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Open Worship as Corporate Altar



by Paul Anderson

Open worship is one of those traditions Friends embrace, but often we do so without much thought as to how to use the time meaningfully. The tendency is to be uncomfortable with too much silence and to fill the "empty" space with words. After all, silence is a strange and foreign commodity within today's noisy society. Turning on the television or stereo becomes a semiautomatic reflex when faced with the shock of a quiet room. Seldom do we find ourselves able to pray for more than three or four minutes because of acute "spiritual attention deficit." We crave entertainment, while at the same time our lives are devoid of substance.

Tragically, we allow such shallowness to influence the meeting for worship until we find ourselves catering to the lowest common denominator among the least committed. We disallow reflective pauses between events in the service, worrying that someone might get bored; we insure that open worship is neither too long nor too embarrassingly silent, interrupting the divine Word with our words of human origin; we fill the silence with background music to "assist" the distracted attender; and we

always command a performance by the speaker...whether led by the Spirit to speak or not. We live in a world filled with words, while at the same time we remain unreached by Truth.

Ironically, at the very peak of the information age, the world suffers chronic malnutrition when it comes to being "fed" by the transforming Word of God. The modern assumption that humans *can* live by bread

alone is found to be naive and falsely optimistic when tested by experience. People starve while the hunger goes ignored or misnamed. Well-meaning folk—both religious and secular—offer a plethora of words...and more words, as though

shells and husks had nutritive value. But the true need for the feeding of the human soul is the life-changing Word of God which comes to us as a divine gift—to be received and ingested through the embrace of faith. When this happens all things become new. Life takes on new meaning and perspective, and the Word which spoke in the beginning becomes the creative and ordering source of all meaningful words today.

So what difference can open wor-

ship make given our situation?

Several years ago during a meeting for worship I gained a cluster of insights that continue to change and renew my life spiritually. We had worshiped at Glasgow Friends Meeting for over half a year by then, and I found myself again struggling with the discipline of silent worship. Our family had moved to Scotland for me to pursue my doctoral work in New Testament studies at the University of Glasgow, and in doing so we transferred our membership to the local Friends meeting. By that time I was more than aware of the cross-cultural differences between an American evangelical Friends pastor and the more reserved manner of British unprogrammed Friends. This awareness caused me to be a little less extraverted with my spoken ministry out of sensitivity to the context, even though Friends had been very appreciative of the times I was led to speak. The result was that I had to face the silence straight on rather than filling it with even my own words. A difficult assignment for one used to preaching and teaching at least three times a week.

This particular Sunday morning, after taking the first half hour to allow the "clutter" of my busied life to settle and to lift assorted concerns in prayer to God, I found my attention being drawn to the watershed marks of my spiritual life. I remembered the time when as a fourteen-year-old I asked Christ to forgive *my* sins and trusted him for the gift of

salvation. And then there was the time when as a sixteen-year-old I had asked to be filled with the Holy Spirit because my life had no empowerment. I saw that Christ needed to be my "lord," not just my savior. Then I recalled prayers for healing, many of which were answered, and the lifting of other burdens to God: direction for the future, concerns about relationships and loved ones, intercession for others, and the list goes on. What struck me about many of these times was that they seemed to have taken place during an "altar call" at the conclusion of a worship service, or during some other less structured context of private prayer or corporate worship.

By now I was being drawn into a kind of "mental dialogue" in which questions demanding to be addressed seemed to emerge one after another.

For instance, "What was it about an altar call context that possessed such a life-changing capacity for you?" came the first question. As I reflected on what really made the difference, it wasn't primarily the music or the speaker or anything external that evoked the change; what really made the difference was coming fully into the presence of God and seeing myself in the light of Truth. Human instruments were used by God, but mainly as a means to the end of Christ's reaching the human soul. When this happens our masks and facades fall away, and we are faced with the stark reality of seeing ourselves as we really are. Truth is always convicting, and as we consider our true conditions we find the Spirit of Truth faithful to convict us of sin and of righteousness. All of this heightens our dependence on God and causes us to draw more fully on his love, grace and empowerment. We find ourselves changed women, men and children and spiritually better prepared to be Christ's agents of redemptive work in the world. Now that's transforming worship!

Another question followed, "Isn't that what is available to you (and every person present) *right here* in

this meeting for worship?" I had to agree, and in doing so began to view the silence differently. Rather than seeing it as a challenge to my undisciplined mind, I began to see it as a sacred place to meet with God. At once the value of open worship changed for me. Like the "holy ground" before the burning bush and the pentecostal fire of the revival meeting the silence had taken on sacred significance. No longer was my focus on what might be shared by somebody there, but it had shifted to abiding in the present Christ—the true Word whence all

inspired words come. Even the Scriptures come alive when the same

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Paul Anderson

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Editor's note: We welcome Paul Anderson to the pages of *Quaker Life* this month. He is the editor of the *Evangelical Friend* and a good friend of the editor of *Quaker Life*. While Paul is writing for *Q.L.*, Jim Newby is writing a guest editorial for the *E.F.* Thanks, Paul, for sharing!

Spirit who inspired their authorship also inspired their readership. Silence within the open meeting for worship creates what Parker Palmer calls "the space in which the Living Word of God can be heard...and obeyed."

A third set of questions followed the others: "If the *real thing* is creating the space in which to encounter the living Christ, why reserve only the closing five or ten minutes for an altar call at the end of the service? Is not the singular priority of worship transforming encounter with God? Why not do away with the "preliminaries" and just have open worship as a corporate altar call?" I began to wonder what would happen if Friends from my own revivalist tradition would recover a sense of spiritual expectancy in worship. What would happen if the entire meeting for worship was perceived as a "corporate altar call" in which all came to lay their lives openly before the risen Lord, not just the few who might go forward at the end of a service. Who needs entertainment and festivities when people's lives are being genuinely touched by God? Conversely, how many times is the Spirit of Christ stifled because there is no space for the human-divine encounter to occur? I recalled that as a pastor, some

of our most spirit-filled meetings came as I yielded to the leading to lay aside the prepared message and to shift the focus to be the present Christ as Leader of open worship. People's needs were always met, and the needed message arose from within the gathered meeting. This caused me to reflect upon my own tradition and to explore how it might be restored to its original spiritual vitality. In doing so, several insights emerge:

1) The spiritually needy include far more than those who raise their hands during an appeal, or who muster the courage to make their way forward at the end of a service. All seekers and finders need a regular setting in which to bring their lives under the scrutiny of the con-

victing and comforting Spirit of Christ.

2) The focus of a meeting for worship should never be the speaker, with one's responsiveness determined by his or her fluency with humor or emotional appeal. Rather, it is the present Christ to whom all effective preachers and evangelists point, and truly being reached hinges upon encounter with him. Around this priority all forms of worship (and formlessness) have their orbit. Their spiritual effectiveness is determined by the degree to which they serve the Center.

3) American evangelical Quakerism blossomed last century when leaders and young people sought to revitalize staled meetings by introducing music and encouraging more

spoken ministry. But vital worship is both expressive and impressive, and the same creativity that has encouraged expression over the last century or more can be used to find fresh ways to recover the impressive aspect of worship.

4) Open worship has the potential of being the most sacramental of Christian experiences, as it is in this context that ongoing immersion in the Spirit—and spiritual communion—take place. Within American revivalism the altar call has come to serve such sacramental functions as initiation, recommittal and divine unction, but Jesus came to reveal that God's presence and grace are never limited to outward forms of human action. Jesus promised to be present wherever two or three are gathered in his name, not just when people use the "right words," raise their hands correctly or perform rituals "properly." Christ came not to "narrow down" the options for how to experience God's presence and grace, but to reveal the all human-made approaches to god are finally bankrupt in contrast to receiving God's gift of salvation mediated through Christ alone. God is Spirit, and those who worship truly must worship in Spirit and in Truth.

In this age of words and more words, the world needs now more than ever, the life-producing Word of God. Christ is truly present in the meeting for worship, seeking to comfort, convict, purify and to lead us into Truth. This kind of Truth exposes our flaws, but at the same time it points the way forward, casting new light on society and our places in it. It is the stuff of which true revivals, conversions and social reforms are made. It effects the healing of the individual and society. It calls us back to the Ground and Source of our being: and yet, it propels us forward toward the imitation of Christ. It involves living into the reality that Christ is indeed present in the midst of those who gather in his name. When this happens open worship changes from a bland form of passivity to an incendiary setting for corporate spiritual renewal. Q



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