

“God-Centered Worship “
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Worship is the expression of a person’s heart-felt love for God – it is not a program. For several years we have been striving to align our public worship services with that objective. For too many, a worship service is little more than a public religious program. For some worship is mainly a psychological “warm-up” for the preaching whether that preaching is evangelistic, aimed at the unconverted, or discipleship, aimed at the believer. For others, worship is mainly an emotional “feel good” interlude between hectic weeks with the primary criterion of success being how it made the worshippers feel. I won’t belabor the point except to conclude that when these or other goals are the aim of “worship” it seems that the public services devolve into “programs” rather than a corporate expression of heart-felt love for God. The intention of the leaders and worshippers in worship seems to make all the difference in what results from our corporate worship experiences. Too much of the time the corporate worship services I have attended, seemed like well produced (or not so well produced) programs with the primary goal being to please the audience. In the worst cases the primary goal seemed to be little more than providing the leaders a showcase for their musical skills. I know that worship, like beauty, is “in the eye of the beholder” but I continue to believe that worship leaders can prepare and “set the table” in such a way that people are drawn into the presence of the Lord rather than simply being impressed with talent and professionalism. I want to quickly add that I believe many of our current worship services are prepared in very appropriate ways to lead us into such worship... (In further describing the role of the music leader): “we want a person who is well grounded in orthodox theology and committed to the Word of God. **God reveals himself to us and it is his Word that informs the content of our worship.** We want a “chief musician” who will engage God in his Word every bit as much as a preacher or a teacher in our Sunday school must. Please don’t pass over this issue too quickly. This is fundamental to what we seek to accomplish in our worship. Just as in preaching or teaching, too many music ministers too quickly look for clever, eye-catching, or emotion-gripping techniques to produce a musical

experience for people rather than **seeking first of all to know what God wants to reveal to his people. We want a man who truly and consistently starts with the Word and builds our anticipated time of worship from that base...**

The “chief musician” must spend time with the text of Scripture that informs the worship. That text may or may not be the same one from which the preacher is preaching. I expect the “chief musician” to pray much (we have even considered making hours of prayer for our worship services a part of the job description). As I wrote above, when I think of the person who will oversee the music of our church we want, first of all, a person who deeply loves Jesus and is himself a worshipper of God. This cannot be overestimated in its importance. I also wrote, that we want a person who is well grounded in orthodox theology and committed to the Word of God. **Worship begins not with catchy tunes or clever lyrics or even with “quality” music – worship begins with revelation.**

In Isaiah 6 we have a dramatic demonstration of the primacy of **revelation** in worship. It is as God reveals himself that Isaiah responds. In verse 1 Isaiah “saw the Lord” and his response in verse 5 was “Woe to me!” In Verse 6 God reveals his grace through his action of the live coals and his words, “See this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away...”. Isaiah’s response, in verse 8, is obedience. Revelation and response, revelation and response - that is the pattern of worship.

The Psalms have for years been considered the church’s songbook and dare I say, “worship manual”. It is very instructive to see that in most cases the Psalmist’s worship centers on something about God. It is that something about God that informs and elicits the worshipful response.

What makes the church unique is that we are formed by the Revelation of God. We must be worshippers ourselves (not merely performers or even presenters) and we must understand our role in leading others into the worship of God – the God of specific character and conduct. “We live in an age and a culture that want instead to turn worship of God into a matter of personal taste and time, convenience and comfort. Consequently we need the biggest dose of God we can get when we gather for worship on Sunday morning – to shake us out of this societal sloth and somnambulism and summon us to behold God’s splendor and respond with adoration and service

and sacrifice.” (From Marva Dawn, *A Royal Waste of Time*) This is why in our services I want songs that present God in clear specific ways along with songs that direct our response. “The church’s worship provides opportunities for us to enjoy God’s presence in corporate ways that take us out of time and into the eternal purposes of God’s kingdom. As a result, we shall be changed – but not because of anything we do. God, on whom we are centered and to whom we submit, will transform us by his Revelation of himself.”

In the late 19th century London there were two highly popular preachers. One of them was known for his eloquence and the other was Charles Spurgeon. A certain man heard both preachers the same day. Of the eloquent preacher the listener said, "My what a great preacher he is." Of Spurgeon he said, "My what a great God he has!" We want people leaving the times of worship saying "What a great God we have", not "My what a great service that was."

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia defines worship as “the dramatic celebration of God in his supreme worth in such a manner that his worthiness becomes the norm and inspiration of human living. Defined in this way worship (1) places God at the center because of his worthiness; (2) avoids the tyranny of subjectivism; (3) allow for the reexamination of the self in the light of God's knowledge of us.”

"The way to evaluate worship then is not by whether we 'like it' or 'get something out of it' but by how effective it is in drawing our attention away from ourselves and onto God." (Rubel Shelley *In Search of Wonder*)

Mark Horst wrote, *“As soon as we come to worship looking for and expecting an experience, we have violated the most basic principle of (worship). We easily become religious aesthetes capable of judging the entertainment value of a church service while remaining unaware of the reality it can open us to. Unfortunately for us, when our worship becomes self-conscious rather than God-conscious, it points not to God’s reality but (only to) our own.”* (Mark Horst as quoted in Anderson p76)

We must resist the "postmodern" demand for experience being the central issue. David Hesselgrave wrote, “The change (in our culture) has been both radical and rapid. So radical that absolute truth is out and relative ‘truths’ are in. Substance is eclipsed by style; sequential learning is passé; and serendipitous discovery is prized. Intelligence Quotients have been replaced by Emotional Quotients as the best measure of success... As far as the church is concerned,

these changes help to explain why, among younger Christians especially, **spiritual experiences are increasingly prized and Christian doctrines downgraded**; why bible studies sometimes degenerate to sharing 'what the text means to me'; and why churches must devote so much money and time to entertainment." (page 3 Vol 11 No.2 Ministerial Forum – Fall 2001")

Our age seeks the experience. The experience becomes the test of reality. The Bible calls us to seek God and the experience is the by-product. But whether we experience what we wanted to experience or not, we are still to seek God. Faith calls on us to keep seeking him whether we "experience" anything or not. We can create experience, we can deliver the music and the rest of the program with such pathos that people have an experience -but an experience of what? We don't CREATE true evangelical experience, we must present God and a true meeting with God creates true evangelical experience.

Too many times I have heard people, following a concert by some well-known "Christian" artist, express what a great experience it was but when I listened to what made it "great" I didn't hear anything about God. **God wasn't worshiped, the experience was.** Music, especially, has the power to evoke emotions but too often those emotions are not directed toward God but toward ourselves – the music made us feel something such as happy, glad, sad, triumphant, guilty, etc. I too often feel that people judge a worship service as "good" or not, based on how the service made them feel. We get worship all wrong when **we** become the object rather than God. But true worship is about God not us.

"Let us remember to direct our worship to God. It is entirely appropriate to sing to each other about God, about his word, and about heaven. There is certainly an important place for encouragement, fellowship and teaching in our assemblies, but let's not forget that we gather primarily to praise God! As Charles Wesley put it, "We become lost in wonder, love, and praise". (P43 Mike Cope in In Search of Wonder by Lynn Anderson)

Worship is not a feeling we conjure up through clever words or emotionally manipulative music but is a response to Who God is and what he has done. "Worship is directed toward Someone... That means that worship is not primarily directed to meet our needs, producing spiritual feelings, or conveying a particular experience. The right worship of God will affect us deeply, but this is not its goal or its orientation. In worship we focus on God rather than on

ourselves...."In order to know how to worship him (God), we need to understand our relationship with him. We must understand who he is - his holiness, his greatness, his glory, his steadfast love and compassion... Therefore the key to better worship in a congregation is not necessarily more teaching on worship but **clearer proclamation of who God is and what he has done for us in Christ**, and teaching about our response - conversion, repentance, faith and a deepening Christian commitment."

"Many Christians think of worship as primarily a subjective experience, the goal of worship being to cultivate a certain spiritual or emotional state, to work up feelings of love, gratitude and awe toward God. A time of worship is evaluated according to whether it succeeds in producing such conditions. This is not the biblical view of worship. In scripture worship is **something** expressed, given, or shown." Kinzer:
(in October 87 Pastoral Renewal)

We celebrate **God**, we worship **Him**. We don't just worship, worship or celebrate, celebration - that would be silly. Usually if someone said we are having a party, we would ask what is the occasion. Worship or celebration demands an occasion – the occasion is getting a glimpse of God. "Sir, we would see Jesus!" The Apostle Paul wrote, "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the of the Spirit's power so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom but on God's power." That same objective and methodology must be true in our worship.

"Worship should be objective, not subjective. The late J.B. Pratt defined objective worship as 'the attempt to influence God and please him, or at least somehow to get into actual touch with Him.' Subjective worship, on the other hand, he defined as the 'effort to influence the mental state of the worshipper.'" I lion Jones in [A Historical approach to Evangelical Worship](#) p173

We want God to be both the subject and the object of our worship. Questions we must always ask are: Does the plan for our worship clearly reflect that God is the subject? What is it about God that we want people to reflect on today? What specifically is it about God that will inform our praise today? Do the elements of the service allow us to make God the object of our worship?