

THE MAINTENANCE OF DIVINE WORSHIP: The Third Great End of the Church

I suppose our text, our Scriptural warrant, for today's lesson could well be any one of several Psalms, but the one that leapt out at me was a portion of Psalm 95:

“O come, let us worship and bow down,
Let us kneel before the Lord our Maker,
For He is our God,
And we are the sheep of His pasture,
And the people of His hand.”
Psalm 95:6-7

We are told in our Westminster Shorter Catechism that our chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever, and I don't know any better way to do that than in the worship of God.

Worship of God, Divine Worship, as the Great End calls it, comes in many forms.

If we were to start at the end of Clinton at the Episcopal Church, and then move up the street to the United Methodist Church, and then to the Baptist Church, and then to our Presbyterian Church, and then hop a little ways out Lafayette to Rivertown Community Church, we would find ourselves exposed to a broad variety of worship styles.

The formality of the service, even the form of the service, the attire of the worship leaders, the musical instruments used, the music itself, would vary greatly.

Yet in each of those places, in each of those forms, in each of those styles, Christians are gathered together to worship God.

We often use the word “liturgy” to describe the order or form of worship. It is the order of worship, the form, we follow as we worship and give praise to God. The root of the word in Greek literally means “the work of the people.” Some might translate that as “public service”.

Well, we use the word “service” to describe our worship, as in “are you going to the early service or the eleven o'clock service?” Or, “does your church have a Sunday evening service?”

Divine worship is public worship. Worship is the service that we perform for God. Public worship is public service.

And that leads me to an important point: the congregation is not an audience. The preacher and the musicians, the choir and the soloists are not performing for an audience. The audience, the recipient of our praise, our worship, is the Lord God Almighty.

That's one reason why we Presbyterians don't usually applaud following a musical selection. We are not there to honor and praise the musicians, but to honor and praise God.

That is different in other traditions.

I led worship at a State Prison on more than one occasion. Those guys applauded everything that happened. If the choir sang, they applauded. If I prayed, they applauded afterwards. I even got a round of applause after my sermon. If we'd taken up an offering, they'd have applauded that!

I wish I could get my head around the concept that applause in worship is a way of giving thanks and praise to God.

But wait! It is right there in the Bible! Psalm 47!

“Clap your hands, all you people!
Shout to God with loud songs of joy.
For the Lord, the Most High, is awesome,
A great king over all the earth.”

Psalm47:1-2

So, there is a Scriptural warrant for hand clapping and loud music in worship!
Even for shouting to God.

Sadly, the greatest battles that have been fought in Christian churches over the last couple of decades have not been battles against sin. They have been worship wars, in a tension between contemporary music and contemporary media and that with which we are comfortable, that which we consider our tradition. Churches even battle over instrumentation.

I've seen churches split over whether to replace an old pipe organ with a “modern” electronic organ.

There was an elder in the church from which I retired who swore if we ever had drums and guitars in the Presbyterian Church, he'd stand up and walk out.

That year, on Youth Sunday, the grandsons of one of his best friends and fellow elders played the Recessional, at the end of the service, on a guitar and a drum set. Now what do you do on the Recessional? You stand up and walk out!

He met me laughing at the door that Sunday, telling me that we got him good!

But I will have to admit; I still have a moment's pause when I see a drum set in the chancel area of a traditional sanctuary.

Whatever form our worship takes, singing, playing music, praying, joining our voices together in prayer, litany, scripture, we are called to worship God, and the maintenance of divine worship is one of the great ends of the church, and maybe the one that all of us can achieve, for all of us can find a way in which to worship the Lord who is our Maker.