

# PRACTICING FOR HEAVEN

Psalm 100; Revelation 7:9-12

Several months ago, IPC conducted a congregational survey on music. The church's music ministry found itself at a crossroads when Cheyne Davidson stepped down as leader after serving for 20 years. The survey gave some good insight into the tastes and preferences of the congregation which, as you might expect in a church like this, are diverse. That information, along with the input from a congregational forum last fall, have informed the church council as it makes plans for the future.

For now, Gordon Schultz and Chandler Cudlipp are sharing leadership of the morning music ministry, with Ruth Pfister contributing her wonderful gifts on the organ. Some important decisions still remain: Is it better to have the leadership of the music ministry centralized in one person or shared among several people? What is the right balance between utilizing the gifts of professionals who earn their livelihood in music and are compensated for their contribution and those who lead worship without compensation as volunteers? What roles do the pastors, the council, and the music leaders play in overseeing and coordinating worship? What role do children play? How do you take into account the variety of tastes that were revealed in the music survey?

As the choir begins its summer break after today, I'd like to step back and reflect with you on why we do this. Why is music such an important part of worship? And why do we even worship in the first place?

My denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), has a short summary of what we believe presented in a question and answer format. It's called the Westminster Shorter Catechism, and we share it with other Reformed churches. The first question of the catechism is "What is the chief end of man?" The answer is, "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." There are lots of ways to glorify God. We do that when we live an upright life, when we treat others with love and respect, when we work to make the world a more just and peaceful place. One of the central ways that we glorify God is through worship.

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Glorifying God through worship is one of the key themes of the Bible. The first thing Noah did when he got off the ark was to build an altar and worship God in gratitude for being delivered through the flood. God showed him a rainbow in response. When Abraham entered the land of Canaan that God promised to his descendants, he built an altar for worship. When God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, God also gave him elaborate instructions on how to worship. God gave the exact dimensions for the ark of the covenant where the priests went for worship, the precise description of what the priests were to wear, and God spelled out the rituals that they were to carry out. Those intricate guidelines for worship are often where people who have resolved to read the Bible cover to cover give up. Two long books of the Bible, First and Second Chronicles, go into detail about worship in the temple in Jerusalem. They judge the kings of Israel and Judah by how attentive they were to the temple and the worship of God. The longest book in the Bible, the Psalms, was the hymnbook of ancient Israel that was used in worship. Many of the psalms have headings that tell the choir director what tune to use when singing them.

Jesus did much of his teaching in the synagogue or the where the Jews gathered for worship. He faithfully took part in the worship ceremonies of his day. In John 4:23 he tells the woman at the well, "A time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in the Spirit and in truth." One of the impetuses for Paul's letter to the Corinthians was to resolve disputes they were having among themselves about how to worship. And the Bible draws to a close with the passage we read describing the whole creation gathered before God in order to give praise. When God's people worship, we open ourselves to be filled with goodness and the glory of God, to be shaped as creatures made by God.

Of course, there are plenty of examples of people going through the motions of worship without really glorifying or praising God. The Old Testament prophets and

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Jesus were clear that if worship doesn't affect the way we live, if it doesn't shape us to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with our God, then we're insulting God rather than glorifying God. We've all been to worship services where we didn't feel like God was being honored, services that turned us away rather than drawing us near.

Huckleberry Finn, the main character of Mark Twain's novel, was a rambunctious, independent minded boy who after his father abandoned him was placed in the foster care of Miss Watson and her sister. Miss Watson was very strict in her worship and prayer practices, and she was obsessed with getting things right rather than enjoying God. She was sour and showed no joy of the Lord. Miss Watson's sister warned Huck that if he didn't behave himself, say his prayers, and do right, then he'd go to the bad place. Huck thought to himself that if Miss Watson was going to be in heaven, then he'd prefer to be in the other place.

Those of us who plan and lead worship have an obligation to reflect the joy and love and majesty of the God we worship, not to just go through the motions and do it because we're supposed to. One of the things I value about IPC is that you set high expectations for your preachers and your musicians. You expect us to help you bring your creative best before the Lord.

But sometimes worship falls flat for us because we, the worshipers, aren't prepared. We have certain expectations for what worship should be, and if those expectations aren't met, then we don't worship. Sometimes you have to know what's going on and be open to new experiences of the Holy or you're left in the dark.

For most of my life that was my relationship with football, or soccer as we call it in America. For some reason, soccer has had a hard time catching on in the US. I'd try to watch a game on TV but couldn't get the point. The other day I heard someone say that soccer has been America's game of the future since 1972. But then in 2008 I was visiting my daughter and her husband in Madrid. We were sitting at a sidewalk café having an apero when in the distance we heard a commotion. It grew louder until it became a roar. Everyone along the street started craning their

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necks, looking at an overpass where the crowd was swelling. A few minutes later, an open-air bus came into view. It was carrying the Spanish national football team who had just won the European cup. I'd heard about the excitement soccer caused, but here I was caught up in the middle of it. Two years later I was back in Spain while the World Cup was going on. The national team was on the way to winning it all, and this time I listened as people explained the intricacies of the game, and the rules and pointed out to me the skills of the players. So now I'm enjoying the football games, and this year I have a new team, Switzerland, to cheer for. Once I experienced the passion and understood what was going on, I could join in. I still only follow every four years; maybe I'm what in church terms would be called a Christmas and Easter fan.

One of the blessings of being part of the Church of Christ that spans thousands of years and the entire human race is that people have found many ways to glorify God in worship. And one of the blessings of the International Protestant Church of Zurich is that many of those traditions are represented in our community. The richness of the world's Christian worship can open us to new ways of experiencing God among us as we glorify God in worship.

Something like that happened to me last summer. A friend and I were walking the Camino de Santiago across northern Spain. It is at heart a religious pilgrimage, and most of the Roman Catholic parish churches along the way will have a short pilgrims' mass at the end of the day. My friend Larry and I would go to those masses occasionally, and I would participate from the perspective of my Reformed heritage, noticing very carefully how certain parts of the service deviated from what I have been brought up to consider proper Protestant worship. About two thirds of our way through our journey, we met a Jesuit priest named Mike. We hit it off, and for the rest of pilgrimage the three of us were what's called a pilgrim family. Mike was much more diligent about attending the pilgrims' masses than Larry and I had been. If there was one being held in the town where we spent the night, he would be there, usually asking the priest if he needed help presiding in the service. Larry and I

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became more regular in our participation. During the day, as we were walking through the countryside, we would sometimes talk about the services. Mike would explain what was happening and why it was important to him. It was obvious that they shaped his life and the way he approached each day. The more I participated, and the more I learned from Mike, the more deeply moved I was by the services. There were some things in which I didn't take part. I skipped over the parts that had to do with the adoration of Mary. Out of respect for Mike and Catholic doctrine, I refrained from partaking of communion. It still upsets me that only men can be priests and preside at the Lord's table. But the beauty of the liturgy, especially the way it often involved all my senses, including the way that incense brought my sense of smell to the praise of God, those worship services became an important part of the spiritual growth I experienced.

Each congregation, like each person, has its own personality, the practices and styles of worship that suit it best. There are ways of glorifying God through worship that we gravitate to. I love the majesty and beauty of this morning service. Others prefer the more casual style of evening worship. But the book of Revelation describes a scene when Christ comes in his glory where people from every nation, tribe, people and language are standing before the throne. I suspect that each is bringing praise in their own special way. Some are singing hymns accompanied by an organ and others are singing praise songs led by a worship band. West Africans are there with drums, Scots Presbyterians with reasoned arguments, Pentecostals from the Caribbean with fervent cries, tattooed millennials with a hip hop beat, Germans singing Bach chorales, each contributing to the chorus of praise that is blended together by the Holy Spirit into perfect harmony that pleases God.

When I was growing up, and through most of my ministry, the practice of taking communion was what I call curb side service. Plates with pieces of bread and trays with small cups of juice, like we use here at IPC, were passed down the pew while the worshipers stayed seated. I always valued that time of quiet and introspection. In recent years the practice of coming forward to receive communion

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has become more common. At first, I was annoyed by it. It deprived me of that personal uninterrupted quiet time. But as I've grown in my understanding of the sacrament and of worship and of the church, I now see that the Lord's Supper isn't something that Christ gave so he and I can have special private time together. It's a gift to the whole church, and watching the congregation walk forward to receive the bread and the cup creates in my mind the image of what it is going to be like when that promise is fulfilled that they will come from north and south and east and west to sit at table in God's kingdom. We demonstrate in our small, very local way, what we will do when we're joined together with that heavenly host. So when I'm in the pew, before I'm invited to join the line to go forward or after I've returned to my seat, I still enjoy moments of peace with my Lord. But I also look up and marvel at the people Christ has invited forward to his table, young and old, powerful and weak, some dear friends and some who rub me the wrong way, all joined in praise and practicing for heaven.

That's what we do when we worship. We practice for heaven. We'll be glorifying God with everything we are, joined with the gifts of all God's people, singing new songs in new tongues with the music of every land, the earth, moon and stars joining in the chorus:

Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen.