

THE RELENTLESS AND EXHAUSTING ATTEMPT TO GET IT RIGHT

Some Brief Thoughts on Worship and the Changing Tides

Rev. Chuck DeGroat

The Baby Boomer reaction to what has become known as “traditional” worship was a reaction, it seems to me, to worship that was detached, redundant, dull, lifeless. And thus, the reaction was against a detached, redundant, dull, and lifeless God.

Baby Boomer worship (or “contemporary” worship, as we often call it) has featured a more pop sound. With its broader range of instrumentation (e.g. guitar, percussion, etc.), its tendency toward the spontaneous, its “friendly” feel (friendship pads, friendly meeting and greeting times, friendly looking worship teams), and its proclivity to avoid “churchiness” (e.g. formal liturgy, spending too much time doing the sacraments, cutting corporate prayer, etc.), Baby Boomer worship effectively tamed the traditional beast. Of course, it tried to be traditional-friendly with its occasional hymns and blended worship. But, by the end of the twentieth century, the shift had occurred. Growing churches featured pop worship, and stagnant churches could only watch and jeer with “you’ve cheapened the Gospel” and “you’ve missed the true way” cynicism.

Now, the tide seems to be shifting again. Among Generation “X” Baby Busters and children of Baby Boomers seems to be a growing discontent with both options. By all accounts, X’ers are flocking to anything different, out-of-the-ordinary, non-traditional in both the old “traditional” sense and the new pop “traditional” sense.

Yes, “contemporary” worship has become the new “traditional” worship to Gen. X’ers for the exact opposite reasons that Boomers rejected detached, redundant, dull and lifeless pre-Boomer traditionalism. Contemporary worship reacted by making the transcendent and detached utterly immanent, replacing the dull with saccharin friendliness, the lifeless with hyperactive liveliness, transforming liturgical redundancy into spontaneous redundancy (e.g. repeating choruses over and over like it wasn’t planned!). Boomers succeeded in making the transcendent relational, but relational like an annoying hyper-friendly next-door neighbor whose supposedly spontaneous pop-in visits are becoming stomach-turning events.

Perhaps this is why my Gen. X peers are flocking to the “high church:” liturgical Reformed, Episcopal, Catholic and Orthodox churches. In a recent email, a 30-year-old friend wrote, “I’m tired of this me-and-my-sweet-Jesus cheesiness... Whatever happened to reflection, contemplation ... prayer?” The reaction says less, I think, about a preference for liturgical high-church style, and more about a sense of authentic meeting with God.

In fact, my hunch is that style is quite irrelevant to my generation. While in England, I had the opportunity to visit an Episcopal church with an upbeat, guitar-led worship time. The worship leader was young. He looked like the lead singer of Jars of Clay. He hadn't shaved in days, and his hair was still wet. He was upbeat, but real. He was reflective, but not morbid. And he worshipped. He was a *lead worshipper*. No plastic smiles. No plastic surgery. Just a genuine sense of communion with God. We sang fast and slow. My eyes glanced variously upward towards the stained glass windows, and downward to the kneeling bench and ancient concrete floors where men and women for centuries before me had worshipped. Something happened that day. I felt connected with old and new, relational and transcendent. I worshipped.

Now, I'm not proposing a new paradigm or a new program. I'm not favoring a massive overhaul or a radical new method. What I am wondering about both in my gut, where words don't always work, and out loud through this new computer that will also be old some day, is if we're not just at a place where honesty and sincerity matters more than style. I wonder if the deep exhaustion we feel isn't just a symptom of a profound desire to put away the artificial gimmicks – the new people-friendly church language, the marketing, the fancy clothes, the Ken and Barbie greeters, the relentless catering to the church consumer - and to get on with *worship*. I wonder if the Gen. X skepticism isn't tied to a basic distrust of the integrity of market-driven "institutions," including the church. I wonder if we're not just yearning for an authentic experience of connection with the transcendent, no matter how we get it – drugs, sex, alternative lifestyles, music, mysticism. I wonder if we're not just looking for God because he's been lost in this mess called "worship wars."

A friend skipped church last week. Her reason wasn't one of rebellion, or laziness, or even cynicism. When I asked her, she simply said, "I just wanted to spend time with God." Could it be that we've spent so much time trying to get it right that we've lost a genuine sense of connection to God?

It's worth thinking about style, and its worth being biblical, whether you call it the Regulative Principle or the Peter Principle or the Victoria Principal. It's worth the time to practice music ahead of time, and to print out bulletins (or what do we call them now – programs?!), and to do overheads, or power-point, or needle-point, or whatever you need to do to get ready. It's worth testing the mics, and testing your heart, and testing the spirits, and testing your pastor's Bible knowledge, and all that. It's worth doing all of that "stuff" that makes up a worship service.

Perhaps, though, it's worth giving up some of it too. Perhaps it's worth thinking through (translated for my fellow Presbyterians: "formulating a committee") where your church is, where my church is, and where our hearts are when we're doing worship. How? I'm not sure. How do you quantify this mystical,

ephemeral sense of connectedness with God and each other? How do we measure authenticity – an authent-o-meter? A connect-o-meter? How do you simplify, and what do you cut? My hunch is that it's worth, at the very least, checking out our own motivations. It's worth taking a look at what we're experiencing and who we're experiencing. It's worth taking at least one worship planning committee meeting to ask the question, "Is God showing up when we worship? Are we showing up? *Really* showing up?" It's worth taking a look at our relentless and exhausting attempt to get it right, facing what it's doing to (rot out) our hearts, and re-forming that place and time when we come into the unique and special presence of God and each other. It's worth it. He's worth it.