

Leading in Prayer: The Power and Importance of Worship and Worship Leadership

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There is a great deal of confusion regarding leadership in worship today. On the one hand there is a certain obsession with it that is susceptible to the trappings of big time production and glamour. On the other hand, there are those in the “worship wars” who rightly question and critique this glitzy approaches, and often opt for an opposite extreme which minimizes the role of leadership in public worship. In this study, we will look briefly at the biblical basis of public worship as well as its import in the life of the Church. We will also consider such questions as purpose and style to arrive at a well rounded position.

Basis for Public Worship

The discussion regarding worship naturally begins in the garden of Eden. It was here God created man in his image, and because of this, man was intrinsically made with not only the capacity, but also the propensity toward worship. Worship is something that no other creature besides humans can do. Worship is the fundamental action of all humanity. Man was made in relationship to God with a powerful bent toward adoration.

With the advent of sin through eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, man’s gravitational pull toward worship was not diminished, but rather just sidetracked. We did not cease to be worshippers, but rather we began to worship anything and everything but our creator. This act of channeling our God intended affections toward anything else is what the Bible calls idolatry. An idol is anything upon which we lay our deepest affections other than our creator God himself. From the fall and the subsequent curse in the garden forward, the question was never if or whether we worship, but simply a matter of what we worship.

It is this fallen state of mankind that necessitates the plan of redemption and simply put, the plan of redemption is to bring idolatrous humanity back into a God worshipping relational intimacy. It is the renewal and reorientation of human faculties that the plan of redemption in Christ aims to bring back into harmony. In fact it is mankind and the whole creation now groaning that is being renewed by the Gospel of Christ. Through the Christ event, Jesus’ incarnation, teaching, death, burial, resurrection and ascension, God is purchasing a people for himself who will worship the father “in Spirit and in truth” because the father seeks such to worship him (John 4:21-24).

Common Worship

The worship life of the visible Church (those baptized of us alive on earth) can be broken into two basic categories, that of “common worship” and “corporate worship.” By common worship I mean the entire and holistic life of the church as both a body and individuals as we live for Christ on a daily basis. It is the worship that pervades every facet of life and is to be distinguished from “corporate worship. Corporate worship is limited certain times when the community comes together to actively listen to the preached word and respond in faith and repentance.

Common worship is important because it is life encompassing. It is not mere expression with the mouth and body. Common worship is expressed in obeying God’s commandments, praying without ceasing, being a productive employee, practicing repentance in our daily lives, serving other people, forgiving those who wrong us, not judging others, acting in mercy, and anything that accords godliness and the Gospel in our lives.

It is often the case that the corporate worship or expressing outward acts of piety toward God such as public prayer, singing, preaching, church attendance, tithing, and various other acts of formal worship have become definitive for worship. In fact, when most Christians speak of worship, and worship leadership, they often refer to the formal Sunday service, if not even more narrowly the music itself. While referring to the formal gathering as worship is correct, thinking of worship so narrowly is not. Our corporate times of worship as the Church are not worship in and of itself, but paradigmatic--they set the tone for the rest of life. So while all Church gatherings and services are “worship” not all “worship” is church gatherings. True worship in spirit and in truth begins in the corporate connection with God where he says “my children” and we say “Our Father.” But for it to have true biblical foundation, it must necessarily bleed into every corner of life.

Corporate Worship

More and more church leaders today have been becoming increasingly aware of this, that worship is not merely church meetings, much less music. However in the midst of this, a new mistake has now arisen in regard to the corporate gathering of the Church. While worship is not limited to our formal gatherings, this often leads to the false presumption that there is no difference between common worship and corporate worship. Recently I was at a small conference on worship where a “worship leader” from a prominent west coast evangelical mega-church stood up and suggested exactly this, namely that there was no difference between the worship we do privately and in daily life, from that which goes on in the congregation. Sadly however, biblical evidence is not on his side. We certainly appreciate the well meaning intentions, but from the early parts of the Old Testament all the way through the New Testament, there is something uniquely inspired about when the Church gathers corporately.

In the Old Testament, the congregation (*adah*) or assembly (*qahal*) of the people of Israel is where God met them. Here in the wilderness, God’s glory cloud dwelt in the midst of the gathered assembly (Exod. 40:38). He commanded the building of the “tabernacle” or more literally rendered “dwelling place.” The Hebrew noun *mishkan* is from the Hebrew verb *shakan* “to dwell.” The significance of this idea in the Old Testament is that the Creator God now revealed as the covenant God, had now come

down to dwell among his people. It was in the most literal sense Immanuel, “God with us.”

This crosses over into the New Testament with the incarnation of Christ. The newborn Christ in Matthew’s Gospel is a fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14 when he says in 1:23: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel (which means, God with us). John applies this theology of the tabernacle to Jesus’ incarnation when he says, “and the word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory.” The term “dwelt” means literally to “tabernacle” or to “pitch a tent” among us in reference to the Old Testament tent of meeting imagery where God’s glory dwelt.

But the theology of God dwelling in the here and now with man is not limited to the incarnation, but is extended to the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2. Here the disciples go to await further direction from the Lord as they pray together in the upper room. It is then that the Holy Spirit comes upon them and overcomes them with tongues of fire. The wording of Acts 2:2 is important because it is meant to reflect the imagery in the story of God’s holy presence filling the tabernacle and temple (Exod 40:35 & 1 Kings 8:10); “And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.” The implications of Acts 2 is that the gathered church is the place where God dwells. God’s gathered body is his new holy temple.

This idea works itself out again and again. Shortly after Acts 2, we come to the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. They devise a lie, execute it, and then come into the assembled body of the Church to propagate it. We must understand that they had committed the sin well before this, but according to Peter, when they come into the formal gathering of God’s people, they have not lied to men, but to God. For this reason, both in turn are struck dead just like Aaron’s son’s Nadab and Abihu when they burned strange fire in the presence of God (Lev 10). In a similar case, there are abuses in Corinth when taking the Lord’s supper (1 Cor. 11). To this Paul responds that some are sick, and even some are dying for not discerning the body and blood of the Lord (11:27-32). His point is simple; not “discerning the body and blood of the Lord” means not recognizing the spiritual presence of God among the gathered community when taking the sacrament.

We could cite more, but this is enough to demonstrate what Calvin referred to as the “real presence.” What this means is that while all of the Christian life is worship, there is something uniquely blessed and qualitatively different about the gathered body of God’s people together. There is a sense in which God is present with all men, his general omnipresence. Then there is the common special presence of the Spirit inhabited believer. But more than this, there is a more intense and personal “real presence” of the savior in the gathered body of the Church. This is patterned after the concentric courts in the tabernacle and temple of the Old Testament. As one ventured further inward the circles rightened to higher levels of holiness as one neared God’s real presence over the ark of the covenant. This is what we see now in the New Testament Church, the holiest place of all being the formal gathered body of Christ for worship and judgment.

In the New Testament, this is naturally a serious thing. Both the people in Corinth and Ananias and Sapphira actually lost their lives over it, because they treated

the corporate worship, which is holy, as a common thing and insulted the spirit of grace (Heb 10:29)! Corporate worship is then special worship because Christ shows up in a uniquely tangible way. This is not to suggest that we can sense Christ with our sense faculties. Flesh is flesh and Spirit is spirit. In the same way, Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu committed this offense because they too could not physically sense the divine presence of Yahweh. So too, the corporate worship of God is not to be taken lightly nor is it to be confused with the common everyday worship we practice in our daily lives. While we need to treat all of life as an act of worship, we must still understand the unique context of the gathered family of God where he meets his church on a much more grave, personal, and intimate level. This then naturally has big implications for the act of persons and teams leading in worship, particularly in liturgy, prayer, and music.

God Speaks to Us and We Listen

Because when we gather together for corporate worship, that Christ is in our midst through the presence of the Holy Spirit, this requires a peculiar posture for us. It requires attentiveness to God. In the corporate gathering, we come to be disciplined by hearing the word of God read and expounded through preaching. One of the central confessions of ancient Israel was the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4; "Hear Oh Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." The call is to "hear" meaning to have not just auditory attentiveness, but a listening of the mind and will that results in obedience. God does not want us to merely understand him, but to act in compliant and joyfully willing obedience.

When we come together for worship, the reading of the word of God and its proclamation is empowered by the presence of the Holy Spirit. Because of this spirit empowered presence, when we come to hear the word of God preached, it is as the very word of God to us. In John 16:8 Jesus says that when the Holy Spirit comes "he will convict the world concerning sin, righteousness and judgment." This was not to imply that the Holy Spirit would do the preaching for us nor would the Holy Spirit interpret it for us. Human beings with imperfect minds are called to struggle with the word of God and articulate it as best they can. Jesus commanded the Church to preach the Gospel to all nations. But John 16:8 means that he did not mean for us to do it alone (Acts 1:8). It is the Holy Spirit that is the power in, through and behind the spoken word. When a broken human being proclaims the Gospel of Christ, it is the Holy Spirit who acts upon the mind and will to convict it of "sin, righteousness, and judgment."

This is most true of the corporate worship of the church of Jesus Christ. When we are gathered in his name, he is in our midst. The corporate worship of the Church is however not a monologue, but rather a divine dialogue where God not only speaks to us as we listen, but in the most profound sense, our God attentively listens as a divine gentleman. But invoking God's presence and attention to hear our communication to him is the most grave and solemn privileges. Therefore we need to consider the gravity of this privilege.

We speak to God and He Listens

When God made man, he set him in the garden to walk and commune with him. God knew man intimately as did man, God. This covenant communion was of course broken by man's sin, but the entire unfolding drama of redemption, played out on the pages of the bible since, is God's compassionate program to restore this communion. It is the story of God saying "Adam where are you?" to a wayward humanity. Because of the Cross, Jesus has torn the veil and conquered sin that separates us from God reopening the way for intimacy and communion with God, particularly for those who will place their faith in his work on the Cross.

But there is a great deal of confusion in regard to worship today. Much of modern church services have become showy and irreverent. When I say that, I am not speaking of "contemporary" style as opposed to "traditional" style. In fact some traditional styles with big organs and long flowing robes are just a dated version of the very same vanity and pomp.

The New Testament makes abundantly clear that all that what God is looking for first in worship is people! Secondly he is looking for an attitude of the heart, namely that those who will worship him, do so in "spirit and in truth." The only criteria for that is a properly oriented attitude of submission to God. God is far more mature than us than to sullen himself with the immaturities of the "worship wars." God is never concerned with accident in worship, but always the substance, that is the posture of the human will of in worship. It is for this reason, that we need to be very mindful of our heart, mind and attitudes as we come together for worship. When we come together for worship we are approaching God and requesting his attention. More so, when we address him, he listens to us, and so what comes from our mouth should be both thoughtful and glorifying. When I say thoughtful, I mean personally reflective, not witty as if we need to impress him. There is nothing we can say that does impress him. But what does honor him is a posture of humility that seeks his glory.

Understanding Worship Music

There is also great deal of confusion regarding worship music today. To begin with, there is the constant temptation to classify church music (of every sort) as "worship." We have already shown the problem with that thinking, namely it is a myopic view of worship. Worship as we have said is life encompassing. But again, there is still something eminent and exalted about the corporate song of Christ's Church. Paul encourages the Ephesians 5:19-20:

19 addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, 20 giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ

Music was a core practice of both the Synagogue and the early church. Here Paul affirms this as not just a practice, but as part of a posture toward both the Lord and each other. The act of singing is fundamentally praise to God for his great and gracious works as we see here in Eph. 5:20. There is no more simple way to express adoration and practice humility than singing to our creator and savior.

But another common misunderstanding we now tend to make is to compartmentalize our understanding of various parts of Christian worship and devotion. It is common to speak of “prayer” and “worship/song” and “prophecy” as various aspects of the Christian life. Maybe in some cases they can be, but when we return to the bible, we see the sharp lines between them suddenly blur.

As we read through the Psalter itself, we see poems that begin with direction on which instrument to use. We see prophetic appeals being made. At the same time these poems are prayers. When we turn to some of the great writing prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah or even the book of Lamentations we come upon a great deal of metered poetry and song, yet in the form of prophetic oracles. In fact many scholars have noted how music was a staple of the prophetic office an ancient Israel well demonstrated by King Saul’s confrontation and participation in the musical prophesying of the “sons of the prophets” (1 Sam. 10:5).¹ And we must finally be reminded that the history of prophetic ministry in the Hebrew Bible is in fact the history of “preaching!”

My question and point is this: Are the Psalms and many of the prophetic oracles of the Bible poetry, prayers, prophecy, preaching, or songs? The answer is Yes! There is very seldom a sharply drawn line between them. While we may speak of some as more clearly songs and others as more clearly oracles of judgement or of salvation, or a song of lament, and so on, the genre does not restrict the wider spiritual application.

This is then instructive for us as we think critically and theologically about music worship ministry, that it is in fact a form of leading in prayer! When the worship leader (and team) rise to lead the congregation in song (regardless of style), it is to address God in prayer. This song is like the Psalms, poetry, prophecy, preaching the Gospel, and most of all prayer all wrapped into a melodic petition. It is a responsive address of God as our Father and we as his Children. This is to suggest that it is a confession of faith too!

The problem with the idolatry surrounding the contemporary worship music scene is not that we take it too seriously, but that we do not take it serious enough. We are more persuaded of its importance because music’s idolatrous importance to our culture, rather than because prayer is important to God. Sure there is something to be said for cultural contextualization because it must be intelligible to be useful. But embracing the idol of culture for the same reason as the culture is idolatry.

As the worshipping community of Jesus Christ, we need biblical values to be our guiding principles. Leading in corporate worship, from the liturgy, to the preaching, to the musical prayers we sing to God (regardless of style) is important for this reason, and this reason alone: Christ is in our midst and is both speaking to us and listening to us.

Summary

In summary we can then make the following suggestions. We need to avoid two extremes in our approach to worship today. The first is the man-centered approach that

¹ Music was a standard practice in the prophetic schools for preparing to prophesy. Note: 1Sam. 10:5 After that you shall come to Gibeath-elohim, where there is a garrison of the Philistines. And there, as soon as you come to the city, ***you will meet a group of prophets coming down from the high place with harp, tambourine, flute, and lyre before them, prophesying.***

sees the human being and his or her “felt needs” as the driving principle. As in any relationship, the relationship suffers when it centers around the needs or desires of one over the other. Of course God does not have needs the way we do, and so when we worship from a man centered approach, it is ultimately us who suffers; we suffer from a lack of true intimacy with God because he resists the proud and gives grace to the humble.

On the other hand, we need to also avoid the hyper-spiritual nonsense that suggests that worship is only about God. This sounds theocentric on the surface, but in fact, it is just a perverted form of self aggrandizing. Most who purport this type of stance are those who actually “prefer traditional worship” and refuse to give any honest thought to the need to communicate clearly and understandably in the contemporary culture. These will normally argue that traditional worship is more holy and transcendent and therefore the “right way” to approach God. What this is in fact is a projection of their own preferences on God’s character. It is a spiritual immaturity of putting their personal preference first, rather than the needs of a new Christian or unchurched person to be engaged and understand with joy. Paul’s argument in 1 Cor. 14:2-4 how a tongue which is unintelligible is not only useless but also self-serving, is an equally useful indictment on proponents of highly liturgical and traditional worship styles that are difficult for the average modern unchurched person to understand. The inherent problem with the so called “theocentric” position is that as much as it claims to honor God, it arrogantly presumes to speak for God. As we have seen with the woman at the well (John 4), the Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18:9-14) and many other Old and New Testament texts, is that what God seeks is the heart posture of worship to God, not the accident of it. This pseudo theocentric approach pretends to express God’s intent in worship as the lie of “excellence” and “transcendence” when in fact God’s primary concern is to see those who are created in the image of God bow in worshipful submission to him. The error is actually putting a style of worship before the human being that God wants engaged in worship. Thus these proponents use the rhetoric of “dumbing down” against more culturally sensitive methods, but actually place their personal preference before the people themselves. Returning to the woman at the well, it is people, not a style, whom Christ seeks to worship in “spirit and in truth.” Therefore any approach to worship in which human beings are made secondary is as unbiblical and idolatrous as making man primary.

Worship then is ever and always transcendent and immanent. The Creator and Redeemer God is made present in the corporate gathering of the body of Christ. Yet the idea that this is mediated through the hipness of contemporary style or the pomp and majesty of traditional worship is just theological foolishness. This is the sin of Nadab and Abihu. Jesus’ statement that “where two or more are gathered in my name, I am there among them,” is evidence of this (Matt 18:20). No matter how small and humble the gathering, the risen Christ meets his people in a unique way and we experience the touch of God. Therefore when we come together we must prepare ourselves to both hear God and speak to him. It is then critical that all those involved in a public worship service understand the critical role they play in facilitating this dialogue between God and man, especially what a beautifully powerful and intimate experience it is for the building up and establishing the body of Christ as a spotless bride.