“Why Do We Worship the Way We Have Always Worshiped When People Keep Changing?”

by N. Graham Standish, *Alban Weekly*, Issue 311, July 12, 2010. http://www.alban.org/conversation.aspx?id=9140

For most of my life I have really disliked worship. My wife tells me that if I weren't a pastor, I would never go to worship. Fifteen years ago she was right about that, although I have managed to change over time. I am a constant tinkerer when it comes to designing worship, always working with our staff and members to figure out how to tweak our worship in a way that will touch people and open them to what I think is paramount in a worship service: encountering and experiencing God in a way that transforms us, even if just a little bit.

The unfortunate reality is that in North American society, neither the surrounding culture nor the church culture embraces the transforming encounter with God. Many mainline churches quit asking long ago whether our worship leads people to an encounter with Christ and the Holy Spirit. Think about why we do what we do in worship. Do we worship the way we do because it is how we have always done it? Do we worship the way we do because it is what we are best at? Do we worship the way we do because it makes certain members of the church happy? These reasons reside at the center of what has caused so many people to walk away from the church. Many people have wanted a tangible, transforming encounter with God but have never found it in worship, because worship has been focused on everything but that transforming encounter. To foster an encounter with God means designing worship that is deliberately focused on making a spiritual and psychological impact on people. If people are to experience God in worship, it needs to resonate with where they are psychologically and spiritually. If we don’t offer people a venue through which they can access the spiritual, they will gladly find some other venue or ignore their spiritual yearnings and substitute the pursuits and pleasures of the world.

The church has to adapt its worship because our culture doesn’t recognize the value of worship when done as it was in generations past. Each generation is different in what it resonates with because over time the culture changes. The result is that worship rooted in previous generations loses its power to connect with each succeeding generation and leads us to address spiritual questions that are no longer being asked, or at least not being asked in a way that can be addressed in forms familiar to today's older generations.

Part of the fallout of generational and cultural shifts is that worship slowly loses relevance for the generations ignored in our worship design. Most generations approach worship differently from previous ones. They are not always looking to reinvent worship, but they are seeking a renewed sense of relevance to their context. Each generation has different yearnings, and so the church is under constant pressure to adapt what it is doing to meet people where they are, while maintaining fidelity to the generations it has already been serving. This is a monumental task, made even more so because each new generation never really tells the previous generation what it is seeking, mainly because they aren’t entirely sure themselves. So, we in the church have to guess, experiment, and try our best to figure out what each of these generations is seeking.

Ultimately, the problem isn't that each generation keeps changing. The problem is that as time passes congregations and their leaders forget to keep the focus of worship on the encounter with the Holy. They forget that unless people sense that they have had an encounter with Christ, an experience of the Spirit and that through worship they are increasingly established in the Creator, then worship is no longer God-focused.

The power of worship is its ability to foster the relationship people have with God. Worship that is either completely God-focused or us-focused misses the mark. The most powerful worship actually is relationship-focused. It enhances the relationship between God and us. The hymns are selected not only to praise God but also to connect us with God. The prayers are said with appropriate inflection and passion that leads people to sense a bond between God and us. Preaching isn't so much an exploration of theological themes as an attempt to lift the veil of mystery separating us from God, as well as an invitation for people to discover how to live in divine union and love with God. Everything in worship should be designed to facilitate relationship with God.

I believe that the main reason congregations neglect the Holy is that over time congregations slowly slip from a spiritual approach to worship to a functional approach. I wrote about this at length in one of my previous books, Becoming a Blessed Church. What is the difference between the two? A functional approach to worship isn't concerned with leading people to experience the Holy. It aims to maintain what has always been done, to make members happy by keeping worship the same, and to design worship around the desires of longtime, traditional worshipers. The focus is on maintaining membership and the status quo. The proper function of worship matters much more than the experience of worship. A spiritual approach, in contrast, wants to help people gain a sense of the Creator's purpose in their lives, Christ’s presence in worship, and the Spirit's power working through them.

No matter how spiritually vibrant a church may have been at one point in history, the attempt to maintain vibrancy by keeping alive traditions of one generation eventually moves it from spiritual vibrancy to functionality. The irony is that the very attempt to stay vibrant by holding onto previous, life-giving modes of worship actually creates a functional worship that eventually drains it of its spiritual relevance. Maintaining passion in worship over the years is hard. It takes compelling leadership, a tremendous level of commitment by members, a clear sense of vision, and a willingness to adapt to new situations. When those four elements wane, the ensuing generations end up merely imitating the functions of worship and spiritual practices of previous generations. In their attempt to hold onto what was, they neglect the experience of the Holy that anchored the previous generations' worship. So they imitate the forms of worship that led people of the past to the Holy, while neglecting the holy passion that led to the creation of those forms. In effect, they just stop asking whether what they are doing is helping people to sense God's presence in worship.

Is there an alternative to the functional approach? The alternative is to try to restore the spiritual to people’s lives through worship by becoming intentional about adapting worship to where people are spiritually. Adapting to where people are doesn’t mean that we have to placate them. It is a question of simply taking down barriers that interfere with what we are trying to do. To emphasize the spiritual in worship means to nurture an awareness that there is more to worship and worship practices than their function. To take a spiritual approach to worship means to explore, extract, and express a sense of meaning found in every element of worship, especially in the mundane aspects of worship. Bringing a spiritual perspective into it helps people transcend and reach beyond where they are.

Being intentional means reassessing our practice of worship and asking whether what we are offering actually connects members of each generation with the Holy. It means asking a simple question: Do people encounter the Holy in our worship services? The challenge in restoring the Holy to worship is to recognize that different people experience the Holy in different ways. Churches cannot account for every difference, but they can become sensitive to these differences and adapt to them.

Comment on this article on the Alban Roundtable blog

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Adapted from In God's Presence: Encountering, Experiencing, and Embracing the Holy in Worship by N. Graham Standish, copyright © 2010 by the Alban Institute. All rights reserved.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_