

## CHRISTIANITY CANNOT SURVIVE WITHOUT WORSHIP

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*By Kazimierz Bem, a former international refugee law lawyer, now a Congregational minister in Massachusetts USA.*

Church leaders who are serious about saving the faith need to be serious about worship. Around the year 1510, a delegation of Christians from Sudan, which had been recently overrun by Muslim conquest, went to the Christian Ethiopian court and begged the emperor to send them bishops and priests. The Christians remaining in Sudan needed clergy to lead worship, administer the sacraments, and teach the people. But the emperor refused, sending them away empty-handed. With no Christian worship, within 100 years Christianity in Sudan became extinct and forgotten until the twentieth century.

That historical moment is a useful example for Christians today. Mainline Protestant churches have been declining for decades. This trend has now reached the evangelical churches, too. In a desperate attempt to stay alive, churches and leaders are coming up with new solutions, new strategies and guesses. New church plants are tailored for busy people, giving them a brief moment of worship (with the stress on brief) "on the run." In one way or another, the refrain I constantly hear is: "The Church of the future is the Church of service." It takes all shapes and forms, but it always boils down to the same thing: Don't focus on worship - "do stuff" instead!

So, a denominational leader blogs that the vocation of churches is to be local community centres, food banks, day cares, or places for diaper drives. Regular meals together are held where the leader says "Holy things for holy people" before the participants share their thoughts, and this is praised as new worship. My own denomination is experimenting with an online community called "Extravagance," where people participate in worship online and then post their thoughts on Facebook. "The post was a part of her worship," we are told.

As I read these emails and articles, I cannot help but think that we should stop ordaining people to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament and instead create an office of "Community Organizer." But is all this really what the church is called to do? Service is important. I'm not saying it isn't. But experience - and history - tells me church must be more than that. Before I became a minister in a small Massachusetts town, I was a lawyer and I worked in academia. This experience allowed me to meet people who worked in the areas of social justice, peace, and human rights. All of them went into their fields with enthusiasm, passion, and conviction.

But I quickly learned that working on justice issues does not guarantee happiness, peace, or fulfilment - nor will you necessarily be working with nice people, including co-workers. One summer I worked for a boss who quickly turned my passion for refugees and refugee law into pure misery. Had the church I was attending that summer been a "community centre" with a "community organizer" calling me to more "service," I would have probably gone crazy. Instead, what kept me sane and grounded was what has been known as traditional worship throughout the centuries - prayers, hymns, sermons and the encounter with God in Jesus Christ.

I deeply believe that when we say, "The future of the Church is service," we are allowing our culture, once again, to get the best of us. We so desperately want to be popular that we are sacrificing our distinctiveness as church. So we create worship where our prayers are innocuous, so as not to scare busy people away. Or we devise a little prayer before or after a meal and pretend it is worship. Let's be the ACLU, Sierra Club, United Way or YouTube at prayer. You know: let's be spiritual and a little - but only a little - religious. If that is the Church's future some see for us, then we are committing suicide.

John Calvin wrote, "To know God is to be changed by God; true knowledge of God leads to worship." The future of the Church is worship. That is the unique, distinct, set-apart thing the Church does and

is called to do. We don't do it for ourselves, but for God. When people sometimes tell me they don't get anything from worship, I am happy to answer, "That's great! Because it's not about you." Our culture needs a place - we need a place in our lives - to tell us that not everything is always about us, about our personal happiness, our convenience, our frantic timetables, or shrinking commitments.

Some things are bigger than us. There needs to be a place where we are told uncomfortable truths about ourselves, our world and even about God - where we ask the questions our pop culture ignores or caricatures, and where we can look for answers. Where we pause - and reflect theologically. Worship is a central act of proclamation of God's grace to us - in preaching and in faithful administration of sacraments. It needs to be robust, faithful, engaging - but its focus must be the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ, God's free, abundant, deep grace and love shown for us on the cross.

Of course this begs the question - what should worship look like? That is a subject of a totally other debate. A Sunday service should involve our confession of sin and words of absolution, the reading of God's Word and its preaching (which can take different forms) and a regular celebration of the Lord's Supper. I do believe that the faithful should experience worship as something extraordinary and uplifting. An encounter with the Holy One of Israel, the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. The God for us. Our service can only be our response in gratitude for what God has done for us.

Yes, service is vital. I agree with Nicholas Wolterstorff that service is the part of worship after the assembly disperses into their daily lives. But unless our service is grounded in worship and an understanding that what we do is in gratitude for what God has done for us first, then we will end up as the all-too-familiar "Church of revolving doors." The endless call for more volunteers, more mission projects, more social justice, more calls to action will sooner or later exhaust our members and us. They will come, join us for one project, and then burn out and leave us, never to return. That's not a future - that's self-destruction.

As Richard Niebuhr once wrote, "If a church has no other plan of salvation than to offer men deliverance by force, education, or idealism it really has no existence as a church and needs to resolve itself into a political party or school." My congregants do a lot of social justice and community projects through work, family, and friends. The role of the Church is not to guilt them into doing more and more. Rather, the role of the Church, through worship of God, is to ground them and refresh them in the faith and love of Jesus Christ so that, despite cranky bosses and annoying co-workers, they will continue in the service they are already doing.

The church is not made holy by the work it does. Rather, it is Jesus Christ and his cross that make us holy. Our service can never replace it, copy it, or perfect it. Our service can only be our response in gratitude for what God has done for us. As the great Congregational theologian Peter T. Forsyth once wrote: "The greatest product of the Church is not brotherly love but divine worship. And we shall never worship right nor serve right till we are more engrossed with our God than even with our worship, with His reality than our piety, with his Cross than with our service." So let us worship God. And because of worship, let us serve God in gratitude.

**Source:** by Kazimierz Bern