

Transcultural Aspects of Worship

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Worship in the Church of Jesus Christ is a phenomenon that has been and is characterized by enormous diversity across the centuries and across the world today. This diversity seems to be allowed by the New Testament, which gives us precious little in terms of specific guidelines for the practice of worship in the church—nor even much in the way of actual examples. The implication is that God allows His people considerable latitude in applying godly wisdom to choose and adapt forms for worship that are appropriate to a particular time, place, and people. And so we find God worshiped with a vast array of different languages, forms, styles, liturgies, dress, music and other art forms.

With all of this diversity, it is appropriate to ask what is unchangeable and non-negotiable in the panoply of worship options. What are the common denominators without which worship is sub-standard, if not sub-Christian? What are the constants that bind and unite true worshipers of every age and locale?

Certainly there are certain doctrinal boundaries, fundamentals of the faith, which define those who are truly in the faith and therefore are able to worship “in truth” as Jesus commanded (John 4:23-24). Besides a common doctrinal base, however, there are some other vital elements that God has given to ensure continuity and purity in the worship that He engenders, encourages, and delights in from His people. These are things we should look for no matter where we go in the world, and regardless of geographic, racial, ethnic, economic or cultural context. And these are things we should actively encourage in our churches and in church planting situations.

1. *The Role of the Word of God in Worship*

God’s people do not gather to exchange their own ideas about who God is and what He is like; rather worship is our response to what God has revealed Himself to be in the Bible. We gather under the authority of the Word, at the invitation of the Word, and with the guidance of the Word. We gather to learn from and respond to the Word.

And the Word of God must permeate all that we do in worship services—certainly in the preaching of the Word, but there should also be public reading of the Word, praying of the Word, meditating on the Word, singing the Word (both through Scriptural texts and also texts which faithfully represent Scriptural truth). God’s people should respond to Him *as He really is*—that He might receive the glory of which He is worthy. And that means that the Bible must have a central place of honor and use in our services, must form the foundation of all our services, and must guide and protect and guide our services. If we are to worship *in truth* (as already mentioned), we must worship *according to the Word*.

As John Stott put it:

What, then, does it mean to worship God? It is to “glory in His holy name” (Ps. 105:3), that is, to revel adoringly in who He is in his revealed character. But before we can glory in God’s name, we must know it. Hence the propriety of the reading and preaching of the Word of God in public worship, and of biblical meditation in private devotion. These things are not an intrusion into worship; they form the necessary foundation of it. God must speak to us before we have any liberty to speak to Him. He must disclose to us who He is before we can offer Him what we are in acceptable worship. The worship of God is always a response to the Word of God. Scripture wonderfully directs and enriches our worship. (John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian*, InterVarsity Press, 1992, p. 174)

No matter where we are, we must repudiate the all-too-common North American phenomenon of a worship service beginning with a haphazardly arranged string of religious songs, with the

first word of Scripture heard (at best) when the preacher gets up. As evangelicals who revere and honor the Word of God, we simply must see that it has a more prominent place in our services. The Word of God must permeate our worship because it teaches us about God's glory.

2. *The Role of the Holy Spirit in Worship*

The Holy Spirit is responsible for true worship taking place. It is He who works in our hearts to show us our need for Christ (John 16:8). It is He who convinces our hearts that God is incomparably lovely and deserving of our worship. It is He who engages both the mind *and* the heart so that worship is an expression of both. It is He who quickens our spirit so that our worship is sincere ("worship in spirit," John 4:24); and as the Spirit of truth (John 14:17) He illumines the truth of God to us (1 Cor. 2:14), so that we might know Him and respond to Him as He really is ("worship in truth," John 4:23,26).

Romans 8:26 tells us that we don't know how to pray as we should, but in God's grace the Holy Spirit intercedes for us. The fact of the matter is, we don't know how to worship as we should either! But here again the Holy Spirit steps in, reminds us of the importance of worship, and assists us in our worship.

3. *The Role of the Congregation in Worship*

Regardless of what kind of planning and preparation and practice goes into a service of worship, regardless of what sort of leadership and tradition and liturgy there happens to be, these things don't produce true corporate worship—the participation of the *congregation* makes it *corporate* worship.

Romans 12:1 teaches that we are to present our bodies—our whole lives—as "a living and holy sacrifice acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship." For a church meeting to fulfill its potential as a service of corporate worship the people of God must come to it out of a week of walking with and worshipping God, with full hearts which can then overflow into a common expression of adoration and praise. (Certainly God can and does minister graciously those who come to worship dry and empty, but that should not be the norm or the ideal.) We must teach our people that worship is a lifestyle, a way of life, not a Sunday event alone.

By definition, corporate worship will also only happen if the people are truly involved in the service. This expression of the unity of the body and of the priesthood of all believers is not optional. We are *commanded* to minister to one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs in the assembly (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). The Word of God requires that worship involve all of the people, and not be a spectator event or performance.

Now we turn to a transcendent truth about worship, one which allows us to recognize a supreme unity across all the temporal, geographical and cultural barriers which tend to make worship look so different in its externals.

4. *The Role of Jesus Christ in Worship*

Perhaps the most crucial constant in all true worship is that which is probably least acknowledged: the role of *the living Christ* in *leading* our worship. "Our worship is not just . . . because of the works and

merits of Christ, but . . . *through the Person of Christ Himself.*” (italics mine; James B. Torrance, “Christ in Our Place,” in *A Passion for Christ*, Handsel Press, 1999, p. 43)

The truth is, how often do we really acknowledge the active presence of Christ, not only back in heaven at the right hand of the Father, but also in fulfillment of His promise: “I am *with you* always, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20)? How often do we recognize the *continuing* mediating ministry of our Lord, “the *man* Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5)? The book of Hebrews teaches us about the *present* ministry of Christ, our *living* High Priest: His perpetual Priesthood (4:14; 5:6; 6:20; 7:17,21; 10:21-2), the One through whom we draw near to the throne of grace (4:16), the One who sympathizes with our weaknesses (2:18; 4:15) and intercedes for us (7:25), the One who continues as the unique God/man and the Mediator between God and man (7:23—8:2).

James Torrance has made the searing observation that most evangelical worship is unitarian in practice:

Probably the most common and widespread view is that worship is something which we, religious people, do—mainly in church on Sunday. . . . No doubt we need God's grace to help us do it. . . . But worship is what *we* do before God. In theological language, this means that the only priesthood is our priesthood, the only offering our offering, the only intercessions our intercessions.

Indeed this view of worship is in practice unitarian, has no doctrine of the mediator or sole priesthood of Christ, is human-centered, has no proper doctrine of the Holy Spirit, is too often non-sacramental, and can engender weariness. We sit in the pew watching the minister “doing his thing,” exhorting us “to do our thing,” until we go home thinking we have done our duty for another week! This kind of do-it-yourself-with-the-help-of-the-minister worship is what. . . the ancient church would have called Arian or Pelagian. . . It is not trinitarian. . . .

The second view of worship is that it is the gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son's communion with the Father. It means participating in union with Christ, in what He has done for us once and for all, in his self-offering to the Father, in His life and death on the cross. . . . There is only one true Priest through whom and with whom we draw near to God our Father. There is only one Mediator between God and humanity. There is only one offering which is truly acceptable to God, and it is not ours. It is the offering by which He has sanctified for all time those who come to God by Him (Heb. 2:11; 10:10,14).

There is only one way to come to the Father, namely through Christ in the communion of the Spirit, in the communion of saints, whatever outward form our worship may take. . . . The living Christ is in our midst, leading our worship, our prayers and our praises. (James Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, InterVarsity Press, 1996, p. 20)

In Hebrews 2:12 we find a brilliant summary of the role of Jesus Christ in leading our worship. According to the inspired writer, Christ is speaking to His Father (with the prophetic words of Psalm 22:22). And He says: Father, “I will proclaim Your name to my brethren” That is, the living, glorified Son undertakes as High Priest and Mediator to reveal and teach the truth about God and His greatness to those who are His brethren (cf. Heb. 2:11). And that gives an incredible significance to the ministry of preaching in the church, and to indeed to all the ways which the truth of the Word is declared and taught to the people—because the one doing the teaching is in a very real way *representing Christ* whose ministry it is to mediate the truth about the Father to His people. The ministry of the Word is *Christ's ministry* to His people.

The second half of Hebrews 2:12 shows us an equally remarkable truth: Jesus goes on to say to the Father, “in the midst of the congregation I will praise Your name.” When we come to worship, *Jesus Christ is in our midst, leading us in singing praises to the Father.*

What an incredible truth! To begin with, it shows that the ministry of music in the church is not a pretty add-on or an enjoyable preliminary, but rather is given an astounding importance by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, whose ministry it really is! And this verse also shows us that *Jesus Christ is the leader of our worship.* (Hebrews 8:2 describes Him as the “minister,” in Greek the “liturgist” or worship leader, in the *heavenly sanctuary*— as the priests were in the

earthly sanctuary.) That means that the worship leader, choir, or whoever leads in this part of the service is likewise *representing Christ*, in *His ministry* of leading the brethren's praise.

James Torrance's brother Thomas has summed up this truth beautifully:

The Church on earth lives and acts only as it is directed by its heavenly Lord, and only in such a way that His Ministry is reflected in the midst of its ministry and worship. Therefore from first to last the worship and ministry of the Church on earth must be governed by the fact that Christ substitutes Himself in our place, and that our humanity with its own acts of worship, is displaced by His, so that we appear before God not in our own name, not in our own significance, not in virtue of our own acts of confession, contrition, worship, and thanksgiving, but solely in the name of Christ and solely in virtue of what He has done in our name and on our behalf, and in our stead. Justification by Christ alone means that from first to last in the worship of God and in the ministry of the Gospel Christ Himself is central, and that we draw near in worship and service only through letting Him take our place. He only is Priest. He only represents humanity. He only has an offering with which to appear before God and with which God is well-pleased. He only presents our prayers before God, and He only is our praise and thanksgiving and worship as we appear before the face of the Father. Nothing in our hands we bring--simply to His Cross we cling. (Thomas Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, SCM Press, 1965, p. 167)

God has been pleased to accept an incredible diversity of expressions of worship over the centuries and around the world, not because of any inherent worthiness or excellence, but because Jesus Christ (who is "the same yesterday and today and forever," Heb. 13: 8) is at the center offering up a perfect sacrifice of praise in the midst of His people. Our worship is acceptable because we come *in Him* and *through Him*.

And so, as we face the ever-broadening range of worship expressions in our world, let us evaluate them according to God's standards and not according to our own preferences and prejudices— and let us insist that worship, in our churches and in our church plants, faithfully follows and gives a proper place to the Word of God, with the Holy Spirit blessing and giving power, with the congregation fully engaged and involved, and with a recognition that we come to the Father led by and clothed with Christ who leads us in our praise.