

The Heart of Worship

1/4 in Series

Act 1: Adoration

Psalm 150 (Responsive Reading)

02 06 2011

A Culture of Critique

(Walk through the congregation and engage the members in conversation).

What do you think of **worship** so far? On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rank the service?

How about the opening prelude/instrumental? It was high energy and exciting; but did I detect a few false notes in the middle? I think the musicians may have played a G rather than an H!

At least the hymns/songs were fairly familiar and singable this morning; but who set the tempo for the second piece? It drug on and on and on

And I hesitate to mention it, but the ushers just didn't bring their "A Game" to church today. They almost skipped one row and didn't raise near enough cash.

The pastoral prayer started strong, but it had its weaker moments. And did Dee Dee REALLY pray for someone's bunions? Or did I mishear what she said?

We haven't gotten to the sermon yet; but I'm SURE it will be the highlight of the morning! And it's a good thing based upon how the rest of the service has gone.

We often view worship with a critical eye. People tend to focus on the negative rather than the positive, to hear the one false note in a well done song, to recall the one mistake in an otherwise inspiring service.

Our critical attitude towards church is symptomatic of our society. We have become a nation of **critics**. We cannot fully enjoy a moment because we are too busy listing what is wrong with it. We are hypercritical of everything and everyone. We critique meals, movies, music, TV, politicians, schools, businesses, and . . . church.

This attitude is reflected in the question: "**How was church?**" The response is often critical. The sanctuary was too hot or too cold. The songs were too fast or too slow. The vocalists were too sharp or too flat. The instruments were too loud or too soft. The sermon was too long or . . . too long. We never seem to find that *Goldilocks Zone* where everything is "*just right!*"

I'll pause here to make a personal confession: When it comes to critiquing worship services, yours truly is chief among sinners. I am a perfectionist who is seldom satisfied. Each Sunday morning I make a mental list of what went wrong. The Worship Team meets on Monday morning, and the first order of business is to debrief the previous day's events; and it is always so much easier to notice what went wrong than right.

And I can hardly listen to another preacher any more. I'm too busy critiquing the outline, flow, illustrations, and exegesis. I leave with the smug certainty that I could have done a much better job if given the chance. Of course, I'm not alone. A lot of folk enjoy a serving of fried preacher at Sunday dinner!

An Audience of One

A **consumer mentality** has warped our attitude about worship. We come to church with an end-user attitude, asking, “What’s in it for me? What can I get out of it? What’s the take-away?” So worship leaders attempt to make worship user-friendly. The success of the service depends upon how well the clergy and choir perform. Or does it?

Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish theologian who lived in the 19th century, compared worship to a play performed in a theater. In such a setting, most assume that the congregation is the audience. The worship leaders are the actors performing on the stage. And the Holy Spirit serves as a prompter—off stage and out of sight—who occasionally reminds the characters of their lines.

However, Kierkegaard said that such an understanding of worship is fundamentally flawed. The members of the congregation are not the audience; instead, they are the actors who gather to actively participate in worship. The worship leaders serve as the prompters, helping others to fully engage in worship. And God, God is an *Audience of One* before whom we perform.

Actually, I believe that the true spirit of worship is found somewhere between these two extremes. Neither the congregation nor God is a passive audience simply observing worship. We are all active participants in the verb of worship.

Perhaps a better way to talk about worship is to recognize it as a place where God and God’s people **meet**. We gather together in the presence of the Holy. We actively participate in the worship of our Lord, and God in turn acts in our lives.

Presbyterian minister, Frederick Buechner, wrote:

Phrases like Worship Service or Service of Worship are tautologies (two ways of saying the same thing). To worship God means to serve him. Basically there are two ways to do it. One way is to do things for him that he needs to have done—run errands for him, carry messages, for him, fight on his side, feed his lambs, and so on. The other way is to do things for him that you need to do—sing for him, tell him what’s on your mind and in your heart, in general rejoice in him and make a fool of yourself for him the way lovers have always made fools of themselves for the one they love . . . Unless there’s an element of joy and foolishness in the proceedings, the time would be better spent doing something useful. (Wishful Thinking, p. 97-98)

The Heart of Worship

The church constantly has to be reminded about the true nature of worship. In 1993, a group of Christians began an outreach mission to the youth in Watford, England. The members called themselves **Soul Survivor**. The movement birthed a local congregation along with a youth movement that spread around the world. *Soul Survivor* became a church on the cutting edge of contemporary worship.

After some time, however, the pastor (Mike Pilavachi) noticed that worship felt flat and uninspired. He wrestled with what was wrong until one day he had a sudden revelation. He later wrote about the experience:

We had become connoisseurs of worship instead of participants of it. In our hearts, we were giving the worship team grades on a scale from one to ten We had made the band the performers of worship and ourselves the audience. We had forgotten that we are ALL performers of worship and that God is the audience The truth came to us: worship is not a spectator sport, it is not a product modeled by the taste of the consumers. It is not about what we can get out of it; it is all about God.

(http://www.higherpraise.com/worship/worship_when_the_music_fades.htm)

So the pastor took a drastic step. For an undetermined amount of time, they eliminated the band, the music, and the song leaders. People were invited to gather in silence until someone was inspired to lift up a prayer, song, word of encouragement, or Scripture passage. It was awkward and uncomfortable at first; but soon the Holy Spirit began to flow through the congregation.

Once worship regained a central place in the church's life, the pastor brought the band back. The worship leader's name was Matt Redman who was a well known composer of contemporary music. On their first Sunday back, Redman shared a song that spoke about their shared experience. It was entitled *The Heart of Worship*.

Solo: *The Heart of Worship* (First verse and chorus)

*When the music fades,
All is stripped away, and I simply come
Longing just to bring
Something that's of worth
That will bless your heart*

*I'll bring you more than a song
For a song in itself is not what you have required.
You search much deeper within
Through the way things appear;
You're looking into my heart.*

*I'm coming back to the heart of worship
And it's all about you
It's all about you Jesus.
I'm sorry Lord for the thing I've made it
When it's all about you.
All about you Jesus.*

The Heart of Worship Sermon Series

Inspired by the song, our new worship series is entitled *The Heart of Worship*. Together we are exploring what it means to worship God “in spirit and in truth.” (see [John 4:24](#)) During the next five weeks, we are using the acronym of ACTS as a model for both prayer and worship. ACTS stands for:

- 1) A Adoration
- 2) C Confession
- 3) T Thanksgiving
- 4) S Supplication

In some ways, this is an artificial division because each movement of worship flows into the others. It’s like defining the human **heart** by describing the four chambers that make up the cardiac muscle. Although the description might be technically correct, it misses the vital energy of the whole. Spirit-filled worship and prayer always encompass adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication.

Act 1: Adoration

ACTS—the **A** stands for **adoration**. The first act of worship is the adoration of our God. There are a variety of ways to describe adoration. The definition I like best is: “Adoration is praising God for who God is.” It is pure praise with no other motivation or agenda. True adoration focuses upon the Lord alone.

A **catechism** is an ancient teaching method of the church which instructs people in the faith through a series of questions and answers. *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* asks the question: “*What is the chief end of humanity?*” The answer: “*Humanity’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.*”

Adoration is the glorification of God—and our ultimate desire is to enjoy living in God’s presence forever. At its best, worship gives us “*a foretaste of glory divine*” as we adore and praise our Creator, Savior, and Sustainer.

Praise spans the emotional and spiritual spectrum. Sometimes we adore God with high energy and volume; other times we praise God quietly and reflectively. Adoration occurs in worship in a rich diversity of ways.

1) Adoration is often expressed in the **hymns and songs** of the church. The Holy Spirit inspires gifted composers to capture praise in rhythm and rhyme. And it’s not only the words but also the music that brings us into the divine presence.

We all have our favorite hymns. For me, it doesn’t get much better than the words of *Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee* set to Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy*. Then there’s *Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty*. Centuries later we still sing Charles Wesley’s *O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing My Great Redeemer’s Grace*.

There are also contemporary songs written for a new generation that are distilled praise. *Our God is an Awesome God* celebrates the Almighty’s power and might. *All*

Creation Worships You recognizes that we do not worship alone. *That's What We Came Here For* reminds us why we gathered here today.

When we lift our voices in singing, we join in a song that began before the creation of the world and will continue forevermore. We glorify God with the angels and archangels, the patriarchs and matriarchs, the apostles and disciples, brothers and sisters of Christ in every age and place.

2) We adore God in our **prayers**. In our divine appointments with God, praise bubbles up inside us like an artesian well. Individual and corporate prayer grants us the opportunity to express our love and devotion to our Lord.

We also adore God in our **silence**. After all, we are trying to express the inexpressible. Human words never suffice. In Romans 8:26, Paul wrote about bringing our needs before God: *“The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.”* In the same way, the Spirit enables us to worship and adore God when we don't have the words to say.

3) A third way we express adoration is through the reading of **Scripture**. So many Biblical passages lead us in glorifying God. The Psalms are a primer of praise. Occasionally in personal devotions and public worship I will call out some of the names of God from Scripture. God is:

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| ✓ Father, Son, and Holy Spirit | ✓ The Bright and Morning Star |
| ✓ Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer | ✓ Advocate, Counselor, Comforter |
| ✓ Alpha & Omega | ✓ Savior and Lord |
| ✓ Rock, Fortress, Deliverer | ✓ God of Abraham, Isaac, & Jacob |
| ✓ The Good Shepherd | ✓ The Great “I AM” |
| ✓ The Fairest of Ten Thousand | ✓ Jesus the Christ |

4) We also worship God physically with our **bodies**. We feel the buttons on the pew cushions in the sanctuary. We hear the WHOOSH of air as people sit down on the padded chairs in the Family Life Center. Choir and congregation stand to sing. We close our eyes and bow our heads. People kneel at the altar in prayer.

We hear the splash of water during Holy Baptism. The taste of bread and juice fill our mouths at Holy Communion. Gritty ashes mark the sign of the cross on our foreheads during the Ash Wednesday service.

Some people raise their hands in adoration. Others clap their hands to the beat of the music. During confirmation, the pastors lay hands on the heads of those dedicating their lives to Jesus Christ.

Christ called us to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and we worship in the same way—with the entirety of our being, adoring God because God IS God!

Conclusion

In 1980, Jane Marshall published a hymn that was included as a newer song in *The United Methodist Hymnal*. The first verse asks:

*What gift can we bring, what present, what token?
What words can convey it, the joy of this day?
When grateful we come, remembering, rejoicing,
What song can we offer in honor and praise?*

What do you give to the God who has everything? We respond with praise and honor. The adoration of God is at the very heart of worship. We come today to glorify God for who God is. We join our voices with all creation in a hymn of gratitude and praise to the Creator. To borrow a line that we normally reserve for the Christmas season, “Come let us adore him, Christ the Lord!”

Amen.

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