

---

# The Pastor and Public Worship

---

*John Palmer*

---

Corporate evangelical worship in the UK has seen great changes over the last fifty years. New Bible versions have become available. New hymns and songs have appeared in increasing numbers. These changes and others have been enthusiastically embraced by some, cautiously welcomed by others, and resisted with varying degrees of passion by yet others.

This article is concerned with a further change to worship patterns – namely, the movement away from the traditional pattern of worship, where the minister stands at the front – often in a pulpit or on a platform – and leads the worship throughout. In many churches there are now different people praying and reading the Scriptures and leading the time of praise. This sometimes has reached the extreme where to a visitor the minister appears as an isolated figure, waiting forlornly at the side for someone to deign to ask him to preach. Is this change – which of course has happened to various degrees in various churches – good or bad; Scriptural or the opposite?

Two questions need to be kept in mind, although the nature of their interlinking is such that we shall need to answer them together. These are: first, should the pastor of a church, who is going to preach, lead the rest of the worship? Secondly, how much control should he have over the content and leader of any parts that he is not leading? In other words: is the alteration which we have seen in the worship practices that have obtained since the Reformation, the completion of that reformation, in this area of worship? Or is it a retrograde step?

Now some who support such changes will doubtless seek to do so by referring first to I Corinthians 14:26. Does not Paul speak here of many participating in worship, with hymns and teaching and tongues? Yes, he does – but not to commend it. The Greek phrase at the beginning of the verse can best be understood as the equivalent of our colloquial ‘What is this I hear’? The author is surely not alone in remembering times at school where the teacher was late arriving. Gradually the noise level rose. People began to leave their seats; perhaps a prank or two was played. Suddenly, the door opened; and there stood the teacher. His ‘What’s going on here?’ was not a statement of approval! Paul, certainly, addresses the Corinthians here as ‘brothers’. This is not a harsh or loveless rebuke: but it is a rebuke.

For the worship at Corinth needed rebuke; and it needed it because it was disorderly. Everyone had a hymn which they wanted to sing, or a word that they wanted to give. The result was an act of worship which was not pleasing to God. He is not a God of tumult, but of peace (v 33). So our worship of him should reflect this. This is part of a wider matter: that our worship should reflect the nature of God. He is Spirit: so we must worship him in spirit. He is truth: so we must worship him in truth. He is holy: so we must worship him in holiness. He is the God of peace: so our worship must be peaceful.

This does not mean that Christian worship should be boring, lacklustre, or a formality. Such worship exists – but we must strive in prayer and preparation that in as far as is in each of us, our church’s worship will not dishonour God like this. However, we must also eschew any striving by human means to make corporate worship

interesting, exciting, or full of the unexpected. If our worship is centred on God, he will make sure it is all of these things, to the extent that he is glorified by it being so; and to the extent that we truly approach him to worship him, and not to gratify ourselves under the guise of worship.

In v 40 of the same chapter, we are given further guidance concerning our worship. All, says Paul, is to be done 'becomingly' (*euschemonos*). The word means in a way which is beautiful – to God – because it is well put together. The Greek idea of a beautiful object – a building, a human body, or whatever – was one in which each part was in perfect proportion, and in its rightful place. So worship which honours and pleases God is that which has a right balance between its proportions.

Moreover, in the same verse of his Word God tells us that our worship is to be 'according to order' (*kata taxin*). The latter word is that from which we derive 'taxonomy' – the science of naming animals and plants in their right order. In worship this means simply – that there should be an order of service. It should have been carefully thought out. The one who leads the worship should ensure it is adhered to as far as possible. We are by nature sinners; and sin is disorderly. We are by the new birth redeemed sinners; and our worship should reflect that we are being re-made into God's image. We should fight against disorder in worship; not glory in it.

The movement away from a structure of worship which is ordered throughout by the pastor is often founded on a confusion between form and formalism. The former, as we see above, is highly desired by God. The latter is just as severely condemned. In Isaiah 1 God calls the thoughtless, formal, offering of his own instituted sacrifices a 'meaningless trampling of my courts'. If our worship is a formal ritual, only undertaken for the sake of doing what we believe is right outwardly, it is exactly the opposite of that which is 'in spirit and in truth.' When Evangelical worship in a church is merely formal, reformation is an urgent priority.

However, the way to prevent worship from being merely a form involves changes in the hearts of the worshippers. These are deep and costly and often – not always – a slow process. Certainly such a malaise goes far deeper than being solved by the sticking-plaster of changing who conducts the worship. Indeed, where the latter change takes place on its own, it is to be feared that often this diminishes the worship. What is gained in freshness is often more than lost in reverence.

Such considerations do not of themselves prove that the preacher should lead all the service. Nor is it that the Scripture insists that he must do so. Yet when we are aware of the way in which God is pleased with well-formed, orderly, worship, where the whole time from beginning to end is composed of parts that fit well together, the advantage of all being planned and led by the same person become obvious.

Consider the relationship between the hymns and the sermon. There are hymns that fit certain sermons and those that do not. If, for example, one is preaching on God's providence, it would be ill-judged to have one hymn concerning the person of the Holy Spirit, one celebrating Christ's resurrection, and one expressing penitence for sin. Any good hymnbook includes a number of hymns and Psalms which declare God's rule over his world and express the Christian's praise and trust which result from the belief in this great truth. These are a fitting accompaniment to a sermon on the same theme. If however, the preacher and the one – if there is just one – who chooses hymns are different people, then that which is sung is likely to lead the thoughts of the

congregation in one direction, and that which is preached in another. This does not mean that the worship is unacceptable to God. It may be good – but the good can be the enemy of the best. Surely we should as churches do our utmost to offer to God that worship which is well-pleasing because well-planned and well – put together? Is there a better way of choosing what is sung?

If the preacher chooses what the congregation are to sing, surely he is also the best person to introduce the hymn. Again, out of carelessness, in many churches the hymn is announced too briefly. Some just give out the number and the first line; or even just the number. If, however, the hymn is the right one to sing at that point in that act of worship, it is often appropriate to point out the links with what has gone before, or what will come afterwards. Again, sometimes it is worth pointing out in some detail part of the text of what is to be sung, highlighting the thought behind it. This too is surely a task for the one who has chosen the hymn as part of an integrated act of worship.

If the preacher should be the best person to choose what is sung, he should certainly be the best person to choose what is read from Scripture. It is usual practice for the reading to include the verse or passage from which the preacher intends to speak. Where the reading should begin and end, he can best judge, by how much of the context he will mention in his sermon. If there is to be more than one reading of Scripture, the other reading should also be an integral part of the worship, and thus also chosen by the same person. We have Scriptural warrant for the preacher choosing the reading in the example of Christ, Luke 4:16-27. This seems to have been the normal practice in the synagogues, and in default of anything in the Scripture telling us differently, we can be sure it has God's approval.

Then there is the question of whether the preacher should read the Scriptures. In 1 Timothy 4:13, Paul instructs Timothy to 'give careful attention to the public reading of Scripture (*'anagnosei'*), to exhortation and to teaching' (NIV). This implies strongly that Timothy himself was to read the Scriptures in public worship. As this is the only text that bears directly on this matter in the New Testament, we must say that the normal practice for our churches should be this. There may be reasons why sometimes there is an advantage for someone else to perform this task. Yet it is to be feared that often those who do so – including preachers – do not realise the importance of this part of worship. Here, alone, we can be sure that we are hearing God speaking to us, infallibly and authoritatively. The man who has prepared himself to speak, aware of his own fallibility, as one who 'speaks the very words of God' (1 Peter 4:11), is surely the person who is most spiritually prepared to read the Scriptures reverently.

Moreover, if he is preaching from the passage, he knows the points which he believes are the most important; so he can give these due emphasis in his reading. If he is preaching on John 10:16, for example, he might be intending to make the point about the certainty of Jesus saving his sheep whom the Father has given him. So he will emphasise: 'I *have* other sheep who are not of this fold. I *must* gather them also. They *will* hear my voice and come to me; and there *shall* be one flock and one Shepherd.' Another person, reading the same passage, but not knowing what is on the preacher's heart, might well come to this verse and emphasise the verbs instead. Does this seem a precise point? Yes; but, as one of old said, we serve a precise God. Any attitude in worship of: 'well, God knows our hearts; even if things could have been done better' misses the point. God does know our hearts – and he knows the sin which can lead us

to prefer to please man – by giving him an opportunity to read the Word – rather than God – in having it read as well as possible.

The third aspect of worship which the preacher does not always lead is the public prayer. Here, the issue is not so clear-cut. Acts 4:42 tells us that the Jerusalem church continued in ‘the prayers’. Paul in 1 Timothy 2:8 says that men who are holy should pray. I personally am far happier to involve godly men of my congregation in leading congregational prayer on the Lord’s day when I am preaching, than in any other part of the worship. It can be a real blessing.

Nevertheless, it is surely true that public prayer is not to be undertaken lightly. There needs to be serious consideration about what to intercede for in the corporate worship of the Lord’s people. One important matter is surely the spiritual state and needs of the congregation as a whole. Now all should be concerned about this, not just the pastor. However, he will be surely a man who is devoting himself more than others to bringing the church – individually and together – to the throne of grace. So, his heart and mind should be the most full of all the congregation of pertinent matter when he arrives for worship on the Lord’s Day.

Even when the church’s pastor is not leading the congregation by praying himself, surely he should be the one who determines who does so? Vocal prayer in the presence of the congregation is a serious business. The aim is to be for what is said to be pleasing to God, and thus produce a heartfelt (and audible!) ‘Amen’ from the congregation. Not everybody has the spiritual and natural qualifications to do this.

The changes which have come over worship are part of a wider picture. There is a spirit of rebellion around in the world against the idea of leadership; or that one person is equipped to do carry out a task better than another. This has invaded the church. We have our ‘levellers’ who seek as much as possible to weaken the role and function of spiritual leaders. This is to re-Corinthianise the church. If we take God’s Word and his worship seriously we must ensure that in this vital area of church life, as in all others, such tendencies are resisted.

---

*John Palmer is minister of Parbold Evangelical Church, Hilldale, Lancashire*

---

*Editor’s Notes continued from page 8*

interesting book on the interaction between pastoral care, spirituality and therapeutic psychology. If nothing else this book offers a useful primer of therapeutic psychology from a broadly Reformed perspective. But Benner does more than that. He has many refreshing things to say about the nurturing of spiritual life as at the heart of pastoral care. This is a timely reminder in an age in which life problems are the meat and drink of much pastoral counsel. Like the Puritans, Benner would put the emphasis on the care of the inner life of the Christian. Readers will by no means agree with everything Benner writes but he should stimulate us to reflect more deeply on the meaning and practise of pastoral care. In this light I would recommend reading a number of the *Puritan Classics* published by the Banner of Truth. Books such as **Richard Sibbes’s *Bruised Reed***, **William Bridge’s *A Lifting Up of the Downcast***, **John Newton’s *Letters*** and **Ralph Venning’s *Learning in Christ’s School*** (Banner of Truth 2000) are invaluable for helping us understand the nature of pastoral ministry as, to use Benner’s expression,

*Editor’s Notes continued on page 27*

---