

The Reformation of Worship

W. Robert Godfrey, "The Reformation of Worship," *Faithwalk*, Vol.3 No. 1, 2003, pg. 5-9.

For Christians who have understood the teaching of Jesus, doctrine, worship, and life have always been intimately intertwined and interconnected. Faith involves the truth of God (doctrine), meeting with God (worship), and serving God (life). The inseparability of these three elements can often be seen in the Scriptures and in the history of God's people.

For example, when Paul wrote to the Colossians, he connected these themes. He discussed the doctrines of the divinity of Christ and His saving work on the cross (Col. 2:9-15). He refuted a variety of errors about worship, concluding with a warning against all forms of "self-imposed worship" (2:16-23). He called the Colossians to holiness by putting to death their fallen nature and living in and for Christ (3:1-14).

WORSHIP THROUGH THE CENTURIES

Throughout the centuries Christians have seen this same connection in doctrine, worship, and life. Augustine, for example, expressed it clearly in his *Confessions* as he discussed his conversion. His conversion had an intellectual dimension as he accepted the truth of Christian doctrine. It had a moral dimension as he abandoned his carnal habits and embraced chastity. It had a sacramental dimension as he was baptized and became a full part of Christ's worshipping community.

The Reformers insisted on the need for reform in all three areas. Martin Luther related doctrine, worship, and life as essential to the Reformation in his attack on the Mass. Luther taught that Christians must reject the Roman Mass because it attacks sound doctrine, is false worship, and leads to corruption of life.

Similarly John Calvin connected these three as he thought about the heart of the Reformation: "There are three things on which the safety of the church is founded, viz., doctrine, discipline, and the sacraments, and to these a fourth is added viz., ceremonies by which to exercise the people in offices of piety." The doctrines of salvation, worship with pure sacraments, and life in the church were basic for Calvin to the reform of Christianity.

Although the three elements of doctrine, worship, and life always remain affected by one another, at times in modern church history one element has seemed more prominent than the others. Doctrine was preeminent in the controversy between liberalism and fundamentalism in the 1920s and 1930s. Worship was the center of Scottish Presbyterian struggles in the seventeenth century. Life has dominated a variety of modern movements that primarily reacted against the perception of formalism and deadness in the church. Pietism, Methodism, revivalism, the holiness movement, and Pentecostalism all stress the call to life. Evangelicals have worked to preserve sound doctrine in their defense of

inerrancy of the Scriptures. They have also undertaken extensive experimentation in the public worship of God.

CHANGES IN WORSHIP

Recent evangelical experiments in worship are particularly significant for two reasons. First, they represent the most widespread changes in Protestant public worship since the Reformation. Second, the contemporary changes in worship offer perhaps the best perspective from which to evaluate the health of evangelicalism today.

Variety has long characterized evangelicals in their practice of worship from the high Anglican liturgy to the wildly charismatic. But beyond these historic differences evangelicals from many traditions in recent years have introduced some common, specific changes in worship in at least five areas.

1. Many congregations have added a variety of new elements to their worship. Some have added liturgical dance and dramatic or humorous skits. Some have added visual aids--from banners to slides and films. Some have added a variety of Pentecostal activities, from being slain in the Spirit to holy laughter. Some have added popcorn and Super Bowl viewing--although perhaps not as an act of worship proper.

2. Many congregations have changed the character of traditional elements of worship. Worship leaders read much more shorter passages of the Bible and spend much less time in prayer. Sermons are more likely to be psychological rather than theological or expository. How to manage stress or time or money seems to be among the most pressing spiritual issues of our time. The Lord's Supper is apt to be either eliminated or elaborated with new ceremony and symbolism.

3. Many churches have seen major changes in the area of music. They give much more time to music and use a greater variety of instruments and more special music, especially soloists and choirs. Whereas traditionally music was an important part of the dialogue between God and His people, for many it has become the heart of worship, even called the "Praise and Worship" part of the service. Music seems to have become for some a new sacrament, establishing a mystical bond between god and the worshiper. With eyes closed and hands in the air, worshipers repeat simple phrases that become Christian mantras.

4. Many churches have abandoned the historic practice of having an ordained minister lead the service. Various parts of the service are now led by professionals or members of the congregation. In some places no part of the service--even the sermon, sacrament, or benediction--seems reserved for the minister.

5. A number of churches have made changes in the time of worship. The Saturday evening service has emerged as a new time of worship for the busy, who save Sunday for work or recreation. Some churches give much more attention to the holy days of the church year. Christmas receives at least a month of preparation in many churches. But strangely, services are often not held on Christmas day itself.

In spite of the magnitude of these changes, an amazingly small amount of discussion or controversy has attended their introduction. The ease with which such momentous changes have taken place points to the dissatisfaction prevalent among evangelicals with traditional worship and gives insight into the contemporary evangelical mind.

AN EVALUATION OF WORSHIP

God has always taken His worship very seriously. He speaks of His worship not only in the Second Commandment, but at least implicitly in the first four of the Ten Commandments. He offers serious warning about worship through the Law (Deut. 4). He visit terrible judgement on those who pervert His worship (Lev. 10 and 2 Chron.26) The same concern is clear in the New Testament. Hebrews 12:28-29 sums up this concern well: "Let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our 'God is a consuming fire.'"

God's concern for His worship must lead evangelicals to much more careful evaluation of their practice of worship. First evangelicals must reconsider the new elements introduced into worship. Are visual elements such as drama, dance, and film acceptable to God? They do not seem consistent with a thoughtful application of the Second Commandment. Rather, they seem more like strange fire offered to the Lord (Lev.10:1).

These elements need to be rigorously subjected to Scriptures. Evangelicals need to see that worship must be Word-directed in specifics, not just in a general vague way.

Second, evangelicals must reexamine the ways in which they have changed the traditional element of worship. Sermons must again be closely expository so that the church really hears God's Word, not human opinions. The Bible must be read as a central act of worship--not only to inform but as an act of reverence to God. Prayer must be restored as the congregation's privilege to speak to God who draws near to them. The sacraments must be seen as the kindness of the Lord in giving a visible expression to the Gospel.

Third, evangelicals must look carefully at their music. Contemporary worship too often is only concerned with the emotion of joy. The Bible certain stresses joy, but it equally stresses reverence. Psalm 2:11 says, "Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling." Reverence and joy must both be expressed in worship. Joy and reverence reflect the character of God, who is just and merciful, holy and loving. Worship that is only joyful serves a God that is stripped of half His attributes. It produces a Gospel that tells of peace where there is no peace. It severs Law from Gospel and repentance from faith.

The worship songs of the church must follow the pattern of the Psalter that praises the character and great works of God. Such praise is not composed of repetition or phrases or bad poetry. It is verbally rich, emotionally varied, and full of content.

Fourth, many evangelicals have diminished the role of the minister in leading the worship and multiplied the number of worship leaders. Evangelicals need to regain a theology of office and ministry. One of Christ's greatest gifts to His church, according to Ephesians 4, is the office of pastors and teachers. Those gifted and called by Christ and His church need to lead the people of God in their worship carefully in accordance with the Word.

Fifth, evangelicals have changed the time of worship to make worship easier and more accessible. Real Christianity is not easy, but embraces the discipline and blessing of rest and worship on the Lord's Day. True faith delights to spend time with God. It does not seek to get worship over with, but seeks to follow the revealed pattern of a day with God.

Evangelicals in relation to worship, doctrine, and life have tended to become minimalists. Too many are asking, What is the least I can do and what is the easiest way to do it to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? Evangelicals must remember--of all things--the Great Commission (Matt.28:18-20). There Jesus declared what true discipleship is. It has a doctrinal dimension: Discipleship must acknowledge Jesus as possessing all authority in heaven and on earth. It has a worship dimension: Disciples must be baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. It has a life dimension: Disciples are to obey everything that God has commanded. Evangelicals must capture the fullness of biblical religion.

Today as always doctrine, worship, and life remain closely intertwined. Where worship teaches that man is good and God is benevolent, worship will be upbeat and life will be oriented to self-fulfillment. Where worship focuses on human needs and entertainment, the doctrine of God, sin, and grace will wither and life will become self-centered. Where life is self-indulgent, doctrine and worship will also be self-indulgent.

Evangelicals need to repent. Too often we have replaced the consuming fire with a mild-mannered God; replaced the worship of the invisible God with some forms of human invention; replaced the moral law of God with the fulfillment of felt needs. Evangelicals need a spirit of repentance that will lead to a thorough reformation of doctrine, worship, and life.

Excerpted from "The Reformation of Worship" by W. Robert Godfrey, published in **Here We Stand!**, edited by James Montgomery Boice and Benjamin E. Sasse. Copyright by the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals. Published by Baker Books, PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287. Used by permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

Source: W. Robert Godfrey, "The Reformation of Worship," *Faithwalk*, Vol.3 No. 1, 2003, pg. 5-9.

Recovering Biblical Worship

"In an age when corporate worship has been greatly trivialized, certain elements desperately need to be recovered, said James Montgomery Boice in his essay "Reformation in Doctrine, Worship, and Life, " published in *Here We Stand!*

1. Prayer. Boice observed, "There is usually a very short prayer at the beginning of the service and another prayer at the time the offering is received." He asked, "How can we say we are worshiping when we do not even pray?"

2. The reading of the Word. "Our Scripture readings are getting shorter and shorter, sometimes only two or three verses, if indeed the Bible is read at all. In many churches, there is not even a text for the sermon," Boice decried.

3. The exposition of the Word. There is very little serious teaching of God's Word, said Boice, "Instead, preachers try to be personable, to relate funny stories, to smile, above all to stay away from topics that might cause people to become unhappy with the church and leave it."

4. Confession of sin. "Who confesses sin today--anywhere, not to mention in church as God's humble people, repentant people?" Boice asked, "It is not happening because there is little awareness of God."

5. Hymns. Boice lamented that one of the saddest features of contemporary worship is that the great hymns of the church are on the way out. The problem, he explained is not so much the style of music as the content of many of the songs sung in churches today. Whereas "the old hymns expressed the theology of the church in profound and perceptive ways with winsome, memorable language," he said, today's songs reflect a shallow or non-existent theology." He mentioned in particular songs "that merely repeat a trite idea, word, or phrase over and over again. Songs like (these) are not worship, though they give the churchgoer a religious feeling. They are mantras which belong more in a gathering of New Agers than among the worshipping people of God."