

The Majesty of “Sameness”

According to a 1996 George Barna survey, seven out of 10 adults (71 percent) say they have never experienced God's presence at a church service. The statistic is set forth without qualification. I suppose one's biases must determine what that data even means.

Does it mean that God does not attend seven out of ten churches? Through the years, I've known a few people who deemed themselves insightful enough to categorically declare when the Spirit was or was not present in a given church or during a given service. Of course, years later, and in some cases, several church-hops later, they find themselves no more content in their pursuit of the presence of God than they ever were.

Does it mean that in any given church, God only makes His presence known to three out of ten worshippers? To broaden the base of those who “experience” God, worship planners constantly search for new techniques, new technologies, new music and new modes of worship expression. But, can any of these things ever make God any more or less present in a church or in a worship service given the simple fact that Jesus once promised, *“For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them”* (Matthew 18:20)?

The presence of the Divine must be treated as a given if it is the Divine One Himself that promises He is present on specific occasions. Perhaps, if we think that God's presence is a matter of whether we detect His presence emotionally or experientially, we would be wise to rethink some of our expectations, not to mention, our rhetoric. Mark Horst makes this interesting observation:

“I am dismayed by the popular phrase “worship experience” to describe the church's corporate worship. Worship has the capacity to transform us, because it focuses our hearts and minds on God - God seen in one another, in ourselves and in the world around us. However, the phrase “worship experience” suggests that worship is important because it induces feelings. In this context worship is focused more on the worshiper than on the One worshipped ...

“Liturgists can generate many powerful experiences, but when experience is the aim, this becomes cheap theater at best and manipulation at worst. Both are repulsive substitutes for an encounter with the power of the living God.”

Classical Christian doctrine through the ages has always held that we are strengthened for our pilgrimage in this world not through periodic and exhilarating worship experiences, but through the ordinary means of grace revealed in God's Word – the Lord's Supper, Baptism, corporate and personal prayer, one another and especially, the Word itself. Indeed, all of these means of grace have the power to generate magnificent experiences, but it is the worshipper's responsibility to look for God in these things no matter how aesthetically well they are presented by the human servants administering them. If we miss Him, it is because we were not paying proper attention.

My idea of a church is a place where 1) every week, God's Word is preached; 2) every week, the unity of the Body of Christ and the story of our redemption are declared at the Lord's Table; 3) every week, prayers, praise and petitions are raised in agreement to Heaven by the community of God; 4) every time a person comes in repentance to Jesus Christ, he or she is baptized as a means of identifying him or her with the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. I guess it does sound like the "same old, same old, same old ...". There is no doubt that God-given creativity and human excellence have their place. But, the majesty of the presence of God in a worship service seems to be a sure thing only in "the realm of sameness."

© 2006 by R. Karl Crouch, 551 Abbeyville Road, Lancaster, PA 17603