

Worship Change: Who Are We Serving Well? Who Are We Frustrating?

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In his *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, C.S. Lewis writes, "I think our business as laymen is to take what we are given and make the best of it. And I think we should find this a great deal easier if what we were given was always and everywhere the same" (page 4).

But we are not always given the same style and if we tried uniformity, we probably could not agree on what should be included. Diversity is one of the strengths of the Church of the Nazarene. We have a rich history of mergers. We came together because we share deep, tenacious commitments to holiness and mission, not because we agree so well on worship style, church polity, or all of the ethical standards that demonstrate the holy life. We value vital worship and seek to avoid dead forms, but we disagree somewhat in our needs and expectations.

Reactions to a recent revival in one of our churches illustrate the issue. By all accounts spiritual victories were achieved in the meeting. However, good, reasonably informed, deeply involved Christians disagreed in their evaluations. One was overjoyed. The commitment and preparation of the evangelist were evident and effective. The preaching was outstanding. The music was just right. What a great revival! The other was very disappointed. The opportunity was so tremendous. So many people had prayed so fervently and expected so much. But the preacher had obviously failed to prepare. His doctrine was sound. He communicated well and clearly. He helped sinners find forgiveness and challenged believers to holy lives. There just was not the emotion in his presentation that should have been there. And, the music was out of touch. They were singing some of those songs thirty years ago. What a waste!

There is, I presume, good preaching material here. Romans 12 raises important issues of tolerance and mutual support in the Body of Christ. We are not all the same, and yet together we form a healthy organism. However, there is some temptation toward intolerance—in the Apostle Paul's day and ours. While diversity is normal, and indeed necessary, egocentrism and ethnocentrism are common. So, Christian love is surely necessary.

I think this could, and probably should, be preached. But, I am not the right preacher and this is probably not the right occasion. It is more modest, but my goal here is to consider some of the implications of the diversity within the American and Nazarene cultures for the health of the Body of Christ. I want to add to our

discussion some data from studies of twenty–four Nazarene congregations conducted over the last year with the help of their pastors.

These data are preliminary, a pilot study which is probably not representative. Congregations were selected on the basis of their willingness to participate in the study. Therefore, all of the descriptive statistics and the conclusions drawn from them should be understood as suggestive and tentative.

Nazarene Diversity

Of the 1,105 people who participated in the pilot study, 23% say they do not have any preference for the amount of congregational singing. On the other hand 34% would prefer to have a major part of the service given to this part of the service. While 45% don't really have a preference for the amount of congregational prayer, one–third (34%) want only a short period of prayer and one in five (21%) would like an extended period of congregational prayer. A majority (55%) do not have a preference about the amount of worship service time given to reading of Scripture, about one in eight (13%) prefer very little time for Scripture reading, but 32% think the time given to Scripture reading should be extensive.

Nazarenes, at least the Nazarenes in this pilot study, would like traditional songs like “How Great Thou Art” or “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” in their worship more often than any other type of worship music. However, as reported in table 1, a majority evidently like a mixture of music. The only type of music with less than a majority saying they would like to have it included often was scripture songs, like “We Bring the Sacrifice of Praise,” and almost half 48% would also like this type often.

Table 1		
Respondents Choosing Often* When Asked, “How Often Would you Like The Worship Music to Include the Following Types of Music?”		
Music Type	Number*	Percent
Traditional songs, like “How Great Thou Art” or “What a Friend I have in Jesus”	739	66.9%
Hymns, like “Amazing Grace” or “And Can It Be”	713	64.5%
Praise choruses, like “He Has Made Me Glad” or “This Is The Day”	694	62.8%
Contemporary Gospel, like “My Tribute” or “Because He Lives”	617	55.8%

Scripture songs, like "We Bring the Sacrifice of Praise"	530	48.0%
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*Numbers and percentages of all respondents marking "often" or "very Often" where the choices also included "Rarely, if ever" and occasionally"

There is apparently more diversity among Nazarenes regarding musical instruments. Three-fourths (77%) of the people in the pilot study say a piano makes worship somewhat, or much, better for them. Two-thirds (69%) say organ music improves worship for them. Somewhat in contrast, one-fourth (24%) indicate that a band or drums improve worship for them. Table 2 summarizes these responses.

Table 2		
Respondents Choosing Often* When Asked, "How Often Would you Like The Worship Music to Include the Following Types of Music?"		
Instrument	Number*	Percent
Piano	845	76.5%
Organ	766	69.3%
Tape backgrounds	460	41.6%
Guitar(s)	405	36.7%
Synthesizer	332	30.0%
An orchestra	316	28.6%
A band	269	24.3%
Drums	268	24.3%

*Numbers and percentages of all respondents marking "This makes, or would make, worship somewhat better for me" or "This makes, or would make, worship much better for me" where the choices also included "Neutral or no opinion," "This makes, or would make, worship somewhat more difficult for me," and "This makes, or would make, worship much more difficult for me."

Away from the church, a majority (55%) of our people choose to listen to gospel music. A small minority (6%) say they "Often" or "Very often" listen to rap music. About one in eight (14%) listen to rock'n'roll. About one in six (18%) choose classical. Country music is the second most popular style. Table 3 reports these preferences.

Table 3

Respondents Choosing Often* When Asked, "During the Week, What Type of Music do You Listen to When You can Choose Whatever You Want?"		
Instrument	Number*	Percent
Gospel	608	55.0%
Country/Country Western	354	32.0%
Popular Contemporary	254	23.0%
Classical	197	17.8%
Rock'n'roll	153	13.8%
Rap	64	5.8%

*Numbers and percentages of all respondents marking "Often" or "Very Often" where the choices also included "Occasionally" and "Rarely, if ever"

Nazarenes say they want worship which helps them think about the implications of their faith. They find value in preaching which helps them live their faith throughout the week. More than three-fourths (78%) say the Sunday morning worship services have helped them in those ways. Two-thirds (67%) want their worship to stir their emotions. About half (51%) prefer spontaneous, unpredictable worship while a third (33%) like worship which is dignified.

Table 4		
Respondents Saying They Agree* With Statements Regarding Worship Preferences		
Worship Preference	Number*	Percent
I like worship to help me think about what it means to be a Christian.	962	87.1%
The preaching is valuable in helping me understand how to live a Christian life throughout the week.	924	83.6%
The preaching should focus more directly on the Bible and what it says.	870	78.7%
The Sunday morning worship services have been very helpful in helping me grow understanding of the Christian faith.	866	78.4%
I like worship to stir my emotions.	742	67.1%

I prefer worship which is spontaneous, unpredictable.	564	51.0%
I prefer worship which is dignified.	359	32.5%

*Numbers and percentages of all respondents marking "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" where the choices also included "Neutral, no opinion," "Disagree," and "Strongly Disagree."

So, the rich diversity within the Nazarene denomination is evident. However, our diversity appears to be more in areas like worship style and personal practice of the faith than in beliefs. Table 5 summarizes responses to questions about beliefs and personal practices.

Table5		
Respondents Saying They Agree* With Statements Regarding Their Beliefs and Practice		
Belief or Practice	Number*	Percent
I understand what "being saved" means.	1000	90.5%
My personal commitment to Jesus Christ is still important in my life today.	995	90.0%
I have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ.	977	88.4%
I would describe myself as a Christian.	963	87.1%
It is important to tithe.	944	85.4%
I often experience the presence of God in my life.	924	83.6%
I spend time in prayer daily.	849	76.8%
Jesus was totally divine, but he was also totally human.	847	76.7%
I understand what "entire sanctification" means.	835	75.6%
It is possible for an individual to lose his/her salvation	786	71.1
It is possible, with God's help, to live a life free of sin	741	67.1%
I spend the time reading the Bible daily	676	61.2%
The stories in the Bible about Christ healing sick and lame persons by His touch probably have a natural explanation.	95	8.6%
The stories in the Bible about Christ healing sick	95	8.6%

and lame persons by His touch probably have a natural explanation.		
The Ten Commandments are not relevant for people living today.	73	6.6%
Sex is all right between two consenting, unmarried adults as long as they love each other.	50	4.5%
Jesus was an exceptional man and showed people new ways of thinking about God and relationships, but he was not divine.	48	4.3%
I have tried Christianity and found it to be disappointing.	43	3.9
The whole idea of sin is outdated.	42	3.8%
Lying is an acceptable practice as long as it serves a positive purpose.	39	3.5%
It doesn't matter so much what I believe as long as I live a good, moral life.	39	3.5%

*Numbers and percentages of all respondents marking "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" where the choices also included "Neutral, no opinion," "Disagree," and "Strongly Disagree."

Satisfaction

The good news is that we appear to be satisfying more of our people than we are frustrating. A majority of our people are "Satisfied" or "Very satisfied" with each of the worship service components examined in table 6. Satisfaction seems to be highest regarding the schedule and lowest with the way we include, or perhaps fail to include, new people and with congregational participation. However, if the good news is that most people are satisfied with every component studied, the bad news may be that even in the area of the time schedule as many as 15% may be less than satisfied or frustrated. It will never be possible, of course, in any one congregation or denomination to satisfy everyone. One of the arguments for multiple congregations, and denominations, is that our diversity is better served by legitimate alternatives. Still, it may be useful for us to think together about the minorities represented in table 6.

Table 6		
Respondents Saying They Are Satisfied* With Various Worship Components		
Worship Service Component	Number*	Percent

Time of day Scheduled	939	85.0%
Use of scripture	878	79.5%
Style of preaching	845	76.5%
Amount of congregational singing	822	74.4%
Amount of Congregational Singing	822	74.4%
Special Music	804	72.8%
Type of music in congregational singing	764	69.1%
The way we include new people	687	62.2%
Congregational participation	687	62.2%

*Numbers and percentages of all respondents marking "Satisfied" or "Very satisfied" where the choices also included "Neutral or no opinion," "Dissatisfied," and "Very dissatisfied."

Change

C.S. Lewis was among those who resist change in worship. He argued that, *"Every service is a structure of acts and words through which we receive a sacrament, or repent, or supplicate, or adore. And it enables us to do these things best—if you like, it 'works' best—when, through long familiarity, we don't have to think about it. As long as you notice, and have to count the steps, you are not yet dancing but only learning to dance. A good shoe is a shoe you don't notice. Good reading becomes possible when you need not consciously think about eyes, or light, or print, or spelling. The perfect church service would be one we were almost unaware of; our attention would have been on God"* (C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, page 4, emphasis mine).

For that reason he wanted stability in worship style. "Thus my whole liturgical position really boils down to an entreaty for permanence and uniformity. I can make do with almost any kind of service whatever, if only it will stay put. But if each form is snatched away just when I am beginning to feel at home in it, then I can never make any progress in the art of worship. You give me no chance to acquire the trained habit—*habito dell'arte*" (C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, page 5).

He recognized that some change is not only inevitable but necessary. "If you have a vernacular liturgy you must have a changing liturgy: otherwise it will finally be vernacular only in name. The idea of 'timeless English' is sheer nonsense. No living language can be timeless. You might as well ask for a motionless river" (C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, page 6).

Max Weber, with others, observed that the poor tend to prefer an emotional religious experience. Higher social classes, he thought, are more likely to prefer rational

ethical religion. These were tendencies rather than any sort of “uniform determinism” (Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, pages 96, 101, 107).

Some differences in sub-culture may be observed among the Nazarenes studied here. The older the person is, the more likely they are to be satisfied with the time of day worship services are scheduled, with the amount of congregational singing, with the type of music in congregational singing, with the special music, with the use of scripture, with the style of preaching, with the way we include new people, and with congregational participation. Respondents in the “Baby boom” age group tend to agree with the older groups regarding the time of day worship services are scheduled, the amount of congregational singing, the use of scripture, and style of preaching. They tend to be with the younger respondents in their level of satisfaction with the way we include new people and congregational participation. And, they tend to fall between the younger and the older groups in their level of satisfaction with the type of music in congregational singing and the special music. “Boomers” tend to agree with older worshippers regarding helpfulness of pianos and organs for their worship. On the other hand, they tend to share the opinions of younger respondents regarding synthesizers, guitars, tape backgrounds, and bands. And, their preferences are generally between younger and older respondents regarding drums and orchestras.

Occupational category also seems to affect some preferences. Clerical workers are more likely to be dissatisfied than others with the way new people are included. Farmers are less likely to be satisfied with the style of preaching. Professionals are more likely to say they are dissatisfied with the type of congregational singing and more likely to be satisfied with the style of preaching. Students are less likely to be satisfied with the time of day worship services are scheduled, with the type of music in congregational singing, with the use of scripture, and with the style of preaching,

Respondents with incomes lower than \$20,000 are more likely to be dissatisfied with the use of scripture. Middle income people (\$20,000–\$60,000) are most likely to be satisfied with the use of scripture in their services. And, the more education, the more dissatisfied the person is likely to be with the way we include new people. The more education, the more dissatisfaction is likely with congregational participation.

Conclusions

1. Ethnocentric inability to see the value in another sub-culture is as dangerous in us as it is in the hide-bound groups who resist our change. If we ask older Christians, for example, to abandon their sub-culture to help us reach “boomers” or a younger sub-culture, that should not be a casual request. This would be easily understood if the difference was in language. An English speaking church which abandoned English in favor of Zulu in order to better

- serve existing and potential Zulu-speaking members, might expect to alienate most of the English-speakers. They could learn Zulu, and undoubtedly some would, but most would probably seek out an English service somewhere else. The challenge of merging cultures may not be as easy to understand when the issue is attire, music, or worship style. For example, when worship style and music are adjusted to minister effectively to returning baby boomers, other members may be alienated. English-speakers could learn to worship in Zulu, and anthem-singers could learn to worship through praise choruses, but the change might undermine their worship.
2. Some, but not all, of what "works" is better. Weber reminds us that religion is expected to work. "The most elementary forms of behavior motivated by religious or magical factors are oriented to this world. 'That it may go well with thee . . . and that thou mayest prolong thy days upon the earth' (Deut. 4:40) expresses the reason for the performances of actions enjoined by religion and magic." Ecstasy "works," but might not result from God's intervention. "Because of the routine demands of living, the layman may experience ecstasy only occasionally, as intoxication. To induce ecstasy, he may employ any type of alcoholic beverage, tobacco, or similar narcotics—and especially music—all of which originally served orgiastic purposes." And, there is a danger that our worship may seek to achieve our will rather than to conform to God's will. "The security provided by a tested magical manipulation is far more reassuring than the experience of worshipping a god who—precisely because he is omnipotent—is not subject to magical influence. . . . Whoever possesses the requisite charisma for employing the proper means [to coerce a god] is stronger even than the god, whom he can compel to do his will. In these cases, religious behavior is not worship of the god but rather coercion of the god, and invocation is not prayer but rather the exercise of magical formulae" (Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, pages 1, 3, 25).
 3. Unless we are very careful, and perhaps even with our best care, improvements in our service to one group will diminish our service to another. Again C.S. Lewis is helpful to me. "It may well be that some variations which seem to me merely matters of taste really involve grave doctrinal differences. But surely not all? For if grave doctrinal differences are really as numerous as variations in practice, then we shall have to conclude that no such thing as the Church of England exists. And anyway, the Liturgical Fidget is not a purely Anglican phenomenon; I have heard Roman Catholics complain of it too. And that brings me back to my starting point. The business of us laymen is simply to endure and make the best of it. Any tendency to passionate preference for one type of service must be regarded simply as a temptation. Partisan 'Churchmanships' are my *beta noire*. And if we avoid them, may we not possibly perform a very useful function? The shepherds go off, 'everyone to his own way,' and vanish over diverse points of the horizon. If the sheep huddle patiently together and go on bleating, might they finally recall the

shepherds? (Haven't English victories sometimes been won by the rank and file in spite of the generals?)" (C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, pages 5–6).

References

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