

On Worship

“Have you ever seen it done well?” This was the reply that came to some of my concerns about contemporary worship. The questioner had a good point. There is a tremendous difference between worship that is led poorly and worship that is led well. Perhaps at least some of my concerns had more to do with sloppiness than with substance.

It was only much later that I realized that the same question could be applied to so-called traditional worship: “Have you ever seen it done well?” Maybe not! Maybe what is presented today as traditional worship is only a pale shadow of what it can and should be. And perhaps the often voiced concern that traditional worship is dull and boring is a reaction not so much to the historic worship of the church as to poor leadership of worship today.

One of the greatest enemies of what intends to be traditional worship today is the almost studied attempt to lead it carelessly. While some might appreciate the personableness supposedly communicated by a conversational style, does not the apparently haphazard character of at least some worship leadership also communicate or suggest a certain thoughtlessness, offhandedness, or lack of preparation? How can that be good, helpful, or appropriate?

More to the point: *If in worship we presume to come into the presence of the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of the universe, how have we imagined that any part of that encounter could be casual? Can we not show at least a minimum of respect, if not outright fear of the Lord? But as long as the ministers (“worship teams”?) are intentionally casual if not completely careless, do we not primarily communicate to the congregations that worship is not important enough to do well and, by extension, that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is not important enough to deserve our best? Therein lies the danger.*

Formality need not entail solemnity. The gospel leads to praise, joy, gratitude, and thanksgiving. Even traditional worship, at its best, is an occasion not only for the reading, preaching, and hearing of the Word of God but also for the full expression of our appropriate response to the gospel. But that appropriate response does not include any suggestion that it is appropriate to be casual in the presence of our Lord!

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9 (ESV))

Yes, God has drawn near to us in Jesus Christ. But even that nearness does not justify the presumption of familiarity suggested by casualness in worship.

Surely the gospel can and should be proclaimed in every language of the world. And surely God can and should be worshiped in a wide variety of cultures and styles (even while the gospel provides a critique of all cultures). Can we not also say that the worship of God is important enough for us to do it well?

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