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Classical Worship for Today:  
*The Hospitality of Worship*



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The love of the stranger is a foundational Christian virtue, for it expresses the generous love of God toward those who are outside his family. Numerous Old Testament Scriptures admonish the people of God to care for the stranger. One example is Deuteronomy 10:19, that commands, "Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt." The "seeker-sensitive" church growth movement that has invaded nearly all branches of the Church is rooted in this noble concern. Indeed, any church that wants to be obedient to the Great Commission to go into all the world and make disciples must be "seeker-sensitive," meaning we must be aware of the barriers that exist between the Christian vision of reality and the vision of people outside the realm of Christian faith. Failure to do that is insular, uncompassionate and disobedient. Our problem is not in our motive but there is, it seems to me, an enormous problem in our method of loving the stranger. Since "love of the stranger" is the biblical word for hospitality, how can we be "hospitable" to all kinds of people with their differing expectations, inhibitions, values, dislikes, preferences and struggles in their need to know God? Serious wrestling with those questions is the responsibility of anyone who sincerely desires to be hospitable.

The difficulty in the hospitality strategy of the seeker-

sensitive church movement is that it often tends to obscure the nature of the community where the seeker is being welcomed. In other words, in a desire to "reach unchurched people" there is a danger that we may give away too much and in doing so, deprive the stranger from really encountering the radical nature of the community of faith which is the Church of the Living God. In a thought-provoking chapter in the book *The Marks of the Body of Christ* (Braaten and Jenson, editors. Eerdmans, 1999), Robert Jenson reflects on how it is that the Church has historically welcomed people into the community of faith. He notes the obvious reality that our culture and the historic Christian faith are increasingly going their separate ways. Jenson writes that as people were coming to the Church from the outside culture they were entering a community "oriented not to their religious needs but to the mandates of a particular and highly opinionated God" (page 139). In order for the truths and practices of the faith to be set before the strangers' culturally created personal preferences and views, the Church needed to devise a method of orientation. Jenson puts it rather baldly that what the unbelieving society regarded as *rights* the Church regarded as *sins*. While we might think such a stark contrast belongs solely in the realm of morals and not worship preferences, there are issues in worship that at least should cause us to rethink our view of *rights*. Rights in worship have become a powerful, if not always articulated, expectation of many who attend church. I think of a person who objected to the moment in the service when the ancient words, "The Lord be with you" is spoken to the congregation and the congregation responds, "And also with you." After a lengthy and cordial conversation on the roots, history and meaning of that exchange, the pastor asked if the explanation helped her understand the reason for that moment in the service. She responded, "I understand, but I don't like it," and found a church where such an annoyance would not trouble her worship experience. The assumption seemed to be that worship according to personal preference is an essential religious right. American evangelicalism is giving powerful affirmation of this new view. This kind of seeker

issue is increasingly causing churches to radically change their worship to accommodate the expectations and preferences of the "worshiping public."

Jenson encourages us to look back on the ancient Christian practice of catechesis as a way through the dilemma of uninstructed people determining the nature of the life of the Church. He notes that "new converts were used to religions with little specificity and so with little intellectual content" (page 139). The catechism was part of a three-phase process whereby a person could move from being an unbeliever to being a baptized member of the Church. This middle step of catechesis was instruction so that the uninstructed would not end up being the now baptized who are determining the life of the Church. The problem we are confronting is that somehow the Church is continuing to assume that Christianity and the surrounding culture is still pretty much the same. Tastes, understandings and expectations in the surrounding culture can be accommodated in the Church in the cause of welcoming the stranger into the family of God. The usual term is that we are to provide "a non-threatening atmosphere," a phrase that seems to beg for far more thought than it ever gets.

The point is this: we are now increasingly returning to the situation the ancient church faced. Our society has values, images and expectations—a world view—that is deeply alien to the Christian vision. This is no time for the Church to minimize its own character and agenda. While the surging size of many churches implies great success, there is no success when it is won by allowing the world to set the Church's agenda. The Church must find ways to lovingly, respectfully and confidently tell its story and instruct those who want to know more about it. Jenson finds the history of the Church's catechism to be a trio of *worship*, *morals* and *theology*. Jenson rightly argues that the Church has been given rites and symbols that she is not free to change.

She is not permitted to adapt these things to the antecedent needs of prejudices of the uninstructed. . . . Instead of perverting her essential rites, the church must catechize, she must

*rehearse* her would-be members in the liturgies, take them through step by step, showing how the bits hang together. . . . And she must show them wherein these rites are blessings and not legal impositions. . . . Nor does it stop with the minimal mandates of Scripture. The church, like every living community, has her own interior culture, built up during the centuries of her history (page 144).

He continues:

Would-be participants will indeed find some of this off-putting: people will indeed drift into our services, not grasp the proceedings, and drift out again. We will be tempted to respond by dressing in t-shirts and hiring an almost-rock group—not, of course, a real one and getting rid of the grim crucifixes. Then we will indeed need less catechesis to adapt would-be participants to the church, *because* we will be much less church. If instead we are aware of the mission, and of the mission's situation in our particular time, we will not try to adapt the church's culture to seekers, but seekers to the church's culture (page 145).

While most readers of this journal would likely be strong advocates of theological and moral training for those coming into the Church, I suspect that many may never have considered the importance of instruction or at least explanation of the worship life and culture of the Church. The assumption of the seeker's *right* to expect a worship style and format that is comfortable to personal preference has penetrated too deeply into the Church's psyche.

One practical means for loving the stranger is for a local congregation to create a short, written explanation of its worship vision and values. A helpful example is Travis Tamerius' piece *Savoring God in Public Worship (Reformation and Revival Journal, Volume 11, Number 4, 135ff)* for use in his church's community. Such a piece given from a friend to someone who has not yet attended the church at least raises awareness and offers initial explanation concerning the church's commitments to worship.

It is both a theological and a historical fact that the shape

of Christian worship developed over two thousand years. Love of the stranger requires preparation prior to experiencing the ways and words of this great family heritage. It is the Church's duty to love the stranger and in the spirit of hospitality, help the stranger enter into the new creation of the Church at worship. Hebrews 13:22-24 frames the dramatic nature of the call to worship in the realm of the heavenly kingdom:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

This vision is radically different from the ways of either a secular or non-Christian religious public event. Our love for the seeking stranger will compel us neither to dilute the grandeur of this radically different vision nor to fail to explain to our seeking friend what it means to participate in worship. Our goal must be that the stranger may by faith, love and wonder become part of this adoring family—angels, Abel and all.