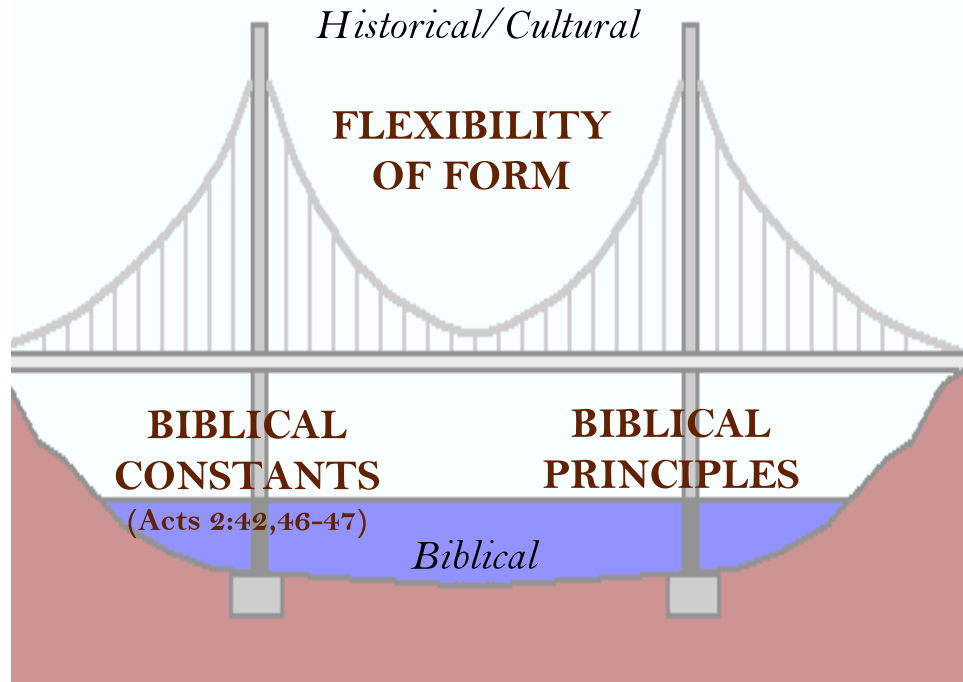


The Bridge

Worship and Culture

Ron Man



Every grounded and mature believer would maintain that the Scriptures must guide us as our final and supreme authority in understanding and shaping our worship. After all, worship is *about God*, and the Scriptures are where He has revealed to us His nature and ways; worship is likewise *for God*, and the Scriptures are where He tells us what He expects of us creatures. The Bible is to be our guide in every area of life; so certainly it should be in this crucial area of worship. People change; times change; cultures change; only in the pages of Scripture can we hope to find an unchanging standard for our worship. And with all the debates about worship forms, styles and practices which continue to rage today, the church of Jesus Christ desperately needs a *unifying* understanding of the unchanging, non-negotiable foundations of worship—and we must turn to the Scriptures for this purpose.

Yet even with this commitment to the Scriptures as our guide for worship, we immediately run into a problem when we go to the New Testament for models and guidelines for congregational worship. That problem has been summarized by John Pieper as the “stunning indifference” of the New Testament writers to issues of form and practice of corporate worship.¹ We search the pages of the New Testament in vain for much in the way of specifics, much less structures or liturgies. Even in the

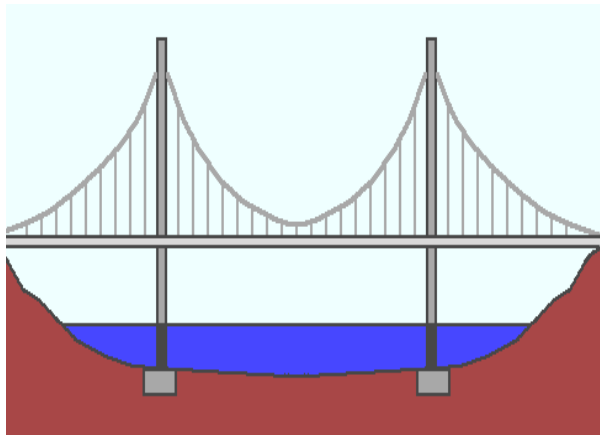
¹ John Piper, *Gravity and Gladness on Sunday Morning: The Pursuit of God in Corporate Worship* (Minneapolis: Desiring God Ministries, 2000), p. 13.

epistles, where we might reasonably expect Paul and the other writers to address these issues as they write to guide and encourage brand new churches, we find frustratingly little.²

This presents us with a crucial question: Just what is it in the Bible that is supposed to govern and determine our worship? It is a reasonable assumption that the virtual silence of the New Testament writers on the matters of form and style for worship means that the Lord intends for us to have considerable latitude and flexibility in these areas. Yet our worship services still need to look like *something* -- so how are we to make choices? Is just a case of “anything goes”?

An Illustration

I would like to suggest a model which at the same time gives biblical guidance yet allows for Biblical freedom. By way of illustration this model may be based on certain characteristics of a *suspension bridge* (familiar examples of suspension bridges are the Brooklyn Bridge in New York City and the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco).



In a suspension bridge, the weight is supported by both the towers and the suspension cable. The towers are sunk deep in the earth and are meant to be as stable and immovable as possible. The suspension cable or span, on the other hand, while sharing a significant portion of the load-bearing, nevertheless has by design a great deal of flexibility to expand and contract, thus allowing the bridge to withstand variances in temperature, wind, weight load, etc. It should also be pointed out that, while both the stationary columns and the flexible span are both important parts of the bridge’s construction, yet ultimately the cable transfers much of the weight of the road bed and its traffic to the towers, so that the towers are crucial to the bridge’s integrity and durability.

What can we then learn about our worship from this illustration? Our worship needs to be supported by firmly rooted biblical foundations, which are illustrated by the two towers. The flexible cable span suggests the liberty which the New Testament seems to allow for individual congregations to constitute their corporate worship. Like any art form, Christian worship allows for much creative expression, but within defined parameters. The Bible gives those parameters as well as that freedom.

² Piper suggests that the reason may be that the message of the gospel is to go out into every nation and culture (we are to “go and tell”), and therefore worship must be flexible to allow for cultural differences—whereas in the Old Testament the worship of the one true God was rooted in one culture and place (Jerusalem), and the message to the world was one of “come and see.”

The First Tower: *Biblical Constants*

The first tower suggests an immovable aspect of Christian worship which we could term “Biblical Constants.” These are non-negotiables, elements which simply *must* be present for our worship to be considered Christian.

What are these elements? One clue may be found in Acts 2. Luke has just recounted the events of the day of Pentecost: the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus’ followers, Peter’s sermon, and the conversion and baptism of “three thousand souls” (2:41). And in the very next verse, Luke tells us what these believers did when they gathered together:

And they devoted themselves to the **apostles’ teaching and fellowship**, to **the breaking of bread** and the **prayers**. . . . **praising God** and having favor with all the people. (2:42,47)

The words in bold suggest a list of crucial activities for the people of God when they congregate together:

1. the word of God
2. fellowship
3. the Lord’s Supper
4. prayer
5. praise

A number of commentators have assessed these verses as indeed something more than simply a *description* of what the earliest church did, but perhaps rather a *prescription* of normative practice for the Church of all ages.³ Indeed, this writer has often given an assignment to students to list what activities are consistently found in *every* Christian worship service, in every denomination, around the world and down through history -- and the results they come up with usually correspond almost exactly with the list found in Acts 2:42, 47! These indeed seem to be non-negotiable elements which define and characterize truly Christian worship, and which must therefore be represented in some form in every church’s corporate gatherings.⁴ These *Biblical Constants* serve as one foundational pillar for our worship.

The Span: *Flexibility and Freedom*

The span, with its built-in elasticity and flexibility, represents the freedom which the New Testament seems to allow for wise and prudent application of culturally meaningful expressions (always within the biblical restraints, of course). The “heart language of the people” is considered when making decisions about forms, styles, music and other artistic expressions of faith.

³ For example, Lenski writes: “Here we have a brief description of the religious life of the first Christian congregation. All the essentials are present and are in proper order and harmony. The church has always felt that this is a model” (*Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 117).

⁴ Allowing, of course, for periodic rather than weekly celebrations of the Lord’s Supper—though the practice of the early church was certainly weekly if not more often!

We certainly can see the application of this principle (consciously or not) in the vast array of worship expressions seen down through the history of the Christian Church, and in churches around the world today. There have been, and are, an enormous variety in terms of architecture, atmosphere, from, structure, style, dress, music, liturgy, etc. And God, who has created the world and humanity with such incredible diversity, must certainly rejoice in such variety from His people.⁵ One would never use Bach organ fugues for worship in an African tribal village; the form would have no meaning for this people. And conversely, some of the most natural cultural expressions of various African villages would be incomprehensible to most northern Europeans. (In many contexts in Africa, drums are *the* primary instrument for worship—not a debated add-on!) Recent developments in missions have given more weight to the importance of helping people groups to develop their own indigenous forms of worship music, rather than simply borrowing and translating songs from the West (as was the practice for too long in many church planting contexts).

The virtual silence of the New Testament as to the specifics of congregation worship practice seems to allow for local churches, as the fundamental unit of the body of Christ on earth, to have considerable autonomy and freedom as individual congregations in working out the issues involving the balance of biblical constants and biblical flexibility in the worship of that church. That does not mean that it is an easy task, however -- as recent history has amply demonstrated. The so-called “worship wars” are symptomatic of the kind of danger into which freedom of this sort can cast us; and we might indeed be left wishing that Paul had just prescribed a set liturgy for all time and left it at that! God obviously wants His people to apply biblical wisdom and discernment in this, as well as in many other areas where he has chosen not to spell everything out for us.

It will take several things for a local church to successfully navigate these treacherous worship waters, among them:

1. *Leadership*. The pastor and the elders/deacons/board must study worship in the Bible, and study their people as well, and seek prayerful conclusions.

2. *Communication*. The careful solicitation of points of view from members of the congregation, while not the last word on worship decisions which must be made by the leadership, is an important step in leading the people as shepherds.

3. *Teaching*. The pastor and other leaders must promote a biblical understanding of worship in the public teaching ministry of the Church. And if any kind of change in worship is to be undertaken in the Church, it is absolutely essential that the people are told the *why*, not just the *what*, of the change.

4. *Principle-based decisions*. This relates to the second tower of our illustration (see below): just because the Bible does not give a lot of specifics about worship services does not mean that we have no biblical guidance at all. Clear biblical principles can be discerned, and this gives hope for agreement on a foundational biblical level within, and even among, churches. But principles by definition must be applied, and that is where the leaders must devote prayer for wisdom and balance in making application of the principles to their particular local church situation. Also, by definition principles may be applied *differently* by different people and in different situations; so we must learn to

⁵ Reggie Kidd in his upcoming book *With One Voice* (Baker, 2005), explores the various legitimate expressions of worship found today in this country using art music, folk music and popular music.

give grace to others in the church who would prefer a different application, and to other churches which apply principles differently to their situation.

5. “*Semper reformanda*”. This Latin phrase means “always reforming” and comes to us out of the Reformation; it expresses the importance of regularly and repeatedly subjecting our worship and other practices to the scrutiny of the Scriptures. Culture and traditions change; the Scriptures do not. A church’s traditions should not be ignored when considering worship issues in that church; but neither should they be allowed to assume the level of authority which is appropriate only to the Scriptures. As someone has said, “Tradition is a wonderful servant, but a terrible master.”

The Second Tower: *Biblical Principles*

Just because the New Testament does not give us a lot of specifics about how to do worship in the local congregation, this most certainly does not mean that we have no biblical guidance concerning worship. It is *not* “anything goes”! As with so many areas in our lives not specifically addressed by the Scriptures (be it movies, smoking, etc.), there most certainly are biblical truths which are applicable and which we must with wisdom and honesty apply to our situation.

The same is true with worship. There are a host of principles which can be drawn from the pages of Scripture to guide us, and guide the leadership of local churches, in fashioning biblically appropriate yet culturally meaningful expressions of worship. These principles serve as the second tower in our illustration, giving further stability and strength to the worship structure as whole.

Biblical principles are different than biblical constants because, as has already been mentioned above, principles must be *applied*. And they may be applied differently in different situations.

What follows is list of biblical principles which pertain to the practice of worship in the local church. The principles and their supporting material were worked out in the course of a process of constructing a guiding philosophy of worship for a particular local church. In each case, the principle is stated, followed by a supporting Scripture verse (or verses). Then there is an explanatory paragraph, followed by a paragraph which lays out some of the implications of the principle as applied in that particular local church situation.

1. God’s glory, and our joyful celebration of it in worship, should be the focus and goal of all life and ministry.

*Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.
(1Cor. 10:31)*

Worship is an end in itself. By definition other types of ministry necessarily have horizontal, man-focused aspects; but worship is purely vertically focused. It is the primary purpose for which God created us and therefore our highest endeavor and greatest fulfillment.
(Isaiah 43:6-7; Psalm 16:11; Matthew 22:35-38; 1 Peter 4:11)

THEREFORE: We shall give worship careful focus and attention in the life of this church. We will relate all of our activities to it and to the goal of magnifying the glory of God. We will make explicit God’s glory as our most important pursuit, aim and preoccupation.

2. Worship is first and foremost for God.

Worship God.

(Revelation 19:10; 22:9)

God is the subject and object of worship; it is about Him and for Him. As God, He is absolutely unique and therefore the only One worthy of our praise; as Creator, He and He alone is deserving of the worship of His creatures and of His creation.

(Romans 11:36; Psalm 148:1-13)

THEREFORE: We will focus on glorifying the Lord in our worship, and in offering up a suitable and appropriate sacrifice of praise to His name. Our supreme motivation in our worship will be His pleasure rather than our own fulfillment or enjoyment. We will come to give more than to receive, yet realizing that we only have something to give because of God's prior gracious giving to us.

3. Worship is a dialogue between God and His people, a rhythm of revelation and response.

Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised.

(Psalm 96:4)

In worship God speaks to us through His Word; and we respond with our hearts, voices and bodies. The impartation of *theology* is not complete until it is answered with appropriate *doxology*. This pattern is seen throughout Scripture: God always acts first to reveal Himself and to reach out to man; all worship is a response to God's prior revealing and saving initiative. (Psalm 48:10; 150:2; 2 Cor. 1:20) The historic worship structure of Word and Table follows this pattern.

THEREFORE: We will allow for a healthy balance of the Word proclaimed (through preaching, Scriptures readings and Scripture-based songs) and the people's response (in song, prayer, confession, testimony and the Lord's Supper). We will allow adequate time for response after the sermon. We will also celebrate the Lord's Supper regularly, and will give it its proper due as a primary response to God's grace by allowing sufficient time for it.

4. The Word must be central in our worship.

Praise Him according to His excellent greatness.

(Psalm 150:2)

Worship is our creaturely response to God's self-revelation. We are responsible to praise Him as He really is, not as we would suppose or hope Him to be. God has revealed Himself and His glory through the inspired Scriptures.

(Psalm 56:4; 138:2)

THEREFORE: We will read the Word, pray the Word, preach the Word, sing the Word in our corporate and private worship. We will allow the Word to invite us to worship, to provide the context and motivation for our worship, to inform and enrich and fuel our worship. We will avoid just singing men's thoughts about God in the absence of what He has told us about Himself in Scripture.

5. Worship is the responsibility of all of God's people.

So we Your people and the sheep of Your pasture will give thanks to You forever.
(Psalm 79:13)

Worship is a verb; it is something we do, not something we watch. An important expression of the priesthood of all believers is that every individual has a vital role to play in the corporate worship of the church.

(Psalm 107:32; Romans 15:5-6)

THEREFORE: We will further whole-hearted participation in worship in every way possible: by encouraging week-long worship and spiritual preparation for corporate worship, by enhancing the physical environment for worship, by carefully selecting the music for worship (using substantial, singable, mostly familiar songs), by giving opportunity for corporate prayer and Scripture reading, etc.

6. Our worship is acceptable in and through Christ our High Priest.

In the midst of the assembly I will sing Your praise.
(Hebrews 2:12)

Jesus Christ is the Leader of our worship. We come in Him and by His worthiness into God's presence, and He gathers up our modest worship into His own perfect offering. (Hebrews 8:1-2; 10:19-22)

THEREFORE: We will strive for excellence in our worship, but not see technical expertise or artistic merit as ends in themselves, or as a means to gain God's favor or acceptance. We will encourage a mindset of service rather than performance among our worship leaders, realizing that ultimately our worship is pleasing to God only because we come through Christ.

7. Our response of worship is enabled, motivated and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

We are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.
(Philippians 3:3)

As God, the Holy Spirit deserves our adoration and praise as much as the Father and the Son. Yet He chooses to glory not Himself but rather to point us to Christ (John 16:14) and thus lead us to the Father in worship. Jesus Christ is the Way into the Father's presence; the Holy Spirit is our Guide. We *can* come to the Father in worship because of the work of Christ; we *want* to come into the Father's presence in worship because of the work of the Holy Spirit, assuring us of our standing by grace (Romans 8:14-17) and filling us for the work of praise (Ephes. 5:18-19).

THEREFORE: We will not focus unduly on the Holy Spirit in our worship, but seek to exalt Christ (1 Cor. 12:3) as the Spirit Himself desires to do. We will humbly seek the Spirit's help in our weakness to enable us to desire, pray to and worship God. (Rom. 8:28) We will rest in His divine enablement to the glory of God. (Romans 8)

8. Worship is the response of our entire lives to God.

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.

(Romans 12:1)

Worship is not just a weekly event, but rather a way of living in dependence upon and gratitude towards our gracious Lord. While corporate worship is an important expression of that walk of worship, it must be fueled by lives of personal and private devotion and faithfulness. (John 4:21-24; 1 Cor. 10:31) Worship is also the expression of the totality of our being—mind, emotions, will, actions: “all that we are responding to all that God is.” (Psalm 135:5; 100:3-4; 22:22; 98:4; Hebrews 13:15-16)

THEREFORE: We will teach the importance of and promote a lifestyle of worship. We will magnify the glory of God as the focus and goal of all of life. We will treat corporate worship not as an interruption of everyday life, but rather as a gathered celebration of the God Who makes life worth living.

9. God is much more concerned with our heart than with the form of our worship.

I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice.

(Hosea 6:6)

The New Testament (in contrast to the Old Testament) is remarkably non-prescriptive when it comes to the shape and form of corporate worship services; we can only assume that God intended to allow considerable freedom in these areas. Both Testaments, on the other hand, are very clear about how seriously God takes the heart attitude and motivation of one's worship.

(2 Chronicles 30:18-20; Mark 12:33)

THEREFORE: We will stress the inward reality of worship and remain flexible in our approach to form.

10. Worship should promote the unity and edification of the body.

Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

(Romans 15:5-6)

The Body of Christ is not an affinity group, but rather a disparate band of saved sinners whom only the Spirit can unify. We must fight the rampant individualism of our age and of our natures, and actively encourage the building up of the body.

(Ephesians 4:1-6,15-16; 5:19-21; Colossians 3:12-17; Hebrews 10:23-25)

THEREFORE: We will exult in our diversity and seek to learn from one another various expressions of worship (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). We will avoid novelty for its own sake, however, and will always strive to keep the health of the whole body in mind when it comes to innovation or change in worship. We will not seek to promote our personal agendas or preferences in worship, but rather prayerfully and deliberately seek the good of the body as a whole. We will exhort one another to

consider another's needs before our own (Rom. 12:10; Phil. 2:2-3), and to look beyond self to our corporate identity in Christ.

11. Young and old need each other in the Body of Christ.

Young men and maidens, old men and children: Let them praise the name of the Lord, for His name alone is exalted.

(Psalm 148:12-13)

The diversity of the body of Christ necessarily and significantly includes the mixing of generations. Young people are to honor and learn from the stability and heritage of their elders, while the young can add new energy and fresh expressions of worship.

(Psalm 79:13; 149:1; Titus 2:2-8)

THEREFORE: We will respect the special contributions of young and old, and seek to involve and engage all groups in our services without giving preference to one over another. We will seek to use godly discernment in evaluating all materials used in our corporate worship.

12. These things must be taught and re-taught.

Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more.

(1 Thessalonians 4:1)

The above truths are important elements of Christian understanding and discipleship, but must be consistently and persistently taught if they are to lodge in hearts and change attitudes and behaviors.

(2 Peter 1:12-13)

THEREFORE: We will teach these principles and exhort one another to grow in these areas. We will seek to model these truths before one another in our congregation, and as an example to our community and to the wider body of Christ elsewhere.

Conclusion

“Man looks on the outward appearance; but God looks on the heart.” (1 Samuel 16:7) We squabble about so many little things related to worship. But God is looking for people who will worship Him in spirit and truth; the externals are not nearly as important to Him as they are to us! He is not as worried about which songs you sing as He is about you “making melody with your heart to the Lord” (Ephes. 5:19)

In today's raging worship debates we desperately need to see that there are biblical constants and principles which we really can agree on. And then we need to have the grace and maturity to allow for the flexibility which God Himself seems to allow for. There is far more that binds us as worshipers than divides us through our different expressions—there is “one body and one Spirit-- just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call-- one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” (Ephes. 4:4-6) Let us obey Paul's command to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with

patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Ephes. 4:1-3)

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Ron Man
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