



## God, Liturgy and Us

Just before I was ordained into the ministry, an experienced pastor advised me to tread carefully when it came to liturgical matters. His comment went something like this: Nothing in church life stirs up more discussion, passion, and disagreement than the details of what happens in a worship service.

Why do we only sing songs from the *Book of Praise* in our worship services? What's the right atmosphere in church: informal or formal, comfortable or dignified? And, of course, which instruments should we use? Should we stick with organ and piano? Do we make use of other instruments? If so, which ones? How? How many?

These questions, and many more, are guaranteed to generate opinions, some of which may be forcefully expressed. As such, this may not be a bad thing, so long as the vigorous debate remains brotherly. After all, worship on the Lord's Day is the opening highlight of every week. We are permitted, through the new and living way opened by Christ (Heb 10:20), to enter God's majestic presence and honour him. Given the elevated status of our weekly worship, we should be passionate about the details.

The challenge, though, is to find biblical answers to liturgical questions. On the one hand, our Lord does not give us a prescribed order of worship in the Bible. That is to say, you will not find something like an A or B Liturgy (*Book of Praise*, 595-96) in one of the letters of the apostles. On the other hand, we rightly confess that we are not to worship God "*in any other manner than he has commanded in his Word*" (LD 35). This is also called the regulative principle of worship. Yet to what level of detail should we regulate? The answers to these questions need to be rooted deeply in scriptural principles. This article will explore four of them.

### **Principle #1**

#### ***Worship is something we give to God, therefore it must please him***

The Lord our God taught many basic principles of worship already in the Old Testament. For example, repeatedly in the book of Leviticus we learn that a sacrifice, when offered in the prescribed manner, is "*a pleasing aroma to the Lord*" (e.g., Lev 1:17). This truth is confirmed in the New Testament where our spiritual worship is to be "*holy and acceptable to God*" (Rom 12:1) and "*pleasing to God*" (Heb 13:16). For this reason we also need to guard our steps when we go up to the house of God (Eccl 5:1). Before all else, we go to the house of worship to honour and exalt our God.

Of course, if we go to church with a reverent and receptive attitude, then we will certainly be edified as well. There is a covenantal, two-way direction in our worship services. And the Holy Spirit will use his means of grace, the preaching of the gospel and the sacraments, in order to strengthen our faith. However, this vital work of the Holy Spirit only serves to highlight who is truly at the centre of the worship service: our Triune God. Therefore, the foremost question in all liturgical matters is this: Does our holy and gracious God like it?

That question is fundamentally different from the one that we naturally ask. Just listen to any conversation about liturgy. Inevitably you will hear a lot of language that sounds like this: "We visited another congregation, and they do (fill in the liturgical blank) in their worship. I just find that so refreshing! I really like it!" or "That kind of worship? It just doesn't do much for me. I don't feel

motivated afterwards." Do you sense why comments like these miss the liturgical mark? In a profound sense, worship is not about what you like or what I like. It is all about what our God likes. So let's make sure that principle is the firm foundation and constant reference point in all our liturgical considerations.

Moreover, we should not be too quick to assume that God must like it because we happen to like it. Here is one quick illustration that may drive home the point. I like singing happy, upbeat songs - maybe you do, too. However, of the 150 psalms that God has given us, no less than fifty-nine of them are categorized as lament songs and by comparison forty-one are labelled as praise songs. At a minimum, this means that the LORD is pleased to hear us sing songs of sorrow from time to time. Whether lament psalms are our own personal favourites is entirely beside the point. If our Redeemer likes them, we should sing them — readily and willingly. After all, we are there to please God.

## **Principle #2**

### ***As God's people of the new covenant, we participate in heavenly worship***

In the old covenant God's people joined with their fellow believers to worship the God of heaven, but they did so as an earthly assembly in Jerusalem where the temple was located. Now, to our natural eyes not much has changed in the new covenant. Of course, we no longer gather in Jerusalem, but for the rest we still assemble with our fellow believers in a physical church building in some town or city to worship the God of heaven.

Is the location of the worship building the only thing that has changed? No, much more than that has been transformed, but we need to look with the eye of faith if we are to see it. In Hebrews 12:22-24 the Holy Spirit says:

*But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*

Now that certainly sheds a different light on worship. When you step into the church building you do not see innumerable angels in festal gathering, nor do you see God, nor do you see the sprinkled blood of Jesus. Yet when worship begins, by faith we walk into the *heavenly* Jerusalem, yes, into the very presence of the angelic hosts and our Risen Saviour. This new covenant blessing speaks volumes about the proper ambiance in worship each week. Since we are stepping by faith into the heavenly Jerusalem, our worship definitely should be dignified. After all, the throne room of God, the judge of all, is an extremely exalted place. Just read Revelation 4.

## **Principle #3**

### ***So far as the musical aspect of worship is concerned, congregational singing is the key thing***

Approximately seventy-five times in the book of Psalms, God's people are commanded to sing to him. This command is repeated in the New Testament when the congregations in Ephesus and Colossae are specifically instructed to sing (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16). Moreover, in final glory God's redeemed people, the symbolic 144,000, certainly enjoy singing to their Saviour (Rev 14:2-3).

Now there is a lot of different singing in the world. There are soloists who sing. There are small quartets and large choirs who sing. There are professional singers who sing for money and hit every note just right. And there are sing-along singers as they drive down the road. They don't get paid a dime and don't always keep the tune so well either. Each kind of singing can be beautiful in its own way.

Yet when we sing in a worship service, something different and very special happens: a *congregation* sings together. Some in the congregation are excellent singers; some are, quite literally, tone-deaf and therefore sing in a nearly monotone voice. Some are so young that they still struggle to read the words and follow the tune at the same time. There is a *lot* going on in those young minds when we sing Psalm 118. Others have aged lungs that run out of oxygen more quickly than previously in their life. They really need that half-rest at the end of the line to respire and make it through to the end of the stanza. Despite the diversity of singers and musical abilities, though, we all sing together as God's congregation.

Singing as a *congregation* is beautiful. More than that, though, it is particularly fitting for us as God's new covenant people. In the old covenant, certain Levites were particularly engaged in singing and music in the temple. The clans of Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun come to mind (1 Chron 25). However, in the new covenant we no longer have a special Levitical or priestly tribe; instead, all together we are "*a royal priesthood*" (1 Pet 2:9). Therefore, we all sing together — regardless of age or musical aptitude.

Applying this principle means that there is a noteworthy difference between instrumental or vocal performances and congregational singing. When done well, each one is a beautiful thing; however, let's not confuse the two or blur them together. At an organ concert, the performer is there to show what the instrument and he can do — and all of that to the glory of God. At a Christmas concert, we may enjoy all the different musical talents that God has given to various individuals in our congregation. These are wonderful opportunities.

However, in a worship service both the occasion and, consequently, the key question are different. In worship the question is not what can the instruments or the musicians do. In worship we are not looking for a display of the diversity of talents that are available within the congregation. Rather we are asking how we can best sing together as a *congregation*. If that means asking the accompanists to pick up the tempo a bit because the congregation feels draggy as it sings, so be it. By the same token, if that means asking the accompanists to slow down a bit because the grade one children and elderly members are struggling to sing that fast, then so be it. After all, we are focusing on the very best congregational singing that we can offer to our majestic God.

## **Principle #4**

### ***Congregational singing involves teaching and admonishing one another; therefore, lyrics are crucial***

Perhaps one of the most underexplored aspects of God's revelation concerning liturgy is the connection between singing and teaching each other about our Saviour's mighty deeds. The Holy Spirit makes this connection in Colossians 3:16 where he says, "*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.*" He also confirms it in Ephesians 5:19 where singing is part of "*addressing one another.*"

Do you ever think about that when you are singing in church? Of course, when we sing, we praise the Lord and offer up our songful petitions to him. Yet, at the same time, according to God's own Word, we are also speaking to each other as fellow believers, teaching each other about the miraculous works of our God and exhorting each other to respect his holiness in our daily words and deeds. Obviously, a tune can be pleasant to the ear, but a tune by itself cannot teach, let alone admonish, in any significant way. In order to accomplish that we need lyrics — good, solid, balanced, biblical lyrics.

When people express their preferences for this song or that song, for songs in the *Book of Praise* or songs beyond the *Book of Praise*, most of the discussion revolves around the tunes. Oh, that we would be as passionate about the lyrics as we are about the tunes! Moreover, if we cherish and wish to share the truth that "*The Lord is King*" despite the haughty pride of wicked men, then we'll

be eager to sing the lyrics of Psalm 10, even if it does not have the most peppy tune, which is actually quite appropriate, considering the content of the psalm.

In conclusion, this little article does not answer all your liturgical questions. The author is well aware of that. Yet the modest goal has been to consider the necessity of addressing matters of worship using the principles revealed in God's Word rather than simply following the preferences that live in our hearts. That is also why the title reads: "God, Liturgy, and Us." The order is purposeful. God and his desires are first. That is where they should be, especially in worship.

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