

One of the questions many Evangelical Protestants immediately ask when evaluating a church is whether the worship at that church is “traditional,” “contemporary,” or “blended” (traditional and contemporary). When asked whether or not the worship at Ancient Hope is “traditional,” “contemporary,” or “blended,” my answer is, “none of the above.”

At Ancient Hope, we describe our worship as “formal” in a way that is not bound to any particular time-bound reference-point – whether that reference-point is relatively ancient or recent. We might use an ancient confession of sin and we might use a new hymn. Our decision to worship in a formal way isn’t because some aspect of it is old or new, but because we believe it is most Scriptural.

At this point, many people would say that whether we worship formally or not is strictly a matter of preference – “you say potato, I say potata.” However, we believe that recognizing the formal nature of corporate worship is not a matter of personal preference, but of Scriptural prudence.

I can hear the retort now, “But the Bible never tells us how to worship!” I understand why people might think this, but allow me to make a case to the contrary. First, there are many things the Bible doesn’t explicitly tell us to do that we know we ought to do by inference. The Scriptures never tell us to have a marriage ceremony when taking vows to our spouse, but no Bible-believing Christian I know thinks legitimate marriage occurs without exchanging vows in the presence of witnesses. Making inferences from the whole counsel of God is something we do carefully all the time – think about the doctrine of the Trinity! Rather than defaulting to saying the Bible teaches nothing about worship, we should be sensitive to what should be inferred from the Bible about worship.

Secondly, while the New Testament doesn’t give us an explicit order of worship per se, it does imply one by telling us that the church has become the new “temple” of God (1 Pet 2:5-10, Eph 2: 19-22). The Old Testament temple was a place of very

orderly worship. While we no longer go to a physical temple to offer physical sacrifices, we do gather as a spiritual temple to bring sacrifices of thanksgiving (Heb 13:15). If we stop and look carefully at the worship in the Old Covenant Temple – particularly in the early chapters of Leviticus, we see an amazingly Gospel-shaped pattern of worship emerge that we must pay close attention to:

- **Call to worship** – First of all, God calls His people to worship (Leviticus 1:1). They don't just come to God on their whims at their discretion, they are called out and instructed by God to worship. We therefore begin worship with a call that reminds us that God has initiated the relationship we have with Him.
- **Confession of sin** – Because the Old Covenant worshipper was an unclean sinner coming into God's presence, the next thing they would do was bring an animal substitute to die the death they deserved to die (Leviticus 1:2). That is why the worshipper would lay their hands on the head of the animal – to symbolically lay their guilt on the animal so that justice could be symbolically carried-out (Leviticus 1:4). Like the Old Covenant saints before us (Isaiah 6:5), we also confess our sin and unworthiness when we come into God's presence.
- **Cleansing of sin** – When sinners confess their sins, God is faithful and just to forgive and cleanse us (1 John 1:9) because Christ, our substitute, has been slain on our behalf (Leviticus 1:5). As the blood was sprinkled around the altar to evidence the justice of shed blood (Leviticus 1:5), so God tells us through His pastors that He has forgiven those who trust in Christ alone.
- **Consecration** – After God redeems His people, He tells them who they are called to be in Him (Exodus 20:2ff) by the reading and preaching of His Word. He sets us apart as a holy people for Himself and teaches them how to remain clean (Leviticus 7:23).
- **Communion** – When God renews His covenant with His redeemed people in worship, He bids them dine at His feasting table as friends celebrating their relationship. The altar in the Temple where the slain substitute was burned was God's symbolic dining room table (Ezekiel 41:22) where He symbolically ate food (Lev. 3:11) in His house (2

Samuel 7:1). When a worshipper brought a peace offering to God, God shared the meal with the worshipper as a sign of renewed fellowship and goodwill (Leviticus 7:15). Christ is not only our peace offering, but is our Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7), our manna (John 6:31ff), our water from the Rock (1 Corinthians 10:1-4). In short, our communion feast is how God seals His Word to us every week (Acts 2:42), assuring us of our participation in Him and our renewed fellowship with Him. We aren't just set apart and renewed by the word, we are sealed and refreshed by sacrament.

- **Commissioning** – God sends His renewed people out of His presence back into the world to be salt and light (Isaiah 6:7,8). He pronounces His benediction (good word, or word of blessing) on us we go forward in His name (Numbers 6:22-27, 2 Corinthians 13:14).

The whole pattern parallels the gospel in our lives – how beautiful to be renewed to this wondrous redemption every week!

Third, the New Testament teaches us that when we worship, we worship in a heavenly context (Heb 12:18-29). When we worship as God's Spirit-filled Temple, we spiritually come to the new Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem where Christ sits on His throne (Revelation 21:10ff). This is very instructive, because every glimpse we are given into heaven shows us it is a very orderly place (Revelation 4:1ff). God is on His throne, surrounded by the company of heaven, which is worshipping His holiness in spirit and truth (Isaiah 6:1-4, Revelation 4:8). It is no casual affair, because heaven, the spiritual Zion which we come to worship at, is the very throne room of God.

Therefore, the writer to the Hebrews says we should "serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear" (Heb 12:28). The word, "serve," is literally "latreuo" in Greek, and is elsewhere translated as "worship." It is also the Greek root from which we derive our English word, "liturgy," or "work of service." When we worship God we are "working" to serve Him in His presence, we should have the appropriate manners and do things as God wants them to be done. We shouldn't come to a wedding without our wedding clothes on (Matthew 22:1-14), and we shouldn't come

to worship God in His throne room however we or our pastor wants to. We will come into God's presence in some way – we all have a de facto "liturgy" or manner of serving in God's presence. Shouldn't we try to have the most Scriptural liturgy possible?

Some people may still be somewhat incredulous about the case that has been made because this schema still leaves many things left to settle. Should the pastor wear a robe? Can we have a choir? Is it alright to incorporate drama into the service? The point of this paper is not to wade into all of these kinds of details, it is simply to show that when it comes to deciding what worship is and whether or not it should be more or less formal in its structure, the Scriptures are not silent and it is not simply a matter of personal preference.

At Ancient Hope, our corporate worship is more formal relative to other Protestant-Evangelical contexts. We not only have a call to worship, a confession of sin, etc., but we also use corporate readings that help us worship together as a body instead of collection of loose individuals. We are not trying to be like a Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or Emergent / Postmodern church. We are seeking to realize the heavenly and gospel-rich context within which we worship every Sunday.

Many Evangelicals have fallen prey to a sort of Gnostic dualism (spirit is superior to body philosophy) that says God is only concerned with people's hearts. We have no quarrel with the fact that God examines our hearts and that we must worship Him in faith (Heb 11:4). Our contention is simply that God made us body and soul, not just free-floating souls. Our bodies will express what is in our hearts (Genesis 4:1-5, Matthew 15:19) and are consequently relevant to discussions about worship. We believe that as our hearts are filled with the gospel and the Scriptural reality of being built into a spiritual house (1 Peter 2:5) we will reflect that in the formality of our liturgy. Being traditional, contemporary, or blended is irrelevant to the matter.

May God bless the worship of His people.

- Brett Bonecutter