

HALLELUJAH!

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Prayer-and-praise Worship And Formal Worship

Some personal reflections about essence, intent, and blended worship

by

David Stocker

The prayer and praise worship style and the formal worship style tend to be located at opposite ends of a worship-style continuum. This continuum, at its extremes, witnesses (a) worship that focuses on the individual's personal relationship to God and personal spiritual needs, and (b) worship which is focused on the worship of the collective as defined by many individuals whose concerns relate to the collective faith community and its mission.

Another way to describe the differences of this continuum is: (a) personal prayer and praise [Matt. 6:6 "But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou has shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret..."] and (b) collected worship or group worship [Ps. 95:1, 2, 6 "O come, let us sing unto the Lord: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make

a joyful noise unto him with psalms... O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the Lord our maker." See also Nehemiah 5:13 "...And all the congregation said, Amen, and praised the Lord."]

It is likely that few worship services in Christendom are entirely one worship style or the other, but rather, have at least some elements of both, even if only in a limited way.

The personal aspect of worship in general is reflected in that commonly-heard negative comment, "I didn't get anything out of it." While this point of view represents a very narrow approach to corporate worship, it remains a substantial barrier to both individual and church growth.

A more appropriate approach to corporate worship might be stated in a revision of president John F. Kennedy's famous statement: "Ask not what [the church] can do for you, but [find out] what you can do for [the church]." Statements like, "I don't feel like going to church today. I have too much on my mind," do not take into consideration that a person's mere presence in the service is a contribution to the collective effect of worshipping with others. One might not "get something from it" on some personal level, but one can contribute to the sense of worship for others by simply being there.

In both worship styles, I also benefit by being in the presence of others who

are worshipping with me. I am uplifted and strengthened in my faith by feeling the power of the assembled body, all of who are worshipping with me. That is also a good argument for having children in corporate worship. They may not understand all of the service, but they are part of the community of faith and they contribute by their presence as well as being blessed by the presence of others. They are also learning from the repetition of the scripture readings, the prayers, even the language of worship.

The historic roots of the prayer and praise service are personal, intimate, often emotional, certainly informal, some say rooted in the model of the early Christians, and are manifested in the revivals, tent meetings, and campground worship events. The historic roots of formal worship are the congregational worship of the Israelites through their priests, the Levites, in the Old Testament, and the continuing tradition of both the Roman Church and, since the Reformation, Protestantism in main-line denominations. Many prayer and praise services, which started under the auspice of a main-line denomination, have shed their denominational title to avoid the historic discomfort for some of being part of a denominational association.

In the prayer and praise service, the opening moments are for the creation and intensification of an emotional response

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through: repetition, intentionally feelingful text-and-music, and prayers. Prayer and praise stresses the relationship between the individual and God—less attention is put on corporate issues, less on prayers for the church, less on externals of church life, more of “me and Jesus” and, as a result, members are less likely to focus on all-church projects and missions.

After prayer and praise sets the mood and the relationship in a service, then it often proceeds to an “instructional” mode through the message.

While formal worship addresses repentance-and-forgiveness-of-sins early in the service to prepare the sinner for entrance into the presence of God, in many of the prayer and praise services, recognition of the forgiveness of sins, if it occurs at all, is more likely to come after the message, after the announcement of grace, leading to the desire for forgiveness.

The following are additional analytical observations of the characteristics of both

prayer and praise and formal worship:

1 Song Texts for prayer and praise: less important as instruction or doctrine. More important as establishing the relationship or setting the intimacy mood. Less poetic than hymns, using more basic, conversational, or even “fad” language. Used more as a conversation through music. More likely to talk about “me and my life” and less likely to cite Bible stories or biblical examples.

2 Song Texts for formal worship: more poetic, more instructional, and more doctrinal. Less relational, less conversational, more likely to cite Bible stories or biblical references. Often, these hymns “witness” by talking about Jesus (to each other) rather than to him as in personal prayer. Hymns and songs for formal worship use corporate language such as in the familiar hymn *The Church’s One Foundation*.

One reason that formal worship uses older music for anthems and hymns and prayer and praise worship uses more recent songs and compositions is that the corporate nature of, say, the Bach chorale text may bemoan the sorrow of all the world for the pain of the crucifixion (the author becomes a spokesperson for everyone, not just oneself); the author of a text from the nineteenth or twentieth centuries would more likely bemoan his own personal anguish over this sad event.

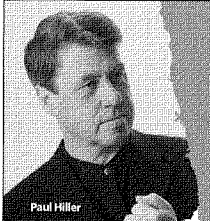
3 It is interesting to note that, of the 38 hymns listed alphabetically under “A” in *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, the majority are corporate in their language rather than personal. For example: *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, *All Creatures of Our God and King*, *All People that on Earth do Dwell*, and *As Men of Old Their First fruits Brought*. This is to be expected since that hymnal was put together with formal worship in mind. (Two notable exceptions of a more personal nature are *Abide with Me*, and *Ah, Holy Jesus*.)

4 “Flow” in a prayer and praise service: relates to mood and transitions, often through the use of dramatic effects.

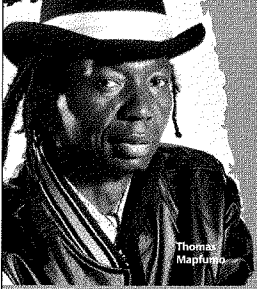
5 “Flow” in formal worship: relates to doctrinal progression, i.e., from (a) entering the sanctuary into God’s presence, to (b) the preparation for worship, to (c) the confessing of one’s sins, to (d) the receiving of forgiveness, to (e) praying for a sanctified life of service and out-reach, to (f) giving an offering to God, to (g) hearing the message from God through scripture, to (h) hearing a message about the theme on Christian life and service, to (i) receiving a blessing and going forth to serve God with our lives.



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6 Visual aspects of the prayer and praise service: In prayer and praise, the video is huge. Mood setting images predominate. Text often overlays the "flowers and mountains" backgrounds. Text is predominantly relational in its orientation and is often provocatively emotional. Leadership is intentionally "personality" driven (hence, personal clothes rather than robes, and more personal-life anecdotes to help put a personal touch on the message). By definition, the rejection of all things formal leads to a very intimate experience.

7 Visual aspects of formal worship: Traditional church building, stained-glass, banners with Christian symbols, formal use of space and formal presentation, less "personality" driven (hence the use of robes on both the clergy, worship leaders, and the choir).

8 The church year is only mildly present in prayer and praise worship, i.e., major festivals and only those with traditionally emotional content (like Christmas, and Easter).

9 The church year is more significant in formal worship and the lessons follow the church year as a way of organizing the parts of Christian life and mission. "...all things decently and in order."

10 Liturgical elements: In prayer and praise worship, liturgical elements—like regular litanies, creeds, Lords Prayer, responses, etc.—are nearly absent.

11 Liturgical elements: In formal worship, liturgical elements are more prominent and regular—use of a Creed, Lords Prayer, Offertory, Introit, etc.

12 It is not expected that the needs and work of the group, the collected Body of Christ, will be addressed on a regular basis in prayer and praise worship since the focus is on the individual's response to God and vice versa.

13 It is more likely, in some prayer and praise worship styles, that an individual may be moved to express an emotional response by standing up and saying, "Hallelujah!" or "Amen" or by the lifting of one's arms.

14 In formal worship, it is less likely that any individual would spontaneously stand and speak or react verbally to any service moment.

15 The prayer and praise service leans toward individualism more than to the needs of the group.

16 Conversely, the formal worship service favors group expression and group action. It is the group that answers the call to "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." Matt. 28:19

17 Music is an intentional part of the entire prayer and praise worship experience. Telling a story and having an experience are more important than the liturgical pieces.

18 Music in formal worship, as a large part of the worship experience, and, while often praise-centered, is often more doctrinal and instructive as well as referential in its focus on the biblical theme or intent for a particular Sunday in the church year. The

liturgical pieces, like a puzzle, have a cumulative effect in creating the "picture."

19 The sermon in prayer and praise: is often more instructional, and, perhaps, more basic in a "sin/grace" context. Deeper doctrinal concepts do not seem as appropriate in a service dedicated to a more informal design and a more emotional context of praise and relational love.

20 The sermon in formal worship: has more themes taken from biblical stories and the Gospels, quotes from major theologians, more complex doctrinal discussions, and more general inspiration rather than "fervent perspiration."

21 The prayer and praise service is generally more attractive to children and the re-churched, because of its simplicity and immediacy of impact, and, as a result, is less complex and less "doctrinaire" in its offerings. The "seeker" service format is intentional in introducing God to the person who has not yet accepted that there is a God or that His presence in their lives can make a significant difference. This is the place for "personal" contacts with Jesus rather than doctrinal contacts that involve the corporate church.

22 The formal worship service is generally more attractive to established Christians who are trying to grow in their faith and understanding. And, it is more likely to be broadly doctrinal in its agenda and the flow of its parts.

23 The prayer and praise service is less likely to contain multiple scripture readings.

24 The formal worship service is more likely to have multiple scripture readings.

In general, it is difficult to include parts of prayer and praise with formal worship or vice versa. They are very different in their design, intent, and execution. Often known as the “blended service” style, many churches have seemingly enjoyed great success by incorporating many elements of both the prayer and praise service style and the formal worship style into the same service. A closer examination, however, usually results in a truer picture of what is happening. Rather than actually blending worship elements, the formal worship is often “toned down” or softened so that more individually satisfying elements or service-environment moments are present. While the church does not want to be “culture driven,” some elements in the service which speak a little to the “me-generation” are often successful.

Softening the Formal Worship Service

In order to appear more relevant, some aspects of the worship environment and content can easily be changed (or softened):

- Remove the robes. This makes the leadership appear to be more accessible and personable—easier to engage relationally. Going tie-less or casual in clothing removes some amount of formality in a formal worship service.
- Get closer in physical proximity to the congregation. Preaching from a closer position will aid in the “connection” that people want to feel with their leaders. Present readings from the middle of the center aisle rather than from a platform. Have the choir

closer to the congregation. Use surround-seating rather than long and narrow as is the norm in a more traditional or cruciform building.

- Encourage person-to-person contact before, during, and after each service. Lively conversations before a service may, in fact, be a good thing rather than something that must be discouraged. Try a moment-of-friendship greeting (“The peace of the Lord”) or even a full minute or two to have people interact with those around them.
- Increase the emphasis on Food Fellowship—significant opportunities for brunch, snacks after a service, meals provided by the church—all of which will bring people together in fellowship. It is, after all, well known that many members stay at a particular church because it includes their circle of friends, and food fellowship is certainly conducive to gathering new friends.
- At least once in every service, have the choir move quickly into the congregation to encourage robust singing of the hymns and songs. Prior to that, a brief “congregational rehearsal” led by the director may help focus on the hymn texts and tune and even the theology of the piece.
- Use other instruments in addition to the traditional keyboard instruments to lead the singing from “on the floor.”
- Be formal (but not stuffy) with those parts of the service which are very traditional—litanies, creeds, etc. But be more informal and friendly in those parts of the service which encourage human contact—announcements, logistical directions,

some active congregational response, baptisms (but be careful not to appear too informal or “flip” in a very meaningful sacrament like Baptism which has both deep spiritual formality but also much of warm human feeling.)

- Use the choir to introduce less-formal music into the service by broadening their repertoire and musical style. This seems to be a benign avenue for changing the sound-environment in the formal worship without forcing the pew-holders out of their comfort zones (especially if we ask them to actually participate in “new” ways).

Some false assumptions and questionable practices that occur in formal worship in an attempt to soften the formality:

- If the formal worship introduces a bit of informality in music-style, some people make the false assumption that this will make the formal service more inviting to the praise constituency. In general, most surveys find that the prayer and praise attendees do not want to worship in a formal building with even a little use of formal service elements. For them, it is called “alternative worship” for a reason.
- Beware of using instruments that are strongly associated with prayer and praise worship, e.g., the electric guitar, the electric bass, a drum set, or other “popular” instruments found in pop music groups. Many formal worship attendees will never be comfortable with this seeming dumbing down of their formal service, nor does it invite the prayer and praise people in. Bottom line: a lose-lose situation for all comers.

- Being informal with normally formal worship elements—Introit, creeds, Lords Prayer, etc. This tends to disturb the formal worship people, but does not induce the prayer and praise attendees to come in.
- Using only modern texts—paraphrases of the Bible, a modernized Apostles' Creed, new "personal" songs instead of hymns, and a modern version of the Lords Prayer. This is irritating to many who have used older (and familiar) texts and Bible verses from their youth.
- Encouraging informality by having non-trained (i.e., lay people) participate in large numbers in a normally formal service. Occasional use is acceptable; too much use of non-professional readers, candle-lighters, speakers, or helpers gives the impression that we do not value giving our best when approaching God as the Israelites did in the Temple. (Only the high priest went into the Holy of Holies once a year.)
- Singing arrangements of traditional hymns, but with popular instruments and drums, might help open the service to other things that normally are not found in an intentionally non-formal service.
- Use a minute of silent prayer every week (as is done in the formal worship service) but specify certain things for which they might pray, such as (a) others in need, (b) specific health concerns of the members by name, (c) general prayer for the success and well-being of other Christians in the church. This could also be handled more formally by having the worship leader do the actual praying as is done in the formal worship service.
- Have additional non-congregational singing, in which some singers, groups, soloists, Gospel quartets, etc., would do an "anthem." The implication is that it would not likely come from the praise team, which is responsible for leading the group singing but may not necessarily do independent music.

near the message.

Adding Formal Elements into the Prayer And Praise Service

While the acceptability by the prayer and praise congregation of some formal elements is, at best, questionable, here are some elements and procedures that could be considered:

- After the mood-setting that occurs at the beginning of the service, always doing a group Lords Prayer would likely be acceptable to most of the congregation.
- A moment of "Let us say what we believe" (formal Creed) could be inserted later in the service, perhaps

It may be a positive step toward the intent of a so-called blended service to consider that the formal service people will likely tolerate a "softening" of their service more easily than the prayer and praise people will tolerate additional formal elements inserted into their alternative worship format and style.

Although some of the above suggestions would have the effect of drawing the two service types closer together on the continuum, it is difficult to imagine the reaction of congregants from either side. Local precedent and temperament would need to be considered.

It is possible that the two ends of the

worship-style continuum discussed above are reflective of a model for Christian worship that, ideally, would include BOTH rather than one or the other. While the current understanding of a blended worship seems to approach this ideal, in reality, the psychological interruption of moving from one worship style to the other in the same service is wrenching. (In those services where this is the norm, people tend to tolerate the intrusion of another style but generally do not embrace it). Rather, an individual might alternate between the two worship styles across several weeks or months as one approach; having a meditative, personal prayer time before formal worship is another.

While a combination of the current formal worship style with the current prayer and praise style is unlikely to be successful, re-thinking the implied intent of the two worship styles and combining both personal issues as well as collective corporate issues into the same revamped service might prove to be a promising compromise.

A full worship life needs both the personal time with God and participation as part of the entire community of faith in collected worship. It is not a question of one or the other. It is an issue of being lifted up in every way we can. We need refreshment as individuals and we need to contribute to the work of the corporate church in order to have constant growth.

Prayerful discussion and a measured pace are the *sine qua non* of any future plans regarding adjustments to the services in style or content.