

Worship Style a Matter of Christian Liberty

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I am a young man in our Presbytery and severely outmatched so I am humbled to be presenting in this forum. We are currently preaching a series from the book of Proverbs on wisdom and I was alarmed by a Proverb I ran across recently which says: **“The one who states his case first seems right... until the other comes and examines him” (Prov 18:17).**

PART 1- INTRODUCTION

My goal: to help us, in all the ways our churches are nuanced, to have a greater regard for and appreciation of one another, particularly in our differences regarding this issue of worship style. Maybe that is not the right goal. I'd like to make the case that it is- not because worship style is a matter of pragmatism rather than principle (not at all!), but because I principally believe the Scripture is replete with commands that we be patient with one another, bear with one another, and teach one another as brothers. And I also principally believe the Scripture commands this of us towards one another with special force and clarity in areas of Christian freedom where the category we're working with is not so much what is right and wrong but what is wise, what is profitable (NAS) - i.e. helpful (ESV)- as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:23ff., (and not just what lawful), what is most loving..

The primary text I have been pointed to by the CE Liason is 1 Corinthians 9:19-23: **[19] For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. [20] To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. [21] To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. [22] To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. [23] I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. (1 Corinthians 9:19-23 ESV)**... I will talk in greater detail about the content of those verses in just a minute. Let me just make this point: these verses in 1 Cor 9 re: ministry style (i.e. for our purposes, worship style) are part of an extended discussion on Christian freedom re: food sacrificed to idols (chapters 8-10). Paul even begins 9:19 with the statement: **“For though I am free from all” (1 Cor 9:19).** So, in context, what Paul has to say about philosophy of ministry in these verses is framed by the larger concern of Christian freedom. Within Paul's discussion of Christian freedom, either here in 1 Cor 8-10 or in Romans 14, his principal concern is not that we ... but that we love one another well in our disagreements, that we not quarrel (Rom 14:1), that we not despise one another or pass judgment on one another (Rom 14:3-4), but that we serve one another and we build one another up (1 Cor 8:1 and 10:23). My goal is to help us do just that.

I am not arguing for contemporary worship over against traditional worship. (I hope that doesn't come as a disappointment!) ... I am arguing that worship style is a matter of Christian liberty and, therefore, churches should be free to be contemporary or traditional (or anywhere in between) in form, depending upon their personal convictions and their prudent application of the Scripture about how to best glorify God, edify the body, and succeed in the task of evangelism.

What we do here at Redeemer?

Where does my church fall on the continuum between contemporary and traditional? It seems appropriate to begin there, though I am not exactly sure how to answer the question. The best answer I could come up with is: *we are neither traditional nor contemporary and we are striving to be both traditional and contemporary*. Let me put it this way: we have had families who have visited with us choose to worship elsewhere because our worship service was too traditional/classical/liturgical for their personal taste, *and* we have had families who have visited choose to worship elsewhere because our service was too informal/contemporary. ... and that is by design. (I'll explain this more in just a minute.)

We are liturgical. We believe that the worship service should have a structure- the service should be telling a story; i.e. it should be taking you somewhere. We value the church calendar and believe it to be a very helpful tool in training our people to live with a distinctively Christian identity. But we do so very carefully, heeding the apostle Paul's warnings against **days and festivals and Sabbaths (Col 2:16)**.

Our liturgy is as follows. (One note: we celebrate Communion on the first Sunday of each month.)

- Call to Worship (from OT Scripture)
- Prayer of Adoration & Confession
- Song of Repentance
- Assurance of Pardon (from NT Scripture)
- Songs/Hymns of Worship
- Prayer of Thanksgiving & Intercession
- Scripture Reading
- Sermon
- Apostles Creed
- Communion
- Offering- Closing Song
- Benediction

Within this liturgy, we sing hymns- sometimes right out of the Trinity Hymnal, other times a traditional hymn text to a new melody. (An interesting note: most of the church's hymns were composed as text only and then put to handful of melodies that were common to the day. The hymn is the text not the music- i.e. the text set to a contemporary melody which would appear to support the practice of new generations created new melodies for old hymn texts.) We also sing contemporary worship songs. However, we try to be very deliberate in our song choice.

I want to explain what I mean by that- because I think it goes to the issue. So let me say a few things about contemporary worship *music* and then move on to what I think is the real issue behind the question of traditional vs. contemporary worship, and the cause for the divide (if there exists a divide) among us- that is, the distinction between "elements" and "circumstance" in worship and where Christian freedom applies.

PART 1- THE SECONDARY ISSUE: "CONTEMPORARY" MUSIC

So very briefly, on the issue of contemporary worship music (or instrumentation, i.e. using guitars and drums rather than a pipe organ or alongside an organ), I'd like to make two points. First, we are commanded in the Psalms (and elsewhere) to sing to the LORD. In 1 Corinthians 14:26 and Colossians 3:16 Paul makes it very clear that song was a vital part of early Christian worship. With great force the Scripture commands us to sing. The purpose of song/music is to glorify

God, to ignite the affections of the worshipper with the truth of the gospel, and even to help the church corporately minister the word to one another (cf. Colossians 3:15-17). The value of music lies in how it helps the church towards these goals. Therefore, in considering music for worship, we should be concerned *primarily* with two things: #1- the Biblical and theological content of the text, and #2- the strength of the melody (i.e. how easy it is to sing, its memorability, etc.) Hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs should be chosen on the basis of how well they help the congregation to sing to the LORD and not on the basis of the type of instrumentation or the “style” of the music. Granted, many contemporary worship songs are shallow and repetitive, or showy; but, of course, there are also plenty of hymns that are practically unsingable because the melody is so difficult or the language is inaccessible. So, the first point: we are commanded to sing and we should choose songs on the basis of how well they help us sing and not on the basis of style.

However, the second point I want to make is that style matters. There is a message in the medium, as Marshal McLuhan declared. Style conveys meaning and we would be wise to remember this. But also to remember that no one style is exhaustive. Traditional forms of worship are much more effective at communicating the transcendence and majesty of God than contemporary forms of worship. Presbyterian and Reformed churches tend to emphasize transcendence, which explains why many P&R churches use a traditional style. However, God is not only transcendent. He is also imminent. In Jesus Christ he has condescended to us. He has come near. He has called us friends. The argument might be made against contemporary worship songs (or forms of worship) that they do not adequately express the majesty and transcendence of God. Critics of contemporary worship music argue that it doesn’t lead people to experience awe and reverence. Whether this is true or not, I cannot conclusively say. There is certainly no Scriptural warrant for that opinion nor does it conform to my personal experience in contemporary worship settings. For sure, the strength of traditional worship is how well it communicates the grandeur and majesty of God and leads people to reverence and awe. Yet, that is not an argument for an exclusively “traditional” style, because it is equally true that the strength of contemporary worship is how well it communicates the intimacy and warmth of the transcendent God of heaven who has come near in Jesus Christ and invites us in worship to draw near to him. The tone of Christian worship is both reverence and joy, formal and informal, grace and truth, but always a delicate balance, never over-emphasizing one to the exclusion of the other.

Therefore, to be exclusively traditional (i.e. to only sing hymns with a pipe organ) or to be exclusively contemporary (i.e. to only sing praise songs with a praise band) is unwise because it is reductionistic. Therefore, regardless of which side of the worship style debate we are on, we should always be striving for balance. For our church that means trying to incorporate the very best of both traditional and contemporary forms of worship because we believe we must do so in order to be faithful to the Scriptures, properly edify the believers, and also to engage an unbelieving world with the gospel.

PART 2- DEFINING THE ISSUE: CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

This leads to the main part of what I want to say on the broader issue of worship style: to discuss the differentiation between “elements” and “circumstances” in our worship and where Christian freedom applies. I whole-heartedly affirm the *regulative principle*- we must worship God in the way that he has prescribed and not according to our own preferences or imaginations (per WCF 21.1). We are to do in worship only what God has commanded and for the *reasons* God has commanded. **From him and through him and to him are all things (Rom 11:36)**, and above all, worship!

The elements of worship are defined by the Confession as: prayer, reading of the Scriptures, preaching, singing, and the due administration of the sacraments. These are the “ordinary” elements of worship (WCF, 21.3-5). The BCO confirms this and even adds offerings and confessions of faith to the list (BCO 47-9). These are the non-negotiables. Commitment to the regulative principle of worship means that the substance of our worship services should consist of these elements. We are not free to add to the list of acceptable worship practices (or subtract from it) according to cultural fad or personal preference. ... I am assuming, I hope rightly, that we are all in agreement with one another about this.

However, the Confession also says (WCF 1.6), **“there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.”** Both A.A. Hodge and G.I. Williamson, in commenting on this passage, agree that the Confession does not “descend in practical matters into detail” (Hodge), but lays down general principles and leaves a great deal of room for us to apply the “general rules” concerning worship to our particular circumstances. The language seems to indicate a concern that we not narrow or shrink the rules for worship beyond what has generally been prescribed in the Scriptures. Faithfulness requires a commitment to the Scriptures, *and* godly, wise application of the Scriptures to our particular cultural circumstance. The Westminster Divines were wise to warn us that we can fail to abide by the regulative principle in two ways: #1- by not applying it and also #2- by over-applying. The distinction the Confession makes between elements and circumstances insures that we avoid these dangers.

Here is my contention: the elements of worship (i.e. “what” we do in worship) are governed strictly by the regulative principle and well as (i.e. “why” we do what we do). (The “general rules of the Word” surely dictate that the aim of all of our worship is the glory of God- BCO 47-3; cf. Rom 11:36; 1 Cor 10:31; Col 3:17. To choose contemporary forms of worship for the sake of cultural relevance or to conform to market-driven models of success is idolatrous.) ... However, the “circumstances” of worship (i.e. “how” we do what we do) are not. They are a matter of Christian liberty. The Scripture tells us to gather on the Lord’s Day for worship. It does not tell us where to gather or at what time or for how long or whether to meet in the morning *and* the evening or only in the morning. The Scripture commands us to sing. It does not command us to sing hymns but not praise choruses, or praise choruses but not hymns. The Scripture commands us to make music. It does not limit the music we are to make to certain instruments. The “*general rule*” of the Word which always must be observed (according to the Confession) is the command to sing and make music, reverently and joyfully. But ... what kinds of songs? ... with what kinds of instruments? All of these questions must be decided, not by the express command of Scripture, but by Christian prudence, i.e. by the diligent, wise application of the Scriptures in consideration of our unique cultural situation.

It is for this reason that we are to take seriously our own Directory of Worship as the mind of the Church agreeable to the Standards, but also acknowledge that it does not have the force of law and is not to be considered obligatory in all its parts. Even more explicitly, the BCO states, **“The Lord Jesus Christ has prescribed no fixed forms for public worship but, in the interest of life and power in worship, has given His Church a large measure of liberty in this matter” (BCO 47-6).** By those statements our Church has maintained the distinction made by the Westminster Divines between elements and principles. That is, there is much about “how” we apply the rules for worship that is a matter of Christian liberty and we should strive with all our might to uphold that liberty.

Yet, a very important question remains: *How far-reaching is the category of circumstance?* (This is the question that we need to explore together.) My answer: Worship “style” falls under the category of circumstance and, therefore, is a matter of Christian freedom.

PART 3- ARGUMENT FOR FREEDOM IN WORSHIP STYLE FROM SCRIPTURE

Having to frame this discussion properly, which felt necessary, has left me a little time to support my contention. Let me briefly do so, first by reflecting on Paul’s words in 1 Cor 9 and then by quoting from a few of our theological forebears.

1 Corinthians 9: **“I have become all things to all people... I do it all for the sake of the gospel” (1 Cor 9:22-23)**. Paul is differentiating between substance and form in his ministry. Paul didn’t change the content of his message dependent upon his audience. He changed the “style” of his ministry. (This may be an oversimplification.) The “how” of Paul’s ministry- that is, the form or the style or the expression of it- changed depending on who he was ministering to. Paul’s gospel did not change. His method of communicating the gospel did. Paul clearly understood that gospel ministry requires a certain amount of application. Call it whatever you want- contextualization, incarnation, etc. *In all things indifferent*, Paul felt complete freedom to adapt to the specific cultural context he was ministering in. And one of the things he felt free to adapt was his style of ministry. He did this, not for the sake of being relevant, but for the sake of gospel success.

Applying what Paul says here to the issue of worship, the text (in keeping with what we have already noted in the Confession and the BCO), assumes, even encourages, a certain degree of multiformity in worship throughout the ages of the church’s history, and I would argue, even among the church in the same time period but located within radically different cultural contexts. (One example: Ben Turner is currently being trained as a church planting apprentice at Trinity Lakeland to plant a church *literally* 500 yards from Trinity’s front door because waling 5 blocks is like getting a stamp in your passport and visiting a foreign country. The cultural divide is that great. For the sake of gospel advance in Lakeland, a new church with the same gospel message, the same commitment to our theological standards, the same desire for spiritual and cultural transformation... but a different form, a different application, a different circumstance.)

I’d like to make one more point: as it relates to style, if there *is* a message in the medium, then Paul, by embracing such adaptability and versatility in his ministry, was reinforcing the gospel truth he was trying so desperately to convey. His style of ministry powerfully communicated his message of a God who had come near in Jesus Christ, the Word made Flesh, to rescue his people, and the entire cosmos, from the guilt and curse of sin. We have the same opportunity in the choices we make re: worship style.

PART 4- ARGUMENT FOR FREEDOM IN WORSHIP STYLE FROM HISTORY

Calvin, in his *Institutes*, makes a similar point to Paul: **“The Lord has in his sacred oracles faithfully embraced and clearly expressed both the whole sum of true righteousness, and all aspects of the worship of his majesty, and whatever was necessary for salvation; therefore, in these the Master alone is to be heard. But because he did not will in outward discipline and ceremonies to prescribe in detail what we ought to do (because he foresaw that this depended upon the state of the times, and he did not deem one form suitable for all ages), here we must take refuge in those general rules which he has given, that whatever the necessity of the**

church will require for order and decorum should be tested against these. ... Lastly, because he has taught nothing specifically, and because these things are not necessary to salvation, and for the upbuilding of the church ought to be variously accommodated to the customs of each nation and age, it will be fitting (as the advantage of the church will require) to change and abrogate traditional practices and to establish new ones. Indeed, I admit that we ought not to charge into innovation rashly, suddenly, for insufficient cause. But love will best judge what may hurt or edify, and if we let love be our guide, all will be safe.”

If I could summarize what Calvin is saying: #1- there are “general rules” which we must follow at all times- the elements of worship (i.e. what we do), reverence and awe in our worship, the goal of glorifying God, etc.; #2- there are many details/specifics (inside of these general rules) that are left to Christian freedom; #3- these details primarily have to do with the form (i.e. style) of worship; #4- no one form of worship is suitable for all ages; #5- forms of worship should be determined by cultural context and accommodated to contemporary customs; #6- therefore, the church must be continually changing, even abrogating traditional practices in worship and establishing new practices; #7- we should be motivated in our decision-making by love. ... I can hardly imagine a heartier endorsement of the freedom to be as contemporary (or traditional) as seems appropriate and wise for gospel success where God has called us to ministry as churches.

CONCLUSION- CHARITY IN DISAGREEMENTS

I have tried to make an argument, from the Scriptures and our theological standards, that worship style is a matter of Christian liberty. If we do not believe it to be so, it seems to me that we are not in accord with the prevailing majority opinion in our denomination, evidenced by the lack of any movement to amend the BCO regarding the binding nature of the Directory of Worship. Therefore, my final appeal, is that we would heed the apostle’s instruction to the church regarding matters of conscience- that is, that we would refuse to quarrel (Rom 14:1), to despise or pass judgment on one another in our disagreements (Rom 14:3-4); but instead, that we would love and bear with one another, patiently teach one another, and have only the affection for one another and joy in one another that is consistent with our familial relationship to one another in Christ Jesus.

This is my great burden for our church- that in all things, but particularly in the areas of our disagreements, we would love one another as Christ loves his Church, that we would strive for unity and peace, by the power of the Spirit, so that the world may come to know the love of God in our love for one another. ... **May the God of peace who brought back again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip us with every good that we may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20-21)**