

The *SBJT* Forum: The Current State of Worship

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the Forum's format. Carl F. H. Henry, Timothy George, Esther Rothenbusch, Lloyd Mims, and D. A. Carson have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the Forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: What are the theological essentials of Christian worship?

Carl F. H. Henry: Christian worship is awe and adoration of the self-revealing God as incomparably worthy. It includes an awareness of His dominion and amazing grace.

Some early twentieth century theology disowned such worship as less than authentic. Instead it promoted modernizing alternatives that emphasized our individual participation in the Ground of All Being. In the late twentieth century even such laudation is being challenged by supposedly "seeker friendly" worship wherein the deity gains less prominence, traditional evangelism is subordinated, and emphasis falls on relational considerations. Insistence on preparatory Bible-learning, on creedal Christianity, on public confession of sin and divine forgiveness on the ground of Christ's substitutionary death—with its awareness of God's amazing power and grace—is no longer in the foreground.

Biblical worship is theocentric. It is a creaturely response to the Creator who is at once transcendent and immanent. In accord with the Psalmist's exhortation it ascribes to the Lord "the glory due His

name" (Ps 96:8) by directing to Him prayer, praise, and presents (or offerings) congruous with His nature and character. One cannot long reflect on the New Testament references to Christian worship without awareness that the Holy Spirit is among its major contributing elements.

Christian worship occurs in the context both of the Risen Lord and of the community of believers permeated by the Spirit. Worship is therefore not simply an isolated private affair, but rather a public matter characteristic of gathered believers and edifying to the well being and fellowship of believers. The notion that individual believers should gather as a company each of whose participants simultaneously worships in a distinct and different way hardly seems normative. It is Christ Jesus—not our feelings—who comprises the vital center of believers gathered in prayer and praise. Yet personal spiritual faith is indispensable.

Early Christians continued patterns of worship familiar to synagogue and temple. Many psalms were used in congregational worship in the Hebrew temple. New Testament scholars have identified hymnology in the scriptures, including especially 1 Timothy 3:16,

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Philippians 2:6-11, Ephesians 5:14, and Colossians 1:15-20. The notion of some recent theologians is arbitrary, however, that poetic references are not to be taken as affirming doctrinal truth, as in regard to the virgin birth of Jesus.

R. P. Martin has noted that some discussions of worship promote an unhelpful contrast between liturgy and liberty in worship. Some so-called worship services include no place for creedal confession, most notably the so-called Apostles' Creed. Some evangelistic meetings during the Youth for Christ era substituted "a cheer for Jesus" (J-E-S-U-S) in protest against ritualistic repetition. Yet emphasis on relationship readily replaces propositional truth at the expense of full-formed doctrinal belief.

SBJT: What is the proper place of symbolism in Christian worship?

Timothy George: Worship is the participation of all God's elect ones, that is, the unfallen angels and the redeemed sinners of all times and places, in the sole priesthood of Jesus Christ the Mediator who unites them in communion with the Father through the power of the Spirit. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it, man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever. Indeed, God has made all creatures for his glory. The Psalmist commands everything that breathes, from angels to earthworms, to praise the Lord. Jesus himself declared that the very rocks would join the choir if the saints of God were too slow in opening the hymnal. Worship matters to God for "the Lord takes pleasure in his people," and all his works give thanks to him (Ps 149:4, 145:10).

Any consideration of the proper role of symbols in worship must begin here, with

a God-centered theology of worship. The primary purpose of worship is not evangelism, nor church growth, nor even the edification of believers, though these are all blessings that accompany true worship. But in thinking of how we should worship, we must never lose sight of why we worship. In worship we respond to God's amazing love and sovereign grace. In worship we lift our hearts to heaven to praise and adore the triune God of eternity because He is infinitely worthy of such acclaim and simply because he likes it.

We do not know whether or not the angels in the celestial courts use images and symbols in their praise of God. Because we human beings are finite and fallen creatures of time and space, God has graciously accommodated himself to our slight capacity by revealing himself to us in earthly signs and symbols. In the Old Testament God spoke to Moses from a burning bush and guided his people through the desert by cloud and fire. He further set forth a pattern of temple worship involving numerous symbols and elaborate rituals: the butchering of lambs, the burning of lamps, the waving of grain, etc. In the New Testament these special symbolic acts found their fulfillment in the incarnate Son of God who was, *eo ipso*, the Lamb of God, the Light of the World, and the Lord of the Harvest.

But Jesus, too, taught his disciples to pray and worship in special signs or sacraments involving earthly elements such as bread, wine, and water. On the day of Pentecost, fire descended on the waiting disciples, symbolizing their filling and empowerment by the Holy Spirit. New Testament Christians also incorporated other symbolic acts in their worship: the taking of offerings (1 Co 16:1-2); the washing of feet (Jn 13; 1 Ti 5:10); the kiss of

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peace (1 Th 5:26); the anointing of the sick with oil (Jas 5:13-15). Moreover, the singing of hymns and the public reading of the Scriptures became central acts of worship, serving a liturgical as well as a didactic role in the community of faith.

Even before Christians were allowed to build their own houses of worship, they proclaimed their faith on the walls of caves and catacombs in the earliest surviving forms of Christian art. Christ was represented by figures of a fish or a young shepherd, the church symbolized by a ship, and Christian hope and faith seen in the image of an anchor. Later the Holy Spirit came to be represented by a dove, the messianic prophecies by the tree of Jesse, and the apostles and saints by images related to their ministry or martyrdom.

The use of images in worship became a burning issue during the Iconoclastic Controversy in the Eastern Church. Those who opposed icons appealed to the prohibition against graven images in the second commandment. Those who defended their use pointed out that God's blueprint for the tabernacle called for many symbolical elements including representations of the cherubim. In 787 the Second Council of Nicea allowed the use of images in worship, distinguishing their proper Christian usage from pagan idolatry. They also appealed to the doctrine of the Incarnation for support of this decision. Because the Word was made flesh, they reasoned, images of Christ can be used in worship as a witness to the creative and redeeming work of God.

These arguments surfaced again during the Reformation as Anabaptists, Zwinglians, and certain Puritans smashed images, whitewashed churches, and ripped out organs and other musical

instruments. We can appreciate the concerns of Reformation iconoclasts. In their day the pure preaching and teaching of God's Word had indeed become obscured by the visual fantasies and elaborate rituals of medieval Catholicism. Luther took a more positive approach, approving of both art and music in worship, thus encouraging the emergence of a distinctively Protestant iconography. But Luther was surely right when, in continuity with Nicea II, he pointed to the Incarnation as the theological basis for Christian art and iconography.

The most radical critics of symbolism in worship eventually did away with baptism, the Lord's Table, and even the Bible, claiming the guidance of the inner spirit within was sufficient. Evangelicals who are tempted to move in this direction today should learn a lesson from the early Gnostics. Having denied the reality of Christ's humanity, they reduced the Lord's Supper to light bread and water and sought escape from the real world of flesh, sweat, blood, and tears into their own private spiritualities. Christian worship is always in danger of lapsing into gnosticism on the one hand or paganism on the other. The former results in ingratitude for the gift of the Word made flesh, the latter in a stultifying idolatry that conveys no grace. May God save us from both.

SBJT: Why is hymnological study important to worship?

Esther Rothenbusch: It is essential, not just important, for at least four reasons.

First, the great, enduring hymns of the past are the living word and witness of the earlier church to us, and through us to our own age. In order to raise our voices and hearts in fullest praise we must know

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who we are—the church of Jesus Christ grounded on Scripture, not bound by time. As a turn-of-the-millennium culture we are obsessed with the curse of the *seculum*. When Jesus said, “Upon this rock I will build my church,” he was speaking across centuries, not only to His first disciples. When we sing a classic hymn of past eras, we infuse breath into the witness, prayers, and praise of saints who are already experiencing the fulfillment of that for which they hoped—“to be absent in the body is to be present with the Lord.” They now see the Beloved they hymned in their songs. Our own hope is strengthened as we sing their hymns and remember that they are a cloud of victorious witnesses around us. Hymns are the only living witness of the earlier saints retained in evangelical worship. Sermons from the patristic era are no longer preached, but hymns from that time are still sung. Thus, an understanding of hymns, their origins, and context is essential to a full-orbed ecclesiology.

Second, hymns not only express our theological views, but hymn singing and hymnological study contribute greatly to our theological understanding and reflection. Isaac Watts argued that the Psalter was insufficient as the people’s song for two reasons: it did not contain the gospel, and it was God’s word, not the people’s word. He “Christianized” the Psalms in his Psalm paraphrases, but also wrote (and was most responsible for the widespread acceptance of) “hymns of human composure” in English. Hymns are a part of our inheritance as the New Testament church, the “new song” of which Psalm 96 prophesied and which Paul deemed equally important to the church’s song as the Psalter. As Martin Luther explained, the new song is the song of Christ.

The body of past and worldwide hymns enables us to “sing up to our theology,” to borrow Donald P. Hustad’s phrase, in ways that a strict diet of contemporary choruses does not, due to the doctrinal lacunae and imbalanced emphases in the latter repertory. It is only by systematic and rigorous study of our current congregational repertory in light of scriptural principles that we will be able to purge its impurities and fill out its deficiencies with both newly composed hymns and resurrected older gems. To extrapolate from Hustad’s argument, it is dangerously likely that whatever elements of our theology we do not sing, we will ultimately lose.

Third, the study of hymns is essential because of the potency and memorability inherent in both poetry and music. Musical memory is more deeply ingrained in the mind than cognitive memory. It is proper and crucial that the spiritual leadership of the church avail itself of scholarship in hymnology, theology, musicology, and culture studies in making decisions concerning congregational song. Surely the praise song repertory has come to hold a valued place within the worship life of the church. It must be noted conversely that without an historical and theological perspective it is possible to plan weekly worship using the praise song *du jour*, but impossible to formulate a philosophy of congregational song that can undergird the long-range maturing of the church. In order for some hymns to have a powerful, uplifting effect, they must be introduced and their content or imagery explained. Every congregation and the church universal needs songs to grow up with and to grow into. Like the wise steward whom Jesus commended for bringing out of his storehouse

treasures both old and new, ministers of worship are obligated and privileged to do research—i.e., to explore hymnic jewels across eras, applying the same biblical evaluative standards to all—and to nurture the church with songs of substance from every age.

Fourth, hymnology embraces every age and every culture. The Asian, Latin, and African churches are growing exponentially faster than ours in Europe and North America, and invite us, the minority cultures, to drink from the streams of fresh hymnody flowing out of their continents. God is stirring the waters. If we decline for reasons of comfort or inertia we will be much poorer, both musically and theologically. We need to complete one another within the body of Christ.

Ethnomusicology, the study of music in living cultures, sheds light on the origins of texts and tunes from other countries as well as from the rich panoply of subcultures in North America. It also elucidates the cultural and sociological meanings of musical styles and practices to participants in the culture. No culture is fully aligned with the gospel; the values and practices of each must be examined afresh within the community of faith. In order for American believers to become world Christians, we need ethno-musicological perspectives by which to identify first our own cultural blindspots and also those of others. Uninformed appropriation of hymns from other cultures can be done in ways that are insensitive and patronizing to the creators of that music, and can send culturally awkward or hurtful messages to them or to our own congregations. However, the sometimes-difficult decisions surrounding cross-cultural musical exchange should not deter us from the joy of worldwide fellowship in

our congregational song. By singing songs from other nations we bear witness that the church is God's people worldwide, and we show solidarity with believers in every place. We can use songs of prayer in drawing us closer to the suffering church. We are enabled to pray for them not only with our minds, but also with our hearts, once we have sung their song. The singing of new songs from many nations can be a foretaste of the future heavenly praise, in which "the kingdoms of this world [have] become the kingdoms of our Christ."

If we are to truly sing with both the Spirit and with the understanding, it is crucial that we study the song of the church with as much rigor and excellence as we do her systematic theology, and that scholars and church leaders pursuing both these disciplines be increasingly in dialogue with one another.

SBJT: Currently, what are the major issues in worship that Southern Baptists face? Should evangelism be the primary purpose of worship services?

Lloyd Mims: First, there seems to be a lack of awareness of what worship is. In the 1950's, if you attended a Baptist church, you could visit almost any other Baptist church and feel very comfortable in their worship service. The format and style would have been very similar to that of your own church. There was a pattern that defined what people did when they came together on Sunday morning and Sunday night in their places of worship. Today, though, you can go to a Baptist church two blocks away from the one you usually attend and you'll feel like you don't know where you are. It will be totally different from the worship pattern that you experience in your home congregation.

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Because of these differences, I think the biggest challenge concerning worship facing Southern Baptists today rests in gaining an understanding of the definition of worship. People need to grasp that worship is not just something that they have done by rote for years, but that it has meaning. By and large, a lot of people are unaware of what biblical worship is. Church members need to understand the elements of worship and how to incorporate those elements into church services.

Second, as we find ourselves trying to define what worship is, ministers and theologians must help us in this struggle. This struggle to define worship has surely confused many people who thought that what they'd been doing all those Sundays was worship. Over the years, I think our ministers could have focused more on teaching about worship. For instance, I do not ever remember my boyhood pastor preaching about worship. I do not remember doing a doctrinal study in Church Training or Training Union about worship and the elements of worship. I think that this lack of instruction is showing itself today in our churches' struggle to understand and perform worship.

Our people must receive, embrace, and employ more biblical, profitable teaching concerning worship. We must examine the elements and characteristics of worship found throughout the Old and New Testaments in order to form a coherent theology of worship. Scripture does not offer an order of service that dictates a particular style of worship, but it does emphasize what is to take place during worship.

Recently, there has been good scholarship in this area from theologians who are striving to understand what constitutes biblical worship. I think theologians are beginning to define and synthesize an

understanding of worship. Their work can aid in developing a biblically-centered worship in our churches.

Third, a major worship issue in churches today concerns musical style. Paul writes of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs being used in worship in his letters to the churches of Ephesus and Phillipi. If this was an important part of worship for early Christians, it needs to have some meaning for us. The psalms Paul spoke of were from the Psalter. The hymns he mentioned must have been expressions of praise that were known and sung. To the best of our knowledge, the spiritual songs were spontaneous, uplifting, theological "praise choruses." If we adopt that New Testament pattern, then our worship must be comprised of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

In our singing we must sing with spirit and with understanding, just as we pray. The music in our services must appeal to both the heart and the mind. While there must be music that helps us feel towards God, there must also be music that helps us think about God. So often our congregations only want to feel. Yet we have some congregations at the other end of the spectrum who are so caught up in the thought process, in the language and the words of the text, that they have no feeling. They sing with absolute dull dryness. It is no wonder that we find ourselves in an era where people are tugging at one another, clamoring for more emotion or more intellect in music. We must incorporate both the emotional and the intellectual in our worship. We can only do that once people understand the need for a balanced concept. People talk about blended worship as if it is the panacea for that problem. However, you can still blend the wrong things together, which will not

give you the right pattern for worship. The elements we blend must be based on our biblical and theological understanding of worship. The pieces that are brought into our corporate worship must help us express the gamut of worship that scripture requires of us.

These three struggles outline the challenges we face in coming to a consensus as to what worship is in its essence. In our struggle to practice worship, there are also some key issues.

Now for the second question. All that we do is to be an act of worship. When we come together to enjoy this privilege of worship, however, we need to follow a biblical pattern that defines worship among a group of believers. For me, corporate worship is the coming together of God's people for the acts of praising God and responding to God's prompting.

I think there is one key aspect of that definition that seems to be overlooked today. Worship is done by God's people. I do not think non-Christians can worship God. We worship that which we understand and adore. I do believe that our worship should be done as a witness to the saving grace of Christ, but it should be done in such a way that observing worship of God convicts sinners of their lack of understanding concerning God.

I certainly would not say that non-Christians should be barred from attending our worship services, but I would strongly reiterate that, first and foremost, worship is for God's people. When we come together corporately, it is our time around the table. It is our time for fellowship with God together as a unit. When we design our worship service solely for non-Christians, then I think we forsake the true act of worshiping God.

I think the emphasis of many church

services has been turned to non-Christians because of a long-established pattern. Many evangelicals designed worship services that were similar to Brush Arbor meetings, the evangelistic campground services. Those meetings were not worship services; they were evangelistic services. The people who were saved at that meeting constituted a church in that town once the evangelist moved on. They kept doing what they had seen modeled by the evangelist, rather than thinking that there may be a difference between an evangelistic service and a worship service. That pattern has continued and most modern services are evangelistic in nature rather than worshipful.

While non-Christians have a need to hear the gospel, Christians also have needs that can be met during worship. It is during those times of corporate worship that I want to get my cup filled up, so that when I leave I am so full of God and God's love and Christ's presence in my life that I'm going to be a beacon, and I'm going to shine. But if I don't ever spend time getting my cup full, then it's very easy for me to burn out.

I think the time we come together corporately in worship is for Christians to praise God, to proclaim Him, to hear His Word preached, and to respond to Him. There must be a time of praise and a time of prayer. Within the prayer, there are times of confession and of intercession. There must be the proclamation of God's Word because it is the Word that speaks to us. There must also be a time of response. The invitation at the end of the service is not for lost people. It is for Christians to reinforce or renew their commitment or to allow time to quietly ponder the Word that has just been given.

It is in this sort of service that both

believers and unbelievers will encounter the living God.

SBJT: What concerns and/or heartens you when you consider the current issues in worship?

D. A. Carson: I'll begin with what concerns me.

When I was a boy, many people seemed to think that the choir was the war department of the church: all those egos dictating what could and could not be done. In many churches today, the war department has extended to the entire church. I have not attempted an accurate poll, but I suspect that among evangelical churches of the Western world, more animus is fired up annually over what worship should and should not be than over any other subject. All this emotional energy is quite commonly directed against other Christians within the same assembly. In some cases the polarities are inflexible. No hymn is worth much unless it was written a century or more ago, and preferably longer, so as to display as much Elizabethan English as possible. The opposite side insists that praise choruses are the way to go—ideally nothing more than ten years old, and repeated times without number in direct proportion to the inanity of the lyrics. To the latter, the former are the upright and the uptight; to the former, the latter are the cool and the fool. Substantial numbers of evangelicals of very “free” traditions are migrating to liturgical churches; meanwhile, the liturgical churches are becoming, in many services, more “free” than anything the non-liturgical churches could have dreamt up.

All of this suggests we are misdefining some issues. “Worship” used to be what was done in the 11:00 a.m. service. Now it is what is done under the direction of the

“worship leader” before the sermon, which, presumably, is therefore not part of worship. Relatively little thought has been devoted to developing a biblical theology of worship—something that carefully analyzes what worship is in the Bible, under both the old covenant and the new. Although there are some commendable exceptions, too many discussions are of the proof text variety, by which one may prove almost anything because the string of texts is not constrained by a mature biblical theology, a thoughtful grasp of what the Bible actually says along its plot-line. The real criterion in such discussions is often whether or not the worship in question pleases me and comports with my cultural and personal biases. In the Scriptures, corrupt worship includes everything that replaces or relativizes God (e.g. Eze 8-9); there is much less concern for whether one chooses a pipe organ or a guitar. Under the terms of the new covenant, genuine worship includes living our lives in God-centered devotion to our Maker and Redeemer (Ro 1:1-2). Thus *corporate* worship is not supposed to encourage the people of God to do something they have not been doing all week (i.e., worshiping). Rather, corporate worship in the New Testament finds the people of God doing together what they are supposed to be doing individually and in their homes all week—living out lives of God-centered praise.

Too few contemporary services are well-integrated. This may be because in too few cases there has not been one mind behind the entire thing. In other cases, little thought has been devoted to this aspect of corporate worship. Too many services are made up of disparate bits—disparate songs, disparate prayers, disparate comments, and a sermon only acciden-

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tally related to the other bits.

According to the New Testament, there is a place in some services for a degree of spontaneity, for testimony, a suggested hymn, and the like. But there are ways of arranging for such things in decency and order. Many contemporary services, both liturgical and free, admit too much ad-libbing, too many throwaway comments that add little of worth, detract from what is going on, or merely draw attention to the leader. I have seen liturgical churches where right in the middle of holy communion the minister offers some entirely irrelevant aside that inevitably channels the minds of many worshippers into fruitless byways. Many non-liturgical churches are so “free” they are merely embarrassingly chatty. Doubtless some enjoy the folksy touch. But where does the informality focus mightily on Almighty God and the truth and glory and repentance and forgiveness and hope that are being placarded that day?

Now, for the things that hearten me.

Some of the stresses in contemporary worship doubtless spring from the fact that Western culture is undergoing several rapid transitions, and we are trying to handle them. Insofar as the turmoil over corporate worship encourages the people of God to think through such matters faithfully, humbly, creatively, wisely, and in subjection to Scripture, and thus eschew mere traditionalism, this can only be a good thing.

Gradually there is arising a new, contemporary, and theologically alert hymnody. I am not talking about brief choruses. Some of them are acceptable; many are not. I am talking about substantial hymns that have a contemporary feel. A few of them are rubbish; many are mediocre; and not a few are frankly

excellent, and will endure. Britain and (perhaps also) Australia are ahead of America on this front. There are at least two reasons for this. First, those countries are farther down the track of secularization and non-attendance at church, so Christians have, by and large, given more thought to the question of communicating the gospel outside the language of Zion. Second, perhaps more importantly, many, perhaps most, American evangelical churches apparently believe that it would be unsound to have a service without an item of “special music.” That tradition does not exist in Britain or most of Australia. The result is that we devote a great deal of energy to creating and publishing and circulating “special music,” since that is where the market is; they devote energy to creating and publishing music for corporate worship. But gradually some of their work is coming over here. May it please God to see the trend continue, and by this to inspire more of our own writers to preparing material to be sung by all the people of God—a very different literary genre to that which is prepared for soloists and small groups.

We have progressed far enough in the worship wars that here and there individuals or groups of Christian leaders and thinkers are beginning to ask the big questions, the theological questions, that ought to drive the discussion. We have still not gone very far down this track. But it is beginning to happen, and I am grateful.

Perhaps the most encouraging things, at the level of personal experience, are the times when I have visited a local church where corporate worship has been really excellent. I hasten to add that such churches belong to different traditions. By “excellent” I do not mean to impose an artificial cultural grid. But in the best of

these churches (I wish I could name them, but doubtless that would be unwise), I have been united in mind and heart with fellow believers, and found myself drawn to the living God in adoration, confession, intercession, attentive listening, and stimulus to God-centered, joyful, serious, obedient living. In short, I have tasted in preliminary ways the joys of heaven. And I am grateful.