

The Cultural Contextualization of Worship

By David Moss

There has been a significant shift in the church within the last generation. Since the time of the reformation when the Bible was set forth as the sole source of authority, churches have come and gone, or formed and split over Biblical interpretation. At the heart of all the church was or wanted to be was what men believed, or did not believe about Scripture. There also persisted an emphasis on experientialism, but even that seemed always to be rooted in some doctrinal whim. Now a new movement has brought about a significant change in emphasis to the church – one that seems devoid of Scriptural doctrine altogether.

With worship as a primary pursuit of many local churches, there has arisen the accompanying phenomenon of cultural contextualization. This is the incorporation of cultural elements into worship to give the experience more relevance to the people who are participating. Attention to Biblical instruction is thus made less important than the diversifying of the worship experience so that each participant feels a connection to the religious sensations being performed. In the process, the priority of worship has become the drawing of the person into a participation in the experience, rather than the directing of his spiritual understanding toward God.

Culture is a form of human expression. It is how people express themselves on a horizontal plane in their interaction with one another within a society. Distinctions in culture have been around since people migrated from the tower of Babel in different language groups. These distinctions consist of many things. There are the tangibles such as dress, music, art, and the domestic and political customs which govern basic human activities. Then there are the intangibles such as moral concepts, ethical principles, and religious beliefs, which mold the way people think and which bear some reflection in the tangible facets of culture.

There are some important questions that must be asked, though, about the incorporation of distinctive cultural elements into the worship of God. Is it appropriate to adjust the form of worship to make it fit the context of the culture in which the worshiper is living? What does God think about this design for worship? Is God open to diverse forms of worship that incorporate a variety of human cultural expressions? After all, it would seem that worship would not exist at all if God did not have some connection to it. So while men are considering the interests of themselves regarding their form of worship, is there any reason to consider the interests of God in the matter?

Worship is also a form of human expression. It is how people express themselves toward God on a vertical plane. The substance of worship should consist of expressing reverence, love, respect, honor, homage, admiration, confession, thanksgiving, dependence, deference and submission to God. Is it possible to do this while contextualizing worship to the culture of the worshipers?

Since the Bible is the final authority in all matters, we need to turn to the Scriptures to seek the answers to these questions. Does the Bible have anything to say about the relationship of cultural expression to the expression of worship toward God?

The Biblical Lesson

Adam's Cultural Initiative

Genesis 4:1-8 records Cain's attempt to approach God by incorporating a form of expression which reflected the way he lived his life on earth. Cain was a dirt farmer, rather than a sheep herder as was his brother Able. Able offered God the blood sacrifice of a lamb and God had respect unto his offering. Cain brought an offering that consisted of the fruit of the ground. The way Cain lived his life was different from the way Able lived his life. Cain wanted his approach to God to be an expression of how he lived his own life rather than an expression of how Able lived his life. What Cain failed to understand was that Able's offering was not about his manner of life, but about obedience to the commands of God. Because Cain attempted to worship God in a manner of human expression rather than in a manner of obedience to divine commandments, God did not respect Cain's offering and He rejected it altogether.

The Israelite's Cultural Blunder

After Israel left Egypt, it was difficult for them to leave their way of life behind. They often complained about the food and the comfort and the perceived safety they left behind (Exodus 16:3; Numbers 11:5). When Moses was delinquent in returning from his visit with God upon Mount Sinai, the people pressured Aaron to provide a connection to their experience in Egypt as a means to provide relief from their mounting anxiety over Moses' absence and their isolation in the wilderness. The Egyptian god Osiris was worshipped in the form of a golden ox, so this is something the Israelites would have been accustomed to seeing. When the golden calf was unveiled in the wilderness, the leaders of the people said, *These be thy gods [Elohim], O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt* (Exodus 32:4). This was an attempt to connect the golden calf, with which the people would have some tangible familiarity, to the true invisible God, who had actually led them out of Egypt, so that everyone could relax and feel more secure in the midst of a difficult situation. Accompanying the presentation of this idolatrous representation of God was a religious festival including burnt offerings, peace offerings, eating, drinking, and playing – activities which also reflected their cultural experience in Egypt. God, however, did not look very kindly on this infusion of Egyptian culture into the pretense of worshiping Him. He promptly sent Moses down the mountain to rebuke the people and demonstrate God's disgust by the breaking of the tablets on which God had recorded His law for His people.

The Judaizers' Cultural Error

In the New Testament, we find a serious error on the part of some professing Christians who could not bring themselves to give up some distinctly Jewish practices in order to feel safe in their relationship with God. Acts 15:1 says, *And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.* A discussion among the Apostles and Elders in Jerusalem tempered by prayerful consultation with the Holy Spirit ended in the conclusion that Jewish rituals were not an appropriate part of the faith that brings salvation and were not to be imposed upon those who approach unto God.

The Corinthians' Cultural Compromise

In the first century city of Corinth, the moral attitude was "anything goes." It was one of the most immoral places in the world at that time and elsewhere it was an insult to call someone a Corinthian. So the church members at Corinth may have thought they were merely reaching out

to its community when they allowed a couple living in fornication to attend their services openly, or when they ate meat offered to idols, or when the rich ate to their hearts' desire just before observing communion while the poor sat watching in envy, or when they allowed undisciplined chaos in their worship services with every member pressing for their moment in the spotlight to perform a psalm, a doctrine, a tongue, a revelation, an interpretation. But none of these were acceptable and the first letter to the Corinthians was written to rebuke them for such ungodly behavior – in spite of the fact that they were doing these things before the Lord.

In every example one may observe in Scripture where people tried to blend the way they live their lives on earth with the way they express themselves in worship unto God, it is presented as wrong and unacceptable. Rather, God teaches us in His Word that we should exercise restraint in relationship to worldly culture. For example, Daniel and his friends were removed physically from their homeland in Israel and forced to live in the land of Babylon (Daniel 1). They were immediately encouraged to submit to the cultural practices of the Chaldeans. Daniel and his friends refused to do this, and it is apparent that throughout his life, Daniel maintained an understanding that worldly cultural practices contradict the prescription for the living of a sanctified life which is a prerequisite for godly service and reverent worship of the one and true God.

The Unlearned Lesson

The Early Church's Cultural Disaster

When the Emperor shut down Roman paganism and ordered the Empire to be Christian, the church found a lot of unconverted pagans suddenly sitting in their pews during Sunday services. Concerned about how to assimilate these political converts to the church, the pastors made a very disastrous decision. Historian Will Durant describes that decision in his book *The Age of Faith*.

An intimate and trustful worship of saints replaced the cult of the pagan gods, and satisfied the congenial polytheism of simple or poetic minds. Statues of Isis and Horus were renamed Mary and Jesus; the Roman Lupercalia and the feast of the purification of Isis became the Feast of the Nativity...the resurrection of Attis [was replaced] by the resurrection of Christ. Pagan altars were rededicated to Christian heroes; incense, lights, flowers, processions, vestments, hymns, which had pleased the people in older cults were domesticated and cleansed in the ritual of the Church; and the harsh slaughter of a living victim was sublimated in the spiritual sacrifice of the Mass. (Page 75)

In other words, the early church fathers decided to take elements of the pagan culture and incorporate them into the church so that the pagans could make an easier transition into Christianity. The corrupting effects of this continue into today, influencing those who call themselves Christians.

The Modern Church's Repeating of History

Following the example of Cain, and the precedents set by the nation of Israel, the first century Judaizers, the Corinthian compromisers, and the early church, modern day Christians have once again turned to worldly and pagan cultural influences to construct a form of worship they purport to direct toward God. They contend that the traditional form of worship which includes the singing of hymns, the reading of Scripture, the offering of prayers, and the preaching of a sermon is a cultural descendent of European culture. It is therefore inappropriate, they say, to force this form of worship on the rest of the world.

On the contrary, an honest study of church history would reveal that the form of worship which emerged out of the Reformation was in part a reaction to the infusion of pagan culture into the worship of God more than a thousand years earlier and in part a submission to the instruction of the Word of God as the sole authority for man. In no part was it European men trying to impose their own cultural context on the worship of the Holy, Reverent God who had saved them out of a system of darkness.

In 1 Corinthians 14 we can observe the same elements of worship which the reformers observed and see the same Biblical instruction for the New Testament church they saw. And because it is the Word of God, people in every culture can see this same truth, because the text of Scripture transcends culture and is instructive and relevant to every believer regardless of where they find themselves living. So in this context we see praying with understanding (verse 15), singing with understanding (verse 15), preaching with clarity to the point of conviction (verse 24), reverencing God so that His presence is observable (verse 25), and limiting participants who must follow a prescribed order (verse 27-32). With this model, every church service should manifest the same vertical expression of worship regardless of the cultural context of the human beings who are participating.

Conclusion

Worship is not supposed to be an expression of how we live our human lives here on earth. It is supposed to be an acknowledgment of who God is and of what He has done for us through His Son, Jesus Christ. It is not supposed to be a horizontal experience of our connection to the world, but a vertical expression of our connection to God. It is wrong for a local church to look at how people are living their lives in the community and then make adjustments to their form of worship so that people will feel culturally comfortable when they attend their services. It is right for a church to look at the holiness of God and to pattern their form of worship after a Biblical model that points every attendee upward to the one who is being worshiped. It is wrong for us to want a worship service to be about us. It is right to want a worship service to be exclusively about the One who gave us the privilege to enter into His presence through His Son Jesus Christ. The Biblical evidence makes this point very clear.