
The Christian Worship “*Channel of Blessing*”
Malachi 1:6-14

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Northway Christian Church – Dallas, Texas

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The first shot in my experience of the “*worship wars*” got fired one Sunday morning after a worship service at the church I served for nearly a decade in Houston. The skirmish involved the “*no-sock diaconate*.” For some inexplicable reason several male members of the Diaconate came down the aisle to serve communion that day wearing shoes but no socks. It was a kind of Don Johnson “*Miami Vice*” look that they were throwing down that day; very chic. And before I was even finished with my lunch an hour later, I was fielding phone calls.

I thought that the first one was kind of funny, I mean we’re talking about guys and socks here. But by the time I got to the third one in less than an hour, it had become irritating. And by the sixth phone call, well, let me say that it had gotten my attention. What was going on here? How could the naked ankles of a couple of young men in loafers generate this kind of reaction from a group of people who I knew to be otherwise so reasonable about everything? Well, as I listened to the barrage of complaints that rolled in over the next few days about “*my*” deacons who were not wearing socks, I discovered that it all boiled down to just one word – “*respect*.”

When I was growing up, Sunday mornings were absolute torture for me. I was bounced from bed way too early and pointed in the general direction of the bathroom where warm water had already been drawn in the tub and used by my two sisters. After scouring myself clean from stem to stern, it was on to dental hygiene. As I brushed my teeth, my mother applied great dollops of sweet smelling butch wax to the little ridge of hair above my freshly scrubbed forehead. And with a whisk or two of her comb, what little hair that I had up there was standing straight-up at attention. Then I would be entombed in a white dress shirt, always stiffly starched, and strangled by a bow tie, always too tight. And why did my mother do this to me every week? It was because we were going to church, and that required something she called your “*Sunday Best*.”

So, what’s going on when men without socks sends parts of the body of Christ into fits of apoplexy? Well, as far as I can tell, it has to do with worship, with what’s thought to honor and dishonor God. Mistakenly, we have been led to believe that the third commandment – “*Thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord thy God in vain*” - is about cussing. When you hit your thumb with a hammer you’re not supposed to think or say, “*Oh, Buddha!*” But is that really what this commandment is about?

I believe that it was the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther who said that the Old Testament book of Malachi is a commentary on the third commandment. And as you heard in our Scripture lesson this morning, what had Malachi in such a snit was the sloppy, distracted and half-hearted ways that God's people were approaching Him in worship. To borrow the language of the Apostle Paul in Romans chapter 2, they were presuming upon the kindness of God (v. 4). They were cutting corners, paying lip-service and bringing less than their best to the sanctuary. They were acting as if God would be delighted to accept offerings from their hearts and hands that cost them nothing. They were taking the Name of the Lord their God in vain, they were treating God with less respect than was advisable.

And so God responded through the Prophet by telling them that if they weren't going to come to Him with their very best, then they'd best not come to Him at all. Worship was too important; worship was too potent to allow it to become a trivializing thing. And so God told His people in no uncertain terms that He would not tolerate being treated by them with disrespect. It would be better for them to shut the doors and turn out the lights of the sanctuary than to keep on that path and wind up in the hands of the God who is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29).

Now, on the surface, men without socks serving communion would seem to be a matter far removed from what the book of the prophet Malachi was talking about. I'm pretty sure that God's got bigger concerns than footwear when it comes to worship. But I guess I appreciate the way this episode highlights the bigger issue; the question of respect in our worship.

The "*worship wars*" get Christians lined up on opposite sides of the sanctuary taking pot shots at each other on matters that are at best peripheral. Here at Northway our biggest worship skirmishes through the years have had to do with whether it is better to be warm and welcoming or quiet and reverent when entering the sanctuary for worship; and whether we should take the time to acknowledge each other's presence as worship begins during a time of meet and greet, or whether we should just keep our focus on God alone; and whether applause is an inappropriate expression of appreciation for a performance, or an appropriate expression of personal identification with something that has just happened in worship, kind of like saying a hearty "*Amen*" was in worship a generation ago. I'm convinced that there are no right or wrong answers here; just a concern that needs to be voiced: that worship that is tailored to suit our tastes and to appeal to our preferences is playing to the wrong audience.

Last week I told you about Soren Kierkegaard, the 19th century Danish Philosopher, who made some of his most important points by telling stories. Last week it was the story of the Love Letter that I told you about, and this week I want to tell you his story about the theater of worship. Kierkegaard said that we need to think of worship as a performance in a theater. Most of us come to worship thinking that we are going to be the audience, that the ministers and choirs are going to be the performers, and that God is going to be somewhere in the wings, only vaguely present. In fact, it looks much like how things are arranged here this morning; you out there; us up here; and God, well, around

somewhere. But if we really understood what this time we share together each week is all about, Kierkegaard said, that then we would see that God alone is the audience, and that you, the gathered congregation, are the performers on the stage offering the weekly sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, and that we ministers and choirs are but the prompters who stand in the wings cueing your lines. It changes everything when worship is thought of like this, doesn't it? It makes our worship an offering to God. And frankly, our worship needs to be thought of like this.

The core principle of Protestant worship since the Reformation has been that *"God deserves to be worshipped as God is pleased to reveal Himself in His Word"* (Mallone 54). As Alexander Campbell, one of our church's founders, pointed out, because there is no book of Deuteronomy in the New Testament, providing us with rules and regulations of worship for us as the New Covenant people of God, it is going to be the heart that God looks at when we enter His sanctuary for worship. Whether or not there is reverence and respect in what we bring to worship is not going to be finally determined by what's on our feet but by what's in our hearts. Styles of worship can vary, but Spirit and truth are not negotiable (John 4:23). And someone here at Northway who truly understands this is Brett Morrell. Moving effortlessly between our traditional worship services here at Northway on Sunday mornings to the emergent worship of *The Way* on Sunday evenings, Brett has found a way to make the blessing of Christian worship in her life the channel of Christian blessing that is her ministry. And so I'm going to ask Brett to come now and share her story.

Witness

The inspiration came to me two years ago, on a bus ride. You remember – as part of the Northway stewardship campaign, we all boarded buses and toured the area surrounding Northway Christian Church. Doug was our bus leader. And I remember him telling us about the number of people in this very area – SMU, Highland Park, and University Park – who weren't associated with any church, and the numbers who weren't even Believers. He spoke of an "alternative worship service" that Northway was planning. This worship service would be designed to attract people who weren't interested in a traditional worship service. It was on that bus that I decided I wanted to be a part of this effort to bring a new and different group to Christ AND to Northway. And so I joined the small group doing the planning and preparation for what is now "The Way" worship service. I took on the role of Hospitality Coordinator and went about my duties and responsibilities with my usual energy and drive. I watched with excitement and sometimes frustration and impatience the slowly growing group of visitors to The Way. I enjoyed the service – but mostly I was on a mission to make this thing work. Somewhere along the way, I realized that I missed The Way when I was unable to attend. Somewhere along the way, I met some wonderful new friends of all ages – some who hadn't been in a church for a very long time, some who had. Somewhere along the way, I cried with joy when one of my new friends

accepted Christ as their Savior and even joined Northway as a member. Somewhere along the way, I found that the music, preaching, and experiences of The Way really spoke to me personally – and helped me to feel a very special connection with God. Blessed....to be a Blessing. Blessed....to be a Blessing. And so it goes. Northway, thank you for supporting alternative worship services here at our church. Come check it out. 5:00pm every Sunday in Fellowship Hall. Oh.....and bring a friend! You never know what surprise blessings God has in store for you...and them!

James Merrell, the editor of our previous denominational magazine The Disciple, wrote an editorial 25 years ago in which he named the principles that he believed that our worship as Disciples as Disciples has been grounded in –

1. *As Biblical Christians, our worship is centered on God and God's mighty saving acts in Jesus Christ. This is why the Lord's Supper is at the heart of our worship each Sunday morning. It focuses on God and what God has done for us.*
2. *Disciples cherish simplicity in worship. Our spiritual roots are Reformed. We are not given to fads, but we are committed to the faith once and for all delivered to the saints.*
3. *Our worship has emphasized Biblical and theological integrity. Meaning matters more than feelings. What we do in worship reflects our intelligent understanding of the Gospel.*
4. *And finally, worship is not a means to another end, a way of manipulating people to some predetermined response. An honest presentation of the Gospel, followed by an opportunity for personal reflection and response is the only "agenda" worthy of worship.*

Disciples worship by these guideposts because we believe that they deliver us to a respectful place of encounter with the living, loving God in Jesus Christ. It's not about socks or shoes, guitars or organs, hymns or praise choruses. It's about what's in our hearts, and whether we come to worship thinking that it's about us, or about God.

Sources

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