

The Red Herring of "Relevant" Worship

(source: "Retro-Church" blog)

Everywhere I go I come across churches with signs touting "relevant" worship. Usually this means a contemporary service with a rock band and multi-media sermons. Sometimes, usually among "emerging" congregations, it means not really having anything that could be called a service at all, but perhaps engaging in conversation, or silence, or social work (all while drinking coffee, of course).

When I was growing up as a Southern Baptist, we had "worship services" which consisted almost entirely of hymn-singing, a few prayers, a long sermon-cum-Bible-study, and an altar call. When I got to college, I began wondering if this was really "worship" at all; after all, most of the time was devoted to the sermon, and while listening to a sermon can certainly be instructive and edifying, it's also certainly at a great remove from the I-Thou focus which seemed to me to be characteristic of true worship.

When I moved away from denominational identity into the non-denominational denomination of the "Bible Church" movement, "worship services" looked pretty much the same, except that the hymnal had been replaced by handouts or an overhead projector (it was early days), and the organ had been replaced by a Fender Rhodes (to this day, the sound of a Fender Rhodes is inextricably linked in my mind to the wispy, plastic-y air of 1980s "praise music" and to the big hair of those who performed it). The long sermon remained basically unchanged, except that the preacher might admit to having had a glass of wine recently.

Then I moved on to a small church which had weeknight small group studies in people's houses instead of Sunday School. I was enticed because my contact there argued that the home studies meant that Sunday could be wholly devoted to worship. What's more, this congregation had taken a thoughtful approach to what worship was all about and had appointed a Worship Committee to help plan worship services. I was put on the Worship Committee. At one of the meetings, I recall someone saying something like, "Since God is too big to fit into a box, worship shouldn't fit into a box, either". The result was mostly praise songs and a long sermon, but sometimes the Worship Committee would throw the congregation a curve ball and plan a Communion Service, which consisted of praise songs,

distribution of crackers and grape juice, and a long sermon. I once asked if we could say the Apostle's Creed, but apparently there must be a box big enough for God, because this was deemed to fall outside it. "People wouldn't understand it," one young woman complained. "Maybe," she offered, "we could say the parts of it that aren't hard to understand." When I asked which parts those were, the subject got changed and a new praise song was introduced by the music leader.

I was introduced to another concept at that congregation. The ministry team (this seemed to be made up of the pastor and whomever agreed with him at the moment) decided that we needed to attract 20-and-30-something singles and families. Market research, it was said, demonstrated that this demographic was leery of traditional denominational affiliation and of "churchiness" in general. The result was something called (I think) CAMEO: Contemporary Approaches to Missions, Evangelism, and Outreach (I think). The basic idea was that churches should try hard not to look at all like churches so that the unsuspecting demographic would wander in (what, I wondered, would they believe they were wandering in to?) and be Christianized all unaware. Since that time, I've seen this idea carried to its incoherent conclusion. Whatever was thought to be interesting to the culture at large was boxed up and brought in, baptized and brandished, all in the name of "relevance".

"Relevance to what or whom?" should be the next question, and the answer would seem to be, "Relevance to the intended audience". If worship is something we offer to God, it is God, and not the worshipper, who is the "audience". And what is it that is supposed to be relevant? Can the offering of the self to God ever be irrelevant? I'd argue that this is exactly what worship is: the complete and utter offering of the self to God. Worship is self-abandonment, self-effacement, self-forgetting. Worship is costly and sacrificial. And while this abandonment of the self to God should be the perpetual mindset of the Christian, it has ever been the understanding of Christians that worship should regularly be undertaken by believers meeting together. And when we undertake a corporate self-abandonment to God, I'd argue that the more regularized, the more formal, the less novel or interesting, the better. Novelty and interest of necessity remove the focus from God and put it instead on the service.

C.S. Lewis addressed this very problem in a letter from 1952:

The advantage of a fixed form of service is that we know what is coming. Ex tempore public prayer has this difficulty: we don't know whether we can mentally join in it until we've heard it -- it might be phoney or heretical. We are therefore called upon to carry on a critical and a devotional activity at the same moment: two things hardly compatible. In a fixed form we ought to have 'gone through the motions' before in our private prayers; the rigid form really sets our devotions free. I also find the more rigid it is, the easier it is to keep one's thoughts from straying. Also it prevents getting too completely eaten up by whatever happens to be the preoccupation of the moment The permanent shape of Christianity shows through.¹

I think the mention of the "permanent shape of Christianity" merits further comment. The Faith does not belong to us; we belong to it, we subscribe to it, we submit ourselves to it, because it is from God. We are not free to change it or to alter it; it is we who must change and alter in order to conform to it. The Faith has a permanent shape, a shape recognized by all Christians who have ever lived. And because every true Christian who has ever lived lives still, and worships still, in Heaven, our worship must be simply a joining in their worship, a lifting up of ourselves to the worshipping company of Heaven, all abandoning self for the Lord. There can be no idiosyncratic worship, because the corporate self-abandonment of believers has a permanent shape, something intrinsically recognizable, not to the surrounding culture, but to the Body of Christ.

Our worship is a family affair, not ultimately meant to appeal to the unchurched or unbelievers, though it is impossible that our otherworldly meeting of family in and out of time in an utter outpouring of self to the Lord could ever be objectively irrelevant to them. The worship of the Church has never been "relevant" to any culture in which she found herself, at least not from the point of view of the culture. Christian worship has always been a mystery to those around us, because the idea of self-oblation, self-abandonment to God is utterly foreign them. Relevance from the point of view of the surrounding culture is not something we should strive for. The search for relevance bends us out of our permanent shape, renders us unrecognizable. Our Lord was irrelevant to the scribes and pharisees, and his coming in the flesh was scandal and foolishness to the Hellenistic and Hebraic cultures to which this good news first came. Christian worship was offensive and sometimes criminal in the Roman world into which it spread.

Now, in an attempt to cajole those from the surrounding culture to get out of

bed and come in off the streets, we've taken down our "church" signs and replaced them with "worship center" signs, as if worship were a commodity to be purchased after trips to the vision center, the garden center, and the entertainment center. We've stripped away the names of saints and of events in our Lord's life, and we've replaced them with druidic-sounding names like rock, river, and grove (really, there's a congregation called "The Grove": haven't they ever read the Old Testament?). But our Worship Center is not a building; our Worship Center is a Person -- the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit is to be worshipped and adored for ever. This worship is not contemporary, but timeless; it is not relevant, but mysterious and sacrificial.

1. Quoted in *The Business of Heaven: Daily Readings*, reading for August 10.