

Old Fashioned Church by David E. Moss

An old Doonesbury comic strip portrayed a conversation between one of the characters and a Minister:

Man: "So how'd your new church get started Rev.?"

Minister: "Aerobics."

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Minister: "I needed something to attract folks from the community. The focus group suggested an aerobics class. It worked, so I added yoga and bingo, and then a few 12-step programs, and then we opened a soup kitchen, which led to cooking lessons. Before I knew it, I had my own denomination."

Man: "Wow...so **that's** how religion spreads."

Before you dismiss this as a mere spoof on the church, consider this. In the early 1970's, a young man and three friends conducted a door-to-door survey "to find out what people wanted in a church." With results in hand, they began to construct a church based upon the opinions and interests of unchurched people. This was the beginning of a dramatic change in the way churches "minister" to their communities. With a theater-like atmosphere, and a come-as-you-are invitation, church services are becoming more like television variety shows. This is necessary, it is argued, because traditional forms of worship have become boring and predictable and consequently do not appeal to people where they are.

The flaw in this philosophy is in believing that what goes on inside the church should be driven by the experience of people outside the church. Worship, they say, should include elements of daily cultural experience so that people can relate to a spiritual message in a context they understand.

Proponents of these changes are the ones who do not understand. What good is a church that is patterned after the world? The church should be a place that stands in stark contrast to the world, offering itself as a refuge from all that is wrong. Instead, it is becoming a place in which each person who attends can find some element of compatibility with his personal experience.

I. THE CULTURE GOSPEL

Nearly a century ago, Christians were concerned about the Social Gospel. Instead of being a light house for lost souls, the Church became a soup kitchen.

Now, in the latter part of the 20th century, Christians need to become concerned about the Culture Gospel. Instead of being an oasis for the spiritually desperate, the Church is becoming a play house of cultural relevancy.

Traditional forms of worship are disappearing as if they were dinosaurs. An atmosphere of reverence is nearly extinct. An expectation that people attend church services dressed respectfully for the occasion is frowned upon as archaic and old fashioned -- as if there is something wrong with being old fashioned.

Popular wisdom prescribes observing the cultural elements of people's daily experience, transcribing them into a liturgical format, and presenting a Christian message in a vernacular setting. The more diverse the demographics of the community, the more diverse "worship" becomes. Something must be included to appeal to every segment of society. Baby Boomers, Generation X, Singles, ethnics, and an infinite list of other special interest groups become targets with new innovations. The activities of "worship" are fabricated with great sensitivity to all the people who may enter the refurbished halls of the Church.

There is a very simple explanation for this phenomenon. The Church used to be focused on God. Now, it is focused on itself.

II. REAL WORSHIP

Traditional forms of worship are being discarded because of a misconception about their origins. The movement of Multiculturalism contends that European culture is oppressive and chauvinistic, preventing the free expression of other cultures. The carry-over into Christianity leads to a claim that traditional forms of worship are too restrictive because they originated within European culture. The conclusion is that they must be replaced with forms of worship that are more culturally inclusive.

If truth be told, traditional forms of worship are not rooted in culture at all. It is mere coincidence that they were developed in a European cultural context.

Traditional forms of worship are actually based upon a set of beliefs. 1. God is holy. 2. Those who approach God should do so in a manner which acknowledges His holiness. 3. This requires reverence, respect, order, mannerliness and a decorum honoring the station of Godliness. 4. Worship is the act of approaching God. 5. Therefore, worship is a sacred activity in which man conducts himself appropriate to the occasion.

The effect of this is to bring people from all cultures into a uniform approach to the Almighty. Culture becomes irrelevant in worship because worship has nothing to do with where man is, and everything to do with where God is. The objective of worship is not to help man find himself, but to help man find God.

1. Respect

Respect is a primary ingredient of worship. It is demonstrated by attitude and appearance.

One should enter a church service quietly and thoughtfully. This is so, not because the building is a hallowed place on the order of the Old Testament Temple, but because the gathering of the believers for the purpose of worship is a hallowed occasion.

One should also dress appropriately for such an important event. Clothes communicate our attitude toward our activities. In the secular world people dress up for appropriate occasions. Business men wear suits to work, women wear evening gowns to banquets, and teens rent formal wear for graduation parties. But along comes the church with an invitation for people to attend the most sacred activity imaginable, dressed in clothes more suitable for the playground.

2. Reverence

Reverence is another primary ingredient of worship. It is demonstrated by our conduct.

A worship service should be characterized by activity that shows the Lord God, our Heavenly Father, we understand who He is. One's deportment in worship should communicate a reverence for the importance of the person to whom sacrifices of praise are being made.

Entertaining ourselves ought to be the furthestest thing from our minds in a worship service. Sensuous music, lewd gyrations, hilarity and applause have absolutely no value in reverencing a holy and sacred God. They are totally man-centered activities. Worship should be completely focused upon the Lord God.

III. OLD FASHIONED CHURCH

There is a great deal of pressure on local churches to conform to the new ways. Not only is there competition from the secular world of entertainment, now churches are competing to create the most effective appeal to a demanding, self-indulgent community.

In spite of this, there may yet be a place in each community for a local church that will resist this tidal wave and maintain an old fashioned form of worship. It can be an oasis for those who are being strangled by the crassness of man-centered worship. It can be a gathering place for the remnant who desire to acknowledge the real God in a worship format that is not based upon a cultural experience, but upon a set of doctrinal convictions. It can be a refuge for those who want to rest in all that God is, instead of relishing in all that man can do. It can be a quiet place of worship, where a soul can rest with other weary pilgrims and escape the disconcerting noise of a confused and disorderly world.

Conclusion

This may sound out of touch. It is. It is out of touch with the wisdom that descends not from above, but is earthly, sensual, and devilish.

But this is in touch with the wisdom that is from above. Such wisdom is first, above all things, pure. It is only with this wisdom that the Church can offer worship to God that is truly acceptable to Him.

The people of every local church face this decision. Will they give in to the demands of a group of people who are lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God? Or, will they stay the course, maintain respect and reverence in their worship, and think first about God and last about themselves? Will they be a modern innovation with a man-centered priority, or, will they be an old fashioned church with one simple objective -- approach God on His terms, rather than their own?