

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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A disturbing disconnection

I've become very lackadaisical about going to church on Sunday mornings, and that's a big change for me. All my life I've attended regularly except when I've been sick or out of town. Even when my husband and I have been out of town, we've often deliberately come home on Saturday night or early Sunday morning to avoid missing Sunday School if one of us was teaching, or missing the main worship service if an anthem that especially needed us in the choir was scheduled.



I'm no longer that conscientious about attending, however, and when I'm absent I don't feel very bad about it. In fact, mostly I enjoy not being there. I sometimes even look for reasons not to go.

Worship hasn't changed but I have

Over time my congregation has had its ups and downs but its main worship services have changed little. A contemporary service has been added, but I can connect even less with it than with the traditional services. So church change hasn't been what's made my feelings change.



What's caused the change, I think, is that over the past several years I've had new experiences and found kindred-spirit Christians from a wide geographical area. I've learned more about the Bible and church history and thought a lot about it. As a result I've clarified my understanding of Christianity and of what God is like. But it doesn't connect with much in worship services, so for me they mostly hinder worship instead of helping.

I know many other Christians who also feel this way. Even if they're a minority, I hate to see them feeling deadened or even driven away by what they find at church. How could worship connect with them instead of disconnecting them from the church?

Words matter



The words of many hymns, anthems, and other songs are a hindrance to me in most worship services. So many of them say things that contradict my experience and what seems to be known about reality.

Ironically, some hymns whose words bother me most are favorites of many Christians. I cringe, for example, when they sing about the amazing grace "that saved a wretch like me." I never hear people use the word "wretch" anywhere else. It sounds straight out of Charles Dickens. A wretch is a despicable, filthy, contemptible person. I know none of us are perfect, but I can't believe that seeing oneself as a wretch is necessary motivation for turning to God. It's emotionally unhealthy, in fact, it seems to me.



Much that our hymns say about Jesus leaves me feeling disconnected, too. In a recent service I simply couldn't make myself sing "Because he lives, I can face tomorrow," because I can't see that facing tomorrow depends at all on Jesus's being alive. And I don't see that the sweetness of holding a newborn baby, which this hymn speaks about, has anything to do with feeling "the pride and joy Jesus gives." In my view, this is meaningless sentimentality that keeps people from seeing the real meaning and value of Christian faith.

Brainwashing in worship

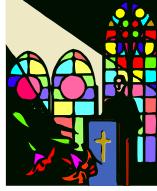


Many churchgoers feel that the words of hymns don't matter. They say they simply love the familiarity of the hymns they've known all their lives and thus can sing easily. They don't even think about what the words are saying. Other churchgoers like the contemporary praise and scripture songs that critics call "7-11 songs"—only 7 words, repeated 11 times. They're lively or comforting and easy to sing without having to think.

That's what makes these songs dangerous. Their contents are drilled into our minds over and over without our realizing what's happening. That's brainwashing. And some of it is giving us a misleading picture of ourselves and of God. Worship shouldn't do that.

I'm no expert

My views about worship come almost entirely from having attended worship services all my life, not from having studied worship or led it. So if you're an expert on it, you may think what I want from it is inappropriate. On the other hand, what we think people ought to find helpful in worship tends not to matter as much as what they actually do or don't find helpful.



Because I find so much in most worship services unhelpful, I'm looking at what I believe worship's real purpose is, at what I want from worship services and why, and at whether finding what I feel the need for is reasonable to expect.

Looking for reasons



For years I've dutifully sat through worship services despite finding aspects of many tiresome, pointless, or even offensive. But maybe my time for doing that simply had a limit and I've now reached it, like putting the last straw on the camel's back. Yet I doubt that. If there are valid reasons for attending worship regularly, surely they don't vanish when one reaches a certain age.

Maybe instead I'm just not as disciplined as I should be, or as committed. Many Christians say the main reason for not getting enough out of worship is not putting enough into it. But I doubt that's the whole reason for my present feelings.

I often hear that people mainly want entertainment from worship services. They watch TV and movies, listen to pop music, play video games, and attend sports events, and expect similar sound and visual imagery and action everywhere they go. Worship services that don't provide it seem dull by comparison. But those aren't my kind of entertainment, so why do I find worship services so deadening?

It's because they seem disconnected with today's world, and they contain so little food for thought.

Praise and thanks

I see worship's main purpose as expressing praise and thanks to God,



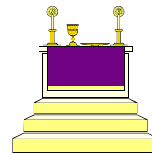
in response to recognizing God's infinite greatness and generous provision for us, in whatever way we understand that. But the necessary motivation for expressing praise and thanks is awareness of God's nature, God's presence, and God's action in our lives and in the wider world—in the entire cosmos, in fact. So worship services need to help us experience and recognize God's presence and see more clearly what God is like.



This means reminding us of what we already know about the nature of God. However, it also means showing us where we may need to revise our views about it, in areas where they are mistaken, and it means making us aware of aspects of God's nature that we haven't previously recognized.

Giving ourselves and our resources

As I understand it, another important purpose of worship is offering ourselves and our gifts to God. During worship we give ourselves by making or renewing a commitment to follow God's will as we understand it. We give part of our material resources in the form of monetary offerings for the work of the church. We give our talents and skills, too. These may include musical talent or speaking ability, for example, as part of the worship service itself or other programs within the church. But another part of our worship, and maybe an even more important part, especially if we're lay, is committing our talents, skills, spiritual gifts, and material resources to the ministries that God calls us to do out in the world where our daily work, home life, and social activities take us.

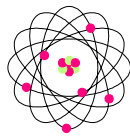


Inspiration and challenge

Accomplishing these purposes is helped by being not only inspired but also challenged during worship services. Being given the impression that we're already doing all that God wants from us and that we already know all we need to know about God doesn't help. Therefore mindlessly reciting and singing statements that came from cultures very different from ours and were developed centuries ago, often as a result of church conflicts long after Jesus's death, doesn't help. It misleads us into thinking we're making timeless, factual statements, and thus



into not looking any further. It keeps us from finding a faith that is consistent with what is now known about how our world and the universe function.



Reciting or singing the Apostles' Creed, the Gloria Patri, and the words of many hymns is thus a distraction for me in worship rather than a help. Even some hymns that have been composed in recent years use 17th-century words and describe God, Jesus, people, and the world in terms of concepts that came from earlier centuries (though still relatively recent ones, not the time of Jesus or the earliest church). These dated statements make me feel that when I go to church I leave the real world.

Disconnected from reality

God is spirit, and those who worship [God] must worship in spirit and truth.
—John 4:24

Such statements portray the universe as flat and finite, with three levels. They make God seem like a person out in space somewhere, and a male person at that, contradicting our belief that

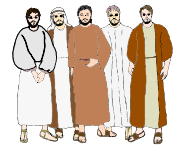
God is spirit and has no gender. To a great extent they describe a Santa-Claus-like god that we might like to have in charge of everything but that doesn't match what we know about how the universe works.

These statements that we so often sing or recite in worship services also portray Jesus in ways that can be appropriate when used as metaphors but can't be taken literally without abandoning much that is now known about his life, the physical world, and later church history. We now know where babies come from, for example, and we know they aren't born to virgins. It's now known, too, that vir-



gin-birth stories were relatively common in the world into which Jesus was born, and were frequently used to claim that an emperor or god uniquely deserved reverence and obedience.

It's also known that the Apostles' Creed came not from the group we call the twelve apostles but from church bodies several centuries later.



Doctrines that many Christians now accept as fact—the Trinity, for example, and the theory of substitutionary atonement, which many familiar hymns and liturgical statements present as if it were fact—also came not directly from the Bible or even from the earliest church, but from powerful church leaders and gatherings in later centuries. Some of these statements were developed to resolve bitter political conflicts within the church, or grew out of pronouncements by secular rulers who had very unspiritual reasons for wanting their subjects to adopt certain beliefs.

A narrow and misleading picture



In church this information is virtually ignored, however, and we use these statements in worship services without also presenting other interpretations or encouraging questions and discussion. This gives the false impression that such statements can be taken literally and were made by God.

When worship services are filled with statements that conflict with what scholars and scientists have now discovered about the world, about human beings, and about Christian history and the nature of all religions, they create a disconnection between our religious faith and the other parts of our lives. When we step into a typical sanctuary for worship

This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I've written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 12 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

on Sunday morning, it's like stepping into a time warp. We have to abandon much of today's knowledge in order to connect with what we hear and are expected to sing and recite during worship.



That can keep us from seeing the real and great value of the Christian faith. It keeps many thinking people away from the church. And for those of us who hang on because we're convinced of Christianity's value in spite of the misleading containers in which it's so often presented during worship, it makes worship a deadening experience instead of the enlivening one it's meant to be.

A crucial question

Could our churches survive if they started revealing the rock of truth that's below the sandy foundation of outdated and unrealistic statements that are so plentiful in our worship? If not, what we have to offer is evidently only a soothing delusion that won't hold up to honest scrutiny and to the truth. If we have something true and valuable to offer the world, as I believe we do, we need to get busy expressing it in terms of today's knowledge and today's most pressing issues, and our worship services may be the most important places to start.

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Connections

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What matters about worship?

I can't believe that God cares what worship style we use, as long as it communicates God's presence and nature to the worshiper and helps that person recognize God and express his or her praise and thanks. What style accomplishes that depends to a great extent on the person's experience, culture, personality traits, knowledge, skills, tastes, and other characteristics.



Giving more of ourselves to more of God



In their 1974 book *The Edge of Adventure*, one of my all-time favorites, Keith Miller and Bruce Larson urged giving as much of yourself as you can, to as much of God as you can grasp. I believe that's what worship services need to help us do. They need to help us recognize aspects of God that we can already grasp, turn loose of what we've thought were characteristics of God but really aren't, and see and grasp more. Our worship services also need to help us recognize and turn loose of false selves, see more of our true selves, and give more of ourselves. I believe worship services are where much of that process happens if worship is accomplishing its true purpose.