

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Thinking about worship

I've attended worship services regularly all my life, but much of the time it hasn't been because I recognized the services' content as valuable. It has been mainly because I want to be part of the church, and I believe being a member carries an obligation to take part in the church's worship.



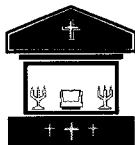
**Worship the Lord
in holy splendor.
—Psalm 29:2**

I know I'm not the only member who participates for that reason. Maybe getting these feelings out into the

open and looking at what may be causing them will therefore be helpful. Understanding the real purpose of worship and the ways in which that purpose is accomplished might help some of us feel better about the worship services we attend. It could also help our churches by enabling us to participate gladly instead of grudgingly.

Surprising help

Like most other lay churchgoers I've received almost no instruction or information about why we do what we do in worship services. Most of what I've learned has come merely from observing and making vague assumptions. Lately, however, I've done a lot of thinking about which parts of worship services mean a lot to me, and which ones leave me cold or turn me off. I've tried to see what makes the difference and why. I've thought about what ingredients are essential, and why. With this on my mind I've come across several books, articles, and conversations about worship. It's odd how help like that appears when it's needed, isn't it!



What's helpful and what's not?

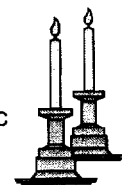
During some parts of the worship services I attend, I feel fully involved. During others, however, I tune out and

Two kinds of prayer

Often the way prayer is done during worship services is a stumbling block for me. *Two Ways of Praying* (Abingdon, 1995), by Paul Bradshaw, has helped me realize why. Bradshaw describes the difference between "cathedral prayer" and "monastic prayer." These labels that came from studying early Christian worship are useful, he finds, for thinking about today's prayer and worship.



- Cathedral prayer, Bradshaw explains, is above all something that the whole congregation does. Monastic prayer, by contrast, is mainly an individual activity.
- Cathedral prayer is led by ordained, formally appointed ministers and cantors. In monastic prayer, however, each person in the community has not only the right but also the obligation to take a turn at the reading, speaking, or singing that is part of the prayer.
- Cathedral prayer is mainly praise and intercession. Its focus is mainly outward. Monastic prayer, however, is inward-looking. It is essentially silent meditation. Scripture readings may provide "food" for it, but the real praying goes on in between the readings as the worshiper reflects on their meaning. Monastic prayer is mainly for teaching or forming the person who prays.
- The externals of worship—actions, candles, and such—are vitally important to cathedral prayer, but are mostly dispensable for monastic prayer because it is mainly interior. It is what happens in the worshiper's heart and mind.
- The cathedral tradition focuses mainly on occasional gatherings for prayer, but monastic prayer takes more literally the Biblical command to pray without ceasing.



Few acts of worship are purely one kind or the other, Bradshaw observes, and outward appearances don't necessarily show what worshipers are experiencing. Also, people experience the same acts of worship differently.

We run into trouble, Bradshaw finds, if we expect monastic prayer in a worship service that is designed as the cathedral type, or vice-versa. Being aware of the difference can help us understand our expectations and preferences with regard to worship, and can help us see why other worshipers need and want something different.

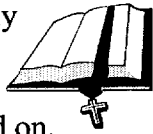


wish that I were somewhere else, or at least that I had a book or crossword puzzle to occupy my mind. I've been trying to think what makes the difference.

I urge you to ask yourself what makes a difference for you. You undoubtedly won't come to the same conclusions as mine, and I'm not claiming to know what's right or to know what my church or others should offer. I'm simply thinking on paper in the hope that it might help both of us become more aware of our reactions to worship and become able to enter more fully into our churches' worship.

Let's look at the main parts of worship services.

▪ **Scripture reading.** I find this especially helpful. I prefer worship that includes several passages read in full, instead of just a few verses that the sermon is based on.



The Lord is in the holy temple; let all the earth keep silence...
—Habakkuk 2:20

▪ **Prayer.** Do you want time for silent prayer? For silent reflection following the sermon or reading of scripture? For reflection on something that is furnished for worshippers to

read during the service? Do you like having the opportunity for attenders to mention their specific current joys and concerns aloud before congregational prayer? Are prayers that congregation members read aloud together helpful? Our answers to these questions depend a lot on our expectations and on our preferences for cathedral prayer or monastic prayer (see page 1 box), as well as on the differences in taste, personality, and experience that greatly influence all of our worship preferences.

Even a tiny bit of silence apparently makes most churchgoers very uncomfortable. Some want much more, however, and I'm one of those. I'm unnerved when a time announced for silent prayer turns out to be only a few seconds. I've barely begun to get my thoughts together when the time is up. Music during supposedly silent prayer bothers me, too, especially if it's a hymn or something else that usually has words. I hear the words in my mind, and they drive everything else out.



▪ **Communion and other sacraments.** Are they valuable to you, or do you merely go through

motions that seem meaningless? Is one method of taking communion more helpful than another?



▪ **Sermons.** Do you want mainly comfort? inspiration? challenge? information? Is humor helpful? What else helps or distracts you?

I recently heard a long-time church member say she had changed churches to get away from sermons that merely analyzed the day's scripture verse by verse. She saw this as teaching rather than preaching, and as more appropriate for Sunday School or some other class setting than for worship. We also hear, however, of members changing churches in order to find sermons that teach, and many pastors feel those are needed. Because so many of today's younger people have grown up without learning the basic contents of the Bible that earlier generations

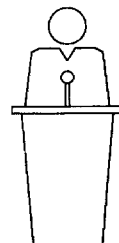


got from their homes or from the culture, and because worship services are the main opportunity for reaching them, pastors often feel that sermons need to teach the contents of scripture.

▪ **Music.** Is singing more helpful than merely listening? Do some instruments or music styles seem more appropriate than others? How important is the quality of the performance? For me, music is a very important part of worship. Depth and substance in both the music and its words are very important, as is top-quality performance. However, I know that churches need to offer more kinds of music than those I prefer.



▪ **Announcements.** Do they belong in worship? If so, where? To me, starting the service by having someone frantically try to get attenders' attention for hearing the week's announcements keeps the service from being as effective as it needs to be. It destroys the structure and flow that are necessary for conveying the service's meaning and importance. In my view, a worship service, like a speech, a book, or any other composition needs a strong beginning that is clearly recognizable as the beginning, and announcements don't serve that purpose. I realize, however, that putting them in the middle can be undesirable because it breaks the flow. I'd prefer to have them printed and not spoken, but I

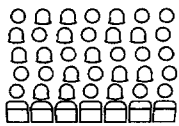


realize they're more likely to be overlooked that way.

Food pantry
Vacation Bible School
Dinner NEW CLASS
Bible study group
Board meeting

Deciding what to do with necessary announcements is like deciding whether to use the sermon for delivering information. When important information isn't reaching people otherwise, we tend to feel we must deliver it during worship. Doing that, however, can destroy some very important aspects of worship.

Different preferences



Our preferences about how these parts of worship are presented seem to depend a lot on what we've gotten used to. If we've known

worship mainly as sitting sedately and quietly in pews, then that may be all that we're willing to do. It may be the best way for us to express our praise to God and to experience God's presence. For many people, however, worship that's quiet and that lacks physical movement and touching seems cold and dead. What seems important to you?

▪ **Physical surroundings.** Do you find a beautiful sanctuary necessary for worship? Does worshipers' clothing distract you if it isn't what you consider appropriate? Do you feel that the clergy who lead worship need to wear robes, to create necessary formality or make the clergy's role clear?

▪ **Multimedia.** Do you want a lot going on at once, or only one thing at a time? Members of different age groups today are especially likely to have different preferences in this regard. Many older worshipers find it very distracting to have several things happening at once. By contrast, however, many younger people want lots of sounds, sights, and movements happening together.



▪ **Physical actions.** Do kneeling, standing, or sitting make a difference in whether worship is meaningful for you? Is dance helpful? What about saying "Amen!"? What about clapping? What about raising your arms for prayer and praise? What about joining hands with other attenders? All these actions are very uncomfortable and distracting for some churchgoers, yet others want more.



▪ **Variety.** Do you want the worship service to include all the same ingredients in the same format every Sunday? Does the regular use of the Doxology, the Gloria Patri, the Apostles' Creed, and the Lord's Prayer seem helpful or deadening? Does using a variety of tunes or translations of these ingredients help or hurt?



▪ **Language.** Using contemporary translations of scripture and of other worship ingredients seems to be one of the most controversial aspects of worship. Even more controversial is the use of all-masculine language. I'm very word-oriented and very aware of how unjust and how culture-based much of our religious language is. To me, therefore, the choice of words makes a huge difference in whether or not I find a worship service meaningful. The barrage of "he" and "him" and "father" to refer to God, and "men" to refer to human beings, which fills most of our hymns, prayers, creeds, and anthems, is painful and terribly distracting to me. Also unnerving for me is the use of outdated words like "thee" and "leadeth" and "hast," especially in songs written in recent decades. I know, however, that very few churchgoers feel the need to avoid this language in worship.

What is man, that you are mindful of him?

Why word is a bump into my feet . . .

Christian history includes variety

The appropriateness of some of these aspects of worship depends on how formal or ceremonial the worship service is. Our reaction to worship services depends a lot on whether we assume that the style we're most familiar with is the only right one. We tend to assume that what we prefer and are most familiar with is what's traditional, but Christian tradition actually hasn't been very consistent. Preaching hasn't always been included in worship. Communion and other sacraments have been practiced in different ways. Music styles and views about the use of instruments have changed many times, and some of our most familiar worship practices, like using the organ, are relatively recent.



What really matters?

Do we need instruction for worship? If so, how could our churches provide it in a way that it would

reach many members? How much variety is permissible? Must we use standard forms for worship, or can it be a spontaneous, unrestricted response to God? Are certain ingredients essential? If so, which ones, and why?



Should we simply try to ignore what distracts us in worship services? Should we stop trying to find what makes worship meaningful for us, if it's something that few other participants want? Should we overlook what we feel is inappropriate or even harmful or contradictory to Christian beliefs, if we know that few other churchgoers share our views? Should we support the church by attending the kind

of worship services that most churchgoers want, if we find them meaningless or even offensive?

I'm not sure. I'd like to see us examine these questions openly and widely in our churches. In future issues of *Connections* I'll be addressing more aspects of them. I'll present the views of so-called experts, about what worship services should include and why. Maybe this can help us deal with our dissatisfactions in better ways. Maybe it can also help us to help our churches provide worship that will let more churchgoers give their best in prayer and praise to God.

Barbara

When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.



—1 Corinthians 14:26

God is spirit, and those who worship [God] must worship in spirit and truth.

—John 4:24

... with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

—Colossians 3:16

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