

How Should We Reform Our Worship?

Theological Commission

Recently at the Free Will Baptist National Convention in Kansas City, five presenters shared different perspectives on the reform of Christian worship. The Commission for Theological Integrity was proud to sponsor this as our annual seminar and see nearly 100 attendees join us for this important discussion.

The panelists, moderated by outgoing Commission member W. Jackson Watts, shared their presentations, then answered questions posed by Watts and a few members of the audience. While the session was recorded and will be available at a later date, the Commission is also pleased to provide the transcripts of each presenter's remarks in upcoming posts on this website. Not only will this enable the substance of that seminar to reach a wider audience, but we hope it will generate careful reflection on both the state of evangelical worship, but also important principles and practices concerning Free Will Baptist worship.

In terms of context, the Commission has been sponsoring a seminar at the annual session since the 1980s. Typically, we've invited someone with expertise on a specific, timely topic to address a current question, debate, problem, or trend. In recent years we've been bringing together multiple voices to help us look at substantial topics from various angles. That's also the approach we took this year.

This was a unique session because we had *two hours* allotted to hear from panelists, hear them discuss a topic, and then respond to questions. Naturally, we weren't able to address *every* aspect of Christian worship. Plenty of books are available which seek to do that. We tried to approach the subject from a different angle: ***the angle of reform.***

We're currently witnessing many different voices and movements in the larger Christian world that are emphasizing the *reform* of worship. They certainly aren't unanimous in what they call "reform", "biblical", "attractive", or "achievable", but the undercurrent of many of these discussions is ***retrieval***. We chose to pose this in the form of a question: "We know all of worship is *contemporary* in the sense that it happens *now*, among God's church *today*. However, **given the 2000 years of Christian teaching and witness, how should the past shape and inform our present worship experiences?** In short, **"how should we reform our worship?"**

Many people discuss worship only with respect to musical styles. What people in Kansas City heard was based on the argument that music/singing, while a biblical component of worship, is *not* the sole equivalent of worship. (In fact, that's one of the biggest myths we sought to bust through our seminar.) While we addressed it briefly, we were more interested in

establishing ***Scripture's role as the norm of worship*** and looking at some guiding principles of worship more clearly.

A final note about timing. Little did we know when we planned this seminar, but one of the most prolific young Baptist theologians, Matthew Barrett, was only days from releasing [this announcement](#) concerning his departure from the Southern Baptist Convention for the Anglican Church. The timing was highly significant given some of the themes addressed by our presenters.

Among Barrett's stated reasons for his decision were worship, liturgy, and aesthetics. These matter more to all of us than we often acknowledge. So, to attempt to think about worship reform *through retrieval* from a distinctly Free Will Baptist perspective at this time was a prescient choice.

Our presenters included:

Rev. Daniel Webster, who is Director of Enrollment & Marketing at Welch College, as well as an instructor in Music and Theology. He's also the Associate Pastor for Music and Worship at Immanuel FWB Church (Gallatin, TN). His remarks were on the definition of worship.

His remarks were followed by Rev. Cory Thompson who addressed the centrality of preaching in Christian worship. Cory is the pastor of the First FWB Church of Poteau, Oklahoma, and an adjunct faculty member of Randall University. He's also one of our Commission members.

Dr. Kevin Hester then shared about the topic of the role of retrieval and reform in the Baptist tradition. Hester serves at Welch College as Dean of the School of Theology, Vice President for Institutional Effectiveness, and Senior Professor of Divinity. He also serves as Chairman of our Commission.

Dr. Matt Pinson, President of Welch College and Commission member, offered some analysis reflections on reform in our current ministry environment, especially as there are concerns about how we take Scripture and tradition seriously, while avoiding some of the excesses we're witnessing in the evangelical community.

Finally, Bro. Rodney Holloman concluded with a pastoral response that took into account what each of the prior presenters had shared. Holloman is the pastor of Hardin Valley Free Will Baptist Church in Knoxville, Tennessee, a Commission member and former Southeastern FWB College faculty member.

Continue to watch for these upcoming written presentations, and be sure to share and discuss them with others!