

Worship in American Evangelical Churches

Dr. Jerry Nelson

www.Soundliving.org

Between September of 2009 and February of 2011 I visited nearly 50 churches in south/southwest area of metro-Denver, Colorado. Admittedly this is a small sampling drawn from a very specific part of the country. I don't pretend that it represents all of evangelicalism in America but I do suspect it represents more than just Denver.

Churches visited:

Evangelical Lutheran ELCA	Sovereign Grace
Lutheran Church Missouri Synod	Episcopal
Southern Baptist	Anglican
Conservative Baptist	Calvary Chapels
Independent Baptist	Evangelical Free
Baptist General Conference	Christian Reformed
Reformed Baptist	Bible Church
Evangelical Mennonite Brethren	Evangelical Covenant
Evangelical Presbyterian	Independent Community
Presbyterian Church in America	Independent Charismatic
Presbyterian Church USA	

My bias as I visited was that there are Biblically mandated elements of corporate worship (Acts 2:41-47; Hebrews 10:25) which include:

- The Word – Read aloud (1 Timothy 3:13), Preached (2 Timothy 4:2) and applied (Nehemiah 8:8))
- Sacraments – (Matthew 28:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24-26) Lord's Supper and Baptism The sacraments (ordinances) are a means of grace (but not salvific).
- Prayers – (1 Timothy 2:1,8) of corporate praise, thanksgiving, confession & petition The worship and catechetical nature of public prayer.

- Praise in song – (Acts 2:47; Colossians 3:16) by the congregation (not just a few musicians)
- Offering – (1 Corinthians 16:2) as an act of corporate worship

Other biases I carried were:

- A desire to allow for Awe/Reverence – Transcendence as well as Imminence.
- A concern with beauty – Our God is beautiful – Everything from the heart of the worshipers, the worship we offer (music/songs, etc) even to the facility in which we worship should strive to reflect the beauty of our God.

Observations of worship in Denver Churches in 2010-11:

- With some good exceptions (noted further below) I found too many churches minimizing or disregarding many of the basic elements of worship:
- The Word is preached better than I expected but seldom read.
- The sacraments are observed infrequently and when they are they seem to have little place or importance in the worship.
- Prayer is truncated at best.
- The “praise” (music) sounds much the same everywhere (Contemporary Christian Music addressing a narrow range of theological issues and Christian experience) with varying degrees of expertise. And in only a few churches are many congregants actually singing.
- Offerings are sometimes not received at all or received with no effort at connecting them to the worship of God.
- With exceptions, the Anglicans and Lutherans seem to appreciate all the elements except the preaching of the word, which is less likely to be substantial in content (more homilies than sermons).
- With exceptions, The Reformed and Presbyterian churches appreciate more of the elements of worship than other “evangelical” churches.

- In all of the churches the trend seems to be to CCM praise with the liabilities noted above and below.

As noted above there are several concerns about the music:

- There was a narrow range of theological concepts articulated in the lyrics. Compare that with a typical hymnal topical index.
- There was a narrow range of Christian experience reflected in the lyrics (and music) – celebration and romanticism almost exclusive of sorrow, reverence, meditation, etc.
- There was a man-centered emphasis in many songs. “My worship, my love, my response,” etc. consistent with the romanticism noted above.
- Apparently little regard is shown for the catechetical nature of songs.
- There seems to be even less regard for objective beauty; it seems too many have accepted that “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder” or “ear of the listener.”
- There seems to be a greater concern for the people who aren’t there than the ones who are – apparent confusion over pre-evangelism and worship. Greater concern with what is accepted (popular) than what is acceptable (regulative principle?).

Where in Denver can one find substantial exegetical preaching, regular observance of the biblical elements of worship (see above), strong congregational singing (not just the up-front vocalists), orders of service that encourage reverence as well as celebration, and an attention to beauty reflected in the worship setting, music, and other elements of worship?