

♪ Worship Notes ♪

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THEME: New Testament Worship Pt. 4

KEY THEMES IN NEW TESTAMENT WORSHIP (Part 4)

In [Worship Notes 4.3](#), [4.5](#) and [4.6](#) we examined three central topics of New Testament worship: the new and unique **access** which believers have into the very presence of God through our High Priest and Mediator Jesus Christ; the emphasis given to the **inward nature** of worship as opposed to outward forms; and the characterization of worship as embracing **all of life**.

This month we conclude our examination of some key distinctives of New Covenant worship by examining the freedom or latitude of form that the New Testament seems to allow.

4. FREEDOM OF FORM

The New Testament is virtually silent on the matter of form for the Church's worship. D. A. Carson goes so far as to say: "There is no single passage in the New Testament that establishes a paradigm for corporate worship" (*Worship by the Book*, 55).

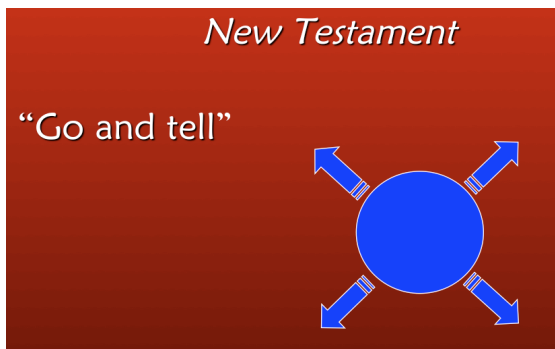
This is surprising, to say the least. The Apostle Paul, for instance, writes letters to newly-established churches, and we would reasonably expect (even hope) that Paul would lay out specific and detailed instructions for these churches' worship (and hence for ours also). Yet that is exactly what he

does *not* do. In fact, Gordon Fee observes that "what comes to us does so for the most part in the form of correction [for instance in 1 Corinthians 14]. We simply do not know enough to make far-reaching, all-inclusive statements about the nature of worship in the Pauline churches" (*God's Empowering Presence*, 884 n. 13).

John Piper suggests one explanation why this is the case. In the Old Testament, he says, we have a "come and see" system: all people and peoples are invited to come to Yahweh in worship; but in order to do so, they must *come through Israel*, and *come to Jerusalem*. Those from the surrounding nations are invited by God to himself; but they must become proselytes (i.e., convert to Judaism and come under the Mosaic Covenant). Because worship is centralized in a particular place and time (the tabernacle and later the temple), the prescriptions for that worship can be (and are) *extremely specific and detailed* (as we know from reading chapter after chapter of the most exacting instructions in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy).



However, in the New Testament we find the opposite situation: we have a “go and tell” system. There is no geographical center to Christianity (as we saw last month in John 4). Rather we are to go and make disciples among every people group (Matthew 28:18-20); we are to plant the Church of Jesus Christ in every culture. And perhaps for that reason, Piper suggests, God has left the matter of form so open: so that a local church can adapt forms of expression in worship that are appropriate and meaningful in the particular culture in which it exists.



And so it is a fair assumption that the non-specificity of the New Testament as to worship forms is intended by God to allow a great deal of flexibility or latitude as to specific structures for corporate worship.

Of course, this fact has also led to the worship debates that are so common in our day. If the Scriptures laid out as detailed a prescription for worship as we find in the Old Testament, there would be hardly any room for debate for churches that desired to be biblically faithful; but it is the latitude allowed that leaves room for differing opinions and (often) conflict.

At the root of most of the current worship debates is the nature of the interface of worship and culture in the context in which a local church finds itself. The church dare not sell out to the surrounding culture, but cannot ignore it either. Indeed, it is not a question of whether a church will be influenced by the culture, but rather how. Erickson and Lindner comment:

Christian worship “swims in creation as a fish swims in water,” as Aidan Kavanaugh has put it. It is permeated with the sights and sounds and smells, the tastes and touch of our material world, and in this way it offers not a disembodied message of escape but rather an encompassing experience of a world redeemed and reconciled to God.¹

This important incarnational perspective still leaves us with a crucial question, however: How shall we then worship? It is certainly not a matter of pulling everything in from the culture, of “anything goes.” Just what is it in the Bible that is supposed to govern and determine our worship?

There are in fact plenty of biblical principles and guidelines that should guide local churches in making wise and informed decisions about particular worship practices in their context. It is this writer’s conviction that it is incumbent upon the leadership of individual congregations to study the Scriptures, but also their culture and their congregation, and to prayerfully make decisions about the form that worship will take in their particular church context. Bryan Chapell, President of Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, agrees:

I think it behooves sessions [elder boards] . . . to discern what is the vision and mission of this church, and then to lock arms and say what is our mission. . . . Now, that means you have to be able to exegete culture too, I think, and not say just that our preferences are going to rule. . . . But principles of worship continue not to be discussed; much more preferences.²

For a fuller treatment of the relationship of worship and culture, please see [Worship Notes 2.8](#), as well as the resources on the following pages; and for extended treatments of 12 biblical principles that can guide our practice of worship, please see [Worship Notes 1.–1.11 and 2.1–2.3](#).

¹ John H. Erickson and Eileen W. Lindner, “Worship and Prayer in Ecumenical Formation,” *Theological Education* Vol. 34, Supplement [1997]: 23.

² “Profile of Today’s Evangelical Church” (audio message).

WORSHIP AND CULTURE

Historical Perspectives on Cultural Latitude in Worship

Pope Gregory I sent Augustine of Canterbury to England about 596 with this advice: “Your brotherhood is familiar with the usage of the Roman Church since you have very pleasant memories of being raised and nurtured in that usage. But 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. For customs are not to be revered for their place of origin; rather those places are to be respected for the good customs they produce. 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.”

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

[Much later, from 1570 until 1962, there was indeed a mandated, uniform service of worship for Roman Catholic churches worldwide (in Latin).]

[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)

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.

(*Augsburg Confession* [Lutheran], Article VII)

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.

(*Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion* [Church of England, 1563])

Other Resources
on Worship and Culture

THE NAIROBI STATEMENT ON WORSHIP AND CULTURE

This important document was put out by the World Lutheran Federation, and suggests a helpful way of seeing the interaction between worship and culture:

“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.”

Read the entire document at http://www.worship.ca/docs/lwf_ns.html

many resources and links available at the website of the

**INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL
OF ETHNODOXOLOGISTS**

<http://www.worldofworship.org>

QUOTABLES

On Form and Freedom in Worship

“There is no single passage in the New Testament that establishes a paradigm for corporate worship.”

(D.A. Carson, ed., *Worship by the Book*, 55)

“The Scriptures include or allude to just about every approach to worship there is: organized,

spontaneous, public, private, simple, complex, ornate, or plain. Yet there is no comment anywhere about any one way being preferred over another.”

(Harold Best, *Music Through the Eyes of Faith*, 146)

“First-day worship has always been characterized by newness, freedom, joy, and the recognition of the day as one of God’s great gifts. How tragic that through the years Christians have freighted it with the baggage of duty, guilt, and sadness.” (Kenneth O. Gangel, “Reexamining Biblical Worship,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* April-June 1985, 170)

“The freedom and creativity that is the strength of the ‘free church’ tradition is squandered where careful planning, prayer, and thought have not gone into the preparation of a public meeting.” (D.A. Carson, ed., *Worship by the Book*, 61)

“Worship requires forms because it is a corporate activity, corporate acts by their very nature setting restrictions to individual freedom.” (Raymond Abba, *Principles of Christian Worship*, 107)

“The frightening freedom of worship in the New Testament is a missionary mandate. We must not lock this gospel treasure in any cultural straitjacket. 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])

“I spent the first 25 years of my life wanting more freedom, the next 25 years of my life wanting more structure, and the last 25 years of my life realizing that structure is freedom.” (Winston Churchill)

“Now public worship is a vital part of the life of the local church. It is even essential to its identity. Yet in the interest of ‘spontaneity’ worship services often lack both content and form Most churches could afford to give more time and trouble to the preparation of their worship. It is a mistake to imagine either that freedom and form exclude one another, or that the Holy Spirit is the friend of freedom in such a way as to be the enemy of form.” (John Stott, *The Gospel and the End of Time*, 124)

“Besides the usual ingredient of prayer, praise and instruction that we might expect, the sort of gathered worship Paul hoped would characterize his congregations featured freedom yet form, unity yet diversity, authority yet mutuality.” (Michael B. Thompson, “Romans 12.1–2 and Paul’s vision for Worship” in *A Vision for the Church*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl & Michael B. Thompson, 131)

“The end of all our prayers and labors toward God-centered worship in our churches will be worship that is shot through with form and freedom: God-centered form and thoughtful structure as the Scripture commands us (1 Cor. 14,33; 1 Tim. 3,15), coupled with bright, non-stuffy freedom (2 Cor. 3,17; Gal. 5,1, 13).” (Jerry Marcellino, “Leading the Church in God-Centered Worship: The Pastoral Role” in *Reforming Pastoral Ministry*, ed. John H. Armstrong, 143-44)

“The Bible simply does not give us enough details to shape an entire service when we gather for worship. When the Bible calls us to sing God’s praises, we are not given the tunes or the rhythm. We are not told how repetitive the lyrics are to be or how emotionally intense the singing should be. When we are commanded to pray corporate prayers, we are not told whether those prayers should be written, unison prayers or extemporary. So to give any concrete form to our gathered worship, we must ‘fill in the blanks’ that the Bible leaves open. When we do so, we will have to draw on tradition; on the needs, capacities, and cultural sensibilities of our people; and on our own personal preferences. Though we cannot avoid drawing on our own preferences, this should never be the driving force (cf. Romans 15:1-3). Thus, if we fail to do the hard work of consulting both tradition and culture, we will—wittingly or unwittingly—just tailor music to please ourselves.” (Timothy J. Keller, “Reformed Worship in the Global City” in *Worship by the Book*, ed. D. A. Carson, 198)

“This liturgical laissez-faire has characterized Christian worship during three-fourths of its history.” (James White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship*, 44)

“Just as there is a diversity of gifts within the church, so there should be a diversity of liturgical forms, if for no other reason than to serve people of different temperaments and traditions. There is no biblical precedent or theological justification for any one form of worship. . . . no attempt should be made to force the church into some kind of liturgical straitjacket. Cultural rigidity has repeatedly eventuated in formalism, ceremonialism, and a loss of religious vitality.”

(Frederick Schroeder, cited by Donald G. Bloesch, “Liturgical Renewal” in *The Reform of the Church*, 33)

“The Scriptures include or allude to just about every approach to worship there is: organized, spontaneous, public, private, simple, complex, ornate or plain. Yet there is no comment anywhere about any one way being preferred over another. Rather, it is the spiritual condition of the worshiper that determines whether or not God is at work. This fact alone countermands the tendency to assume that if we could just find the correct or fashionably relevant system, all will be well and God will come down. This doesn’t imply that we have no responsibility to make intelligent and sensitive choices or to be creative. But whatever these choices eventually are, they are incapable all by themselves of establishing the superiority of one system over another.”

(Harold Best, *Music through the Eyes of Faith*, 146)

“A Church of Scotland minister was visiting his Anglican friend in north of England during the 19th century. As they were getting ready to leave the vestry to enter the sanctuary where the Presbyterian minister was going to give the message, the Anglican said to him, ‘Your vestments are right there.’

‘Oh, do I have to wear them?’

‘No.’

‘Well good, then I will.’”

(source unknown)

“Worship requires forms because it is a corporate activity, corporate acts by their very nature setting restrictions to individual freedom.”

(Raymond Abba, *Principles of Christian Worship*, 107)

“What comes to us does so for the most part in the form of correction. We simply do not know enough to make far-reaching, all-inclusive statements about the nature of worship in the Pauline churches.”

(Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 884 n. 13)

“Choices about worship need to be grounded in God’s revelation, in the wisdom of the Church through time and space, in tradition and community, and in the new winds of the Spirit in order to from faithful decisions. The path that will lead us to truth about worship is not that of power and influence, but of humility and obedience before God.”

(Marva Dawn, “Worship and Community,” *Reformation and Revival* 9:2 [Spring 2000], 75)

“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. In fact, the act of getting together as Christians in the New Testament to sing or pray or hear the word of God is never even called worship. I wonder if we do not distort the biblical meaning of “worship” by using the word almost entirely for an event for which the New Testament never uses the word.

But all of this makes us very free and, perhaps, very frightened. 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. And frightened, perhaps, because 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])

“Even if the Reformation sometimes excessively insisted on this liberty of “ceremonies”, and in a way which sometimes threw doubt on the inextricable bond between form and content, it is absolutely right that the preoccupations, tastes, culture of a place and a period should find expression in the cult [public worship].”

(J.-J. von Allmen, *Worship Its Theology and Practice*, 105)

“In large measure, the reason many churches today are splitting over forms of communal worship may be found in the relative paucity of direct guidance that the New Testament provides. We want to be New Testament churches. The only trouble is . . . the New Testament doesn’t give us much specific instruction on how to do church, that is, the cultic gathering. Nowhere does the New Testament tell us to build churches, to meet on Sundays, to have morning worship services, to open with a song and a prayer, to have a long sermon, and then to close with a benediction. . . . About the only custom which it prescribes as a regular occurrence is participation in the Lord’s Supper. . . . Remarkably . . . this is the one liturgical worship rite that the New Testament describes, but we treat as optional or occasional or random. We squabble over everything else and neglect the weightier matters of the gospel.

(Daniel Block, “The Joy of Worship: The Mosaic Invitation to the Presence of God (Deut. 12:1-14)” [audio message])

“Our study of the hymns which have been preserved for us from the New Testament period has revealed further facets of the diversity of first-

century Christianity—in particular, the diversity which arises when worship reflects the moods and background of each particular group of worshippers or which reflects their concern to use the language and thought forms of their contemporaries and environment, to worship in ways that speak most meaningfully to their time.”

(James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, 140)

another view:

“The Old Testament especially matters for an evangelical theology of worship because it furnishes a Biblical precedent for many ancient liturgical practices that evangelicals have forgotten or rejected. It also provides Biblical guidance and wisdom concerning many disputed features of Christian worship. It is the Old Testament that furnishes sufficient Biblical foundations for a theology of the order of worship, the theological content and musical accompaniment of liturgical song, bodily posture in worship, art, architecture, color, ministerial vestments, and an annual calendar of liturgical festivals.”

(Michael D. Farley, “[What Is “Biblical” Worship? Biblical Hermeneutics and Evangelical Theologies of Worship.](#)” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* March 2008)

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