

Purity of Worship

I had a cup of coffee with an exit student. His zeal to preach the Gospel oozed from every word he spoke. He couldn't wait for the day of his ordination.

Our conversation touched the issue of the ordination vows. I reminded him of the solemnity of those vows. We talked about the vow regarding the purity of worship (the third vow). *"What do you understand about the purity of worship as practised in this church?"* I asked.

"I have no idea! Before I took the vows at my licensing I picked the brains of some ordained ministers, but they couldn't help me. They said it is not really important, as long as I preached the Gospel of Jesus!"

My thoughts went back to the night of my induction into my first charge in the Presbyterian Church of Australia. I had read up about those vows as I had found them in the Code Book. Furthermore, the [Westminster Confession of Faith](#) (WCF) is clear about the [purity of worship](#). The regulative principle had been known throughout the Reformed world – even where I come from!

I answered the questions, knowing that I was binding myself to something which could be tested from the Word of God, something for which I could be held accountable before God. The moment I stepped out of line, or deviated from these vows, God would hold me answerable to Him through the elected and inducted office bearers of his Church as they would apply the standards of his infallible Word. They too were in the final instance also answerable to Him!

Then, after the induction service, I asked some of the brothers where I could obtain a *Book of Forms/Worship*. The response was astounding, coming like a hammer between the eyes, *"Do as you like. The new one is in print but no one will probably use it once it's published."*

I somewhere else wrote, *"Worship is standards applied/ theology practised. Theology shapes worship and worship impacts upon theology."*

The teaching in some worship services I attended recently was generally good and edifying. It was, however, presented as a "talk", and not as the authoritative proclamation of the Word of God. The result was that you walk away from "fellowship" and not worship.

No call to worship, no blessing, no benediction. No awe, no respect, no *worship* of God. A talk *about* God, but not God speaking to his gathered people on his appointed day in his revealed way. The atmosphere is user-friendly, no doubt, but disjointed: everyone tried to make feel welcome the other, but I was not struck by the presence of God (1Cor 14:25).

The result was that prayers of confession of sin were not always heart-felt. Who would really feel sorry for offending the holiness of God if His throne of grace is approached with the service (fellowship?) interrupted for morning coffee? Visitors were also encouraged not to put money in the plate. (Did I want to give money to the "fellowship" or did I want to worship God with my offering?)

A question, *Is it possible that both 'traditional' (as seen by the more contemporary minded churchgoer) and 'contemporary' (as seen by the more traditional minded churchgoer) styles of worship can arrive at the same result of meaningless worship?* Both arrive there because there is no life, no sincerity and no works to prove that the worshipper was in the presence of God. The one makes tradition the norm, while the other (in reaction?) makes user-friendliness the norm of "biblical" worship. Both miss the point: it is no worship of God!

As lifeless, unauthentic and insincere traditional worship has to answer before God if it is not in accordance with his Word, so does contemporary worship, lively and in step with modern expectation as it might be.

The question is not contemporary as opposed to traditional worship, or *vice versa*. The issue is the choice between biblical and non-biblical worship. Where different styles of worship should meet is at the throne of God where *He is worshipped the way He ordained it*.

The element which should never be missed is *the worship of God*. Fellowship is not worship. The singing of songs is not worship (as opposed to the other elements of reading and the teaching of the Word of God and prayers); singing is only an element of worship. Observing tradition is not worship. *Worship is only worship when God's redeemed people gather as His Church on His ordained day, the Lord's Day, to enjoy Him in the way He ordained it in the Bible.*

What flows from true worship of God is everyday *service* in all areas of life as saved children of God: fellowship, caring, prayer, effective discipleship, etc. by living as redeemed people of God. The true worshipper is never satisfied with corporate worship only; corporate worship shapes his *service* between *worship*.

Dr. A. A. Hodge made the following pertinent comments: *"Since God has prescribed the mode in which we are acceptably to worship and serve Him, it must be an offence to Him and a sin in us for us either to neglect His way, or in preference to*

practise our own. . . we have in no case any right, upon the ground of taste, fashion or expediency, to go beyond the clear warrant of Scripture" (A Handbook on the Confession of Faith pp. 271-2).

It is my prayer that God will give us discernment to practice purity of worship. May He protect us from the sin of wilful worship.

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