

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

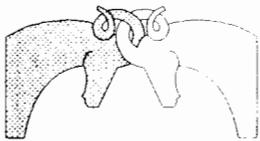
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## The worship wars

The recent decline of some mainline churches, and the realization that non-churchgoers are often turned off by the style of our churches' worship, are causing a lot of conflict among church members. Some feel that the remedy is to use only contemporary music and less-formal worship formats. Other members, however, believe that if we do this we lose the substance of the Christian faith.



Many observers of these conflicts call them the worship wars. In most wars, if neither side will look for common ground and hear what the other side is saying, both sides suffer. I'm afraid that's what's happening in the worship wars.

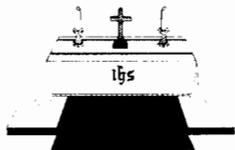
## We need to consider both sides

Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine.

—1 Corinthians 11:19

Church disagreements can be helpful if they make us look honestly at the pros and cons of each of the conflicting viewpoints. However, if

we merely defend our own position without fully examining it, and attack our opponents without admitting that some of what they are saying might be valid, we accomplish nothing but tearing our congregations and denominations apart.



In *Connections* I've often advocated updating some features of our worship, because I believe we urgently need to do that, yet many church members resist doing it. However, I also believe we risk making worship meaningless if we don't save or replace the essential features that the ritual and music of earlier years provided. This month, therefore, I'm writing about what the Christians who oppose some of the recent changes in worship are saying.

## Real speech to the real God

In an effort to keep from driving any potential worship attenders away, many churches have stopped including any mention of suffering, sacrifice, and sin. We try to make everything upbeat in our worship. This can make worship seem unrelated to real life and the real God.



One way we've disconnected worship from reality is by abandoning the regular use of Psalms. Theologian Walter Brueggemann points out, in his book *Praying the Psalms* (St. Mary's Press, 1982), that the Psalms cover the whole range of human emotion, from rage to hope. He reminds us that expressing the whole range to God in worship is essential if we want worship to make a real difference in participants' lives.



## Expressing the anger and pain can free us

Only when we can voice our anger and pain, Brueggemann observes, can we turn them over to God's mercy, get past them, and start feeling compassion for other people. Giving God our desire for revenge frees us from its power.

Expressing our powerlessness and despair and having them heard also makes us less likely to harm ourselves or others. And real hope comes from having our laments heard, not from acting as if our suffering didn't exist.

**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? ...  
I am poured out like water,  
all my bones are out of joint,  
my heart is like wax ...  
my strength is dried up ...  
a company of evildoers encircles me ...**

—Psalm 22:1, 14-16

**May [my enemy's] days be few;  
may another seize his goods!  
May his children be fatherless,  
and his wife a widow! ...  
Let there be none to extend  
kindness to him ...**

—Psalm 109:8-12



## Serious speech is essential

The Psalms, Walter Brueggemann assures us, are "serious speech addressed to a real God, about things genuinely important." Real worship requires that kind of speech.

## A call for a cease-fire

Marva J. Dawn is an experienced church musician with a Ph.D. in Christian ethics and scripture. She is a member of the Baby Boomer generation, many of whom have been turned off by traditional worship and other features that churches rarely questioned until recent years. However, she fears that churches have abandoned too much of the traditional Christian ritual and music. In her book *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), she calls for a cease-fire in the worship wars.



Dr. Dawn feels that churches have made some harmful changes in an effort to make worship participation easier and more comfortable. In her view we're doing what has been called "dumbing down"



in schools and colleges—lowering requirements and forbidding teachers from giving low grades even when students fail to do the required work, so that more students can feel successful.

## We may lose essentials

Marva Dawn believes that if in an effort to reach new people we stop using the historic rituals and the hymns and classical music that for many years have been part of Christian worship, we risk losing features that are essential to real worship.

### ▪ Focus on God

In Marva Dawn's view, this is the most important feature of worship. However, many contemporary worship services leave it out. She observes that being reminded of the superiority of God's qualities and actions is what makes us want to praise God. Merely being told to sing or say something that contains the word "praise" doesn't motivate real praise.



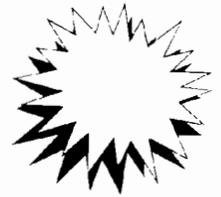
Dr. Dawn also points out that we are not praising God when we merely express our personal wishes or feelings. She cites a typical contemporary song that claims to praise God but actually doesn't. Its words repeatedly say "I will celebrate . . . I will praise God, I will sing to God a new song." However, they



never say anything about or to God. "If an unbeliever heard the words," Dr. Dawn observes, "she would have no idea of why God is praiseworthy or of who God is."

### ▪ Transformed character

If our worship is focused on God, Marva Dawn points out, what we say and do in worship will "stir new thoughts about God—new insights into God's character, which will result in a transformation of our character." The result, she assures us, "will be new attitudes, new petitions and intercessions, new behaviors." It won't be merely warm, fuzzy feelings, and it won't be the resistance that understandably comes from merely being given a list of rules that someone says we should follow. I'm afraid Dr. Dawn expects too much from thoughts and insights alone, but other results of God-focused worship will also contribute to transformation.



### ▪ Community

When we make worship less formal we're often trying to promote the fellowship and intimacy that create community. However, Marva Dawn points out, echoing many other observers of church life, that ritual provides the feeling of safety that most people need before they will risk intimacy. Being expected to reveal themselves to strangers during informal worship makes many attenders drop out or at least become only passive observers. Participating with others in ritual provides the combination of togetherness and privacy that many people require when they do not know their fellow worshipers well. Real intimacy develops, Dr. Dawn finds, not in worship services but in small-group activities such as Bible study or choir.



### ▪ Trust in God

We can't just sit idly by and expect God to accomplish the church's purpose by magic, because God works through people and their abilities. However, when we start thinking that simply by identifying the right market and by finding and using the right methods we can make our worship attract people, we're forgetting that the church is God's. God's action—not just ours—is essential in drawing people into the church.

▪ **Giving to God**

According to Marva Dawn, today's worshippers too often see the purpose of worship as receiving a blessing, yet true worship consists of offering gifts to God. And we feel inclined to offer our gifts only when we recognize and acknowledge the countless gifts we receive from God, including the gift of having the opportunity to worship.

▪ **Beauty, depth, substance, and quality**



A related problem is the contemporary tendency to offer God less than our best, by using worship-service ingredients that do not reflect beauty and excellence. We may ignore the creations of Christian musical giants like Bach, for example, to use only music that is shallow and without substance—songs whose words and music merely repeat one or two simple phrases over and over.

Like Dr. Dawn I find that this shallow music quickly becomes boring, but it seems to me that very few other people feel that way. Evidently what different people find boring depends a lot on factors like educational level, past experience, and personality traits. The depth and complexity that are needed to hold some people's interest are seen by others as too tedious or too difficult.

Dr. Dawn says education is the remedy for this problem.



She strongly feels that our churches need to educate attenders so they will learn to recognize and appreciate the value of the ingredients that provide needed focus and substance for worship. However, I'm afraid she's too optimistic about whether we could reach enough people with that kind of education. Providing it requires skills that few church volunteers or staff members have, and if it doesn't interest people, they won't come to hear it.



Besides, how can we legitimately claim that education is necessary for proper worship? Surely all kinds of people, not just those who have reached any particular educational level, can perceive and respond to God's nature and God's presence in ways that please God.



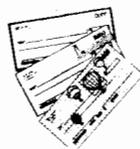
## Answers and a big thanks

*Connections* recipients often say, "I don't know when I last paid for *Connections*." Many ask, "Is \$5 a year still enough to cover your costs?" Here are some answers to these kinds of questions and comments, along with a big thanks to the many readers who help support *Connections* with monetary contributions.



### I can't run a real subscription system

Just as I did when I began *Connections* more than four years ago, I still do everything except the printing and folding by myself. Writing and mailing *Connections*, maintaining the mailing list, and replying to the related correspondence takes a lot of time.



For tax purposes I keep records of the money I receive for *Connections*, but I can't run the kind of subscription system that commercial publications do. I merely put occasional reminders in *Connections* and depend on readers' voluntarily paying at least \$5 a year.

Developing and maintaining a strict subscription system that provided for all the different ways recipients pay for *Connections* would take more time than I feel I can spend. Even printing expiration dates on the mailing labels would require a more elaborate system than I now use. Many readers send more than \$5 a year, and I don't know when they consider their payment to have expired. Others get *Connections* as a gift, and cross-referencing my list to show when a giver renews a gift would be tedious. Also, I send some people *Connections* in exchange for something they publish. Besides, from the beginning I've been sending *Connections* free to some people, to reach church leaders and a wide range of members in the hope of stirring up insights and action.

### You're welcome to pay more than \$5 a year!

Writing and publishing *Connections* takes money as well as time, of course. Receipts cover less than half of my costs, and the rest is a contribution on my part. I'm not suffering as a result of making it, and writing *Connections* is very rewarding to me. Besides, I believe it is something God is calling me to do. For these reasons I'm willing to make the necessary monetary contribution. If you're getting *Connections* free, however, and you like *Connections*, I'd greatly appreciate a check from you every now and then.

If you consider *Connections* worth more than \$5 a year, you're certainly welcome to pay more—I don't limit anyone to that amount! In fact, I'd greatly appreciate your paying more, and many readers do.

*Thanks!*

Thanks for your help!

### Preserving the essentials



What's the answer? I suspect it's offering worship services of more than one style. Some people say this is harmful because it separates the congregation. That may be true in very small congregations, but larger ones function mostly in separate smaller groups anyway.

Many worship specialists recommend including a mixture of styles of music and other ingredients in every worship service. However, this can turn off both the members who want a contemporary style and those who want a more traditional one.

Whichever styles it includes, our worship needs to center on God. It must communicate the truth of the Bible, offer the best that we can give, and nurture real community. We urgently need to communicate in ways that a wide variety of people will hear and respond to, but we also need to include these timeless essentials.

*Barbara*

Next . . .

**Why do we want new members?**



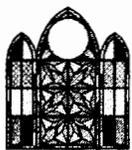
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## The worship wars

### Classic churches



In the February 19 issue of *The Christian Century* magazine, theologian Martin E. Marty compares classical music to mainstream churches. Classical music sales and attendance at Catholic and mainstream Protestant churches have both declined in recent years.

Marty prefers to call the churches as well as the music "classic" or "classical." He admits that both are troubled, but he doesn't expect either the music or the churches to die. After, all, he concludes, "in their own ways, we know, they are beautiful."



Can classic beauty keep our traditional music and rituals alive, if so few people see its value?

### If you've just discovered *Connections*

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