

IS THERE ONE RIGHT WAY TO WORSHIP?

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Worship styles are changing. But then, has there ever been a period when worship styles have not changed? Some of the first Baptist worship services, for instance, lasted for over three hours and included several sermons: thank God we have moved on! The fact is that there is no one 'right' way to worship God. As Baptists we may not be enamoured with the liturgical patterns of *Common Worship* – but this does not mean to say that our Baptist way of doing things is any more 'Spirit'-inspired than that enjoyed by our Anglican brothers & sisters. And any rate, what is 'our Baptist way' of worshipping God? With the sad demise of *Baptist Praise and Worship*, we no longer have a common hymnbook – indeed, many a church has no hymnbook at all. Of more concern than the lack of a common hymnbook, however, is the way in which in some churches the planning of worship is left to the last minute, as though 'spontaneity' is a mark of spirituality. For me the reverse is the case: unprepared worship is a mark of laziness. God demands our best – not least in the area of worship. Good worship demands hard work and concentrated thought. Like King David, we should not offer to God in worship that which costs us nothing (see 2 Sam 24.24). Needless to say, a minister's preparation should not be a strait-jacket – there are times when circumstances or just an inward sensing of the heart may dictate a change to the words we had chosen to us or the hymn we had chosen to sing. But these are the exceptions to the rule that Spirit-inspired worship is prepared worship. As for the form of Spirit-inspired worship, that will vary: just as there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, so there are varieties of Spirit-inspired worship forms. Just as there was no one pattern of worship in the early church (the worship at Corinth as described in 1 Cor 12-14 was undoubtedly very different from the worship at Ephesus as outlined in Paul's letters to Timothy), so there is no one pattern of worship for today. But although there may not be one basic order of service, there are a number of ingredients basic to worship. It has often been said that the essential ingredients of Spirit-inspired worship find their roots in the Jewish synagogue and the Upper room. To the praise and prayer, the Scripture readings and the sermon – all characteristic of the Jewish synagogue – were added the breaking of bread and the fellowship of the Upper Room. In our Baptist churches today there is plenty of praise – but prayer in terms of intercessory prayer is often sadly missing; there is plenty of sermonising, but sometimes very little Scripture; fellowship too is in good supply, but most Baptists celebrate the Lord's Supper just once a month (even where communion takes place once in the morning, and once in the evening, most people are not present at both services). Where a Baptist church has not got a fair balance of all these ingredients, then it seems to me that something is wrong. At the end of the day it is not the form but the content which counts.

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