

Worship Wars, Blenders, and “Ancient-Future” Faith

Though Baptists have historically shied away from symbols in worship, I am blessed to serve in a church where the sanctuary is rich with symbols. Each stained glass window features a scene from the life of Christ, along with a historic cross, the baptistery has a prominent place in the overall architecture, the Lord’s Table is covered with a season-appropriate parament and is topped with a sturdy cross. Good, solid symbols all.

But I think perhaps the most significant symbol—and it is certainly the most visible one—is the gathered assembly. We believe that the people of the church *are* the church and not, say, the programs or the building. God calls us to worship by name through the power of the Holy Spirit. We belong to God; we are his own. When we come together for worship, the greatest, single symbol of the presence of the Holy Spirit is the group. *Together, we are the Body of Christ.*

To me, this is a challenging idea, for we are already too easily lured into thinking that worship is mostly about us. I am tempted to assume that any worship service is a sacred assembly, but I am also inclined to think that not all worship services have God as their object. He might very well be the subject, but then that isn’t at all the same thing. Take a close look at pronouns in our hymns and songs. So many—even those ostensibly about God—have quite a bit too much “I” and “me” in them.

This month’s Liturgy topic, “Assembly Song,” brings us straight away to some of the problems many churches face today. The term “blended worship,” coined as I understand it by my mentor Dr. Robert Webber, was once a fashionable way to describe the mixing of traditional elements, like hymns, with more contemporary ones, like choruses. The idea was that most of us weren’t blending—that we were on one side of the musical fence or the other—and that doing so might help to end the raging worship wars. (By the way, I am convinced that most all worship is already blended; it is simply a matter of whether the service is on the “Grate” or “Grind” end of the blender spectrum, or down at the other end at “Frappé” or “Liquify.” Not many churches, at least those in my denomination, were ever doing Mozart every Sunday. Besides, when I am in the kitchen, blending things together usually ends up leaving a chunky mess).

Worship leaders are recognizing that mixing “traditional” and “contemporary” in some sort of functional way in order satisfy two different groups of worshipers can leave both sides frustrated. And should we even be trying to satisfy worshipers anyway? I found out early in ministry that the term “traditional” to a Baptist can mean anything from “Eine Feste Burg” to revival songs. And the term “contemporary” doesn’t fare much better: just ask Boomers and Millennials for their definitions.

Here’s the dilemma: Who is worship for? What is worship for? If worship is for the congregation, then what we sing and how we sing it become issues of popular taste. If worship is a tool to get people to come to church, then what we sing and how we sing it become consumer products. But if worship is for God and about God, and if it also has to do with our obedience, as well as growth in Christian character and discipleship, then that changes most everything. Musical style does not win people to Christ, personal relationships do; musical style does not

connect people to God, the Holy Spirit does; musical style does not grow our Christian character and discipleship, the Word does. How ironically sad if we were to neglect the Lord's Table, meaningful use of scripture, and significant prayer—the very things that most connect us to God in worship and define us as worshipers—in order to focus on attracting people to worship. I think we can get into all kinds of trouble if we convince ourselves that worship is a tool for some kind of goal, no matter how noble. Our biblical mandate as a church is for worship to be our purpose. Our tasks, which descend from worship, are evangelism and discipleship, among other things. Have not we confused *relationship with church* and *relationship with Christ* enough already? Worship must not be a tool for anything.

So here is another challenge: for some in my tradition, the point of the service is whether or not any public decisions are made. Worship, then, becomes a means to that end. Worship, for others, *is* the sermon. Have you ever heard a preacher say, just before starting the message, “I don't know about you, but I think we've already worshiped here this morning”? I had a pastor once tell me that he wanted the invitation hymn to “draw people in.” Is not that the Holy Spirit's business? There is a big difference between reaching someone and getting a reaction out of them. And do we really believe that only a certain kind of music reaches a certain kind of person? I wonder if some leaders think of worship planning as a kind of religious culinary art: if we add a dash of this or a splash of that, blend in a bit of something else, then we are sure to get the perfect service or the intended result.

So what in the world are we to do? May I share a couple of things that have made an enormous difference in my ministry?

First, a confession: I was once, as Dr. Harold Best puts it, a music functionalist. I would take a blank worship bulletin, plug in this or that hymn—whatever “worked”—make a little change here or there and call it a day. What Best proposes instead is a *pastoral musician*. With God's help, this is what I want to be. He talks about this in his marvelous [Music Through the Eyes of Faith](#). A pastoral musician cannot just “plug things in” here or there. A pastoral musician cannot design a service based on popular taste or consumer product. A pastoral musician cannot go to worship war.

A church musician is a person who earnestly places his or her musical skills and development in service to the church. A pastoral musician does so as well, but frames them in the context of worship. As one of my friends Dr. Connie Cherry has put it, “A pastoral musician is immersed in the scriptures more deeply, understands the liturgy, the church year, the theology of worship, the prominent role of music as servant to the Word, the need to approach people from a position of pastoral care, the dynamics of Christian leadership, and the importance of administering effectively.”

Discovering this distinction between church musician and pastoral musician had a profound impact upon me as God began to deepen the understanding of my call to ministry, and it has also made me a better, more sensitive worshiper. Imagine the looks I got one Wednesday night at church when I announced to the congregation that I no longer wanted to be their music director. But I did desire with my whole heart, I explained, to be their pastoral musician. It has

made all the difference in the world in how I approach worship, how I relate to the saints in my care, and even my relationship with God.

Now, about blended worship: I propose that we scrap the whole idea of blended worship. In fact, it is not even a term being used much these days by worship thinkers. The term now from Robert Webber—and I think it hits the nail on the head—is “convergent worship.” Convergent worship means bringing traditions together and creating something new.

I am working these days on a project that looks at worship and contemporary culture and, more specifically, the shift from the modern era to the post-modern. There is monumental change occurring across our country, worship included, as we leave the modern era behind and move into the post-modern. Think of it as the collision of two great land masses: there will be friction, there might be some earthquakes—*maybe even some fire*—but in the end, the steady push of the “new” will make its mark and change the landscape forever. The modern, with its emphasis on reason and intellect and word, is slowly but surely being overrun by the post-modern, with its emphasis on the metaphysical and spirituality and symbol. Blended worship is a modern tool that attempts to fix a modern problem; convergent worship is a new, post-modern creation.

Here’s the part that fascinates and energizes me: much of the “new” is actually old. Drove of post-modern worshipers—*especially youth*—are turning for inspiration to the language and pattern of the ancient church. There they are rediscovering classic Christianity and learning to draw strength and spirituality from a deep well of time-tested truth and tradition. The post-modern world need not frighten Christians, for many of its thirsts can be marvelously and even uniquely quenched there.

I understand that one thing post-moderns do not want is performance worship—they do not want a slick show. But conventional wisdom says that young people are looking for drums and keyboards. In fact, those are the exact words I heard a preacher use at an evangelistic meeting a few years ago. “You want young people to come to your church?” He asked the crowd. “Go over and unplug that pipe organ; get some drums and keyboards. That’ll get the young people in your church.”

Let me tell you about a couple of experiences I have had with our church’s youth group. I was invited by our youth ministry team to lead the worship in a discipleship week. In year’s past, the youth had traditionally done a mission trip, but the new leadership felt a need to lead our kids on a “Back to the Basics” retreat where personal growth and discipleship were the focus. When the “Back to the Basics” theme was given to me for planning, I saw an opportunity to try out this ancient-future theory about youth and worship music.

I started our week together by giving one another permission to use our bodies, posture, etc., in worship, and by talking about the importance of sign and symbol in worship. The music I used was truly contemporary, as well as simple. Many of the songs were from the contemporary worship movement in England, particularly from the live events at Stoneleigh, and most featured fairly simple accompaniment. The key for me in choosing it was the powerful, straightforward

texts (some of them old hymns and Psalm paraphrases), many of which I thought would be too deep for our kids. I was completely wrong to worry about that.

Each of our morning worship sessions was loosely designed after a traditional morning prayer service. I used some pre-service time to explain how we would do the corporate prayers, when we would kneel, etc., and we used students to read the scripture lessons (and this made a big impact upon the group).

There were two especially powerful experiences that week. We conducted a simple, candlelit communion and healing service. I started the evening by talking about communion in the early church and the simple beauty of a healing service. Our youth were mostly accustomed to the Lord's Supper from primarily a memorialist point of view, and the idea of a healing service conjured up images of TV evangelists. The impact this simple service had on our students was profound. After a joyful yet moving communion, many of them, with tears, came to us for anointing and prayer for healing.

Then on another evening, and most moving of all, I led the kids in what I called a "veneration of the cross" service. I began by talking about Christ's suffering and death, the work he accomplished on the cross, and both the discipline and freedom the cross represents. And then, quietly, I started some music appropriate to the context and invited the kids to consider the rough-hewn cross we had made earlier that afternoon. What happened next stunned all of us and even changed some lives. At first, no one moved. Then, one girl approached the cross and knelt. She lifted up her hands in supplication and began to weep. Slowly, more came. Some knelt, some prostrated themselves on the floor, others simply stood. One young man came and kissed the cross, then left a favorite necklace draped over one of the arms. By the end, we were all in tears. Even when the music stopped—when it was time to go—we lingered, embraced, sang. And we worshiped.

What we experienced that week was powerful. It was more than blended, more than ancient, and more than contemporary: it was convergent. And it was simple. Here was a group of traditional Southern Baptists worshiping with the lifting of hands, bending of knees, using responses from the ancient church, and sitting in stillness and quiet contemplation! We were not trying to attract kids or get someone to make a public decision or even try to grow our numbers. We were trying to worship.

So what about convergent worship and the gathered church on Sunday mornings? Robert Webber says that convergent worship should be liturgical, culturally relevant, participatory, holistic, and should express a variety of moods. How to accomplish this?

At our church, bringing traditions together and attempting convergent worship has centered on using the Christian year. Following the church year cycle and using liturgical colors may seem like old news in other places, but it has refreshed and renewed worship for us. (By the way, if using the liturgical year and colors has grown threadbare or perfunctory, perhaps it is time to go back and do some intentional instruction). At our church, we talk about using the Christian year as a way to redeem the time and order our steps as we grow in Christlikeness. A

short feature in the weekly worship bulletin reminds the people where we are in the cycle and I have marveled at how this discipline has enriched the lives of many.

Bringing traditions together might also mean recovering a few of our own. When I began to look at some historically Baptist tenets, I came to believe that we needed to renew some of our own traditions. The Bible is foundational—even central—to most Baptist worship. But a look at many actual services themselves reveals little meaningful use of scripture. The passages tend to be short, read by the pastor, and depending upon the preaching style, not referred to much again. For me, one convergent worship challenge has been the meaningful and intentional use of scripture in worship. This includes involving lay readers (a refreshing change for many Baptists) and finding ways to use God's word, spoken or sung, to punctuate the service, for example as a call to worship, prayer or as a congregational response.

And what about congregational song? My desire to be a pastoral musician has led me toward several reforms. First, I have given myself permission to be spontaneous. Initially, I had to plan to be spontaneous! I was so entrenched in my functionalist mode that I could not imagine departing from the printed order of service. Now I think some of the best congregational singing wells up from Spirit-led, spontaneous moments. One Sunday after our pianist finished a beautiful arrangement of "Holy, Holy, Holy," there was a wonderful pause—a quiet moment when everything stood still. Rather than jump up and push things along, and rather than try to nervously fill the silence, I let the moment linger and, after a moment, quietly began to sing the same hymn. Then a marvelous thing happened: the people put down their bulletins and joined me. And we worshiped. If nothing much else comes from convergent worship, I hope at least that the call for more silence takes hold.

Next, I have been experimenting lately with writing new hymn texts to familiar tunes. When our pastor announced that he wanted to do a series of sermons on spiritual gifts, I quickly realized that our hymnal had only one hymn with that subject, and it was not well known. So, after meditating on the scriptural reference, I wrote four texts to familiar tunes and "practiced" them with the congregation. My verse was not especially good, but our earlier practice and the novelty of the idea helped us look forward to worship and to sing with enthusiasm once there. (We did a similar thing, by the way, with the help of a wonderfully talented woman in our church who wrote an excellent Thanksgiving hymn that we used throughout the month of November).

I had the pleasure of hearing the aforementioned Harold Best deliver a series of lectures on worship and vividly recall one in particular that focused on the parable of the lost sheep. You know the story, the one where the Good Shepherd leaves the "ninety and nine" to search for the one that went astray. Dr. Best read the scripture passage, then made this profound observation, which I paraphrase here:

"Notice that the shepherd didn't remain in the fold and try to lure the lost sheep back; to do that, he would have had to make the fold look like the place to which the sheep had wandered. And even if he had done that—even if by some manner he had managed to attract the lost sheep back to the false fold—would he have ever revealed the true nature of the fold to the sheep? No, the Good Shepherd, who is after all the original Seeker, left his flock and went out into the world and brought the lost sheep back home."

I believe that convergent worship—ancient-future worship—will refresh, renew, and revive the Church. Matters of style are bound to change, but the un-negotiables of our faith, the true nature of the fold, cannot. We are the Body of Christ, but we are not the subject or object of worship. Convergent worship avoids the pitfalls of blending and, most important of all, shifts the focus back to the proper Object.