

Ancient-Modern Worship

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Acts 2:43-47

Sermons Series:
Best Spiritual
Practices

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- Martin Luther*

In 1734, a spiritual awakening erupted in a church in Northampton, Massachusetts, led by Jonathan Edwards. This Great Awakening, as it was called, swept through the colonies and ushered in a whole new way of singing. Previously, the only hymns allowed in churches were settings to the Psalms. But now, critics complained, churches were singing “hymns of human composure,” meaning they were composed by contemporaries rather than taken directly from Scripture.

George Whitfield, the famous preacher who helped lead the Great Awakening, observed that colonists without formal education had a difficult time with the sophisticated hymn tunes of the Psalms. So, Whitefield took music already well-known by people, sung at stage operas and taverns, and arranged sacred words to them. Although Whitfield was roundly criticized for this effort, he argued, “Why should the devil’s house have all the good tunes.”

So, here we are, 300 years later, still fussing about church music. Maybe it’s not all that surprising, given how important music is to people. Martin

Luther said it well: “Next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world.”

A man, accustomed to traditional worship, one Sunday attended a church that sang only praise choruses. When he came home, his wife asked him about the service. “It was interesting,” he said. “They sang praise choruses instead of hymns. His wife asked, “What’s the difference?”

He said to his wife, “If I said to you, ‘Martha, the cows are in the corn,’ that would be a hymn. But suppose I said, ‘Martha, Martha, Martha. Oh Martha, Martha, Martha, the cows, the big cows, the brown cows, the black cows, the white cows and the black cows, the cows, cows, cows are in the corn, the corn, corn, corn.’ If I were to repeat the whole thing five or six times that would be a praise chorus.”

That same Sunday, a woman accustomed to contemporary worship attended a traditional church. When she came home, her husband asked about the service. “It was interesting; they sang hymns instead of praise choruses.” “What’s the difference?” her husband asked. She replied, “If I said to you,

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'Earnest, the cows are in the corn,' that would be a praise chorus. But suppose I would say, 'Oh Earnest, dear Earnest, hear thou my cry; incline thy ear to the words of my mouth. Turn thy wondrous ear by and by to the righteous, inimitable, glorious truth. For the way of the animals, who can explain? There is no shadow of sense. Hearken, they not in God's sun or his rain. Unless from the mild, tempting corn they are fenced. Yea, those cows in glad bovine, rebellious delight, broke free from their shackles, their warm pens eschewed. Then goaded by minions of darkness and night, my Chilli-wack sweet corn has chewed. So look to that bright shining day by and by, where all the corruptions of earth are reborn, where no vicious animals make my soul cry, and I no longer see those foul cows in the barn.'"

Some people criticize contemporary Christian music for being repetitive. Let's be fair about it. Have you ever counted how many Hallelujahs there are in the Hallelujah Chorus? We use repetition for emphasis. Those who are married, what would your spouse say if you only spoke "I love you" once in your life? What if a child said to his teacher, "I don't want to recite the pledge of allegiance today, I pledged allegiance yesterday."

I'll admit, contemporary worship can be individualistic and overly sentimental. What I

sense in contemporary music is a longing to connect to God.

People often ask me what kind of music we sing at Vienna Presbyterian. Do we sing Bach or praise choruses? Does our worship follow a traditional or contemporary style? At this point, I want to scream. Enough about style already, let's talk about substance.

The choice between traditional and contemporary is a false dichotomy. It's not an either/or. This faith we profess is at one and the same time both ancient and modern. I'm committed to worship that is both ancient and modern.

Our faith is rooted in the past. Our first hymnbook, the Book of Psalms, dates back to the era of King David in 1000 BC. We claim allegiance to Holy Scripture that is thousands of years old. We recited a creed earlier in worship that takes shape during the second century of the modern era.

Christianity is not the new religion on the block. It's a religion rooted in history, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We claim constancy with spiritual forebears who gathered in the temple daily to sing praise to God (Acts 2:46-47). Luke records in verse 42, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." We order our worship today around these ancient practices. We are devoted to

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the apostles' teaching, what we call the New Testament today. We aspire to become a fellowship or community of Christ followers. We continue to observe the breaking of bread in the Lord's Supper and center our worship in prayer.

This ancient faith also makes demands upon our present lives. Peter's sermon in Acts connects this ancient faith to people's present circumstances. That's why his listeners respond in verse 37 with the words, "What shall we do?"

Our worship is ancient. The past contributes to this present moment. We don't reject the past; neither do we idolize it.

Our worship is also modern. This ancient story has a contemporary application to our lives.

Some people would rather segregate worship into contemporary and traditional services. No, thanks! To worship exclusively in a traditional venue deprives traditionalists of new expressions of faith. To worship only in a contemporary format separates modernists from continuity with the early church.

In our consumer-oriented American culture, many churches have adopted a presentation style of worship. Worship has become something of a show; entertainment, if you will. We have become a generation of religious spectators.

In such a setting, worship leaders serve as actors while the congregation functions in the

role of audience. Your job, then, is to critique how we are doing. But in the Biblical understanding, leaders and congregation alike are actors and God is the audience. The role of worship leaders is to serve as prompters, helping us, you might say, with our lines.

The central question in worship is not how Pete is preaching or how David is praying. The central question is how am I doing in worship? Am I bringing my heart and soul to worship?

We invited you in our Daily Devotional this week to meditate on Psalm 96. We are summoned in the Psalm to "Worship the Lord" (96:9). In this and every other Psalm, worship is a verb, not a noun. Worship is not something done to us or for us; it's done by us. Worship is something we do. Note the action verbs in Psalm 96. We sing, bless, declare, ascribe, bring an offering, rejoice and exult. Our word "liturgy" literally translates as "the work of the people." There is good work for us to do in worship.

So what? So what difference does this sermon make in my life? I urge you to recognize your role in worship. I prepared myself to preach this sermon. Are you prepared to receive it? Some people walk into this service cold. They sit back and fold their arms as if to say, "Go ahead, preacher, see if you can move me."

Worship is a verb!

It doesn't work that way. You must prepare your heart to receive the Word. If you stagger into worship Sunday morning after a night of partying, you're not going to get much out of this worship and sermon.

Our worship essentially involves four movements. The first movement is adoration. We begin each service with praise. We sing songs and hymns of praise to God. Worship is an old English word meaning worth-ship. We determine what God is worth and give God what He's worth.

Our praise to God sets in bold relief our sins and shortcomings. The second movement of worship centers on confession. This morning, David led us in confession. I always appreciate David's prayers of confession. His words always seem to reach inside of me. But perhaps you weren't stirred by his prayer of confession. You were thinking, 'Hey, I didn't do these things!' Well then, you can substitute other sins in their place.

The third movement of worship is proclamation. We proclaim the Word in Scripture and sermon. You must hold our pastoral feet to the fire to preach Biblical sermons. We don't want to preach mere psychobabble.

I ought to preach, sometime, a sermon on how to listen to a sermon. Many of us regard listening as a passive exercise. Listening takes considerable

effort, especially in this media-saturated culture in which we live.

I must resist the temptation to critique other preachers' sermons. It's an occupational hazard, I suppose, of evaluating what I would say on the topic and what illustrations I would use. We become a judge and jury of sermons rather than asking, "Lord, what do you want to say to me through this sermon?"

It's hard to stay focused for a 20-25 minute sermon in this sound-bite culture. I stay focused by taking notes. The physical act of writing something down helps me remember what is being said.

The fourth act of worship is response. Scripture calls us to "Be doers of the Word and not hearers only" (James 1:22). We read in Acts about the Bereans who received Paul's message with eagerness and "searched the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were really true" (Acts 17:11).

Worship is a verb! We hear the Word; then we do it.