

The Varieties of Worship

By The Rev. Shawn P. Stapleton

Introduction

Worship in the Congregational tradition - as in many Protestant traditions - comes in all shapes and sizes. A survey of forms of Congregational worship is a bit difficult because of this. We have rather “porous walls” and are susceptible to all sorts of influences outside of our tradition. We have clergy serving our churches from a variety of denominational backgrounds, with few actually born and raised in the Congregational Way. All of them bring to the churches they serve their own perspectives on worship. Some embrace the approach of extemporaneous worship, while others use the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship*, the Methodist *Book of Worship* or other worship resources. Some embrace traditional worship, while others look to what they consider a more “contemporary” approach to leading and conducting worship. A concise survey of worship styles is difficult in this environment.

However, some general comments can, and should, be made concerning the theology behind our worship, because it is important for our worship services to convey the Gospel message - not just in the words that are spoken, but also in the process by which the *ecclesia* worships.

A Biblically-Based Understanding of Worship

Worship is drama - a biblical drama that retells the story of God's people each week, even if only a small section of that story is expounded upon each week. As such, it is appropriate for the structure of the worship service to mimic the Biblical drama. One such reflection of the drama is to consider the Call to Worship as taking us back to Creation, reflecting our primal relationship with the Creator. It calls us to order from the chaos of the world, and focuses our attention. It is the beginning of the story for that gathering and calls us to our roots. After Creation comes The Fall, and so the Confession is appropriate. Following the Fall, of course, is Redemption, and so the story of God's redemption of humanity is read from the Holy Scriptures. But the story does not end with Biblical times, and so the sermon follows, to bring the redemptive story of God to the contemporary fore. As a result, humanity is restored, so it is appropriate that a fellowship of prayer follow the sermon, where thanksgiving and intercession may be offered. This leads to the fellowship of the Table or the act of initiation at the Font, where past and future are combined and a glimpse of the eternal world is offered. Then we are dismissed with a blessing, sent out into the world from which we came, empowered to combat sin and temptation.

Another scriptural model for the drama of worship could be drawn from Isaiah 6:1-8:

1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. 2 Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they

covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³ And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." ⁴ The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵ And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" ⁶ Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷ The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." ⁸ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

Notice the similarity of pattern: Isaiah is drawn up into the divine presence, where he recognizes Yahweh's greatness and his own frailty. Isaiah confesses that he is not worthy to dwell in such a presence because of his sinfulness, whereupon he is cleansed of his sin. Yahweh speaks Isaiah listens, and responds by volunteering to engage in the prophetic ministry.

These are only two of any number of scriptural models for a theological approach to worship. They can be handy ways of thinking about the process of worship when constructing a worship service, whether traditional or contemporary. Whatever the worship form, it is important to remember that throughout our history as Congregationalists, and throughout the history of the Christian church, worship has been understood to encapsulate three basic actions: God speaks to us, we speak to God, we speak to one another. All of these are vital parts of the worship service.

Building an Order of Worship

As an order is built, the worship leader should consider first that Scripture be held as central to all that is done in worship. This is a service to worship God, and God's Holy Word gives us the necessary basis on which to build worship. Secondly, the worship leader should pay attention to the entire service, ensuring that there is a sense of progression; ideally this would be based on the theological justification listed above. Finally, the leader should pay close attention to the parts of the service to ensure that pieces that belong together are indeed together. The scripture readings and the sermon need to be in close proximity to one another. Hymns should be chosen based on their position in the worship service, so the texts fit the movement of the drama. Prayers should also be worded accordingly.

In other words, the worship leader is encouraged to give serious thought to the worship service he or she is constructing, paying attention to the roles of the various parts. Author Marva Dawn suggests, "A dialectical tension is required that must be carefully maintained by worship planners - to maintain liturgical form, whatever style that might involve, that actually frees worship participants to focus on God without being distracted by either novelty or monotony."

“Traditional” Worship

The following order is a basic construct. It does not include liturgical elements like the Doxology (“Praise God from whom all blessings flow ...”) or the *Gloria Patri* (“Glory be to the Father, and to the Son ...”), nor does it include choral anthems or other special music. I have also not included a “Children's sermon,” again because of the debate surrounding whether or not such an item belongs in worship. If included, the “Children's Sermon” should be located in reasonable proximity to the reading and expounding of scripture.

Order of Worship

Prelude

Call to Worship

Prayer of the Day/Opening Prayer

Hymn

Confession/Pardon or Prayer of Invocation (if no opening prayer)

Prayer for Illumination

Scripture

Sermon

Hymn

Pastoral Prayer/“Prayers of the People”

Offering

Prayer of Thanksgiving

[THE SACRAMENTS]

Hymn

Benediction

This order incorporates the principles outlined above. Notice the movement of preparation, confrontation, response and sending (denoted by spaces between each section).

“Contemporary” Worship

The church needs to give serious consideration to the context of its worship. A “traditional” service that serves well in assisting the worship of elderly members of a congregation may not give voice to the worshipping souls of younger generations. It is that criterion - whether or not the language of worship assists worshippers give voice to the groanings of their souls - that should be weighed when considering whether or not to alter a worship setting.

Contemporary worship is no different from “traditional,” in the sense that it, too, should have a theological sense of progression. A contemporary service must not be a theatrical show; theological reflection must be engaged when constructing such a service. The Latin proverb *lex orandi, lex credendi* - “the rule of prayer dictates the rule of belief” - still applies, meaning the way we worship speaks volumes about what we believe. As one writer put it,

an ill-conceived worship service will only result in conveyance of a belief in a meaningless God.

Those who seek to construct a “Contemporary” worship service will find that the audience sought wants authenticity that is immediately evident. They will focus on God but resist a corporate confession of sin. Preaching should be short and consist of events and stories. “The worship ... is more about experiencing God than it is reflecting on God.” As such, it may represent a substantial departure from the worship service to which the older members of the congregation have grown accustomed.

Often, “contemporary” services will begin with praise choruses. Some have suggested a five-phase order of choruses: invitation, engagement, exaltation, adoration and intimacy, and even gives potential titles for each phase. This model is closely connected to the above model for traditional worship services, with the invitation correlating to the time of preparation, the engagement to the time of scripture reading and preaching, and the exaltation, adoration and intimacy correlated to the time of response and sending. There are many helpful resources available to assist the worship planner with constructing such a service.