

ANCIENT FIRE

The Power of Christian Rituals
in Contemporary Worship

Ken Heer



Indianapolis, Indiana

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Introduction

O

pening my Sunday paper before heading out to church, I noticed a front page story that caught my attention. The article began:

The priest is wearing a collar but has ditched the bright robes of a cleric for blue jeans and a black shirt. There are still hallelujahs in the hymn book, but there's no organ. And the choirboys are missing in action. And while a sermon is in the offing, don't look for the preacher to ascend a lofty perch and deliver the word from on high. Soon, he will be stepping out in the middle of the congregation to take questions. This new take on the Sunday service isn't from some upstart evangelical church. It is an innovation from perhaps the starchiest of all Protestant denominations: the Episcopal Church.¹

You would have to be sequestered in a cave somewhere not to realize that dramatic changes are happening in the church. While local churches are structuring themselves more missionally and the future of denominations is being questioned, the changes most responsible for rocking the boat are changes in how we worship. Like any change movement, modern worship contains excesses and extremes, along with much that is good and beneficial. One thing we know, though—God *does* care how we worship Him.

At some point, every generation has to make peace with generations who have gone before. Each generation tends to think it is the pinnacle of civilization. We believe we are smarter than those whose organizations, systems, beliefs, values, and rituals we have inherited—not to mention those to whom we will leave our legacy. We carry this mindset into how we do church, often resulting in tensions between generational groups within the congregation.

Most of us have witnessed—or perhaps even experienced—the sting of shrapnel and the wounds of war that often accompany changes in worship patterns and practices. A quick casualty count will verify that friendly fire can be as deadly and devastating as enemy fire. Too often, the worship service—a time set aside for the Body of Christ to connect with God, encourage one another in our walk with Christ, and prepare us for battle with the Enemy—actually causes some people to feel disconnected from God and others and diminishes their ability to wage war against the world’s darkness.

Partially motivated by concern that some who feel disenfranchised by the worshipping church never experience this connection and encouragement in the body of Christ, I add my perspective to the hundreds of books written about worship, but with a focus on the *rituals* of worship and how the church might effectively use them to bridge differences and bind together contemporary worshipers.

Two basic concepts form the foundation for this book. The first grows out of a quote attributed to a French philosopher: “Take from the altars of the past the fire—not the ashes.” The worship rituals and practices passed down to us contain genuine power—the fire; but they also come with residual elements that retain little value—the ashes. We must retain the central essence of worship and leave behind the residue of worship elements that no longer connect people to God, though they may once have served a purpose. Jesus made a similar distinction when He said new wine requires new wineskins. Leaders of worship must exercise great care and insight to determine what is ash and what is fire. They must be careful not throw out the fire with the ashes. The critical responsibility of those who lead the church in worship is to keep the fire.

The second concept this book is founded on grows out of God’s assignment to Aaron and the priests to tend the fire on the altar. God said, “The fire must be kept burning on the altar continuously; it must not go out” (Lev. 6:13). God outlined His plan for the construction of the Tent of Meeting—the place where He would meet and connect with His people—and then prescribed the ritual that would take place at those meetings. The priests were given the responsibility for making it happen. The climax of this ritual was the offering of a sacrifice on the altar; the priests were to be sure the fire on that altar never went out. This requirement to maintain the perpetual fire is repeated numerous times in Scripture, emphasizing the seriousness of God’s command. The analogy to present-day worship is easy to see; we must not allow the fire of genuine worship to be extinguished in our churches.

I do not pretend to have the answer that will erase the significant tensions arising from generational worship preferences. However, while navigating some of the current worship whitewater, I do hope to offer a way forward—a means of separating ashes from fire and

expressing eternal values in ways that connect contemporary worshipers with God.

I personally dislike attempts to categorize styles of worship by placing them into boxes labeled traditional, contemporary, and blended. These labels may loosely identify a group's worship style, but the terms mean different things to different people, so they require interpretation, which often confuses matters even more. When I use the word *contemporary*, I am referring only to a point in time—current rather than ancient—and to people who reflect the characteristics and complexities of our present age. Regardless of worship style, our mission fails if we do not connect with our present age for Christ. We cannot be effective if we cease to be contemporary. If a church is to be missional, it must always be relevant. God is as relevant as this morning's sunrise, and the church must be too.

From Moses and the burning bush to the flaming tongues on the heads of the followers of Christ in the upper room, fire is a symbol in Scripture of the presence and power of God. John the Baptist said of Jesus: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Luke 3:16). Those who gathered in the upper room on Pentecost "saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:3–4). Fire is an image of vitality, but its very nature also implies a caution—fire can go out if not properly tended. Paul admonished believers to "not put out the Spirit's fire" (1 Thess. 5:19). The message God gave the ancient priests is the message He gives to contemporary worship leaders: The fire must be kept continuously burning—it must not go out.

The *Ancient Fire* must be present in our contemporary worship patterns and practices if the church is to exist as a vital force in our world during an age of unprecedented change.