

Developing Scripture-Driven Worship: Some Practical Considerations

In recent years, many churches and individuals have engaged in fierce debates concerning the shape of the weekly gathering of the body of Christ. One group could be characterized by a conviction that the primary aim of the worship service should be to offer evangelistic appeals to non-believers. Accompanying this belief is a desire to provide an atmosphere that would be inviting and non-threatening for this segment of the population. Therefore, this mindset seeks to make the environment as seeker-friendly as possible by employing the same musical styles and even the same language of the secular world.

While this first group might begin with the question, “What would please the person who does not come to church?” another group would ask, “What would please God in our worship?” While this may be manifested in many forms and ways, the underlying motive for the second group is clear: to be driven by a desire to please God in all they do. While we may acquiesce with this desire, the question then rises of how this will be fleshed out in the life of the church. I would like to suggest various principles that, when applied to our weekly services, would direct us closer to the end of shaping all our thoughts and practices concerning worship towards this God-centered end.

Principle 1: Develop the Importance of the Proclaimed Word

It is certainly true that while many churches have championed the necessity of the Word as it relates to doctrine, the practical use of Scripture is usually found with alarming scarcity. We must immediately jettison from our minds any notion of the preaching and worship being divorced in our practice. It is not as though when the musical section of the service is over we are through worshipping. It is also incorrect to

think that only the times of preaching should be Word-driven. The pattern of the early church was to set aside much time to the preaching of the Word (Acts 2:42) and certainly they used songs as an aid as one of the means by which the Word of Christ was to dwell with believers (Col 3:16)

The role of the pastor should be to maintain a strong, expository pattern during the times of preaching. If a well-developed sense of gathering the sermons around the Biblical text is not developed, the result will be topics that are of interest and of natural inclination to the pastor and the result will be to preach sermons to the congregation but not speak God's Words. When expository sermons are the norm, difficult texts are dealt with and the full counsel of God is presented to the flock (Acts 20:27).

The worship leader's job is to view everything he does with a passion for scriptural proclamation. Throughout the planning and execution of the service, the person given the primary responsibility of leading the congregation must consciously involve scripture to engage the congregation with the texts. When the primary focus is on Scripture we will develop a greater sense of God's presence through His proclaimed Word and not a reliance on spiritual "feelings" that can be artificially generated in hope of sustaining our faith and practice.

It is desirable for the worship leader to develop a sense of "expository singing". This term would characterize the practice of showing how songs used relate to scripture. What makes the times of singing viewed as gathering around the Word is a conscious application of the scriptural truths in the context. Many times we sing phrases that are filled with scriptural truths, but unless we are shown that they come from scripture, we neglect the benefit of being shaped by the Word. Whereas a preacher may say many

statements that are true and noble, unless he shows how these things are founded upon Scripture, it is not expository preaching and his congregation is in danger of being shaped by the preacher's ideas and not God's.

Practically, the worship leader must be adept enough with Scripture to select songs based upon their Scriptural truth and not merely on the basis of musical effectiveness and must connect the songs with Scripture as he leads. The end result will be pointing people to the God of Scripture and not to the particular song being used.

Principle 2: Develop the Importance of the Read Word

While the word is to be proclaimed through expository preaching, it is also important to underscore the value of reading portions of scripture by itself. God's Word is powerful enough to achieve its desired effect without comments. It is most regrettable that in churches that espouse the necessity of biblical inerrancy often fail with respect of reading the Word publicly. The practice of the early church was to read sections of scripture as they gathered (1 Timothy 4:13). In many traditions it is customary to read a section from the Old Testament, Gospels and Epistles every Sunday.

Here are a few things to keep in mind while executing Scripture reading. First, care must be given to select readers who are articulate and can read well. Second, the person doing the reading must prepare ahead of time and give attention to the important words and phrases. Third, when the person understands the passage, they will be able to read in a way as to give sense to the reading (expository reading). Lastly, it is advisable to begin with smaller passages and later build up to longer ones as the congregations grows accustomed to this practice.

Principle 3: Develop the Importance of Congregational Singing

In almost any church songs have risen to become a vital part of their worship experience. A brief look through the Psalms will reveal the inclusion of song as a means of offering thanks and praise to the Redeeming God. But the question arises: What shall we sing? The answer can be briefly given from Paul's words: Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs. There should be conscious attention to the inclusion of the Psalter in worship. The Hymns can be described as human compositions that teach doctrinal truths. I believe the last category, while remaining the most difficult to define, is best understood as personal songs of testimony accounting the individual's conversion experience.

First, when the body of Christ gathers for worship, it is important to encourage the whole body to sing. A healthy expression of the church at worship is for the whole church to be participating. While we employ the gifts of those who have been gifted by God through song, we should avoid the mentality that the congregation is being sung to. It is also necessary to note that those who are redeemed have a song to sing. Martin Luther has been quoted as saying that "if a man will not sing, he does not know Christ". Second, choose songs based upon their content rather than for their style, but be careful to employ a variety of styles as a means to enjoying all of God's creation. Last, be aware of the style and ask if it takes prominence over the text or if it encourages the text. Only those songs that encourage the text should be used.

Principle 4: Develop the Importance of Prayer

Like singing, prayer during the worship service should not be viewed as one professional person doing the work while the rest of the congregation listens passively.

The whole congregation must be engaged in the process. This element was also vital in the early worship of the church (Acts 1:14, 2:42, and 12:12).

In elevating the importance of prayer several things should be considered. First, time should be devoted in the service for prayer. It is a holy moment when the Spirit, who lives within us, intercedes on our behalf to the living God. Second, those who would pray should prepare ahead of time. We need to avoid mindless ramblings. Third, confession is an element that should be included regularly. The person praying cannot forgive sins, but should direct the congregation to fall completely upon the grace and mercy of Christ. Fourth, elements of thanksgiving should be a mark of our prayers. Last, it is appropriate and desirable to include the needs of the congregation.

Conclusion

While we may differ of the application of these truths, they are vital to a healthy worship environment for the body of Christ. It has been said that for a Christian, if he or she should be cut, they would bleed Scripture. For our gatherings, when we evaluate any section of the service, the Scripture should clothe and permeate every aspect. Our desire is to become like Christ. When we shape our services to His desires and fill them with His Word, we are drawn closer to the end of sanctification and grow into the powerful church we are called to be.

Bibliography

- Authentic Worship in a Changing Culture*. CRC Publications: Grand Rapids, MI, 1997.
- Bennett, Arthur, ed. *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975. Reprint, 1994.
- Dawn, Marva J. *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1995.
- Dawn, Marva J. *A Royal Waste of Time*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999.
- Frame, John M. *Worship in Spirit and Truth: A Refreshing Study of the Principles and Practice of Biblical Worship*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1996.
- Frame, John M. *Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1997.
- Hustad, Donald. *True Worship: Reclaiming the Wonder and Majesty*. Wheaton, Ill: Hope Publishing, 1998.
- Kendrick, Graham. *The Source*. Buxhall, Great Britain: Kevin Mayhew Publishing, 1998.
- MacArthur, John. *The Ultimate Priority*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1983.
- Martin, Ralph P. *Worship in the Early Church*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1964. Reprint, 1998.
- Old, Hughes Oliphant. *Worship: That is Reformed According to Scripture*. Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1984.
- Praise! Psalms and Hymns for Christian Worship*. Darlington, Great Britain: Praise Trust, 2000.
- The Baptist Hymnal*. Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1991.
- The Celebration Hymnal*. Nashville, TN: Word Music/Integrity Music, 1997.