

Learning to worship

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I used to be someone who went to worship to “fill up” spiritually for the week ahead. I wanted to have something to carry with me; wisdom from the sermon, a particular hymn, a prayer, something to guide me. My focus, sadly, was on myself—what I got out of worship. I worshiped to receive.

My experience of worship has changed over the years. Now it is not so much what I take away (although I take away plenty). Now for me worship is more about participation and being in God’s presence. I don’t mean that I was never in God’s presence before, of course I was. But my experience has tipped and shifted gradually over the years.

It occurs to me that, if I could watch myself during worship these days, I might appear sad or pensive or lost in thought. That is a good thing. Worship is the place where I can be who I am and put my public face away—for a bit. I bring myself, my real self, into God’s presence. That real self confesses and praises. That real self sings and prays.

Now I could of course do that at home. I hope during personal devotions that I do bring my real self before God. But at home I often find myself distracted, thinking about laundry or work, or stuck in worry over something. I look out the window and realize that the yard needs raking or the grass needs cutting.

Often my real self lacks focus. In worship, the liturgy, the music, the standing and the sitting, the praying, all help me stay focused on God.

John Calvin believed that in worship that we, as the church, entered into God’s heavenly presence. When we lift our hearts up to God the rest of our selves follow. My real self, what that looks like on any Sunday, is who I offer to God. So in worship I am sad if I need to be. Pensive. Content. Worried. Glad. I offer my real self and know that the real me is loved and accepted by God.

It is an hour or so a week where I stop thinking about myself. My wants. My needs. My troubles. My responsibilities. Once a week I am not the center of my universe. Once a week things are in their proper order. The weekly practice of worship is an important discipline for me. Crucial in fact. I could not have learned how to worship honestly and truly without the church. The only reason I have any idea how to act, how to feel, how to pray the rest of the week is what we do together on Sunday mornings. Without worship, how would I ever know how to properly live?

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