

SBJT: What concerns and/or heartens you when you consider the current issues in worship?

D. A. Carson: I'll begin with what concerns me.

When I was a boy, many people seemed to think that the choir was the war department of the church: all those egos dictating what could and could not be done. In many churches today, the war department has extended to the entire church. I have not attempted an accurate poll, but I suspect that among evangelical churches of the Western world, more animus is fired up annually over what worship should and should not be than over any other subject. All this emotional energy is quite commonly directed against other Christians within the same assembly. In some cases the polarities are inflexible. No hymn is worth much unless it was written a century or more ago, and preferably longer, so as to display as much Elizabethan English as possible. The opposite side insists that praise choruses are the way to go—ideally nothing more than ten years old, and repeated times without number in direct proportion to the inanity of the lyrics. To the latter, the former are the upright and the uptight; to the former, the latter are the cool and the fool. Substantial numbers of evangelicals of very “free” traditions are migrating to liturgical churches; meanwhile, the liturgical churches are becoming, in many services, more “free” than anything the non-liturgical churches could have dreamt up.

All of this suggests we are misdefining some issues. “Worship” used to be what was done in the 11:00 a.m. service. Now it is what is done under the direction of the

“worship leader” before the sermon, which, presumably, is therefore not part of worship. Relatively little thought has been devoted to developing a biblical theology of worship—something that carefully analyzes what worship is in the Bible, under both the old covenant and the new. Although there are some commendable exceptions, too many discussions are of the proof text variety, by which one may prove almost anything because the string of texts is not constrained by a mature biblical theology, a thoughtful grasp of what the Bible actually says along its plot-line. The real criterion in such discussions is often whether or not the worship in question pleases me and comports with my cultural and personal biases. In the Scriptures, corrupt worship includes everything that replaces or relativizes God (e.g. Eze 8-9); there is much less concern for whether one chooses a pipe organ or a guitar. Under the terms of the new covenant, genuine worship includes living our lives in God-centered devotion to our Maker and Redeemer (Ro 1:1-2). Thus *corporate* worship is not supposed to encourage the people of God to do something they have not been doing all week (i.e., worshiping). Rather, corporate worship in the New Testament finds the people of God doing together what they are supposed to be doing individually and in their homes all week—living out lives of God-centered praise.

Too few contemporary services are well-integrated. This may be because in too few cases there has not been one mind behind the entire thing. In other cases, little thought has been devoted to this aspect of corporate worship. Too many services are made up of disparate bits—disparate songs, disparate prayers, disparate comments, and a sermon only acciden-

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tally related to the other bits.

According to the New Testament, there is a place in some services for a degree of spontaneity, for testimony, a suggested hymn, and the like. But there are ways of arranging for such things in decency and order. Many contemporary services, both liturgical and free, admit too much ad-libbing, too many throwaway comments that add little of worth, detract from what is going on, or merely draw attention to the leader. I have seen liturgical churches where right in the middle of holy communion the minister offers some entirely irrelevant aside that inevitably channels the minds of many worshippers into fruitless byways. Many non-liturgical churches are so “free” they are merely embarrassingly chatty. Doubtless some enjoy the folksy touch. But where does the informality focus mightily on Almighty God and the truth and glory and repentance and forgiveness and hope that are being placarded that day?

Now, for the things that hearten me.

Some of the stresses in contemporary worship doubtless spring from the fact that Western culture is undergoing several rapid transitions, and we are trying to handle them. Insofar as the turmoil over corporate worship encourages the people of God to think through such matters faithfully, humbly, creatively, wisely, and in subjection to Scripture, and thus eschew mere traditionalism, this can only be a good thing.

Gradually there is arising a new, contemporary, and theologically alert hymnody. I am not talking about brief choruses. Some of them are acceptable; many are not. I am talking about substantial hymns that have a contemporary feel. A few of them are rubbish; many are mediocre; and not a few are frankly

excellent, and will endure. Britain and (perhaps also) Australia are ahead of America on this front. There are at least two reasons for this. First, those countries are farther down the track of secularization and non-attendance at church, so Christians have, by and large, given more thought to the question of communicating the gospel outside the language of Zion. Second, perhaps more importantly, many, perhaps most, American evangelical churches apparently believe that it would be unsound to have a service without an item of “special music.” That tradition does not exist in Britain or most of Australia. The result is that we devote a great deal of energy to creating and publishing and circulating “special music,” since that is where the market is; they devote energy to creating and publishing music for corporate worship. But gradually some of their work is coming over here. May it please God to see the trend continue, and by this to inspire more of our own writers to preparing material to be sung by all the people of God—a very different literary genre to that which is prepared for soloists and small groups.

We have progressed far enough in the worship wars that here and there individuals or groups of Christian leaders and thinkers are beginning to ask the big questions, the theological questions, that ought to drive the discussion. We have still not gone very far down this track. But it is beginning to happen, and I am grateful.

Perhaps the most encouraging things, at the level of personal experience, are the times when I have visited a local church where corporate worship has been really excellent. I hasten to add that such churches belong to different traditions. By “excellent” I do not mean to impose an artificial cultural grid. But in the best of

these churches (I wish I could name them, but doubtless that would be unwise), I have been united in mind and heart with fellow believers, and found myself drawn to the living God in adoration, confession, intercession, attentive listening, and stimulus to God-centered, joyful, serious, obedient living. In short, I have tasted in preliminary ways the joys of heaven. And I am grateful.