

Thoughts on Worship and Culture

By John Piper

September 26, 1990

1. There is very little in the New Testament about the forms and style and content of corporate worship. Following Old Testament forms too closely contradicts the obsolescence of the wineskins. God must mean to leave the matter of form and style and content to the judgment of our spiritual wisdom—not to our whim or our tradition, but to prayerful, thoughtful, culturally alert, self-critical, Bible-saturated, God-centered, Christ-exalting, reflection driven by a passion to be filled with all the fullness of God. I assume this will be an ongoing process, not a one-time effort.

2. One way to describe the differences in how people approach worship is to speak in terms of fine culture and folk culture. By "culture" I mean a pattern of life including thought and emotion and speech and activity. By "fine culture" I have in mind the pattern of life that puts a high priority on intellectual and artistic expressions that require extraordinary ability to produce and often demand disciplined efforts to understand and appreciate. By "folk culture" I have in mind the pattern of life that puts a high priority on expressions of heart and mind that please and help average people without demanding unusual effort.

For example it's the difference between classical music and blue grass (or easy listening or rock or show tunes or oldies or country western—all of which are "the music of the people", though I realize there is a continuum rather than a neat box for all kinds and qualities of music.)

Or another example would be the contrast between a Shakespearean drama at the Guthrie and "The Empire Strikes Back" at a theater.

Or one might think of the difference between reading Gerard Manley Hopkins' Poem "The Windhover - To Christ Our Lord". "I caught this morning's minion, kingdom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing. Or on the other hand reading the homespun poetry of Edgar A Guest, It takes a heap 'o livin' to make a house a home.

3. We should not pass judgment on fine culture or folk culture per se. There are caricatures of the excesses in both that are easy to condemn. That is not our purpose. It is more profitable is to consider the strengths and weaknesses built in to both of them so has to avoid the weaknesses and affirm the strengths in both. Fine culture and folk culture have intrinsic vulnerabilities to sin and unique potentialities for God-glorifying goodness. They are redeemable.

4. Intrinsic vulnerabilities of high culture include elitism and snobbishness. In demanding high levels of intellect and skill, it easily inflates the ego of those who succeed in it, and tempts them to look with contempt on folk culture with its simpler achievements. It easily isolates technical expertise from the larger issues of life and attempt to give it intrinsic value instead of defining its value in relation to other, more important spiritual and personal realities. It is inevitably less accessible to average people and therefore tends toward performance rather than participation, and this performance orientation carries again the tendency toward an atmosphere of aloofness and distance.

5. Intrinsic vulnerabilities of folk culture include a laziness and carelessness. There is an intrinsic drift toward increasing indifference to simple disciplines that define excellence at the most rudimentary levels (for example, using bad grammar in worship songs like "you reigneth" or having "you" and "thou" in the same line. This is not like the word "ain't" in "You ain't nothin' but a hound dog." It's like singing "Thou ain't nothin' but a hound dog."). Folk culture, with its intrinsic anti-intellectualism tends to short circuit the mind and move the emotions with shortcuts. Thus folk culture is not generally a preservative force for great Biblical doctrine.

6. The positive potentials of fine culture include the preservation of what we might call the "life of the mind". Fine culture is more likely than folk culture to inject into the stream of society the commitment to think hard and think clearly. It is more likely than folk culture to keep the intellect from atrophying. It is especially crucial that Christians not surrender the life of the mind to the secular world, first, because it belongs to God, and he commanded us to love him with our minds, and second, because we will lose succeeding generations if we do not have intellectually credible expressions of faith to pass on to them.

Further, fine culture has the potential of preserving the very concepts of *truth* and *excellence* and *beauty* as objective ideals rooted in God as our Absolute. Folk culture tends always to exalt what works. It is intrinsically pragmatic and colloquial and does not measure its achievements in terms of objective, absolute ideals, but generally in terms of wide appeal and practical effect. Fine culture tends to march the beat of a drummer other than mass appeal or practical effect. At its best it strives to create images of excellence and beauty and truth that echo more faithfully the ultimate excellence of God. Fine culture thus has the potential (if not contemporary success) of helping preserve the real complexities of truth and thus guarding against the intrinsic tendency of folk culture toward oversimplification and eventual distortion.

Fine culture has the potential of touching some emotions that folk culture will not touch. Folk culture tends toward what can be commonly shared and therefore minimizes what is rare. However some emotions that belong to God are rare and profound, and may be awakened and carried best through the expressions of fine culture. For example there are probably *some* senses of grandeur that find preservation and expression best in some grand and magnificent artistic statements that are not part of folk culture.

7. The positive potentials of folk culture include meeting people where they are in order to communicate. Folk culture affirms the importance of building bridges of shareable experience. It is a go-and-tell mentality rather than a come-and-see mentality. It goes the extra mile to make its vision accessible to the average person.

Folk culture keeps the truth clear that elite groups of intellectuals and artists that look with contempt on the common man and his needs and tastes are not admirable persons no matter how accomplished their talents. Folk culture has the potential of reminding us that God must have loved the common people because he made so many of them. Folk culture is by nature incarnational: it clothes its claims with the skin of ordinary people and affirms implicitly the value of getting though to the mind and heart of the masses.

Folk culture at its best has the potential of touching emotions that fine culture will not generally touch. Thus folk culture honors the preciousness of average wonders. Falling in love, taking a walk, eating a good meal, talking to a friend, swimming in the ocean, having a baby, planting a garden—all these are likely to be the subject of folk culture creations and communications. It helps us not neglect ordinary beauty.

8. In the church all that we do falls somewhere on the continuum between fine culture and folk culture. Our music, our architecture, our furnishings, our dress, our written materials, our preaching and teaching, our conversation between services, etc.

9. In thinking about our worship forms and about the general tone and atmosphere of our church we should take the possible weaknesses and potential strengths of fine culture and folk culture into account. We will hopefully be able to affirm all that is good in both cultures find a way both to "be ourselves" (which is partly inevitable) and be what we need to be to honor the excellence and truth and beauty of God and reach out to all the kinds of people God is calling us to touch.

10. This will be an ongoing process, not a once for all discovery.