

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Our most important activity

God is the subject of true Christian worship. Worship is the main thing—maybe the only thing—that the church can do that no other institution can do. Worship is the main entry point into the church for newcomers. In most churches, worship is the church activity in which the most members participate.



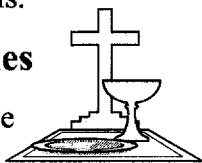
Even if worship had only one of these characteristics it would deserve very high priority in the church. Having all of them makes it the church's most important activity. It is therefore the one we most need to do well.



Despite worship's unique importance, however, most churchgoers know little about why it includes what it includes. Many participate in it without finding any connection with God. Many find worship boring or meaningless. Many don't see it having any connection to their lives or to what they see as real life in the real world. We urgently need to remedy this.

Maybe we can help our churches

Until now I haven't wanted to write much about worship in *Connections*. The topic seemed too big for the available space, and I felt I knew too little about worship to write intelligently about it. I've kept thinking and reading about it, however, because I'm concerned about how negatively many people react to worship services and I'd like to feel better about them myself.



As a result I'm going to write several issues of *Connections* on worship during the coming year. My knowledge about worship is still meager, and I know that in *Connections* I can only hit some high spots of the subject and mention some views held by a few experts. But maybe even that little will help some readers to clarify their understanding of worship, and maybe that will help our churches.

Diversity and change aren't new

Some churchgoers assume that whatever worship style they're most familiar with has been used always and should continue always. Others assume that the worship of the early church is the pattern all Christians should be following.



Evidently both of these views are wrong. Experts on Christian history tell us that no one style of worship was standard in the early church. There was unity in substance, they find, but a lot of diversity in methods.

Also, if we look at all of Christian history we find that change has been the norm rather than the exception. We learn, too, that many worship practices we consider traditional are of relatively recent origin—they arose long after the early church. Pews weren't used until the Middle Ages. The pipe organ was introduced about 1000 and only gradually became widely used. Singing by choirs in worship didn't become prominent until sometime between the ninth and twelfth centuries.



Less formality at times, more at others

The basic features of much of today's U.S. Protestant worship, in churches and on TV, have come from revival techniques developed in the camp meetings of frontier days. Preaching and singing became especially prominent there, and worship became less formal.

More recently, use of candles, crosses, special clothing for clergy, and ritual gestures and postures has increased. Some denominations have revised their liturgy, and the laity's role in worship has been re-emphasized.



Recent concern for differences

In recent years, too, many Christians have become more aware of how worship methods reflect cultural and ethnic differences. We've also become more aware of how our use of words and music in worship can unjustly cause some participants to feel excluded or put down.

Worship keeps changing, and that's not necessarily bad. The images, gestures, and objects used in worship always come from the surrounding culture, so they won't be the same in every time and place. We just need to be sure all of our worship focuses on God and God's truth, whatever worship style we may currently be using.

God—the focus of true Christian worship

Like many other words that now have religious meaning for Christians, our word “worship” originally had a strictly secular meaning. It comes from Old English words that mean “attribute worth or respect.” In fact, in England some high public officials are still addressed as “Your Worship.”



When we speak about worshiping, therefore, we’re referring to acknowledging the worth of someone or something. We’re saying that we find that person or thing deserving of respect. The very meaning of the word “worship,” then, when we use it in its religious sense, lets us know what the only proper focus of Christian worship is. God alone, we believe, has ultimate worth and thus deserves our supreme respect. So the purpose of Christian worship is to express that.



Getting clear about that purpose is the first step we need to take in evaluating our churches’ worship services. Then we need to keep reevaluating them to be sure they don’t stray from that purpose.

Keeping the right focus

Unfortunately we often use our worship services for other purposes. Knowing that worship services are the only church activity some people attend, and that for newcomers worship services are the main entry point, we use them for trying to accomplish everything we want our churches to accomplish. We find that many attenders aren’t familiar with the basic contents of the Bible or the Christian faith, so we use our worship time for teaching them. We know they have many other options for spending their time, so we do whatever will attract them. We see that many want to enjoy whatever they do, so we avoid mentioning anything that might disturb anyone. We focus on attenders’ feelings instead of on who God is and what God is saying and doing. We know that

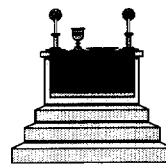


many attenders want constant sound and action, so we avoid silence and stillness.

These aims are understandable in light of the competition that churches face in today’s world and the decline in



attendance that many are experiencing. Some of these aims are even legitimate side effects of worship that focuses on God. True Christian worship is educational—we often learn things about the contents of the Bible or Christian history by taking part in it. It is evangelistic, too—it often leads people to Jesus Christ. The problem comes when we make one of these results our worship services’ goal. We lose worship’s intended focus on God.



Finding God in silence

We lose that focus even more when we refuse to allow silence in our worship services. It helps us clear the clutter from our minds, so it’s important before or during prayer. Silence also can be important for reflecting on what has been said or sung. Silence after sermons and anthems, for example, could help us hear what God was saying to us through them. God’s presence and voice often don’t become apparent until we are silent. Since becoming aware of God is what inspires us to worship, we need some silence in our worship services.

There was a great wind ... but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence, ... Then there came a voice ... that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”
—1 Kings 19:11-13

Be still, and know that I am God!
—Psalm 46:10

It has been said that true worship comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable, and there’s a lot of truth in that. Real comfort and healing aren’t likely to come until we recognize and acknowledge our real afflictions, and silence is likely to be where that happens. As long as we’re surrounded by sound and activity we can avoid facing our fears, doubts, emptiness, and sin, but in silence, seeing them is likely to become unavoidable. That’s why silence is scary, of course, but it’s also why we need it.



Letting God disturb us

Just as worship can’t focus very clearly on God without including silence, it doesn’t focus clearly on God if it doesn’t include anything disturbing. God’s messages quite often turn our usual ways of

thinking upside down. If we take those messages seriously they call into question many aspects of the institutional-church culture, the culture that surrounds the church, and our personal ways of thinking and acting. That's disturbing.

God's messages say things like "love your enemy," and "if your enemy is hungry, feed him." They say "if you have two

[Opponents] dragged Jason and some believers before the city authorities, shouting, "These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also ..."

—Acts 17:6

coats, give one away." That kind of messages are disturbing—*very* disturbing. They're especially disturbing if you dare to think of them in terms of the actual people who treat you unfairly, or the particular dictators who are currently terrorizing the world, or the particular coats that are in your closet. So if attenders aren't disturbed by anything they hear in our worship services, those services probably aren't focused very clearly on God. They're concealing God instead of revealing God.

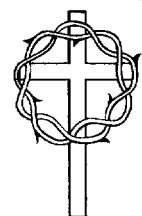
Reminding us what God does

Besides exposing participants to God's challenges, real Christian worship focuses on God by reminding participants what God has done in the past and reporting what God seems to be doing right now.

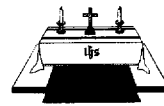


We tell this story in several different ways as part of worship. We say historic creeds and prayers. We sing hymns and anthems. We hear scripture. We see dance or drama that re-enacts part of the story. We hear sermons. We hear testimony about what God is doing in someone's life. We hear how the church is responding to human need around the world. We hear about injustice and suffering that needs our attention. In worship that is focused on God, the story gets told in many ways.

Offering our best gifts to God



Continually hearing the story keeps us aware that God has given us the unearned, undeserved gift of salvation, plus every other gift we have received. If we get that message



clearly, it prompts us to respond by giving our best in return.

"Every act of worship," Marva J. Dawn reminds us, "should be understood as part of the Church's offering to God." (*Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture*, Eerdmans, 1995) She points out that sacrifice and giving—making offerings to God—were central in the worship described in the Old and New Testaments.

Dr. Dawn finds that in much of today's worship this focus has been lost. "At some time in the church's history," she observes, "attitudes shifted. People began attending worship to receive a blessing rather than to make an offering."



In true Christian worship, Dawn along with many others reminds us, the whole act of worship is a gift to God of the worshipers' whole lives. That means the quality of what we offer is vitally important. We insult God when we offer less than our best, by failing to contribute our talents and spiritual gifts, by presenting music or words in worship that lack beauty and substance or haven't been adequately prepared, or by giving only the leftovers of our time.



Celebration? Of what?

"Celebration" seems to have become the "in" word for describing what we need more of in our worship services. If it means praise of God and doesn't crowd out other important parts of worship it's a legitimate goal, but what we're celebrating isn't always clear. "Celebration," as James F. White points out in his book *Introduction to Worship* (Abingdon, 1990), "seems to have developed a vagueness that makes it rather meaningless unless used with a specific object so that one knows what is being celebrated." In our celebration as in every other aspect of our worship services, the focus needs to be clearly on God.



"Right worship" is important

The word "orthodoxy" is often used to mean "right doctrine" or "right belief." However, according to scholars, the Greek root of the "dox" part of



the word can mean not only “belief” or “opinion,” but also “praise,” “honor,” or “glory.” This is the emphasis in the familiar word “doxology.” A doxology is an expression of praise—of worship.

Author Kathleen Norris points out that in one ancient tradition of the Christian church, orthodoxy mainly means right worship, and only secondarily doctrinal accuracy. (*Amazing Grace*, Riverhead Books/Penguin Putnam, 1998) In Norris’s view, “Much of the exasperation with what people term ‘organized religion’ comes from the fact that the

Christian church has often given so much weight to doctrinal accuracy that the life-giving potential of worship, and faith itself, gets lost in the shuffle.”

We can’t afford to let that happen. To avoid it, we need to give more attention to what’s happening and what’s not happening in our worship services.

Worship the Lord in holy splendor . . . —Psalm 96:9

Barbara

Looking at your church’s worship services

I hope you’ll use this issue of *Connections* as a discussion-starter in some church groups you’re in. Look at your worship services in terms of the aspects of worship I’m writing about here. Ask yourselves,

▪ To attenders (not just to the worship planners!), what seems to be the main focus of our worship services? If it’s not clearly God, how might we correct that?



- Do we include silence? if not, why not?
- Do we avoid including content that is likely to disturb attenders? If so, why?

You’re always welcome to make copies of *Connections* for such purposes.

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