

Some Thoughts on Worship “Etiquette”

Dub McClish

Introduction

Acceptable worship must be God-centered, rather than man-centered. For failure to understand or remember this fact, many are introducing strange practices into worship assemblies because these things please and excite them and make them feel good. However, some who would never consider introducing any strange worship practices behave in worship assemblies in a manner that indicates their inattention toward God. It is this latter group I have in mind in the comments to follow.

It is axiomatic that when we assemble for worship, we should do our very best to express reverently to God and His Son the praise, honor, devotion, and exaltation They deserve. If we enter into worship with sincere and genuine hearts, such behavior will be our aim. The Lord teaches that true worshipers “worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:23-24). The “spirit” part of His statement is a reference to our wholehearted devotion, as described above. We should therefore strive to behave so as not to interrupt the meditation and concentration (our own or others’) of those involved in worship – the purpose for which we have gathered.

Even in small assemblies there will likely be some unavoidable distractions (crying babies, sudden illness, etc.). The larger the assembly, the greater the likelihood of such occurrences. However, my concern is not with the unavoidable behaviors, but with those that **are** avoidable. Many of these will be recognized and eliminated if we will but employ common sense and good manners. I am convinced that many brethren engage in some of the activities discussed below, not intending to distract or even realizing they are doing so. However, the distraction, though unintentional, is no less real.

Some may wonder about my qualifications as a “church etiquette” expert. I claim only one: I preached almost every Lord’s Day for over five decades. Those who have not stood before crowds on a consistent basis would be amazed at what preachers observe while they are standing in the pulpit. The lists of such things by others might be a bit different from mine, but below is my list of unseemly behavior I’ve seen during worship.

Talk, Talk, Talk

While realizing that there may be an occasional justification for one to make a brief comment to the worshiper next to him, but not for doing it several times during a worship

period, or for carrying on an extended conversation during the sermon, the singing, or any other part of the assembly. Sometimes young people are notorious for so doing. However, I have observed many adults who have this distracting habit as well. Those who seem compelled to talk during worship distract themselves, the one(s) to whom they talk, and several people who are sitting around them.

If they must talk, they should move to the back row where at least there will be no one behind them to be distracted. No, I am not seriously suggesting that any more sit at the back (too many do already!), as the reader will soon see. The real remedy is to cease talking during worship. A more effective (and less distracting) way to exchange necessary questions or comments relating to the sermon, announcements, songs, or other things is to write it and pass it to one's neighbor.

Walk, Walk, Walk

Each time a person leaves during worship it is a distraction for those seated nearby (especially if it is necessary to crawl over people to get to the aisle). Admittedly, circumstances sometimes arise, requiring one to get up and leave during or to come in late for a worship assembly. A mother with one or more little ones seldom gets through a worship hour without having to take a baby out. However, I am convinced that most of the traffic during worship is avoidable and unnecessary. Children (as do as adults) need to be "watered" and "bath-roomed" between Bible class time and worship. There is rarely a necessity for an adult or a child to leave a worship assembly and certainly no excuse for one to do so two, three, or even four times in a sixty-to-seventy-five-minute assembly.

Circumstances can arise to cause any of us to arrive late occasionally, but some do so frequently or even habitually. Others also make it their habit to leave early – during the invitation song. In some congregations, if one wanted to respond to the invitation, he would have difficulty dodging the outgoing traffic on his way to the front. If one arrives late and the sermon is not in progress, waiting until a time between songs or until after a prayer is over to find your seat, instead of just "barging in" will cause minimum distraction.

"A Worthy Manner"

The behavior of some during the Lord's supper is little short of amazing, considering the solemnity of the occasion and the plain words of warning about trivializing it (1 Cor. 11:26-29).

I have difficulty believing that there is much remembering of the suffering of our Lord by some when I see them begin talking, even jovially, with the one sitting next to them immediately after being served the bread or the fruit of the vine. On one occasion, I saw the mother of a three-year-old stooped over picking up her child's toys from the floor as the bread was passed. The one next to her had to alert her to the arrival of the bread plate, at which time she straightened up, took a portion of the bread to her mouth, then promptly resumed her toy collecting job. Surely, such activities do not qualify as partaking in "a worthy manner."

I suggest one of the following practices to help keep our minds where they should be as we observe this sacred supper:

1. Open your Bible to one of the accounts of the Lord's trials and crucifixion and read it (Mat. 26-27; Mark 14-15; Luke 22-23; John 18-19). Or, read some other appropriate passage (e.g., Isa. 53; 1 Cor. 11:23-29; Heb. 7:26-28; 9:11-28; et al.).
2. Turn to some of the great hymns and spiritual songs that memorialize the Lord's death, and read and meditate on their words (e.g., "The Old Rugged Cross," "I Gave My Life for Thee," "Night with Ebon Pinion," "Nothing But the Blood of Jesus," "'Tis Midnight, and on Olive's Brow," "He Loved Me So," "The Lord's Supper," et al.).

The Way-backers Club

If anyone ever invents a church auditorium with no back pews, he will attract the acute interest several hundred preachers and elders. (The rumored design never materialized in which pews mounted on tracks, upon the push of a button, could be moved from the back to the front when the back pew was filled.) Generally, the pews and the songbooks with the least wear are those near the front.

The back pews seem to have an almost magnetic attraction to some folk. Some, as they enter, just cannot seem to get beyond the second or third pew from the back. Ironically, most of these same brethren want to be front and center when they attend a theatrical performance, a concert, or a sports event. (Are they thereby saying that they want to be as far from "the action" as possible when they come to worship God?)

Those with health problems, late arrivers, and mothers with small babies really **need** to sit near the back. In some cases, however, they would almost have to fight the confirmed "way-backers" to do so. All the encouraging, cajoling, and almost begging by elders and preachers to the "way-backers" seem to be wasted effort. Like the tree planted by the water, **they shall not be moved**. They

don't seem to realize that their presence nearer the front would minimize distractions and thus enable them to better hear and concentrate on the message presented, contribute more to the singing, encourage the preacher and/or the elders, and work toward closer fellowship with others.

Rubber Necking

Apparently, some folk played hooky from the manners class, or perhaps they were taught, but forgot. It is bad manners to "rubberneck" – to turn around and stare every time one hears a noise behind him (e.g., a baby crying). Some appear to have owl-like swivel necks. They turn around and gawk, even when there is no obvious reason to do so, and they may do it several times in the same assembly. This behavior is a sure sign of inattention to the worship of God, even were it not ill mannered. This behavior is inappropriate in a **secular** gathering, and even more so in an assembly of worshippers.

Rubbernecking is especially in poor taste when the gawker turns and glares at a young mother who is trying to quiet her baby. She feels badly enough without some rubberneckers staring at her and calling more attention to her plight (as if their glares would quiet the baby). Some need to work much harder at resisting the temptation to turn around and stare, or even just to turn around, period. The rule for both adults and children during worship ought to be "eyes front."

Necking

For the uninformed, *necking* is a slang term for outward expressions of affection usually (and better) reserved for private circumstances. I refer not merely to putting an arm on the back of the pew behind one's wife or girlfriend, but of what borders on "petting." I have observed this both when I have been preaching and when I have been in the audience listening to someone else. One might think such behavior to be characteristic mainly of immature teenagers, moon-struck with a bad case of puppy love. However, I have observed intimate hugs, massages, running fingers through the hair, and even kissing one's wife during worship activities (songs, sermon, even the Lord's supper – maybe even the prayers [I have not peeped to see]).

Without intending to be indelicate, some of the touching (and the body parts touched) I have seen during worship would be far more appropriately done in the bedroom by married couples than in the pew. Obviously, the ones involved in such behavior have their minds on something besides worshipping Jehovah. Such conduct is totally unseemly in a worship assembly, indeed, in any public setting. The Bible commands husbands and wives to love each other, but intimate expressions of such

during worship hardly contribute to their concentration on things spiritual. Nor do such antics enhance the spiritual concentration of those who observe them.

Baby Matters

Few sights are more beautiful than to see new mothers with their babies in the assemblies of the church. The following comments are in no way to be construed as any discouragement of mothers to bring their infants with them to worship at the earliest possible moment. However, babies can be distracting, and we should all be interested in keeping the distractions to a minimum. Babies are totally innocent relative to any disturbances they create, unlike adults who engage in unnecessary distracting behavior,

I earlier mentioned the need for mothers with babies to take their little ones out, and they should not be embarrassed when they must do so. Likewise, mothers are not to be blamed for the momentary distraction their crying innocents may cause. However, I can see no excuse for a mother to wait for three to five minutes of a baby's crying before taking the little one out. I have heard crying so loud that, if it did not overpower the preacher over the sound system, it at least totally distracted the entire assembly from what he was saying. A baby's cries seem especially amplified during the quietness of the Lord's supper.

Most buildings have facilities where a mother can take a baby and attend to its needs, while still being able to know what is taking place in the auditorium. It constitutes simple good manners, consideration of others, and reverence toward God to prevent a baby from disrupting an entire worship assembly, especially when it is so easily avoided.

Some just cannot seem to resist playing with and making faces at the babies or toddlers in front of them. Never mind that this may make it more difficult for the mother to make the child behave or that it is distracting to those sitting nearby. The one playing with the baby is surely not doing much worshiping himself, either.

May we let Paul's admonition concerning behavior in our worship assemblies be our constant guide: "But let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40).

[**Note:** I wrote this MS, and it originally appeared in the June/July 2002 issues of *The Gospel Journal*, a 36-page monthly of which I was editor at the time.]

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