



# Freedom in our Worship

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The Rolling Stones once famously sang, “I am free to do what I want any old time.” Thankfully, Mick Jagger and his associates have never been considered an authoritative source for Christian doctrine or practice. However, in regard to worship, many Christians have chosen to emphasize “I am free to do what I want.” At the same time, others have elected to accentuate an “old time” inclination in regard to worship. How should the Church respond to these often polarizing preferences?

The primary and authoritative norm for Christian doctrine and practice is the Word of God. Lutheran Christians have always proclaimed one of the rallying cries of the Reformation, “*Sola Scriptura!*” The Word of God is the “*norma normans*” which forms and shapes what we believe, teach, and confess. Also, the Lutheran Confessions to which we unconditionally subscribe are a true exposition of this Word and a correct exhibition of our doctrine. Therefore we need not look elsewhere. All that we truly need to guide our consideration of the topic of freedom in worship is found in these two sources. Far too often Christ’s people have chosen to formulate their response to the matter of freedom in worship based on opinions, traditions, social trends, or cultural norms. These considerations can be helpful, but only in a tangential manner. They can be illustrative, provide context, or add nuance to particular situations but they should never be viewed as determinative in regard to doctrine and practice.

What does God’s Word say about freedom in worship? Let’s begin in the Old Testament. As one reads through Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy one overarching principle stands out. God cares about how His people worship Him. He is concerned with the details. He gives instruction regarding the dimensions and materials for the tabernacle. He mandates many different types of sacrifice and their attendant rubrics. He fastidiously specifies certain festivals and feasts. He meticulously outlines what may and may not be done on Sabbath. He is a God of order and structure. Nowhere in the Torah is ecclesiastical chaos encouraged, much less tolerated.

However, as one continues to read through the corpus of the Old Testament there is also remarkable freedom given by Yahweh to His covenant people as they express their faith in worship. The Psalms are the “hymnal” of the Old Testament. There is a diversity of genre contained within the 150 Psalms. The subject matter of the Psalms differ greatly, even within the different types. There are a multiplicity of musical instruments mentioned for accompaniment. It is apparent that the Hebrews did not have a “one-instrument” approach to worship. Sometimes the Psalms call for a “new song” (Ps. 33, 40, 96, 98, 144). Sometimes Israel sang “old songs” like the Song of the Sea from Exodus 15 (Ps. 76, 136). And when it came to these old songs, they often did not update them from the more ancient form of the language to a newer form in order



to “stay relevant.” This is why Exodus 15 is so notoriously difficult on novice Hebrew exegetes; it is in an archaic form of Hebrew. In a similar manner, we still sing “How Great Thou Art” rather than “How Great You Are.” The predominant theme was freedom within the boundaries of what God gave them. They exercised liberty in regard to genre, theme, instrumentation, setting, date of composition, and even dialect.

In the pages of the New Testament we encounter a similar approach to worship which maintains this tension between order and freedom. The Gospels unflinchingly record Jesus’ habit of being active and engaged in the worship life of God’s people. It was His custom to be in the synagogue on the Sabbath (Lk 4:16). He regularly and faithfully travelled to the Temple to observe and fulfill the obligations mandated by the Old Testament (Lk 2:41, Jn 2:13, 7:14). The One who is Lord of the Sabbath (Mk 2:28) and who is the Temple incarnate (Mt 12:6, Jn 2:19-22) chose not to dispense with these strictures or make light of them, but to fulfill them. He says in Matthew 5:17, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”

At the same time that Jesus is fulfilling the old, he is bringing something new. We read this account from John 4 in His conversation with the woman at the well in Samaria,

<sup>21</sup> Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. <sup>22</sup> You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.<sup>23</sup> But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. <sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” <sup>25</sup> The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.” <sup>26</sup> Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am he.”

With these words, and with many others, Jesus announces that He is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises and prophecy. And as He does so, He sets people free by focusing their worship on His redemptive activity on their behalf. “If the Son sets you free, you are free indeed” (John 8:36). People no longer have to be trapped by “the traditions of the elders” (Mk 7). They are no longer slaves to Sabbath regulations (Mk 2).

How does the rest of the New Testament echo this chorus of freedom in Christ, especially in regard to worship? Paul states in Galatians 3,

<sup>23</sup> Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. <sup>24</sup> So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. <sup>25</sup> But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, <sup>26</sup> for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.<sup>27</sup> For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.<sup>28</sup> There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup> And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.”



This liberty is expressed in the worship life of the New Testament church. They did not compartmentalize their worship as only a “part” of their life, they viewed the entirety of their lives as worship pleasing to their Lord.

From Acts 2, “<sup>42</sup> And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers”  
to Colossians 3, “<sup>16</sup> Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. <sup>17</sup> And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him”  
to Revelation 7, “<sup>9</sup> After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, <sup>10</sup> and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

We see a consistent thread of worship and praise. The predominant theme in New Testament worship is freedom within the boundaries of what God has given us in Christ Jesus our Lord. We exercise liberty in regard to genre, theme, instrumentation, setting, date of composition, language, and even dialect.

The Rolling Stones once sang, “I am free to do what I want any old time.” But you and I won’t be fooled again. It has never been about “I am free to do what I want.” It has never been about liking that “old time” worship style that just soothes the soul. Preferences, opinions, traditions, social trends, and cultural norms all need to take a back seat. The worship life of the people of God in both the Old and New Testament finds its substance and shape in the words of Scripture. There is great freedom when that occurs. May it continue to be so among us.