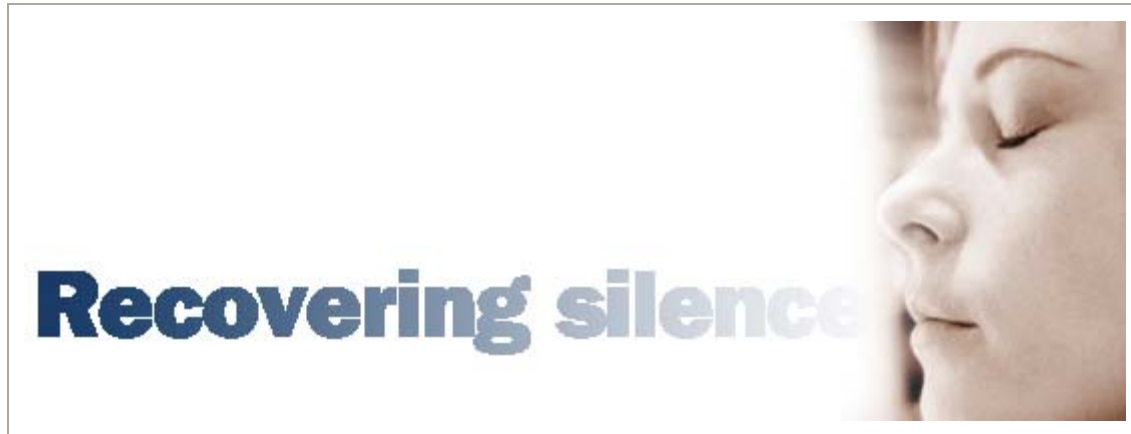


Faith&Life



Philosopher Blaise Pascal asserted that all human troubles stem from our inability to sit quietly with ourselves in an empty room for more than 20 minutes. A similar case could be made for the current troubles in many church worship services.

Silence was a part of biblical worship and was held in high esteem by the early church. However, the “sounds of silence” in worship were lost to a great extent during the Reformation, and the noise level of many church services has increased steadily until the present day.

Silence needs desperately to be recovered in our worship services if the words that are spoken and sung are to have any depth or ring of truth to them, in the same way that lament needs to be recovered in order to make our praises more honest and less hollow.

The loss of silence in worship is something that many churches today ignore at their own peril. Mennonite churches are not immune.

Silence needs to be recovered by many Mennonite churches, according to Marlene Kropf, who directs the Office of Congregational Life for Mennonite Church USA. “Most of us come to worship on Sunday morning expecting to

experience a time of rest and renewal in God's presence," she writes in "Unhurried Worship," a Leader Online article.

"But how often have our work-world habits come with us and intruded on our worship?" she asks. "Programmed for productivity, we design our Sunday morning gatherings accordingly," she asserts. "We fill every moment with words and move through the actions of worship with assembly-line efficiency. How difficult it is to 'be still and know that I am God' (Psalm 46:8)! And yet this is what Sabbath-keeping calls us to do."

Silence in biblical life and worship

"There is a season for everything," according to the writer of Ecclesiastes, "a time for keeping silent and a time for speaking." This maxim is important for regulating human discourse. It is equally important for regulating the worship in spirit and truth—a dialogue with God, if you will—that God expects.

The Bible speaks often of silence as it pertains to worship and other awe-inspiring, reverential encounters with the holy, transcendent God of the universe. These encounters begin early on in the formation of the Israelites and continue until the culmination of history and beyond:

- Moses spent six days in silence on the mountain before "Yahweh called to Moses from inside the cloud" (Exodus 24:16—all references from The Jerusalem Bible);
- Job replied to God after his first speech, "My words have been frivolous: what can I reply? I had better lay my finger on my lips. I have spoken once...I will not speak again" (Job 40:4-5a); and,
- John was even more graphic in his description of encountering God in heaven: "When I saw him, I fell in a dead faint at his feet" (Revelation 1:17).

Humans are not the only ones to be quiet before their maker, though. Habakkuk calls all of creation to silence in a verse that foreshadows the Romans 8 passage, which speaks of creation groaning in travail. In this instance, Habakkuk declares, "Yahweh is in his holy Temple: let the whole earth be silent before him" (2:20). And heaven, if not silent now, will be at the end of earth's history; in Revelation 8:1, John declares prophetically that when "the Lamb broke the seventh seal...there was silence in heaven for about half an hour."

Finally, silence was an appropriate response to Christ while he was on this Earth. Silence was called for at the Mount of Transfiguration, when God told Peter, James, and John from out of the cloud, “This is my Son, the Beloved; he enjoys my favour. Listen to him.”

Silence in the early, medieval church

Being silent before God is important for human beings for three reasons, according to Andrew Hill, in his book *Enter His Gates With Praise*:

First, theologically, silence heightens communication with God because it provides a framework for hearing his word. Second, spiritually, the silence of worship leads the Christian to maturity in Christ because in silence we learn obedience to God. And third, sociologically, the silence of worship teaches compassion for others because we are no longer attempting to devour people with our words.

The early and medieval churches seem to have understood these concepts very well, for their worship and the lives of their members seem to have been permeated by a holy—if not completely aural—silence. What is interesting to note—some might say, ironic—is that the liturgies of the medieval churches, both East and West, were verbose; many different people spoke many words throughout each service. But the effect was one of reverential quiet.

Richard Foster, in *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home*, quotes the desert father Ammonas on the effectiveness of silence:

I have shown you the power of silence, how thoroughly it heals and how fully pleasing it is to God... Know that it is by silence that the saints grew, that it was because of silence that the power of God dwelt in them, because of silence that the mysteries of God were known to them.

It should not be surprising that since these saints valued silence in their own walk with God, they would encourage it in the lives and worship of their followers.

St. Benedict had much to say about silence in the life and worship of his monks, which is appropriate for Christians today in our “cell phone-palm pilot-57 channels but nothing on” society. One interesting rule was Benedict’s insistence that complete silence follow evening worship: “On leaving Compline, no one will be permitted to speak further....”

This is a far cry from the conversations over coffee after many North American Sunday services!

What should be made clear at this point is that silence is not the opposite of speech; they are not antagonistic to each other. Both the Benedictines and the Eastern Orthodox Church agree on this point. States Father Thomas Hopko in *Speaking of Silence*, “It is...said that he who cannot keep silent should not speak. In the Eastern Church, the words coming out of the silence are traditionally called ‘anointed words’ or ‘words proper to God.’”

While much of today’s worship centres on the verbal, it was not always so. Worship renewal authority Robert Webber says, “Worship as an act of communication contains the ingredients of speech, symbol, dialogue, interaction and relationship.” So when these other forms of communication are involved, the noise level of a worship service can decrease because the mouth ceases to be the only organ of communication; touching, smelling, seeing are, by their very definition, “quiet” senses.

The Quakers elevated silence before God to a place it had never before had in worship—although for different theological reasons; in worship, they wait in the immanent presence of the Holy Spirit. This is not silence for its own sake, though, Thomas Hodgkin wrote in 1915:

Not at all, for as our worship consisteth not in the words, so neither in silence as silence, but in an holy dependence of the mind upon God, from which dependence silence necessarily follows in the first place until words can be brought forth which are from God’s Spirit.

Eleanor Kreider, a mission educator with Mennonite Mission Network, sees such possibilities in Mennonite worship. “Instead of rushing from one thing to the next, we can allow silence in our worship for listening to what the Spirit is saying,” she writes in *Music in Worship: A Mennonite Perspective*.

The Mennonite Historical Society of Canada (MHSC) website notes that “silent prayer is growing in prominence in many churches, in part as the result of increased contact with Quaker and contemplative spiritualities, but also reflecting earlier Anabaptist and Mennonite practice.”

The rise of ‘talk worship’

It is hard to say exactly how silence fell into disrepute and neglect in much of modern worship, but let me suggest two possibilities—one theological, the other ecclesiastical.

“Theology shifted from the God who acts to the God who spoke,” Webber states, as the spoken word became the primary means of communicating to the faithful and to those whom the evangelical churches hoped to bring into the fold.

Ecclesiastically, the Reformers tried to separate themselves in practice as much as possible from the Roman Catholic Church. Webber laments that, “when the Reformers attempted to rid the church of its bad devotional habits...they failed to retain other positive approaches to spirituality that had emerged in the early church.” Silence was one such casualty.

To paraphrase a modern slogan, it could be said that Reformation liturgies became “talk worship.” And talking became an even more important mode of worship communication during the ensuing enlightenment and revivalist periods, as people’s minds and hearts were bombarded with many words.

Webber describes the change succinctly:

Protestantism, which can be characterized as a movement of the Word, led the way in the shift from symbolic communication of the medieval era. Because words were regarded as higher and more significant vehicles of truth than symbols, images, poetry, gestures and the like, all forms of communication other than verbal became suspect.

This has led us to the place, he says, where “we have locked ourselves into discursive speech as the preferable, if not the only, form of communication.”

Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word....

T.S. Eliot did not know it at the time he wrote “Choruses from The Rock,” but he was describing to a tee the frenetic praise and worship, or celebration, type of worship that is all the rage today.

In radio parlance, the maxim is, “Two seconds of dead air and listeners will tune out.” Using that rationale, “worship” time has become upbeat and fast-paced. Silence is kept to a minimum, and then generally only during the

prayer times, when congregants are given a few seconds to pray silently before the pastor prays audibly.

The MHSC website notes that “the impact of television evangelists...with their slick and highly choreographed services, is felt in many congregations.”

Cornelius Platinga, Jr., describes this malaise in a 1995 Christianity Today article. “[C]ontemporary worship...fills in silences with an emcee’s patter or with snappy Christian music from which all the rests have been removed,” he states, adding his own note of warning, “A loss of silence is as serious as a loss of memory and just as disorienting.”

As Marlene Kropf says, “Nothing destroys Sabbath peace as much as thoughtless or excessive wordiness.”

The recovery of silence in missional worship

“Rather than envisioning worship as a time to learn or accomplish something,” Kropf urges worship leaders and congregants to “think of it as a retreat. Call to mind the millions of Christians around the world who are pausing to revel in God’s mercy and love. Breathe deeply.”

Silence needs to be recovered by the church and it would appear that the postmodern generation might be the most amenable to such a recovery, as many of them yearn for the transcendent in life and worship, and show disenchantment with a First-World-only orientation.

In his 1987 article “Hear Him: How to listen to God’s voice,” David Bryant notes that “much of the Bible focuses specifically on God’s concern for, action toward and involvement with, the nations.... Hopefully, every time we become silent before Scripture [as we do in worship], we listen for its global concerns. Otherwise, we may misunderstand God’s message altogether.”

Admittedly, postmoderns listen for other marginalized voices better than do many moderns.

Worship has been compared to art or narrative—which require silence (the ability to keep quiet) and stillness (the ability to keep from moving)—to appreciate, two attributes that many moderns lack or denigrate. But not so for many postmoderns. It is to such people that worship as an art form speaks.

Says this anonymous author of such worship:

It evokes mystery and brings us into wonder, awe and transcendence. This is what the next generation of worshippers is seeking. They are tired of entertainment, self-focused, chorus-driven worship. They want more. They want mystery, awe, wonder, transcendence. The rediscovery of worship as an art form that signifies the Christian reality of the relation between God, creation, history, incarnation and the ultimate re-creation of all that is, is a place where our new worship leader can begin.

And where are postmodern worship leaders and congregations to begin looking? To the early church, perhaps!

Arthur Paul Boers, a former Mennonite Church Eastern Canada pastor who now teaches theology at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Ind., writes in *Christianity Today* of the ancient offices of prayer being practised in such diverse Christian communities as Lindisfarne and Northumbria in England, Iona in Scotland, and Taizé in France. In total, they attract upwards of a half-million people each year, the majority of them postmodern youths who go to learn about prayer and worship in the early Christian tradition.

At Taizé, Boers describes the worship as consisting of “chants, short Bible readings...prayers and a prolonged silence of five to 10 minutes [no mean feat with thousands of youths]. This is a far cry from the beachball pyrotechnics at our denominational youth events. The emphasis is on simplicity...and evoking mystery and reverence.”

A far cry indeed!

—**Ross W. Muir**

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Creating ‘sounds of silence’ in worship

T.S. Eliot poetically asked, “Where shall the word be found, where will the word resound? / Not here, there is not enough silence.” In order for that criticism not to be levelled at our churches, Marlene Kropf of Elkhart, Ind.—who directs the Office of Congregational Life for Mennonite Church USA—provides the following five suggestions. They are adapted from her article, “Unhurried worship,” that appears on Leader Online.

1. Begin on Saturday night. In Jewish tradition, Sabbath begins the night before. Encourage families and individuals to deliberately slow down their pace of activity on Saturday evening. In quiet moments, spend a few moments reflecting on the week just past and pray for those who will lead worship the next day.

2. Plan the opening and closing moments. If a musical prelude is the tradition in your congregation, include a line of poetry or a centring prayer in the bulletin for those who desire a focus for meditation during the prelude. Occasionally ask people to enter or leave the sanctuary in silence. Let them feel the spaciousness of being together in God's presence without words to interfere.

3. Slow down your Scripture readings. Frame Scripture readings with silence. Let each word be spoken distinctly and lovingly. Once in a while, provide two or three minutes of silence for worshippers to reflect on God's call to them through the text. Select musical responses to Scripture readings that open a space for receiving the Word. Or choose a short refrain to sing after each portion of text is read, engaging the congregation in prayerful dialogue with the Scripture.

4. Avoid clutter. Pare down unnecessary words and actions. Try eliminating all words of transition and announcements of song numbers, relying instead on the bulletin or overhead. Such paring back may not only improve the sense of flow in your service, but also add more contemplative space in worship.

5. Let your prayer time be contemplative. Provide ample space for prayer. Instead of relying on many words, precede or follow the pastoral or intercessory prayers with silence, or include moments of silence within the prayer for people to offer their own petitions to God.

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