

What Is Your Worship Style?

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People ask me, "Is your church's worship traditional or contemporary?" That's a hard question to answer in the Reformed Presbyterian Church because our worship is neither "traditional" nor "contemporary." In fact, we don't even think about worship that way.

We begin with what Jesus says about worship. Jesus says that God wants us to worship him in Spirit and truth. (John 4:24) Only by the power of his Holy Spirit can we acclaim God's greatness. Godly worship comes from hearts that are born again by the Spirit. And only according to truth can God rightly be worshiped. Sincerity cannot make lies acceptable to God. Good worship, therefore, is not what seems good to us. Worship that God accepts is worship in Spirit and truth (that's one thing, not two, in the Greek of the New Testament).

Here's the next point. We don't know how to worship God. Without his telling us how to worship him, we simply can't know what he wants. What's more, sin often makes us love the wrong things. People get worship wrong so regularly that God actually forbids the all-time most popular form of worship. Worldwide and cross-culturally, what do people love most of all in worship? Idols! Idols make the worshiper feel close to God. Idols give him a god to see, a god to work with, even a god to control. But God hates idols. Even if people love them, God hates them.

One of God's longest commandments forbids idols in His worship. The second commandment says: "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, ... you shall not bow down to them nor serve them." (Exodus 20:4-6) In the New Testament the Apostle John closes a letter to all Christians with a simple reminder: "Keep yourselves from idols." (1 John 5:21) Taking things further the Bible warns against all "will worship" or "self-imposed religion" (Colossians 2:23) You see, we may want to choose how to worship God, but God knows that we cannot be trusted to follow our feelings. Left to ourselves we will not choose worship that is in Spirit and truth.

So how does God want to be worshiped? First of all, he tells us that we must worship him through a mediator. Because of sin we are at war with God and we need someone to make peace. Only one mediator can do that, the Lord Jesus Christ, fully God and fully Man, both natures united in One Person forever. (1 Timothy 2:5) All worship in Spirit and truth must be directed to God through Christ and must honor Christ. It will not get sidetracked into adoration of anything else in heaven or on earth; it will not try to make the worshiper feel good about himself; it will not hear any voice except that of God speaking in his Word. It will honor God in his way. True worship is "orthodox," a word which originally meant "right praise." What we desire to offer to God through Christ our mediator is "right praise."

Now I will give our worship a name, Reformation Worship. At the end of the Middle Ages, the Church had for centuries been adding things to the worship of God that are not in the Bible, such as prayers to Mary, pictures of Christ and the saints, organs, and imagined transformations of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ in the Mass. Many Church members were

ignorant and superstitious. The Reformers stripped away the additions of centuries to go back to the Bible and to the practice of the ancient Church. After studying ancient church practice and the Bible's teaching about worship, the French Reformer John Calvin published a book in 1542, *The Form of Prayers, According to the Custom of the Ancient Church*. The 1564 Scottish Presbyterian *Book of Common Order* followed Calvin's example closely and included a Psalter. We follow the Reformers because we agree with them. Our worship should be like the worship of the earliest churches that we read about in the Bible and in ancient Christian writers like Justin Martyr.¹

Here is what we do. First, a call to worship reminds us of God's greatness and our need to worship him. God's greatness reminds us of our sin, so a prayer of confession in the name of Christ comes next. The Ten Commandments tell us how to live; Bible readings from Old and New Testaments tell us what to believe; preaching explains God's Word; and a prayer by one of the elders and the Lord's Prayer offered by the whole church ask for God's help. There is an offering, the singing of Psalms, and on certain weeks baptisms to bring new members into the Church and the Lord's Supper in which we remember Christ's death until he comes again.

The first thing visitors notice in our church is the music, so I will finish this account of our worship by explaining two words related to music, 'a capella,' and 'hymn.' "A capella," means "singing without instruments." Literally it means, 'according to chapel style,' because singing without instruments *was* church singing for the first 1000 years of church history. There is no hint in the New Testament that the first Christians used any instruments in their singing. Therefore, we also don't use instruments in our worship; neither did the early Presbyterians, nor the ancient Jews in their synagogues. We sing a capella, "church style."

"Hymn," from the Greek 'hymnos,' was a title used for some of the Psalms in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. When we imitate the ancient and Reformation Church by singing from the Book of Psalms, we sing 'hymns' that God inspired. These 'hymns' speak of Christ. Psalm 2 celebrates his reign over the nations, Psalm 8 praises his rule of the Creation, Psalm 23 adores him as our Shepherd, Psalm 110 calls him Priest and King, and so on. As Jesus said, the Psalms speak of him. (Luke 24:27) So should all of our worship. The aim of our worship is to exalt God by praising him in his own Words, praying to him for help, hearing his Word to believe and obey it, and believing his promise that in his forgiveness of sin God is reconciled to us and all of our enemies are defeated. The theme of our worship is this: *To him be the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever.*

1 "On the day which is called Sunday, all who live in the cities or in the countryside gather together in one place. And the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read. Then, when the reader has finished, the president, in a discourse, admonishes and invites the people to practice these examples of virtue. Then we all stand up together and offer prayers. And when we have finished the prayer, bread is presented, and wine with water; the president likewise offers up prayers and thanksgivings according to his ability, and the people assent by saying, Amen. Those who are prosperous, if they wish, contribute what each one deems appropriate."