

The Public Worship of God

Our generation has witnessed nothing less than a revolution in worship. If our forefathers were to walk into one of our Sunday morning services, how shocked they would be! Most anything passes for worship now—entertaining productions, dancing, drama, high-tech images, cappuccino, comedy, women preachers and especially the increasingly dominant rock concert.

We may think we are dealing with issues never faced by previous generations, but that is not the case. Our forefathers were not “worship Neanderthals”! As we study church history we learn that they possessed surprising insight concerning public worship. Their worship was not by default, but by design. Like them, we must measure all things by the standard of Scripture. When we do, we will realize how far our present age has strayed.

Slopping God

In Matthew 7:6 Christ taught us not to cast pearls before swine. But today many are casting their swine slop before God and calling it worship! Their attitude is, “God doesn’t care what we bring to Him in worship. As long as we are happy, He is happy.”

Does God Care?

He certainly does! Both Old Testament and New testify to the fact.

In the Old Testament, God carefully regulated worship. Cain thought God didn’t care, but God rejected his worship. The first four commandments regulate Whom, how, with what attitude, and when we should worship. God gave Moses detailed instructions on every aspect of the tabernacle, priesthood and offerings. Then He repeatedly emphasized that Moses must make sure to follow the prescribed pattern. Meanwhile, Aaron made a golden calf, and many died in judgment. A little later when Nadab and Abihu made one deviation from God’s pattern, they were immediately stricken and died. David made one innovation in the method of transporting the ark, and the result was that Uzzah suddenly died when he touched it. Does God care how we worship? Ask Nadab and Abihu and Uzzah!

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ set forth vital principles of worship in the discourse with the woman at the well of Samaria in John 4. He shows that significant changes were on the horizon—changes which only He as God could appoint. He says in effect, “The question of Mt. Gerizim vs. Mt. Moriah is no longer relevant. What matters now is not the location of worship but the *spirit* and the *truth* of worship.”

All through the New Testament we find the same emphasis on spiritual worship as contrasted with carnal, ceremonial worship. *We worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh* (Php. 3:3). Galatians chapters 3 and 4 tell of the radical break with the Old Testament economy and ceremonies. 2Corinthians 3 calls us to the *administration of the spirit*. The book of Hebrews speaks of a better priesthood, better sacrifices, a better covenant, and the removal of the *carnal ordinances* now that the *time of reformation* (literally “rectifying” or “setting straight”) has come through Christ. New wine is put into new bottles, not old ones (Mat. 9:14-17). Now we have a spiritual temple, spiritual sacrifices and spiritual circumcision of the heart. Even our songs are called *spiritual songs* (Eph. 5:19).

Yes, God cares how we worship. He has every right to determine what He accepts and what He rejects. Now that the Old Testament ceremonies are past, we must look to the New Testament for instruction and example as to how we should worship God.

Elements of New Testament Worship

As we examine the New Testament we find a striking simplicity and spirituality in worship, contrasted with the elaborate sensory-focus of Old Testament worship. New Testament worship supersedes the Old, and is modeled more after the synagogue than the temple. The only items mentioned in the New Testament in connection with public worship are the following:

1. Reading of Scripture (Co. 4:16; 1Th. 5:27; 1Tim. 4:13).
 2. Praying (Acts 2:42; 1Tim. 2:1, 8; etc.).
 3. Preaching (Acts 2:42; Eph. 4:11; 2Tim. 4:2; etc.).
 4. Singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16).
 5. The observing of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper (Mat. 28:19; Acts 2:41-42; 1Cor. 11; etc.).
- A possible sixth item is the collecting of offerings (1Cor. 16:2).

No man has any right to add to this list, nor to subtract from it. To do so is to be guilty of what Colossians 2:23 calls *will worship*, or worship that man innovates and imposes at his own will.

Some have said that we may introduce into public worship anything except that which God has forbidden. But this opens the door to all manner of confusion and excess, which we see today. Are we to assume that when God is silent He has no opinion or will? Is His silence tantamount to approval? No. We are to interpret His silence as non-approval. For example, Hebrews 7:14 shows that when nothing was said about a priest coming from the tribe of Judah it meant that no man had the right to anoint one from that tribe.

Public Worship in Church History

The early centuries of church history continued to follow the apostolic simplicity. But Constantine forever changed the face of Christianity, including worship. He initiated a return to the Old Testament mentality with temples, altars, priests, vestments, sacrifices (the "bloodless sacrifice" of the mass), sights, smells and bells.

However, some groups refused the innovations and maintained purity of worship. For example, ancient Waldensian documents decry the corruptions of Romanism with regard to worship. As Baptists we possess a rich heritage!

When the Protestant Reformers emerged, they were concerned not only with doctrine but with worship. If Constantine had introduced a worship revolution, they introduced a worship reformation. All of them, save Luther, insisted on the regulative principle in worship (i.e. that only what the New Testament expressly enjoins constitutes true worship). The Puritans who followed spoke with virtually one voice for the regulative principle.

In the mid-1700s, the slippery slope back toward Constantinianism began. It began with slight deviations from the regulative principle, but it has grown into what we see everywhere today—a total infusion of anything that anyone wants to call "worship". The changes came against the complaints of Baptists and others from both sides of the Atlantic. Sadly, their voices were drowned by the waves of innovation. That innovation began with music. Music continues to be the tie that binds most "churches" with their "worshippers". In many people's minds, the music is the only worship. Therefore we turn our attention to this subject.

A Look at Music

All agree that music is a powerful medium. All do not agree that God has regulated this medium in public worship just as He has every other element of worship.

Rather than looking to the New Testament, most of today's "anything-goes" worshipers retreat to the Old Testament for a defense. They imagine a musical free-for-all in the temple and then insist that they are merely doing the same today. But what really took place in the Old Testament musically?

There is absolutely no mention of music in worship for the first 2500 years of human history. The first mention of it is the song of Moses in Exodus 15, which was a one-time celebration, not a routine feature. At Mt. Sinai, God gave explicit instructions concerning the tabernacle worship. He instructed Moses to make two silver trumpets to use for various purposes including certain worship occasions (Num. 10). Moses had no right to make any other instruments for worship. Nor could he blow the trumpets himself: only the priests could. For many generations, these were the only instruments God ordered.

Over 400 years later, King David introduced the singing groups composed of the Levites whose services of transporting the tabernacle were no longer needed. (See 1Chr. 15, 16, 23, 25.) At the same time he introduced three instruments: psalteries, harps and cymbals. These are repeatedly mentioned in the Old Testament as David's instruments. But did David simply take upon himself the prerogative to introduce these additions to worship? (After all, he played the harp and appreciated music.) Not at all! No doubt he had learned his lesson with the Uzzah incident, and he dared not deviate from God's expressed will on these matters! Rather, God Himself instructed David to appoint the singers and to make their instruments. We read in 2Chronicles 29:25-26 that God, through the mouths of the prophets Gad and Nathan, commanded David to do these things. Had it been otherwise, David would have been guilty of a presumptuous desecration of worship.

At every season of national revival in Judah, when the pure worship of Jehovah was restored, these same instruments of worship are mentioned: under Jehoiada and Josiah (2Chr. 23:18); under Hezekiah (2Chr. 29:25-26); under Josiah (2Chr. 35:15). It is especially interesting to note that after 70 years in Babylon—after they had been exposed to *all kinds of music* and instruments and culture (Dan. 3:5)—they returned to Jerusalem and reinstated the worship of God with the simple trumpets of Moses and instruments of David in the hands of the priests and Levites (Ezra 3:10-11; Neh. 12:24, 27, 35-36, 45-46). Imagine the scene: an older generation teaching the younger how to worship God. How different from today's younger generation who is imposing its innovations on the older!

We read of other opportunities for informal music and singing that involved the whole nation, such as feast days, national celebrations, etc. But in temple worship only the priests and Levites were appointed by God for music. They were part of the ceremonial law and worship that is put away in the New Testament. That is why we find not one mention of musical instruments in connection with worship in the New Testament. Now in the New economy, we all are instructed to lift up our voices in song as spiritual, living, intelligent "instruments" of praise. Ignatius (AD 35-107) gives the prevailing thought of the early centuries of church history when he quotes Romans 15:6, *that ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God*, as teaching that live voices are the only proper instruments in worship.

If all the musical emphasis of today were biblical, we would expect to find the lists of gifts in the New Testament to include "worship leader, bass player, drummer, etc." without which we can hardly worship God. But no musical gifts are listed!

The First Music Revolution

Slowly, Romanist "churches" began imitating Old Testament worship with special choirs singing complicated arrangements. But even these were non-instrumental. The term *a capella* derives from Italian and means "chapel style" since no instruments were used in worship.

About 670 AD the first organ was introduced in a cathedral in Rome, but not without opposition. Organs did not become common until the 1200s. By the time of Luther, singing as worship was left only to expert musicians and trained singers whose performance in Latin was so elaborate it could not be understood. The Reformers sought a return to the apostolic simplicity of the New Testament. Erasmus (1466-1536), who never left Romanism, lamented the scene in the Romanist “churches” with words that might well be applied to our contemporary scene:

We have introduced into churches a type of laborious and theatrical music, a confused chattering of diverse voices such as I do not think was ever heard in the theatres of the Greeks or the Romans. They perform everything with slide-trumpets, trombones, cornets, and little flutes, and with these the voices of men contend. Men run to church as to a theatre, to have their ears tickled.

The Second Music Revolution

Slowly, Lutherans and Anglicans began using a few select stringed instruments. Eventually pipe organs were installed. Then other denominations followed. The last to make the transition were the Presbyterians and Baptists in the mid-1800s.

Baptist historian David Benedict (1779-1874) lamented, “Staunch old Baptists in former times would as soon have tolerated the Pope of Rome in their pulpits as an organ in their galleries, and yet the instrument has gradually found its way among them.” Another Baptist, Francis Wayland (1796-1865), said that Baptists had simply bowed to the pressures of the times and imitated the Protestants in church music. However, he commented, “I have rarely met a Christian person who did not prefer the singing in a vestry-room below, where nothing was heard but the voices of the congregation, to the music of the choir, aided by the organ in the meeting house above.” C.H. Spurgeon (1834-1892), an outspoken opponent of musical instruments in church, said, “We might as well pray by machinery as praise by it.”

The prevailing arguments in those days for musical instruments were: (1) the rising popularity of their use, (2) the need to keep the young people from going to other churches that had already made the changes, and (3) the usefulness of instruments in evangelism. Does this sound familiar?

In the last 50 years we have witnessed a further decline in both the style and lyrics of church music. It is time for the Lord’s churches to awaken and return to New Testament singing: psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, sung as a congregation, with one voice, to the Lord. *In the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee* (Heb. 2:12). This is truly our “special music”!

“But instruments enhance the worship experience,” some say. We beg to differ. No violation of God’s regulations enhances anything! Rather, it is an impediment.

“But your church uses a piano.” Yes, but only as what the *1689 Confession of Faith* (1:6) calls a “circumstance concerning the worship of God,” in the same way that we have a building, stated hours for meeting, hymnals, etc. One instrument (and it need not be a piano) may be employed to help the congregation start, keep time, and stop together. It only provides minimal accompaniment and should be played modestly. Adding more instruments goes beyond a “circumstance concerning worship” and invariably develops into a musical production, an end in itself, a man-centered entertainment.

“But shouldn’t those with a gift use it in worship?” The New Testament never says that every gift is to be used in public worship. What about the one gifted in volleyball? Should we not put up a net in the sanctuary and let him use his gift in worship?! Or should we have a chessboard for those who have the gift of strategy? Certainly there are a variety of venues for musical gifts to be used for the glory of God, but there is no New Testament basis for making public worship one of them.

A Call to New Testament Worship

Let us return to the simple, spiritual, intelligent worship of God set forth in the New Testament. Let our worship reflect the character of God as John 4:24 teaches, *God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth*. Let our worship tell something of the majesty and dignity of God. Let the overall atmosphere of worship be one of reverence, structure and mutual edification (1Cor. 14). Let us teach a new generation the pure worship of God!

Some today are uncomfortable with the modern worship, but do not have Scriptural arguments against it. They simply rely on “custom” or “good taste” or “discretion”. Andrew Fuller (1754-1815) addressed the same mentality of some in his day, “On the principle of discretionary worship you may introduce the dance, and commence Welsh Jumpers; the surplice, and become Episcopalians; and even the mitre, and shake hands with his Holiness. I doubt not but *your* discretion will keep you from these things; but if there be no bar but discretion, I do not know what right you have to censure them in others.”

For Further Study

- Benedict, David, *Fifty Years Among the Baptists*, p. 281f.
Chamberlin, Daniel, *Music and Worship*, Nine audio sermons available online at <http://www.sermonaudio.com/covenantbaptist>.
Dagg, J.L., *Treatise on Church Order*, p. 238f.
Fuller, Andrew, *Complete Works*, Vol. 3, p. 515f.
Gill, John, *Body of Divinity*, p. 957f. Gill argues for exclusive psalmody.
Masters, Peter, *Worship in the Melting Pot*.
Price, John, *Old Light on New Worship*. Includes an extensive bibliography.
Wayland, Francis, *Notes on the Principles and Practices of Baptist Churches*, p. 147f.
(I have only included works by Baptists.)