

Reformed Worship Part 3: Worship Must Be Historical

By Nollie Malabuyo • February 2008

In June 2007, tens of thousands of people all over the United States lined up in front of stores for a chance to be one of the lucky first Apple iPhone owners. But in February 2008, only six months after these lucky people bought their iPhones, Apple released a “new and improved,” “bigger and better” version.

We live in a “new and improved” culture. We trade our “old” cars, computers, cell phones, and all other gadgets in for the latest model. We replenish our wardrobe according to the season of the year. Even our homes get old very quickly. “Old” means obsolete, useless, and material for thrift stores. Toddlers today would probably not know what an iPod and an iPhone are by the time they become teenagers.

Our churches are not immune from this “new and improved” culture. The “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic” church – one church throughout the ages whose foundation was laid by the apostles’ teaching – does not mean much to them. Evangelicals have no knowledge as to what the church’s worship and music was like only a few decades ago. They have no connectedness to the past, and will surely be disconnected from the future. Their worship is constantly changing so that worshipers do not know what to expect on any given Lord’s Day. Everything “new and improved” is welcomed, and everything “old-fashioned” is discarded. Their “new songs” and new “musicians” last but a few months, “famous for 15 minutes,” so that even their younger siblings do not know their songs. In my class of thirteen young students, no one knows Luther’s 500-year-old classic “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” and in my daughter’s 8th Grade class of thirty, no one knows the 1949 hymn “How Great Thou Art.” Recently, I preached in a seminary chapel, and hardly anyone knew the ancient church doxology “Gloria Patri.”

From Generation to Generation

In contrast to our culture’s disconnectedness to the past and ever-changing doctrine and worship, the Holy Scriptures teach us about the constancy of the doctrine and worship of God that we are to impart to our children – to the “thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments” (Exodus 20:6). God’s command to the Israelite parents before they entered the Promised Land to “make [his statutes] known to your children and your children’s children” (Deuteronomy 4:9) is the same as his command to us today to “bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4).

What are we to teach our children? Every “new and improved” doctrine, worship, insight, and innovation that is introduced in our churches? God forbid! We are to teach them the unchanging Word of God. After entering the Promised Land, Joshua renewed God’s covenant with Israel as “he read all the words of the law... before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones (Joshua 8:34-35). Israel was reminded of their duty to their children whenever they sang, “We will... tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done... that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children (Psalm 78:4-6).

We are to teach our children God’s glorious, wondrous, and mighty works that are to be found in Scriptures. And what is the consequence of neglecting to teach God’s commandments to our children? “A stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God” (Psalm 78:8). Thus, to ensure faithful generations to come, the church must continue to be connected to the past, present, and future generations of God’s covenant people.

A Glorious Intergenerational Assembly

Hebrews 12:22-24 tell us about what happens every time Christians assemble for worship:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant...

Christians should not think that when they come together for worship, the assembly is made up only of those people whom they see worshiping with them. Whenever we assemble for worship, we worship with all of God's people from Adam and Eve all the way to the last believer on the last day of this age, whether they are in heaven or on earth, in America or in Asia. We are lifted up to heaven and the Spirit brings heaven down to us, so that we worship with the heavenly host in a joyful assembly, before a holy God, with Jesus as our merciful High Priest.

How then are we to confess one faith, one Lord, and one baptism, when we do not know what the Scriptures say because our parents neglected the apostles' teaching and we have not kept the Apostles' Creed in our heart? How are we to sing with God's people from every age when we know only songs from a few years ago? How are we to pray the Scriptures with them, when we do not even know the Lord's Prayer? How are we to live godly lives like them when we can not even name a few of the Ten Commandments? How are we to receive the means of grace together with them through the sacraments when we do not even know what they mean?

When we, as the people of God, continue with our ever-changing gimmicks and innovations in the worship of God, our own children and our children's children will be asking the same questions above. They will have no clue as to what they believe and why, where they came from, where they are going, and how they are to worship God and live godly lives, thereby producing a stubborn, rebellious and unfaithful generation.

Reformation Worship: Revival of Simple Ancient Worship

This is why the 16th century Reformers diligently sought out what the ancient church believed and how they worshiped. They wanted to tie together what the Scriptures and the early church fathers wrote about public worship by connecting to the "great cloud of witnesses" who were only a few generations removed from the apostles. They realized that medieval worship has to return to Word- and Sacrament-centered and Scripture-regulated worship to be acceptable to God. They saw the simplicity of worship in the Scriptures and in the early church, devoid of man-made pompous gimmicks and innovations – a delight to the senses, but unintelligible and meaningless to the great majority of worshipers. Worship must be meaningful, understandable, and edifying not just to the uneducated, but also to the many generations to come.

What did ancient worship look like? To get a good idea of what Christian assemblies were like starting from the late first century to the fifth century, one has to read early patristic writings such as the *Didache* (ca. 80-160), Justin Martyr's *Apology* (ca. 155), Tertullian's *Apology* (ca. 197), Hippolytus' *The Apostolic Tradition* (ca. 215), and various treatises and sermons of Augustine (354-430). The *Didache*, or "Teaching," is a guide for Christian rituals such as preaching, sacraments, and prayer. As well, the pagan governor Pliny has a short description of an early church assembly in a letter to Emperor Trajan (ca. 112):

[T]hey were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit, fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food – but ordinary and innocent food...

Tertullian describes the assembly of his congregation as follows:

We meet together as an assembly and congregation, that, offering up prayer to God as with united force, we may wrestle with Him in our supplications... We pray, too, for the emperors, for their ministers and for all in authority, for the welfare of the world, for the prevalence of peace, for the delay of the final consummation. We assemble to read our sacred writings... and with the sacred words we nourish our faith, we animate our hope, we make our confidence more steadfast...

In the same place also exhortations are made, rebukes and sacred censures are administered... The tried men of our elders preside over us, obtaining that honor not by purchase but by established character.

There is no buying and selling of any sort in the things of God. Though we have our treasure-chest, it is not made up of purchase-money, as of a religion that has its price. On the monthly day, if he likes, each puts in a small donation; but only if it be his pleasure, and only if he be able: for there is no compulsion; all is voluntary. These gifts are... to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents, and of old persons confined now to the house...

Among the above writings, Justin Martyr's Apology has the most detailed description of early church worship. I will include his liturgy, along with other historical liturgies, in the chapter on Covenantal Worship.

In the above examples, as well as in all the other writings mentioned, there are some things to be observed in early church worship:

- The service was divided into two main parts: (1) the Service of the Word, which included singing, reading of the Scripture and the sermon, which was open to everyone; and (2) the Service of the Lord's Supper, which included prayers, and which was open only to baptized believers.
- While we do know from the New Testament that singing was a part of the services, it was clearly not as important to them as to evangelical worship services today, which typically assign 15-60 minutes to continuous "Praise and Worship."
- The administration of the Holy Communion was a much more solemn and vital part of the service than in most of today's Protestant churches; it was celebrated as often as the Word is preached, and it was "fenced."
- The elements of worship - reading and preaching of the Word, thank offering, Holy Communion, and the prayers - generally conform to the elements in Acts 2:42, since "fellowship" is the sharing of material wealth in the thank offering.

Reformed worship then can not and should not be categorized as "traditional" or "contemporary." But it is "traditional" not because it wants to cling to what is old-fashioned, but solely because it wants to be faithful to the apostolic tradition of worship. Thus, when you come to a Reformed worship service, do not think that it is obsolete and old-fashioned. On the contrary, you are actually worshiping in the same manner as Christians from the early post-apostolic and 16th century Reformation churches worshiped the unchanging God. You are, in reality, worshiping together with all the saints of all ages and places and all the angelic host in the heavenly Mount Zion in a reverent and joyful worship of the Triune God.