Transforming Worship

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TRANSFORMING worship is both impressive and expressive.

As we receive God's love for us and return our love for God, we find ourselves changed, transformed, renewed from the inside out. New insights help us live in the newness of life. Greater sensitivities emerge as we come to view those around us through the eyes of Jesus. We receive power to overcome life's obstacles and temptations. All things indeed become new, and creation even takes on another smell.

Quakers have struggled, however, to find the right balance between impressive and expressive aspects of worship. For the last century or more, evangelical Quakers have refined the expressive arts of singing, preaching, and testifying, but silence has become a distant companion. We don't want to worship the silence, and yet we ponder how recovering its use can be vitalizing, not deadening. A couple of insights may help.

First, our open worship suffers from a devastating mixture of expectations between what Wesleyans call "testimonials of progress" and what Quakers call "holy expectancy." In the testimony meeting where the query is, "How has Jesus Christ made a difference in your life this week?" any silence or pause bespeaks spiritual failure. Nobody wants that! So, people search for some account of spiritual progress to share, and the fuller the meetings are, the greater the sense of success. These meetings can be very heartwarming, especially when the sharing is genuine and the progress is real.

For Quakers, the goal of expectant waiting on the Lord is to create the space wherein the living voice of Christ can be attended, heard, and obeyed. Because silence is so fragile, busied contributions distract the worshiper and frustrate the listening process. It also takes time to separate the "chaff" from the "wheat" of one's life. The rustlings of those with allergies to silence, or the well-meaning offerings of those who misjudge its value, at times ensure a minimal level of contact with the streams of living water that flow from the deep currents of the Holy Spirit. But a single taste of that deep refreshment makes one thirst for the true fountain and hunger for heavenly manna. A dozen dry runs can be endured for the memory and hope of the life-changing encounter with Christ, who speaks order into the chaos of our lives, and healing to the agonies of our souls. Silence cannot save, but the One we meet in it and through it can if we let Him.

Because these two wonderful—and yet incompatible—uses of open worship are often attempted at the same time, frustration inevitably occurs. The testifier speaks too often or too long for the meditator, and each misunderstands or undervalues the other's aspiration. One way forward is simply to clarify what kind of open worship is being cultivated during a particular time. Designating special times for testimony sharing and expectant waiting may help. Then, with a bit of teaching and modeling by elders, the rest of the meeting will follow, and the Lord will bless.

A second insight is that no meeting for worship will be filled with transforming power unless those who attend it immerse themselves in prayerful preparation during the week. This abiding immersion is the baptism of Jesus: baptism with fire and the Holy Spirit, and it prepares us for sacramental communion in the gathered meeting.

The prepared message can never replace the "prepared messenger" in its effect. And, because the Lord may call upon anyone to bring His message, all must prepare for worship with a sense of urgency. Christ may want to speak through you. Have you prepared worthily? Jesus, said to His drowsy disciples, "Could you not attend and pray with me for an hour?" Regarding private and corporate worship, He asks us each the same.

Few need silence more than those least comfortable with it. In silence, all our props for distraction and symbols of worth come crashing down, until we are left with the naked truth about ourselves, if we dare face it. But out of the painful truth comes the power of life. That is where spiritual rebirth happens...again and again.

We evangelical Quakers have grown adept at meaningful, expressive worship, but to recover the fire of Pentecost and the glory of the burning bush, we must recover the impressive side of worship. However, it won't come by mastering formlessness as a new form. Our only hope is in the real thing: transforming encounters with Jesus Christ. He has promised to be present in the gathered meeting, and prayerful preparation during the week imubes the meeting with power. If we really believe that, let us prayerfully create the space to attend, hear, and obey His life-producing word. Jesus offers us manna from heaven...and He is that which He offers.

About this issue: For the next-to-the-last issue of EVANGELICAL FRIEND, we are very pleased to offer several essays on the topic of worship. We hope they serve the reader well, and most importantly, that the Lord is glorified by what comes of seeds planted.