

Worship (35) Corporate Worship Issues - Form and Freedom

Should we plan our corporate worship or should we be led?

- [Here is one church, whose pastor feels that to preach from notes is unspiritual. He even feels to study beforehand is unspiritual; the Lord should guide you while you are up there.
- [Here is another church whose pastor actually has a preaching calendar – outlining the topics and messages he will preach for another year. He never deviates from this schedule.
- [Here is one church which chooses its songs spontaneously, the song leader sometimes just beginning a song that comes to mind, and the congregation joining in. The singing time could stretch on as long as the song leader or musicians want it to – adding song after song, with periods of music playing, people swaying and the song leader talking in hushed tones.
- [Here is another church which plans the hymns or songs in advance, tying it to the message, the day or season. It even keeps track of what hymns have been sung during the year.
- [Here is another church which has a set liturgy of songs to be sung, creeds to be recited and so forth.
- [Here is another church which lets people select what hymns they want to sing on a Sunday night.
- [Here is one church where public prayers are prepared beforehand, written out in full and read out as a prayer.
- [Here is another church where public prayer is spontaneous and impromptu by the one praying.
- [Here is another church where prayers come out of a prayer book, and are frequently re-used.
- [Here is one church where anyone can stand up at any time and announce that they have a message from the Lord.
- [Here is another church where standing up and speaking out of turn will have you ushered out by one of the deacons.
- [Here is another church where people are asked to give testimonies of God's grace in their lives.

We're talking about this matter of form vs. freedom. To what degree should our worship be planned, and to what degree should it be spontaneous? How much of it should be structured, how much of it should be creative and impromptu? To what degree should we prepare in advance, and to what degree should we let things happen in an unplanned, spur-of-the-moment way?

If you are used to the free, spontaneous form of worship, anything structured and planned may seem dry, cold, lifeless, formalistic, and ritualistic. It can seem like a mindless stand up, sit down, going through the motions, with no heart involved. And indeed, it can certainly be just that.

If you are used to the structured, planned kind of corporate worship, anything more free and spontaneous may seem chaotic, untidy, rowdy, irreverent, uncontrolled. It can seem like a bunch of lazy people who couldn't take the time to prepare, making it up as they go along. And indeed, it can certainly be just that as well.

Although the Bible does not give us many clues as to how a church service in the early church operated, it seems there was a balance between form and freedom. **1 Corinthians 14** gives one of the best insights into what corporate worship looked like in the early church. Through this we can understand some of the balance.

1. Worship Must Have Order

1 Cor. 14:40 *Let all things be done decently and in order*

Verse 40 is a kind of summation of all Paul has been saying in chapter 14. *Let everything – all the corporate worship – be done in this way – decently, and in order.* So this statement is going to help us understand the balance of form and freedom.

Let's focus for the moment on the last phrase – '*in order*'. This is an interesting phrase. Ancient Greeks used this word to speak about military discipline. They used it to speak about how an army was organised, about a single rank in the army, a squadron. They also used it to talk about other kinds of organisations – political, social, and even financial. The ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament uses it to speak of how the Israelites were to be organised in their camp as they marched. By the time the New Testament writers are using it they mean 'discipline, order, structure for Temple worship.'

So what would it mean here regarding corporate worship? It would mean 'Let everything be done with structure, with discipline.'

The Spirit of God used this word to emphasise worship is not to be a free-for-all. It is not to be loose and open to any whim that pops into the mind of anyone present. There is to be a kind of discipline to it which is both beautiful to behold, and also a little uncomfortable to the unruly. Military parades are majestic to watch, they are difficult to train for.

There will be a sequence of events. There will be a plan, there will be organisation, and consequently, there will be supervision.

Although there will be spontaneous elements, the whole service will have the cohesion, organisation and precision you would expect from an army. Things will be in their right place, at the right time and the right kind of things will be done in the right kind of way.

In fact, looking back to Old Testament worship, it is clear there was much structure. Consider David's arrangements for public worship **1 Chronicles 25:1-8**:

Moreover David and the captains of the army separated for the service some of the sons of Asaph, of Heman, and of Jeduthun, who should prophesy with harps, stringed instruments, and cymbals. And the number of the skilled men performing their service was: ² Of the sons of Asaph: Zaccur, Joseph, Nethaniah, and Asharel; the sons of Asaph were under the direction of Asaph, who prophesied according to the order of the king. ³ Of Jeduthun, the sons of Jeduthun: Gedaliah, Zeri, Jeshai, Shimei, Hashabiah, and Mattithiah, six, under the direction of their father Jeduthun, who prophesied with a harp to give thanks and to praise the LORD. ⁴ Of Heman, the sons of Heman: Bukkiah, Mattaniah, Uzziel, Shebuel, Jerimoth, Hananiah, Hanani, Eliathah, Giddalti, Romamti-Ezer, Joshbekashah, Mallothi, Hothir, and Mahazioth. ⁵ All these were the sons of Heman the king's seer in the words of God, to exalt his horn. For God gave Heman fourteen sons and three daughters. ⁶ All these were under the direction of their father for the music in the house of the LORD, with cymbals, stringed instruments, and harps, for the service of the house of God. Asaph, Jeduthun, and Heman were under the authority of the king. ⁷ So the number of them, with their brethren who were instructed in the songs of the LORD, all who

were skillful, was two hundred and eighty-eight.⁸ And they cast lots for their duty, the small as well as the great, the teacher with the student.

So, there is nothing unspiritual about planning our worship service. We have enough evidence from this verse alone to indicate that we should follow some kind of sequence – be it in our minds, be it planned carefully, or planned generally. There should be planning.

So, for example: The sermon should be studied and prepared in advance. The hymns and songs and Scripture readings should be planned. The Lord's Supper should be planned. Even the prayers can be, in a sense, planned. If they are written from the heart and prayed from the heart – they can be effective. Though I myself don't favour them, a beautifully planned prayer, as Tozer writes in his book, 'The Pursuit of God,' 'is better than a dry and half-hearted spontaneous one.'

So there is nothing wrong with an order of service. There is nothing wrong with a liturgy. Liturgy just means 'ceremony'. If an order has been tried and tested and found useful to the people of God, if God's people understand it and engage with it, it can be wonderfully useful.

It is an immature Christian who thinks that planning is being insensitive to the Spirit of God. All of us plan on certain levels, all the time. Why should we think that the elements of worship must be completely unthought-of until we get there? In fact, when we understand the ministry of the Holy Spirit, what is it that He uses to lead the children of God? He uses the word of God.

When we make our plans in submission to God's Word, and remain open to Him changing them – this is the kind of organisation God blesses. Planning quenches the Spirit of God when we are not open to changing what we have planned. We do not love planning for planning's sake. But we should plan what we do before we worship because organisation provides harmony, proportion and beauty.

When we plan the elements of worship this also enables us to savour and digest each element. As the old saying goes – 'Less is more.' It enables us to select the very best music, hymnody, and so forth. It's just a fact that a hymn which took Wesley or Watts years of learning and growing and hours, if not days or weeks of work, is going to be worth more than the song which you might make up on the spur of the moment.

Who is to do the planning? It seems to follow that it would be whoever presides over the corporate meetings of the church, which appears to be the elders of the church. The pastors may delegate some of the music planning to a music pastor or song leader who works with the elders. But overall, they should plan the service, trying to balance the needs of the congregation with the need to exalt God, having familiar planned elements with space for spontaneous ones.

2. Worship Must Allow Freedom

1 Cor. 14:26 *How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.*

Verse 26 gives us an interesting insight into the church at Corinth. Now not everyone agrees as to whether or not Paul was commending the Corinthians for their way of worshipping, or criticising it. Nothing in the original gives it away – he is reporting what they are doing.

He says, ‘When they come together,’ there was obviously individual, free participation. One would have a psalm or a hymn to sing, one would have a doctrine – or a lesson to teach, one would have a revelation, one would have a tongue, and one would have an interpretation of that foreign tongue. What is clear is that it wasn’t just one man doing all the talking. People participated. You can already tell there is a place in corporate worship for more spontaneous, open participation.

In our church, open participation takes the form of such things as allowing testimonies in some services, allowing prayer requests, having corporate prayer meetings, having discipleship times of open discussion, asking people to pray spontaneously, allowing people to select hymns, allowing questions and answers after a Bible study. In smaller groups, there is even more freedom for a more open form of worship, with people coming with a reading that has blessed them, an understanding of the Scriptures that was illuminated to them and so forth.

But the moment you move away from a planned structure, you run some risk. There is the risk of people saying unbiblical things, choosing sentimental hymns, praying trite and shallow prayers. There is the risk of people trying to show off or exalt themselves. There is the risk of people being controlled by the flesh and not the Spirit. Instead of adding to the service, such things can take away from it. So to avoid this – the Bible places at least three restrictions on open participation.

i. Open participation should still edify. 1 Cor. 14:33 For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints

If a testimony, a prayer, a special song does not build up, it should not be included. How can we know if our contributions will be edifying or not? I would say the answer is – to be edifying there should be some kind of preparation. It might sound contradictory – but open, free participation does not mean it has to be made up on the spot.

For example, even if a preacher changes his message at the last moment, he is to be always preparing; always reading, studying, meditating, learning the needs of His people, so that a spontaneous message would still have edifying substance.

A musician should be training and learning so a spontaneous hymn or song could be edifying to the church.

God’s people should be thanking God in prayer so their spontaneous testimonies are clear, to the point and edifying.

Prayer requests should be thought out so that they are not rambling and off the point when presented.

Favourite hymns should be considered in advance. Know your own hymnbook.

Open participation is good when what comes out is spiritual and edifying. Spontaneity becomes boring when people spontaneously say and pray and sing things which are shallow, selfish or unspiritual.

The problem with ‘open’ worship, is that some can exploit it to make themselves seem spiritual. That is why Paul emphasises, ‘*Let everything be done unto edifying.*’ If someone’s

contribution only edified them, it was not useful to the Body. Corporate worship is for corporate benefit.

ii. *Open participation is still to be under authority. 1 Cor. 14:27-32* If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be two or at the most three, each in turn, and let one interpret. ²⁸ But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in church, and let him speak to himself and to God. ²⁹ Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge. ³⁰ But if anything is revealed to another who sits by, let the first keep silent. ³¹ For you can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be encouraged. ³² And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets.

Paul moves quickly to lay down some guidelines for their open worship.

- [Tongues – two or three at the most in one service, one at a time; an interpreter must be present or they must not speak at all (V27-28).
- [Prophecy – again, two or three at the most, with the other prophets judging - also one at a time.
- [And then, the principles of male headship are not to be thrown out the window just because there is open participation.

The point is that open participation does not mean every man is a law unto himself.

A train is free to travel on any of the railway tracks that have been laid down for it. On those tracks it can go as fast or slow as the driver chooses to. A train cannot go anywhere outside of those tracks; a train not on tracks will cause great damage. Free, open participation is still governed by the Word of God. It is the railway track bolting our human natures down so that we can enjoy participation without the flesh getting it.

So while we might have testimonies – if the testimony became unbiblical – we would need to correct it publicly, if it was serious error, or even interrupt. The same would be true of spontaneous prayer. We need to place a time limit on how many testimonies we take. We would not allow testimony time to become a preaching time for anyone. There may even be some hymns we would reject if selected. Open participation is not a time for every man to be right in his own eyes – it is still under authority.

iii. *Open participation should still be proper in nature. 1 Cor. 14:40* Let all things be done decently and in order.

Look back to verse 40. The first phrase is ‘let everything be done decently...’

The word ‘decently’ comes from a word meaning ‘properly, orderly.’ Everything fits – there is a place for everything and everything in its place. It suggests everything must have its place, its proportion. Things must not be out of balance. The worship of God is not to be wild or uncontrolled.

Worship at Corinth was getting out of hand. People were speaking in foreign languages supernaturally, but no one was interpreting. So, there were people babbling away in other languages which they didn’t understand, nor did anyone else. More than three people were prophesying per service, and they weren’t even waiting their turn. It had gone so low that Paul had to tell them, ‘No one cursing Jesus does so by the Spirit of God.’ Things in Corinth were not proper; the nature of what they were doing was not fitting to worship Christ.

The worship of the pagan gods was often orgiastic, and would get increasingly maddening to get greater heights of ecstasy. You really see this whenever the Bible lifts the curtain on pagan worship. Remember the prophets of Baal? As they cried out to Baal for fire, they were cutting themselves and shrieking. Elijah, on the other hand, is a picture of reasonable calm.

Or recall when Israel worshipped the golden calf – they were in such a wild way that Joshua said to Moses as they were coming down from the mountain, ‘It sounds like the noise of war in the camp.’

In recent times we have witnessed this same kind of chaos being called the work of the Holy Spirit. Churches where people fall down, make animal noises, writhe on the ground, laugh hysterically, or babble incoherently, say this is the power of the Spirit.

But common sense, combined with this Scripture, leads us to believe that people losing control are not being decent, in any normal sense of the word. People acting like animals are not being ‘proper’ as understood by any civilised people. People collapsing or laughing uncontrollably, or speaking incoherently, are not looked upon by even the unsaved as being orderly. Behave like that in a court of law, a corporate boardroom, a municipal office or any other public place and the chances are that you will be arrested or whisked away by an ambulance. I understand God’s house is a place of praise, but the Spirit of God never produces things which even the unsaved will regard as improper.

Rather, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, self-control. The Spirit is a flame of love, but it is a pure love, an ordinate love, a love appropriate to Him whom we love – not a sensual, ecstatic, uncontrolled love.

So, whatever the Spirit produces spontaneously, it will not be improper in its nature.

Notice verse 33 underlines this – *God is not the author of confusion*. Think about that. The source of a book is its author. We speak of the act of making something as ‘authoring’ it. If the Spirit of God is authoring acts of open, spontaneous worship – it will not be a confusion of conflicting doctrines and weird phenomena that contradict His own nature and offend decent sensibilities.

But is it a risk worth taking? My answer is yes. Here are four reasons why we need some amount of open and free worship within our meetings.

- 1) Because the Word of God suggests it.
- 2) Because we grow through participation.
- 3) Because we learn through our own mistakes and those of others.
- 4) The Spirit of God is more likely to empower hearts looking to Him for help, than hearts which are looking to the pastor to do all the work.

3. Worship Should Wisely Combine Planned Events and Free Expression

How do we find the balance between planning and spontaneity? There isn’t a formula in the Bible, but I think we have already seen some of the balance.

Have a church where you robotically follow set prayers, liturgies with no variety, and no real participation, and people soon become bored and even disconnected. Corporate worship becomes a ritual which the pastor performs like a priest, not something you do.

Have a church with too much free participation, and people are annoyed by the immaturity of the remarks, unsettled by the lack of consistency, lost because they cannot follow. You end up with the same problem, a sense of disconnectedness.

We need enough preparation and enough familiar pieces so that we recognise what we are doing, where we are. We need enough spontaneity to keep things fresh, to know the Spirit of God is at work amongst us.

So let me suggest some ways that we can have both.

Preaching must be prepared. And yet the preacher must be ready to be led by the Spirit to expound further when He is in the pulpit. He must be ready to add an invitation at the end or not, to open it for questions afterwards or not.

The hymns and songs should be prepared and practiced, but be ready to change them – omit, add, repeat them.

Scripture readings should be prepared, but open to how the Lord may use you in the midst of it.

We should be ready to be called on to pray in public (if you are a man) with an idea of what to petition the Lord for in a service. We should come to prayer meetings with prayer requests on our hearts, testimonies ready.

Above all, we should recognise the Spirit of God moves in hearts yielded to Him. We must make our plans in pencil, and give Him the eraser, as well as the pencil. Trust Him to empower what He has told us to do in the Word, and yet be open if He changes, leads or guides us differently.