

# False(?) Alternatives in Worship

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When discussing a controversial subject, it is tempting to set up a straw man.

An opponent (often a caricature) is created on the other extreme of the debate in order to gain support for one's own view. This happens all the time in politics. It is often seen in religion as well. A slogan of the Methodist Movement is "Deeds over Creeds." But this is a false alternative. The Christian faith encompasses both creeds and deeds, both beliefs and actions. False alternatives have often been set up in our current discussions about worship. This article asks you to reflect on what follows with questions like these in mind: *Has one side of the debate created an imaginary straw man in order to bolster their own position? Is this, in fact, a false dichotomy? Is there some biblically sound middle ground between the two alternatives?*

- Is worship a place to emphasize God's **immanence** or His **transcendence**? This poses a false alternative. God's majesty, holiness and "otherness" ought to make worship an awe-full event! At the same time, in worship God comes in water and Word, in bread and wine, to be present intimately among and within us. The point is not to choose between the two, but to incorporate both.
- Should the elements and style of worship be completely **separate and distinct from the surrounding culture**? Some answer in the positive; others say, "No." If the latter group **incorporates elements from the culture**, does this mean culture will necessarily dictate and dominate? The practices of biblical worship were not totally "foreign" to the cultures which surrounded God's people. In its use of a priesthood, animal sacrifice, and the design of sacred space, for example, the Old

Testament has definite points of commonality with other religions of the Ancient Near East. Does this inevitably end up in syncretism? Or is there some middle ground? Can one incorporate elements from the culture in order to be relevant within that culture without allowing culture to dominate? The practice of St. Paul as he brought Christianity into the Graeco-Roman world would suggest so.

- The textbook I use in a course on *Theology of Worship* contends, “*Jesus’ worship was not a dignified formality but joyous abandon before His Father.*”<sup>1</sup> One may want to emphasize the "joyous abandon" or the "dignified formality" of our Lord's worship life. But I would suggest this is clearly a matter of *both/and*, not *either/or*.
- Is worship predominantly an **emotional, subjective experience** or is worship primarily **objective and rational**? Pitting emotions against intellect or *vice versa* is another false alternative. In worship, as in life, God's people are called to love the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength (Deut. 6:5).
- Must worship be done **the time-honored, traditional way** or does it need to be **new, up-to-date, and constantly evolving** to fit the changing times? This is a false dichotomy as well. It is possible to tell "the old, old story" and to "sing a new song" to the Lord (e.g. Psalm 149:1) without choosing one over the other.
- An article I recently received contends the worship of its community is "**liturgical**" and, therefore, not the "**entertainment-driven**" practices of other Christians. Does this set up a straw man?

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<sup>1</sup>*The Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship*, ed. R. Webber, vol. 1 of *The Complete Library of Christian Worship* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), p. 17.

- Many contend worship ought to be done in a specific "**order.**" While worship should be orderly, does this insistence militate against Christian freedom (Gal. 5:1)? Can one preserve **freedom and even spontaneity** in worship while, at the same time, doing all things "decently and in good order" (1 Cor. 14:40)?
- Some want worship to be **comfortable and familiar.** Worship should not be disturbing to those who participate, or should it? The Law ought to **unsettle** us when we are complacent in sin. While the Gospel is comforting, it also has the power to break us out of our comfort zones in order to bring further growth and maturity. Should worship be simple so that it can be grasped by any and all who attend or should it contain all the richness, depth, and complexity which appeals to a life-long Christian? Does one have to choose one or the other?
- Are there "**right**" practices of worship? Does this imply practices which differ are, therefore, **wrong**? For example, if we teach that the "right" way to pray is with hands folded and head bowed, the implication is that to raise one's hands, to kneel or even prostrate oneself before the Lord is incorrect. [In this case, which are modeled in Scripture? The last 3!] Instead, we should clearly articulate that many worship practices, such as one's posture in prayer, are adiaphora.
- Churches are criticized for making worship a **numbers game.** While there are dangers if this becomes the driving force, what is the alternative? An attitude which shows **no concern to welcome**, involve or include those outside the fellowship? One can keep focus on biblically faithful worship and, at the same time, still be properly concerned about numerical "church growth."

- Some churches aim particular **services at distinct segments** within that Body of Christ. Does this violate the concern Paul intends to be shown for all within the Body (1 Cor. 12)? Does this practice inherently focus on some while excluding or ignoring others? Does it divide the Body or split it into parts? Is there a way to integrate aspects which reach and appeal to **all members of the Body** within the worship life of a congregation?

In conclusion, *Gottesdienst* ("service of God") is the German word for Lutheran worship. But does this expression refer to our "service of God" or the "service of God" to us? This is another false alternative. First and foremost worship must be *God's service* to us in *both Law and Gospel*. But worship is also *our service* of praise, prayer, and dedication to God in response. As long as the alternatives are biblically faithful, may God grant us a spirit of both/and instead of either/or.

## **ADDENDUM: More False Alternatives?**

- Old/new
- Outdated/relevant
- Outdated/relevant
- Deep doctrinal content/shallow
- Passive/active
- Initiating/responsive
- Entertaining/boring
- Chaos/order
- Rigid/spontaneous
- Vibrant/stale
- Growing/dying
- (for the) Old/(for the) young
- God serves us/we serve God
- Varied/repetitive
- Directed to God/about God
- God is immanent/transcendant
- Objective/subjective
- Simple music/complex music
- Performance/leading
- Intellectual/emotional
- I or me dominant/God is the focus
- Time-tested & proven/suspect
- Roman Catholic/Evangelical
- Lutheran/small "c" catholic
- Liturgical/non-liturgical
- Constant/changing
- Culturally relevant/foreign
- Familiar/new
- Outreach/for those within
- Joyous abandon/dignified formality
- Right/wrong