

Reformed Worship

Notes for a lecture delivered Nov. 13, 2012, Southwest Florida Presbytery

By David B. McWilliams, Ph.D.

I found it interesting that the organizers asked the speakers to begin with I Cor. 9:19 to frame this discussion: *For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.* I Cor. 9:19 is not about worship and is certainly not preeminently important in this matter of how we worship God. In this passage Paul desires to become a slave to all, really after the manner of the call of Philippians 2. Paul is a free man in Christ and, therefore, he would not become indulgent (the point of 24-27). His life is gospel controlled and so in ministry he will be a man of integrity, holy and appropriately adaptable. In this way Paul declares himself to be a slave of all so that he might win the more. He was willing to forego his Jewishness to win men or retain it as needed.

Never, however, did Paul set aside what was for God's glory or for a man's real good in evangelism and that included using vocabulary in preaching that would have been foreign to his hearers and needed explanation. All one must do is read 2 Cor. 5. If that is, as I think, a summary of the gospel Paul preached in the agora one finds a large vocabulary and many concepts that would have been preached to people who would have had no understanding or given their pagan culture a wrong understanding of his words. Yet, Paul did not alter the Biblical vocabulary even in his initial proclamation to sinners.

I Cor. 9 is the wrong starting point. The question should be: are there Biblical principles that are determinative of worship that are applicable in any culture and in any time? And from those principles may we learn wise application in our setting? I think the answer to that is definitely positive. Do we unintentionally, and often with good pastoral motive, move away from clear prescriptions about worship by using such passages as I Cor. 9:19 as trump passages to excuse our own insecurities over Scripture's intended methods of worship as well as evangelism? Do we see worship as "evangelism" (and therefore for the unchurched) or do we see worship as a duty joyfully performed only truly by believers for the glory of God alone? Is worship an act of the universal Church or is it something we do because we think of it as advertising or a means of getting the word out about Jesus?

Biblical Principles of Worship

I can only mention a few Biblical principles of worship and stress those that will help us think our way out of the present divisions that are among us. Here are a few:

The first Biblical principle of worship is that worship is for God offered by believers. To put it bluntly, worship is not for unbelievers. Do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that unbelievers should be ignored in the worship context nor am I saying that worship has no evangelistic impact. Quite the contrary. I myself passionately call sinners to Christ in virtually every sermon and our services have significant numbers of unbelievers present almost every week. Paul tells us in I Cor. 14 that an unbeliever in the midst of God's people may well be converted. But he does not suggest that the service be determined by the presence of unbelievers among us. This is basic Pauline theology; men dead in trespasses and sins cannot worship God. Therefore, to begin there is to become God oriented but man centered rather than God centered and man oriented.

Another way of putting this is that all Christian worship is overtly Trinitarian. No unbeliever has any understanding of the Trinitarian nature of God. Christian worship is Trinitarian, not generally theistic. Our hymnody must reflect the Trinity, prayer is an exploration of the Trinity, the Trinity shapes our preaching,

the sacraments and our fellowship. It should be plain immediately that, with this essential criterion in mind, it is foolish to attempt to construct a worship service with unbelievers at the forefront of our liturgical concern. A general concern for intelligibility (we speak English and not French in English speaking churches) does not set aside this principle.

To put this still another way: worship must be Biblical. Of course, this first of all means the elements of worship are those prescribed by Scripture. We can all say we have Biblically prescribed elements, but that has not solved the issue of style. When I say that worship is Biblical, I also mean that it is pervaded with the Bible and its instruction. The depth and breadth of the covenant of grace, the wonder of electing love, the truth of Christ's propitiatory sacrifice, indeed the whole counsel of God must pervade our worship. This excludes an approach that stresses the intelligibility of worship to unbelievers.

The above is essential. Linguistic intelligibility aside, the vocabulary and grammar of the Christian religion is incomprehensible to the unconverted. Rather than removing difficulties, we should see opportunity to (1) highlight the antithesis between the Church and the world and (2) explain the Gospel in its own terms. I think the abandoning of traditional hymnody has at its heart the real pastoral concern for comprehensibility but that concern is misplaced. Comprehension (absorption) requires long exposure and, above all, the work of the Holy Spirit.

A second Biblical principle is that worship is covenantal. This means, among other things, that our worship has an aspect of dialogue that is essential to liturgy. There is logic to Reformed worship. It is axiomatic that we are called into worship by His Word. It is axiomatic that when we come into God's presence we adore him; axiomatic that we confess our sins and hear His Word of pardon; that we sing praises that seek to be worthy of Him who is beautiful in holiness, that we hear Him speak in His Word and that we respond in giving, that we hear Him lastly in the benediction. Reformed liturgy is a two-way street. God initiatives and we respond all the way through. The liturgical forms of our Calvinistic fathers represent the genius of the Reformed system and the church has been most unwise to reject these forms. Liturgy should be informed at every point by our theology.

Also note here that the Reformers' view of dialogue put God at both ends. We respond to Him using His words, His thoughts. In a sense, liturgy is a one-way street – from God to God. The congregation is a conduit. This is why the structure of the service is so important. Confession precedes absolution, anamnesis precedes *eucharistia*, etc. We do things in the order God's word prescribes, and after a fashion our Father's over many centuries have confirmed to be the most Biblical. When we treat a worship service as if it belongs to us, we misunderstand the primary purpose of worship (as God bringing honor to Himself) as well as its natural function as an expression of the obedience of the universal Church to God's holy will and pleasure. The liturgy does not belong to us and we err greatly when we see ourselves in our own generation as qualified to determine its structure and content apart from the guidance of the whole Church of our Fathers. Reformed attitudes to worship always include this element of catholicity and it is with the advent of revivalism that the immediate comes to dominate the constant. This problem is only exacerbated by the dominance of pop culture in worship.

To say that worship is covenantal is also to say that we must be concerned with the best that our fathers have passed on to us in worship including her hymnody. Covenant theology means that we are a part of the people of God through the ages and we should be concerned to pass to our children the worthy traditions of our fathers. We must be concerned with patrimony and to fail to do so is to break the fifth commandment. In the story of redemption, we are not rootless. It is all distinctive baptismal speech.

To put it another way, the church has her own culture no matter in what specific geographical location and among what people she worships. The worship offered to God should be in the language of the

church; the power of the words that God has given in Scripture and that we have received from our fathers to shape culture. Worship inherently is enculturation. It can make no sense apart from the history of the people of God through the ages. To use the buzz word, all language is “story” dependent. That is the reason by the way, that in the Reformation liturgies the order of the Mass is discernible. The Reformers did not throw away what was good but retained it and passed it on.

Our liturgy, after all, is rooted all the way back in the worship given to God’s people by Moses. Only now the Tabernacle that was horizontal has been “verticalized” so that we now have access through our Great High Priest the Lord Jesus.

A third Biblical principle is that all worship must be offered in reverence and awe and our liturgy and hymnody must without fail stress this at every point. This is God’s commandment to His new covenant community in Hebrews 12:28,29. This is the missing note in discussions about worship. Now, it seems to me that if this were grasped many differences between us would be minimized upon an immediate, careful and ongoing application of this principle. Yes, worship is to be joyful, yes we should also express lament in worship, and so forth. But reverence and awe are not principles that come and go in worship. Rather, we are Biblically mandated to express these principles at every single point. This is the note that in large measure defined Reformed worship in the past and that is very much neglected today. This is the principle that could bind us together. A consistent application of this principle would have the effect over time of bringing us closer together.

We must ask ourselves the question, “what is God’s character?” I think if we do this, we cannot be casual or flippant or sentimental in worship. When we understand how great a debt we owe Him and how glorious He is in His holiness, to do anything other than fall down in reverence and awe is a failure to know Him as He has revealed Himself in the Scriptures. God is not our buddy.

The writer of Hebrews concludes his discussion of New Covenant worship in Hebrews 12 not by telling us that the awe of Sinai is somehow lessened in worship today but that given the progress of revelation reverence and awe is heightened in worship today. The entire discussion is concluded with these words: *Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.*

Since our worship is to be offered with reverence and awe because of the nature of our God as a consuming fire, the point is simply that God’s holiness determines our worship. At any point that this is set aside worship has gone astray. This is another reason, by the way, that worship cannot be offered by unbelievers and that worship must not be determined by the likes and dislikes of unbelievers. Worship must be congruent with God’s holiness. All that God is is holy. His love is holy love; His justice is holy justice; His truth is holy truth and so forth. To worship God with reverence and awe must pervade every aspect of worship just as God’s holiness is true of all of His attributes.

Surely, we can all see that since this is so we should be asking when we put together our services: does this prayer display God’s holiness? Does this music – in whatever culture we worship – lead us to a sense of God who must be worshiped in reverence and awe? And surely we can see that some things are immediately excluded from worship such as casual attitudes, certain kinds of music and even vocabulary. For example, who can think that a service peppered with Salsa rhythms will lead the congregation to worship God in reverence and awe? Or rock music? Will sentimental tunes or music that reminds one of night clubs lead us to reverence and awe? Certain forms of music, attitudes and actions are immediately excluded from worship by the one principle that we are called to worship in reverence and awe. Worship is too important for the worshiper to determine what is acceptable; we are given by God himself the chief principle that makes it so. When worship is offered in reverence and awe, by the

way, real evangelism can take place because the Scriptures make it clear that we can only worship this holy God through the atonement of the Son.

It is not insignificant to note that reverence and awe are going to be, to a certain degree, informed by cultural expressions and traditions. This is the right kind of cultural sensitivity – knowing what forms of music, etc. are considered reverent in a given context. Insensitivity to this could be disastrous on the mission field. I took note of an interesting piece that mentioned plainchant as being considered “religious” in film and television. The cultural association of the musical form makes it immanently useful in depicting aurally the gravity of worship. This is exactly why music like rock, associated as it is with rebellious youth, the very worst sort of capitalistic excess, and a culture of general profligacy, is unsuitable in Church worship.

This also means that worship is to be beautiful; God is beautiful in holiness. The Church should be the arbiter of the arts. We should offer God our best. Next to procreation, making art is the closest thing we are capable of doing to God’s initial act of creation. We should follow His example. Form, simplicity, complexity, symmetry, balance, contrast, harmony of parts into a unified whole- we can know what is beautiful and worthy and what is not. And we can determine what is simply mediocre.

A final Biblical principle is that worship is eschatological. In Hebrews 12 we are told that we are come to mount Zion and to the heavenly 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 righteous men 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. That means, as John Owen puts it, “worship is offered in heaven. Though they who perform it are on earth, yet they do it, by faith in heaven.”

One implication of this is that when an unbeliever walks into a service of worship he should sense that he has walked into a different universe; because that is what is happening. It should be disconcerting and uncomfortable to him. Worship should not resemble what can be received from other sources, television, clips from movies and there should be no gimmicks in worship. Moreover, God’s people are refreshed when the worship context is different from what they have experienced through the week.

Concerns

We are not thinking theologically about worship. We do not delve into the Scripture; we are ignorant of what our fathers taught about worship and are so concerned with the culture at large we have been willing to allow that to determine our worship. “Style” is not neutral but reveals a minister’s deepest theological commitments. Theology and style must be compatible.

Having come from other denominational backgrounds the first time I attended a Presbyterian worship service I was captivated by the difference. I could tell as a young person that the theology that drove the Presbyterian service was very different than the theology that drove the approaches of churches of my background. That was an indispensable catalyst in my study of Reformed theology. Now, the very forms of worship from which I fled to come to the Presbyterian Church are most often the norm in Presbyterian services. We have imported a foreign worship into the Presbyterian Church and naively think that it will have no negative impact on our theology.

What has derailed Reformed worship? I can only mention:

1. “Free forms” of the Finney revival. Along with this the over emphasis on individuality, sentimentality and spontaneity that comes from pietism.

2. The influence of the charismatic movement
3. An overly inflated view of contextualization. It is often associated with the idea that change is inherently a good thing even if that means choosing to sing musically inferior and theologically inferior pieces in worship. Pop culture is monogenerational and cannot convey catholicity and therefore is incapable of providing the proper context required for Biblical worship.

I am not suggesting that your liturgy must be that of Geneva in the sixteenth century. But I am bold to say that if Calvin walked into our services and did not recognize them either in ethos or form, we should be terribly concerned. The worship of the church is relevant; we do not have to make Biblical worship relevant. When the church is the church, she is always relevant. To think that people will not be converted if our worship services do not pander to the culture is (a) contrary to the facts of history; (b) implicit Arminianism.

A Special Word about Music in Worship

Worship is the most essential part of the pastoral care of God's people. Therefore, music should be selected with the preceding criteria in mind. When I select music, I consider the following:

- Lyrics
- Tune appropriate to the words
- Singable (perhaps with practice)
- Appropriateness
- Not one emotional tone throughout the service
- Beautiful
- "Poise and Majesty"
- Relates to the text (or theme of the day)
- Patrimony (the Christian faith is handed down!)
- Develops our vocabulary
- Expands our horizons
- Matures us
- Psalms
- The use of notes on a page so that we may learn music and sing parts

Why it is wrong for Worship approaches to accommodate pop culture:

"It is essential that every local congregation shall realize that it does not worship in isolation from the rest of the Church, whether on earth or in paradise, and also that it worships in and through a Being other than itself, Christ, the Head of the Church. Public worship must always be understood, not as the human

initiation of a process in one corner of the earth, but rather as a joining in something always going on, both throughout the Church on earth and eternally in the heavenly places... A consciousness that the congregation of which I am a member is only one of tens of thousands on the earth's surface, and is as a drop in the bucket among the myriads in the world to come, make me less clamorous that my momentary preoccupations shall dominate the concern of all at public worship. I want rather, not a liturgy which comes down to my level, but one which will take me and my fellow worshippers out of ourselves and our little world into a vaster experience with God than I can ever imagine with my modest spiritual resources. A fixed liturgy, gloriously indifferent to my worries and notions, not hedged about with the limitations of life in my neighborhood or the decade in which I live, is going to do for me just what needs doing. It will confront me with the eternal verities and place me upon the everlasting hills; I shall realize that my thoughts are neither God's thoughts nor His ways mine; and then I may begin with the angels and archangels to worship and adore... A fixed liturgy with a long and steady growth behind it, slowly evolving through the centuries, with roots in early antiquity, not too strongly betraying the special preoccupations of any one epoch of history, is the ideal material for public worship."

He adds: "To try and entice a nonbeliever by obscuring the 'whole counsel of God' is as fruitless as it is unprincipled... What is fashionable today will be unfashionable tomorrow; the bait that is attached to the liturgical hook in one decade will have lost its savour in the next, even if it ever had any! There is always a 'scandal' or stumbling block in Christian faith, and the liturgy, no less than the Creeds, cannot rid themselves of it if they are to be true to divine revelation." - Colin Dunlop, Dean of Lincoln

He is writing from a classical Anglican perspective but I hope that you can see how this applies to Presbyterian worship. A worship that is driven by the present hour will not, simply cannot, lift us up in mind and heart to the Holy God before whom we are called to bow down. And if *becoming all things to all men* applies at all, it is by giving to all men in any age worship that transcends the peculiarities of that age.

"One of the distressing things about the changes that have been made in Presbyterian worship is that they have been made with no theological reflection, with no concern for the past, and no consideration of where it might lead. It is like a golfer who goes to tee off and sets the driver head just slightly off kilter; it *will* have an affect! But many of us have intentionally reset the driver head with no thought to where it will lead long term." - Sinclair Ferguson

We have seen where pop culture leads. Pop culture (to make use of just a few of Ken Myers observations) does not focus on the timeless, does not encourage reflection, the use of norms and is not well suited to the communal. Pop culture discourages patience, appeals to sentimentality, and does not suggest the transcendent and tends toward relativism. More can be said, but is that what we want for the church?! Do we really want congregations that cannot sing Bernard of Clairvaux's *O Sacred Head, Now Wounded* or children never to learn to sing *Of the Father's Love Begotten* or the majesty of *For All the Saints (Sine Nomine)*, but rather to come and hear women sing congregationally unsingable songs into microphones suggestive of the night club? Is that faithful pastoring? Is this just a matter of taste I ask you? Is there not a distinct Reformed theology and since our theology is first and foremost expressed in our worship should there not be a distinct and recognizable Reformed worship? The church has her own culture and we should be inculcating it.

We are the only generation of the church ever that has consistently set aside past norms in worship. Our forms should reflect the weight and significance of the worship to which we are called, and pop culture cannot do that because it is wedded to triviality. In the end it is syncretism and conveys all the wrong messages. It is not hard to discern why it is the baby boomers and their successors that have ruined worship in the church. But fathers and brothers, the Christian faith is no new thing; it is old and is not

properly expressed by “pop” culture. In using pop culture in the church, we show that we have fallen into Lessing’s ditch. In other words, a Christianity that progressively severs itself from the historical will, in time, cease to exist. Moreover, we cannot think that if we impose on Reformed worship a form foreign to its theology that it will over time have no effect upon its theology.

Have you ever considered that the typical pop culture worship service is excessively sacerdotal? The people are dependent on one man who arranges the service at a whim, a man or woman who has no idea of liturgical training and make things up at a whim (usually the minister gives it over to a “worship leader”) and the people have no prayers memorized that can be called their own, no creeds and very little real participation in anything meaningful in the liturgy.

Another thought: many of us are very much into discipleship but we have set aside the greatest tool for discipleship next to the Bible itself, the hymnbook with its rich theological themes and ennobling tunes for Psalms and hymns. Someone may say, “Children don’t get it.” Do we say the same thing about catechizing? Is not the point that our children are taught truths that they grow into? Hymnody is part of the catechesis of the church. Setting the Psalters and hymnbooks aside is just not wise. One has written: “In order to play a Beethoven sonata you begin just by playing it and playing it very badly. But playing it badly helps you to play it better next time.” The point here is twofold: worship is *exercise*; and to practice anything there must be repetitive form. We lack this, and many of the approaches to worship today are not theologically and Biblically rich; neither the prayers, the music, the entire approach lacks Biblical and theological content and seriousness. There is no depth and substance. In many instances it is simply liturgical silliness. God’s people are not being lifted up and are not being confronted with eternal verities.

Furthermore, pop culture cannot give people a sense of the long and steady growth that is behind the worship of God. People are cut adrift from the history of the church. It leaves the church with nothing for which to aspire; all that matters is now. We give our churches the impression that their faith is not more profound than that congregation at that moment in which pop worship takes place. Someone has noted that pop worship shrinks our vision to one place and time and ignores not only the great music of the past that comes from every continent and time period but truly contemporary church music today written with a concern for the church’s past and musical canons. I remind you: the Protestant Reformers did not throw out what is good but retained it; so you can discern the Mass in the liturgies of Calvin and others. Moreover, Praetorius wrote for the Lutherans and Goudimel for Geneva without devising new canons but made use of the hundreds of year’s development of musical tradition within the church.

Recommendations:

1. Extensive seminary training in these principles with well prepared professors.
2. Worship must be learned by inhabiting the liturgy. Christianity must be taught. Worship is no exception.
3. A binding Directory of Worship. A Directory of Worship spells out principles and some things are immediately excluded. (Ex. call from Glen – family now in PCUSA). It does not prescribe forms but can give the principles and precedents for forms. A Directory does just that; it gives Biblical direction for worship.
4. Return to the hymnody of the church and new music built on the canons.
5. Teach the great hymnody of the church to our children; it will mature them. Our children will as a norm love what we teach them to love. That many of our PCA children do not know what a hymn

book is and are not learning to read music is an unmitigated disaster. I plead with you: take down the plasma screens (icons of pop culture), and get sound hymnals in the hands of your children.

6. Pastors, understand that the liturgy is one of the chief means by which you pastor your people. Understand it Biblically, theologically and historically and do your duty in shepherding your flock through mature leadership. YOU are the worship leader of your congregation – do not off load that to others. What is generally called “contemporary” worship is impoverishing our churches. The old was better and in the end more truly contemporary because it focuses on the timeless and is representative of catholicity.
7. Our pastors must become theologians. Muller speaks of the “churchly dialogue between exegesis and dogmatic formulation, biblical interpretation and catechesis, homiletics and systematic theology that was presumed necessary, by the seventeenth-century Reformed, for a healthy community of belief, but that is quite without parallel in our own times” (Scripture and Worship, 53). He observes that one can easily move from dogmatics to homiletics in the work of these divines. Do you not see that this is the problem? We need this for worship as well; we no longer see all of this as a seamless garment and our Confession of Faith is not allowed to determine the ethos of our worship. Brothers, there is such a thing as Presbyterian worship and when our worship looks like the worship found in Arminian and charismatic settings something is desperately wrong.

Sum: The use of pop culture as a medium for worship, I fear, represents a kind of latitudinarianism and opposition to the antithesis that includes a view that thinks the church’s calling is to transform culture but that, in reality, is being transformed by culture. It is syncretism. To whatever degree I am right no recommendations will accomplish anything without repentance.

Please Note: Submitting the “paper” after the discussion affords me opportunity to answer a question from the floor that I wish I had answered better. Some hearing my paper assumed a dichotomy between God’s Transcendence and Immanence. I rightly pointed out that I was misunderstood and that no such dichotomy was assumed in the paper. However, I should have added that God’s immanence is not known by a feeling but through Word and sacrament. This is how, through the power of the Holy Spirit, God’s immanence is known by His people. Moreover, the rich hymnody of the church expounds God’s transcendence and immanence wonderfully and in ways not done in “pop” culture music which abstracts both truths. A chorus may say that God is awesome; hymns tell us why, thereby proclaiming both truths. -
- DBM