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REMOVING THE DEBRIS AND LAMENTING THE CARNAGE

At the beginning of this conversation, we need to clear away some debris remaining on the battlefield from the wars over worship. Some cleaning and deconstruction must take place to make room for a proper Christian theology of worship. This chapter will critique some poor theologies and practices of worship that caused and resulted from the wars over worship.

Worship as Music: Hymns or Choruses?

The wars over worship were not about whether communal worship should happen but about what should be done during worship. During these wars, as a pastor in charge of worship, I found myself asking what now seem to be the wrong questions. Some were, "What songs will make folks happy?" and "What can I do to attract new people and have a bigger attendance?" Too often my local church's worship was centered on a vision of music. In fact, the language used by many of us underscored this way of thinking. When people used the word "worship," they often thought only about music. Those with the title worship pastors were often the ones in charge of music and choirs. Worship teams were those who led the congregation in singing. After a Scripture reading and just prior to leading the singing, a leader might retort, "Let's start worshipping again."

In light of this, much of the warfare and emotional angst revolved around musical issues: "Should we sing hymns or choruses?" "Can we play organ or drums?" "Should we use hymnals or PowerPoint?" On the surface these issues appear to be mostly about music, but they are theologically loaded. Music is crucial to Christian worship, but a full imagination of worship includes more than music; it encompasses all of a communal worship service and the way Christians live during the week. The musical side of the worship wars was especially bloody. Lifelong members of the church suddenly felt as if the hymnody they had grown up with was being taken away. What was familiar had become alien. Still others felt there was no space for the new and creative worship songs. The selection of songs chosen seemed to be guided more by musical transitions and flow rather than theological maturity.

Worship as Marketing: "How Can We Get Bigger?"

Other battles, those that were not music centered, were equally toxic and seductive. Worship was imagined as a marketing strategy. Some members would ask, "What are the big and successful churches doing?" "Is our worship creative and edgy enough?" "Will it attract new people?" Attracting a bigger crowd was equated with fulfilling the Great Commission and with worshipping "in spirit and truth" (John 4:23). This exposes not only a poor theology of worship but also an anemic ecclesiology. Moreover, not only is worship poor when it is designed to "attract the masses," but it is also inferior when it is fashioned to avoid offending longtime constituents. Some of the guiding questions that arise when crafting this kind of communal worship include, "Will it make everyone happy?" "What did we do last week?" "Will it appease our tithers?" These questions often produce worship services that fail to encourage people to be present to God while also increasing their tendency to view worship as entertainment. There must be a better way.

In recent years churches have confused bigger crowds, stages, projector screens, and movie theater sound systems with faithfulness. Certainly numerical growth can be a sign of God's blessing and the authenticity of a faithful church. However, bigger is not always better. Conversely, there is nothing particularly holy about staying small or slowly declining to a "holy huddle." The lurking danger here is the confusion that equates faithfulness with increased membership or with sustaining the happiness of the "saints."

Worship as Personal Preference: "Can We Do What I Want?"

One of the primary biological weapons of the wars over worship was personal preference. While much of the consternation focused on music, all facets of worship came under scrutiny. Let me offer an example.

The pastor just finished her morning coffee. She sat down at her desk for her Monday morning routine. It was a ritual she did not look forward to, but knew it could be put off no longer. On some Mondays it brought great hope and joy, but most days it offered pain and sadness; she opened her email. Too much of her email was junk, even though some of it came not from a company, but her parishioners. Some emails offered gracious words about the message. Some emails—couched with pleasantries and praise—leveled critiques. "Pastor, why did we sing this song?" "Pastor, the drums were too loud." "Pastor, the Bible reading was too long." "Pastor, why do we never sing any new choruses?" "Pastor, why do we never sing any of the old hymns? Would it hurt to sing a hymn every now and again?" "Pastor, do you know that someone on your worship team did (fill in the blank) this week?" "Pastor, when are you going to let me sing my special song?" "Pastor, I do not like any of the songs we are singing!" The pastor turned her computer off and wept.

Hopefully, such a narrative is foreign to your experience. Sadly, it occurs often. Too many people determine where they will worship on the basis of their personal preferences being met. While a worship service must be *familiar* to each local context, there is a profound idolatry at work when I can only worship when the church's worship is what I want, what I am comfortable with, or what I am used to.[1]

At this juncture, a word must be said about many local churches who, for the sake of the lost, alienated people who had decades of worship history in the church. There is something far beyond preference at work when people no longer know any songs and find the rhythms and practices of worship unfamiliar. Those with a lifetime in the church do not simply prefer hymns out of taste, but their own spiritual journey and growth in Christ through the years are intertwined with the use of hymns and specific worship practices. This larger conversation argues that those hymns, prayers, and practices shape the very core of what it means to be Christian, and thus human. This is not to deny that God can be at work in new songs and worship practices, but there was a pastoral transgression when those with a lifetime of worship memories felt as if someone "had stolen their worship."

Worship as an Emotional Drug: "Can I Feel Something?"

Another poisonous way of imagining worship asserted that worship is only valid or spiritual if I *feel something.* Certainly, communal worship is an event that should impact the full person: intellectually, spiritually, physically, and emotionally. The poor theology of worship that must be avoided, however, claims that a worship service is only valid if a person has a deep emotional response. When worship leaders believe that a person "feeling something" is the final goal of a worship service, they tend to create worship experiences that feel more like emotional manipulation than genuine encounters with God. There is nothing particularly Christian about singing the same chorus first slowly then quickly then slowly again ten times.

A pastor friend of mine told me of an interchange that occurred as he was greeting his parishioners after a Sunday service. The exchange went something like this: "Pastor, I did not like any of the songs today. Because of this I did not feel God in worship today." The pastor looked lovingly at his friend and said with conviction and sincerity, "Then it is a good thing worship is not about you." While this exchange may be a bit curt, the pastor is correct. Worship's primary goal is not about me feeling something but about God receiving praise and glory.

Certain feelings often come from true worship, but those same feelings can be caused by other things besides worship. This is not suggesting that people's emotive and attitudinal posture when encountering God is irrelevant. God created people with emotions, and worship should affect people at the cognitive and emotional level. However, when communal worship is first about God, humanity can then more fully encounter God and become more fully human.

Worship as Consumer's Choice: "What Options Do I Have for Worship?"

As the wars over worship waged on, many worship leaders tried to create peace by offering a smorgasbord of options. Instead of making people unhappy, churches offered a variety of worship styles. Early on, these services were often given one of two titles: traditional or contemporary. *Traditional* generally meant a service for the "old-timers" who wanted the same worship they had growing up. This service promised to keep things the way they had always been. The organ, robed choir, hymns (maybe even from a hymnal), special music, and sermon (with a pastor still wearing a suit) were all safeguarded so the saints would feel at home. *Contemporary* services were often created to appease people who wanted to have as little as possible of what they had growing up. Choirs were replaced with worship teams, hymns with choruses, organs and pianos with drums and guitars, and suits with jeans and sweater-vests (now designer T-shirts). Sermons were shortened to create space for more music and videos. The lights were turned down, and the volume was turned up. With multiple options, people could choose which service style they wanted. This menu approach seemed to ease some of the surface problems temporarily. However, this was not a true reconciliation but peace through segregation.

Another style emerged that attempted to bring folks together, allowing each person to have something in the service he or she liked. This style was often called *blended*. In these services you would often see choirs and worship teams, organs and drums, hymns and choruses, and the pastor in jeans and suit jacket. On the surface this seemed like a great compromise; unfortunately this felt more like worship schizophrenia than a thoughtful, contextually appropriate worship service. As a consequence of the menu approach, people developed loyalties to their preferred styles that often perpetuated or deepened divisions in local churches.

Worship as Evangelism: "How Many Were Saved Today?"

While each of the previously described worship postures were easy to critique, some might be initially misidentified when challenging *worship as evangelism*. The Great Commission is a calling given to all Christians: "In your coming and going make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19, translation mine). If this task is so important, why would this not be the most prominent feature of communal worship? Christians from evangelical traditions often structured worship as a service of music, sermon, and altar call. While this is foreign to some, many may find this representative of much of the worship during the 1940s through the 1990s (and beyond for some).

As a child raised in such an evangelical tradition, I "learned" that people measured the success or failure of the pastor's sermon (and by extension the entire worship service) by how many came to the altar in response to the message.

I can remember being nine years old and seeing my pastor at the back of the sanctuary after a sermon when no one came forward to the altar. Attempting to be encouraging, I said, "Don't worry, pastor. I am sure your sermon will be better next week." It is noteworthy that several evangelical traditions that had weekly altar calls at the conclusion of their worship services have stopped offering them with any regularity.

Certainly, in the event of communal worship, it is God's hope and desire that people be transformed, but there is more to a full imagination of a worship service. A Christian communal worship service's end and goal is the glorification of God. While the healing and transformation of people in communal worship is extremely important, even this is not the ultimate hope and goal of communal worship.

As a pastor responsible for planning and executing worship during the height of the worship wars, I was influenced by all the above approaches. Offering this list here is not an indictment of the past. I am convinced most pastoral and lay leaders were trying to seek God's will in navigating those turbulent waters. Even as I was trying to manage all of those theologies of worship, something was not quite right in my spirit. I have few doubts about the sincerity of most worship leaders (preachers and music ministers), but as I look back on this era, including where we are today, it seems we *were* and perhaps still *are* asking all of the wrong questions. Rarely do we ask a very basic question, "Why do we worship?" or "How do we know our worship is Christian?"

Many more poor theologies of worship could be added. Yet the goal of this conversation is not to ridicule or condemn the past but to shed light on more faithful Christian theologies of worship. In my estimation most of the theologies of worship I critiqued contain an element of truth. My primary goal here is to help local churches articulate a theology of worship that will inform and guide their congregations into imagining, planning, and living worship that is Christian.

So now that some debris has been cleared, let's begin the mosaic of a Christian theology of worship—God's invitation to become fully human.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. **What theologies of worship did you most resonate with in this chapter?**
2. **What scars, if any, do you have from the wars over worship?**
3. **How did your local congregation navigate these issues?**
4. **What new ideas and insights were raised that can be used as your local church moves forward?**