



Working on worship

The Bible expresses a very joyful attitude toward the worship of God. The well-known words of Psalm 122 are a case in point: *"I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD!'"* Also Psalm 84 speaks about the desirability of being with God in His dwelling place: *"How lovely is Thy dwelling place, O LORD of hosts!"*

For a faithful Old Testament worshiper, no experience could match the thrill of being with the holy God in His temple. Think of Psalm 27:

"One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in His temple."

From a New Testament perspective, we understand the house of the Lord to be the Church. God dwells among His people in Word and Spirit. The church members are the living stones of the house of the Lord. When they come together in worship, then the temple goes up and the Lord comes to dwell in their midst. New Testament worship may lack the pomp and ceremony of the Old Testament liturgy, but its loveliness is deeper and its privileges stupendous. In this spiritual worship of the new covenant age, the believers have direct access to the throne room of the living God. Jesus Christ has made the way for them! Fellowship with God is now more intimate than was ever possible in Solomon's temple (cf. Hebrews 12:22-24).

It follows, then, that the Old Testament Psalms about the joy of worship have not lost their relevance. If anything, we who live in the "last days" of the world can sing them with renewed verve and vigor.

Knowing these things, questions begin to arise. Does worship still compel our interest? Do we anticipate the moment of meeting our God in the midst of His people? Is it our highest joy to stand in the presence of the Most High? Is our worship really centered on God? Further, are the expectations we have about worship based on God's Word?

Complaints about worship

We ask these questions because sometimes we meet evidence to the contrary. It goes without saying, of course, that a great many young people go to the church service with indeed much joy and pleasure. Still, there are troubling inconsistencies. For example, it can be noticed that not all young people appear to be aware of their surroundings on Sunday mornings and afternoons. By their posture and demeanor, you might judge them to be watching a fourth-rate movie or listening to some worn-out jokes for the tenth time in a day rather than sitting in the presence of the Holy One who made heaven and earth.

Sometimes the attitude displayed finds a voice. Remarks like the following can be gleaned: "Church is boring ... it doesn't do anything for me ... I get nothing out of the service ... it's so tiresome. . ." On other occasions, we notice tedium induced power snoozes during the services. We can observe a failure to participate in the sung praise of God. In still other cases, we can note that attendance is not regular. For some people, one day in the world is better than a thousand in the house of God. They would rather be doorkeepers in the tents of sin than to ever dwell among the people of God. Worshipping the Maker of heaven and earth seems to them drudgery instead of a pleasure.

From another category of people we encounter a different type of complaint. They are in church regularly. They don't sleep. They do sing. Yet they are not really happy. They hunger for a different style of worship. They find the Reformed worship service arid and stuffy. If they could have their preference, they would jazz up the service to a greater or lesser degree.

First of all, they believe, the sermons should be shorter (15 minutes maximum!) and simpler (please don't challenge us with high thoughts). Then, too, they feel that the church should allow other people to be involved in the worship service. Worship should not be a "one man show." Further, why not permit other styles such as the use of drama, puppets for children, liturgical dance or even clowning for Jesus? In any case, we will need something more than those Old Testament Psalms with Genevan melodies. We need songs that are more lively, songs which go hand-clapping and foot-stamping and raucous hallelujahs. . . .

The basic issue

Behind the different complaints about worship, we can isolate a basic, underlying cause. We could ask people: what is worship for? Or, better yet: for whom is worship? Scripturally, the answer comes very quickly. Worship is for God! Worship is God-directed and God-centered. It has a vertical orientation. Worship is not intended in the first place to impart personal satisfaction, nor is its purpose to please our aesthetic inclinations. In worship, the focus is on God.

Once again, Psalm 95 is our guide in these matters. In verse 5, we hear the call to worship:

"O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker."

Worship is bowing down with heart and mind (if not in body) before the Creator and Savior. Worship means adoring God. It is a confession of His Kingship over us. It is a way of saying: "Lord, you are our Master, our Lord, our Owner. All we have and are is from You, the Living God. You are worthy of all praise!"

When we come together in worship, we are to be aware of the nearness of God. As we enter into His presence, our minds will be preoccupied with Him in His majesty and mercy. If things are well with our souls, there will be a feeling of being enraptured with God, our God, great in glory, the Lord so marvelous and mighty.

When people show an attitude of boredom in the worship service they are demonstrating that they don't really care about God. God does not fascinate them. Instead, they are preoccupied with themselves! And what a silly obsession the self really is! How boring to focus on man, small, finite and sinful, rather than on the Living God.

If we remember that worship is God-centered, we will not so quickly say, "I got nothing out of it." The first concern is: what did God get out of you? Did He receive true praise from your heart and mouth? Did He notice in your attitude that He is your greatest joy and highest pleasure? Could the Lord see that His living Word is like gold to you?

Of course, people may find it rather petty of God that He desires to be worshipped every day and every week. But this is only because the god in whom they believe is not the real God, not the God who speaks in Scripture. Knowing the real, living God of the Bible, nobody will find it small-minded of Him to demand regular worship. Instead, this necessary worship will seem singularly appropriate.

If it is really true that worship bores you, it would be a good idea to examine the overall drift of your life.

Attitudes in worship

Once the underlying issue of the nature of worship is understood, certain other consequences become clear. In the first place, we may speak about posture and dress. When people draw near to God, the right attitude is obviously one of reverence and awe. Obviously, most important is the

attitude of heart and mind. However, what lives in the heart will also be seen on the outside. For example, slouching just doesn't fit the atmosphere of godly reverence. Nor does a fixation on the girl or boy beside you.

Also our dress needs to conform to the nature of worship. It's true that our churches do not prescribe dress codes. Still, would it not be true that a sudden change of habits with respect to clothing indicates also a change in attitude toward worship? Not everyone need to look the same, but surely there can be agreement that church dress is formal dress. We meet in a formal way with the Lord of heaven and earth. Would it not be simply natural to show this in neatness and dignity of dress?

People say that styles change. Of course they do. But still, even with the progressive change of styles, there remains a distinction between formal and casual dress. When formal and casual merge into one styleless mode of dress, haven't we lost something? Haven't we given in to the secularization of life so that no holy moments are left?

When people come to church dressed as though they mistook the pew for a strip of sand on the beach and the pulpit for a hotdog stand, doesn't this say something about a changing idea of worship? Doesn't it indicate that we want to feel more casual about worship? But worship is never casual. Even in the new creation, it won't be casual. Normal, yes, relaxed, surely, but casual? Never! Instead, worship is always characterized by the reverent fear of God our King.

We need to remember that we are not equals with God. Yes, He is our God. True, He does love us. Still, He is holy and infinite, while we are small and unholy. We need to be deeply aware of our unworthiness to come before Him. Of course, we are able to come before Him. We can be confident in Christ. The temptation, however, is that this confidence becomes presumption. A Christian sense of unworthiness and awe, it seems to me, does not promote leisure dress for worship. . . .

Hunger for novelty

Apart from those who find worship plainly boring, there are also some who hunger for liturgical renovations. First of all, it can surely be conceded that some liturgical variety is possible. There is variety in song, in prayer, in Scripture reading and in text for sermon. There could also be more variety in salutation and benediction. A call to worship preceding the actual service could not be forbidden. A congregational "Amen" answering the sermon would likely be an improvement. We could recite the Creed together. We could have an elder reading the Scripture passage and the Law. We could consider reading the baptismal form only once a month in large congregations with frequent baptisms. We could separate the prayer of penitence and the prayer for illumination. And so forth. . . .

However, the variations I've mentioned here are basically circumstantial. They do not challenge the basic essence and order of worship in the Reformed churches and may therefore at least be considered. However, I'm thinking now of those who want to jazz up the worship service in more significant ways. They want things to be more lively.

For some people, lively worship means contemporary music and songs, especially sentimental songs which speak about our human feelings and experiences. It may imply shorter, sweeter sermons. Candlelight services may seem appealing to this mindset, as would children's sermons, hand-clapping, spontaneous Hallelujahs and Amens as well as sporadic jumping for Jesus. "Livelier" worship may result in use of film clips, guest speakers, live testimonials, and overhead projectors. The goal is to have a greater "human dimension." Basically, such people are often suspicious of fixed "forms" of worship in general. Spontaneity and variety is the thing, while fixed liturgies smell like death to their sensitive nostrils.

Another way to analyze this is to say that some desire more sense-appeal in the worship service. A Word-centered liturgy does not thrill them in the least. It cannot captivate them and hold their attention.

Worship and outreach

In connection with the last thought, it is sometimes alleged that Reformed worship services have little power to compel the interest of potential converts. An unsuspecting nonbeliever, we are told, would only encounter a lot of apparent mumbo-jumbo. Again, it can surely be acknowledged that we could do a lot better in making guests feel welcome and at home. For example, it would help to have printed copies of the liturgy with brief explanations available. Above all, wouldn't it be wonderful if all guests were greeted with believable warmth instead of that embarrassed attitude of "I wonder what he (the visitor) thinks of us Reformed people?"

On the other hand, if we set out to alter the worship service so that it has more appeal to ungodly people who don't know the Lord, we would be acting dangerously. The spiritually uncommitted are in no shape to judge what is appropriate for worship. Catering to potential converts with emotional songs, handwringing appeals and superficial effusiveness will surely transform worship into entertainment. After all, that's what unbelievers naturally prefer! Worship is not intended primarily to attract people but rather to be a sweet-smelling offering to the Lord. If we attract Gentile people to join us by a man-centered style, their last state may well be worse than their first. They will have joined a church that exists to satisfy the self-defined needs of man rather than to praise God.

Perhaps we have underestimated the evangelistic power of true, regulated worship. Fervent singing, solid, uncompromising preaching, intense prayer and an overall atmosphere of reverence and sincerity will not be without impact. When the heathen hear the worshiping church declare the mighty deeds of God who called us out of darkness into His glorious light, will this not be powerful to draw in the elect of God?

Indeed, the very existence of a praising community is a testimony to the world. The culture of the world is narcissistic. The world's praise is for man and his works. But in church we are preoccupied in the praise of God and His acts. We speak great things of the Holy One. Therefore, worship is in itself a form of evangelism. Our praise calls the whole world to make a joyful noise to the Lord (cf. e.g. Psalm 66:1).

The Lord needs no entertaining gimmicks and no spiced-up worship to call His own elect to Himself. He can impress them with His own holiness as His Name is lifted up and revered by His people!

On the other hand, if a stranger were to observe sleeping young people, snoozing old people, halfhearted singing and lack of interest in the preaching, he may well conclude that it would be better to stay home next week to mow the lawn.

Regulated worship

The basic point to remember in our present discussion is that the Lord regulates His own worship. Presbyterians are accustomed to speak of the "regulative principle." By this they mean that in worship we may only offer to the Lord the things He has Himself commanded. What human imagination finds pleasing to the Lord may in fact be highly insulting to Him. Who are we to invent the form of worship?

Lord's Day 35 articulates the same principle:

"We are not to make an image of God in any way, nor to worship Him in any other manner than He has commanded in His Word"

The proof texts mentioned under Answer 96 make for fearful reading. They indicate that the Lord is exceeding particular as to how He is worshiped. We dare not insult Him by bringing before Him in worship the sin-tainted products of human imagination.

What then does the Lord require of us in worship? Lord's Day 38, in its explanation of the fourth commandment gives a summary of the scriptural content of worship: hearing God's Word, using the sacraments, public praise and prayer, Christian offerings for the poor. In all times and places these elements have formed the basic pattern of the worship of God. The pattern is a God-centered and a Word-centered liturgy.

Those who desire to enliven the worship service by various innovations need to ask themselves: has the Lord commanded this or that to be offered to Him in worship? If the answer is negative, who dare introduce it nonetheless?

Furthermore, it needs to be asked whether the desired changes would really enliven worship. What we sometimes call "lively" and "meaningful" and "exciting" may only indicate our addiction to the superficial. Is the modern hunger for newness not like the hunger of an addict? He needs increasingly heavy dosages of artificial stimulants.

When we lose our fascination with the self-revealing God in worship, when reverence and awe diminishes, when the focus is more on human beings than on the Lord, then there will always be a longing for new experiences and new forms of worship. God and His Word will not compel interest, nor will the biblical style of reverent praise.

Formalism

All this is not to say that a lawful critique of formalism is impossible. Formalism may be defined as "going through the motions." It means to engage in the outward activities of worship without the engagement of heart and mind. It means to close your eyes and fold your hands during the congregational prayer without actually paying attention to what is asked of the Lord and without entering into that prayer. Formalism is shown when people listen to the Law of God but have no intention of obeying it in the regular pursuit of holiness. When mouths form pious words while hearts are far from God, this is formalism. Giving offerings without giving the heart likewise constitutes formalism. Formalists tolerate the preaching of the Gospel, but they do not truly receive it. They surely believe that going to church is the whole duty of man.

This tiresome ritualism offends God. Frequently His prophets condemn it. I mention only one passage:

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of he-goats. When you come to appear before me, who requires of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of assemblies - I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; (Isaiah 1:11-15)

So-called worship which lack true faith and real love for the living God is vain. In other words, it's a waste of time! Do we want to spend our time on Sundays in activities which weary God? So it will be if by our sham worship we attempt to disguise our unbelieving and unrepentant hearts.

Thus, as said earlier, there is a lawful place for a critique of formalism in the church. However, when we suspect that worship is becoming formalistic, whether for ourselves or others, the solution is not to invent new forms. Without faith, the new forms, too, will soon be formalized. Whatever the nature of the form, without faith the worship will be bogus.

The solution to formalism is to breathe life into the old, regulated forms of worship. This life comes via faith! Worship in this life is ever a matter of faith. We do not see Christ. We do not hear the voice of God directly, but through His written Word. The glory of heaven is not revealed. We draw near to the throne by faith, in the power of the Spirit.

Where faith is lacking, there will arise the inevitable craving for new experiences which would justify going to church. After all, a person can't go to church for nothing! Something understandable has to happen in the service to make it appealing.

The point, however, is that all the "happenings" in the church service are experienced by faith! It takes faith to see that God's New Testament dwelling place is really lovely! It takes faith to know that the Lord Jesus is with His Church in worship. If people don't have faith, they will demand something to satisfy their senses, for without faith you live by sight, by experience and by the hunger for novelty.

Thus, we conclude by asserting that the true, spiritual worship of God must have a *heartfelt* quality. Not merely adherence to the biblical form of worship is adequate but to use those forms in faith - that really pleases God and gives glory to Him.

We can also say that, ultimately, only this kind of worship truly satisfies man. What pleases God is totally fulfilling for us, too, not in the sense that drugs fulfill and satisfy an addict, but in the sense of a real, vibrant, growing relationship with the Lord! When we worship the Lord in spirit and truth, we finally become fully human!

RA Schouten

© 2011
www.christianstudylibrary.org