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Now because we were created to worship, worship is the normal employment, not something stuck on or added, like listening to a concert or admiring flowers. It is something that is built into human nature. Every glimpse of heaven shows (God's creatures) worshipping. . . .

"O WORSHIP THE KING," A.W. TOZER.

People on a plane and people on a pew have a lot in common. All are on a journey. Most are well-behaved and presentable. Some doze, and others gaze out the window. Most, if not all, are satisfied with a predictable experience. For many, the mark of a good flight and the mark of a good worship assembly are the same. "Nice," we like to say. "It was a nice flight/It was a nice worship service." We exit the same way we enter, and we're happy to return the next time. "Seek and you will find," Jesus promised. And since a nice service is what we seek, a nice service is usually what we find.

A few, however, seek more. A few come with the child-like enthusiasm of the boy. And those few leave as he did, wide-eyed with the wonder of having stood in the presence of the pilot himself.

MAX LUCADO, *JUST LIKE JESUS* (WORD, 1998), 77,79.

## WORSHIP AND COMMUNITY

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*Marva J. Dawn*

*Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name;  
Worship the Lord in holy splendor.*

Psalm 29:2

The verbs in this verse are all plural. We are always called to ascribe the glory to the Lord together and to worship in the holy splendor of God's community. Do the people in our churches realize that almost all of the verbs that instruct God's people in the Bible are plural, with the exception of those in Timothy, Titus, and Philemon—letters written specifically to those three men? How much difference it would make in our conversations about worship and in our being Church if we really understood that we are in this together!

However, we live in a society bereft of genuine community. Yes, I know that we all participate in lots of groups and activities—soccer or baseball parents, the exercise club, neighborhood block parties, various associations related to our work and our children's schools, Internet groups and chat rooms, craft guilds and trade unions, societies for our hobbies, and our churches. But would the members of any of these organizations die for one another? Do we really live our lives in common? Lack of time and too much space between us prevent us from actually investing our lives in each other.

The problems of community spiral with struggles over worship. Unless there is an intentional effort to counteract the anti-communal temptations of our times, worship will contribute to the decline of the church as Body by fostering destructive battles over taste or narcissistic private comfort.

### DANGERS TO COMMUNITY IN WORSHIP

In our fragmented and alienated, individualistic and competitive society, many people wonder if the Christian church is any different. Congregations and denominations seem constantly to be fighting within or against each other; strangers who visit a worship service often are not welcomed or even acknowledged by anyone. Sometimes churches designate particular individuals to be the “greeters” in order to be hospitable, but that practice often militates against a genuine hospitality on the part of all the members of the parish.

Darrell Guder and his team from the Gospel and Our Culture Network critique contemporary images of community that exhibit what Parker Palmer calls an “ideology of intimacy.”<sup>1</sup> Such images emphasize

sameness, closeness, warmth, and comfort. Difference, distance, conflict, and sacrifice are alien to this approach and therefore are to be avoided at all costs. Modern communities maintain a façade of unity and harmony by eliminating the strange and cultivating the familiar, by suppressing dissimilarity and emphasizing agreement. The traumatic and tragic events of human life are glossed over, ignored, or explained away. Those who are strange—other than we are—are either excluded or quickly made like us. The results are “homogeneous communities of retreat where persons must be protected from one another as well as from outsiders, and where reality is suppressed and denied due to fear and anxiety.”<sup>2</sup>

Community in the biblical sense is more open to the realities of differences, more openly gracious to all, more deliberate, an act of will. It does not depend upon feelings of affection. In fact, sometimes (perhaps always?) God seems to put us in a community together with people whom we don’t like so that we learn the real meaning of *agape*—that intelligent, purposeful love directed toward another’s need which comes first from God and then flows through us to our neighbor. To develop a community that practices biblical principles is very difficult in this technologically efficient society. It takes a lot of work and time, sacrifice and commitment.

### THE TRIUNE GOD

Before we consider some practical ways to build community in worship, we must note this obvious, but often overlooked, truth: the triune God wants our churches to be genuine communities. The night before his crucifixion Jesus prayed that we would all be one, even as he is one with the Father. Furthermore, as the apostle Paul stresses by means of a series of repetitive phrases in 1 Corinthians 12, “one and the same Spirit” gives us all our various gifts, puts us as particular members into the Body just as he wills, and makes all those members *one* Body of Christ.

Since we know that God is at work to make us all one, we are set free to enjoy the process—knowing that it does not depend on us. What we do to build community is a response to the grace of a unifying God; who we are as the *people* of God is an image of the relationship within the Godhead. When we have struggles in our communities, we can have confidence that God is at work to bring to completion the good work he has begun in establishing his Church.

### DEVELOPING HOSPITALITY

To counteract our culture's wariness, members of the congregation need to be trained specifically to be hospitable to strangers (and to each other). Do our worship practices form us to welcome outsiders, to invite newcomers, to tell others about our faith, to care for members of the community who are missing from corporate gatherings?<sup>3</sup> We can each welcome those who sit beside us, make sure they know how to follow our order of service, point them to pages or instructions, and, with specific education, explain to them why we do what we do.

Many contemporary critics of worship maintain that building community requires us to jettison the habits of the past and use new materials that are in the idiom of the culture. This notion is dangerous in that Christianity is not simply an intellectual assent to a set of doctrinal propositions, nor is it merely having certain emotional/spiritual experiences. Rather, it is a way of life, a language, a set of habits, an entire culture. If we conform worship too much to the prevailing culture, it is difficult for participants to learn the unique "language" of faith, to be formed by the community and the Word to be followers of Christ.

I have found, contrarily, that any kind of music or style of worship, including both new and old, can be hospitable if the persons who participate in it welcome the strangers, if the customary rituals do not become empty performance, if the leaders give gentle and invitational explanations of what we do and why, if melodies for singing are clearly played or perhaps led by a cantor, if the printed music is available to everyone, if corporate worship is kept open as a "public space" into which every person can enter rather than becoming the private coziness of individuals in their devotional relationship to God.

### MUSIC

The Christian community, as the New Testament emphasizes repeatedly, is a unity of diversity. We capture that best musically when we learn to sing each other's songs, when members of the Body help each other learn why their faith is nurtured and strengthened by particular sets of words and music, when different persons in the community contribute their gifts of playing musical instruments or singing, arranging and composing. These contributions, however, must not take the place of everyone in the Body participating in the work of worship.

We must be careful in choosing new music from our era (as opposed to the music in hymnbooks, which has already for the most part been sorted by history so that the best usually remains). Since we live in an increasingly narcissistic culture, we must guard against new songs that are self-centered, that fail to convey the we-ness (and we-ness) of the Church. We want to avoid music that focuses only on our personal feelings of happiness, instead of equipping us to be a missional community that reaches out beyond ourselves with the good news of grace in Christ and cares for the world around us with peacemaking and justice building.

### OTHER GIFTS

Our worship also needs the offerings of those who make banners, grow flowers, weave vestments or altar cloths, carve furniture, make pottery vessels, or bake bread for the Lord's Supper. Other members of the Body devote their energies and skills to ushering, designing the worship folders, serving at the Lord's Table, reading Scripture lessons, or leading prayers. It is also especially important that we highlight the gifts of the children and teenagers in the community.

### CORPORATE PRAYER

It is essential that we train members of the congregation to comprehend that prayers are more than the words we speak about others. Prayer also involves placing ourselves into God's hands for the effecting of his answers. Thus, when we pray, "Thy will be done," we are seeking God's wisdom for how we can be agents for actuating his will. Hence prayer is the chief way in which the sense of community established and nurtured in the worship service is widened into other aspects of congregational life.

### PREACHING

As the primary educational vehicle of the worship service, the pastor's sermon plays a critical role in building the community. Simple language choices are vital, because the constant use of the plural *we* to describe faith pulls the congregation away from the individualism so rife in our culture. It is also essential for the pastor continually to emphasize that faith is not something we construct by ourselves for our personal use, but rather a gift, into which we are invited, that has been passed on through the community of believers since Sarah and Abraham. (Saying the historic creeds of the Church with the plural pronoun *we*, and looking at each other while we say them, also reinforces this sense of communal faith.)

Furthermore, the sermon builds community with specific instructions—for being hospitable, for carrying the corporate prayers into daily life, for each adult to participate more in the spiritual nurturing of the congregation's children, for more outreach to the neighbors. Short messages specifically for the youngest children help them to feel a part of the community; sermon illustrations concerning the youth's schools or activities enable them to know that they are valued. To demonstrate how the Scriptures form us, the pastor can include familiar situations from the

members' lives and occupations (excluding those that would break confidences or cause embarrassment), and thereby the people learn afresh that worship trains us together in the habits and practices of faith for daily life.

### WORSHIP STYLE

I have been a co-speaker at a few conferences with a person who says, "Every congregation must have at least two styles of worship, two points of entry into the congregation." Wrong! Worship is not the entry point; *you are!* I want 490 points of entry into the congregation if there are 490 members. If we confuse this, not every person in the pews recognizes that he or she is a vital part of the Christian community and its outreach to the world around us. Not only is the idea of taste as an entry point wrong biblically, but also it is extremely destructive of genuine community, fosters an independent view of the local congregation, and reduces worship simply to a matter of preferences instead of an entering into God's presence in the company of the Church throughout space and time.

Many churches have bought into the notion that they must have at least two "styles" of worship services in order to attract new members. The major reason for the popularity of this notion is that it gives a quick-fix answer to the problem of declining numbers in churches, thereby confusing worship with evangelism. It is much easier to change the kind of music offered than to change the hearts of members to make them more hospitable in worship and daily life, more willing to witness, more loving toward their neighbors.

### THE DANGERS OF DIVERGENT WORSHIP

Sometimes those who want "traditional" or "contemporary" styles of worship fight a war of control in a congregation; then frequently the war splits the Body into two

more or less vitriolic camps with each having its own worship service. In other places the leadership of a church decides to split worship into two services with different “styles” for the sake of attracting the neighbors; this choice is almost as destructive of community as the bitter war. Readers might think that I overstate the case, but let me point out several very harmful effects of such splitting. All of these are very destructive of the community.

1) If we set up different kinds of worship at different times, this fosters the “vendors/consumers” disposition and promotes the notion of marketing religion. It is difficult enough to avoid the consumerism of our culture. Causing people to shop for the musical style they prefer makes it even less possible to wean them from this mentality.

2) The division into a “traditional” and a “contemporary” service is destructive to community because these terms are so poorly defined, and the result is a narrowing of the community’s appreciation. Which tradition do we mean? The historic mass, for example, is often denigrated as the work of white Europeans—when in actuality it was composed in the early centuries of the Church from biblical roots in Judaica, Africa, and Asia Minor. Similarly, what is meant by contemporary? Do we mean choruses from Taize, pop songs, or the esoteric music of contemporary composer Krzysztof Penderecki? Congregations are limiting themselves to two kinds of sounds instead of recognizing that there are hundreds—and that almost all of them could be helpful in revealing the splendor of God.

3) The division into “traditional” and “contemporary” seems to match the tension of truth and love in the Scriptures. For example, Ephesus in Revelation 2 has lost its love, whereas Pergamum is rebuked for having false teaching. Older music, written in eras that were more objective in orientation, most often stresses content, whereas new

music is frequently more directed to loving God. Both are needed, so they ought not to be separated.

4) Furthermore, of all the various tastes in music that there are, why should we limit ourselves simply to traditional and contemporary? How will a community decide which taste to follow? Research shows that people in the United States are quite evenly divided among those who prefer hard rock, soft rock, classical, jazz, blues, country and western, contemporary easy listening, and several other kinds. Which idiom should we choose? Since Christianity is a different language altogether, what language should we use to capture its grammar?

5) When congregations divide the body into a “traditional” and a “contemporary” service, this often separates the old from the young according to their preference for what they know. The result is that young families no longer worship next to those more experienced in the faith who could be mentors to them—and the old are bereft of the vitality of the young.

6) Moreover, what the old know comes from a culture that was much more Christian than contemporary culture. We must face the fact that the surrounding ethos has much more effect on contemporary musical composition than most people realize—although there certainly are numerous examples of contemporary composers who have thoroughly resisted the influence of their milieu.

7) To split a congregation into traditional and contemporary worship services deprives the “traditionalists” of new expressions of faith. They do not learn anything fresh and lack the nourishment of reformation and renewal.

8) Similarly, splitting the congregation robs the “contemporaryists” of continuity with the Church throughout time. It steals from them their roots in Judaica and the early Church and takes from them the wisdom of all the ages of the developing Church.

9) Furthermore, different styles of worship often split the loyalists from the returnees, to the detriment of both in much the same ways as the splitting of old from young. People who have rebelled against the Church for a while and then come back need the mentoring of those who have never left.

10) A flyer that arrived at my home to advertise an evangelism conference offered a model of a "spirited praise and worship service." If that is the only kind of worship a community has, how will the people learn to lament? Are praise choruses enough for a community's faith? They certainly aren't enough for a funeral, for example.

11) Some kinds of worship services tend to reduce participants to an audience.

12) Certain styles of worship services almost inevitably entail the problem of a star clergy and cult of personality, a focus which is inimical to the biblical picture of Christian community in which all gifts are equally important for the Body. The last place in which anybody ought to be famous is in the Church.

13) It is important to learn to sing songs I might not like for the sake of the community. Notice that I did not say "songs that are of questionable theology" or "songs with little musical merit." But if tunes are interesting and singable and if the words are theologically sound, then a Christian should be willing to sing it for the sake of brothers and sisters for whom it might be especially useful spiritually. By such willingness the whole community learns to appreciate a wider diversity of musical styles for the sake of caring for each other in the Body.

14) The worst result of turning worship into a matter of taste is that to do so is to lose sight of the fact that it is God we are worshipping—not ourselves. And God, I hear, has widely eclectic tastes!

All of the dangers above contribute to narcissism, to preferring ourselves, which in turn prevents witness, concern, and outreach to the neighbor. Could Christians instead carefully assess what we do in order to bring together opposing sides of various arguments and an intermingling of styles in worship? Can we learn better what it means to be Church as we talk together about worship practices? Can we make sure that old and young worship together for the sake of wisdom and vitality for all? Most of all, can we be theologically faithful about worship instead of being beguiled by the unbiblical advice of church marketers?

Choices about worship need to be grounded in God's revelation, in the wisdom of the Church through time and space, in tradition and community, and in the new winds of the Spirit in order to form faithful decisions. The path that will lead us to truth about worship is not that of power and influence, but of humility and obedience before God.

#### Author

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#### Notes

1. See Parker Palmer's helpful book, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 108.
2. Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), 179.
3. See the excellent evangelism questionnaire from St. John Lutheran



Church, Northumberland, Pennsylvania, in Jim Pertersen, "Join the Crowd," *The Lutheran* (October 1995), 40.

William Hendriksen analyzed all occasions in the Old Testament when bodily praise occurred:

28x prostration before God on one's face

14x hands spread lifted up towards God

12x kneeling with humility and admiration

9x lifting the eye toward God,

who is the source of blessing

6x standing with reverence and

respect before God

4x bowing the head

DAVID JEREMIAH

God is pursuing with omnipotent passion a worldwide purpose of gathering joyful worshipers for himself from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. He has an inexhaustible enthusiasm for the supremacy of his name among the nations. Therefore let us bring our affections into line with his, and, for the sake of his name, let us renounce the quest for worldly comforts, and join his global purpose.

JOHN PIPER, *LET THE NATIONS BE GLAD*  
(GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN: BAKER, 1993), 40.

Of all the activities in the church, only one is an end in itself: worship.

JOHN PIPER