

## Worship and The Pastor

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### **Introduction**

1. *The focus of the church and the pastor is worship.*

Worship is the key function for pastors and churches. John Stott: “True worship is the highest and noblest activity of which man, by the grace of God, is capable.” A W Tozer: Worship is the missing jewel. He points out both the importance of worship as well as his concern for the lack of proper worship in the church. The Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it well when it declares that “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”

2. *The focus of worship is God.*

God is the focus of our attention in worship. This challenges some popular assumptions behind ideas such as “seeker services” which tend to have their agenda set by the felt needs of the seekers rather than the character and glory of God. I remember being quite disturbed in one such seeker service which a church was introducing to reach out to non-Christians (of which there were only a handful in a congregation of about 200) when the service began with a band singing “I believe in music” and concluding with “I believe in God”. Evangelism is a noble goal but it must be rooted in the proper worship of God.

William Temple’s definition of worship is very helpful. “To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God.” Note that God’s attributes are the focus here: His holiness, truth, beauty, love and purposes.

3. *Implications of the above observations.*

- a. *Increased reverence.* There is a great need to regain the sense of awe and reverence which is being rapidly lost in our increasingly secularised worship services.
- b. *Worship is only secondarily a fellowship.* It is the vertical dimension of worship which anchors the horizontal dimension.
- c. *Less focus on man.* Whatever happens at the worship service should avoid glorifying man (whether it is the preacher, worship leader, testimony giver, singer, or choir).
- d. *Pleasing God becomes central.* The purpose of worship is to please God. Our central attention should be God’s pleasure, not our own. Kent Hughes has observed that “The unspoken but increasingly common assumption of today’s Christendom is that worship is primarily for us – to meet our needs.”

- e. *Beware turning congregation into audience.* The primary audience in the worship service is God himself. If the congregation is allowed to become the audience (and churches are beginning to think like this and even use such vocabulary).

## **Common Problems in Worship**

### *1. Lack of Pastoral leadership*

There is great lack of pastoral leadership in the church when it comes to worshipping. Worship is not merely having a good time, or a good programme (A W Tozer's warning), or having good skills to work up the crowd. Proper worship is based on a proper understanding of God, his worship in the church, and the history of the church's worship of God. Pastors are the people in the church who are best trained to provide leadership in worship.

- a. Methodists – pastor has authority to lead in divine worship. Methodist clergy are ordained with authority given, among other things, to lead in divine worship, a responsibility they share with local preachers, an order of lay ministers in the church. If such responsibilities are clearly given to a select group of people, it follows that not everyone can or should lead worship. This is not to create elitism, but to secure a key aspect of the church's life in the hands of trained people who are accountable.
- b. Need for training laity. There should be proper training of worship leaders, and other participants in the worship service, such as the musicians, scripture readers, and so on. Many such persons may not have an adequate understanding of what the worship service is all about. It is more than creating the right atmosphere, more than good music, more than emotions.
- c. Some examples to show the need for having properly trained worship leaders.
  - A. A young worship leader in a big church in Singapore led the congregation with more than half an hour of enthusiastic singing (of contemporary choruses). Then he introduced me as the speaker and invited me to come to the "stage". I tried to gently remind the congregation that I was standing behind a pulpit more than on a stage. (Our vocabulary in worship is important. "Stage" connotes entertainment; "pulpit" connotes exposition).
  - B. Another worship leader in another church started the service by sharing about "my disciples," a group of young people he was discipling. Again I thought there was a problem with the language. Those people were the disciples of Christ.
  - C. Another worship leader I found led in singspiration interjected with prayers to "Father Jesus". I had to correct him.

### *2. Entertainment Paradigm*

- a. My experience in US

I spent the early part of 1999 in the United States. My observation was that the entertainment paradigm has become dominant in all arenas of life, probably aided by television and Hollywood. Nothing was left untouched. Even family problems had to be presented in an entertaining way; hence, those awful shows which brought family members on stage to quarrel to the applause of the audience. Religion was also made entertaining by religious TV as well as stage and programme management in worship services. Christian music is big business there. Nothing is too sacred for the powerful hands of the entertainment mindset to touch. Life is one big entertainment.

Neil Postman has written a scathing critique of modern American media and life in his book, "Amusing ourselves to death". This is a perceptive view of the modern consciousness, which is increasingly being also seen in churches since the church is easily influenced by popular social trends, ideology, and obsessions.

Experience packaged for the consumer, individualistic and private experience, the use of technology to serve these ends, the secularisation of life, the resurgence of romanticism (mixed strangely with materialism) are all major influences in modern life and have not left church worship services untouched.

b. Trappings of entertainment.

Worship in church is increasingly reflecting the props and trappings of the entertainment industry. There is the lead singer, back up singers, applause, audience participation, etc. (It is interesting that Chrysostom, when he became bishop of Constantinople, he banned applause in church, saying that it was incompatible with the worship of God.)

c. The pastor as entertaining performer.

Bruce Shelley, in an article in Christianity Today, describes the changing images of the pastor, from pastor-theologian, to professional minister, to enterprising healer. This reflects changes in social expectations and popular culture. To attract modern crowds, the pastor is often tempted (or convinced) to become an entertaining performer to cater to the needs of an audience looking for entertainment.

d. Loss of formative element

The result of worship becoming nothing more than entertainment is the loss of the deeply formative potential of right worship. Liturgy, doctrine, and spirituality are closely connected. "Orthodoxy" often understood as "right belief" is made up of two Greek words, "orthos" (correct or true) and "doxa" (praise or prayer). It is no accident that liturgy and theology are connected. The old Latin saying, "Lex orandi, lex credendi" meaning "the law of believing stands on the law of praying" also expresses this truth. Much of the historical liturgy of the church arose from the doctrine of the church as well as to propagate and teach this doctrine.

Our liturgy also shapes our perspectives on life and our responses to it. We are shaped by our liturgies. Poor or distorted liturgies fail to deliver, or worse, damage

us. If our songs are all triumphalistic, with no reference to suffering as part of life, then we become people who deny suffering or who cannot cope with it.

There are some particular concerns I wish to point out.

- i. *Hymns* – the educational and formative nature of hymns.
- ii. *Rituals* – Lord’s prayer, gloria patri, creed, etc, were all considered to be important parts of the worship service.
- iii. *Fragmentation of community* – The growing popularity of such things as youth services, children’s church, etc. leads to a failure in true Christian community, which is unity in diversity, and multi-generational. It leads to a fragmentation of the Christian community, and a loss of the traditioning process, vital to the continuity of the church.

### 3. *Implosion of popular culture*

- a. Ken Ohmae, the Japanese writer, in commenting on the globalisation of popular culture, speaks about “the californiasation of taste”. Popular taste is created by the media which is controlled by people in the fringes of society . The fringe is shaping the mainstream through popular culture propagated by modern media.
- b. Question: Can we not take on board popular culture e.g. its music, just as Luther is said to have done (when he took tunes sung in pubs and gave them new meaning with Christian poetry)? On the surface, there seems to be case for such adaptative strategies. However, for the modern situation, there is the problem of the philosophical underpinnings of contemporary popular culture – postmodernity. E.g. note the TV camera, when doing interviews, etc., does not stay steady, but produces a vertigo from not having a solid foundation to stand on. MTV has developed an art form of a pastiche of fleeting images, with very little story line.
- c. Songs. In popular culture, songs seem to have moved emotions to sensations, from moving the heart to moving the body.
- d. Christian pop songs are becoming more anemic theologically, psychologically, and aesthetically. They seem to be more mantra than doctrine, more fad than faith. In modern Christian hymnology, there seems to be a loss of memory and story. They seem to focus more on present emotions which are not satisfactorily connected to past history and future hope.
- e. Don’t mistake cultural osmosis for revival. Audiences in musical shows e.g. have changed from quiet appreciation (e.g. in concert halls) to expressive exuberant participation (e.g. in rock concerts). If we say there is a revival in church because of similar changes in visible and expressive enthusiasm, then we must also say that there is a similar revival in the popular music scene.

#### 4. *Lack of healthy contextualisation*

- a. Cf. worship leaders using Americanised accent when speaking of “God”. It probably comes from too much listening to music tapes and CDs produced in America, which propagate a certain style of leading and conducting worship services, not just the songs.
- b. Christian pop songs, rap etc, are often out of place in non-western (even non-American) cultures.
- c. In addition, certain practices in worship services such as hand holding, dancing, clapping hands can be offensive in some cultures. One has to be sensitive and wise.
- d. Music and musical instruments also need to be contextualised. The organ or piano need not be the major instruments in worship. There are many other non-western musical instruments, which may be more culturally appropriate.
- e. Asian hymns and hymn writers are sorely needed in Asian churches. I was deeply touched when speaking in a Malaysian church camp when I heard their theme song, sung in a Malay tune.
- f. There are many historically significant Asian hymn writers e.g. Vedanayagam Sastriar, an 18<sup>th</sup> century poet in a royal court in India. His songs are both doctrinally rich and devotionally deep. They are gems in terms of Tamil poetry as well as Indian classical music.
- g. I cannot forget a comment made by an elderly man who was a convert from Islam. We were attending a low-key gathering to address the issues related to evangelism and discipling among Muslim peoples. On a Sunday, a special service was arranged for the participants. I was not present at the service but later I met this man and asked him about the service, which was conducted in forms similar to Muslim practices, e.g. sitting on the floor, prayer postures, etc. The man told me how for the first time, he felt like he was worshipping God from the depths of his heart. He had been worshipping for several years in Christian churches. There were tears in his eyes as he spoke to me.

#### 5. *Some Suggestions*

- a. Bring back pastoral leadership in worship. More effort should be spent on worship planning and preparation, training of worship leaders, participants, and proper teaching on worship. Recently I was in a church and one of the songs the worship leader in the first service introduced was a contemporary song which began with “We enthrone you.” I was not very comfortable with the words of the song. The pastor turned to me after the song, and remarked that there may be a problem theologically with that song. I agree readily with him. He proceeded to tell the “worship team” to drop the song for the second service. I was glad to see pastoral leadership being exercised.

- b. Plan the worship services well. Think seriously of following the church year and the lectionary. Work on the various parts of the service.
  - i. Prayer. Use prayers well. There are so many beautiful prayers around. Those who lead in prayer must understand how prayer fits in the liturgy.
  - ii. Scripture reading. Make sure you don't skip this! How about standing for scripture reading?
  - iii. Confession is an essential part of the service.
  - iv. Preaching. Needs much improvement. Expository in nature.
  - v. Singing. Select hymns and choruses carefully, noting content, music, and suitability.
  - vi. Other parts such as gloria patri, responsive readings, doxology, and creed, should be carefully integrated and included in the liturgy.
- c. Cut down entertainment. Remembering the meaning and purpose of worship, pastors must seek to reduce the tempting but corrupting paradigm of entertainment in worship services. This means doing away with the vocabulary and props related to the stage of entertainment, cutting down on performance, not treating the congregation as an audience.

The implications of the definition of worship by Temple (above) must be noted. The focus is God and our response to him. In worship our response is not so much to be entertained, but the quickening of conscience, feeding of the mind, purging of the imagination, opening of the heart, and submission of the will to God. If these things do not happen, but we come out from a worship service remarking how much we "enjoyed" the service, we may have failed in the worship service.

- d. Use technology wisely. Technology is useful in worship to a limited extent. Microphones, printed material, etc are useful. But why must every church have OHP screens? What will computer assisted worship do to our worship services? The cost of modern gadgets, their influence on our perspective and experience of worship must be considered carefully.
- e. Avoid "latest is best" policy. In the field of electronics and cybernetics, we have been brought up with the notion that the new is better, and the latest is best. This may be generally true in those areas. But it is certainly not true in church and theology, and in worship. There is something about Christian remembering, traditioning, truth, and revelation, that challenges this notion. The pastor must therefore be careful about not throwing away what has been carefully handed down through the history of the people of God, for what deceptively promises to be better.
- f. Be sensitively contextualised. Why must all worship be determined by American popular culture in church and society? The answer to crass popular western music is not necessarily classical western music. We have other possibilities in Asian music and the history of devotional music in Asian settings. What may be natural movements and behaviour in another culture

may not be suitable in our culture. If we must borrow forms from someone we might as well borrow from sources closer to home.

- g. Have intergenerational worship. Let us carefully consider the negative implications of practices such as youth services and children's church. Let the children grow up with the rituals, practices, vocabulary, and life of the faith community. There is no better way of grounding them in the faith.
- h. Avoid having traditional vs contemporary services. Marva Dawn has rightly pointed out (*A Royal Waste of Time*) that we should not reduce worship to a matter of taste by offering various options of the worship service – contemporary, traditional, etc, as is being done in many churches. Likewise, the LCMS Commission on Worship in its report in January 1998 dissuades this practice on the basis for the need for the church to be one. I agree with these sentiments in many ways. In my own experience, I have gently refused to give in to pressure to have different styles of worship. Not that I do not understand people's different temperaments or the need to make sense to people etc. However, I have persisted in this matter because I believe truth is more important than taste. We should be guided by truth which must over-ride taste. The focus of worship is the truth of God rather than the taste of man.