

Telling the Story: In Worship **Psalm 100:1-5 and John 4:21-24**

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At the start of his article entitled, “How We Worship”, Dr. L. Edward Phillips playfully imagines the first meeting of a church’s new worship committee. The chairperson asks the pastor, “What are we supposed to accomplish with this committee?” and the pastor responds, “Our goal is to facilitate good worship for our church.”

“How will we know when we’ve done that?”, the chairperson asks. “Good Worship” sounds a little vague to me.” So, the pastor suggests they ask each member of the committee what is important to them in making worship “good”...

One man says, “I like worship that uses the old, traditional hymns, like ‘Blessed Assurance’”.

Another person responds, “But our teenagers want music they can clap their hands to. Remember how much they liked the Christian rock music performed by that touring youth choir?”

A teenager joins in, “I didn’t like that at all! I find it embarrassing when my church tries to do that stuff.”

One of the women says, “I like it when we say the Lord’s Prayer” and another woman asks, “But do we have to say it every Sunday? I like it when the pastor just makes up a prayer.”

Someone else suggests, “Isn’t worship supposed to give us something to think about?”

Then the teenager speaks up again, “I think we need to focus on social issues such as hunger or homelessness.”

The first man who spoke comments again, “But let’s not forget that we need to focus more on personal conversion.”

Finally, the chairperson sighs saying, “I think we’re headed for trouble here.”

Ironically, Phillips wrote this little scenario 25 years ago, but we’re still having the same conversations in the church today. In fact, we’ve been having quite a few of them here just recently.

Discussions about how we worship have been around since the church began. In his letters to the Corinthian church 2000 years ago, the apostle Paul addressed a conflict the Corinthians were having over Holy Communion. Things really heated up after the Protestant Reformation when a number of new denominations were formed, each prioritizing different elements of worship. Then, in the 1960’s, the contemporary worship service emerged from the Jesus Movement. At the same time, there was an ecumenical worship and liturgical movement that led to a common understanding of how to worship based on the practices of the early church. The work of this group is the foundation for what United Methodist clergy are taught about worship in seminary still today.

So, yes, Christians have been trying to figure out how to worship since the beginning of the church. But, perhaps that is the wrong place to start. Perhaps we can better understand how to worship by asking why we worship.

The most obvious answer is because the Bible tells us to. Psalm 100 is one of many, many scripture passages that instruct us to worship God - particularly to worship God with thanks and praise. Which leads to one of the things that I think trips us up when we think about how to worship. We start in the wrong place, focusing on our own preferences rather than on what God. After all, worship is really for God - an offering to God in gratitude and praise for all that God has given us. We worship with song and scripture, sermons and prayer starting first with the question, “What is pleasing to God?”

Our passage from John 4 answers that question. God seeks for us to worship in spirit and in truth. “In truth” means we worship grounded in what we know about our faith - the beliefs we hold as Christians, which we have learned from the healing, hope-filled, salvific life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Each of us will be in a different place in understanding and wrestling with those beliefs, yet we come to worship engaging our minds in the pursuit of truth.

“In spirit”, on the other hand, is a matter of the heart. To worship God “in spirit” is to connect with God through the movement of the Holy Spirit which moves within and among us. Through the practice of worship, we are reminded of God’s unconditional love for us, and we can’t help but express our love for God as we reconnect with the One who creates, sustains, and redeems us. So, worship becomes the practice of loving God with all our heart, mind, and strength.

In discussing what it means to worship in spirit and truth, theologian John Piper writes, “Worship must be vital and real in the heart, and worship must rest on a true perception of God. Truth without emotion produces dead orthodoxy and a church full (or half-full) of artificial admirers On the other hand, emotion without truth produces empty frenzy and cultivates shallow people who refuse the discipline of rigorous thought. . . Strong affections for God rooted in truth are the bone and marrow of biblical worship.”

As Methodists, we frame this understanding of worship in what John Wesley called the “means of grace”. Means of grace are practices that invite God’s transformative grace to work in our lives. They can be personal or social. The personal means of grace are all elements of how we worship - prayer, reading and studying scripture, and taking Holy Communion. I would say that in the Wesleyan tradition, singing is another as is the sacrament of baptism. Through the means of grace, we are changed. These practices transform us. Author Debie Thomas writes, “worship is far more than expressive; it is formational. It makes us. It focuses our attention. It orders our priorities. It teaches us what’s important and what isn’t. Our prayer, our devotion, our praise—these rewire us. They enable us to see, hear, and think in new ways. God commands my worship so that my heart can be softened into servanthood, gentleness, humility, and love. This is a God who offers me the practice of worship as a gift. Not for God’s benefit, but for mine.”

One more characteristic of worshiping in spirit and truth is that worship is not only an expression of your love for God but also an inspiration to love your neighbor. Worship inspires each of us to go out into the world and do something to embody God’s love for others. Maybe that is challenging yourself to love someone who makes you uncomfortable or to volunteer your time and gifts at church or another organization. Maybe it is signing up to work on the habitat for humanity house this summer or joining a group focused on dismantling systemic racism.

As we consider why we worship and how we worship, what reveals itself is that God is much more interested in what is happening internally in us when we worship than in the style of our worship. Yet, the external is important, without doubt, because what we sing, how we pray, how we receive the scripture and the teaching of a preacher, the atmosphere in which we worship, whether the service is full of energy or quiet and contemplative - all of these impact the opening of our hearts to God and God’s transformation. The style of music, preaching, prayer, etc. you choose should be what brings you closer to God, allowing you to both praise and give thanks but also feel a deeper connection to the Source of light and love and justice.

There isn’t one right “style” of worshiping but, especially given the diversity of music and liturgy available to us, there does need to be some kind of structure to our worship. In the United Methodist church, we typically use a pattern known as “word and table”. It’s even printed in the front of the Methodist hymnal. This structure has four parts. First is the gathering of the community for worship which may include a welcome, announcements, singing, an opening prayer or call to worship, and a time of greeting each other. Sound familiar?

This is followed by the Proclamation of the word and our response to the word. Proclamation includes learning about the scripture through reading it, preaching, witnessing, music and other arts and media. The response to God’s word includes acts of commitment and faith such as baptism or the joining

of new members as well as offering our prayers, gifts, and service to God. Holy Communion is a response to the Word, as well.

Finally, the service ends with what is called the Sending Forth - the words of Benediction which bless the people as they go out into the world to share God's love.

Notice that the only parts of the service in which there are words that "have to be said" is in the sacraments. Otherwise, the elements of the worship service can be in whatever style the worshiping community embraces.

What matters is that we tell the story and we offer our worship to God. We give thanks, we open ourselves to transformation through prayer and scripture, we give of ourselves and our gifts, and we leave with a charge to go out and offer God's love to the world.

Now, that is not going to answer all of the preferences of our fictional worship committee, but it's a great place to start if you are seeking "good worship".

May it be so. Amen.