship God according to our own preferences, we will inevitably slide into idolatry – worshiping ourselves (the creature) rather than God (the Creator)*.

When we consider all this, the question we raised earlier – *should worship be “contemporary” or “traditional”?* – begins to appear fundamentally wrong. To speak of “traditional” or “contemporary” worship is to make worship a matter of preference – either in a more conservative or a more liberal direction. But we have just seen that worship is to be determined not by our preference, but only by God’s revelation.

The better question to ask then is this: *how does God tell us to worship him?* To put the question this way expresses the matter in a way that both honors and listens to God. *How does it listen to God?* God speaks to us in his Word. Thus to learn how God tells us to worship him, all we need do is carefully study the Bible – looking for exact commands, particular examples, and precise principles which apply to public worship. Thus we ought to speak not of “traditional” or “contemporary” worship, but only of *biblical worship*.

In studying the Bible, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church has determined that there are nine elements of biblical worship: a call to worship, the reading of Scripture, the preaching of Scripture, the sacraments, the blessings (salutation and benediction); public prayer, congregational singing, confession of faith, and bringing of offerings.

What about music? For many, this is the crux of the question.

The Orthodox Presbyterian Church understands music to be *a beautiful and helpful aide to congregational singing, but not an independent element of worship*. For this

reason, music must be used very judiciously. So far as it may aid the congregation in praising God, it can and should be employed with dignity and excellence (Heb 12:28). But music must never control the worship or turn into a performance. For this reason, the vast majority of Orthodox Presbyterian Churches sing the historic hymns and psalms of the church accompanied by simple, classical instrumentation.

In practice, this means that biblical worship services in Orthodox Presbyterian Churches tend to resemble “traditional” services. But this is not tradition for tradition’s sake. Rather, it is a sincere attempt to worship God according to the beautiful simplicity of the Bible.

But why is such worship so dull?

This is a fair question, but perhaps it needs to be rearranged. As written, it assumes the problem is with the worship. *But what if the problem is not with the worship, but with us?* What if worship seems so dull to us *because we are dull?* What if we have so over-stimulated ourselves in the bazaar of culture that we have dulled our senses to the theatre of the eternal?

The Bible teaches us that worship is not a matter of human preference, but a matter of divine service. But it also promises us that when we serve faithfully in divine worship, we will enjoy it more than we imagine: “Serve the LORD with gladness! Come into his presence with singing!” (Ps 100:2); “You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore,” (Ps 16:11).

Do you want to experience the joy of biblical worship? Join us for worship at Resurrection OPC this Sunday!