

THE VINEVILLE PAGE

Helping us all grasp the big picture of where we are and what our challenges are as we face the future.



The Wonder of Worship

Issue #2

Worship is the most important activity in our lives. Not all worship will be done in churches during *worship services*. Most of our worship will take place in the seemingly ordinary moments of life. Most people of faith make a faulty distinction between sacred and secular. Nothing is more important to life than the decisions we make and the actions which follow outside the arena of Church. It is in the arena of life events that what is truly in our

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hearts emerge—our morality, our truthfulness, our love of goodness and beauty, our attention to the wounds of others, and our concern to mirror the life of the kingdom in the dark places of the world. These ideas are behind

the Apostle Paul's exhortation in Romans 12:1, where he states that we are to present our bodies (the totality of our lives) to God as a living and holy sacrifice, which is our "spiritual service of worship."

Within the context of worship services, however, style often becomes an issue. We must be thoughtful enough to recognize that all kinds of music and approaches to worship can speak to people. There is no right music or wrong music (although for me, "heavy metal" music drives out every spiritual thought from my universe). In my early 20's I preached in the Cayman Islands over the period of a month. In some of those services, the musical

instruments were an electric guitar, an old organ, and clanging pot lids (talk about an ethereal effect). They offered to God the best they had and because their hearts were seeking, God walked in their midst.

Over the years, I have observed several important things about worship approaches:

- Through our lives, a particular musical style and content is imprinted in our soul so that God is experienced most deeply through those forms. The overwhelming majority of people over 50 will never discover God's nearness as intensely through contemporary as they do through the more classical approach of hymns, choirs, and anthems.
- Contemporary music is better able to reach the younger, more unchurched people in our culture. Contemporary approaches are geared to cultural tastes (multimedia pageantry combining music, dramatic elements, and video) and are driven by the pragmatic concern of what works to reach people.
- Contemporary approaches tend to focus on what God means to us. It emphasizes the nearness of God who can be experienced in energizing ways through celebration.
- Traditional approaches tend to focus on what we mean to God. It emphasizes the transcendence of God (he is above us, guiding us and shaping our lives). Traditional approaches embody the need for stillness, reflection, beauty, commitment, and belonging on a person level (as opposed to an emotional experience).

- Those who find God through contemporary see the traditional as dull, lifeless, and uninspiring. Those who find God through traditional see the contemporary as shallow, emotional, and drowning out the sense of reverence which marks authentic worship.

In all truthfulness, we need in worship what each approach represents. We need celebration and reflection. We need to speak to people in culture and we need to give them an alternative culture of faith. We need to be creative in the way we communicate and we need to preserve the classic hymns of faith which have endured the passage of time. We need to experience God in ecstasy (emotion), but we also need to know God through stillness and listening (intellect). Each approach has its own potential strengths and weaknesses. We must, however, never forget what worship is—the opening of thankful hearts to God that we might listen and respond to his words to us.

My fundamental concern about the present contemporary approach to worship (in style and preaching) is rooted in a significant change which has occurred in the last 30 years. Few describe it as well as Sally Morgenthaler. She writes, *“What is worship? Post-shift, it is no longer necessarily about engaging people with the divine. Protestant worship in the new millennium is increasingly about communicating life principles; disseminating information people need in order to gain more control over their lives and insure individual*

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*happiness. (Never mind that control is an illusion and happiness is transitory).”** For some of us, there is a haunting fear regarding the success of the contemporary approach. We fear that it ultimately offers a religion in service to the success of man rather than a faith which transforms man into a servant of God. It offers people knowledge to become more successful people and a sense that they are favored by God without people having to stand in the presence of God in ways that cause them to hear his demands.

At Vineville, we are able to do traditional with excellence. Although we appreciate much that is in contemporary music, the traditional is

better able to remind us of the message that “worship is about what we offer to God, not about how he makes us feel”. Traditional is not only our heritage, it defines how the overwhelming majority of our members discover the gifts of God as we worship. The question remains, what role does God want us to play in this changing religious landscape? I have a deep conviction that God’s role is for us to be who we are: a faith community who discovers God in celebration and stillness; friends singing rich texts accompanied by the large and grand sound of brass, organ, and piano; and, believers who know that ministry is the evidence that our faith and worship is true. We don’t need more information, we need to find ourselves in a space and place that allows God to touch our souls.

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