

## 5 The problem with our church services – identifying the issues

There are many different kinds of meetings, even inside a single culture. In Kenya four examples of different kinds of meeting are the “harambee” (a community fund-raising meeting), a committee meeting, a wedding and a funeral. Each has their own “flavour”; in each, there are unspoken assumptions, learnt and shared by everyone, as to what is or is not appropriate. Everyone learns their role and the acceptable ways of participating.

If we move from Kenya to the UK, then we also find meetings for fund-raising, committee meetings, weddings and funerals. Comparing with the same meetings in Kenya, we would find many common elements that transcend the cultural differences. There are behaviours that would be inappropriate in both places, and for the same reasons. Not everything is relative; some things are absolutes, because we are all human beings made in the image of the same God, living in the same world. On the other hand, there are local differences, and these normally both reflect and reinforce the local cultures.

### Church culture

I think that Reformed believers can be tempted to deny that our church meetings have a “culture”. We might feel it is possible to claim that there is one basically true approach to a church meeting in any place, and that deviations from it are deviations from the Bible and reflections of faulty beliefs. This temptation might be especially strong in a movement such as ours which has historically been small and centralised, and experienced and approved relatively little variation in styles of church meeting.

Another danger we can face is to view this discussion too much through the lens of theological controversies from the West. The history of so-called “worship wars” and debates over hymn styles and congregational participation will surely be matters to learn from. Conclusions from them should not, however, just be imposed without looking at the differences in our setting. Someone once remarked to me that most African churches have simply reproduced the personal preferences of their particular foreign pioneer. The temptation to do this can be strengthened by seeing the over-reaction of “African traditional churches” which have instead imported clearly unbiblical ancestral and tribal traditions.

With such dangers in mind, I think we can now go forward by discussing one of the pillars of Biblical worship, the “regulative principle”.

### The regulative principle of worship

The 1689 confession, in the first paragraph of chapter twenty-two, concerning “*Worship and the Sabbath Day*” contains a classic statement of the regulative principle. It says:

*“The light of nature shows that there is a God who has lordship and sovereignty over all, is just and good, and who does good to all. Therefore he is to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart and all the soul, and with all the might. But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God has been instituted by himself, and therefore our method of worship is limited by his own revealed will. He may not be worshipped according to the imagination and devices of men, nor the suggestions of Satan. He may not be worshipped by way of visible representations, or by any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures.”*

The only right ways to worship the true God must be specifically and explicitly instituted and revealed by God himself, in his Word, the Bible. No other form of worship is acceptable to him. The great Object of true worship tells us what kind of worship he desires to receive. Mortal creatures and rebellious sinners have no authority to craft their own forms of worship, but must use his, alone. All of life is worship, but there are particular activities which God has designed and revealed to us

as specific acts or “ordinances” which we are to use, and them only.

Paragraphs 3-5 then identify the components of worship which God has actually revealed to us. They are prayer (paragraphs 3-4), and then the *“reading of the Scriptures, preaching and hearing the Word of God, the teaching and admonishing of one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with grace in our hearts to the Lord; as well as the administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper”*, all to be carried out *“in obedience to Him, with understanding, faith, reverence and godly fear”*, accompanied at special times as appropriate by *“solemn humiliation, fastings, and thanksgivings.”* The confession then explains the special significance of the first day of the week, and there concludes. Besides these appointments of God, there are no other New Covenant ordinances of worship. (It is worth noting that neither the 1689 confession in particular, nor other Reformed confessions in general mention any kinds of church offerings or tithes as positive ordinances of divine worship as such. This part of the service is often very prominent in Kenya churches, though not the Reformed ones).

One way of worshipping God using these revealed activities is the way in which Kenyan Reformed Baptists – having historically inherited it from English Baptists – do it. That is, the minister can stand at the front with the congregation all seated facing him, and he can announce and lead a succession of traditional English hymns, readings and prayers, and then preach a sermon, pray and perhaps sing once more before ending the meeting. It is important, however, to notice that this approach is nowhere prescribed or preferred in the 1689 confession, and hence is not actually a confessional Reformed Baptist distinctive. They belong to the unwritten, unofficial appendix – which we are free to not sign up to if we prefer! It is part of the implementation of the confession, and we are free to question – and indeed must, question, to be faithful – whether it is the best way of doing so in our cultural settings. If after investigation we decide it is the best way, then we will not lose anything for being more sure of it; if however it is not, then we should reform.

## **Weaknesses of the present approach**

If we accept that the question is legitimate, then we can go forward. First, we should ask: what are the weaknesses of this approach? Does it have unfortunate side-effects, and edges which cause trouble particularly in a different culture to the English one that it was brought from? The rest of this paper will be mostly negative. I believe it is important to see first what is the problem, so that we will then be more ready to consider alternative suggestions. That will then come in the next paper.

Firstly, consider the central place of the minister as he leads the service. This is where we will begin. As it is actually the defining characteristic of this kind of service, I will have quite a lot to say about it. Kenya is a class-based, hierarchical society. Everyone knows their station. In particular, the poor – who are the great bulk of the population – are especially expected to know their place. They are expected to be passive recipients and servants – doing as they are told, accepting the conditions given to them, and not usurping when in superior company. This system is very advantageous to the small, wealthy class, and they are keen to retain it as it works for their benefit, though against the good of the aspiring poor. Biblically evaluating it, we see a lot of oppression and injustice. God is opposed to those who maintain their own advantage like this (Deuteronomy 24:14-15, Psalm 82, Amos 5:12). God is the friend of the poor against the rich oppressor.

Let us be clear. A hierarchical society is not unbiblical *per se*. God is also an enemy of anarchy, and he delegates authority into his world. That authority can be further sub-delegated (e.g. Romans 13:1-8). A style of service which reflects this kind of order is not in itself sinful. We are not discussing matters of sin; Scripture does not describe this kind of service as sin, nor does the confession understand Scripture that way. What we are doing is questioning what is maximally helpful. The cultural default in Kenya is to expect nothing from the poor, and not to empower them or give them opportunities. As Christians, however, we believe that all are brethren, all having equal rights and value before God, and we want to enable and empower the poor man to serve as an equal

in the kingdom alongside the rich man. We want to help them to overcome the problems that are stacked against them in the culture. Is it then the best option to employ a style of meeting whose tendency is to confirm the *status quo*?

Perhaps someone will think that here I have gone too fast, and joined dots that were not really there. Even if you think so, is it not a fact that our churches have suffered from a general lack of initiative from members, and too many poor believers who have continued to assume that their role is to receive, and that the minister is a separate and superior kind of being, doing a work they could not dream of partaking of meaningfully? Our churches have not broken the power of cultural assumptions, even though we are part of the kingdom of God. Is that not an issue which calls for a response? If I have missed the target, then just where are we to point the finger? We should not duck the question.

## **Impersonal and unbiblically restricted**

Another weakness of our present approach is that it is rather impersonal. There is no interaction within the church – all is vertical, none horizontal. One person speaks and everyone else listens. As a general picture of God's word going out, that is appropriate: God speaks (through his appointed messenger) and his people bow in submission. But that is only one part of church life. What about brotherly interaction, iron sharpening iron, encouraging, exhorting and even rebuking one another (Proverbs 27:17, Luke 17:3, Hebrews 3:13, 10:25)?

It is true that we can do all those things when the meeting finishes, or in our homes. But what is the theological reason for relegating those other interactions that way? Is there a principle that says that these necessary functions of church life must be done in “unofficial” time, instead of during the actual meetings of the church? Is that the best of all the possible alternative ways of organising ourselves?

The New Testament clearly shows us that meetings in the early church did not happen that way. People asked questions, and received answers (1 Corinthians 14:35 – women were not permitted to ask questions, which implies that men were and did. Historically it appears that questions were asked by wise men, as a teaching device – bringing out potentially obscure points for others to understand). When the church gathered, the members came bringing their contribution - “every one of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation” (1 Corinthians 14:26). There is no hint that Paul was speaking such words only to the elders. Some of the listed items in that verse were extraordinary gifts in the apostolic church; but others were not. That should not cause us to miss the main point. Paul had to instruct the Corinthians to bring their contributions in an orderly way. He never hinted that the participation in meetings should be restricted to a chosen one, or pre-picked and pre-programmed two or three. All members were free to contribute, subject to the laws of good order (which included that women did not speak in any teaching capacity, 1 Timothy 2:12). “Good order” for Paul did not mean a pre-planned meeting controlled by a chosen few.

## **New Covenant distinctive**

The assumption that the bringing of Scriptures, words of exhortation or rebuke, and of prayers and songs, was to be restricted on God's day to only elders or a select group of approved members, is not in the Bible. I would go further. I question whether it tends to deny the glorious New Covenant distinctive that the Spirit of God is given to all of God's people, that all are kings and priests, and not just an anointed few (Jeremiah 31:31-34, Acts 2:17-21, 1 Peter 2:9). It covers up our equality, and the truth that there is a variety of useful gifts spread across the church.

It is a fact that in Kenya, the Old Testament concept of an “anointed few” is very much alive. “Come and hear the anointed man of God”; “come and receive a blessing from this great prophet”. Would not changing the format of our services be a good, reforming move to challenge this false

belief? Would not it be a challenge to an unhelpful aspect of culture, and be a means to the real, practical demonstration to the poor of their true status as God's children, all co-equals together – that this status exists in reality, and not just on paper? Would it not be a helpful means for the Kenyan majority? If it would, surely we should seriously consider it.

## **Weaknesses in teaching**

A further problem is can only be spoken of with great sorrow and heart-felt prayer. Sadly, a good deal of preaching in Kenyan Reformed Baptist churches is boring and lacks practical, direct, earthy application to the hearers' situations. At its worst it is excessively abstract, incomprehensible and dull. When the Word of God is so thrilling and lively, this is a great tragedy.

This situation to some extent reflects what can happen in Kenyan education in general. In the unhappy default, as Kenyan children go to school, they learn passively. They sit for long periods, they hear theoretical knowledge, they repeat it, they memorise it and they regurgitate it all when tested. If they regurgitate it well enough they get a qualification. In this process of learning, teachers have too little genuine interaction with their students. This all fits with the overall picture of a hierarchical, top-down, insufficiently fluid society. If a student desires to become a teacher, then he goes to teacher training college where he takes the same learner's role until the day that he receives a certificate, and then he just switches roles. This has passed over into the training of ministers in many churches. Colleges are built where students passively and patiently learn, eventually receive certificates, and then consider themselves qualified to repeat the process by inflicting their lectures upon others.

I am certainly not saying that the traditional English Baptist style of service either requires or encourages these things. What I am saying is that, in a culture where these things are so, the uncritical adoption of such a style has been unhelpful.

## **The “man of God”**

These strands come together in the Kenyan culture of the pastor as “the man of God”, as if every Christian believer was not equally a man or woman of God. This belief is not simply that he is to be honoured as a teacher of God's word. Rather, he is practically above contradiction; questioning him is an act of spiritual rebellion. As a church member, he is your leader: you are a follower, and should be submissive as he tells you where to go. This is a real and lethal teaching which has spread throughout Kenya and is commonly believed across the land.

Reformed preachers, of course, would never teach this idea explicitly; but they can teach a “Reformed” version of it both by emphasis and omission, implicitly supporting it, and using the benefits of these assumptions to their own advantage. Once a church member came and asked me for “permission” to evangelise children on his estate. I told him that he did not need anyone's permission, and I had no authority to give any – Jesus commanded him to use his gifts, and it was his duty to get on with it with the opportunities he saw! Of course, there is nothing wrong with asking for advice and appropriate forms of brotherly oversight. But this brother had come to believe that his pastor had a much greater authority than that. His understanding was that the Pastor has authority over everything in a church, to run it how he sees best, including members' personal ministries. Our style of church life and service has not challenged this belief, but has rather perpetuated it. Is there not a case for change?

## **Looking forward**

Lastly, one simple issue is the English hymns that we sing. We generally use “Grace Hymns”, or a selection of hymns from it. Most of these hymns are largely incomprehensible to the larger part of our congregations. Many of our people are third-language English speakers (first their mother

tongue, then Swahili, then English). We are not looking at an issue of people needing to gain some understanding before they can really appreciate deeper truths. We are talking simply about accessibility. Most of these hymns are in an archaic idiom (whether with obsolete language, or particularly the flowery style of the Victorian-era hymns) that are inaccessible to a totally unacceptable degree. It is like giving steak to babies. It is like choosing to run a doctrine class whose procedure was to read them chunks of John Owen or Louis Berkhof. We can all explain why that would be unhelpful, and why to prefer other ways. So why are hymns different?

Arguably, the case for simplicity is *stronger* with hymns than other parts of the sermon. Though hymns can and do teach us, that is not their primary purpose. Their first purpose is for us to express great truths from our hearts, especially in prayer and praise to God our Saviour. If it is wrong to go above people's heads when teaching them, is it not more wrong when asking them to express their response?

## Looking forward

Where do we go from here? I want to emphasise again that I am not saying that the style of meeting I have criticised is in itself wrong, or never the best approach. It developed for sound historical reasons, and has its place. What I am questioning is whether it is really appropriate in Kenyan situations. In our country, a church congregation is made up of a mix of different classes of society. In that society, the privileged few seek strongly to maintain the existing divisions. If our meetings consistently have a style that reflects and (even if only implicitly) reinforces those divisions, are they in line with or unhelpful to the kingdom? I am especially asking whether we should, whether explicitly or implicitly, treat such an approach as if it were “the one true way”.

I am not preaching revolution. It is not the duty of the church to attack or change the social order *per se*. Contrary to the common belief in the West, there is no virtue in change simply because it is change. Revival will not come simply because we alter our style of meetings. The church has no business trying to change the social order through outward or political attacks on the *status quo*. Rather, it works only through the leaven-like influence of God's word working its implications out in the lives of believers and those they touch.

Change should come because we recognise that we have another kingdom, from another world, which does not have a hierarchical social order, and this should come in a natural way. I think we are presently limiting the leavening influence of the kingdom. By insufficiently acknowledging and enabling the lower classes we are keeping them in their place, in contradiction to their real equality with us in God's kingdom. We are discouraging them from using their potential and developing their gifts, and actually hindering our purpose. They are being reinforced in the belief that they are not as capable or as valued in the kingdom as their social superiors. We must challenge that. In the next paper I want to begin making positive suggestions, and provide a suggested new model of a reformed church service in our culture.