How do we know when it's good worship?

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How do you know when you've participated in a good worship service? Is it when everything happens decently and in order? Or is it when something surprising and unexpected happens? Is it when a new insight from scripture captures your attention or when the congregation weeps together as someone shares from the heart? Is it when the children's time takes less than five minutes, the singing is especially powerful, the sense of God's presence is vivid, the unity of the body of Christ is keenly felt, or worshipers leave with a passion to join the work of Christ in the world?

If you asked any ten Mennonite worshipers on Sunday morning whether they had attended a good service, you would likely hear a variety of answers. Then if you probed further and asked them the reasons for their answers, you'd hear even more diversity. What makes a worship service good seems to be a subjective matter, one that varies considerably from one individual or congregation to another.

Because the most complete Christian understanding of God is signified in the image we call Trinity, our worship must reflect that image in both form and content.

An entertaining website regularly reports the worship evaluations of an intrepid team of mystery worshipers who travel incognito in the British Isles and beyond. The team reflects on the comfort of the pews, the warmth of the welcome, and the length of the sermon. They comment on how full the sanctuary was, which part of the service was like being in heaven (and which wasn't), the quality of after-service coffee, and whether the service made them glad to be Christian. At the end of the service, according to the website, "the only clue the mystery worshipers leave behind is a calling card, dropped discreetly into the offering plate." Then they post their reviews—sometimes scathing, sometimes genuinely affirming—on the Internet.[1]

In certain ecclesial traditions, what makes a good worship service seems fairly objective. If the rubrics have been accurately followed, authentic worship has occurred. Whether people like or understand what has happened is somewhat irrelevant; what matters is faithfulness to a traditional structure. In the free churches, where uniformity is not as highly prized, identifying what makes a good or bad service can be much more difficult.

A shift in understanding and practice

Prior to the publication of *Hymnal: A Worship Book* in 1992, Mennonites in North America who were represented in the hymnal project had no formal, agreed-on structure for the order of worship. Though strikingly similar worship patterns would have been found in places as farflung as Ontario and Oregon, these similarities were more the result of migration patterns and oral tradition than systematic or central decision making.[2]

In the intense upheavals of community life that occurred in the 1960s and '70s, many of these traditional practices fell by the way. By 1978, *Planning Congregational Worship*, a joint publication of General Conference Mennonites and (Old) Mennonites, said simply, "There is no prescribed order of worship that must be followed." The booklet goes on to list some common components of worship, such as hymns and songs, personal greetings, Bible readings, pastoral prayers, children's time, sharing of concerns, sermons, offerings, and announcements. One of the sample orders of worship suggests dividing the service into three parts: "A time for praise, a time to share, and a time to serve." Apart from this example, the publication provides no evidence that worship leaders were thinking in terms of essential actions of worship or a basic structure into which the earlier laundry list of items might be arranged.[3]

What changed with the emergence of *Hymnal: A Worship Book* was a suggested order of worship. As the worship committee of the joint hymnal council did its work, they examined worship bulletins from General Conference Mennonite churches, Mennonite churches, and Church of the Brethren congregations to find what actions of worship were regularly included. From that survey they developed an order of worship organized loosely on the structure of Isaiah 6:1–8, a text frequently used to describe the

essential actions of biblical worship: (1) gathering and praising God, (2) confession and reconciliation, and (3) hearing God's Word and responding in obedience. Though the outline in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* is more detailed (it includes gathering, praising/adoring, confessing/reconciling, proclaiming, affirming faith, praying, offering, witnessing, and sending),[4] it is merely an expansion of the underlying structure of Isaiah 6:1–8.

During the years since 1992, many Mennonite Church USA and Canada congregations have begun to use the order of worship described in our denominational hymnal. The church-wide worship resources developed by volunteer teams of writers from area conferences (which were first published in *Builder* and now in *Leader* magazine) tend to follow this order, although variations are occasionally suggested. The result is that a firmer consensus regarding what is essential in worship has developed among users of the hymnal. Any guide to Mennonite worship published today would likely not claim there is no prescribed order of worship.

Worship patterns that were once more fluid and locally designed have become more standardized. But when leaders follow a prescribed outline, they may begin to think of worship as accomplishing an agenda and lose sight of its purpose.

At the same time, congregations that do not use the hymnal or other denominational music resources typically draw from a variety of other sources for the structure of their worship. Among users of praise-and-worship music, a typical order might include two parts: an opening song service followed by preaching. Along the way, worship would incorporate such elements as thanksgiving, praise, adoration, silent or spoken or sung prayer, scripture reading, and dismissal.[5]

The net effect is that what was once more fluid and locally designed has become more standardized—whether churches use denominational guides or draw from other resources. Today Mennonites aren't as likely as we once were to experience a worship service without any acts of praise (though we still get confused and sing didactic songs during the time of praise). While standardization has value, it also creates potential dangers. When leaders follow a prescribed outline, they may begin to think of worship as accomplishing an agenda and lose sight of its purpose.

Filling in slots can become a substitute for deeper engagement and discernment regarding the actions required for worship to be authentic and transforming in a particular time and place.

Although a common order of worship may provide some protection from overly subjective evaluation and can certainly help focus on what is essential, it still doesn't give us all we need. More is required if we want to develop criteria for Mennonite worship that will enable us to plan worship that sustains us and molds us into Christ's beloved community.

Reliable framework for evaluating worship

What needs to form the bedrock of criteria for Mennonite worship is an understanding of the character and mission of the Trinity. Because the image of the Trinity reveals who God is and what God is doing in the world, it is our most reliable guide for shaping and developing all the ministries of the church, including the ministry of worship. Thus, we will know what constitutes good Mennonite worship when our worship reflects the character and mission of the Trinity.

Many years ago, as a fairly inexperienced worship leader, I planned and led one of the services for a major festival of Mennonite worship in our area. Because this event was a training opportunity for pastors and worship leaders, evaluations took place immediately after each worship service. Participants reflected on what had helped or hindered their worship. They also raised questions for further conversation. Among the many helpful responses offered that day was one I've never forgotten. A participant remarked, "I heard much about God and Jesus today but nothing about the Holy Spirit." That comment set me on a journey of exploring why the Trinity is important in worship. What is gained by giving careful attention to this fundamental theological conviction of the Christian church? What kind of imbalance or distortion emerges if we disregard the Trinity?

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At first I found myself carefully checking prayer and song texts to make sure references were made to all three members of the

Trinity. Then I became aware that something much deeper was going on. Because worship is the primary setting in which the congregation is corporately formed in faith, the fullest possible understanding of God needs to be expressed and experienced in that context. And because the most complete Christian understanding of God is signified in the image we call Trinity, our worship must reflect that image in both form and content.[6]

In the Trinity we come to know God as creator and source, the one whom we love and praise with heart, mind, body, and soul. We come to know God as Christ, our brother and redeemer, the one we follow as disciples through death to resurrection. We come to know God as Spirit and energy, animator of our world, the one who empowers us to witness and serve with joy. The three-in-one, joined in perfect love and harmony, invite us to join their communion, and thus we become a community that is a visible sign of God's presence and power in the world.[7]

At its heart, worship is a response to the love and grace of the triune God. Three ordinary yet essential movements of worship—encounter, engagement, and empowerment—invite us into relationship and union with the Trinity.[8] Together, these movements create a dynamic rhythm that pulses through our lives, forming and transforming us individually and corporately into the body of Christ.

The difference made by trinitarian theology

As the focus of worship, the Trinity not only becomes the theological center of worship, it also provides the criteria and rationale for evaluation of worship. While preferences such as styles of preaching, praying, or singing inevitably affect our participation in worship, these preferences are not the heart of the matter. What matters is whether a full-bodied understanding and experience of the triune God is made manifest.

The following definition offers a simple but sturdy foundation for understanding worship and suggests a framework of three central questions that can guide our evaluation of worship practices: *Christian worship is an encounter with the triune God experienced in the midst of community, which transforms and empowers members of Christ's body for loving witness and service in the world.*[9] The three questions that emerge from such a foundation are:

Have we encountered the triune God in worship? Has the community experienced itself as the body of Christ? Have worshipers been empowered to love and witness and serve Christ in the world?[10]

Have we encountered the triune God? Worship begins with meeting the living God—Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. No other reason for gathering is adequate—not even our well-intentioned desire for Christian fellowship or our need for instruction or encouragement. Unless we encounter God, we have not worshiped and will not be shaped into God's people.

The implications of this question are immediately observable in the actions of worship. Do we greet worshipers with folksy comments about the weather or weekend sports events, or do we guide people into awareness of the true and living God? Do we assure ample time for prayer and praise, or do we skimp on adoration of God and spend more time in sharing or announcements? Does our music proclaim God's glory and grace? Are sermons biblically centered? Do they have theological integrity? Does the congregation receive an adequate and nourishing diet of scripture? Are the arts trusted to help us touch the hem of mystery? Can we wait in silence before God? Do we meet regularly at the Lord's Table? Is a rich array of biblical images of God offered for reflection and instruction? Do leaders prepare prayerfully? Do they communicate their own faith with passion?

While preferences regarding styles of preaching, praying, or singing affect our participation in worship, what matters is whether a full-bodied understanding and experience of the triune God is made manifest.

Have we experienced the community as the body of Christ? Worship recreates the body of Christ as we gather each week. In worship we come to see and know ourselves as members of one another, sisters and brothers who incarnate and reflect Christ's love, reaching out to one another in healing, strengthening ways. We also know one another as frail and fallible human beings. Some of us struggle to believe and follow Christ. Some are longing for forgiveness or the renewing touch of the Spirit. Some are in despair.

The implications of this question require persistent and loving attention to hospitality. Does everyone—all ages, genders, social

classes, racial-ethnic identities, and political persuasions—receive a warm welcome? Does our worship invite us to be real, earthy, and human? Do we regularly engage in confession, naming our sins with bold honesty? Do we speak the truth in love? Is grace abundant? Is the Christian story proclaimed with creativity and power? Does it inhabit our imaginations and shape our behavior and relationships? Is the community engaged in interpretation of the Word? Do we love to sing together? Do we respect one another's preferences and tastes in worship? Do we pray together? Suffer together? Share our fondest hopes and joys? Are those who stir up division called to repentance? Do leaders identify with their people? Can they both comfort and confront?

Have we been empowered to love and witness and serve Christ in the world? Though the vertical and horizontal dimensions of worship are essential, they do not yet constitute the whole of worship. Worship is finally evaluated by its fruit in daily life. Worship equips people, through the power of the Spirit, for participation in the new world of God's gracious reign. As our vision of God's purposes in the world is clarified and renewed in worship, we are transformed for faithful witness and loving service.

Answering this question requires us to look both at what happens within worship and at what happens beyond worship. Is the Word preached faithfully and with the conviction that it will transform individuals and the community? Are rituals of response thoughtfully designed? Do we pray fervently for the world? Do we lament injustice, violence, and greed? Do we intercede for God's people at home and around the world? Do we anoint for healing? Are offerings a dull moment in worship, or do they become acts of commitment? Do our songs lull us into torpor, or do they agitate, inspire, and empower us? Does our joy abound? Are our baptismal services hearty celebrations? Is there a lively traffic between what happens during the week and what happens on Sunday morning? Are we clear about whose kingdom receives our allegiance? Can leaders function both as prophets and as priests? Do they inspire worshipers to hope for the fulfillment of God's reign?

God decides what's good

When all is said and done, God determines whether worship is faithful or not—not an intrepid team of mystery worshipers who

show up on Sunday morning with evaluation grids in hand. The prophets of the Old Testament often warned God's people not to become complacent or self-satisfied about worship.[11] God expected them to give their best and provided detailed instructions for visual elements, music, rituals, and spoken words. Like those ancient leaders, worship planners and leaders today are called to excellence: to keep worship Christ centered, to call the community to genuine engagement with one another, and to strengthen the links between worship and our life of peace and justice in the world.

Without a robust theology of the Trinity, however, Christian worship easily becomes one-dimensional, anemic, and unfaithful. What the image of the Trinity offers us is a durable and comprehensive framework for evaluating what is essential and life giving, not what is peripheral and ephemeral. And although we have used the image of three distinct members of the Trinity as a lens for analysis and assessment, the reality that we desire in worship is—like the Trinity itself—an integrated whole. With the Trinity as our guide, we will offer worship that is pleasing to God, creating space for an encounter with the fullness of God, by which the Spirit transforms God's people into vibrant witnesses of God's love and grace in the world.

Notes

[1] For more information, see http://ship-of-fools.com/Mystery.

[2] For examples of these older oral traditions in worship, see John L. Ruth's essay in this issue of *Vision*, "Affectionate Memories of Traditional and Transitional Mennonite Worship in Pennsylvania."

[3] Wilfrid J. Unruh, *Planning Congregational Worship* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press; and Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1978), 28–30.

[4] *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press; Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press; Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992), i.

[5] Barry Wayne Liesch, *The New Worship: Straight Talk on Music and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 64–67.

[6] Though scripture speaks more suggestively than definitively regarding the Trinity, the Christian church has from the beginning found this image to be essential for understanding and describing God's character and activity in the world. A small flood of contemporary theologians has been reexamining the doctrine of the Trinity, finding in it a source of creativity and new life for the postmodern church. See, for example, Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000); Stanley J. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004); Catherine Mowry Lacugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper

SanFrancisco, 1991); Molly T. Marshall, *Joining the Dance: A Theology of the Spirit* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2003); Mary Timothy Prokes, *Mutuality: The Human Image of Trinitarian Love* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993); Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). After his careful discussion of early and contemporary Anabaptist understandings of the Trinity, Mennonite theologian Thomas N. Finger, in *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 421–64), affirms that a theology of the Trinity offers the church essential perspectives for both ministry and mission.

[7] John of Damascus, seventh-century Greek theologian, describes the relationship of the persons of God as *perichōrēsis*. Literally meaning "circle dance," this image emphasizes constant movement in an interpenetrating circle of intimacy, equality, and mutuality. Furthermore, this interaction is not only external; it is also a reciprocal interiority. Shirley Guthrie writes, "The oneness of God is not the oneness of a distinct, self-contained individual; it is the unity of a *community* of persons who love each other and live together in harmony" (*Christian Doctrine*, rev. ed. [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994], 92).

[8] For a fuller discussion of these three essential movements in worship, see chapter one of the forthcoming book, *Preparing Sunday Dinner: A Collaborative Approach to Worship and Preaching* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2006), collaboratively written by June Alliman Yoder, Marlene Kropf, and Rebecca Slough.

[9] This definition is central in *Preparing Sunday Dinner: A Collaborative Approach to Worship and Preaching*.

[10] For another useful set of evaluative questions, see "The Opening of Worship: Trinity," by John Witvliet, in *A More Profound Alleluia: Theology and Worship in Harmony*, ed. Leanne Van Dyk (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 1–27, in which Witvliet discusses a series of trinitarian habits which become central in congregational life and thus form worship and its outcomes.

[11] Note, for example, this warning from Isaiah 29:13–14: "The Lord said: Because these people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote; so I will again do amazing things with this people, shocking and amazing. The wisdom of their wise shall perish, and the discernment of the discerning shall be hidden."

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