

Report to the Presbytery of Grand Canyon
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The subject of my report today is the state of Sunday morning worship in congregations of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the need for reform in the ways we conduct worship. Some of you may find my words uncomfortable and some may disagree with them completely. Time has been set aside at the end of this report for small group discussion at which you can express your views.

Reforming the church in various ways has been a continual theme in our denomination for centuries. Reformed, always reforming, we say, or reformed always being reformed, ascribing the action of reform to God. In the present era, calls for reform within the PC(USA) are framed in terms such as justice, inclusiveness, broad or narrow biblical interpretation, and doctrinal purity. Some Presbyterians envision denominational reform as radical obedience to the inclusive demands of the Gospel, while others see it as a recovery of strict doctrinal conformity, a return to some golden age in the past when a particular set of doctrines was accepted by everyone in the Reformed Tradition. Such a golden age has never existed, of course. There has never been a time of complete doctrinal unanimity among Presbyterians -not from the very beginning of the Reformation. And there has never been a time when all Presbyterians believed the same thing about the inclusivity or exclusivity of the Gospel.

Disappointment awaits those who pursue reform as a matter of left wing or right wing ideology or who understand the product of reform as enforcement of doctrinal purity. The reality about this kind of reform is that it does not succeed over the long term. The clear lesson from our history is that such movements lead not to reform but to division. The surest way to create schism in the Church is to press relentlessly for ideological conformity based on narrowly defined doctrines.

There is, however, an avenue for reform that can and does bring people together across doctrinal divides. And that is worship. Worship has power to unite people across otherwise unspannable boundaries of dogma. Unfortunately, worship can also divide, discourage, and frighten people. It can draw them in to a community of faith or it can drive them away.

A liturgical reform movement developed in our denomination over the last quarter of the 20th century, embraced by church leaders across the theological spectrum. The Directory for Worship in our Book of Order is a wonderful product of that movement, as are the revised Book of Common Worship and a host of other resources. In Pennsylvania I met a pastor in the Orthodox Presbyterian denomination who was using our PC(USA) Supplemental Liturgical Resources. He said they were the highest quality worship resources available for churches in the Reformed Tradition. How's that for inclusive appeal? Sadly, many of these extraordinary resources go unused among our own pastors.

The liturgical reform movement, in my estimation, has been a huge blessing to the church, but liturgy alone is not worship. It is only part of the equation, and it is the entire enterprise of worship that desperately needs reform. I've been in governing body service for fifteen years, and as a result, I have enjoyed the privilege and opportunity of attending worship in many different churches –hundreds of them- mostly Presbyterian, but also services of other denominations. The breadth of these worship experiences is hard to describe. Differences between high and low liturgies are fairly easy to explain, but it is more difficult to talk about the quality of worship. I've attended liturgically low, medium, and high services that were inspiring, faith enhancing, awe-filled, and transcendently beautiful. I've been present in worship where the sublime immanence of Jesus Christ was palpable in the sanctuary. I have also agonized through far too many services that were insipid, tasteless, sloppy, and unfocused. Other services seemed to be designed to manipulate people into pursuing certain goals or to control their behavior. At times I have been so embarrassed at the conduct of pastors and worship leaders that I felt like crawling under a pew. The majority of services fall somewhere in between these extremes –not terrible but not wonderful. I am grieved to report, however, that more services fall into the deficient category than in the inspirational one. Far more often than I would like, I am reminded of a line from the Directory for Worship: “(C)areless or disorderly worship is both an offense to God and a stumbling block to the people.” [W1.4001]

There are some specific things that are bedrock for worship in Presbyterian Church (USA) congregations: Scripture reading, preaching, and prayer. Interpreting scripture, primarily through preaching, is central to our tradition. Apart from the particulars of the order of worship, however, a basic assumption under-girds what happens. The pastor, musicians, other worship leaders, and members of the congregation share one common task of demonstrating devotion to God. In worship there is an audience of one: God.

The congregation is not the audience. It is easy to drift into functioning as if they were, but that's a big mistake. The work of the participants in worship –all of them, the whole congregation- is to offer their best to the One who is the true audience. This doesn't mean perfection. No one is perfect, and all our gifts are flawed in some way. This doesn't mean that only those with professional talents should lead worship. Worship is the work of the people. But worship should reflect the best we have to give. Too often it does not. Too often it doesn't even come close.

Over the years I have attended services that were tired, perfunctory and mechanical. It seemed as if everyone was simply going through the motions, as if merely being there and saying the words would satisfy some magical formula of efficacy or arcane requirement of God. A doctrinal understanding nearly as old as the Church itself makes clear that the effects of the sacraments, for example, do not depend on the goodness of the pastor or participants. Moral purity is not the issue here. The issue is motivation.

Are we presenting a gift of praise and adoration to God, or are we meeting an obligation we can check off a list? Are we demonstrating a community relationship with Jesus Christ by praying for one another, or do we show up for personal wish fulfillment? Are we preparing ourselves for the inbreaking of the Holy Spirit, or are we allowing indifference to be the Spirit's venue? My observation is that careful preparation for

worship creates channels of opportunity that make it easier for people to discern the movement of the Holy Spirit.

With regard to the sacraments, I have observed in recent years an increasing tendency to treat them matter-of-factly or even as trivial adjuncts to regular worship. The elements are treated with casual indifference. I have experienced the Lord's Supper at which the words of institution were not spoken at all or were offered in carelessly prolix form. Certainly communion and baptism are experiences drenched in joy, and they need not be approached as overly solemn events. But where is the reverence? Where is the respect for the spiritual presence of Jesus Christ? Where is the careful attention to the holy? Where is the dignity?

There are many reasons why people come to church, and not all of them are noble. Given the brokenness of humankind, it would be astounding if everyone who attended worship did so for entirely pure reasons. In the face of this reality, pastors and sessions have been tempted to try anything to lure more people to church. For example, I have attended worship that seemed to be aimed at entertaining the people in the pews rather than presenting pleasing works to God. Is this a good strategy? Does the end justify the means? Is it acceptable to appeal to ignoble instincts to lure people to church?

People also come to church because they want to be part of something larger than themselves. They feel the need to be connected to a community of faith that makes a difference in the world. They want to learn about Jesus Christ and experience a sense of the holy. They sense the mystery of God and want to be led toward it. Wouldn't it be better to encourage people to participate in worship by appealing to these more noble instincts?

Now I'm all in favor of worship that is appropriately light-hearted, interesting, and that engages the emotions. The most profound worship is not only cerebral but that which connects with our whole beings and all our senses. However, it must include a strong appeal to reason if it is to be truly Reformed worship. I cannot believe that God finds stuffy worship or sleeping parishioners a pleasant offering, but neither can I imagine God appreciating glib prayers, cute sermons, or liturgical gimmicks.

The finest evangelism program in the world will fail if the people who are drawn to church in response to it find an apathetic community of half-hearted believers. It will fail also if they are exposed to shallow sermons and prayers that are offered as magical amulets to ward off evil spirits.

Drama is an important, even necessary, element in worship, but liturgical drama is far different from entertainment. Evangelism through entertainment creates passive congregations, dependent upon the worship leaders, and requiring, incidentally, that pastors be skilled performers. It tempts pastors to lead worship as if they were on stage rather than on the chancel. A pastor who consciously speaks from the chancel communicates in a way that is perceptibly different from one who speaks from the stage. People attracted to church because of the entertainment values frequently bail out when life becomes difficult. I've seen it over and over again. The level of commitment to the community of faith tends to be significantly lower among people who have been taught that the church exists as a pleasant diversion or to meet their own individual needs. And it's not their fault, because they have been misled.

Another area in great need of reform is anemic and even harmful theology presented through prayers, sermons and music, and particularly these days through praise songs that have been taken in from religious sources that are inimical to the Reformed Tradition. The epidemic of “just you and me Jesus” theology may please people who want Jesus as their personal possession, but it is shallow comfort for people searching for a deep and authentic relationship with the Lord. As a commentator on NPR recently noted, singing “Your name is Jesus” fifteen or twenty times does little to edify the congregation, and I’m quite sure that Jesus knows his name without having to be told in this manner.

Misuse of prayer is a disturbing phenomenon. Probably the most frequent misuse is the sermon that masquerades as a prayer. You’ve all heard this. The pastor or worship leader says, “Let us pray” and proceeds to preach rather than beseech. Preaching already occupies a central place in worship in the Presbyterian tradition. There is no reason to add sermons to prayers.

A call to reform the integrity of worship does not single out liberal churches or conservative churches. It tracks with neither a progressive agenda nor an evangelical one. It is a call to everyone and is directed toward contemporary and traditional forms of worship, high church and low. Surely we can do better.

Now, I know that many of you already take the preparation for and conduct of worship very seriously. Every week of the year, from the simplest sanctuary to the most elegantly appointed, from the smallest congregation to the largest, profound offerings are made to God through services of worship in this presbytery.

Yet when it comes to honoring God, even the best among us can find details to improve. And those who now give great attention to the quality of worship can serve as mentors for those who want to do better. Perhaps this presbytery can become the vanguard of a denomination-wide movement to renew and reinvigorate our services of worship. When we gather in our sanctuaries, we need to be clear that we are offering to God the best we know how to give. What constitutes the best varies from place to place and person to person, and there is no one single order of worship exclusively suitable for the glorification of God. Our Directory for Worship describes many appropriate forms. But not all expressions of worship are equally good. In truth, some worship inspires and some worship discourages. Some worship reflects quality of effort and some worship shows off deficiencies.

What do you think? Is reforming worship a worthy goal for this presbytery? And if so, how should we go about doing it? Here’s one more thing to think about. How would improving the quality of Sunday morning worship affect your congregation’s evangelism efforts? Thanks for listening.