

## *Philosophy of Worship*

In attempting to develop something as daunting as a position paper on a philosophy of worship, my mind reels in many directions and thinks of at least a few million places to go. In order to reduce the schizophrenia and give focus to this paper there will be two main limitations. The first: *this paper will deal primarily with worship as it pertains to music*. The term “worship” can have a very broad scope, such as Rom. 12:1-2, or a narrow scope, such as music. This paper will address the latter. This second limitation will focus the paper on *music intended for use inside the church, for corporate worship*. Narrowing down the use of “worship” again, this paper is not addressed to music outside the church or music separate from the corporate worship service, such as in family’s homes.

### **Our Gospel**

The one over-arching concept of any ministry is the gospel. The gospel is content and process. It is not just what we believe for our lives, but how we go about our lives. Accordingly, gospel-centered worship will contain both the “what” and “how” of worship. The gospel given to us by the Spirit’s inspiration is a broad concept that contains grace, but not merely grace. This gospel includes grace and mercy and also justice and judgment (Eph. 1:7; Ps. 89:14; Zeph. 3:5). Therefore, in gospel-centered worship, grace is present alongside justice, much like the cross of Christ, where mercy and justice meet. In this respect worship is cross-centered. But just as worship cannot be merely grace-centered, it cannot be merely cross-centered. It is true that we have all been “crucified with Christ” but now Christ “lives in us” (Gal 2:20). Jesus’ resurrection, as well as his life and death, must be a defining point in our worship, for he is the proof and picture of our redemption.

### **Our Narrative**

In the Bible, we have been given a beautiful story in which we find ourselves. From Genesis to Revelation there is a magnificent narrative speaking to us. In speaking of music’s merits, Jeremy Begbie<sup>1</sup> presents a form found in many biblical narratives, and one that can be seen as *the* unified story of the Bible: it is the concept of home-away-Home. We started with “home” in the Garden, the fall began the “away” concept and, as

---

<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Begbie. 2000. *Theology, Music and Time*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

believers, we await the true and final “Home,” our promised land. The significance of this for ministry is that believers are all on their way to Home, even though we aren’t quite there yet (Heb 11:8-10). If we are redeemed, we should not classify ourselves as “away” but we need to recognize that we live in a world that is away, and our flesh continues to lead us away from Home. This metaphor embraces the “now and not yet” nature of our semi-eschatological faith, embracing our perfection and incomplete sanctification (Heb 10:14). For practical purposes, this would include not focusing worship only on the fact that we are not perfect, as that incomplete understanding would lead anyone to depression, nor only on the fact that we have attained perfection, as that incomplete understanding leads to an unbiblical triumphalism, but to embrace both views whole-cloth. Yes, we are sinners. Yes, we are redeemed.

### **Our History**

The Spirit of God works in some incredible ways, and one of those ways is composing music and words for the worship of God. A worship song is steeped in history and culture and is the creative outworking of the indwelling Spirit. We should take full advantage of the music and words written by those in our time and culture, especially if these writers are in our congregation. However, there is an increasingly perceived need in our contemporary society to become “relevant” not only to those in the church, but those outside the church. The typical conclusion that is to be gained from this assertion is that the church should focus on the newest music as made popular by the current artists. Though there are many faults in this line of reasoning, the concern here is Christianity’s historical roots. To be sure, one of the beautiful aspects of the Christian faith is just that: it *is* rooted in history, in real events with real people, and the Spirit has been working from the beginning of time to complete the story. It is to all of our shame to disregard our past spiritual ancestors, their music included. We need not be focused solely on past hymns of a certain time, as if the 17<sup>th</sup> century (or any other) is superior to another (including our own), but we should seek to embrace as much of history in our music as possible, submitting to and taking advantage of past teachers (just as we do in theology), as well as illustrating to others the work of the Spirit in many lives, not just those of our current decade or culture. This is possible to accomplish while also being conscious of current music, presenting both past and present.

## **Our Current Concerns**

There are many areas of debate when it comes to worship, a few of which will be addressed here. There is much talk when it comes to the content of worship songs, of deep theology versus accessible theology. Both sides have their principled concerns, and, again, I believe we can embrace both ideas. The quintessential example of this in Scripture is in Romans 14, where we encounter those stronger in the faith and those weaker. Both sides come to the table with error: the stronger despise the weak and need to humbly realize that even though *their* consciences are not convicted, their brothers and sisters are convicted, and those who are weaker should not pass judgment. Applied to our worship dilemma, those who are stronger should humbly understand that our weaker brothers and sisters need content to be accessible in order to understand the songs they are singing; they should seek to educate the weak. Those who are weaker need to not stay that way, but should mature in their faith, avoiding judgment by understanding that “Christ has purchased for all believers a liberty inherent in the gospel”<sup>2</sup>, and humble themselves to learn. We should deal with each other in love.

There is also the question of worship style and how much do we draw on our culture to determine the church’s worship service. I am very cautious to present any style of music as wrong in itself, given the Confession’s biblical definition of liberty, but there are certain general parameters of which to take account. The first is that of Christ’s incarnation. Our Messiah came in human flesh, took on human words, and lived in human time. This incredible truth informs how we ought to live. Just as Christ Jesus came into the world to save us, we ought to go into the world to do His work (1 Tim. 1:15; Matt 28:19-20, 1 Cor. 14). We must take on the dress and speech and music style of the culture we are in, not only to understand it for ourselves, but for others to understand it. This point of view does not necessitate a worship service that is primarily determined by those who are outside the church (as its first priority is for equipping the saints) but it does take into account the presence of unbelievers. The church can, and should, craft services that are sympathetic towards unbelievers without being driven by them.

---

<sup>2</sup> Paragraph 1, Chapter 21, The 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith.

So the style cannot be informed by merely looking outside the church, but we must also look within the church. This is where context plays a large role. Who are the people that make up the church? What kind of culture? The makeup of the church itself will largely determine the worship style. This is not to say that there won't be deviations from the majority culture of the church, but there should be a healthy interaction with where the church is comfortable yet also not sitting back in their comfort. We must appreciate God's sovereignty in placing us in our culture and embrace God's command to reach out to those who are not exactly like us, embracing the incarnation.

This question leads in to the so-called regulative principle where our confession reads, "Visible symbols of God, and all other forms of worship not prescribed in the Holy Scripture, are expressly forbidden."<sup>3</sup> This is all very true, as many places in Scripture attest to, such as Nadab and Abihu of Lev. 10. However, we must also embrace texts such as Ps. 150, as it doesn't seem to be prescribing correct worship forms so much as expressing freedom. So, according to the principle itself outlined in the Confession, certain freedom of creativity would seem to be included in the prescriptions of approved forms of worship. Now this does not give the believer complete artistic license, but it does present a case for creativity in our worship services. This is something the church ought to guard: setting boundaries of creativity and also fostering its healthy use.

So we have seen how the gospel, the narrative of the Scriptures and our history determine our worship. In areas where we experience conflict, we must seriously look to the Bible to inform our decisions and respond to our brothers and sisters in love. And let us never lose sight of Rev. 22:5, where night will cease and we will have no need for lamps or the sun, for God will be our everlasting light.

---

<sup>3</sup> Paragraph 1, Chapter 22, The 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith.