

Theological and Biblical Foundations for Performance Ethics in Congregational Worship

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ABSTRACT

Changes in global trends are throwing up discordant views in Christian worship which requires a biblical-theological approach to maintain a balance. This paper advocates for the necessity of standard ethics that is guided by theological and biblical principles for congregational worship. These guiding principles entrenched in the Old and New Testaments are fundamental to meaningful worship. The article examines the meaning of performance ethics, the concept of congregational worship, biblical and theological concepts of performance ethics in worship and the concept of congregational music in worship. The paper concludes with the recommendation that congregational worship which includes church music should be guided by biblical principles underpinning actions, liturgy and disposition with robust performance ethics to enrich worship and glorify God.

Keywords: Theological, biblical, performance ethics, congregational worship

INTRODUCTION

Worship is a vital spiritual experience in the life of the Christian and church life. The word worship originates from “weorthscipe” which is an old English word (Wardle, 1992, 24). It consists of our words and actions, the outward expression of our homage and adoration when we are assembled in the presence of God (Maxwell, 2007). Therefore, an understanding of its nature and practice is key in the savvy of worship. ‘Worship’ means ascribing worth to a person or thing of value. Since creation, God’s plan for humanity is worship. Therefore, how we worship matters, and there are standard guidelines in the Old and New Testaments on how it should be conducted. Webber (2009) noted that currently, the worship of many local congregation stands at an uncertain crossroad. One of the major reasons for this uncertainty is the breakdown of distinct denominational worship styles; the interdenominational character of many denominations, and the freedom of worship leaders to draw from the many styles of worship is changing the worship of many churches. For this reason, there seems to be a great deal of anxiety among pastors and other worship leaders.

Worship can be personal or congregational, which are not contradictory, but complementary (Stanfield, 1965, p.18) and engaging in both types. Raughley (1962) opines that most of our worship is “fundamentally dull, inglorious, irrelevant, and lacking in adequate abrasives” due to the wants in performance ethics. Personal worship has its challenges, but this paper will focus on congregational worship relating to its performance ethics. The experience of congregational Worship rests upon three things (Segler, 1967, p. 196), namely, the worshippers

themselves, the Holy Spirit's Power, and the human leadership provided in the order and conduct of worship. It is therefore, expedient for worship leaders to be cautious of the process of serving and ministering (Liesch, 2001, p.126 and Segler, 1967, pp. 198-199). It is against this backdrop that the paper highlights performance ethics in congregational worship, its meaning, and its theological and biblical foundational underpinnings. This forms a basic necessity for worthwhile congregational worship, and also as a weightier responsibility for careful planning of worship service and its orderliness and effective conduct which also includes congregational music.

MEANING OF PERFORMANCE ETHICS

Ethics is an inquiry into the "oughtness" of the state of issues. On the other hand, Performance ethics in congregational worship is an inquiry into the "how" or "the ways" of carrying out congregational worship. It could also mean a liturgical sequence of worship as found in Leviticus 8–9 and 2 Chronicles 5–7. cf. 1 Chronicles 15–16 (Farley, 2008, p. 605). "Performing" and "performance" are potentially contentious words within the context of contemporary Christian worship. However, performative elements are explicit in congregational worship (Thorton, 2023, p.1).

Some literatures have emerged in recent years, says Thorton; such as Ingalls *et al.* (2013); Kelman (2018); Steuernagel (2021); Rein and Springer (1986) and a host of others who have attempted to connect worship to performance ethics, however, these have been tilted towards contemporary Christian Singing (Thorton, 2023, p.2). Studies have found that group singing increases a sense of group connectedness, trust and cooperation (Kirschner & Tomasello, 2010; Wiltermuth & Heath, 2009). Brown *et al.* (2022) reported that a study with church congregations has found that participation in church worship increases feelings of connection, as measured by communicative items and the Involvement of Others in Self (IOS) (Aron *et al.*, 1992), with one's congregation (Charles *et al.*, 2020, 2021). These findings point to the blessings of good performance ethics in congregational worship experiences. To perform, as Liesch (2001) expresses it: "is to do something complicated or difficult with skill in public to serve and minister" (Liesch 2001, p.126). This takes into cognizance the environment, style, structure, and style of worship (Webber, 2008, p.163)

Performance ethics which is also called attitudinal stance (Khalia and Mark, 2021) has evoked some critical issues as argued by different shades of the church, such as the Roman Catholic, evangelicals, puritans, Charismatics and others, giving reference to liturgical practices in different church age (Farley, 2008, p. 591). This according to Morris Ford (cited by Farley, 2008), could suggest two meanings. The first is the position of the body, as suggesting some thought, feeling, or action, while the other is the state of mind, behaviour, or conduct regarding some matter, as indicating opinion or purpose. Performance ethics is guided by many orientations, which include: Praxis, theological, historical, and biblical-typological models. Many disputes about worship practices occur in part because there is no shared hermeneutical and theological framework for developing a biblical theology of worship (Farley, 2008, p. 591).

An enquiry into the ethos of Performance of biblical worship, suggests it is a concept about the process of worship, which expresses theological explanation and justification of Christian practices in corporate worship that draws upon the whole Bible (Farley, 2008, p. 591). Additionally, Farley opines that since the church's liturgy happens in symbolic forms that are

both verbal and non-verbal and sacramental forms are a constitutive part of Christian worship, Christians must acknowledge that worship involves the response of the whole person in mind, heart, and body. Thus, biblical theology of worship will attend to matters like ritual gesture and bodily posture, color and other visual symbolism, architectural setting, and other physical/tangible ways that corporate worship is embodied (Farley, 2008, p. 599).

Wayland (1971) argues that the Christian church is in a time of tremendous experimentation in ways of worshipping God, but this has resulted in diverse and inconsistent ways of worship as revealed in the Bible and practiced by the early church. Worship is ordained by God; Man is created for worship and the end of worship is to glorify God. Webber in his view of performance ethics or worship principles maintains that "Principles of worship may be drawn from both the Old and the New Testament. . . In the Old Testament, God gives His people specific directions regarding the how, when, and wherefore of meeting Him in worship" (Webber, 2009, p.14). These directions contain principles that were not abrogated for the Christian church (Farley, 2008, p. 600). Following these positions, one could enunciate that worship should be done according to the stipulations of Him who has ordained it, for we are not free to worship God as we like. Everything must be done according to the scriptures.

CONCEPT OF CONGREGATIONAL WORSHIP

Congregational worship is a concept that expresses the communal and cooperative nature of worship. It connotes a corporate worship environment. It could also mean the church gathered in worship (Stanfield, 1965, p.29). According to Gains (1962, p. 58), congregational worship is the cooperative response of the Christian community to the "Divine Presence-Purpose". Farley avers that worship (congregational) involves specific acts of devotion that embody the relational dynamic between God and his people in a more explicit and focused manner (p. 591).

Congregational worship comprises certain phases (entrance, in-service, closure), and elements of worship (Bible reading, singing, preaching, prayers, and responses), each of these is directed by a designated person ranging from the Pastor, Music Director, Choir, instrumentalists and other officiating personnel. Also on this note, Farley submits the following regarding liturgy and worship:

In the Christian perspective, every act and aspect of life can be considered worship, in the sense that every occasion in life is an opportunity for gratefully receiving God's gracious gifts and responding with whole-hearted devotion. These specific acts of worship include activities more commonly associated with the term "worship", such as prayers of confession, praise, thanksgiving, and intercession (spoken or sung), reading and reflection on Scripture, giving of money or other offerings for the poor, participation in baptism and the Eucharist, etc.

These particular kinds of worship may be performed by individuals in private, by small gatherings of Christians (for example families, small groups), or by a whole congregation (Webber, 2009, p.14). Nevertheless, in serving at these designated moments and activities, differences occur, hence the possibility for freedom, but responsible freedom (Stanfield, 1965, p. 30) and not formlessness (Gains 1962, p.21), as Dobbins concludes by saying that "freedom in worship does not mean license, but heavier responsibility" (Gains, 1962, p.52). Neil Summerton, submits that corporate worship has widely fallen, and there has been a wide gap between what is professed in corporate worship and the poverty of spiritual experience and

practice in the lives of the worshippers, it is only to be expected that corporate worship will be hollow and unrewarding, says Neil Summerton, who aver that this is due to deficiency in the understanding of worship and its performance (Summerton, 1994, p.25), hence for congregational worship is to be restored, contemporary Christians must give heed to their content, form, style, structure, and other issues related to worship performance (Summerton, 1994, p.40.) Summerton also averts:

If truly corporate worship is to be revived, leaders may need to seek to change attitudes by teaching, by example, by structures, and by the sensitive leading of worship, which is aimed at obliging the congregation to recognize one another's presence. Appropriate ways include greeting one another, addressing one another at suitable moments, and acknowledging one another in passing the elements in communion. (Summerton, 1994, pp.42-43).

The experience of congregational Worship depends upon three things (Segler, 1967, p. 196) — the worshippers themselves, the Holy Spirit's Power, and the human leadership provided in the order and conduct of worship. It is therefore expedient for worship leaders to be cautious of the process of serving and ministering (Liesch, 2001, p.126 and Segler, 1967, pp. 198-199). Webber (2009) noted that:

Currently, the worship of many local congregations stands at an uncertain crossroads. One of the major reasons for this uncertainty is the breakdown of distinct denominational worshipping styles. The interdenominational character of many denominations and the freedom of worship leaders to draw from the many styles of worship is changing the worship of many churches. For this reason, there seems to be a great deal of anxiety among pastors and other worship leaders. What kind of worship could possibly meet the changes that are taking place in the church?

The words of Dachis (2012) "You Can Do Anything but Not Everything" are therefore through here as they convey the idea of concern in the way and manner we engage in worship, primarily.

THEOLOGICAL AND BIBLICAL UNDERPINNING FOR PERFORMANCE ETHICS IN WORSHIP

From the beginning of time, God has always had a plan for worship. As society has changed across ages, modes and practices of worship have changed both negatively and positively. Nevertheless, a study of the bible gives insight into the nature of worship. Present-day congregational worship has been influenced by many things (Stanfield, 1965, p. 29). Farley (2008, p. 591) speaking on "What is Biblical Worship" argues that God's revelation is the ultimate guide and norm for true Christian worship, Christians should care about properly understanding what God has revealed in his word on this subject. In view of this, Owens and McMurray (1999, p. 11) observe that one can turn anywhere to find individuals or congregations attempting to modify worship to soothe their own taste resulting in different shades of worship. However, congregational performance ethics are arrayed in the Bible (Old & New Testaments). If worship is to be engaged effectively, it must be ethical, though not stereotyped.

The Bible is full of God's instructions about worship. Performance ethics finds its command beginning from the Genesis' account of Cain and Abel's sacrificial moments (Gen. 4:1-16), which connotes worship to be an act towards God, and climaxing at the eschatological worship in the apocalypse (Rev. 4). The construction of the tabernacle and establishment of the temple and its

liturgical practice, ritual procedures and elements (furniture) connote the need for order in worship (Exodus 25-40). Unique biblical emphasis is found in God's command to Moses and Aaron in regards to processes (Exo. 35:30, 32-33; Num. 4:26-27, 8:22). The Psalms are embellished with worship instructions, as the manner of worship, place of worship, and the posture of the worshippers (Psalm 1, 15, 90, 95, 96, 100, 120-134, 143, 148, and 150). These bible passages attest that worship has three audiences: God, the worshippers, and the prompters as Barry (2001, p. 24) observed. Furthermore, the prophetic books address the issue of unethical and improper worship, which was despised by God (Amos 5, Isaiah 55, Ezek. 44, Malachi 3, and others). Worship customs and practices are seen in the gospel and the book of Acts, such as the fixed hours of prayers (Acts 4), and reading of scriptures (Luke 8).

Paul in the New Testament exhorts on worship and worshippers in regards to prayer (1 Tim. 2:8). His letters to the Corinthians are channeled to address issue of disorderliness in worship such as inappropriate ways of administering and partaking of the Eucharist, and formalism. He instructs Timothy on how believers are to conduct themselves in the house of God, which is the ground and pillar for truth (1 Tim 4:16). The writer of the book of Hebrews sets worship in the right perspective, contrasting and comparing new covenant worship, through Christ and the Old worship system, through animal sacrifices (Heb, 7-10), with an outstanding exhortation of not neglecting the gathering of the brethren (Heb. 10:25). Also, the Apostle Peter addresses saints and worshippers to be holy, for God who called them is holy (1 Pet. 1:15-16). Worship as revealed in the Book of Revelations, is an ordered process, with worship persons waiting for their turn to worship God (Rev. 19:4-7).

George Janvier, in his work *Leading the Church in Music and Worship*, identified issues related to church worship, in which he listed action-related issues (George, 2007, p.46). He argued from his research that this issue has resulted in disorderliness, distractions, and disruptions in worship (George, 2007, p.47). It will therefore, be accounted that the focus of improving our worship experiences, demands that worship should be done in an orderly manner.

CONCEPT OF CONGREGATIONAL MUSIC IN WORSHIP

Corporate worship involves congregational singing which comprises all congregation whether members or just participants. Miller (1993, p.49) affirms that the singing should be done by the people. In the same light, Davidson (2002, p.40) submits that the plan of God is for His people to come united, sharing a common faith, common experience, common relationship with God (Ex.19:5-9, Eph. 4:4-6) and striking a balance between personal and corporate interactions which are guided by specially selected leaders.

Forms of musical expression in congregational worship include vocal and instrumental music which must be properly organized for effective and acceptable worship to God. Adedeji (2000) in his theological theory submits that sacred music practice and study should be founded on sound theological philosophy and approach. This implies that the Christian worshipper or the church musician and leaders must experience the new birth and be filled with the Holy Spirit to enhance worship (John 4:24). It is not surprising then that George Janvier, in his work *Leading the Church in Music and Worship* identifies problems related to worship in the church (Janvier, 2007, p 46-47). Standard performance ethics requires that every aspect of worship including music should be led by the spirit; Music leaders should be capable, well trained and involved in adequate preparation. Disorderliness and lack of proper organization are causes of

distractions and must be avoided in worship. Every part of worship should be done to the honour of God (Janvier, 2007, p.50).

Bussey (1994) in his work on *Biblical Worship Today* argues that, though the precise details are not spelled out, worship should be done in an orderly manner. To address this idea, Aniol (2009, p. 30) proposes the notion, that "worship is a spiritual response to God as a result of understanding biblical truth about God" hence "scriptural truth about God should be the content of congregational worship music... because it is truth about God that moves us to appropriate worshipful responses. Personal experiences or other subjective expressions of God are not as sure and true as biblical truth. (Scott, 2009, p.174). considering the personnel in worship: the Holy Spirit, the congregation, and the worship leader, Franklin (1967, p. 196) quoted Luther Reed, who warns against fussy and meaningless practices in congregational worship that cannot satisfy men who are seeking reality. He insists that the mechanics of worship be unobtrusive and that the details must not attract attention to worship leaders (Summerton, p.49). Roberson (2022) citing Myrick (2021) rightfully agrees that congregational music should be ethical (p.106). Congregational music that is ethical is guided by good performance ethics.

Adedeji 2007 submits that Christian music should be presented decently and orderly, the language and the message of the music should be understood by the congregation and there should be moderation in the dressing (1Tim. 2:9) and commitment to the Christian message. Adegboye (2007, p.17) agrees with Adedeji (2007) on this accession and maintains that "Christian music cannot be more important than Christian message" it is therefore, imperative to supply good congregational Christian music with a good message and live by that message which is the gospel of Christ. In the same vein, Brown (2013) rightly enunciates that good performance ethics enhances better congregational worship experience.

CONCLUSION

As society has changed across ages, modes of worship have also changed both negatively and positively. Different contemporary congregations' clamour for various forms of worship: flexible or scripted, however, the idea that the practice of worship in the contemporary church should be based on the solid foundation of biblical, historical, and theological studies should be given credence in worship in all its forms. Congregational worship which also includes music performance, should not be worldly, but guided by biblical principles that will edify worshippers through standard performance ethics which will enhance effective Christian worship and bring glory to God.

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