

# Worship Has Its Reasons

by Earl F. Palmer

What are the reasons we have for what we do as a church in teaching, in serving, in worship? I've been thinking about these questions not only for what they mean to me personally but for what they mean to our common ministry in the Christian fellowship. The heart of it all is straightforward and plain to tell but takes a lifetime to experience. For myself I have three goals as a Christian. First I want to have a centered, worshiping faith that is focused clearly and unmistakably upon Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Second, I want to be a growing biblical Christian who is daily discovering the implications of Christ's reign in my own discipleship journey. Third, I want to make a difference in the places where I live so that Christ's love is shared through my life toward the complicated world around me.

These are my goals. Now the question is, how can they happen? As in every human adventure, it is the primary goal that makes the others possible. This fact is so basic that if this beginning place is vague or confused, then all the plans, programs and strategies that become the activity of my life or my church will lack a lasting foundation. My first goal is to be a centered person who knows who Jesus Christ is and to be a person who is assured of the kingly claim and the kindly love of Jesus Christ in my own life. This centering and assurance happens as I discover the character of Jesus Christ from the Old Testament in its narratives of anticipation and from the New Testament in its narratives of witness. The encouragement that comes from other Christian believers also helps me to make the discovery for myself. But the mystery of it all is that God the Holy Spirit confirms the Scripture and the witness of the Christians so that I am able to say that Jesus Christ is my Lord.

This Lord who stands at the center is the Jesus of history, not the theme of our hopes or the phantom Christ of religious invention, but the Jesus who spoke and acted in human history. This centering goal for my life as a person and as a pastor means that my intention for discipleship and for ministry is to be a biblical Christian. I want to guard against the kind of teaching, preaching and public worship that treats the gospel as a general truth source which I as a pastor interpret through the stories of my own life journey though my own journey bears witness to the Lord of the biblical text. I have a different and a harder

goal than to tell my own story: it is to enable those who I am privileged to teach to read and study the texts of the Bible for themselves, so that, they discover in terms that they can understand the vast truths of the gospel and, so that, they see for themselves where those truths come from.

We have this experience when the Bible is put into our hands, is opened, is read, is talked about, is struggled with, and in one or several exciting moments we hear ourselves and someone else say because of a small group study or during a mission project or in public worship— "Yes, I see what it means." It has never been enough to tell someone that God loves them; they need to discover that God loves them. By every means and strategy I know, my first goal therefore is to enable a hearing for the witness of the Old and New Testaments and then to leave the conviction of sins and the assurance of belovedness to God. The task of worship and teaching is not manipulation but open statement and lived witness. God must be his own validation.

God uses the friendship and caring witness of our lives as an endorsement of the gospel to other people, but we must not distort this truth and make the mistake of thinking that we are the gospel. The gospel is true and good even when we are not! This is why we stay Christians even when the Christians we know let us down. Jesus Christ is the one who wins each of us to faith because faith is our trust in his trustworthiness. Faith is not trust in the Christians, or the church, or even the worship and sacraments of the church but it is trust in the person Jesus Christ who is greater than the church and greater than our attempts to honor him.

When this first goal is firmly established in my life, there are two results: The one is a refreshing simplification of my ministry task and my life. The second is a refreshing broadening of my life and my ministry task. I am simplified because I know that there is only one true source of meaning.

The sheer size of the Lordship of Jesus Christ has an exciting broadening effect upon my life too. The reign of Christ's love and faithfulness opens up subtleties that go far beyond my expectations of what possibilities are present in life. Therefore we are not surprised that Christian faith has been a persistent inspiration for the poet, the musician, the artist and the philosopher. The gospel also makes the most ordinary tasks meaningful. Christ at the center makes everything better, both the large and the small, so that, we write songs that praise his grandeur or we wash the dishes at a meal for the homeless because his song is in our hearts.

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There is no other first goal, but with this goal as primary then every other secondary goal can happen too. Pascal put it well: "Do great things as though they were small because of Jesus Christ and do small things as though they were great because of Jesus Christ." But there is another question that confronts each Christian. Where can these three goals happen? Can they happen in the worshipping, serving, learning fellowship we call our church, or are such goals only possible in the secrecy of the soul?

Christians sometimes wonder, "Why should we belong to churches and denominations? Why not just be a Christian and live out our discipleship personally and directly?" But when I read the New Testament I realize that the early Christians were organized so that Paul could write a letter to a fellowship that had deacons and bishops (Phil. 1). Also, one first-century bishop named John would write a book to seven churches in seven cities—each related to each other—which sounds like a denomination to me.

If this is true, then the question is, "What attitude should I take toward the church as an organized institution?" If we look to the Bible for help with that question we are led toward two conclusions; the biblical witness encourages me not to expect too much from the church and not to expect too little.

First, too much: the Christian fellowship is made up of real people in a real place who through the Holy Spirit have discovered the grace of God in Jesus Christ. But God does not cancel out our freedom in this discovery or in the lifelong journey we have as disciples who are growing as Christians. Therefore, the church sometimes disappoints us just as it ministers to us. Nor should we be surprised when the denominations that connect, by tradition and heritage, local congregations are themselves in need of renewal as much as they are a mighty force for mission and renewal. We Protestants have always vigorously thought and argued about what we believe and how discipleship should be lived out, and these sometime arguments can be the result of human stubbornness or a part of our quest for the wholeness of truth; we argue theology and ethics because of the fact that we in the church need to live under the gospel as much as we are to share the gospel. All of this means that we should be realistic in the most healthy way about the church because of what we know of ourselves and of our own weaknesses. It is a company of complicated people who God invites into this worldwide family. It is this complicated community of faith that leads most of us in public worship, in the study of the Bible, in service ministries.

Second, we should also not expect too little from the Christian Church. The mystery of the Holy Spirit is that God makes use of ordinary groups of Christians to make the gospel real and knowable to other ordinary people. Not one of us becomes a Christian without the institution we call the church. God could have used an angel to convert Cornelius, instead he uses an angel to encourage Cornelius to send for a member of the church named Peter the fisherman.

There are times when we think of the church as more fragile than it is! We are often so nervous about the church's ordinariness that we become too protective toward the congregation of believers in its building with an address and phone number. We convince ourselves that the people are unable to bear strains or straining and therefore every denominational crises or struggle within a congregation about music or styles of worship or pastoral leadership becomes more shocking than the situation deserves. We become too alarmed and disappointed at these strains that are really at heart normal and sometimes in the end healthy.

Here is some good advice I've learned from experience. Never become cynical about the family, in spite of every story you hear of unhappy homes. And never become cynical about that ancient fellowship called the church, in spite of every story you hear of the real failures of her people, because at one embarrassing moment you may meet an angel from God Almighty and he may say to you, "Go to church and meet my fisherman Peter there—he will tell you about the meaning of grace." "Go to church and when two or three of you are gathered together I will be there in the middle."

Christian faith is profoundly personal and therefore we have our own unique journeys of faith but Christian faith is not private and therefore we need fellowship because it is God's good provision for our growth in grace. This is where the public worship of Christians and the celebration of the sacraments as signs and seals of the gospel become a vital part of our life as a Christian.

What is worship for a Christian? It is the coming together of the grand themes of discipleship in which we bow before the Lord who has first stooped down to find us. In worship we bring our real selves before God and claim his love in Jesus Christ. Because of this claim worship is confessional both in our admission of our sins and our confession of God's redeeming love. This gives worship its solemnity. Because of Christ's victory over sin and death worship is thankfulness expressed and this is what gives worship its sheer celebration. Worship is focused upon Jesus Christ as the way the truth and the life and therefore it is a time and a place of learning from the words of Christ and the words about Christ from Holy Scripture.

This importance of teaching within worship has been a major mark of reformed Christianity so that the sermon in each time of public worship is essential to the heart of it all, in the same way as prayers of thanksgiving, prayers of repentance, and prayers of intercession are inseparable from the fabric of worship. Because the Holy Spirit assures us of Christ's love and faithfulness worship is also a time of equipping for ministry in the world for all who are receiving the grace of Christ. Because the Lord at the center draws believers and enquirers toward himself we find brothers and sisters who are being drawn to that center and this discovery creates fellowship within the community of faith that is another mark of worship. These are people like ourselves who are in need of grace and this gives to Christian worship its humanity with all the problems and joys that are the result of that coming

together of those men and women, girls and boys who want to worship God.

But there is one more important ingredient. Because worship so deeply stirs the human soul we find ways to express that mixture of responses in the music of worship. Music has become such a vital part of the worship of Christians it needs to be considered in a special way. What is there about music that makes it so significant, so comforting, so challenging and so controversial?

Why has music taken on such importance in our contemporary culture? Popular music that is highly focused and consciously directed toward a specific age generation, namely the younger person in the society as a whole, has been an increasingly important force in western culture in the second half of this century. The exploding technology of TV, motion pictures and transistors have intensified the power and communication possibility of music so that it has become an event of expression and communication that people are able to experience universally and instantly in any place or time they choose. The power of this almost immediate communication possibility has staggering implications culturally, politically and spiritually.

The music we hear is itself never static or fixed and it continues to evolve through different rhythmic, melodic, lyrical and even in loudness/softness, but what stays constant is its importance to the generation that hears and listens to it. We who want to understand youth in America will make a serious mistake if we underestimate the importance that music represents to the teenager today. Every survey of youth values and opinion reveals that music is for most youth the single most treasured input into their daily lives.

The generational directedness of music in this century became most noticeable during the years of World War II as song writers and performers directed and communicated music to the young men and women who were fighting in a world war during those crisis years. Those youth songs of the 1940's were highly focused and the themes in their lyrics all related in one way or another to a very definite age, to a shared worry, and a shared hope. Since then, that focusing trend continued and has become even more consciously and tightly directed to very special groups of people, not only age but race and life style advocacy as well.

What does all of this mean? First, our feelings for music are directly tied to our feelings about ourselves. The most significant clue to the personhood role of music today I believe is found in this special directedness. Music is therefore both a bond and a fence. Music bonds together those persons who know and appreciate the unique rhythms, sounds and lyrics of their music and thereby music provides an inner circle of knowing companions, however, at the same moment what is a bond is also a fence of protection against a larger unknowing circle. The music box and the personal "walkman" therefore provide both a secret and an enjoyable time of inner place and privacy, and for those other friends who understand the

tempo and sounds, music becomes a means of community. Music is a secret to be kept and it is also a language of communication and both happen at exactly the same time.

My own experience determines what I like, but when others are able to understand, then my music becomes our music. It is then that a single tune becomes a folk song, a patriotic song, or when it is a lyric of personal conviction about God's grace it becomes a Christian hymn. Communities large and small are created by many building blocks and one of the most durable building block ingredients of all is music. Wherever songs are sung they tell a story about who we are: songs at a campfire, songs at a school game, songs in a church, songs at an Olympic award ceremony, songs in a car radio, songs when everyone is cheering, songs when our hearts are breaking, songs in the night at home, songs in prison. Music is ours to fully own and at the same moment, it is a marvelously rich gift that we share with others.

What are the generations to do when they cannot really understand or feel that certain resonance at the sounds of another generation's music? I have two suggestions that appear to take opposite directions. First I believe it is important to preserve for each other person that privilege that Paul Tournier calls "the right to keep my secret." This means that we who desire to know and communicate with people who live in another time and place from our own must respect the mystery and secret of that neighbor's own place. We cannot force our way into the inner solitude of any other human being, even of the people we love very much. "Very inquisitive people rarely hear secrets" (Tournier) but at the same time almost every human being wants to share good secrets and music is one of our own best secrets. Our role, therefore, as a trans-generational or transcultural friend is to try to learn how to listen and to respect the music of other cultures and other generations. Since music is the most easily shared secret between people and cultures, we might very wisely begin our efforts of crosscultural communication with music.

Christian faith has always sung its greatest themes in the music of each generation and I believe we owe every new generation a listening ear and an open heart to learn the songs of each new time so that we are able to share with one another the songs that worship the living God. We should encourage the new songs of faith and honor them for what they really are, the psalms of our life. What we discover when this happens is that the timeless hope and love and faithfulness of Jesus Christ is as wonderfully portrayed in the new motifs of the music of youth as in the older themes of previous generations.

The Christian faith has a long and friendly alliance with music that goes far back into the Old Testament and has continued until now. Throughout that journey of tunes and words and rhythms, certain ones will stand out as our most favored Christian music.

Let me share some of the titles of Christian songs and works that mean the most to me:

1. First the carols of Christmas—they stand apart in their own special place. I love them all, especially *O Come All Ye Faithful* and *Silent Night*
2. Great works—for me the greatest four are: Handel's *Messiah*, Brahms' *Requiem*, Mozart's *Requiem*, and Bach's *Passion of St. Matthew*
3. Praise music— *Give Thanks*
4. Gospel—*Redeemed, Blessed Assurance, Amazing Grace, What a Friend We Have in Jesus*

5. Spirituals—*Deep River, Swing Low Sweet Chariot*
6. Great hymns—*A Mighty Fortress Is Our God, Now Thank We All Our God, O Worship The King, Crown Him With Many Crowns, And Can It Be That I Should Gain?, Great Is Thy Faithfulness, O God of Earth and Altar, Eternal Father, Strong to Save, Praise The Savior, Ye Who Know Him, How Great Thou Art!*

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