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Variety in Worship: Innovation, not Accommodation

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Experimentation and novelty are increasingly commonplace in contemporary Christian worship.¹ The spectrum runs from the formal style of vestments, visual symbols, and the weekly observance of communion to the free style of hand-clapping, foot-stomping, and emotional abandonment. How should a pastor respond to such variety in the Christian landscape? He does not want to copy every novel form, nor does he want to burn every new idea. Has not God rather called him to evaluate the various expressions in light of scriptural principles and one's own cultural setting? In this article, the writer wants to establish some guiding principles for evaluating current expressions of worship, to list a sampling of ideas that might be appropriate in one's worship service, and to offer some advice in implementing change in the worship service.

Guiding Principles

Worship can be defined as "the act of declaring [to] God His worth, affirming who He is and what He has done, and responding to Him in praise, adoration, thanksgiving, and awe"

¹This article focuses on the corporate worship service, rather than the individual expression of commitment and service found in Romans 12:1ff.

so that His person becomes the inspiration for godly living.² Thus, worship describes a theantric relationship with a theocentric priority.³ Therefore, variety in worship should only facilitate the purpose of worship.

As a congregation implements a new form of worship, it is critical that the form and the content never violate a moral principle of God's Word. In the Old Testament, for instance, priests mediated God's Word to the people and represented the people before God. In the New Testament, however, believers are corporately a royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9) because of their great high priest, Jesus Christ (Heb. 4:15-16). Consequently, it would be contrary to Scripture for a believer to address another man as *our* priest in a worship service. The lyrics of worship songs, therefore, should be examined to insure that they adhere to this truth.

A second guiding principle is that authentic worship may be expressed in a variety of ways. In their zeal to uphold the truth, some have canonized a traditional expression of worship. In so doing, they have elevated it to that which is exclusively biblical. Various styles, however, are used both in Scripture and in church history.⁴ For instance, the New Testament refers to both a Jewish (synagogue) and a gentile (e.g. Corinth) expression of Christian worship. The Jewish model is marked by a clear

²This definition is largely taken from Barry Liesch, *People in the Presence of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 22. For another good definition, see Ralph Martin, *The Worship of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 4.

³Kenneth O. Gangel, "Re-examining Biblical Worship," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143 (April-June 1986): 169 describes theantric as, "man and God coming together in a unique relationship designed and sustained by the Holy Spirit."

⁴For a variety of styles used in the scriptures, see Liesch, *People in the Presence of God*. For a survey of styles of protestant worship traditions, see James F. White, *Protestant Worship Traditions in Transition* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1989). For a concise survey of evangelical traditions, see Bruce and Marshall Shelley, *Can Evangelicals Win the World without Losing Their Soul? Consumer Church* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 175-186.

structure (viz. reading, preaching, praying). The gentile model of Corinth is characterized by a high level of participation (1 Cor. 14:26ff). Of course, certain non-negotiable elements do establish the parameters in worship (i.e. prayer, 1 Tim. 2; praise, Acts 2; reading, teaching and preaching the word, 1 Tim. 4:13; propriety, 1 Cor. 11:13; the ordinances: divine teaching-pictures, 1 Cor. 11:17ff; practices of giving, 1 Cor. 16:2). Within these parameters, there is freedom to make wise choices concerning mood and form. For instance, one worship service may consist of a mood of awe and humility (Ps. 95:6-7); another one may be characterized by joy and expressive praise (Pss. 100; 150); some services could utilize both (Ps. 95).

This leads to the third guiding principle. Although the word may permit a particular form of worship, it may not be appropriate for one's cultural context (cf. 1 Cor. 10:23). For example, a certain form of music may detract from worship even though there is nothing inherently wrong with it. A worship leader is interested in using or introducing forms that facilitate worship. Thus, it is crucial that a pastor learn to *exegete* the people to whom he ministers.

A Sampling of Worship Ideas

Variety is not to be used for variety's sake, but for God's sake. Thus, the various forms should facilitate true worship. "In responding to God, we should be open to using every expression of beauty and genius, which are reflections of his own nature."⁵ Some of the following ideas may resonate with the reader, while others may not. This requires a prayerful evaluation of each idea

⁵Jack Hayford, John Killinger, and Howard Stevenson, *Mastering Worship* (Portland: Multnomah, 1990), 103.

before adopting or discarding it.⁶

The first way to use a variety in worship is to rearrange the present service. Since worship is a response to God's revelation, why not try to preach at the beginning of the service and then sing and take up an offering during the latter part of the service? In addition, "the sermon could be delivered in sections divided by its major points and punctuated by hymns, other music, or congregational responses of various kinds."⁷

A word of caution is fitting at this point. It is essential to inform the congregation when making a change in the service order; otherwise, they may miss what you are trying to communicate. Several weeks ago, this writer attended a church in another state. Apparently, the pastor switched the order of service without informing the congregation. One of the ladies in the church expressed her confusion and frustration over the change. Her confusion was a clear obstacle to her worship that day.

Another way to use variety in worship is to orchestrate a part of the service or the entire service thematically. Liesch suggests considering the "five-phase worship pattern" for an extended period of praise singing.

The five phases are (1) invitation, (2) engagement, (3) exaltation, (4) adoration, and (5) intimacy The *invitation phase* is like a call to worship. The lyrics used in this phase should address the people and draw their attention to worship In the *engagement phase* the people begin to draw near to God, and the lyrics should reflect that In the *exaltation phase* the people sing out with power In the *adoration phase* the dynamics may gradually subside and melody may have a smaller range The last phase

⁶This writer is not discussing spacial enhancements like architecture, proxemic, and acoustics; sound enhancements; or visual enhancements like lighting.

⁷Gangel, "Biblical Worship," 176.

before the close, the *intimacy phase* is the quietest and most personal.⁸

Traditional liturgists like Robert Webber suggest shaping the structure of the service around four elements: (1) Preparation: "Come," (2) Ministry of the Word: "Hear," (3) Ministry of the table: "Remember," (4) Dismissal: "Go."⁹

If the worship leader wants to develop a specific service around a specific theme, Ralston offers several questions concerning the theme, tone, and flow to assist the worship leader in developing a thematic service.

- What is the focus of our praise in this service? Why?
- What does the congregation need to know about this subject to worship intelligently?
- How ought the subject (theme) be developed?
- How can those present respond to this particular truth?
- What should be the dominant emotional/psychological state of our morning together? Why?
- Are there other states through which we must/ought to/will travel in our journey toward this goal?
- What ought to be the overall tone(s) of the service to properly reflect this theme and this state?
- How do the worshippers get from a cold start to the thematic goal?
- What will be most helpful (effective) in eliciting their worship toward this goal?
- Why is each element placed as it is for this audience in this context at this time?¹⁰

For an example of a thematic service, the worship leader

⁸Liesch, *People in the Presence of God*, 92-93.

⁹For another variation, see Martin, *Worship of God*, 219-227.

¹⁰Timothy J. Ralston, "Leading the Church in Worship" (Class notes from Dallas Theological Seminary, 1992), 29.

may refer to appendix 3 in Liesch.¹¹ In addition, a whole service could be structured around baptism or communion.

A third way to use variety in worship is to add various forms into one's present worship service structure. The reader will have to consider the appropriateness of each suggestion based on his own congregational context.

1) Drama, which has been used throughout biblical and church history, has become increasingly popular in our day. The sketch, which either introduces a subject/sermon or applies a subject/sermon, has been popularized by Willowcreek Community Church. In an event (e.g. dramatic sermon) a majority of the message is based upon the presentation. Typically, a pageant (e.g. Christmas cantata) "occupies the entire service and carries the weight of communicating the message."¹²

2) Silence can be used several ways. It can be used to prepare for the service, to focus before prayer, to internalize after a song, and to meditatively apply a message.¹³

3) Reading of Scripture can be done several ways. One person can read the text. The text can be read in unison. The text can be read responsively or antiphonally.

4) Physical movement can accompany aspects of the service. People can stand for the reading. People could kneel for prayer. People could look upward during the singing of praises.

5) "Use the bulletin creatively to include sermon outlines, interpretive verses, different names for the activities of

¹¹Liesch, *People in the Presence of God*, 293-298.

¹²See Ralston, "Leading the Church," 37 for the preceding development.

¹³*Ibid.*, " 40.

worship, and for the printing of congregational response in whatever form it is used."¹⁴

6) Dialogical preaching could be periodically used. "If the church is not too large, a roving microphone can be handled by one of the ushers as people are allowed to ask questions about the sermon."¹⁵

7) Songs could be projected on a screen so that the congregation has a sense of corporate focus. By projecting song after song on the screen, the worship leader can avoid the interruption of announcing the next hymn.

8) Prayers can be offered extemporaneously, formally, or in unison (e.g. Lord's Prayer).

9) A communion service could be introduced by a pot-luck dinner or followed by a pot-luck dinner.

A fourth way to use variety in worship is to diversify the various services of a church. This can be done in at least two ways. First, the distinct services could be offered simultaneously. It is becoming increasingly popular in evangelical circles to offer a contemporary service and a traditional service at the same time. Critics of this format fear that a church might become divided and lose its unity. In addition, there is a fear that a contemporary service may compromise biblical teaching through the music selection.¹⁶

Second, the distinct services could be offered at different times. Allen P. Ross suggests the following three distinct

¹⁴Gangel, "Biblical Worship," 177.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶A noted exception to these criticisms seems to be Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church. See the report on this church's experience in *Worship Leader* 2 (April/May 1993).

services: (1) The Expository Service: This "service would provide for the teaching of the Scriptures with very little attention given to other facets of worship." (2) The Worship Service: This service would be the formal worship service for the church." (3) The Fellowship Service: "This service will provide the church with the opportunity for genuine Christian fellowship, i.e., the Spirit-led sharing of the faith in communal worship. The entire format is far less structured than either of the other services."¹⁷

Advice for Implementing Change

People tend to resist change because of the habits they have formed and their own personal heritage. A pastor often wonders if it is possible to add creativity without losing the congregation.¹⁸ This writer believes it is not only possible but necessary. Creativity allows us to continually come to the God we love in various expressions of worship. One should not implement a new form without considering at least four questions.¹⁹ Is there cultural accessibility? In other words, can the congregation meaningfully understand the new form and its message. Is there artistic quality? In other words, the form should be done well. Is there thematic unity? In other words, this form should advance the quality of worship. Is there biblical integrity? In other words, the form should be consistent with the teaching of Scripture.

Although every situation is different, the writer would suggest progressing through three stages in introducing new forms to worship. In the cultivation stage, the leader seeks to

¹⁷Allen P. Ross, "Worship in Israel 151" (Class notes from Dallas Theological Seminary, 1989), 294-302.

¹⁸Hayford, Killinger, Stevenson, *Mastering Worship*, 103-105.

¹⁹See Ralston, "Leading the Church," 42 for the following discussion along with the writer's last point.

train and teach the members about the purpose of worship and the importance of creativity within worship. In addition, it is vital that the leadership is trustworthy and credible. The leadership must be sensitive to timing and to the concerns of anyone in the congregation.

In the evaluation stage, the leadership evaluates the present worship services and the available resources along with several key individuals in the congregation. Ownership by key individuals is critical before implementing change.

In the implementation stage, introduce a new form alongside of an old form. "Stay within the boundaries of trust." "Remain sensitive to people's response." Go slowly in implementing change. "Good ideas don't need to be implemented immediately, they will still be good ideas in six months or a year. We need to lay the proper groundwork, think them through carefully, and get all the advice we can."²⁰

Worship is a great privilege for God's people. It must be facilitated by leaders biblically, responsibly, and creatively. May God help the leadership implement creative worship both carefully and boldly.

²⁰Hayford, Killinger, Stevenson, *Mastering Worship*, 106-109.