



## Renewing Worship

**F**inally, of course, only God can renew worship, which should give us pause as we in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America consider a “project” that will get this job done. Since the purpose of our renewed worship is that worship might renew us, we will need to think clearly about the source of renewal.

There are, certainly, penultimate renewals of which we are capable. As I think back on my work as a parish pastor, I’m quite sure that many parishioners might have hoped for more of these as they dozed, eyes open but unengaged, through yet another Red Book service. At the same time, others would obviously have preferred fewer as they worked to undo the innovations of that “young whippersnapper pastor” as soon as I left. Apparently one person’s renewal is another person’s offense.

And there’s the rub. Renewal projects that are too certain of the audience and its needs, the time and its temperament, may get it tragically wrong or find themselves quickly parochial. Case in point: writing on “the significance of Israel’s worship for us” in my recent Worship in Israel course, at least one-third of the students focused on “the holy,” discussing notions of sacred space and time, temple, holiness, awe, reverence, and purity. Common to all the papers was a perceived loss of a sense of the holy in contemporary American worship. These were all “modern” Gen-X (or even Gen-Y) students, and they were no longer sure that a garage church or megachurch would do. They were seminarians, of course, but, as far as I know, nothing in my course or elsewhere in the curriculum had directly encouraged this response (and in fact, much in their experience had pushed in other directions). They were concerned with attitude and style, as these are expressed in architecture, language, music, and posture. Worship that is too casual—or too “chatty,” as Edward Farley once put it\*—had lost for them all sense of otherness. And better entertainment or performance was available elsewhere.

Which is not to say, of course, that some do not find the various “alternative” worship styles effective—though these require as much planning and reflection as “traditional” worship to do their proper work. And that reflection will include thinking about the message in the genre and style as well as in the content. How odd, for example, that pastors sometimes reject liturgical garb, because “it makes them different” from the laity, without considering that dressing in mufti might suggest that the authority of preaching and presiding resides in the person rather

\*Edward Farley, “A Missing Presence,” *The Christian Century*, 18–25 March 1998, 276–277.

than the office. How odd that in an appeal to populist worship, in-your-face microphoned bands and talk-show presidens take on the role of performers in a way that puts the spotlight much more directly on them than on their message and militates against full congregational participation. (Can you spell “American Idol”?)

My biases are showing here, no doubt (and probably my age), but my goal is certainly not a preservation of or return to the past. It is rather to remind us that form does matter (a lot), and thus requires more thought than merely asking what works for the moment. No unexamined axioms will do—whether “if it was good enough for Grandma (or Luther) it’s good enough for me” or “as we all know, a ‘mission’ congregation can’t succeed with traditional liturgies.” Which brings us back to the starting point—namely, that in the end *we* do not renew worship; God in Christ renews worship, day by day, congregation by congregation, simply by showing up. The task of worship leaders will be to point to and expound the living presence of Christ and then to get out of the way to permit the congregation to hear and to respond in prayer, praise, and self-giving.

No musical or liturgical style will guarantee the proclamation of Christ (and thus, true renewal of worship). What will matter, above all, are sermons, hymn texts, and liturgical language that are firmly based in Holy Scripture, for this alone promises the real presence of Christ, and musical and liturgical practices that fully involve the congregation, for it alone constitutes the members of the body of Christ. That presence and that body cannot be manipulated into existence by psychological techniques nor, actually, can they be suppressed by less than charismatic, though faithful, leaders. Christ promises to be present in word and sacrament, and will be present where these are faithfully proclaimed and administered. Christ promises to be present where two or three are gathered in his name and will be present where Christian community is fostered. Because the incarnation—Christ’s immersion in human stuff—is real, our various penultimate successes or failures will matter and must be taken with great seriousness, including debates about the pluses and minuses of the forms and styles in the Renewing Worship materials. Still, finally, Christ alone makes all things new—including worship—so that is where we must focus our attention.

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