

CALVIN SEMINARY FORUM

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COVER ESSAY

SPIRIT-CHARGED WORSHIP

You might be surprised to hear that the Reformed tradition is famous for its emphasis on the Holy Spirit in worship.

Yet Hughes Oliphant Old, Reformed theologian, historian, and pastor contends: "If there is one doctrine which is at the heart of Reformed worship it is the doctrine of the Holy Spirit." And a number

of Calvin scholars have called John Calvin nothing less than "a theologian of the Holy Spirit."

Indeed, if you read the sections of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* on worship-related topics, you will discover that the Holy Spirit is the grammatical subject of many of the key sentences

about worship. The Spirit lifts us up into the presence of Christ at the Lord's Supper. The Spirit illumines our hearts as we hear God's Word proclaimed. In Calvin's words: "that the Word may not beat your ears in vain, and that the sacraments may not strike your eyes in vain, the Spirit shows us that in them it is God speaking to us, softening the stubbornness of our heart, and composing it to that obedience which it owes the Word of God" (*Institutes*, IV.XIV.10).

In sum, the Spirit makes possible each broad movement in worship: both the human-Godward movement of praise and prayer, and the God-humanward movement of proclamation and spiritual nourishment. In the drama of worship, the Spirit has the leading role. Worship is charged with divine activity and energy.



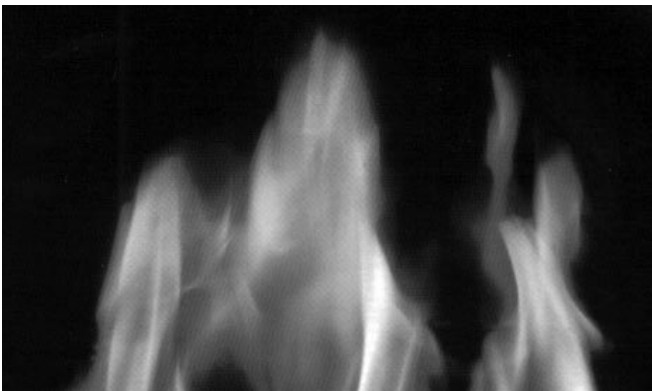
JOHN WITVLIET

Director of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship and Adjunct Professor of Worship at Calvin Seminary.

Some Common Misconceptions

Exactly how this happens is, of course, difficult to explain. And perhaps we ought to shrink from trying to state too precisely how the Spirit works. Yet, with scripture's help, we can determine when our way of thinking about the Spirit's role in worship has become distorted.

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"The Holy Spirit is Jesus' gift to the church. Why would we not embrace this gift?"

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COVER ESSAY cont.

WITVLIET

Consider three common problems.

A first problem occurs when we ignore or downplay the Spirit's role in worship. Not long ago, a worship conference attendee remarked that she was quite content not to hear any

style and formality, the question always before us is this: 'Does this act of worship bring praise to God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit?' Indeed, the Spirit may well work through both the careful preparations of a preacher and through a gesture or sentence that the preacher hadn't planned on saying.

A third problem is the temp-

theological points – direct liturgical implications. One of them has to do with how we pray for the Spirit. Throughout the history of the church, prayers for the Spirit's active presence in worship have been a fundamental element of Christian worship. These prayers are sometimes called "invocations" or "epicleses" (from *epi-cleo*, "to call upon").

This type of prayer is beautifully preserved in nearly every classic form or liturgy for baptism and the Lord's Supper (including those in the back of the *Psalter Hymnal*) at least as far back as the fourth century. The classic example of this type of prayer in the Reformed tradition is the prayer of illumination before the reading of scripture and the sermon. (In fact, the most recent Methodist liturgical materials have added a prayer for illumination, which they attribute to the influence of the Reformed tradition.)

An invocation or epiclesis prayer is essentially saying, "Lord God, the power of what we are about to experience is not the result of our creativity, imagination, or insight. It is purely a gift. May your Spirit work powerfully through this reading of scripture, this sermon, this celebration of the sacrament. And because of the Spirit's work, may we be given the grace to see Jesus Christ more clearly through what we are about to do."

In recent years, some of us – occasionally in the name of making sacramental celebrations more "spirited" – have abandoned the use of liturgical forms and subsequently failed in our improvisations to include prayer for the Spirit's action. On the other hand, some of us rely exclusively on approved forms, but have no idea of the power, beauty, and gospel-proclaiming truth of such "epiclesis" prayer. Each approach can miss one of worship's main ingredients.

Here is an example of why we need to think theologically about how and why we do what

we do in worship. Thoughtful prayers for the Spirit's active presence place us in a posture of expectation and hope. They invite us both to expect the Spirit's work in our midst and to comfort us with a reminder that worship's divine encounter – like faith, and salvation itself – is more like a gift we receive than an accomplishment we achieve.

Discerning the Spirit's Work

How do we know if the Spirit has been active in worship? Ecstasy or solemnity, by itself, doesn't tell us. The Spirit can use both.

One hint may be our response to a service. Consider the difference between the following post-service comments: "My, what impressive music today" vs. "Thank you, musician, for helping me pray more deeply today." And again, "Wasn't that a brilliant sermon," vs. "In this service, I encountered the risen Lord." One of the Spirit's main character traits is that of always pointing toward Christ. The Spirit is a witness and advocate for the person of Jesus. If we leave a worship service comforted and challenged by our faith-filled encounter with Jesus Christ, then we can be grateful for the Spirit's work in our hearts.

Clement of Rome wrote some of the first post-New Testament documents we have on Christian faith and life. His writings include this prayer: "O God Almighty, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ: Grant that we may be grounded and settled in your truth by the coming down of the Holy Spirit into our hearts. Reveal to us what we do not yet know. Fill up in us what is wanting. Confirm what we know. And keep us blameless in your service, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen." May God give us grace to pray and to mean these words as we prepare for worship. ■

“ The Spirit's presence is always a gift. It can never be engineered or produced. ”

talk of "all that Holy Spirit-stuff." This remarkable comment gives the impression of showing distaste for none less than the third person of the Holy Trinity. The Holy Spirit is Jesus' gift to the church. Why would we not embrace this gift?

A second problem is limiting our view of the Spirit's role to only the spontaneous or ecstatic elements of worship. We confess that the Spirit worked through the authors of scripture to produce the highly refined poetry of the Psalms as well as the spontaneous sermons of Peter and Paul. While the Spirit led early Christians to speak in tongues, the Spirit of God also brought order out of chaos at creation. If the Spirit works through both order and spontaneity, why do we sometimes limit our language of the Spirit to refer only to the spontaneous (as when we casually say, "Well, we didn't have time to plan worship this week, I guess we will have to have the Spirit lead today.")

As *Authentic Worship in a Changing Culture* (CRC Publications, 1997) makes clear, "We shouldn't link the Holy Spirit with less planning or less formality. The Holy Spirit can be powerfully present in a very highly structured service and can be absent in a service with little structure. Beyond questions of

tation of thinking that we can bring about an experience of the Spirit, that we can somehow engineer the Spirit's work. This would be no different from magic, thinking we can manipulate divine action by "pulling the right lever" with certain words or sounds or movements. (Acts 8:18ff has a thing or two to say about that.) This leads into the age-old trap of thinking that we are the primary agents who make worship what it is. Then we can begin to think that powerful pulpit rhetoric or musical excellence can, by themselves, make worship into an encounter with God. Scripture is clear: the Spirit's presence is always a gift. It can never be engineered or produced.

When we fall into one of these three temptations, we alternate between quenching the Spirit (I Thess. 5:19) and grieving the Spirit (Eph. 4:30). In contrast, may God give us grace to both welcome and honor the Spirit.

An Ancient and Contemporary Liturgical Application: Prayers for the Spirit's Action

The theological insistence that the Spirit makes worship what it is, has – like most key

Harry Boonstra, Guest Editor

WORSHIP CHANGE

Pain and Promise



HARRY BOONSTRA

Guest Editor,
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What's happening to our rich heritage of church music? Why should ditties (and other "off the wall" songs) push out "How Great Thou Art"? How can a saxophone take the place of the organ? Why should a soloist imitating Amy Grant edge out the choir or congregational singing? What's happened to our Reformed emphasis on worship being God-centered? And don't those people see (and hear) that secular influences of entertainment, rhythms, and self-gratification are dominating the worship of the church?

One aspect in these skirmishes is the old debaters and politicians technique of choosing only the worst features and examples of the opposition. Are there "traditional" churches that are dull, where the singing is listless, where heritage is worshipped, where (high) culture seems more important than spiritual fervor? Yes, there are such churches – I have preached in them. Is that torpor or that elitism typical of traditional churches? Not at all. I have worshipped in congregations with worship traditions that had not changed substantially for the past fifty years, where I heard spirited singing and participated in a true encounter with the living God.

So with the "progressive" churches. Are there those where decibel level covers poor quality, where repetitive choruses usurp the place of solid hymns, and where glitz is a poor substitute for biblical reverence. Yes. But I have worshipped in many progressive churches where carefully chosen "Praise and Worship" songs are balanced with traditional hymns, the praise team promotes better congregational song, Scripture

// Be fair to those who disagree with you and do not try to win your argument with caricatures. //

choruses give new vitality to psalm singing, the variety of instruments mirrors Psalm 149, and God-centered praise is powerful.

Part of my response to the worship debates is to urge people to greater charity: be fair to those who disagree with you and do not try to win your argument with caricatures. Also, be careful about identifying your words with the Word, or your position as synonymous with THE Reformed position.

with the "dance" of Psalm 149? What is the place of candles and crosses in Reformed worship? Should we celebrate Advent? How can we use Christian poets and musicians of our time without succumbing to the tyranny of novelty? How do we keep respect for tradition from becoming an arid conservatism? And, most importantly, exactly how does Scripture regulate our worship?

Two of the contributors to this issue of *Forum* are crucial participants in this discussion and renewal. Emily Brink has been the pilot and captain of the Liturgy and Worship Office, the 1987 *Psalter Hymnal, Reformed Worship* magazine, and countless worship conferences. John Witvliet is the first director of the new Calvin Worship Institute that promises to be a boon, a rich blessing, to the church's development of thoughtful, biblically-based worship.

Are there developments and trends in worship today that disturb me? Yes – just as there are worship practices, buildings, singing, communion observance, music in the past that dismay me. Do I value the Reformed tradition for a rich heritage of worship? As the catechism would say – indubitably! But I am also grateful for many of the developments in the past twenty years and trust that God's people will continue to worship him as is appropriate in their time and place. ■

Worship Skirmishes

In recalling some twenty years of skirmishes about worship in the CRC and the broader Christian community a typical scenario goes as follows: The progressive church musician looks at the worship at First CRC and concludes that things have to change. The *Psalter Hymnal* (both blue and gray) are stuffy, the doxology has been the same for thirty years, the singing is listless, the minister chooses all the hymns (and obviously doesn't spend much time on it or else doesn't know much about music), the order of worship seems to be cast in old concrete. It's time for a change. In come the red (or purple or rainbow) *Hymns for Today and Tomorrow*, the projection screen for choruses too new to be in any book (and to allow people to clap and raise hands), the drums, the amplifiers, and—of course—the praise team.

The traditionalist is aghast!

Worship Hopes

Another part of my response is to appreciate the debates and discussions. After 1930 (when the CRC synod axed a liturgical proposal that had been in the making for over ten years) there was very little discussion on worship. Beginning in 1968 this discussion was resumed and has been vigorous ever since. Churches are asking significant questions about worship: What is the role of the minister and other worship leaders? How should our choir function? Should we even have a choir? Are Scripture choruses in the same league as Genevan psalms? How often should we celebrate communion? Is one particular order of worship more appropriate than another? How important is change in worship? How can we broaden the western European worship tradition, so that other peoples and other voices will teach us how to worship the Lord? What do we do



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PRAYING OUR SONGS SINGING OUR PRAYERS

Praying with Words

Augustine once said, “He who sings prays twice.” For some that statement still rings true, and their spirits soar in prayer when they sing. But others struggle to pray when they sing, or perhaps they haven’t even tried to pray when they sing.

Our psalms and hymns as well as responses and choruses offer a rich array of ways to pray together in song. Many texts are extended prayers coupled with teaching and witness. For example, “Oh, for

worship. We can pray simply, and we can pray with more “content.” (For biblical examples, compare the three verses of Psalm 131 with Psalm 119). The important purpose of both types of songs is to unite us in prayer. When we offer our voices in song, we should also be offering our hearts in prayer.

Praying with Melodies

But the text is only one part of the song. It’s the quality of the melody that reaches as deeply into our hearts, some-

practice of projecting only texts on screens will further diminish the number of music readers. If the notes are there, those who can read music can help the others learn new songs. Until we really know the song, it is difficult to pray and sing at the same time. Praying while we sing new songs may be a greater challenge than singing familiar ones.

Leading Sung Prayer

But there is still more to praying our songs, or singing our prayers. A song is more than just a text and a tune; it is not really a song until it is sung. To be able to pray when we sing, we need someone to lead us. The leadership is just as crucial as the text and the tune. And so, going back to the seminary choir’s leadership at that same service, the planning group paid just as much attention to the way the songs were introduced and sung as they did to choosing the songs.

A song of praise—one kind of prayer—was introduced with bright organ sounds, while a prayer of confession was led very quietly. One song was better suited to piano and guitar than to organ, another was introduced by someone singing the first stanza as a solo testimony.

Surely musical leadership is first of all spiritual leadership. The whole issue is one of

The Seminary Choir was ready to lead the entire worship service. The planning was complete, and different students took various leadership roles. The planning team had chosen a *Psalter Hymnal* setting of Psalm 43, “Send Out Your Light and Your Truth,” as a sung prayer for illumination before the sermon. One worship leader began the service. After we sang this prayer, another student stepped into the pulpit and said, “Let us pray.” He then offered a spoken prayer for illumination, read the Scripture, and opened the Word.

At the next choir rehearsal we did the usual “debriefing,” and I asked him why he had offered a spoken prayer for illumination. “I always pray before I preach,” was his response. But we had just sung a prayer! The discussion that followed raised an important question: Do we really pray when we sing? During that sung prayer, his thoughts were moving forward to his spoken prayer and the message to follow.

“ Do we really pray when we sing? ”

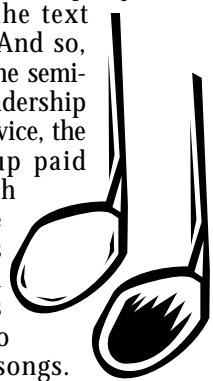
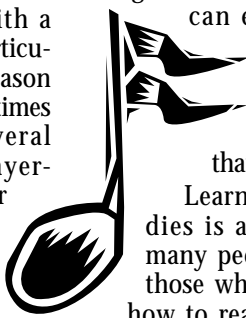
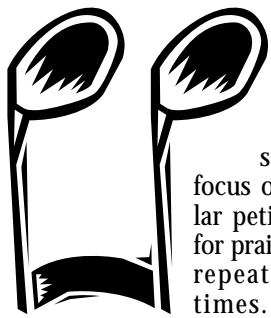
a Thousand Tongues” was originally eighteen stanzas long; the seven stanzas in the *Psalter Hymnal* include prayers of petition and praise, teaching on the power of Christ, and encouragement to those in need. Other songs are short and simple, with a focus on one particular petition or reason for praise – sometimes repeated several times. The prayer-song “In Our

Lives, Lord, Be Glorified” is one such example of a short and simple prayer song.

There is a good place for both the more complex and the more simple texts in

times more deeply than the words. We all know the power of a melody to evoke responses that cannot be put into words. And we know that when we pray, the Spirit prays with us, interceding for us not in words, but “with groans that words cannot express” (Romans 8:26). Music is God’s gift to us by which we can express everything from groans of need to exaltation in praise and thanksgiving.

Learning new melodies is a challenge for many people, especially those who do not know how to read music. Most people are able to read words, but far fewer know how to read notes, and the growing



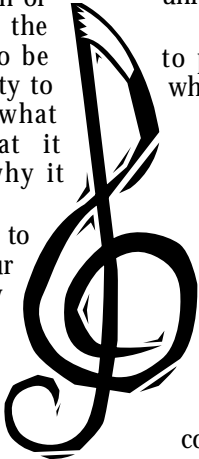
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PRAYING... cont.

BRINK

discernment: how best to help people pray when they sing. Whether the congregation is led from the organ or by a praise team, the impetus needs to be spiritual sensitivity to what is sung, what it follows, what it precedes, and why it is there.

To summarize, to be able to sing our prayers, or pray our songs, we need to offer the words and melody to God with our minds and hearts



and voices, all together, led by those who can discern how to bind the whole body together, uniting us in our prayers.

Those who find it difficult to pray can be encouraged when others pray with them, perhaps for them, understanding also that even the Holy Spirit is praying with and for us all, and that Christ himself is with us when we meet together in his name. To enter into that kind of sung prayer is one of the most holy and beautiful experiences of Christian community. ■

“ Music is God’s gift to us by which we can express everything from groans of need to exaltation in praise and thanksgiving ”

Will there ever be another Psalter Hymnal?

So many worship songs have been composed in the last fifty years that one congregation may be singing an entirely different repertoire from another. New songs are replacing older ones at an ever increasing rate. Will there ever be another *Psalter Hymnal*? Or will Christian Reformed congregations become so diverse that each one reflects the kind of niche marketing that works against community?

A new *Psalter Hymnal* is not currently in the works, but a supplement is. *Sing! A New Creation*, with about 250 contemporary songs (all composed in the last fifty years) is being produced by CRC Publications, the Reformed Church in

America, and the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship. It is scheduled for release in 2001. The supplement committee presented a draft to the CRC Publications Board in February, 1999. The discussion of that draft brought into very sharp focus the diversity in the Christian Reformed Church. One person’s definition of “contemporary” was different from another’s. What was familiar to some was totally new to others. Some congregations use the blue *Psalter Hymnal*, some the gray, some use a second hymnal, some use no hymnal at all. It will increasingly be a challenge to keep a shared body of songs in our denomination. ■

Singing the Congregational Prayer

Could we ever sing the congregational prayer? This prayer, often the longest part of the service except for the sermon, presents its own challenges; it is often hard to really pray when another is speaking our words for us. (The current issue of *Reformed Worship* 52, June 1999, a theme issue on prayer, addresses many of those challenges.)

Since a longer prayer needs organization, one can help the congregation move through different sections by having them speak or sing a verse of a hymn or a short refrain at the end of each section. And since the focus of the prayer is usually intercession, not only for the local needs, but for the larger church, indeed, for the whole world, we can consider on occasion songs

that come from outside North America. In fact, naming this prayer “Prayers of Intercession” or “Intercessory Prayers” might help to keep that focus before the congregation.

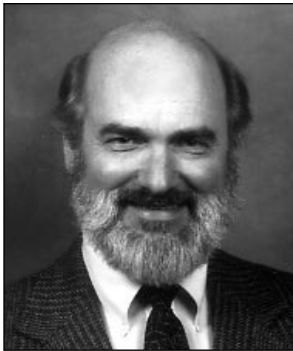
Below, one sees one example from Korea. There is something deeply moving about taking on our lips the prayers of those to whom we may have brought the gospel in an earlier age, but who now can teach us much about prayer. We can offer our local prayers along with the many Christians from North and South Korea who pray for peace in their divided land. The unity of the body of Christ is strengthened whenever we sing songs that come from the larger Christian community. ■

Come Now, O Prince of Peace

This is a contemporary Korean song which can be sung in unison or four parts. It has a lovely simplicity and could be used to intersperse intercessions. Note the clashes in harmony towards the end and don't be afraid of them.

Words: Geonyong Lee; paraphrased by Marion Pope, altered. © 1991, Geonyong Lee
Music: O-so-so; © 1991 Geonyong Lee

CHURCH ARCHITECTURE: PUBLIC PROFESSION OF FAITH



ARIE C. LEDER

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“ Church architectural language...is above all a matter of publicly speaking the truth about the body of Christ in the world ”

Reformation churches have prided themselves on building simple, rather than ornate, worship places. Because a church building was simply a place where God's people met to worship, little, if anything, visual was used or wanted. A simple pulpit, practical sacramental furniture, and pews; no altars, statues, incense, confessionals, or stations of the cross. The sacramental character associated with Roman Catholic church architecture was minimized, if not denied, to the point of a proud iconoclasm.

This tradition may have contributed to the impression that building a church is basically an exercise in the practical, economic organization of space. The process usually begins with a “building” or an “expansion” committee which engages an architect who then prepares proposals. A careful examination of church buildings, however, will show that theological commitments also

deeply matter. You will find baptismal fonts in some and baptismal pools or tanks in other churches. Some churches may have kneeling benches, others yet a communion railing. Enter the worship areas of churches in your neighborhood and you may find yourself reflecting on how you could, or not, worship there. This reaction has little to do with economics. Rather, it responds to the shape of the building, to the furnishing and organization of the worship space, and to the use of color, light, and darkness.

Buildings Are Not Silent

In the symbolic language of architecture, buildings publicly identify the groups and activities associated with them; they also shape the space for activities inside. Thus, church architecture is not just a matter of the most economical means of building and organizing space; it becomes a public profession of the faith of the building community, a profession uttered in the language of architecture. In addition, after all the committee meetings are finished and the bills paid, it is the building that continues to speak in and to the world.

What should, or do, church buildings say publicly? How should, or do, they

address those who enter? Frank Lloyd Wright's Unity Temple (Chicago) impresses its visitors with its horizontal lines, leaving them on a mere human plane; the soaring Gothic cathedral of Chartres (France) draws visitors' eyes ever upward, enjoining a gaze beyond themselves. In similar and others ways the buildings of Willow Creek (Chicago), the Crystal Cathedral (Garden Grove), La Grave Ave. Christian Reformed Church (Grand Rapids), and West End Christian Reformed Church (Edmonton) speak. If this is so, should church architecture be just the concern of a building committee and the architect, or is it just a matter of taste? No. In fact, church architectural decisions belong to the worshiping community, a community identified by particular theological traditions.

Theology and Church Architecture

Liturgy, the shape and process of worship, has implications for shaping the worship area, as do the theology of preaching and the sacraments. Thus, in the past the location and symbolism of the pulpit, font, table, or altar, differed among Reformation and Roman Catholic Churches; among the churches developing out of the Reformation dif-

ferences also emerged. Some of these differences persist; others have been abandoned. For example, traditional liturgical furniture is absent from some contemporary Protestant church buildings. Font and table are present only when necessary; the pulpit is replaced by a movable, acrylic lectern. A large stage for music groups, dramas, and large choirs functions as the liturgical center. Just outside of this worship area there is a large space for mixing with the people before and after worship. And, although you might be in a Lutheran, Reformed, Baptist, or Pentecostal church building, the architecture and organization of the worship space would probably not tell you that.

In spite of all these architectural changes, such church buildings continue to address the world and the gathered worshipers. The building community has not abandoned its public, architectural profession of faith; it has, however, selected a non-traditional architectural vocabulary to embody its vision. It is also true that in the actual preparation and building, theology may not be consciously present and so eclectic forms evolve, especially where a desire for being different, or a reaction against traditional forms is strong.

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ARCHITECTURE...cont.

LEDER

Theology Past and Present

For some contemporary church builders "values" replaces "theology" out of the belief that the traditional language of theology has lost its meaning, that it does not communicate in the contemporary environment, or both. Speaking about "values" is thought to be less offensive, not freighted with alien terminology.

This move away from theological language, representative of the age-old problem of the Church's location in and address to its cultural context, recasts the theology of the church versus the world into the sociological values of relating well to the world, and creating a hospitable environment. Such a posture, however, requires an architecture that blends the building into the neighborhood, that avoids assertive, confessional angularities. At the same time, this shows that church architecture, whatever its shape and wherever practiced, is an exercise in public speech. Builders of traditional, neotraditional, contemporary, or post-modern church complexes know this, and design accordingly.

For the church of Christ, however, church architectural language is not merely a question of cultural or environmental taste; it is above all a matter of publicly speaking the truth about the body of Christ in the world. Therefore, we cannot define effective church architecture by recasting the church's traditional theological language into language that is relevant to our present culture. Rather, we must begin with the essen-

tial nature of the gospel, and ask ourselves: if the gospel of Christ is an offense to every culture and people, how can that gospel's architectural embodiment not be confessionally assertive?

This does not mean, of course, that we need only one style of architecture; nor that we should redo our theology when designing new church buildings. It does mean, however, that we should pay more attention to how the truth about God, Christ, the Church, and the creation are expressed architecturally, in a given time and place. In other words, we must learn publicly to profess our Christian faith architecturally, without embarrassment. Christians must do so for the simple reasons that we keep building churches everywhere. Let us then shape church buildings to speak the truth of Christ in the world. But how do we decide these matters?

How Then Shall We Speak?

Rather than answer this question in terms relevant to a particular confessional tradition, let me briefly discuss one

theological truth that ought essentially to be expressed in all church architecture: the transcendence of God.

Because architectural speech is public and located in a particular culture, church building is inevitably a public exercise in defining the relationship of the church to the world. In general, our North American world is impressed

exteriors of church buildings publicly remind the world of a transcendent God who critically intersects and inspects the world and its dwellers. Church buildings, then, will not blend into the neighborhood with inoffensive forms, but with disruptive line, angle, and material, proclaim the vanity of human striving for security, and point to the gate

// Truthful church architecture will evoke the transcendent God in a world that ignores him. //

with the limitless capacities of the human self, the need for unrestrained aesthetic, personal, religious, and sexual experience. What matters most is us, our environment, our needs. Our vision is horizontal and personalistic. Perhaps the architecture that best embodies our culture is the shopping mall (think of the vacation package tours that take you to "The Mall of the Americas" or "West Edmonton Mall"). The mall likes us as we are; it wants us to be comfortable,

of heaven (Gen. 28:16; "This is the gate of heaven" is inscribed above the entrance of many older Roman Catholic church buildings.). Inside, the worshipers will, by the organization of the space, color, light, and furniture, be reminded to abandon the world, urged to move beyond themselves to find rest in God. Unlike the mall, a truthful church building does not like us as we are; it will disrupt us and address us with spoken, sculpted, written, and sung Word, and by them remind us of the change God has wrought and maintains by his Spirit.

Truthful church architecture will evoke the transcendent God in a world that ignores him. Its exterior may annoy the world but it will evoke peace on earth for the faithful. Its interior may be eccentric to those who seek self-esteem, for the architecture sustains the liturgy's primary focus: God; but for the faithful it will encourage solemn, joyful, grieving, humble, waiting devotion of the one who said: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). ■



to meet our felt needs, so that we come, gather, mix, eat, buy, drink, and be merry. The mall leaves us satisfied but unchallenged and unchanged, perhaps even trapped in our horizontally limited world.

The gospel proclaims that such horizontalism is of our own making, and that we cannot escape it, unless God makes it so. In such a culture, the

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CALVIN SEMINARY FORUM

FOCUSSED ON WHAT?



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We read a lot about burnout today. We are all too busy, with too much work, too many demands. We live harried, often fragmented lives. Most of us.

Preachers too. But preachers should live focussed lives, shouldn't they? Why so much burnout among them, so many who quit or feel like quitting the ministry? I am not certain, but perhaps the contemporary need-based ministry heaps up so many demands that the focus of ministry is scattered.

What should that focus be? In an interview in the Spring 1997 issue of *Leadership* magazine, Eugene Peterson reflects on ministry. He says, "The most important thing a pastor does is stand in a pulpit every Sunday and say, 'Let us

worship God.'" That is the focus of ministry. To maintain that focus the minister must spend time in prayer, study of the Word, and sufficient reading to understand the culture. Ministers are, says Peterson, "in the saint-making business, not the human-potential business."

Most ministers wish to acknowledge that focus. But they get side-tracked by numerous voiced needs and demands. Of course, the needs of parishioners are important, but Peterson declares, "I've been a pastor for thirty-five years, and I don't trust people one inch in defining what they need." They need to become saints and saints are focussed on God. So let us worship God.

Peterson is absolutely right if what is happening in heaven should be happening on earth. The vision granted to the apostle John in Revelation 4-5 continues to surprise me. Obviously what is going on in heaven is absolutely critical for life on earth. Yet when John gets a peek into the heavenly throne room, he sees and hears a worship service! Surprise! The most natural and the most important event in the universe is worship! Worship of God the Creator and the Lamb who was slain, ceaseless worship, joyful worship, loud worship. All the creatures in heaven are focussed on the throne. That is the critical posture for living our lives on earth.

Notice the four living creatures who are the noblest representatives of the major groups of created beings on earth: wild animals (lion), domesticated animals (ox), flying creatures (eagle), and human beings. Standing in the center around the throne, they never stop saying, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come." Ceaseless adoration of the Creator for who He is and for what He has made.

That's intriguing, for what happens in heaven is the norm for what should be happening on earth. The ceaseless worship of the four living creatures reveals that created beings express their deepest essence in their worship of their Creator. Apparently, animals do it naturally, only human beings have a choice. That is both our privilege and our burden. For we have made and do make wrong choices. We worship other gods and our lives lose their focus and their vitality.

Jesus came to restore the focus and the vitality. Through His Spirit the church exists to do the same. Ministers are gifted, trained, and ordained to gather God's people around the throne. Worship flows from an awareness of being in God's presence and from the desire to give Him thanks and praise and to hear His voice. Such

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worship renews, creates joy, and gives focus to our lives. Is there an activity more centrally important?

To succeed in helping others worship God, ministers must take time to create space for God in their own lives. It cannot be done on the run. There is a sacred center that holds our lives together and our relationship to that center must be nourished. That is what worship does. Out of it will flow the energy for witness, mission, and all sorts of kingdom activity. Without it we run out of steam, for we are trying to do it in our own strength.

Worshiping God is the most natural and important activity of our lives. It is the only way to run and not grow weary, to walk and not faint (Isa. 40:31). ■