

Appendix H- Worship at the 31st General Assembly

By Terry Johnson (June 2003)

Are we in the PCA ready to abandon our liturgical culture in favor of a diversity of worship styles?

PCANews - “All things are lawful, but not all things edify” (1 Corinthians 10:23; cf. 6:12). Those are the Apostle Paul’s words to those approaching life and ministry choices on the basis of narrow biblical/legal concerns. “The Bible doesn’t forbid it,” is no justification for doing that which may be done but ought not be done because of the impact such choices may have on others.

By my reckoning 4-1/2 of our 5 General Assembly worship services were “contemporary.” Seventeen of 20 congregational songs sung by the commissioners used contemporary music, as did four of five “special music” items. Three of the five services used unordained men and women to lead the worship. Instrumentation was predominantly that which is associated with the contemporary genre.

I concede the point – it is lawful to do things in this way at GA, and in the local churches for that matter. I suppose we could have 100% contemporary songs and 100% unordained male and female leadership in worship. But would it be wise? Ought we to do it, or should the considerations that restrained us from walking down these roads in the past continue to restrain us today?

First, is it wise to use so much contemporary music? The hymnbook and Psalter represent the accumulated musical and lyrical judgment of the church, Catholic and Reformed over the last 450 to 3000 years (depending on when you want to start the dating). More than that, along with our traditional order of service (typically using the Creed, Lord’s Prayer, Doxology, and Gloria Patri), they represent the liturgical culture of our church. Every church has a liturgical culture. That culture consists largely in its order of service and its hymnbook.

This is clearly the case with the Episcopal Prayer Book, as it is for the Lutheran and Methodist orders of service, and even charismatic praise services. Each has an ecclesiastical or liturgical culture that the people of that tradition expect to encounter when they walk through the doors of their respective churches. That culture belongs to no particular generation within the church and so it belongs to the whole church across racial, ethnic, and generational lines. The more uniform the church’s liturgical culture, the more the diversity of membership may be unified by the church’s common worship. For example, African, Latin American, Asian, and European Anglicans joyfully unite to worship with the Book of Common Prayer when the whole church gathers from around the world. The same can be said for Lutherans, Methodists, Revivalists Baptists, and Charismatics.

Are we in the PCA ready to abandon our liturgical culture in favor of a diversity of worship styles, one for each group within the church? If not, is it wise for 85% of our congregational songs at GA to be from outside the Trinity Hymnal? Is it wise not to sing even a single metrical Psalm? (This is in spite of the rulings of two previous GA’s that we would sing them in our worship services.) Is it wise to choose music that appeals to a very narrow segment of our whole constituency (let’s call it our Anglo-contemporary culture) and in the process alienates every other group outside of that demographic? Should other groups demand equal time next year? Should we have an African-American service, a Latino service, a white WWII generation service next year? The latter might love to have an evening devoted to Peterson and Gaither. If not, is it wise to imply that this is how ministry is done, that we win groups by adopting their cultural forms (music, format, order), and abandoning our own Presbyterian

culture, an approach which if universally adopted will divide the PCA into a thousand different sub-cultures, each with its own liturgical culture, divided from the rest by its peculiar music and format?

Among my most cherished memories of GA's past is the sound of a thousand male voices raised in the singing of commonly known and beloved hymns and Psalms. I don't know who was responsible for the decisions made. But it showed exceptional lack of sensitivity or awareness of the worship culture of the overwhelming number of churches of the PCA. Yet culture awareness is supposed to be what the contemporary worship movement is all about. I ask these questions as one who has encouraged the writing of new tunes, who uses the RUF tunes to "Beneath the Cross of Jesus" with Psalm 71 and "When I Survey" with Psalm 35 in the Trinity Psalter. I am in favor of gradually introducing the best of the new tunes, especially when joined to words begging for better music, at the rate of something like one per month in local churches and one per year at the GA. But the proportions of new to old at the 31st GA spoke not just of disproportion but revolution.

Second, was it wise to have women and unordained men leading our services? I was struck by the absurdity of 1000 teaching elders sitting out in the congregation while very young men and women of unknown theological conviction and spiritual maturity were leading us in song. Let me split this issue.

1. What does this say about ordination to the Gospel ministry if the unordained are in up-front, prominent positions leading in song and prayer? What exactly are ministers ordained to do if not lead worship services? My understanding of ordination has been (at its simplest) that those who represent the church in public are subject to careful scrutiny and examination, lest the church be harmed by the errors of novices or the indiscretions of the immature. The more the public importance of the function the stricter the scrutiny, rising from deacon to elder to minister. Are we relaxing this standard? Are children and women to lead us (Isaiah 3:12)? If so, how does this affect the meaning of Presbyterian ordination?

2. What does this say about the role of women? Shall we say that women may not occupy the offices of the church, and yet allow them to perform the functions normally associated with those offices? At GA women led in worship with their voices and musical instruments. In some of our churches they are reading Scripture, serving communion, and taking up offerings. We might ask our brethren in the CRC if this is a position that will hold, if saying, "You may do the work but you may not hold the office," will prove satisfactory for the long haul. I suspect the logic connecting work, calling to the work, and office responsible for the work will prove irresistible. What looks and walks and quacks like an officer will eventually be one. Again, the question is not, does the Bible forbid that women should collect offerings, serve communion, read Scripture, or lead in song. It may be that there are no verses that directly address these issues. The question is, is it wise? Is it wise to place women in positions of public leadership when we have no intention of allowing them to occupy the offices of the church? Since we affirm male headship should we not continue to provide symbolic representation of that in the church's public functions? Is it wise to create the impression to committed members and casual observers alike that the women of the PCA hold positions of leadership when in fact they do not and will not?

3. Is it wise to adopt uncritically the style of the charismatic movement? The use of "praise bands," unconventional instruments (guitars, accordions, and drums), singing for extended periods of time, repeating lines and stanzas over and over, eyes closed, hands raised, swaying rhythmically back and forth, are all 20th century innovations that originate in Pentecostalism (ask Dr. Robert Godfrey about Aimee Semple McPherson's leading role in this). Add to this (dare I confess to noticing?) pelvic gyrations such as would have forced Ed Sullivan to raise the aim of the camera a mere generation ago, and we have, needless to say, a radical departure from the liturgical culture of the PCA. Many were the

expressions of discomfort, of alienation, and even of anger. “I don’t recognize my church,” was a common comment.

Why would those responsible for the services fashion them in a form so foreign to most commissioners? We were never told and so we are forced to speculate. Were they working a theme such as, “Alternative Forms of Worship in the PCA,” seeing these as options for a minority of churches but not intending to overthrow our common worship? Perhaps, but if so it was not explained. Was it “Our View of the Future of the PCA,” that is, “here is where we hope to see the PCA moving?”

Again, we don’t know. Did they intend to shock? Or, less threateningly, did they hope to convert, thinking “if we can show everyone what we’re doing in mission churches and on campus they will be inspired and do the same, leading to better outreach and evangelism in the PCA?” In other words, was there an agenda to change the liturgical culture of the PCA on the part of those who see classic Reformed worship (with traditional keyboard instruments, songs from the Trinity Hymnal and Trinity Psalter, and familiar orders of service) as a barrier to growth? No, no, someone objects. It was unplanned, accidental, a matter of chance (in a Presbyterian sense). It just happened that way. I draw no comfort from that thought. Has the contemporary worship movement in the PCA progressed to the point that when leaders for worship services are randomly chosen the proportions come out as they did? Someone call the doctor.

At this point, we can only speculate as to how and why we worshiped as we did. Whatever the motive, anything so significant as replacing the current worship culture of our church with another should not be done without considerable reflection by our denomination.

The traditional worship of our church, shaped by the old burgundy hymnal of the PCUS, The Hymnbook, and the Trinity Hymnbook, blue and red, with its dignity and order, its moderate use of fixed forms (e.g., Creed, Doxology, Lord’s Prayer), its ordained leadership, its emotional restraint and absence of ostentation, with its roots in the liturgies of the Reformation and the Westminster Directory, served us well. It united the various ethnic divisions of Europe and Britain, and from the late 18th to the mid-20th century united those churches with their mission churches in Asia, Latin America, and Africa.

That unity is on the verge of being shattered in the name of diversity. We are being urged in some quarters to trade our common worship for multiple worship styles tailored for each sub-culture. May we pause for a moment and reflect on whether or not we ought to walk any further down this road? Our increasing diversity makes this more important than ever. Shall we have a common Reformed liturgical culture that unites us at the hour of worship, or shall we be an increasingly segregated and divided church? “All things are lawful.” Where will wisdom take us?

=====

TE Terry Johnson is the senior pastor of Independent Presbyterian Church in Savannah, Ga.