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"How Shall the Seeker Say Amen?" *The "Seeker" and the Service in First Corinthians*

Jeffrey Peterson

Change is inevitable, as the Greek philosopher Heraclitus observed some 500 years BC. This venerable insight has recently been rediscovered and urged as the key to guiding Churches of Christ into the next century. Among other needed changes, it is argued, worship must be refashioned so as to "connect" with a new generation and serve more effectively as a means of evangelism. To attract the masses of the unchurched adrift in urban and suburban America, the public services of the church must be rethought with the tastes of these "seekers" in mind.¹

The general fact of change is inevitable, but the direction in which particular changes tend is not, especially when change results from deliberation and choice. Churches will implement radical changes in worship only if their leaders become convinced that this is the best course for the church to follow into the next century—or the only way for the church to survive. A theological examination of proposals to

* A first draft of this essay was presented to the ICS Administrative and Development Board at its Fall Retreat, September 18, 1993, in Salado, Texas. I am grateful to those attending for a stimulating discussion. My thanks also to my colleagues on the Institute faculty and to Lanny Henninger, pulpit minister of the University Avenue Church of Christ in Austin, for helpful criticism of the penultimate draft.

¹ A noted evangelical advocate of this approach to worship is Bill Hybels, pastor of the Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, author of several books, and frequent contributor to *Leadership* magazine. George Barna has collected much of the data that inform the approach. For a brief introduction to the approach, see Ed Dobson, *Starting a Seeker Sensitive Service: How Traditional Churches Can Reach the Unchurched* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993). Both Hybels's and Dobson's churches hold separate services for seekers and for believers, as is currently done in some Churches of Christ. This essay argues only against the refashioning of *believers'* worship services along the lines of the seeker service in the interests of evangelistic outreach, as has been advocated in a number of essays appearing in the journal *Wineskins*; Dobson also advises against such a blurring of the lines between seeker and believers' services (*Seeker Sensitive Service*, 95–96). The alternative service itself raises a different set of questions, not dealt with here—such as how to distinguish regular attendance at a seeker service from full membership in the church, a problem which Dobson's church has encountered but which does not seem to concern him especially (*Seeker Sensitive Service*, 96–97). For the sake of brevity, this essay refers to the attempt to target unbelievers in worship as "the seeker service approach," including in this description both the rationale for the appeal to non-Christian perceptions through worship and the suggestion that the main worship assembly of the church should serve this function.

reorder worship so as to attract the unchurched is therefore in order, and the present essay is intended as a contribution to that effort?

A Service for "Seekers"

"Seekers" may seem familiar, for they are identical with the baby boomers whose exploits are chronicled in *Time* and *Newsweek*: a generation reared on television and rock, impatient of authority, dismissive of tradition, and willing to commit themselves to people or organizations only for a clear and immediate personal payoff. The following testimony is typical of the religious attitudes of this group:

I think it's difficult for me to grow spiritually in an organized church. I have a hard time with a lot of dogmas. They don't match what I feel on a spiritual level, so I keep looking and looking. The thing about the Serendipity Class [at church] is we are exploring lots of different things. We've been talking about the concept of evil and Satan and all that, but any view is accepted. We will talk about it. People will argue with you, but you are perfectly free to express what you think and how you feel about things. In the course of talking back and forth, it helps us all to clarify it for ourselves. And we still may walk out not really agreeing on it, but we may have come a little bit farther in our own spiritual journey. That's what for me is so appealing about this class?

The minister who makes it a first priority to attract and retain people with such sensibilities may succeed in presiding over a weekly convention of religious dilettantes; unless this attitude toward the Christian faith is challenged, the proceedings can scarcely be called a church.⁴ Nonetheless, we are assured, the church for today is "seeker-targeted," and the worship service of the future is a "seeker service."

Seekers feel left out when words and actions that are strange to them predominate in a service. Worship targeting seekers will therefore soft-pedal those things that distinguish Christians from non-Christians—including the language in which the church has confessed the work of God in creation and redemption throughout its history, the symbolic actions by which Christians renew their incor-

² The essay is thus limited to examining whether worship in the seeker service mode is the most appropriate course to follow. To determine whether it is the only way to survive, one would need to know among other things whether modified services in fact attract the unchurched or merely redistribute members among the existing congregations of a locality. It would seem to many that what is needed to insure the survival of Churches of Christ in the next century is not the wholesale recruitment of non-members but the retention of the church's children, and it is at least debatable whether public worship will better facilitate this by attempting to compete head-to-head with the other diversions available to youth or by articulating a view of life not available in secular culture.

³ Cited by Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993) 253.

⁴ For a discussion of the kind of ministry needed to transform such attitudes, see William Willimon, "Turning an Audience into the Church," *Leadership* 15 (1994) 28–35.

poration in Christ, and the traditional hymnody of the church.

Seekers have short attention spans; most are not given to sustained reflection on anything, much less the mysteries of existence and creation and redemption—traditionally, the stuff of the Christian sermon. One “connects” with them not through the mind but through the emotions. To lure seekers, it seems, the church must devise a worship service as stimulating as MTV, as vogue as *People*, as intellectually challenging as “Entertainment Tonight,” and as personally demanding as membership in a video club.

The most troubling aspect of the seeker service approach is not any particular change in traditional worship that has been advocated.⁵ It is rather the pervasive assumption in the seeker service approach that the crucial perspective from which to assess worship lies not within the Christian tradition but outside it; the services of the church are evaluated from the standpoint of an outsider looking in on the church from a position somewhere in modern American culture. Any element of worship which might not appeal to contemporary pagans or to disaffected members of traditional churches should be suppressed.

Such lack of concern for continuity with the historic Christian tradition, and such readiness to impoverish the worship of the faithful in order to attract persons with no more than a casual interest in the faith, is staggering. It is one thing to propose reforms in worship to better express the historic faith of Christians.⁶ It is something else entirely to propose that churches abandon the Christian tradition as the principal resource for worship and replace it with the latest fads in entertainment and informational media and public relations. The basis of change in the seeker service approach is not the faith of the church but the predilections of potential religious

⁵Among the many departures from traditional worship suggested in this connection are the following: the removal of communion to another meeting for believers only, often in private homes; choral music or featured performers as a supplement to congregational singing, or in place of it, with contemporary Christian music replacing traditional hymns and the projection of lyrics on a screen displacing hymnals; the use of skits in addition to preaching to present the Christian message; and a limitation of the amount of traditional doctrine conveyed in the sermon, with preaching focused on contemporary problems faced by the church and the unchurched alike.

⁶Two reforms arising from recent study of the history of Christian worship deserve special consideration. First is the adoption of a scriptural lectionary, which would address the unhappy circumstance that since the Second Vatican Council, the worship of most denominations involves more public reading of Scripture than is usual in a tradition based on respect for the Bible; see *Common Lectionary: The Lectionary Proposed by the Consultation on Common Texts* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1983). Second is the recovery of the Pauline understanding of the Lord's Supper as a communion in the risen Lord and the focal point of the service, which ancient liturgies preserved in part by the observance of the supper after the sermon; see Wendell Willis, *Worship* (Living Word; Austin, Texas: Sweet, 1973) 37–45; Keith Watkins, *The Breaking of the Bread: An Approach to Worship for the Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ)* (St. Louis: Bethany, 1966); and Robert E. Webber, *Common Roots: A Call to Evangelical Maturity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 77–114. Allan McNicol has proposed an order of service that includes both of these reforms (“Contemporary Developments in the Church of Christ: Reflections on Worship,” *Leaven* 1/1 [1990] 30–35).

consumers.⁷ For guidance in the conduct of worship, the church is advised to consult not the Christian tradition but reigning fashions in marketing.

Paul and the "Seeker Service"

Advocates of this approach to worship have claimed the support of Paul: the apostle to the Gentiles became "all things to all men" in his preaching of the Gospel, and so should the church today, so that we might by all means save some (1 Cor. 9:19–22).⁸ The apostle was prepared to regard much in his religious background as dispensable, and Christians who follow his example today will so regard their accustomed style of worship.

The appeal to 1 Corinthians in this matter is appropriate, for here we find the most extensive discussion of the church's worship in the New Testament (chapters 11–14). Also, throughout this letter Paul keeps one eye on relations between Christians and non-Christians, both inside and outside the setting of worship?

But Paul's description of his missionary strategy in 1 Corinthians 9 is not the only passage relevant to the question, nor even the most pertinent; his description of the response of a "seeker" to Christian worship in 1 Corinthians 14 clearly shows the limits that the apostle set on the accommodation of the service to a pagan audience.

Seen in the context of the whole discussion of worship in 1 Corinthians 11–14, Paul's remarks suggest that, far from pioneering the seeker service, he would frown on the attempt to tailor the church's worship to the preferences of those unacquainted with the faith. In Paul's view, the church's worship should rather exhibit the heart of the Gospel, so that believers might be fortified in their adherence to it and outsiders might be inescapably confronted by its claims.

⁷ The attempt to disguise this aspect of the seeker service approach by citing its theological grounding in an attachment to Jesus rather than the first-century church is not convincing. To drive such an absolute wedge between Lord and church represents a serious misunderstanding of the incarnation; in 1 Cor. 12:12–13, Paul applies the description "Christ" to both the Lord Jesus and Christians incorporated in him through baptism, taken together (cf. Eph. 1:10; Gal. 3:28 [literally translated, "you are all *one man* [*beis*] in Christ Jesus"). As Austin Farrer has remarked, "There is no ... partaking in the Head which is not communion with the members: the separation of the two aspects is unthinkable" ("Eucharist and Church in the New Testament," *The Parish Communion: A Book of Essays* [ed. A. G. Hebert; London: SPCK, 1954] 83). Rubel Shelly and Randall Harris thus quite properly focus on the image of the church as Christ's body, although the title of their ecclesiology (Monroe, La.: Howard, 1992) does not quite capture the Pauline doctrine: the church is, not *The Second Incarnation*, but the one incarnation extended, the diffusion of the life of the Son of God through those who have become his members. One need not regard the New Testament's description of the churches which the apostles established as an exhaustive blueprint to see in it a definitive embodiment of the Gospel and an indispensable guide for the common life of all Christians who follow after.

⁸ Dobson, *Seeker Sensitive Service*, 53–64.

⁹ Paul contrasts the church with those outside its fellowship in 1:18, 23; 6:1–2, 6, 9–10; 7:32–40; 8:5–6; 11:32; and 12:2. He describes conversion to the Gospel as a crossing from the world into the church in 1:9, 13, 15, 21, 26–30; 3:1, 10; 4:15; 6:11, 20; 7:15, 17–24; 9:11, 19–23, 27; 12:13; and 15:1. He considers relations between Christians and non-Christians outside the context of worship in 5:9–10; 6:1–6; 7:12–16; and chaps. 8–10 before considering the presence of non-members in worship in chap. 14.

The Apostle's Example and the Worship of the Church

The use of 1 Corinthians 9:19–22 as a Pauline warrant for the seeker service is not supported by a consideration of the passage in its context in the letter. The text is one of several in 1 Corinthians in which Paul presents his way of life as a model for his converts at Corinth.¹⁰ Paul applies his example to different problems in the Corinthian church, and he commends different aspects of his life for imitation.

In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul develops the particular use of his example that he introduces briefly in 6:12; his refusal to insist on his rights as an apostle shows the Corinthians how to behave in the matter of food sacrificed to pagan gods.¹¹ The chapter leads up to the statement of Paul's general missionary policy in vv. 19–22, which involved giving up the Jewish way of life to which he was accustomed for the sake of making converts among both Jews and Gentiles.

The lesson for the Corinthians is that in their difficult social situation, caught between sociable pagan neighbors on the one hand and fellow Christians chary of sacrificial meat on the other, they must be ready to forsake their accustomed dining practices to avoid leading other Christians into sin.¹² The text says nothing about what Christians should do when they meet to share their regular banquet in memory of Jesus and rehearse the deliverance that God wrought through him.

Paul's example is mentioned in connection with the church's *worship* not in 1 Corinthians 9:19–22 but in 10:32–11:2. The passage forms a transition between two main sections of the letter: chaps. 5–10, which treat various issues concerning the relations between Christians and non-Christians in Corinthian society, and chaps. 11–14, which deal with problems in the Corinthians' worship assemblies.¹³ Paul's admonition in 1 Corinthians 10:32 to "give no offense to Jews or Greeks or to the church of God" summarizes his resolution of the dispute over food sacrificed to pagan gods in chaps. 8–10. "Giving no offense to the church of God" means in the first

¹⁰ Abraham J. Malherbe discusses this characteristic feature of Paul's exhortation of his converts in its ancient setting in *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 52–60.

¹¹ Paul begins the appeal to his example at 8:13, with the use of the pronoun "I," and this verse specifies the respect in which he commends his life as worthy of imitation in the chapter that follows. He devotes 9:1–14 to establishing his right as an apostle to receive financial support from his converts; he then turns around in 9:15–18 to present his refusal of support from his churches (mentioned in passing already in 9:12b) as the model to be followed.

¹² In 1 Cor. 8:10–13 and 10:27–28, Paul concretely describes the behavior to which he is exhorting the Corinthians throughout chaps. 8–10.

¹³ For this division of the letter into sections, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 277–289. Transitional passages between sections are a feature of 1 Corinthians and of Paul's letters in general. See also 1 Cor. 4:17–21, which connects 1:10–4:16 with chap. 5; and 5:12–13, connecting chap. 5 with chap. 6. Nils A. Dahl discusses such transitional passages in Romans and points out the inadequacy of a traditional outline to represent their function in Paul's epistolary rhetoric ("The Missionary Theology in the Epistle to the Romans," *Studies in Paul: Theology for the Early Christian Mission* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977] 78–88).

instance refraining from actions that will lead a fellow member of the church to violate a moral scruple.

But the admonition to “give no offense to the church of God” also points forward, preparing the reader for what follows in chap. 11; as he introduces the topic of adornment in worship, Paul commends the Corinthians for their fidelity to the traditions that he had passed on to them (11:2), which accord with the practices of churches everywhere (11:16; cf. 4:17).¹⁴ One way for the Corinthians to avoid offending against the church of God is to conserve the apostolic traditions, both in worship (11:23–25) and in doctrine (15:1–11).

Throughout 1 Corinthians Paul stresses the obligations of the local church to the church universal (cf. 1:2; 4:17; 7:17; 14:33, 36; 16:1–4). It is striking that when he turns to the service of worship he insists that his converts respect the twenty years of Christian tradition that preceded the foundation of the church at Corinth!¹⁵ The attitude of the apostle to the Gentiles toward liturgical tradition contrasts markedly to that of contemporary advocates of the seeker service.

The “Seeker” and the Service in 1 Corinthians 14

In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul argues that prophecy is superior to speaking in tongues as a public medium for the praise of God and the proclamation of his saving deeds.¹⁶ By the phrase “speaking in tongues” Paul refers to the praise of God in utterances that other worshippers cannot understand (vv. 2, 4a, 9, 14), while by “prophecy” he means praise and exhortation in language intelligible to all present (vv. 3, 4b, 19). Since a principal aim of worship is to “build up” the church in the understanding of the faith (vv. 3, 6, 12, 19), prophecy is a better gift than speaking in tongues; for “the one who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but the one who prophesies edifies the church” (v. 4).

In vv. 13–17, Paul insists that the “edification” or “building up” of the church takes place only if the understanding is engaged; prophecy rather than tongues-speaking edifies the church because it can be understood. Paul once again appeals to his example in vv. 14–15 with his statement, “I will pray with my spirit, but I will also

¹⁴ Besides the reference to the churches of God in 11:16, another indication that 1 Cor. 10:32 should be read with both what precedes it and what follows is the appearance of the motif of imitation in both 11:1 (“practice the imitation of my example”) and 11:2 (“you remember every aspect of me [as a model for yourselves]”). The major break inserted between 11:1 and 11:2 in most versions obscures this element of continuity.

¹⁵ Paul had once staked his ministry on the essential congruence of his message with the Gospel of those who preceded him in the faith and in the apostolate, and so he went to Jerusalem to determine that he “was not running, or had not run, in vain” (Gal. 2:2). Paul is constrained to mention this possible negative outcome even though he recounts this episode in Galatians to stress his relative independence from the pillar-apostles at Jerusalem.

¹⁶ For full discussion of the chapter, see Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 652–713.

pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind" (NIV). This statement pre-empts outright the proposal that personality types should determine the character of worship, with rational, "left-brain" worshipers requiring cognitive services and "right-brain" personalities who sooner feel than think—most seekers among them—in need of emotive worship activities!¹⁷

In response to the enthusiasm of some Corinthians for unbridled ecstasy in worship, Paul insists that the understanding ("mind") and the emotions ("spirit") properly move together in the corporate celebration of God's gift in Christ!¹⁸ The emotions appropriate to Christian worship arise from the understanding of God's actions in Christ. Emotional uplift generated apart from the preaching and re-enactment of God's redemption of us through his Son has no legitimate place in the worship of the church.

While the edification of the church is the major consideration that Paul uses to commend prophecy, in vv. 16–25 he introduces an additional consideration: the reaction of non-Christians to the worship service. Paul mentions two categories of non-members who may be guests in the assembly. One of the words that Paul uses to describe non-Christians means "unbeliever" unambiguously (*epistos*, vv. 22–24, as in 1 Cor. 6:6; 7:15; 10:27); the other word (*idiotēs*, vv. 16, 23–24) is translated by the standard Greek lexicon of the New Testament as "inquirer"—a person interested in the faith who attends the service in order to learn more about Christianity!¹⁹

In 1 Corinthians 14:16–25, then, we have Paul's counsel precisely as to how the church should accommodate "seekers." Paul's major concern is for *clarity* when the Christian confession is proclaimed in worship; when Christians gather for

¹⁷ The proposal that worship oscillate between intellectualism and emotionalism to satisfy both these personality types grossly oversimplifies current neuropsychological theory. Stephen G. Meyer has suggested more responsibly that worship should engage *each* worshiper on *both* rational and symbolic—not simply emotive—levels ("Neuropsychology and Worship," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 3 [1975] 281–289). Webber argues (*Common Roots*, 93–96, 104–108) that the celebration of the Supper is the key element in the service for alleviating the rationalistic tendency inherited from Zwingli, which Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen have argued to be characteristic of the restoration tradition (*Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America 1630–1875* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988] 156–160). Modeling the service of the spoken word on a television variety hour, as currently some appear to be suggesting, hardly represents a lasting contribution to the restoration tradition.

¹⁸ Diogenes Allen suggests a helpful illustration to show how the understanding may be indispensable to an emotional experience: at a crucial point in a football game, a pass dropped in the end zone will elicit a groan of anguish, and a caught one whoops of delight, only from a person who understands the rules of the game well enough to recognize a touchdown (*The Traces of God in a Frequently Hostile World* [Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley, 1981] 3). As the rules of the Christian "game" are infinitely more difficult to master than those of football, involving such difficult "plays" as repentance and reformation of life, the church had better spend its communal time clarifying the rules and discussing the plays rather than staging pep rallies.

¹⁹ *Idiotēs* denotes a "layman" in secular Greek and is used in a religious context of a non-member permitted to offer sacrifices in the meetings of a private religious cult (Walter Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* [translated and adapted by W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979] 370b, s.v. "*idiotēs*"). The title for this essay is adapted from the translation "inquirer" in 1 Cor. 14:16.

worship, the faith is to be exhibited with sufficient clarity that the interested non-member can respond to the living God who has brought salvation through his Son²⁰

The affirmation of Christian faith takes different forms in the service. Paul has earlier mentioned the Lord's Supper, in receiving which Christians "proclaim the death of the Lord until he come," in a way comparable to Paul's own missionary proclamation of the cross (1 Cor. 11:26).²¹ Christians made several different kinds of verbal proclamation in worship (14:6, 26); the particular one that he mentions in connection with the seeker is a "blessing" or "thanksgiving" (14:16).

The blessing is a form of prayer traditional in Jewish worship; for example, "Blessed art thou, O Lord, who quickenest the dead!"²² This form of prayer focuses attention on God and his action, relating the benefits of the Gospel to the God who has given them, as in Paul's blessing in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4. Typical of early Christian worship are two extended blessings which fully recite God's saving deeds in his Son (Eph. 1:3-14 and 1 Pet. 1:3-12). Paul expects the service of the spoken word to acquaint visitors with the story of Christ.²³

Paul assumes that non-members will be present in worship, brought there by friends or relatives, but he offers not the slightest suggestion that Christians should arrange their common worship with an eye towards *enticing* non-members; indeed, the restrictions on ecstatic prophecy in 1 Corinthians 14:27-28 may have made the Corinthian assembly *less* attractive to pagan devotees of oracles like the one at Delphi. Paul insists that worship be *intelligible* to pagans, not that it be *attractive*. He knows that the Gospel, clearly stated, scandalizes non-Christians (1 Cor. 1:18-25). Indeed, Paul's reason for avoiding *unnecessary* offense to non-Christians and counseling his converts to do the same was to lead unbelievers to an understanding of the *necessary* scandal, the word of the cross at the heart of Christian faith.

²⁰The recent study of Frank C. Senn (*The Witness of the Worshipping Community: Liturgy and the Practice of Evangelism* [New York: Paulist, 1993]) suggests how this understanding of the function of the service in evangelism, characteristic of the ancient church but markedly different from the seeker service approach, may be appropriated today.

²¹Paul uses the verb *kataggellein* ("to proclaim") also in 1 Corinthians 2:1 and 9:14, both in reference to the missionary preaching of the cross. The verb is cognate with *euaggelion*, Paul's characteristic word for the Gospel.

²²From the second of the Eighteen Benedictions of the Jewish synagogue service, some of which were likely prayed in the first century AD. For a convenient listing of all eighteen, see Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 543-544.

²³That the content of the various forms of verbal utterance in early Christian worship (cf. 14:6, 26) concerned the Gospel of the crucified and risen Messiah is suggested not only by the response of the outsider in 14:24-25, but also by the transition that Paul makes from the description of the service to the summary of his Gospel that opens chap. 15. Paul must argue for the general resurrection in chap. 15 because "some . . . are saying that there is no resurrection of the dead" (v. 12); presumably this denial has taken place at the service, where the foundational beliefs of the community are rehearsed and developed.

When worship is appropriately conducted, "everyone is *instructed* and *summoned to right conduct*" (1 Cor. 14:31).²⁴ In such a service, the bearing of the Gospel on the life of the hearers will be inescapable. The unbeliever will be led to a critical evaluation of life apart from the living God (vv. 24–25a), a submission to him (v. 25b), and a recognition of his presence in the church (v. 25c).²⁵

It is questionable whether a service calculated to appeal to persons with the attitude to religion characteristic of many baby boomers is capable of evoking such a response. Such worship will certainly do nothing to strengthen the faithful in their adherence to the historic, biblical faith.

Common Worship and Christian Identity

In 1 Corinthians 14:16, Paul asks rhetorically how the non-member can assent to unintelligible prayer. The phrase that Paul uses for the inquirer's assent is "to say the amen"—a Hebrew word which Greek converts had to be taught to say. In fact, worship in Greek-speaking churches included a number of traditional words and phrases taken over from the Christian Jews of Judea.²⁶ Far from being an expression of their "heart-language," these were terms that the Corinthians had to learn from Paul; "seekers" learned them, too, when they observed the church at worship.

The Corinthians' new vocabulary reflects the new identity that worship conferred on all Gentile converts to Christianity. Perhaps the most striking indication of this new identity is the description of their life before conversion as the time "when you were Gentiles" (1 Cor. 12:2). By learning the traditions of the church, these Greeks have become subjects of Jesus the Messiah and gained a share in the inheritance of Israel, the people of God. The church of both Jews and Gentiles now makes up "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16).

Paul's converts have undergone a transformation in their understanding of themselves, their place before God, and their destiny.²⁷ Even the language in which they now praise God is language that they have learned to speak. This transformation, which began with baptism, was confirmed and deepened week to week in worship, as they confessed the name of the one who found them "aliens to the commonwealth of

²⁴ The versions translate "instructed and encouraged." The latter word is used to mean not "cheered up" but "urged to live rightly." It is Paul's characteristic term for the "appeal" to live in conformity with the Gospel (Rom. 12:1; 1 Cor. 1:10; 4:16; 16:15; 1 Thess. 4:1; 5:14).

²⁵ For conversion as a turning from idols to the living God and his Son, see 1 Thess. 1:9–10; 1 Cor. 12:1–3. For some of the Corinthians, this also involved forsaking certain vices (1 Cor. 6:9–11).

²⁶ Paul assumes also that Gentile Christians know the Aramaic expressions *marana tha* ("Our Lord, come!" 1 Cor. 16:22) and *abba* ("Father!" Gal. 4:6; Rom. 8:15).

²⁷ Thus, Paul can speak to his Gentile converts about "our fathers" who crossed the Red Sea (1 Cor. 10:1). Paul once refers to ethnic Jews as "Israelites" (Rom. 9:4) and to the nation as a whole as "Israel" (Rom. 9–11 *passim*), but he more fully describes them as "Israel according to the flesh" (1 Cor. 10:18). For the Christology correlative to this ecclesiology, see N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 18–40.

Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise” and drew them near to himself through the cross of Christ (Eph. 2:12–13).

If the church today forsakes traditions of worship *only* because modern pagans find them foreign or offensive, it is unclear how Christians in our generation are to be established as the Israel of God.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of this century, conservatives have criticized mainline Protestantism for its accommodation of the church’s faith to the assumptions of modern secular culture. Now, as the century draws to a close and liberal Protestants in increasing numbers call for an end to accommodation, it is the evangelicals who are taking the lead in fitting preaching and worship to the mold of popular culture. Paul’s treatment of common worship suggests that the seeker service approach advocated by influential evangelical preachers lacks the biblical and theological support that its advocates have claimed for it. Indeed, it reflects a basic misunderstanding of the relationship between Christian worship and the Gospel.

The unbeliever can say “Amen,” expressing assent to the Christian vision of God and his saving work, only when our worship clearly articulates and embodies the Gospel. The critical need in worship today is not for current tunes, celebrity testimonials, or increased outlets for self-expression and enjoyment; it is for clear affirmation of the fundamental convictions which unite the church. Worship which abandons or disguises such affirmation may succeed in attracting an audience, but it must fail to include worshipers in the adoration which the Son offers to his God and Father from eternity, the everlasting worship which he will complete when he returns to make all creatures subject to the Father (1 Cor. 15:23–28). Failing thus to associate worshipers with the incarnate life of the Son of God, the church fails in its reason for existence, the goal of both its mission and its worship.

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