

Christ Church Communique



The Monthly Newsletter of Christ Church

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Healthy Church Worship

There are few subjects in the contemporary church that have sparked as much debate and controversy as that of worship. Sadly, much of the rhetoric has little to do with a biblical understanding of worship and, rather, revolves around personal preferences concerning musical style. To be sure, so fuzzy is the thinking concerning worship today, that many use “music” and “worship” as synonyms. In the minds of many “worship style” has to do with the type of music that is featured in a church (“traditional hymns” versus “contemporary praise choruses”) and the kinds of instruments that are played in leading the music (organ and piano versus guitar and drums).

Of course, this fuzziness in thinking leads people to set the musical (“worship”) part of the service over against the “talking” (sermon) part of the service. For example, we recently had a couple visit Christ Church for corporate worship who exclaimed during the follow-up guest reception: “We certainly enjoyed the sermon very much, but we prefer contemporary worship.” To their minds, music constituted “worship,” and the sermon was something altogether different.

Sadly, the overwhelming majority of people today select a church on the basis of its “worship” (read: “music”) style, with relatively little consideration given to its theology or spiritual health. Consequently, most churches place considerable emphasis upon their music program; usually making the hiring of a “music and/or worship pastor” a top and highly competitive priority.

Equally heated is the debate concerning the intended audience for worship. Common today are those churches that insist in one way or another that they are “a church for people who don’t like church.” On this view, Sunday mornings are designed with the unsaved person in primary focus. Many such churches describe themselves as “seeker” churches, which provide “worship services” for those who are unbelievers and who wish to explore the Christian faith in a comfortable and non-threatening environment.

Invariably, the “worship style” of the “seeker” church is contemporary and progressive, with not a few “seeker” churches resembling somewhat of a rock concert, along with all

the lights, bells and whistles. The messages or “talks” (they are seldom referred to as sermons in “seeker” churches) tend to place a high premium on the practical over the propositional. Hence, the words, “How to...” make frequent appearances in the titles of “seeker” messages, and the talks are usually devoid of any language that could be possibly construed as inflammatory, harsh, judgmental, or condemning. The messages are primarily intended for “seekers” and, as such, tend to be softly evangelistic.

That the “seeker” church is focused on catering to unbelievers was strikingly demonstrated in December 2005, when a number of “seeker” churches across America closed their doors on Christmas morning, which fell on a Sunday, because, as one Bay Area pastor put it, “seekers won’t be coming on Christmas morning and that’s who we are here to reach.” Inasmuch as the Sunday morning “seeker” service is geared primarily for the unbeliever, “seeker” churches will sometimes provide mid-week studies and ministry opportunities for those who are already Christians so that they may “grow in their faith.”

Because the overwhelming majority of people decide to attend a church on the basis of its music (they would say, “worship”) style, and the “seeker” presentation of the Gospel tends to be rather innocuous, “seeker” churches tend to be large in number and shallow in spiritual maturity. Interestingly, national longitudinal studies have repeatedly confirmed that most “seeker” church numerical growth (92-95%) is as a result of transfer growth, and that those who “come to Christ” are usually presented with a thin and inadequate presentation of the Gospel, resulting in little real or sustained life-transformation.

In keeping with their primary objective of attracting unchurched people to the church, “seeker” churches will frequently publish their attendance statistics in community publications. The thought here is to present the church as exciting, successful, and as the kind of place that lots of people are flocking to, so perhaps, you might want to come and check us out, too.

Those who happen to grow or hunger to grow in Christ usually find themselves restless, unfulfilled, and feeling as though they are “missing something.” Eventually, the spiritual void becomes too great, and those seeking maturity in Christ move on; accounting, in some measure, for the recent decline in the popularity and number of “seeker-driven” churches. The “seeker” movement is also waning because the philosophy of ministry that informs and directs its efforts has been vigorously criticized. In the end, the “seeker” church tends to worship *worship*, rather than God.

In an effort to pursue the popularity and numerical growth generated by “seeker” churches, and simultaneously avoid some of the shortcomings and criticisms of the “seeker” model, a growing number of churches have adopted a slightly modified version of the “seeker” approach known as the “community-oriented” or “community-friendly” church approach. The philosophy of ministry is a hybrid of sorts, as it seeks to retain the emphases of the “seeker” church on numerical growth and Sunday morning

evangelism, while providing slightly greater spiritual depth and challenge. The “community-oriented” church attempts to avoid tilting the orientation of the service too far in the direction of catering to the “seeker,” and strives to put on offer a type of “worship service” that has both the believer and unbeliever in view, and to which church members can feel comfortable inviting their unsaved friends and neighbors.

In keeping with the blended audience and objectives of the “community” church, the “worship style” of the “community” church is also frequently blended. Tamed praise choruses and traditional hymns set in a more contemporary musical style are the standard fare. Like the “seeker” church, the “community” church will often feature “special” music, which is North American church slang for “performance” music, offered by a choir, ensemble, or soloist. And like “seeker” churches, “community” churches tend to avoid the word “sermon” and list this part of the service as a “message” so as to not be too off-putting for visitors.

The messages at “community” churches tend to be blended, as well; offering something for everyone. Emphasizing the practical, their messages may be either topical or expositional, but they tend to skate rather thinly and widely through the biblical text, and make use of analogies, examples, and humor, so as to not lose the interest or attention of the unsaved. The more austere biblical language may be retained (in contrast to the “seeker” church), however, the overall tenor and tone is generally encouraging, uplifting, and enthusiastic, and seldom confrontational, hortatory, challenging, or “hard,” regardless of the selected biblical passage. Usually, the message will offer insights and application points for both believers and unbelievers to consider.

Like the “seeker” church, and for the same reasons, “community” churches find announcing their attendance figures to the community an irresistible temptation. However, unlike established “seeker” churches, “community” churches are generally more modest in size, while wishing to be much larger and perceived as growing. Hence, “community” churches frequently embellish their attendance figures, and sometimes grossly exaggerate actual numbers, in an effort to draw attention to their church as “*the* place to be.”

“Community” churches tend to produce Christians who are somewhat better grounded than those in “seeker” churches, though on the whole, they remain theologically and biblically naïve, and spiritually immature. Few “community” church attenders sense any need for serious spiritual growth or accountability, for they attend largely for social, rather than biblical, reasons. Friendships, events, and good feelings keep them coming back. It is “their” church; not His church, that they attend. In the end, while “seekers” end up worshipping *worship*, “community” church attenders end up worshipping themselves.

Musical style and intended audience focus—such are the main touch points in the contemporary debate over “worship.” But what does the Bible actually say about

worship? How is worship to be offered? And who is the intended audience of worship? Such are the questions that are addressed in this issue of the Communiqué.

Toward a Biblical Definition of Worship

The task of constructing a biblical definition of worship is made difficult by the fact that the scriptures nowhere define the term. In fact, there is no Greek or Hebrew word that directly corresponds to our English word *worship*. Furthermore, nowhere do the scriptures develop the topic of worship in the same way as they do, for example, justification by faith. Rather, the Bible depicts worship, commands worship, or describes worship, and most often worship is presented as a verb and not as a noun. Given this, perhaps we might say that biblical worship, like biblical love, is better described than defined.

To exhaustively examine the topic of worship as presented throughout the sweep of the Bible would be a project well beyond the scope of this brief article. However, when the testimony of Scripture on the subject of worship is examined, several derivatives emerge that help us to bring the topic into clearer focus.

First, only God is worthy of worship. Worship is concerned with the worthiness of the object being worshipped. Given the fallen state of all creation, including people, and the holiness and perfections of God, only God is worthy of all possible praise, and honor, and glory. As such, it should come as no surprise that the Bible consistently affirms that it is God and God alone Who is to be worshipped. At times, this takes the form of an exclusive command (e.g., 1 Chr. 16:29; Ps. 29:2; Luke 4:8; Heb. 12:28, etc.), whereas at other points, it takes the form of prohibiting the worship of anything or anyone other than God (e.g., Dan. 3:28; Matt. 4:9). In worship, the worshipper acknowledges the awesomeness, the splendor, the truth, and the unsurpassing glory all that makes God, God.

Second, only born again believers can worship. Jesus told a Samaritan woman that the time had come when true worshippers would worship the Father “in spirit and in truth,” and that such was the only form of worship that God could receive (John 4:23-24). Inasmuch as the Holy Spirit is the “Spirit of truth” (John 14:15-17) and abides only in those whom God has born again from above through His Spirit (John 3:1-8 cf., John 14:17), unbelievers cannot worship God. As such, whatever is taking place on Sunday mornings that has unbelievers in view, it cannot be “worship,” for unbelievers are totally incapable of worshipping. It may be described as a gathering of non-Christians for the purpose of mass evangelism (e.g., “seeker” churches), or it may be a gathering of Christians and non-Christians for purposes of encouragement, instruction, and mass evangelism (e.g., “community-oriented” churches), but it cannot be worship if the unbeliever is an intended participant.

This is not to say that unbelievers should be barred from attending worship services, but it is to say that worship services are not the proper starting point for introducing unsaved people to the Christian faith. It is also to say that unbelievers should not be invited to worship services without prior discussion as to what corporate worship is (the whole response of born again believers to the Person and essence of God) and for whom it is intended (God, and not people). Such is absolutely critical, for corporate worship is unlike any other human experience in that it is not intended for the benefit of the one who is worshipping, but for the One Who is being worshipped.

Unfortunately, an increasing number of Christians have come to erroneously believe that they ought to feel comfortable in inviting their unsaved friends to church, and that in doing so they are fulfilling their responsibility to share their faith. However, this is completely wrong-headed, as the scriptures affirm that the most basic, normative, and effective means of evangelism is the personal, one-on-one sharing of one's faith (e.g., John 1:35-51). Worship services ought to be just that—worship services designed for believers to worship God and exalt Christ, and not evangelistic crusades designed to reach “seekers” or attract crowds.

Third, worship is bound to neither time nor place. Unlike the temples and feasts of the Old Testament, which prescribed a specific place and time to worship God, in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul said that believers are to present their bodies (i.e., the whole person in his or her entirety) to God as living sacrifices, which is the believer's spiritual worship (Rom. 12:1-2). In other words, worship involves the whole person, at all times, in everything that he or she does. In the short, worship is bound up with the way one lives. As such, the church gathers on Sunday mornings to corporately engage in what each believer ought to have been doing individually throughout the entire week. “Worship” is not confined to an hour of two on Sunday mornings, as though this time is somehow set off from the rest of life when one is supposedly not worshipping. No, we gather to *corporately* worship God as an extension of our individual worship of God *every* moment of *every* day, and in *everything* that we do. Biblical worship is *constant* worship. As such, if you are not studying the Word, praying, singing hymns and spiritual songs in your heart to God, fellowshiping, etc., throughout the week, then you are missing the true meaning of corporately worshipping on Sundays.

Fourth, worship is God-centered. God is the intended audience for worship, not the congregation. Worship is not directed to those who come, but for the God Who is there. We may say that corporate worship is “consumer-driven,” as long as we realize that it is God, and not the congregant, Who is the “consumer.” As such, what makes worship worshipful, is not the music, or the aesthetics, or the novelty, or the beauty, or the emotions, or anything else that humans can evaluate, but its object—God. Sadly, in its Sunday morning gatherings, most churches have unwittingly come to view God as the facilitator, the platform people as actors, and the congregation as the audience. This understanding needs to be completely turned on its head. Remaining with this analogy, more properly, the platform people are the facilitators, the congregants are the actors,

and God is the audience. We gather not for ourselves, but for Him. We gather not to receive (though the true worshipper *always* receives something in worship), but to give. Few comments reveal the heart of the unregenerate or misguided “worshipper” as easily or quickly as: “I didn’t get anything out of that,” following a worship service.

Fifth, worship is Christ-exalting. God’s design is that His Son, Jesus, should be honored even as the Father is honored (e.g., John 5:23). Paul wrote that it was in Jesus that the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form (Col. 2:9). As very God come in flesh, Jesus is deserving of all honor, praise, and glory—He is worthy of our worship. And as God exalted His Son and gave Him a name above all names (Phil 2:9-10), so, too, we are to exalt the name of Jesus in worship. The pattern for this was established by Thomas who offered to Jesus his worship, which Jesus accepted and did not refuse (John 20:28). And from Revelation 5 on, we read that Jesus is to be worshipped. In worship, Christ is to be exalted...He is to be lifted up as very God and adored and praised because of Who He is.

Conclusion

We could say more, but this is sufficient to provide us with a proper biblical understanding of worship. Worship is not an attitude, or a sentiment, or merely an activity. Rather, worship is the very way in which believers constantly live out their lives before God, in Christ, through His Spirit. It is the all-consuming practical reality of loving God with one’s whole heart, whole soul, and whole mind, and loving one’s neighbor as oneself. And in corporate worship, God’s people gather in Christ, to God, and for God, to be and offer together what they have been and offered individually every moment of every day throughout the week.

As such, corporate worship is directed toward God, not man. Corporate worship is intended for believers, not unbelievers. Corporate worship is God-focused, not “seeker” or “community” focused. Corporate worship is Christ-exalting, not self-celebratory. Corporate worship is so preoccupied with God’s glory, and Being, and essence, that mere humans and human preferences completely fade away, and only He remains in all of His magnificent splendor, and with awesome weight and consequence.

Come...*now* is the time to worship!

Grace and peace,

Robert W. Evans

P.S. Those interested will benefit from ordering the sermon series entitled, “On True Worship,” by Dr. Evans, available through the Christ Church tape/CD ministry.

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A Heart for the Lost



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