

## "INFORMED WORSHIP"

(Romans 12:1-2)

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The contemporary church is in a ferment over worship. Musical styles have been the lightning rod for the debate: organ versus guitars, traditional hymns versus contemporary choruses, hymnals versus overhead transparencies. Some churches have maintained a traditional style of worship, but many more have adopted, to a greater or lesser degree, a contemporary approach. A few others have thrown up their hands in despair and decided to try to please everyone, with both a traditional and a contemporary service.

Sometimes missing in the heat of this battle has been attention to a more fundamental issue: What is worship? Fortunately, more and more people are recognizing the need to address this basic question. Several excellent books have been written, seminaries are adding courses in this area, and pastors and laypeople alike are having to think through issues that might otherwise never have surfaced.

I am no expert in worship. I have not seriously studied the issue, I do not lead worship, and I probably have as many uninformed prejudices as anyone (give me an organ, every time). But I do think that Romans 12:1 sets out two fundamental values that should inform all our discussion about worship.

(1) Worship is the way we live, not what we do on Sunday morning. The title of Ernst Käsemann's essay on this passage says it well: "Worship in Everyday Life." We worship God, says Paul, by giving ourselves in sacrificial service to our Lord. We are to serve him every day, every hour, every minute.

Paul deliberately uses the word "body" (soma) to describe what we are to offer to God. This word focuses on the "embodied" nature of our persons, reminding us that we are

physical beings, interacting with a material world. By using this word, the apostle emphasizes the degree to which our worship should involve even the very prosaic parts of life. As we eat our food, we worship God by thanking him for what he has given us, honoring him with our conversation, and providing for the bodies he has given us. As we sweat on the treadmill, we worship God by seeking to be good stewards of the body he has given us. As we seek (speaking for myself, sometimes in vain) to avoid driving with the same egotistic aggressiveness as others, we worship God by displaying the fruit of his Spirit. We do our work to the best of our



ability, worshipping God by giving our best to our employers.

One of the greatest temptations in the Christian life is to bifurcate the "spiritual" world from the material, to begin thinking that only certain parts of our lives have eternal significance. All of our life is to be a continuous worship of the God who created and redeemed us.

(2) The worship we offer corporately in a worship service must be "informed." Nothing we said in the last paragraph takes away from the importance, indeed, the requirement, for believers to meet together regularly to worship God. What happens during that time will vary enormously, depending on our location in the world, our cultural and social context, and our denominational heritage. But verse 1 makes clear that God-pleasing worship, however expressed, must engage the mind. It must be *logikos* worship, worship appropriate for rational creatures, worship that arises from understanding something about God and his truth.

I do not think that God ultimately cares how we sing, but he does care about what we sing. The words we sing must be true, expressing something about what he has told us about himself. By reminding ourselves of such truth in our singing we are moved to the praise and worship that pleases God.

I am afraid that what passes for worship in some churches goes little beyond an emotional reaction to a certain form of music. Some writers of music and certain kinds of worship leaders know how to get people excited, but I am not always clear that they are getting people to worship. Emotions must, of course, play a role in worship. But it is both easy and tempting to focus too much on an emotional reaction to music, bypassing the mind entirely. Yet if I read Romans 12:1 rightly, this is not the kind of worship that truly pleases God. Worship that pleases him and that truly leaves its mark on a believer always engages the mind.