

Book Review

When You Come Together: The Theology and Practice of Congregational Worship by Wendell Willis, Christian Studies Press, 2010

Across the spectrum of Christendom many churches have experienced 'worship wars'. Typically this is manifested as a battle between traditional and contemporary worship styles. Much ink has been shed in this war of words.¹ Wendell Willis acknowledges that Churches of Christ have experienced this tension too. He states that 'a previous fundamental uniformity no longer exists' among Churches of Christ in the US. He should know – he's a former minister among Churches of Christ for 18 years and is now a Bible professor in Abilene Christian University, Texas.

Willis' short book is suitable for most readers who wish to think through these worship issues more carefully. He confines his discussion of worship to our weekly congregational gatherings. Whilst acknowledging that one can make a 'very good argument' that worship is about how we conduct daily life, he refrains from entering that fray. He also avoids a detailed consideration of how the 'heart' and our inner attitudes affect worship. Willis' approach produces a shorter, more focused book – and for that we're thankful. But his approach is also limiting. After all, the Bible is replete with passages about how we are to praise God with all our heart (eg. Psalm 9:1). Indeed, can worship without heart be considered to be worship in spirit and truth (John 4:24)? Thus, some may view this feature of the book an unfortunate omission.

Despite this limitation, Willis does a commendable job in examining what we do in our weekly assemblies. He begins with a chapter on the theology of worship. After a short exposition on John 4:24, he stresses that Christian worship is Christ-centred: the Lord's Supper is a partaking in the body of Christ; hymns are sung to Christ; prayer is offered in the name of Christ and the gathering is the body of Christ. From this theological basis, Willis uses four criteria to evaluate our worship:

- theological (what are we confessing and teaching about God when we do what we do?)
- historical ('a sense of history saves us from the tyranny of present trends and fads')
- pastoral (are worshippers encouraged, is the whole church growing closer to God and each other?)
- communicative (words, gestures and forms ought to be examined for what they communicate).

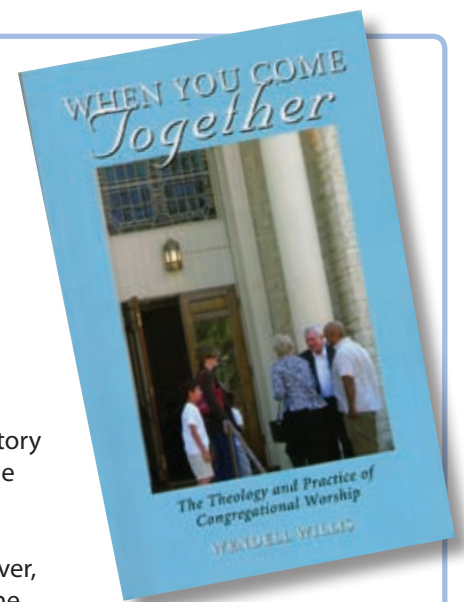
The next chapter is a discussion on early Christian worship among Jews and Gentiles. Willis points out that the New Testament provides 'very little explicit information' about how the earliest church worshipped. However, early church history can supplement this. He notes, for example, that early church worship was closer to synagogue worship

(which was word and prayer-based, participatory and lay-led) than Temple worship (which was sacrifice-based and priesthood-led). Moreover, as more Gentiles became Christians, it was remarkable that Gentile pagan cultic practices (typically involving sacrifice, processions, dance, singing with instrumental accompaniment) weren't carried over into the church. Christian worship was distinctive in its simplicity and restraint.

After that follows seven chapters on specific aspects of worship: prayer, singing, the Word (reading), sermon, the Lord's Supper, giving and baptism. Each chapter begins with a description of what is typically done, followed by an evaluation using the theological-historical-pastoral-communicative criteria. Among some of Willis' more thought-provoking comments:

- 'Because the Lord's Prayer was intended as a prayer which both shaped and defined Jesus' followers, I believe that it is still appropriate and valuable for worship today.'
- 'It will surprise many both in and out of Churches of Christ to know that the rejection of instrumental music in worship is not unique to us – even today. Apart from the fact that there are factions in most major traditions of Christendom which are *a cappella* (Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists), this is also the case with the numerous Eastern Orthodox churches (Greek, Russian, etc).'
- On Scripture reading: 'There should be a place for God to speak to us through his word apart from our attempts to explain or interpret his words.'
- 'The goal of biblical preaching is to work with a portion of Scripture until by thought, study and prayer it becomes transparent, and the hearers can see God through it.'
- On the Lord's Supper: 'Theologically, we would want to emphasize that this meal is the Lord's (we are his guests), that it is community based (from the word *koinonia*), and that it presents a remembrance of God's gracious act in Christ for which we give him thanks (eucharist).'

Willis also makes a case for baptism to be undertaken in the context of worship. : 'If...worship is a community-shaping event, and if baptism is the occasion for entrance into that community, then the two have an essential, not simply pragmatic relationship.' Whilst he acknowledges the validity of 'private baptism' (baptism outside the context of congregational worship), he argues that 'baptism in the



Book Review cont.

context of the church gathered for worship is a better normative pattern'. However, Willis doesn't explicitly deal with the question of timing: should we wait for the Sunday worship assembly if, on Monday, a person is convicted of his need for baptism and wants to be baptised immediately?

The closing chapter looks at the shape of the worship hour. Willis favours worship having some form or structure. He asserts that 'free form' worship may give the impression that God too is random and unpredictable – whereas Scripture depicts God as an intentional creator and shaper (Genesis 1-3). He also points out that the 'shapeless approach to worship' probably increases anxiety rather than attention in many worshippers. On this he quotes C. S. Lewis – who once observed that Jesus' command to

Peter was 'feed my sheep' and not 'run experiments on my rats'!

Overall, Willis has made a useful contribution to the literature on worship. He writes clearly and demonstrates familiarity with Scripture and church history. He's also sensitive to the practices of Churches of Christ. Granted, some might quibble that he doesn't use footnotes and his treatment lacks detail. Others might be disappointed that he doesn't address worship in other contexts – like house churches and family or individual worship times. However, the upside is that the book is short and simple to read. Most importantly, Willis' tone is respectful and considered. He's removed the pugnacity that sometimes characterises the worship wars, and made it more of a dialogue – and that's something to be thankful for. □

1 For more detailed treatments, see: Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for This Urgent Time* (Eerdmans, 1995), one of the first books to question seeker-sensitive worship services. Dawn's sequel is *A Royal "Waste" of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World* (Eerdmans, 1999). For a more recent discussion, see Bryan Chappell, *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* (Baker Academic, 2009).

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Gleanings

On suffering

'When souls become wicked they will certainly use this possibility to turn on one another; and this, perhaps, accounts for four-fifths of the sufferings of men. It is men, not God, who have produced racks, whips, prisons, slavery, guns, bayonets, and bombs; it is by human avarice or human stupidity, not by the churlishness of nature, that we have poverty and overwork.'
– C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (Geoffrey Bles, 1940) p 70.

'To say that Christ takes upon himself the sins of the world is to say that he takes upon himself the suffering of the world too... But unlike Buddhism, Christianity...affirms this love that suffers and, what is more, affirms it not in spite of the fact that it suffers but because of it. It affirms it for the reason that to love others to the point of suffering with them and for them in their own suffering is the only way ultimately to heal them, redeem them, if they are to be redeemed at all.'
– Frederick Buechner, *Now & Then: A Memoir of Vocation* (Harper, 1983) p 103-104.

'The modern humanist traditions see suffering as a deficiency – usually under the analogy of sickness... Suffering, as such, has no value and no meaning – it is only a sign that things have gone wrong, and a challenge to humanity to set them right again through goodwill and ingenuity... In counteracting the trend, Lamentations provides demonstrations for the ennoblement of suffering. It *faces* suffering, *encounters* suffering. It doesn't *do* anything about it. It doesn't *give* an answer. It doesn't *provide* a remedy. By taking suffering seriously it gives significance to it... [It] encourages the "longsuffering" of pastoral work, gives meaning and dignity to the person who suffers, and leaves the healing up to God in Christ on the cross.'
– Eugene H Petersen, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (Eerdmans, 1980) p 137-141.