

Some More Thoughts On The Philosophy And Mechanics Of Leading Worship

By Kevin Twit, September 2000

Emotion is not a bad thing! But it is not the goal of worship, it is not an end in itself. Worship is a formative experience (whether we like it or not!) and we need to be aware of this in our planning for worship. Do we communicate that only certain emotions are appropriate in our worship? (The Psalms bring the whole range of emotional experience before God)

Do we communicate that the Christian life is always fun and exciting or that living as a disciple is “a long obedience in the same direction” (as Eugene Peterson puts it)? Our worship should not communicate something false about what it feels like to be a Christian. Again the Psalms are a helpful guide in this - they do not romanticize the Christian life. This does not mean that worship is always somber and heavy, but it should not always be light and familiar either. I am arguing for a more full demonstration of the character of God reflected in our worship. What we often see is that each group reflects part of who God is, one group focuses on joy, one on majesty, one on awe, and one on “Abba” intimacy - yet all of these things needs to be part of our worship!

Bodily posture matters and so does the mood of the service. The Psalms are filled with directions for our bodies in worship and if we don't work to make this a part of worship, then we communicate that mankind is merely a mind, or bundle of emotion (i.e. we become Gnostics who deny the importance of “physicalness.”) People sing differently standing than they do sitting. I am not going to tell you what to do when, but I do want you to think about it and include body posture in your thinking about worship.

Corporate worship is not a bunch of individuals worshipping in the same room! In our highly individualistic culture we need to be aware of the tendency for people to view even corporate worship as a privatized experience where the only value the other people in the room have is to help the individual “lose himself or herself in God” (whatever that means!) We should pray corporate prayers, read scripture, and confess our faith using creeds, together. This is one limitation of songbooks (unless you include corporate prayers or creeds in your books - which I don't think I've ever seen.)

We don't want to be tradition-driven but we don't want to be cut-off from tradition either! The Protestant reformers were not trying to reinvent worship they were very self-consciously trying to go back to the early church worship, by removing medieval corruptions. The Holy Spirit has been working in His church for thousands of years and we want to include the best of all eras. (Lately I think we are seeing a “hymn-snobishness” creep into our circles, and we must be careful not to say that the Spirit isn't inspiring any good music anymore!)

A call to worship can be very good for establishing in people's minds what we are doing now. It reminds us that worship is not something we “wump up” it is a response to His call. I find it helpful (when I can find the opportunity) to read and pray the gospel into my heart before trying to lead worship. But we must remember that not everyone may be where you are when you begin the worship - your role is to lead, not just to express your own heart.

Worship needs to be Christ-centered. This doesn't mean that every song needs to be a gospel presentation but the service as a whole needs to strongly communicate that

everything we do is made acceptable by Christ! There are many praise choruses that have no reference to Christ or His work. We can use these but they must be blended in a context in such a way that people don't think they can come into God's presence through their own desire or sincerity or willpower! It is appropriate to tell God what you want to do (as long as it's true and not a lie!) in worship "I want to praise you Lord!" but beware of crafting a whole service around what we want to do. These songs are best as responses to God's revelation of His character, and His promises. There are too many worship services that are really about us declaring what we are going to do. Taking vows (which is what you are doing when you sing a song like that) has a place in worship, but it should never be done lightly.

Worship is not just the singing! The sermon, the prayers and the sacraments are worship too!

Think theologically about the order of the songs. I think it is great to let people know what the theme is at the beginning of the service and to plan songs, prayers, and readings that will develop the theme. I order songs in a way that makes *theo-logical* sense. For example, Rom 2:4 says that God's mercy is designed to lead to repentance and so sometimes I will structure a confession of sin after a song declaring the gospel. But sometimes I will have a song declaring God's character first which then leads into confession as we see who He is. There is no one "right" order but I do think we should think about it rather than just picking a bunch of songs we like and haven't sung in awhile. Looking at older liturgies can give you some great ideas regarding ordering the elements in a worship service.