

A Vision for Christian Life: Sincere Commitment to Worship and Prayer

Acts 1:12-14

March 25, 2007

I want to tell you about a recurring experience I had here at Calvin Church several years ago. The experience involved two members who no longer attend Calvin Church, for reasons you'll understand in a moment. The first member was a man in his 80s, a man whom I remain friendly with and like. He believed that real worship had to revolve around the organ if it were to be real worship. On many Sundays he would shake my hand and say to me, "What's the matter with the organ? Is it broken?" Of course, he knew it wasn't, but it was his way of complaining that the organ wasn't being played in worship. It was hard to know how to answer him because I let Bruce and the music program decide what instruments to play. The only guidance I've ever given Bruce is to play hymns on the instruments that will make them sound the best.

Meanwhile, the second member would often come by and shake my hand a few moments later. She would say to me, "You know, we need to change the worship service and do all contemporary. Contemporary worship is the wave of the future. This kind of worship is dying." It was hard to answer her. We had tried contemporary once here, and it just didn't work. It wasn't a right fit for us.

The two of them brought up a conundrum in the modern church. In a nutshell they captured the essential problem of doing church worship nowadays. We live in an era in which it is tough to be a church because so many people have so many opinions of what makes worship worship. In many ways, today's worshippers want church to fit them, not vice versa. In a short 35 years, we've gone from a culture in which there was basically only one kind of worship to a culture that now has many, many different styles. 35 years ago there was agreement among most churches and denominations that worship meant playing hymns on the organ, singing hymns that were written before the 1930s, and having a service that followed a clear and traditional order. How did we get to where we are today from where we were yesterday?

Let me take you back over those 35 years and give you a short history of worship. Back then all worship was traditional worship. It was worship that seemed to hark back to the days when the church began. That wasn't quite true, but it seemed that way because worship had remained basically unchanged for perhaps 50 years, for almost three generations. You might be surprised to know that the worship wars we have today aren't the first time we've had these kinds of wars. Between 1880 and 1920, many churches fought over whether to allow organs or church, or to maintain the tradition of singing *à capella*. 100 years before then there were worship wars over whether it was permissible for worship to allow people to sing the psalms at all. The tradition at that point had been to recite the psalms and to allow no music in worship.

Still, 35 years ago most churches followed a fairly traditional style. The focus was on God the Father who was in heaven. We call this a focus on God as *transcendent*. Worship was orderly and majestic, attempting to draw us closer to God above.

Things began to change in worship during the 1970s as part of something called the *Jesus Movement*. This was a movement that tried reach out to hippies, and the original followers were often called “Jesus freaks.” A church in Costa Mesa, California called Calvary Chapel created a contemporary style of worship that imitated, in many ways, the major spiritual experiences of the hippies, which were large-scale concerts such as Woodstock. The attempt was to create worship that focused on upbeat praise of Jesus, and it was structured much like a rock concert. The worship emphasized a much more positive approach to faith that emphasized forgiveness, joy, and praise. Of course, you know what the response of the traditional church was to this kind of worship. People complained that this contemporary style wasn’t really worship. Still, the contemporary movement grew throughout the 70s, 80s, and 90s to what it is today.

What you may not know is that at present there is a new form of worship that is gaining in popularity around the country. It is called “emergent” worship. It is a reaction against the contemporary movement. Where contemporary worship creates churches that look like concert halls and auditoriums, emphasizes bright lights, has few symbols or crosses, and offers a lot of stimulation, emergent worship goes in a completely different direction. It is hard to describe a typical emergent church because they emphasize being unique and different. Some set their churches up to look like living rooms. Some are set up like coffee shops where they offer Starbucks coffee, or are held in coffee shops. Some look like bars, or are actually held in bars. The lighting tends to be low, with lots of candles. The emphasis is on intimacy and being small. Few emergent churches are truly large. In fact, many emergent churches have a policy of splitting when they get over 100 in worship. They have names such as “Taste and See Church,” “The Living Room Church,” and “Solomon’s Portico.” The two most prominent emergent churches in the Pittsburgh area are called the “Hot Metal Church” and “Open Door Church.” Do you know what the response of many contemporary churches has been toward emergent worship? Many say that it is not real worship. Ironic, huh?

Do you notice a significant trend in the rise of these different forms of worship? You might not, but if you look closely you will notice that these churches are divided among generations. The traditional church tends to appeal to worshippers over 55. In many of the churches that are the most resistant to new forms of worship, it is hard to find many children or young adults. Contemporary churches tend to appeal mostly to Baby-Boomers. Of course there are exceptions, but for the most part the people who attend the larger contemporary churches tend to be under 55. For the first time since the creation of this kind of worship, though, there has been a decline of interest by those under 25 in these kinds of churches. Many are going to emergent churches instead because they tend to appeal to people under 30. It is not uncommon for these churches to not have any kind of children’s education program or youth groups, mainly because they tend to appeal to people who have not yet had children.

It’s really difficult to be a church and create meaningful worship today because what is worship to one person is often considered either boring or sacrilegious to another. Everyone has an opinion on what is worship, and we tend to be strong in our opinions. So we have a culture that is divided on what makes worship worship. Let me give you some examples of some of the issues we’ve had to deal with here at Calvin Church that divide us among generations.

Should we have quiet before worship, or should we allow people to spend time in noisy fellowship? This is a generational issue. Many of you grew up in churches where you were expected to enter quietly and spend time in private prayer prior to worship. Spending time in conversation was reserved for after worship. Those who grew up among the Baby-Boom generation didn't like this quiet. For them it feels much more natural to spend time talking, laughing, and doing those things that may seem like making noise to older generations. What we've done to deal with this situation at Calvin Church is to create a quiet time after our chant, so that everyone has time for quiet prayer. Still, it's tough to strike a balance.

Other conflicts surround the issue of whether we should clap hands during worship. Older generations grew up believing that clapping during church was sacrilegious because it put the focus on the performance rather than on God. Younger generations don't see it that way. For many of them, clapping hands after hearing an inspiring piece is normal because it is a sign of appreciation. For one generation, hand-clapping is irreverent. For the other, it is a sign of appreciation and reverence.

It seems that no matter what you do in worship, you engage one person and turn off another. We have such differences today over what is and isn't worship. How do we bridge the gap?

What I want to get you to do this morning is to think a bit deeper about worship, and see if it makes any difference. Let's start with a very basic question: *What is worship?* There are a lot of different opinions, but at its core worship is supposed to be a time in which we center ourselves in God and give God our undivided attention with our whole selves—spirit, mind, and body. Why is it important to do this once a week in worship? Because most people who don't worship also don't give God much time. Think about your own life. How often do you spend time really devoting your attention to God. I don't mean just praying for the things that concern you, but I mean really focusing on God. What do you do outside of worship to really build your relationship with God? Worship is meant to give us a time and a place to build a relationship with God. And when I mean a relationship with God, I mean more than just having a connection with God. I hear so many people say that they are spiritual but not religious. I certainly recognize that many in the church are religious and not spiritual, but when it comes to those who are the most deeply spiritual, there is a clear connection between them being spiritual and religious. They work on growing spiritually all the time, and worship is a central part of that focus.

Think about the worship service we have at Calvin Church. It is structured to build a relationship with God. We begin with a time of centering through the opening chant, time of quiet prayer, and prayer of blessing. The opening hymn is meant to be a song of praise in which we simply spend time in appreciation and rejoicing over what God has done in our lives. The first hymn is almost always some sort of praise hymn. Then we move into a time of confession in which we honestly offer our sin and faults to God, especially our failures to put God at the center of our lives. The praise and confession act as a time of a preparation, preparing ourselves for God to enter our lives and for us to eventually hear God. Next we move into the time of listening in which we pay attention to God's voice both in scripture and through the sermon. This is a time in which we let God speak to us and guide us. Afterwards, we enter a time of

response. The song after the sermon, the offering, the pastoral prayer, and communion are all responses to God's grace. We respond by offering God our contributions, by offering our prayers, by offering our hearts and minds in the sacrament. Finally, we close with a hymn of praise and a time of blessing as we are sent into the world. Everything we do in worship has a structure. Everything has a purpose. Every part of worship is intended not only to deepen our relationship with God, but it is also intended to help us to grow spiritually—for spiritual depth is what I want for you. The striving for depth is the reason I give myself permission to have longer sermons. Shorter sermons don't lead us into the depths. Longer sermons allow us to go deeper into a topic, and therefore to grow deeper spiritually.

Is there a "right" way to worship? Every way of worshipping is the "right" way to someone. I think that the more important question is how much do we need to "fit" worship, and how much does it need to "fit" us? One of the realities of the generations is that those in older generations tended to fit themselves to worship. Those in the younger generations tend to want worship to fit them. Looking at denominations, it's apparent that the Roman Catholic denomination expects worshippers to fit their worship. The worship style is highly centralized, with few substantial changes (at least from a Protestant perspective) over the decades and even the centuries. On the other end of the spectrum, emergent worship tries to create worship services that fit those who've walked away from the church. They try to fit worship to people by integrating almost any idea that will work.

Do we have to go to church to be saved? From a Presbyterian perspective the answer is no. We don't worship to be saved. We worship because we are saved. We worship as a response to God's grace and call. In the Roman Catholic tradition, worship is an obligation that goes into the process of purging us of sin and preparing us for heaven. In the Protestant tradition, worship is not an obligation. It is a response in which we recognize all that God has done for us, and so we willingly spend time with God each week to grow in God's grace.

Doing worship nowadays is hard because everyone has an opinion on what is and isn't worship. To me, the best worship strikes a balance, which is what we try to do worship here at Calvin Church. We are a church that is grounded in our Presbyterian tradition, but that is open to other ways of doing things. We don't reject anything out of hand, but will integrate it if it helps bring generations together. Our focus is creating a multigenerational church. This is where we differ from so many other churches. If you look around our sanctuary on Sunday morning, you will see an equal distribution of people from every generation. And we try to create worship that has elements that appeal to every generation. We offer traditional hymns and contemporary ones. We have a traditional-looking sanctuary with every attribute of a contemporary one, including theatrical lighting, power point, and a top-notch sound system. We are willing to do things the way Presbyterians have done them for generations, and we are willing to integrate new elements of emergent worship. The key for us is striking a balance.

I will tell you something I've learned over the years. Despite everything I've said so far, and regardless of what style of worship a church does, ultimately the quality to worship really reflects the quality of the worshiper. It all comes down to a simple question of where your focus is on worship. Is your focus on God, or on yourself?

Amen.