

JOY IN WORSHIP

paper by,

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OUTLINE

- I. Worship and Experience
- II. Worship and Understanding
 - A. Catechize
 - B. Preach
 - C. Pray & Praise
- III. Worship and Reality

Worship and Experience

We live in a feelings-oriented age. With television entertainment and multi-media education, people want to feel along with their thinking. Sometimes we want to feel *instead* of thinking. Electronics have helped multiply thoughtless experience. However, modern technology is not the origin of this craving for virtual experience. The preference for experience-boosters over disciplined thought is an age-old human trait.

One of Rome's errors in the medieval Church was related to an experience-based philosophy of worship. Rome had established images and ceremonies designed to make Biblical truths more tangible — more experiential. Although some of these additions may have been developed in sincerity, they were nonetheless idolatry. Fanciful images, mystical music, and beautiful ceremonies evoked feelings whether or not participants thought about what these items were meant to represent. Experience threatened to replace belief as the essence of worship.

The 16th and 17th century Reformers brought an aggressive purge to worship practices. They removed all that was not expressly called for by Scripture. In so doing, they discovered that disciplined thought, not feelings, was man's primary experience in true worship. Intellectual participation in Psalm-singing, preaching in the language of the audience, relevant and thoughtful prayer — these were the hallmarks of Reformed worship.

Was this abandonment of Roman experience a denunciation of enjoyment? Or had the Reformers discovered a joy in worship not evoked by images and ceremony?

The first question of the Westminster Catechism (in the Longer edition) declares:

Q: *What is the chief and highest end of man?*

A: Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and ***fully to enjoy*** him for ever.¹

Reformed worship was never expected to be devoid of joy. Reformed worship is meant to be serious, devout, and disciplined. It is meant also to be thoughtful; and thoughts of Christ,

¹Westminster Larger Catechism, question 1. Emphasis added.

understanding His grace, will produce joy in worship.

Today, we find many protestant churches returning to the Roman ideas of experiential worship. Evocative music, innovative ceremonies, emotional rhetoric, and drama are featured characteristics of contemporary worship. We who seek to call our brothers back to the orthodox faith would do well to revisit the basic elements of Biblical worship. We would do well to reaffirm in our own understanding: *What is the proper place of joy in worship?*

Worship and Thought

Preaching, prayer, and praise were three central elements of Reformation worship. Catechizing was also a key feature of the Reformation. Catechism provided a means of preparing for worship. The purpose of catechism was to prepare worshippers to worship God *with understanding*.

Martin Luther expressed this motivation for writing his *Small Catechism* in the introduction to that work. “Merciful God,” he wrote with characteristic passion, “what misery I have seen, the common people knowing nothing at all of Christian doctrine! . . . [They] partake of the Holy Sacrament, [but] they know neither the Lord’s Prayer, nor the Creed, nor the Ten Commandments, but live like poor cattle and senseless swine.”²

Not just to hear, but to *understand* the Word and the sacraments, to *participate* in prayer, to praise *intelligently* — to worship with the spirit *and the mind* became the emphasis of Reformed worship.³ Each element of Reformed worship is designed to lift *intellectual* devotion to God, which, when genuinely done, will be accompanied by true joy.

The centrality of preaching was the primary distinctive of Reformed worship. Roman Catholic worship centered around the Mass. The priest’s supposed re-sacrifice of Christ on man’s behalf (a man-to-God act) was the anchor around which Roman worship was formed. The Reformation turned the congregant’s focus to hearing God’s Word. This God-to-man revelation was a 180

²James Hastings Nichols, *Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition* (Philadelphia, Penn.: The Westminster Press, 1968), pp. 15-16.

³Note also the Apostle Paul on this subject, in I Corinthians 14:15, 19, 26.

degree transformation in the concept of worship.⁴

The purpose of worship no longer centered around what was done, but what was heard — or more importantly, what was *understood*.

The ecclesiastical Latin of Roman worship held the Scriptures out of reach of understanding. The Reformers sought to bring preaching within reach of the people by opening God's Word in their own language with clear explanation. Protestant preaching (in the words of the *Westminster Directory for Public Worship*) ought to be given:

Plainly, that the meanest may understand; delivering the truth not in the enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect. . . .⁵

Making the Scriptures understood is so important to the Reformed idea of worship that the framers of the just quoted *Directory* said the very effectiveness of the cross depends upon the plain exposition of Scripture.⁶

The minister's effort to make the Scriptures plain is important but not sufficient for understanding. It is also necessary to raise the understanding of the people to the level of Scripture. It was, in part, to raise the spiritual understanding of the congregations that catechisms (discussed above) were developed. Private family worship was another distinctive of the Reformation. Even during times of persecution, "at the dead hour of night, when others were asleep, [several families] assembled in one house; the sacred volume was brought from its concealment; and, while one read, the rest listened with mute attention."⁷

⁴Raymond Abba, M.A. discusses the *man*→*God*; *God*→*man* distinction between Roman and Reformed worship on page 45 of his book, *Principles of Christian Worship* (New York and London; Oxford University Press, 1960).

⁵*The Directory for the Publick Worship of God, etc.* (Edinburgh: Alexander Kincaid, His Majesty's Printer, 1788), p. 538.

⁶The effectiveness of the cross is certainly not limited by the reach of mankind; nevertheless, "God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe." (I Corinthians 1:21)

⁷Thomas M'Crie, D.D., *The Life of John Knox* (Edinburgh: G. Caw, printer, 1813), vol. I, pp. 32-33.

The congregation's earnest desire to hear and understand the Word was an important part of Reformation worship.

Whatever else it was, the Reformation was a great preaching revival, probably the greatest in the history of the Christian church. . . . In most of the Reformed communities there were two or three sermons on the Lord's Day and several during the week, sometimes daily. The appetite for the Word preached was startling by modern standards, both in length and solidity of sermons and the number of them desired by the congregations.⁸

Understanding God's Word is a cooperative effort between the preacher and the congregation. The preacher seeks to make the text plain. The congregation listens with diligent minds. When understanding is thus achieved, the testimony of the Reformation is that worship is far from boring. Worship is such a marvellous experience that people yearn for more.

In a study on the place of joy in Old Testament worship, Eckart Otto and Tim Schramm concluded, "Joy cannot be commanded, rather it must be established. The basis of joy is meaning."⁹ So it is in worship of every age — the basis of true joy is in understanding the meaning of what God has promised and what He has done.

A review of Reformation liturgies, however, will show that a broad range of emotions were experienced in Reformation worship. Joy over God's promises was not the sole focus for which believers were called to gather. Specific orders of service varied somewhat among Reformation liturgies; nevertheless, they each characteristically began with grief over sin and concluded with joyful praise and a blessing.¹⁰

The *Westminster Directory of Public Worship* demonstrates the place of the Scriptures in this broad movement of emotion between grief and joy. Examine the *Directory* selections on the next page, and note the "hinge" upon which the emotional tenor of the service outline turns.

⁸Nichols, p. 29.

⁹Eckart Otto and Tim Schramm, *Festival and Joy* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1980), p. 7.

¹⁰An helpful comparison of Reformation liturgies compiled by William D. Maxwell, Ph.D. is presented on pages 18-23 of his book, *The Liturgical Portions of the Geneva Service Book* (Westminster, G.B.: The Faith Press Ltd., 1965).

The Directory of Public Worship

(Westminster Assembly of Divines; 1645)

1. "Of the Assembling of the Congregation . . ."

" . . . The people (having before prepared their hearts thereunto) ought all to come. . . . in a grave and seemly manner. . . ."

2. "Of Publick Reading of the Holy Scriptures"

"[By] Reading of the word . . . we acknowledge our dependance upon him, and subjection to him. . . ."

3. "Of Publick Prayer before the Sermon"

" . . . The minister who is to preach is to endeavor to get his own and his hearers hearts to be rightly affected with their sins, that they may all the more . . . hunger and thirst after the grace of God in Jesus Christ. . . ."
A five page prayer of confession is provided in the Directory.

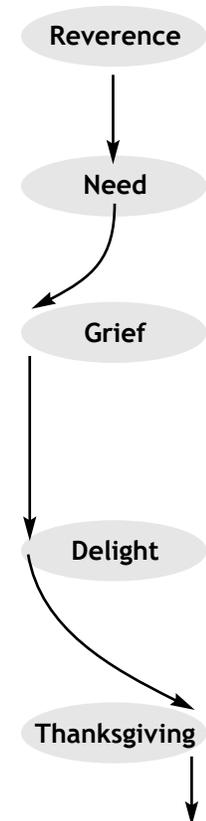
4. "Of the Preaching of the Word"

" . . . The arguments or reasons are to be solid, and, as much as may be, convincing. The illustrations . . . such as may convey the truth into the hearers heart with spiritual delight. . . ."

5. "Of Prayer after the Sermon"

"The sermon being ended, the minister is 'To give thanks for the great love of God, in sending his Son Jesus Christ unto us. . . .' The prayer ended, let a psalm be sung. . . . After which . . . dismiss the congregation with a solemn blessing."

Expected
Emotional Tenor



It can be seen from the above outline that the Westminster Divines anticipated their congregants would experience a full range of emotions during the worship of God. At first, coming into His presence is expected to evoke brokenness and grief over sin. Then, the revelation of God's mercy and truth, it is anticipated, will stir such delight as can only be met with praise and thanksgiving.

Note, however, the turning point of these tides of emotion. Points 2 and 4, the two points at which the Word of God is introduced, are the pivot points of human experience in worship.

Contrary to the "frozen chosen" stigma frequently attributed to unadorned orthodoxy, Reformed worship covers a vast range of emotional experience. However, the experience is completely

dependent upon the listener's thought and understanding. In this way, experience is not the purpose of worship. It is, nonetheless, a gauge by which to measure whether one is really understanding and affected by what God has said.¹¹

Another distinctive of Reformation worship was congregational singing.

The music of High Mass in the mediaeval Church had become so elaborated that for all its beauty and charm it was far beyond the compass of the people and could only be rendered by highly trained choirs. At Low Mass there was no music, and the responses and people's parts had in practice disappeared.¹²

The Reformers (most notably Martin Luther and John Calvin) reintroduced singing to the congregation. Along with prayer, the singing of praise to God provided a means of human response to God's glory and grace.

"Prayer and praise," writes Raymond Abba in his book, *Principles of Christian Worship*, "spring from contemplation of the saving acts of God in Jesus Christ."¹³ Abba goes on to point out Paul's example in the Book of Ephesians: Ephesians 1:1–14 expounds upon the grace of God followed immediately in verses 15–22 with an exultant prayer of praise. Abba notes the same pattern in Peter's first epistle, as well.

With the exception of Martin Luther who established hymn-writing in Lutheran tradition, the Psalms were used exclusively in the services of Reformation worship. Contrary to the modern concern that exclusive Psalmody is restrictive of human expression, John Calvin believed the Psalms gave human emotion its most free and fullest expression. In Calvin's introduction to his *Commentary on Psalms*, he wrote:

I have been accustomed to call this book, I think not inappropriately, "An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul"; for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not

¹¹In Deuteronomy 28:47, note how joy is cited by God as the indicator of Israel's genuine worship, and the absence of joy as the indicator of the vanity of their worship.

¹²Maxwell, p. 61.

¹³Abba, p. 6.

represented here as in a mirror. . . . It is by perusing these inspired compositions that men will be most effectually awakened to a sense of their maladies, and at the same time instructed in seeking remedies for their cure.”¹⁴

Once again, as Calvin here notes, it is by *thought* and *understanding* (“perusing” is the word Calvin uses) that the Psalms blossom within the heart of human emotion. The *Westminster Directory of Public Worship* emphasizes this same point of singing with understanding: “In singing of psalms, the voice is to be tunably and gravely ordered: but the chief care must be to sing with understanding, and with grace in the heart, making melody unto the Lord.”¹⁵

So thorough was this effort to focus on understanding what was sung that even instruments were commonly abandoned. With no New Testament directive for instrumentation, Reformation Protestants reserved their instruments for personal leisure.¹⁶ Reformation worship featured Psalms a cappella.

The whole focus of the Reformed order of worship was to remove emotional experience outside that stirred by the contemplation of what God says. In our own day, believers often struggle to discern between the moving of the Spirit and the moving of the music. As long ago as 399 A.D., St. Augustine wrestled with the same difficulty:

. . . When I see that I am moved not by the singing but by the things that are sung . . . I recognize once more the usefulness of this practice [singing in worship]. . . . Yet whenever it happens that I am more moved by the singing than by the thing that is sung, I admit that I have grievously sinned, and then I should wish rather not to have heard the singing.¹⁷

¹⁴John Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, (Edinburgh: The Calvin Tract Society, 1845; trans. James Anderson), pp. xxxvi-xxxvii, cited in Horton Davies, *The Worship of the American Puritans, 1629-1730* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc, 1990), p. 121.

¹⁵*Directory of Public Worship*, p. 558.

¹⁶In 1545, John Calvin wrote, “Instrumental Music is not fitter to be adopted into the public worship of the Christian Church than the incense, the candlestick, and the shadows of the Mosaic law... In popery, a ridiculous and unsuitable imitation of the Jews, they employed organs and such other ludicrous things, by which the word and worship of God are exceedingly profaned, the people being much more attached to these rites than to the understanding of the Divine Word...”

¹⁷Augustine, *The Confessions* (F. J. Sheed’s translation), X, 33, cited in Abba, pp. 119-120.

Even the prayer books instituted by early reformers were removed by later reformers when the Protestant prayer books became “no better than an idol by many ignorant and superstitious people, who, pleasing themselves in their presence at that service, and their lip-labour in bearing a part in it, have thereby hardened themselves in their ignorance and carelessness of saving knowledge and true piety.”¹⁸

Anything that might provide a false sense of comfort was removed from worship, that the only source of solace, and the only delight of worship, would be the received Word and therein the revelation of God.

Worship and Reality

In all the experiences of life, worship is man’s purest exposure to the *reality* of God. In worship, God reveals Himself through the Word read, the Word preached, and the Word demonstrated by the sacraments. In worship, man responds to God in prayer and whole-hearted praise. It is the reality of restored communion between man and his Creator which is the basis for true joy — joy that even transcends sorrow.

Consider the testimony of the Judean remnant on their return to Jerusalem as recorded in the Book of Nehemiah. Ezra read the Law to all the families. He also explained what he read, giving “the sense so that they *understood* the reading.”¹⁹ When the people understood the words of the Lord, all the people wept and mourned over their sin. Nevertheless, Ezra and the Levites “calmed all the people, saying, ‘Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved.’ And all the people went away . . . to celebrate a great festival, *because they understood the words* which had been made known to them.”²⁰ The understanding of God’s Word brought sorrow — but ultimately joy. Their

¹⁸*Directory of Public Worship*, p. 526. The Westminster Confession of Faith further affirms the need for prayer “with understanding” in chap. XXI, sect. III.

¹⁹Nehemiah 8:8. Emphasis added.

²⁰Nehemiah 8:12. Emphasis added.

sorrow was over their sin. Their joy was that they had been received into fellowship with God.

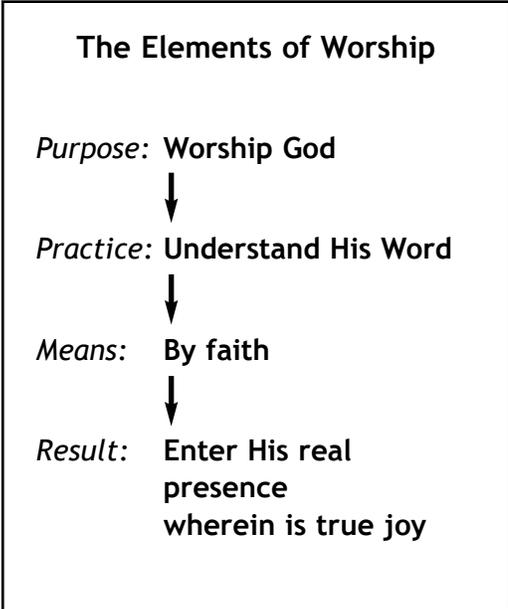
True worship brings the worshipper into the presence of God. Approaching His presence must involve repentance of sin. Being received into His presence with grace brings great solace and joy unspeakable. It is by entering into the real presence of God that true joy finds its proper place in worship.²¹

“Without faith,” however, “it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.”²² Thus the Reformed ideal of worship centers around faith nourished in the comprehension of God’s Word.²³ (See table at right.)

Paying attention and thinking in worship is a discipline. In this age of entertainment and increasingly entertainment-based education, the

culture does not train us to focus our thoughts unless something external is leading them. For modern believers, focused meditation in worship is difficult. Short-cuts to making church feel good, however, only rob worshippers of the true joy of comprehending God’s promises and entering His presence by faith.

We might do well in the 21st century to simplify our worship and to learn, once again, to think at church.



²¹Psalm 16:11.
²²Hebrews 11:6.
²³Romans 10:17.

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