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Classical Worship for Today:
Worship That Is Evangelical and Classical



Wilbur Ellsworth

Christ then is the mirror wherein we must . . . contemplate our own election.

JOHN CALVIN

In efficacious grace we are not merely passive, nor yet does God do some and we do the rest. But God does all, and we do all. God produces all, and we act all. For that is what he produces, viz. our own acts. God is the only proper author and fountain; we only are the proper actors.

JONATHAN EDWARDS

Style of worship is the most prominent issue that the evangelical Church in America is struggling with today. With the emphasis on style certain words have come to have explosive impact: relevance and authenticity. Church success and pastoral survival rise and fall on these words. Strangely, it seems that relevance and authenticity are nearly impossible to define. We are left to assert, "Well, I know it when I see it."

Two presuppositions underlie much of the current thinking about worship. First, that worship should be *spontaneous*. We have come to believe that worship that is authentic must "come from the heart." This means that what is spoken, particularly in prayer, should rise up from within us even as we are speaking. What I say in worship must come from what I am thinking and feeling at the moment and if I am not using words I have created, I am failing to give myself fully to God or to those who are part of my Christian community.

The second presupposition is that spirit-filled worship is *undefined* in terms of biblical directives. That is to say, as long as we don't actually violate the biblical concerns for right doctrine and right living, we are pretty much free to go about our worship life as we think will be effective for our situation. Our conviction here is that God is concerned about our heart and motives, and what we actually do in worship can

only be evaluated by its accomplishing our purposes in terms of the people who attend that service. I recall a worship leader saying, "I love our independent tradition because we can take from the best of all the rest and put it together as we like." At the time, I thought that was a great idea. I have since thought better of it. *All of this is to say that when spontaneity and freedom are the unexamined presuppositions of worship, style will end up being the ultimate focus of our concern.* And without fear of serious contradiction, I believe that style is the predominant focus in our worship discussions and struggles today. I propose there is a better way.

Two great commitments in worship can help us navigate through the overwhelming subjectivity and the crushing urgency to "keep up in worship." They are: (1) Commitment to worship that is classical, and (2) Commitment to worship that is evangelical.

CLASSICAL WORSHIP

Classical worship is profoundly different from what we today call "traditional worship." Traditional worship often means little more than choosing a slice of the past and clinging to its well-loved and familiar feelings and asserting that this is what true worship really means. In recent years the 1950s seem to be a prime candidate for the "golden age of worship." And one of the reasons traditional worship has been so thoroughly rejected by both our popular secular culture and much of our popular Church culture is that the baby boomer culture has passionately distanced itself from the world of Ozzie and Harriet. Unfortunately, that cultural shift has also collaborated with a militantly Protestant mindset that assumes that the corruptions of medieval worship provide a warrant for cutting off the historical roots of Christian worship and starting all over again. Classical worship, however, is not based on reactions to cultural or spiritual corruptions either past or present. It is rooted in the patterns the Lord gave to his Old Testament people and that Christ himself embraced. Luke 4:16 records the Lord's custom of going to the synagogue on the Sabbath day and entering into that worship. Contrary to popular opinion,

the early Christians did not merely meet together in home groups to enjoy informal and spontaneous worship followed by a potluck supper. Rather, the early Church formed its worship by continuing the patterns of synagogue worship. Today sincere Christian people will freely confess they distrust liturgical worship, apparently having no awareness that Acts 13:2 specifically states that "while they were worshiping (the Greek word is *leitourgounton*, "doing the liturgy") and fasting" the Holy Spirit spoke to them and began the missionary movement of the Church. The word liturgy simply means "the work of the people," a work in which all the people together play a part in giving to the Lord the worship that he seeks from his people. That work has been summarized in seven elements: prayerful adoration, confession of faith and human sinfulness, intercessory prayer, Scripture reading, preaching the Word of Christ and the benediction. These elements from the synagogue came into Christian worship with one revolutionary change: all God's promises and goodness are now realized in the Lord Jesus Christ. The worship forms of the early Church did not discard the patterns of the synagogue, but the forms were now filled with the second person of the Trinity who became flesh, Jesus Christ our Lord, the Savior of the world and the Son of the Living God. During these formative centuries the worship of the Church rested clearly in this God-given pattern. That is classical Christian worship.

EVANGELICAL WORSHIP

The Christocentric nature of worship brings us to embrace worship that is evangelical. Forms are always in danger of becoming empty, dry and meaningless when what they are serving is forgotten. For many sincere Christians "liturgy" means just that: empty, dry and meaningless. Many feel sorrow and anger for the years they spent in churches where they were trying to worship God and never once heard the saving name of Jesus Christ proclaimed with clarity. They often react by rejecting liturgy now that Christ has changed their lives by his saving grace. While the motive is understandable, the reasoning is not. If a person has broken a bone, the solution is

not to remove the skeleton from the body, but to set the bone and do all that is possible to facilitate healing the break. The corrective to dead, grace-deprived liturgy is not to abandon the biblical and historic forms God has given his people but to see to it that Christ is set forth in every part of the worship in the demonstration of the Spirit's power. This is the passion of Colossians 3:16, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God."

A common response to a call for evangelical classical worship is that we are doing well with our "contemporary" and "creative" worship. Many will claim that that they are reaching far more people with their evangelistically appealing worship than any liturgical worship ever could. In response, may I suggest that nearly every day another sad story of a worship style war comes through the evangelical pipeline? Our pragmatic effectiveness in "reaching lost people" is taking an immeasurable toll on the health of the Church. Further, we are continuing along with confidence that we are doing God's work in ways pleasing to him even though we are disregarding the very structures of worship that he has built into his Word and that the Church has followed from its beginning and through its formative years.

Style and personal preference or tastes have never been the measures by which God's Word directs our worship of him. And we need to make no mistake about the fact that worship directly affects the spiritual condition of the Church. Evangelical worship without classical biblical structure is increasingly producing a shallowness that is alarming many evangelical Christians. Classical worship structures which are not zealously Christ-centered produce little more than aesthetically-pleasing spiritual experiences that do little to glorify God or draw people into deeper and transforming relationships with him.

Our culture really cannot form the core of our worship vision. It is too unstable. It is too coarse. Above all, culture does not tell us what God wants from us in our worship of him.

When God created the heavens and the earth, he first established the forms of his universe and then he filled these forms with his generous gifts of life. In creating the worship his people are to offer to him, God has made the same provision. The forms come from the unfolding history of his instruction in Scripture and the fullness comes in the outpouring of the Spirit of Christ upon his people. Form and freedom in Christ will create elements of spontaneity and among the various parts of the body of Christ will even produce some variety that we might call style. But style will be a humble servant that does not gain the power it now has to dictate the life of the Church's worship. Let us take heart and vision from that glimpse of the early Church in Acts. In chapter two, the infant Church gave itself to apostolic teaching of the Scripture seen as declaring and explaining Christ, deep community with the people of God both historically and in presence fellowship, the breaking of bread at the Lord's Table and the prayers of people serving together in worship. Is there life in this? In Acts 13:2 while the Christians were lifting their liturgy to the Lord, the Holy Spirit came upon them and the mission to the world took a great step forward. Style will never accomplish that!