What Does Worship in the Vernacular Mean Today? (2 of 2)

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Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Lecture Series
Calvin Institute of Christian Worship
Grand Rapids, Michigan
January 2015

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In less than three years, we will be celebrating the fifth centennial of the Protestant Reformation. As is well known, one of the emphases of the Reformation of the sixteenth century was worship in the vernacular. Four and a half centuries later, in the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church conceded the point, and now there are vernacular masses in practically every language on earth.

But the original Protestant emphasis on, and use of, the vernacular must be placed in its proper context. Too often we Protestants think that Luther and the Reformers simply rejected the use of Latin and that the Catholic Church refused to use the vernacular out of mere meaningless traditionalism. But things are not that simple. On the Protestant side, Luther rejected the notion that all of worship should be in German, and the great Lutheran composers wrote much music to accompany ancient canticles, responsories, etc. still to be sung in Latin. On the Catholic side, in the sixteenth century Latin was not quite a dead language. It was dead in the sense that it was nobody's mother tongue. But it was still alive as a means of communicating across developing language barriers. Luther's 95 theses made such an impact in Germany because someone translated them into German and had them printed. But they were originally written in Latin, and the great reformers in lands such as France and Great Britain read them in Latin. Likewise, Calvin published his various revisions of the Institutes in tandem editions, one in French and one in Latin.

In a word, while the vernacular was a sign of the inculturation of the gospel in a particular land, Latin was a reminder that the church reached beyond the limits of that time and place.

But Latin was also a language of privilege. It was the language of scholars and, to some extent, of far-reaching trade. This meant that in insisting on the Latin mass, Roman Catholicism was also insisting on the authority of the hierarchy and the priesthood, while Protestant use of the vernacular was a means of sharing with others what was discovered and believed by the privileged leaders who read and wrote in Latin.

However, by the eighteenth century, the notion of worship in the vernacular was connected with the growing spirit of rationalism. Worship was seen as true and valuable only if the worshipers fully understood every word that was said, and every gesture, and every symbol. As a result, worship in the vernacular was often understood as purely rational worship—worship devoid of mystery. And, conversely, the Latin mass—in a language that by then was truly dead—was enshrouded in a sense of mystery not so much because it dealt with the great mysteries of the faith but because it was incomprehensible for most worshipers.

Now much of that polemic has been left behind. In a way, we all worship in the vernacular. Or at least, we think we do. But the vernacular is not just a language; it is also a concrete culture and worldview. And the question posed at the time of the Reformation still remains: How can our worship be, so to speak, in the vernacular, enculturated in a particular setting, using the expressions of one place, time, culture, and at the same time be catholic, joining us with believers of all times and places in a common

experience of mystery? And, even more, how can those of us who plan and lead worship, and whose theology, aesthetics, liturgical, and musical knowledge are part of a culture of privilege, plan and direct worship that uses that culture of privilege, not to retain privilege, but rather to share its bounty?

I do not know the answer. But as a starting point for a discussion I dare suggest some points at which the question needs to be addressed.

In the tradition in which I was formed and in which I still worship most often, the so-called mainline Protestant tradition, we like to think that we worship in the vernacular. But perhaps we are like those back in the sixteenth century who did not realize that Latin no longer meant what it did two hundred years earlier. For instance, we say that we worship in the vernacular because our hymns are in English. And yet, in a society in which the number of those who can read music is declining and in which growing numbers have limited literacy, we insist on hymnbooks with music, and we seem to care little for the brother next to us who has some difficulty moving from one bar to another, and who has no idea where he should go when instructions are more complicated. We say that our worship is such that anyone can join. And yet we give children "activity packages," with the clear implication that worship is not for them—and with the unspoken corollary that as the population ages and can no longer understand all that is going on, worship will not be for them either. We say that in our worship we approach God jointly as a communal act of praise, and yet we criticize those who put up the words in a screen and prefer to sing with our own individual books—without realizing that in many ways putting up the words on a screen is quite similar to what monastic communities did throughout the Middle

Ages, with their choir books placed on revolving stands. Is placing the words on a screen not simply the twenty-first century vernacular version of the old monastic songbooks?

But, on the other hand, similar questions may be asked of much of what many today call "contemporary worship." I experience this most often in some of the Hispanic churches I visit both here in the US and in Latin America, where there is no sense of worshipping with the universal communion of saints. Everything must be new, everything must be hip. Sometimes it would even seem that mystery is confused with noise.

There are two things we forget when we speak of the vernacular. The first is that the vernacular does not mean the disappearance of the mysterious. It means making sure that the element of mystery is where it belongs and not simply in mumbo jumbo, in words and actions whose mystery lies simply in our not knowing their meaning. Secondly, to speak of the vernacular means that, while we value our culture of privilege and what we have received and continue receiving from it, we are willing, first of all, to set some of it aside for the sake of the unity of the worshiping community. Thirdly, it means to be open to the values and discoveries of other, so-to-speak "vernacular" cultures, which at some points may have an advantage over ours—what is often called the "hermeneutical advantage of the oppressed."

Today's vernacular worship, like Luther's, must be deeply enculturated in today's various environments. But it must also acknowledge that there are many other vernaculars, and that it is in all of them jointly that the church catholic sings praises to God and to the Lamb. Praise God! Gloria a Dios! Laus Deo!