

Making “A Worship Service” A Service Of Worship

(Thoughts For Consideration And Discussion)

Randy Pope

When asked about my view of today’s contemporary worship, I am hard-pressed to determine how to answer. Most would assume my response would illicit a defense, arguing for one style of worship over another. The truth is, I appreciate and embrace traditional, contemporary, and blended worship.

It is my belief that the discussion should not be so much about style, but rather purpose. The question to ask is, “What is the church’s leadership trying to accomplish?” Assuming the correct goal, the only question left to be answered is, “To what degree does the church accomplish that goal?”

In this brief article, I am specifically addressing the musical portion of the church’s worship service. We could easily focus on other portions of the service as well, but I will limit my thoughts here to the use of music and song during worship – and even in this discussion of music, I will not address the content of the song’s lyrics.

So what is the appropriate target for which to aim? Paul Tripp gives us insight into the answer when he writes:

“Each worship service should be guided and shaped by the words of Romans 11:33-36. The last verse here reads: ‘For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him the glory forever.’”¹

Tripp goes on to say,

“The final verse is a prescription for every worship service...life is not about us. It is not about our wants, our needs or our feelings... It is not about our satisfaction and contentment. These things must not rule our hearts, because when they do, they place us at the center of our world and make it all about us... Corporate worship calls us back again and again to remember and to celebrate. It calls us to remember that all that

¹ Paul Tripp...info?

exists, including us, is from God and exists through Him and points to Him. He is the beginning, the center and the end of all things.”²

To put it in simple terms, the purpose of worship is to “illuminate God’s presence” – thus to put a spotlight on God’s honor and glory through the rightful use of His means of grace.

Up against such a lofty target for which to aim, there is a constant temptation to choose a lesser intent. It can be extremely subtle and even unnoticed by the best of Christ followers who are sincere worshippers. The temptation is at least two-fold.

First, there is the temptation to design the worship service with the priority of satisfying present worshippers and/or attracting new worshippers – instead of focusing on the previously defined goal. This is typically accomplished by putting attendees wants ahead of their needs.

When I began pastoring in 1977, the needs and wants of Christians were very close. For the most part, what they wanted, they needed, and what they needed, they wanted.

I can remember when starting our church, the best of our believers would caution me when I would open my message with a story to prepare them for the teaching of God’s Word. Their caution to me would be, “Be careful Randy. You should be starting the message with the words, ‘Open in your Bible to...’”

Though I didn’t then and don’t now agree with their admonition, I so appreciate their concern that their pastor-teacher remained biblically focused. Today, in most Christ following churches, believers are content to have God’s Word sprinkled throughout the sermon, as long as it is relevant to their perceived needs, is well communicated, and even, if it is humorous. Gospel centrality is not a major concern, as long as the message is applicable, especially to their felt needs.

I used to tell our church’s leadership team that we could double the size of our church relatively quickly simply by turning the programming knob of ministry more toward felt needs (wants) than to our people’s true needs (often, not felt). Four decades after I began preaching, believer’s needs and wants could not be much further

² Paul Tripp...info?

apart. What Christians need, they often don't want. And what they want, they often do not need. And what they most often want is described by words such as "entertaining", "inspiring", "encouraging", and "spiritually and emotionally uplifting". Songs which attendees love most and want sung most often will be those which meet the above descriptions.

Instead of our focus today being on what the worshippers offer to God from their hearts through song, it is far too often evaluated by what the worship leaders on stage offer to "the audience."

The second temptation church leaders face is to turn a worship service into a participatory worship concert. To borrow a statement from the popular podcast, "The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill",

"We have chosen to mimic culture instead of creating culture."³

Though the context of this quote is used regarding a different application, it certainly describes well much of today's worship. Worship services have mimicked concert performances and worship leaders have mimicked concert performers.

I mentioned earlier that the purpose of worship could be described simply as to "Illuminate God's Presence." In order to accomplish this, worship leaders must seek to "Eliminate Human Distraction." This includes both visible distractions as well as audible ones.

So what are the items in a worship service that have the potential to be distracting? Each church's leadership needs to carefully make wise discernment between that which is truly distracting to those who are sincerely seeking to worship, versus those things which are not distracting, but merely not one's preferences.

Allow me to give a few suggestions which might serve as a beginning point for a church's leadership to evaluate. This is certainly not meant to be an exhaustive list. In fact, it should be viewed as only a starting point.

³ The Rise And Fall of Mars Hill. Which episode?

1. Use of IMAG during singing to show close ups of musicians and singers instead of displaying only the words of the songs.

As mentioned previously, the purpose of worship, and thus of singing during a service of worship, is to put a spotlight on God's honor and glory. This should happen whether the song be didactic or one of praise or prayer.

Do the images of a drummer or a guitarist or an individual singer, moving from one to the other, aid or distract the worshipper from accomplishing his or her goal as previously defined? If they serve as an aid to most worshippers, it is certainly something the church leadership should hold on to. If not, such use of images during singing should be eliminated.

2. Alternating between lead singers who are mic'ed in such a way that his or her voice and presence is elevated above the other singers, so as to bring attention to that person (all eyes on that leader).

Does such attention draw one's focus (at least momentarily) away from the target of worship? Would blending all the upfront singers serve to eliminate attention being given to the premier vocalist – enabling worshippers to better focus on the Lord and the truths being sung? If so, why not eliminate that distraction?

3. The dramatic use of smoke and lights drawing attention to its effect, rather than to the Person we worship.

Smoke, and especially lighting, can certainly be used effectively to create an attractive and inviting environment. But the question that has to be asked by the church's leadership is, once again, what are we trying to accomplish? If the smoke and lights draw attention to their presence and dramatic effects (no matter how attractive or appreciated they may be), good worship leadership must be prepared to remove this distraction.

4. Song leaders excessively singing over and between the words the congregations are singing.

The question becomes, does such draw the attention of the congregants to the upfront vocalists rather than the Recipient to whom the song is being sung or the truths of the songs themselves.

The issue for the church leadership should not be “What sounds the best?” but rather “Is this a distraction for large portions of faithful worshippers?”

Compounding this is the practice of mic’ing the worship singers and band with such loud volume that the congregation misses the opportunity of hearing the voices of the family of God.

Let me make it clear, there is nothing wrong with such practices. The real issue is whether or not this is a human distraction which could and should be eliminated.

5. Worship leaders dressing in such a way so as to cause the congregation to be thinking about how stylish, attractive, or even sexy the musical leaders are rather than focusing on the Lord and God’s truths.

This can easily happen when the worship leaders are dressed in an extreme style or even a very different way from those in the majority of the congregation.

Once again, assuming modesty, there is nothing wrong with a unique dress style. But again, the question must be asked, “Does our worship leader’s dress style distract us from the primary goal of our worship service?”

6. Applauding Songs Which Seem To Especially Connect With The Congregation.

It has become common in contemporary worship services to often applaud after outstanding solos and even after certain congregational songs. In many of these churches, even preachers are being applauded after highly appreciated sermons.

Such applause is often valued in the name of expressing appreciation for the special giftedness of the singer or preacher or for the song or message itself.

The danger of such a custom can easily be overlooked. Even as an appropriate expression of appreciation to God as the gift-giver, worship leadership has to discern the greater good weighed against the greater danger.

Once applause for song and/or sermon is introduced, it quickly becomes the norm. Now the temptation, for both the one who selects the songs as well as the preacher who preaches the sermon, is to make choices of content and style based on the strength of previous applause meter readings.

If such be the case, we are once again back to the practice of mimicking the culture of a concert, more than that of a service of worship. When this takes place, we have lost the battle to choose to address our people's needs against their wants, when the two often contradict one another.

Having said all of this, I would certainly agree with most, that there is nothing inherently wrong with the use of applause in a service of worship. This is because there is no way to know the motives of one's heart. So once again, it becomes the job of the church's leadership to determine what will bring the greatest glory to God – which again, is the highest priority of a service of worship.

7. Lead singer's expressiveness and movement, or the lack thereof.

Lead worshippers of a church service have a very challenging assignment. Anything they do which is viewed as an extreme to the norm of their church family is likely to create a distraction for large numbers seeking to focus on worship. This includes their physical movement, or their lack thereof.

There was a day in the early life of the church I pastored, where the lead singers would rarely move, and I mean rarely move at all! From the moment a song began, until it ended, their feet seemed stuck to the floor and their arms fixed to their sides. Many of the leaders rarely demonstrated even a pleasant smile, or any expression of any sort. This lack of movement was so extreme that it became a distraction to many.

In the contemporary worship of today, the pendulum in many churches has swung to the opposite extreme. And by the way the term "extreme" describes something very different, depending on how a particular church describes its norm. For instance, a "charismatic church" would view its norm much differently from a church describing their worship as "high church".

So, what is perceived as a distraction varies from one church to another. A traditional protestant church may typically have a choir and only one worship leader "up front". The worship leading may consist only of using his or her arm or arms following a repetitive pattern, seeking to keep everyone singing together in unison. Even this can be done in such an extreme way that many will be distracted, finding it hard not to become focused on the worship leader, rather than the One whom they came to worship.

A church's worship leadership may well create unnecessary distractions by having a stage full of worship singers being highly expressive (such as by raising or waving their arms) while the culture of the church is such that only a small percent of the worshippers would be equally expressive.

It is in situations, such as these I have described, where the church's leadership must ask and answer some very important questions regarding their worship leaders.

- 1) Is this a practice which is normative to them when worshipping in the congregation, or only when on the stage?
- 2) Do they find it a bit awkward being this expressive, yet willing to do so knowing that such is expected of them as a worship leader?
- 3) Do they enjoy the idea of being noticed on the stage, perhaps believing that their demonstrative manner will draw attention to themselves?

Even if all the worship leaders on stage are naturally expressive and have no desire to be noticed, it still may be wise to let one's propensity to overt, physical expression, be taken into consideration when selecting the worship team for each given week.

Churches should, and often do, find it wise to pick musicians which display the diversity found in the congregation, whether it be age, sex, race, or ethnicity. Why wouldn't they want to do the same regarding the worship leader's natural expressiveness in worship?

Christians, especially new and immature believers, can easily feel outsiders when everyone "up front" is greatly different from themselves. But most importantly, the church's leadership should want to eliminate as many distractions as possible for all those seeking, first and foremost, to worship their awesome God.

Again, this is not "the list" but "a list" to merely get each church's leadership started in doing their own evaluation. The bigger point is this, "If there is anything we find in our worship service that distracts from bringing glory to our God, we must seek to eliminate it."

I so long to see the church discover how to keep the honor and glory of God its overarching goal. I long to see the church willing to create its own culture which avoids, as much as possible, anything which distracts from that end. In so doing, the church will become far more relevant and attractive to true Christ followers.

Based on all I have said, I will probably be asked, “But what about attracting non-believers to our churches?” Such a question reveals the weakness of the modern church’s philosophy of ministry as it relates to reaching the unchurched. It is the job of believers to reach non-believers every day of the week where they live, work and play. For worship to be the primary plan to attract non-believers to God’s Kingdom, is to cripple God’s plan to have the saints doing the missional work of the church every single day of the week. All of this certainly points to the absolute necessity to have a church philosophy of ministry oriented to “equipping the saints to do the work of ministry.”

A second question I will be asked is, “Can’t God-glorifying worship services attract non-believers?” Of course, they can. It’s been known throughout the years as doxological evangelism. But it is not God’s plan A to bring about the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

What a wonderful call, as leadership of the Lord’s bride on this earth, to keep struggling to figure out how to most obediently and therefore, effectively, marry what takes place during the Lord’s Day worship to the ministry of the church from Monday through Saturday.

What a privilege! Making the bride of Christ as beautiful as she can be before the return of her Groom, our Savior. This will best be done with a truly God honoring worship service on the Lord’s Day and an equipped congregation doing the work of ministry the rest of the week.