

Now you are God's people (not your own people): 1 Peter 2:2-10

When I lived in Vancouver and then in Barrie, I attended a number of different churches ranging from the very evangelical and charismatic to the traditional mainline. At some of these churches the music was engaging but the preaching was terrible. At others, the preaching was great but the rest of the service was dull and life-less. At some churches I felt that I was really engaging in fulfilling worship and at others I could barely keep my eyes open. At some churches I really agreed with the preacher, and at others I thought the preacher was a borderline heretic.

During these years of “church-shopping” and “church-criticizing”, I was looking for that one church that would meet all of my needs, would be engaging in music and preaching, and was full of people who were welcoming and engaging. But after several years of not finding what I was looking for, I became discouraged that such a church actually existed, and I wondered why I should bother with church anyway.

I am sure many of you have had similar experiences with church. I am sure we have all been to church services that have left us wondering why we bothered showing up or have left us with countless shortcomings to complain about. Perhaps the music wasn't great, perhaps the preacher was boring or spoke for too long, perhaps the person sitting next to us was smelly. Perhaps the people weren't as welcoming as we thought they should be or were creepily too friendly.

The reality is that our worship experiences will never live up to our expectations unless we re-think what worship really is and shift our expectations a little bit.

So, let's take a look at what worship is and how it can become life-giving, life transforming, bright, and full of energy – how it can become vibrant.

The first thing we need to understand is that our cultural experiences and expectations of worship aren't the same as what the bible tells us about worship.

The church has always struggled with the influences of the culture on its worship. The church has always struggled with how its worship can be meaningful and relevant to people within the culture of the time, whether it has been how to engage those of medieval culture, Victorian sensibilities, or “contemporary” culture. Most of the time, the area that is most affected by culture is the music, but other areas are affected as well, including how we understand our worship space, the time and place of worship, what kind of liturgy we follow, and even what we expect the minister or the choir or the congregation to wear. All of these expectations are culturally conditioned and have very little (if anything at all) to do with what scripture tells us about worship.

Looking to scripture, we discover some very different criteria for what worship is supposed to look like. The most common biblical thread with respect to worship is that worship occurs rightly and properly under one most crucial circumstance. Right worship arises out of a right understanding of who we are as God's people, and a right understanding of who God is and what God has done.

Throughout scripture, the worship of God's people had only 2 foci: the character of God and the works of God. Any study of the Psalms, the prophets, and the New Testament will reveal that this is the case.

Because God's people understood themselves as the recipients of God's marvelous grace, they were compelled to worship: to give thanks, to lift up the deeds and the character of God in adoration and praise. The right worship of God's people is always and everywhere shaped by God and God alone.

So, who are we and what has God done for us?

In Peter's first letter, he reminds the church that "once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Pet 2:10). When we come to understand that God has chosen us, set us apart, made us a holy nation in Christ, we find that we are compelled to offer adoration and praise for God's grace, his love, and his mighty acts of salvation throughout history and ultimately in his Son, Jesus Christ. Once we understand who God is and who we are, our understanding of worship shifts a little bit.

Peter is also very clear about our identity in Christ: we are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. And we have been created as a chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, and God's own people, for one reason, and for one reason only: *so that* we might proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9). This is our one and only purpose in worship: to recognize who we are in Christ, to recognize what God has done for us, and to proclaim that reality by offering up God's name in adoration and praise. *Because* we have been formed into God's people (not our own people), *our sole reason for existence is to proclaim the mighty acts of the Lord.*

Throughout scripture, whenever the psalmist or the prophets or the writers of the New Testament talk about what God has done for us in Christ and who we are in Christ (forgiven, saved, adopted), the reason for God's redemptive work in our lives is always given: *so that* you may proclaim the mighty acts of the Lord and lift up his name in adoration, love, praise. The function of the priesthood is to offer worship, lifting up the name of God in adoration and thanksgiving. We adore/thank God not because we want to gain his favour, but because adoration is our response to his grace. The core of our worship isn't receiving, but giving

This certainly changes our view of church a bit, doesn't it? This certainly reshapes our expectations of Sunday morning worship, doesn't it? We have been conditioned to think that we come to church on Sunday morning to get something out of it. Scripture tells us that we come to corporate worship to *do* something – to proclaim the mighty acts of our Lord and Saviour.

This brings us to the role of sacrifice in worship. Peter also tells us that an integral piece of our worship is the offering of spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Sacrifice in worship? Hasn't Jesus already done the sacrifice bit on our behalf? After all, this is a communion table where we celebrate life in and through Jesus Christ, not an altar on which sacrifices are made.

Spiritual sacrifices. We know all about Jesus' sacrifice, but our own? Well, if we are to understand worship as our adoring and loving response to God's grace in our lives and work in the world, then there are going to have to be some sacrifices made on our part if we are going to respond to God appropriately.

The primary sacrifice that we need to make is to sacrifice our own egos and our own deeds. That's a hard one for us. We don't declare our own acts, we don't declare our own preferences, we don't declare our own selves. We don't put our preferences about how we think worship should be done

ahead of God's requirement for our perfect obedience and our submission to his will. We recognize that worship isn't about us. And that means we have to put ourselves aside.

We also need to sacrifice our traditional and cultural expectations of what our worship together ought to look like. What songs we sing, how we sing them, what prayers we pray and how we pray them, what order we follow and how we follow it – all of these things are to reflect our love and thanks for who God is and what God has done, not how we think things should be done. We would do well to pray through every element of our worship services to discern how each one honours God, how each one worships God, and how each one draws us into living and life-giving praise of God.

This is where “vibrant”, meaningful, and transformative worship comes from. It arises out of the realization of who we are as God's people and what we have been created to be and do. When we recognize who we are – once not a people, but now a people in God – then we find that all of our energy is given over sacrificially to the praise of God's name. When we understand who God is in the world and in our lives, our grateful and joyous response to God can't help but be vibrant and full of life.

And the life that it is full of is a Spirit-filled life, a transformed life in Christ, a life that is led deeper into the presence of God and into a deeper relationship with God. Vibrant worship arises out of our identity as living sacrifices – people who live out of the life of the risen Christ and who live lives that reflect the light of Christ, which overcomes the darkness.

So, as we think about worship in the days to come, and as we think about what it means for worship to be vibrant, let's think about who we are and who God is. We are a people who have been called out of darkness into the light of Christ. We are a people for whom God has given his entire self in love and sacrifice. We are a people whom Christ has formed to be his body on earth, empowered by the Holy Spirit to continue his ministry of healing and reconciliation in the world. We are a people whose every breath depends on the sustaining breath of God. We are a people who are a holy nation, a royal priesthood, a chosen race. And then let the Spirit of God draw adoration from our lips, praise from our hearts, and sacrifice from our lives. This is our spiritual sacrifice of praise to our Lord and Saviour. Amen.