

317 Rhythm in Life and Worship

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth ... And there was evening, and there was morning the first day ... And God said, Let luminaries be in the expanse of the heavens, to divide between the day and the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years ... And God saw that it was good” (from Genesis 1.1,3,5,14-15,18, Literal). These simple statements in the opening verses of God’s Word tell us that God has set this, His creation, within a framework of order, pattern and rhythm.

So by the grace of God our lives function within these time-rhythms of days and nights, of weeks, months and years, which are regulated, virtually to the second, by the wondrous movements of the Earth and Moon around the Sun. Truly, “When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; what is man that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man that thou visitest him? (Psalm 8.3-4, KJV)!

As with rhythm in our lives, so also there is rhythm in our worship. We read of the rhythm of the God-introduced Feasts under the Old Covenant for God’s people to observe, based on the farming seasons, such as Passover and Unleavened Bread, Pentecost (also known as Weeks or Firstfruits), the Day of Atonement, and Tabernacles (also known as Booths or Ingathering). We see how each of these Feasts in its own way pointed the people forward to Jesus the promised Messiah, and how, when the time came, Jesus fulfilled His Gospel ministry within the rhythm of the Feasts: notably for example, He was crucified as the Lamb of God at the Passover of AD 33 (Matthew 26.17-20 and parallels).

Then under the New Covenant the Christian Church duly adopted and adapted these seasonal rhythms of worship, giving us Advent, Christmas, Easter, the Ascension and Pentecost. Over time there developed fixed rhythms or “liturgies” in many denominations, keeping worship quite formal and in close step with these Christian seasons.

But alongside this liturgical emphasis there has also been a respectable and long-standing strand of Christian worship, Non-Conformity, joined in recent decades by the many informal “House Churches”, which shuns formal liturgy because of the real risk of mere outward form, how ever beautiful or well-ordered that might be, snuffing out our genuine worship of God “in spirit and in truth” (John 4.23). Even here though, it is obvious that any group of Christians meeting regularly over time for worship is bound to develop their own habits, forming a rhythm or “liturgy” in itself, even if it is not recognised as such! We see how our instinct for rhythm is God-implanted and deeply ingrained.

So in our worship life together it seems to be a question of “both-and” - of our drawing on the strengths of the old and new, while avoiding the dangers inherent in overdoing either approach. By using long-established hymns and set prayers in our worship for example, which have stood the test of time and which have been the means of blessing down the centuries, we are kept conscious of the small place we hold in Christian history and identity. We realise that we are the ones currently entrusted with the Gospel and its truths, and that we, like all the other saints before

us, are only passing through. In these ways our focus is lifted up and away from mere Me or mere Us to the “Communion of Saints”, to the divine programme of salvation and restoration in Christ, and to the glory of Almighty God.

Within that rich context of the “old”, the “new” in worship takes its place – an openness to the leading of the Holy Spirit in our midst over music, prayer, the Word and the appropriate use of the spiritual gifts of I Corinthians 12 for example. This ensures that the faith of those present is kept real and relevant, and rightly grounded in the Here and Now.

It is the humble openness of those in leadership to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, both before and during our times of worship, that ensures a proper blend of the old and the new, and upholds that divine requirement - “Let all things be done decently and in order” (I Corinthians 14.40, KJV).

One final blessing arising from the rhythms of our worship, be these formal or informal, old or new or both – is the blessing of perspective: the worship rhythms enable Christ’s redeemed people to keep the current political turmoils in our country, weighty and significant as they are, in their true place, under the gaze, authority and power of Almighty God; and hence to pray accordingly.

Meanwhile, by God’s mercy, we rest in His gracious promise that – “While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease” (Genesis 8.22).

This great assurance of the continuing same-ness of the changing seasons might just remind us of Someone Else we know! (Hebrews 13.8).

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