

# ♪ Worship Notes ♪

Volume 2, Number 8 ♪ August 2007

**THEME: Worship and Culture**

## The Bridge

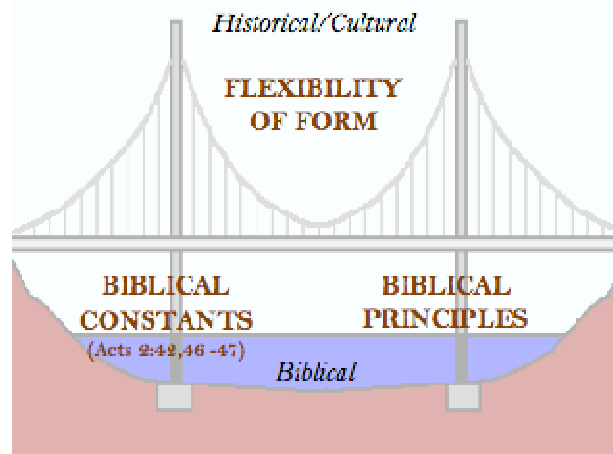
Just what is it in the Bible that is supposed to govern and determine our worship? It is a reasonable assumption that the virtual silence of the New Testament writers on the matters of form and style for worship means that the Lord intends for us to have considerable latitude and flexibility in these areas. Yet our worship services still need to look like *something*—so how are we to make choices? Is just a case of “anything goes”?

### An Illustration

Here is one model which at the same time reflects biblical norms yet allows for Biblical freedom. It is based on certain characteristics of a *suspension bridge* (familiar examples of suspension bridges are the Brooklyn Bridge in New York City and the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco). In a suspension bridge, the weight is supported by both the towers and the suspension cable. The towers are sunk deep in the earth and are meant to be as stable and immovable as possible. The suspension cable or span, on the other hand, while sharing a significant portion of the load-bearing, nevertheless has by design a great deal of flexibility to expand and contract, thus allowing the bridge to withstand variances in temperature, wind, weight load, etc. It should also be pointed out that, while both the stationary columns and the flexible span are both important parts of the bridge’s construction, yet ultimately the cable transfers much of the weight of the road bed and

its traffic to the towers, so that the towers are crucial to the bridge’s integrity and durability.

What can we then learn about our worship from this illustration? Our worship needs to be supported by firmly rooted biblical foundations, which are illustrated by the two towers. The flexible cable span suggests the liberty that the New Testament seems to allow for individual congregations to constitute their corporate worship. Like any art form, Christian worship allows for much creative expression, but within defined parameters. The Bible gives those parameters as well as that freedom.



### The First Tower: *Biblical Constants*

The first tower suggests an immovable aspect of Christian worship that we could term “Biblical Constants.” These are non-negotiables, elements which simply *must* be present for our worship to be considered Christian.

What are these elements? One clue may be found in Acts 2. Luke has just recounted the events of the day of Pentecost: the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus’ followers, Peter’s sermon, and the conversion and baptism of “three thousand souls” (2:41). And in the very next verse, Luke tells us what these believers did when they gathered together:

*And they devoted themselves to the **apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. . . . praising God and having favor with all the people** (2:42,47).*

The words in bold suggest a list of normative activities for the people of God when they congregate together:

1. the word of God
2. fellowship
3. the Lord's Supper
4. prayer
5. praise

Other necessary elements for worship to be called truly Christian would be of course a focus on the gospel and on Christ and His work.

### **The Span: *Flexibility and Freedom***

The span, with its built-in elasticity and flexibility, represents the freedom that the New Testament seems to allow for wise and prudent application of culturally meaningful expressions (always within the biblical restraints, of course). The “heart language of the people” is to be considered when making decisions about forms, styles, music and other artistic expressions of faith.

We certainly can see the application of this principle (consciously or not) in the vast array of worship expressions seen down through the history of the Christian Church, and in churches around the world today. There have been, and are, an enormous variety in terms of architecture, atmosphere, form, structure, style, dress, music, liturgy, etc.

The virtual silence of the New Testament as to the specifics of congregation worship practice seems to allow for local churches, as the fundamental unit of the body of Christ on earth, to have considerable autonomy and freedom as individual congregations in working out the issues involving the balance of biblical constants and biblical flexibility in the worship of that church. That does not mean that it is an easy task, however—as recent history has amply demonstrated. The so-called “worship wars” are symptomatic of the kind of danger into which freedom of this sort can cast us; and we might indeed be left wishing that Paul had just prescribed a set liturgy for all time and left it at that! God obviously wants His people to apply biblical wisdom and discernment in this, as well as in many other areas where he has chosen not to spell everything out for us.

### **The Second Tower: *Biblical Principles***

Just because the New Testament does not give us a lot of specifics about how to do worship in the local congregation, this most certainly does not mean that we have no biblical guidance concerning worship. It is *not* “anything goes”! As with so many areas in our lives not specifically addressed by the Scriptures (be it movies, smoking, etc.), there most certainly are biblical truths which are applicable and which we must with wisdom and honesty apply to our situation.

The same is true with worship. There are a host of principles that can be drawn from the pages of Scripture to guide us, and guide the leadership of local churches, in fashioning biblically appropriate yet culturally meaningful expressions of worship. These principles serve as the second tower in our illustration, giving further stability and strength to the worship structure as a whole.

Biblical principles are different than biblical constants because, as has already been mentioned above, principles must be *applied*. And they may be applied differently in different situations. Twelve such “Biblical Principles of Worship” are laid out under that title at [www.worr.org/articles](http://www.worr.org/articles); and each of these twelve have been dealt with extensively in previous issues of *Worship Notes* (Issues 1.3-1.11 and 2.1-2.3).

### **Conclusion**

In today's raging worship debates we desperately need to see that there are biblical constants and principles on which we really can agree. And then we need to have the grace and maturity to allow for the differences in approach that God Himself seems to allow for. There is far more that binds us as worshipers than divides us through our different expressions—there is “one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephes 4:4-6).

adapted from “The Bridge: Worship and Culture”

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(entire article can be accessed at  
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## QUOTABLES

### *Historical and Present-Day Perspectives on Worship, Culture and Flexibility of Form*

“Pope Gregory I sent Augustine of Canterbury to England as a missionary about A.D. 596 with this advice:

‘It seems to me that you should carefully select for the English Church, which is still new to the faith and developing as a distinct community, whatever can best please Almighty God, whether you discover it in the Roman Church, or among the Gauls, or anywhere else. . . .

‘From each individual church, therefore, choose whatever is holy, whatever is awe-inspiring, whatever is right; then arrange what you have collected as if in a little bouquet according to the English disposition and thus establish them as custom.’”

(James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship*, 44)

“And to the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike.”

(Article VII of the Lutheran *Augsburg Confession* [1530], Article 7)

“[The Master] did not will in outward discipline and ceremonies to prescribe in detail what we ought to do (because he foresaw that this depended on the state of the times, and he did not deem one form suitable for all ages). . . . Because he has taught nothing specifically, and because these things are not necessary to salvation, and for the upbuilding of the church ought to be variously accommodated to the customs of each nation and age, it will be fitting (as the advantage of the church will require) to change and abrogate traditional practices and to establish new ones. Indeed, I admit that we ought not to

charge into innovation rashly, suddenly, for insufficient cause. But love will best judge what may hurt or edify; and if we let love be our guide, all will be safe.”

(John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV, 10, 30)

#### “Article 34 - Of the Traditions of the Church”

“It is not necessary that Traditions and Ceremonies be in all places one, or utterly like; for at all times they have been divers, and may be changed according to the diversities of countries, times, and men’s manners, so that nothing be ordained against God’s Word. . . .

“Every particular or national Church hath authority to ordain, change, and abolish, ceremonies or rites of the Church, ordained only by man’s authority, so that all things be done to edifying.”

(*39 Articles of Religion*, Church of England, 1563)

“In the New Testament, all the focus is on the reality of the glory of Christ, not the shadow and copy of religious objects and forms. It is stunning how indifferent the New Testament is to such things: there is no authorization in the new Testament for worship buildings, or worship dress, or worship times, or worship music, or worship liturgy or worship size or thirty-five-minute sermons, or Advent poems or choirs or instruments or candles. . . . [We are] free to find place and time and dress and size and music and elements and objects that help us orient radically toward the supremacy of God in Christ. . . . Almost every worship tradition we have is culturally shaped rather than Biblically commanded. The command is a radical connection of love and trust and obedience to Jesus Christ in all of life.” (John Piper, “Our High Priest is The Son of God Perfect Forever, sermon)

“The frightening freedom of worship in the New Testament is a missionary mandate. We must not lock this gospel treasure in any cultural strait-jacket. Rather let us find the place, the time, the dress, the forms, the music that kindles and carries a passion for the supremacy of God in all things. And may our communion with the living God be so real and the Spirit of God so powerfully present that the heart of what we do becomes the joy of all the peoples we are called to reach.”

(John Piper, “Our High Priest is the Son of God Perfect Forever,” sermon)

“The gospel ought never to be entirely at home in any culture. If gospel and culture fit together as easily as hand-in-glove, then the likelihood is that the gospel has capitulated to the values of the culture. . . . There must always be some tension between gospel and culture. The trick is to tune that tension just right, so that gospel and church can play a transforming role in its host culture. The gospel doesn’t carry with it a culture of its own. It must always find its place in the culture of the time and place. Nevertheless, it always questions the local culture and holds it accountable before the cross.”

(Ronald P. Byars, *Christian Worship*, 110)

## Nairobi Statement on Worship & Culture

(see the entire document at [www.worship.ca/docs](http://www.worship.ca/docs))

Christian worship relates dynamically to culture in at least four ways:

First, it is **transcultural**,  
the same substance for everyone everywhere, beyond culture.

Second, it is **contextual**,  
varying according to the local situation (both nature and culture).

Third, it is **counter-cultural**,  
challenging what is contrary to the Gospel in a given culture.

Fourth, it is **cross-cultural**,  
making possible sharing between different local cultures.

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