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The word “worship” is thrown around all the time in popular Christian culture. Twenty years ago, you never would have heard of a university offering a worship degree. Now the term “worship” is used frequently and has become commonplace. Whether it’s the “worship leader” or the “worship” (AKA music) before the message or the “worship service,” the use of the word “worship” has been revitalized. In fact, there is even a local radio show entitled “Worship” that plays Christian pop music. If you surveyed a church and asked the members to define worship, you’d get a wide range of responses. Everyone has heard of “worship” but few know what it truly is.

Donald Whitney, in his book *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* states that: “Worship is the God-centered focus and response of the inner man; it is being preoccupied with God” (88-89). Worship is the holy, appropriate, unavoidable response of the Christian to God’s character, deeds, and promises through every facet of his or her life. There are two particular avenues where we perform worship that I would like to focus on: worship in daily living and worship within the church service.

Worship, first and foremost, must be a lifestyle. God is more concerned with our everyday lives than He is with what we say and do in church. Worship ought to permeate the life of the believer; it is what differentiates Christians from non-Christians. Romans 12:1 is oft quoted; it reads: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship.” Every thought, every action, every word should be subjected to Christ’s authority.

True worship in everyday life looks like sincere obedience motivated by a deep love for God. In Malachi 1:6-14, the people of Israel are rebuked for their half-hearted obedience of the Lord’s decrees. They continue to offer sacrifices to God but they give him the crippled, blind and diseased animals instead of their best. God says in response to this, “Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you,” says the Lord Almighty, “and I will accept no offering from your hands.” In Zechariah 7:4-12, God rebukes His people telling them to “Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other” instead of fasting and observing religious feasts. When we fail to honor God with our private acts of worship, He rejects our public worship.

This is true for every Christian. Communal worship on Sunday is impossible without the practice of worship by the individuals in their own lives throughout the week. While essential in the life of every believer, a lifestyle of worship is even more essential in the lives of Christian leaders. One cannot lead where he himself has never been. Pastors, elders, church musicians, choir members, and worship leaders all must live lives of integrity; an attitude of worship must be constantly cultivated and lived out daily. One cannot expect the joy and yearning for the Lord of Psalm 82 without having prepared his heart outside of the church service. Psalm 82 stands as a clear reminder that our hearts and hope should be constantly fixed on God, and that our worship transcends the Sunday service and carries into every daily, pedestrian act of our lives. As 1 Corinthians 10:31 reminds us, we are to “do everything to the glory of God.”

Within church services, the same definition of worship applies. Because we have entered into a relationship with the Almighty creator through the blood of Jesus Christ, we respond with penitence for our sin and thanksgiving for God’s grace and good blessings. Our lives should overflow with joy; we do not act as the world does. As Matt Redman puts it in his book, “…the unquenchable worshipper is different. From a heart so amazed by God and His wonders burns a love that will not be extinguished. It survives any situation and lives through any circumstance” (1). When we as individuals live daily as unquenchable worshippers, our corporate worship is most meaningful and pleasing to God. Corporate worship is a time of unity, of edification and encouragement. As a worship leader, my ultimate goal is to encourage believers to true worship in all aspects of their lives so that the worship service is a communal response to what God is doing in the lives’ of the congregants. Worshipping believers not only encourage one another, but they teach and admonish each other with songs, hymns, and spiritual songs (Colossians 3:16).

While as Christians we are always growing and learning and certainly need not know everything, it is important that we have at least a rudimentary, working-definition and understanding of worship if we are to honor God in our communal worship services, and we are growing in our understanding of what God desires of us concerning worship.

Worship has been going on since the beginning of time. The ways that people have worshipped are as diverse as the people themselves. God’s artistic tastes expand far beyond that of any human individual; God sees and accepts all worship done in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). I believe our worship on earth ought to reflect the diversity of the body of Christ even as it ought to reflect the truth of God’s Word, as Bryan Chapell writes, “We tell the gospel by the way we worship” (19).

There is a place for every artistic expression of truth in the worship of God. Interpretive dance, painting, sculpting, videography, photography, and music along with countless other forms of art are acceptable in God’s sight when they are done with the proper attitude at the appropriate time. Singing a funeral dirge at a wedding service would not be fitting much as doing a congregational rap of a Lecrae song in a liturgical Lutheran church would not be appropriate. Likewise, sharing an artistic masterpiece in church to motivate congregation members to buy your art is inappropriate.

When planning the use of creative elements in a service one must take into consideration several things. Firstly, we must consider what truth is portrayed by the art. If it is a song, what do the lyrics convey about the person or character of God? If it is a piece of art, how does this visually represent and express the truth of God in a fresh way? With every element, we must also ask the question “Is the message of this piece consistent with Scripture?” In my own criteria, the element not only has to convey scriptural truth, but it must also do it in a clear, powerful way. I don’t want to present something ambiguous to the congregation and ask that they use it in the worship of Almighty God.

Next I ask the question “Is the element fitting for my congregational context?” As mentioned earlier, people have personal preferences and comfort zones. And while I want to stretch people and push them outside of their comfort zones, I don’t want to disregard their desires. Each and every member of a congregation has different tastes, but, generally speaking, a congregation is most comfortable with specific styles of worship. Not only that, but each congregation has different needs. My goal when choosing creative elements is to identify the style of worship of the congregation and use elements that expand their comfort zone while meeting the stated needs of the congregation, after all, the use of creative elements in worship is to honor God and edify the congregation.

This past year my church was going through the book of Acts and focused on the story of Pentecost for a couple Sundays. The church is fairly conservative and while the style of worship is moving toward blended, it is definitely still on the traditional side. For the weeks that the sermon was on Pentecost, I introduced the song “Holy Spirit” by Jesus Culture. I believe that the song is a poignant and pure cry for the presence of God in our lives; it was fitting in the context of the sermon series, and it spoke truth into the lives of the congregants. I didn’t do the song like Jesus Culture does it, though. I knew my audience and knew that style would be inappropriate and distracting from the message of the song. Instead, I introduced the song to them on the piano. I first let them listen to it, and then asked them to join in. In this way, I was sensitive to their discomfort and unease over a new song without allowing them to stay in their comfort zone.

Finally, I consider the quality of the element. While I don’t want to judge or condemn anyone who sincerely desires to bring an offering to the Lord, I also know that God desires and deserves our very best. As Malachi 1:6-14 (noted above) reminded us, God doesn’t want our blind and diseased sheep. He wants our very best. When we give God less than that, we devalue Him and the edification of His church. Doing anything in a half-hearted or unprepared manner leads to confusion and distraction during the worship service. Even if a particular artist is sharing his best, it is not wise to incorporate any creative element, musical or otherwise, that would distract congregants from focusing upon the Lord.

In a worship band setting, the best way to avoid being a distraction is to practice hard. Songs should be planned, but there also should be such a level of musicianship and familiarity with music that other songs outside of the “set list” could be played if the appropriate situation arises.

While man-made creative elements are wonderful tools in worship, the use of Scripture is even more important in the worship of God. Through Scripture, God reveals His will and works the process of sanctification in our lives. The psalms have been the hymnbook of Judeo-Christian worship for centuries. The psalms reflect the depth of all human emotional experience and therefore serve as a fitting expression of personal laments, prayers of thanksgiving, and praises to God. Of course, all of Scripture is to be drawn upon in our worship of God.

Scripture is very powerful; it is God breathed (2 Timothy 3:16)! Whether it is in paraphrases of God’s Word like “Revelation Song” by Jennie Lee Riddle or “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” by Martin Luther or in the explicit singing of Scripture whether that is the kids’ song, “Romans 16:19” or a Gregorian chant, when God’s Word goes out it does not come back to Him void (Isaiah 55:11). Many songs draw from the great well of Scripture in such a way that brings the entirety of the story of the Bible together (i.e. “Your Grace Is Enough” by Matt Maher). Congregational responsive readings are yet another way to incorporate Scripture into worship services.

I aim to use Scripture in every service that I lead; who am I to say that my words and the words of other humans are more fitting in His worship than the very words inspired by His Spirit? If a song is taken from a particular passage of Scripture, I will always try to introduce the song with a reading or allusion to that Scripture. I also love using responsive readings. Not only are these readings engaging, but in them we together recite the truth of God’s Word before Him and to one another.

Prayer also plays an important role in the worship of God. Prayer is a crucial means of communication with God. For there to be relationship, there must be communication. Prayer, in its purest sense, is the expression of hopes, hurts, petitions, and praises. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 reminds us to “pray without ceasing” and the psalms composed for public worship at the temple are all prayers. Certainly our worship of God should incorporate prayer!

I seek to incorporate prayer into every service. Usually the services that I facilitate will begin and close with prayer. I find it fitting to bookend the truth of God’s Word and the praises of God’s people with the public conversation proclaiming who God is and asking for His aid to live as we ought.

Though I have only begun to touch on a wide range of subjects in this sphere of “worship.” There are so many more things that could be said, so many more applications that could be made. I avoided the use of too many specifics because I believe that each and every church is different. While the context and needs of every church may be as different as Christian pop artist Chris Tomlin and Christian art academician Jeremy Begbie, God’s character and desires concerning worship never change. Sincere worship of God is our response to His truth first and foremost; when that is at the forefront, styles and means will fall into place.

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