

EVANGELISTIC WORSHIP

By Timothy Keller

THE WORSHIP WARS

One of the basic features of church life in the United States today is the proliferation of worship and music forms. This in turn has caused many severe conflicts within both individual congregations and whole denominations. Most books and articles about recent worship trends tend to fall into one of two broad categories. Contemporary worship (CW) advocates often make rather sweeping statements, such as “Pipe organs and choirs will never reach people today.” Historic worship (HW) advocates often speak similarly about how incorrigibly corrupt popular music and culture are and how they make contemporary worship completely unacceptable.¹

Contemporary Worship—Plugging In?

One CW advocate writes vividly that we must “plug in” our worship to three power sources: “the sound system, the Holy Spirit, and contemporary culture.”² But several problems attend the promotion of strictly contemporary worship.

First, some popular music *does* have severe limitations for worship. Critics of popular culture argue that much of it is the product of mass-produced commercial interests. As such, it is often marked by sentimentality, a lack of artistry, sameness, and individualism in a way that traditional folk art was not. Second, when we ignore historic tradition, we break our solidarity with Christians of the past. Part of the richness of our identity as Christians is that we are saved into a historic people. An unwillingness to consult tradition is not in keeping with either Christian humility or Christian community. Nor is it a thoughtful response to the postmodern rootlessness that now leads so many to seek connection to ancient ways and peoples.

Finally, any worship that is strictly contemporary will quickly become dated. Also, it will necessarily be gauged to a narrow market niche. When Peter Wagner says we should “plug in” to contemporary culture, which contemporary culture does he mean—white, black, Latin, urban, suburban, boomer, or Gen X contemporary culture?

Hidden (but not well!) in the argument of CW enthusiasts is the assumption that culture is basically neutral. Thus there is no reason why we cannot wholly adapt our worship to any particular cultural form. But worship that is not rooted in historic tradition will often lack the distance to critique and avoid the excesses and distorted sinful elements of the surrounding, present culture. For example, how can we harness contemporary Western culture’s accessibility and frankness but not its individualism and psychologizing of moral problems?

Historic Worship—Pulling Out?

HW advocates, on the other hand, are strictly high culture promoters who defend themselves from charges of elitism by arguing that modern pop music is inferior to traditional folk art.³ But problems also attend the promotion of strictly traditional, historic worship.

First, HW advocates cannot really dodge the charge of cultural elitism. A realistic look at the Christian music arising from the grassroots folk cultures of Latin America, Africa, and Asia (not commercially produced pop music centers) reveals many of the characteristics of contemporary praise and worship music: simple and accessible tunes, driving beat, repetitive words, and emphasis on experience.⁴ In the

¹ Some writers who emphasize historic continuity, tradition, high culture, and theological exposition in worship are Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), and David Wells, “A Tale of Two Spiritualities,” in *Losing Our Virtue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). Examples of those urging a move to contemporary worship with emphasis on “visual communication, music, sensations, and feelings” are Lyle Schaller, “Worshipping with New Generations,” in *21 Bridges to the 21st Century* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) and C. Peter Wagner, *The New Apostolic Churches* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 1998). See also Michael S. Hamilton, “The Triumph of the Praise Songs,” *Christianity Today* 43, no. 8 (July 12, 1999): 28-ff., for a discussion of “Reformers” who value tradition and liturgical forms and “Revolutionaries” who promote contemporary music.

² C. Peter Wagner, “Another New Wineskin—the New Apostolic Reformation,” *Next 5* (Jan-Mar 1999), 3. Leadership Network: www.leadnet.org/archive_next.asp (April 21, 2009).

³ Marva Dawn does an excellent job of distilling Ken Myer’s concerns about pop music in her chapter “Throwing the Baby Out with the Bath Water,” in *Reaching Out*.

⁴ See “The Triumph of the Praise Songs,” *ibid.*

United States, an emphasis on strictly high-culture music and art will probably appeal only to college-educated elites.

Second, any proponent of historic worship will have to answer the question, *whose history?* Much of what is called traditional worship is rooted in Northern European culture. While strict CW advocates bind worship too heavily to one present culture, strict HW advocates bind it too heavily to a past culture. Do we really believe that the sixteenth-century Northern European approach to emotional expression and music (incarnate in the Reformation tradition) was completely biblically informed and must be preserved as if it were essential to the gospel?

Hidden (but not well!) in the arguments of traditional worship advocates is the assumption that certain historic forms are purer, more biblical, and untainted by human cultural accretions. Those who argue against cultural relativism must also remember the essential relativity of all traditions. Just as it is a lack of humility to disdain tradition, it is also a lack of humility (and a blindness to the noetic effects of sin) to elevate any particular tradition or culture's way of doing worship. A refusal to adapt a tradition to new realities may come under Jesus' condemnation of making our favorite human culture into an idol, equal to the Scripture in normativity (Mark 7:8–9).⁵ While CW advocates do not seem to recognize the sin in all cultures, the HW advocates do not seem to recognize the amount of (common) grace in all cultures.

Bible, Tradition, and Culture

At this point, the reader will anticipate that I am about to unveil some grand "Third Way" between two extremes. Indeed, many posit a third approach called blended worship.⁶ But it is not so simple as that. My major concern is that both sides are equally simplistic in the process by which they shape their worship.

CW advocates consult the Bible and contemporary culture, while HW advocates consult the Bible and historic tradition. But we forge worship best when we consult the Bible, the cultural context of our community,⁷ and the historic tradition of our church.⁸ The result of this more complex process will not be simply a single, third middle way. There are at least nine worship traditions in Protestantism alone.⁹

This more complex approach is challenging but extremely important. The Bible simply does not give us enough details to shape an entire worship service. When the Bible calls us to sing God's praises, we are not given the tunes or the rhythm. We are not told how repetitive the lyrics are to be or how emotionally intense the singing should be. When we are commanded to do corporate prayer, we are not told whether those prayers should be written, spoken in unison, or extemporaneous.¹⁰ So to give any concrete form to our worship, we must fill in the blanks that the Bible leaves open. When we do so, we will have to draw on tradition, the needs, capacities, and cultural sensibilities of our people, and our own personal preferences. Though we cannot avoid drawing on our own preferences, they should never be the driving

5 Too often advocates for high-culture or pop-culture worship music try to make their advocacy a matter of theological principle, when it is really more a matter of their own tastes and cultural preferences. For example, when pressed, HW advocates admit that jazz is not really a product of commercial pop culture but qualifies as a high-culture medium that grew out of genuine folk roots, requires great skill and craft, and can express a fuller range of human experience than rock and pop music can. (See Calvin M. Johansson, *Music and Ministry: A Biblical Counterpoint* (Hendrickson, 1984), 59–62 on folk music and jazz.) On their own stated principles, then, there is no reason for traditionalists not to allow jazz music in worship, yet I see no traditional-worship proponents encouraging jazz liturgies. Why not? It appears that they are going on their own aesthetic preferences.

6 Unfortunately, for many people blended worship consists of a simple, wooden, 50-50 division between contemporary songs and traditional hymns. This is often quite jarring and unhelpful. It is more of a political compromise than the result of reflection about a community's culture and church tradition. A far better example of a "third way" is Robert E. Webber, *Blended Worship: Achieving Substance and Relevance in Worship* (Hendrickson, 1996). Webber is talking of a more organic blend of liturgical elements, content-filled preaching, and a variety of music forms. In many ways my essay agrees with Webber's basic thrust. We would not use the term *blended worship*, however, because it usually connotes the political compromise mentioned above. On the problems of 50-50 music division, see comments below under "Selecting Worship Music."

7 A good case for a balanced view of consulting culture within an evangelical view of the authority of Scripture is made by Andrew F. Walls, "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture" and "The Translation Principle in Christian History," in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of the Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996).

8 A balanced view of consulting tradition within an evangelical view of the authority of Scripture is laid out by Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon for Evangelical Theology* (Eerdmans, 1993), 83–101. He writes that Christian humility makes us recognize the reality of our biases and prejudices when coming to Scripture. This means it is unbiblical (in our doctrine of sin) to think we can find the biblical way without consulting our own tradition and other traditions to check our own scriptural findings. See also John Leith, "Traditioning the Faith," chap. 1 in *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition* (John Knox, 1981).

9 James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Abingdon, 1993), 107, identifies the Protestant worship traditions as follows:

16th century: Anabaptist, (Continental) Reformed, Anglican, Lutheran / 17th century: Quaker, Puritan/Reformed
18th century: Methodist / 19th century: Frontier / 20th century: Pentecostal

10 John M. Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1996), does a good job of showing how great a variety of forms the basic biblical elements can take. Some have argued against the use of choirs and solos on the basis of the "regulative principle," namely, that they are not prescribed by Scripture. But Frame asks, if some are allowed to pray aloud while the rest of the congregation meditates, why can't some be allowed to sing or pray aloud while the rest of the congregation meditates (p. 129)? Why would song be regulated differently from prayer and preaching? Some have argued against using hymns and nonscriptural songs on the basis of the regulative principle. But Frame asks, if we are allowed to pray or to preach using our own words (based on Scripture), why can we not sing using our own words (based on Scripture) (p. 127)? Why would song be regulated differently from prayer and preaching? Some have argued against the use of dance in worship, but aside from many apparent references to dance in worship in the Psalter, Frame asks, if we are exhorted to raise hands (Neh. 2:8; Ps. 28:2; 1 Tim. 2:8), clap hands (Ps. 47:1), and fall down (1 Cor. 14:25), is it not expected and natural that we accompany words with actions (p. 131)? We can't preach, surely, without using our bodies to express our thoughts and words, so how can we arbitrarily draw the line to exclude dance? Frame points out that the real way to make decisions about these issues (such as dance) is with wisdom and love—that is, by asking what will edify. If you think that dancers in leotards will be too distracting and sexually provocative for your congregation, just say so—don't try to prove that the Bible forbids it. It is a bad habit of mind to seek to label as forbidden what is really just unwise.

force (cf. Rom. 15:1–3). But if we fail to do the hard work of consulting both tradition and culture, we will—wittingly or unwittingly—choose music just to please ourselves.

SEEKER-SENSITIVE WORSHIP

Many younger pastors say that seeker-sensitive worship does several things that alienate the seekers of *their* generations:

1. It over-adapts to the rational, ahistorical, high-modern worldview. These services supposedly adapted for the unchurched have typically been calibrated for a very narrow and transitory kind of unchurched person: namely, the college-educated white baby boomer suburbanite. The increasingly multiethnic, urban-oriented, less rational or word-oriented, and more secular generations under the age of thirty-five are not the same kind of unchurched people.
2. It removes transcendence from its services by utilizing light, happy music and tone, complete accessibility of voice, and dramatic sketches that create a nightclub or TV-show atmosphere. But their generations hunger for awe.
3. It ditches connection to history and tradition and goes contemporary in all cultural references, from sermon illustrations to decorations to a suburban mall/office building setting. But their generations hunger for rootedness and love a pastiche of ancient and modern.
4. It emphasizes polish and technical excellence, professionalism, and management techniques. But their generations hunger for authenticity and community.
5. It emphasizes rationality and practical how-to maps. But their generations hunger for narrative and the personal.

A SOLUTION: EVANGELISTIC WORSHIP

Two models, with problems

The most thoughtful advocates of the Seeker Friendly Service (SFS) movement agree that the straight “seeker service” is not really worship, and therefore new believers are brought out of the seeker service into a weekly worship service for believers. The critics, on the other hand, generally see the church’s principal worship service as the place for renewing and edifying believers who then go out into the world to evangelize. The two models then, seem to be as follows:

Seeker service (evangelism) —→ Worship service (edification)
Worship service (edification) —→ World (evangelism)

There are pragmatic problems with both models. The SFS model is very expensive; it is hard to assimilate new Christians out of seeker services into real worship services. And if the main worship service is very oriented toward seekers, the Christians often feel underfed.¹¹ On the other hand, the critics cannot avoid the charge that they are not proposing any alternative to the current evangelistically ineffective church. One critic is very typical when he writes: “While we [the seeker-friendly church] try to entice the world to come to church to hear the Gospel, the New Testament proclaims a powerful church worshipping God going out into the world in order to reach the lost (cf. the book of Acts.). True revivals have historically proved . . . that a revived and healthy church reaches a dying and lost world through its own awakened people.”¹² This view says that evangelism will take care of itself as long as we have great worship. But the history of revivals also shows us innovations in outreach.

¹¹ Some disadvantages of the SFC approach:

1. *Costliness.* It is extremely expensive and difficult to do seeker services well. Essentially, they don’t work unless the unchurched feel the art is as good as what they could pay to see in a theater. Many SFC attempts are mediocre, and unless you hit a home run every time, the effect is quite discouraging.
2. *Sunday issue.* When Sunday is the day for seeker-focused services, it gives the world the impression that this *is* the people of God in worship, that this is all there is. Further, it isn’t good for Christians to have to squeeze their weekly worship into a weeknight evening between two busy days of labor. It robs Christians of a whole day for worship and renewal.
3. *Assimilation issue.* Regular weekly seeker-focused services can create a large assimilation problem. If a person comes to Christianity through a seeker service, he or she may then settle into that environment for weekly worship. Supposedly the new Christian is to be invited out of the seeker service into worship, but the jump is not easy to accomplish. In one church, persons who met Christ through the seeker service could not be assimilated into the regular worship because the believers’ worship was totally oriented toward long-time Christians who are immersed in the evangelical subculture and inhabit a very different world from that of the new Christian. (See Ed Dobson, *Starting a Seeker Sensitive Service* [Zondervan, 1993], 83.) And if the seeker service becomes the worship service of new believers, either they will not be fed properly or the service will gradually become a contemporary worship service and will lose its effectiveness in outreach.
4. *Friendship evangelism issue.* The most effective way to reach a nonbeliever is for a Christian to share the gospel with him or her in the context of a friendship. But if a Christian wants to bring a non-Christian friend to a seeker-focused weekly service, he or she will have to come out twice a week, once to take the friend to church and once to get his or her own nurture.
5. *Nurture issue.* A church may have one seeker-sensitive service that is heavily focused on the unchurched but that serves as the weekly worship for believers. As time goes on, however, the Christians often hunger for something deeper. In response to complaints, the pastor often “gets more meaty” and begins to lose the non-Christians.

¹² John H. Armstrong, “The Mad Rush to Seeker Sensitive Worship,” *Modern Reformation* (January/February 1995), 25.

The Great Awakening was marked by two remarkable innovators: George Whitefield in evangelism and John Wesley in organization. Many criticize seeker services as being not worship but entertainment. Often they call us to look instead at the revivals of the past. But they do not criticize George Whitefield for attracting huge crowds to his own “seeker programs.” He drew people into open-air meetings with a preaching that was unparalleled at the time in its appeal. His humor, his stories, his dramatically acted-out illustrations, and his astounding oratorical gifts drew tens of thousands.¹³ At the time he was labeled an entertainer. His meetings were not worship, nor did they replace worship, but they were certainly critical to the revival. They provided Christians with a remarkable place to do friendship evangelism. His meetings were all over a given city on virtually every day of the week.

Whitefield’s evangelism was enormously aggressive and passionate. His preaching was lively and popular while pointing toward the transcendent and holy God. Yet his public meetings shared many of the characteristics of seeker services today (and attracted many of the same criticisms). Whitefield and Wesley did not become instruments of revival by simply being great expository preachers and renewing historic worship.

The main problem with the two models, however, is theological. They both assume that worship cannot be highly evangelistic. I want to show that this is a false premise. Churches would do best to make their “main course” an evangelistic worship service, supplemented by both (a) numerous, variegated, creative, even daily (but not weekly) seeker-focused events and (b) intense meetings for Bible study and corporate prayer for revival and renewal.

Theological basis

God commanded Israel to invite the nations to join in declaring his glory. Zion is to be the center of world-winning worship (Isa. 2:2–4; 56:6–8). “Let this be written for a future generation, that a people not yet created may praise the Lord. . . . So the name of the LORD will be declared in Zion, and his praise in Jerusalem when the peoples and the kingdoms assemble to worship the LORD” (Ps. 102:18). Psalm 105 is a direct command to believers to engage in evangelistic worship. The psalmist challenges them to “make known among the nations what [God] has done” (v. 1). How? “Sing to him, sing praise to him; tell of all his wonderful acts” (v. 2). Thus believers are continually told to sing and praise God before the unbelieving nations. (See also Psalm 47:1; 100:1–5.) God is to be praised before all the nations, and as he is praised by his people, the nations are summoned and called to join in song.

Peter tells a Gentile church, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). This shows us that the church is challenged to the same witness that Israel was called to—evangelistic worship. A key difference: in the Old Testament, the center of world-winning worship was Mt. Zion; but now, wherever we worship Jesus in spirit and in truth (John 4:21–26), we have come to the heavenly Zion (Heb. 12:18–24). In other words, the risen Lord now sends his people out singing his praises in mission, calling the nations to join both saints and angels in heavenly doxology. Jesus himself stands in the midst of the redeemed and leads us in the singing of God’s praises (Heb. 2:12), even as God stands over his redeemed and sings over us in joy (Zeph. 2:17).

BIBLICAL CASE STUDIES

1 Corinthians 14:23-25

Here Paul is addressing the misuse of the gift of tongues. He complains that tongues speaking will cause unbelievers to say that the Christians are out of their minds (v. 23). He insists that the worship service must be comprehensible to the outsider. He says that if an unbeliever or unlearned one (an uninitiated inquirer) comes in, and worship is being done in an edifying manner, “he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all” (v. 24). Of what does this conviction consist? “The secrets of his heart will be laid bare” (v. 25). It may mean he realizes that the worshipers around him are finding in God what his heart had been secretly searching for, but in the wrong places. It may mean the worship shows him how his heart works. The result: “falling on his face, he will worship God, exclaiming, ‘God is really among you’” (v. 25).

Acts 2

When the Spirit falls on those in the upper room, a crowd gathers (v. 5) because they are hearing the disciples praising God (“we hear them declaring the wonders of God”), and also because this worship is “in our own tongues!” (v. 11). Thus first they are made very interested (“amazed and perplexed, they asked

13 Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Eerdmans, 1991).

one another, “What does this mean?” v. 12), and later they are convicted deeply (“they were cut to the heart and said . . . , ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’” v. 37).

Comparison

There are obvious differences between the two situations. In 1 Corinthians 14 conversion happens on the spot (which is certainly possible). In Acts 2 the nonbelievers are shaken out of their indifference (v. 12), but the actual conversions (vv. 37–41) occur at the end of an “after meeting” in which Peter explains the gospel (vv. 14–36) and shows them how to individually receive Christ (vv. 38–39). It is often pointed out that the tongues in the two situations are different. But students usually are looking so carefully at what the two passages teach about tongues and prophecy that they fail to note what they teach about worship and evangelism.

We can learn several things from these texts:

1. Nonbelievers are expected to be present in Christian worship. In Acts 2 it happens by word-of-mouth excitement. In 1 Corinthians 14 it is probably the result of personal invitation by Christian friends. But Paul in 14:23 expects both *unbelievers* and *the unlearned* (literally a seeker—“someone who does not understand”) to be present in worship.

2. Nonbelievers must find the praise of Christians to be comprehensible. In Acts 2 it happens by miraculous divine intervention. In 1 Corinthians 14 it happens by human design and effort. But it cannot be missed that Paul directly tells a local congregation to adapt its worship because of the presence of unbelievers. It is a false dichotomy to insist that if we are seeking to please God we must not ask what the unchurched feel or think about our worship.

3. Nonbelievers can fall under conviction and be converted through comprehensible worship. In 1 Corinthians 14 it happens during the service, but in Acts 2 it is supplemented by after meetings and follow-up evangelism. God wants the world to overhear us worshipping him. God directs his people not simply to worship, but to sing his praises before the nations. We are not simply to communicate the gospel to them, but celebrate the gospel before them.

THREE PRACTICAL TASKS

2. Getting unbelievers into worship.

The numbering is not a mistake. This task actually comes second, but nearly everyone thinks it comes first! It is natural to believe that non-Christians must get into worship before “doxological evangelism” can begin. But the reverse is the case. Non-Christians do not get invited into worship unless the worship is already evangelistic. The only way to have non-Christians in attendance is through personal invitation by Christians. Just as in the Psalms, the “nations” must be directly asked to come. But the main stimulus to building bridges and issuing invitations is the comprehensibility and quality of the worship experience.

Christians will instantly sense if a worship experience will be attractive to their non-Christian friends. They may find a particular service wonderfully edifying for *them* and yet know that their nonbelieving neighbors would react negatively. Therefore, a vicious circle persists. Pastors see only Christians present, so they lack incentive to make their worship comprehensible to outsiders. But since they fail to make the adaptations, Christians who are there (though perhaps edified themselves) do not think to bring their skeptical and non-Christian friends to church. They do not think they will be impressed. So no outsiders come. And so the pastors respond only to the Christian audience. And so on and on. Therefore, the best way to get Christians to bring non-Christians is to worship as if there were dozens and hundreds of skeptical onlookers. And if you worship as *if*, eventually they will be there in reality.

1. Making worship comprehensible to unbelievers

Our purpose is not to make unbelievers comfortable. (In 1 Corinthians 14:24–25 or Acts 2:12, 37, they are cut to the heart!) We aim to be intelligible to them. We must address their heart secrets (1 Cor. 14:25). That means we must remember what it is like to *not* believe; we must remember what an unbelieving heart is like. How do we do that?

a. *Worship and preach in the vernacular.* It is hard to overstate how ghettoized our preaching is. It is common to make all kinds of statements that appear persuasive to us but are based upon all sorts of premises that the secular person does not hold; it is common to use terms and phrases that mean nothing

outside of our Christian subgroup. So avoid unnecessary theological or evangelical subculture jargon, and explain carefully the basic theological concepts—confession of sin, praise, thanksgiving, and so on. In the preaching, show continual willingness to address the questions that the unbelieving heart will ask. Speak respectfully and sympathetically to people who have difficulty with Christianity. As you write the sermon, imagine a particular skeptical non-Christian in the chair listening to you. Add the necessary asides, the definitions, the extra explanations. Listen to everything said in the worship service with the ears of someone who has doubts or troubles with belief.

b. *Explain the service as you go along.* Though there is danger of pastoral verbosity, learn to explain each new part of the service briefly and without jargon, in one or two sentences. For example, to introduce a time of prayer and confession, say: “When we confess our sins, we are not groveling in guilt but dealing with our guilt. If you deny your sins, you will never get free from them.” It is good to begin worship services as the African-American church often does, with a “devotional,” a brief talk that explains the meaning of worship. This way you continually instruct newcomers in worship.

c. *Directly address and welcome nonbelievers.* Speak regularly to “those of you who aren’t sure you believe this, or who aren’t sure just what you believe.” Give them many asides, even employing the language of their hearts. Articulate their objections to Christian living and belief better than they can do it themselves. Express sincere sympathy for their difficulties, even when challenging them severely for their selfishness and unbelief. Admonish with tears (literally or figuratively). Always grant whatever degree of merit their objections have. It is extremely important that unbelievers feel you understand their objections: “I’ve tried it before and it did not work.” “I don’t see how my life could be the result of the plan of a loving God.” “Christianity is a straitjacket.” “It can’t be wrong if it feels so right.” “I could never keep it up.” “I don’t feel worthy; I am too bad.” “I just can’t believe.”

d. *Cultivate high-quality aesthetics.* The power of art draws people to behold it. Good art bears its message into the soul through the imagination and begins to appeal to reason, for art makes ideas plausible. The quality of music and speech in worship will have a major impact on its evangelistic power. In many churches, the quality of the music is mediocre or poor, but it does not disturb the faithful. Their faith makes the words of the hymn or the song meaningful despite its artistically poor expression, and further, they usually have a personal relationship with the song leader and musicians. But any outsider who arrives not convinced of the truth and having no relationship to the music leaders will be bored or irritated by the poor offering. Excellent aesthetics includes outsiders, while mediocre or poor aesthetics exclude. The low level of artistic quality in many churches guarantees that only insiders will continue to come. To say this positively, the attraction of good art will play a major part in drawing non-Christians.

e. *Celebrate deeds of mercy and justice.* We live in a time when public esteem of the church is plummeting. For many outsiders and inquirers, the deeds of the church will be far more important than words in gaining plausibility. The leaders of most towns see “word-only” churches as costs to their community, not as value. Effective churches will be so involved in deeds of mercy and justice that outsiders will say, “We cannot do without churches like this. This church is channeling so much value into our community through its services to people that if it went out of business, we’d have to raise everybody’s taxes.” Mercy deeds give the gospel words plausibility (Acts 4:32–33). Therefore, evangelistic worship services should highlight offerings for deed ministry and should celebrate through reports and testimonies and prayer what is being done. It is best that offerings for mercy ministry be separate, attached to the Lord’s Supper. This brings before the non-Christian the impact of the gospel on people’s hearts (it makes us generous) and the impact of lives poured out for the world.

f. *Present the sacraments in ways that make the gospel clear.* Baptism, and especially adult baptism, should be made a much more significant event if worship is to be evangelistic. There may need to be opportunity for the baptized to offer personal testimony as well as assent to questions. The meaning of baptism should be made clear. A moving, joyous, personal charge to the baptized (and to all baptized Christians present) should be made. Similarly, the Lord’s Supper too can become a converting ordinance. If it is explained properly, the unbeliever will see the difference between walking with Christ and living for oneself. The Lord’s Supper will confront every individual with the question: “Are you right with God *today, now?*” There is no more effective way to help a person take a spiritual inventory. (See below for more on addressing unbelievers during Communion.)

g. *Preach grace.* The one message that both believers and unbelievers need to hear is that salvation and adoption are by grace alone. A worship service that focuses too much and too often on educating Christians in the details of theology will simply bore or confuse the unbelievers present. For example, a sermon on abortion will generally assume that the listener believes in the authority of the Word and the authority of Jesus and does not believe in individual moral autonomy. In other words, abortion is “doctrine D,” and it is based on “doctrines A, B, and C.” Therefore, people who don’t believe or understand doctrines ABC will find such a sermon unconvicting and even alienating. This does not mean we should not preach the whole counsel of God, but we must major on the ABCs of the Christian faith.

If the response to this is “Then Christians will be bored,” it shows a misunderstanding of the gospel. The gospel of free, gracious justification and adoption is not only the way we enter the kingdom but also the way we grow into the likeness of Christ. Titus 2:11–13 tells us how it is the original, saving message of grace alone that leads us to sanctified living: “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.” Many Christians are defeated and stagnant in their growth because they try to be holy for wrong motives. They say no to temptation by telling themselves, “God will get me,” or “People will find out,” or “I’ll hate myself in the morning,” or “it will hurt my self-esteem,” or “It will hurt other people,” or “It’s against the law—I’ll be caught.” or “It’s against my principles,” or “I will look bad.” Some or all of these may be true, but Titus tells us they are inadequate. Only the grace of God, the logic of the gospel, will work. Titus says it *teaches* us, it argues with us.

Therefore, the one basic message that both Christians and unbelievers need to hear is the gospel of grace. It can be applied to both groups, right on the spot and directly. Sermons that are basically moralistic will be applicable only to *either* Christians or non-Christians. But Christocentric preaching both grows believers and challenges nonbelievers. If the Sunday service and sermon aim primarily at evangelism, they will bore the saints. If they aim primarily at education, they’ll bore and confuse unbelievers. If they aim at praising the God who saves by grace, they’ll both instruct insiders and challenge outsiders.

3. Leading to commitment

Our experience at Redeemer has shown that unbelievers in worship actually “close with Christ” in two basic ways. Some may come to Christ during the service itself (1 Cor. 14:24-25); others must be followed up very specifically.

a. *During the service.* One major time to invite people to receive Christ during the service is as the Lord’s Supper is distributed. We say, “If you are not in a saving relationship with God through Christ today, do not take the bread and the cup, but as they come around, take Christ. Receive him in your heart as those around you receive the food. Then immediately afterward, come up here and tell an officer or a pastor about what you’ve done, so we can get you ready to receive the Supper the next time as a child of God.”

Another way to invite commitment during the service is to give people a time of silence after the sermon. A prayer of belief could be prayed by the pastor (or printed in the bulletin at that juncture in the order of worship) to help people reach out to Christ.¹⁴ Sometimes it may be good to put a musical interlude or an offering after the sermon but before the final hymn. This affords people time to think about and process what they have heard and offer themselves to God in prayer. If, however, the preacher ends his sermon, prays very briefly, and moves immediately into the final hymn, no time is given to people under conviction to offer up their hearts.

b. *After meetings.* Acts 2 seems to show us an “after meeting.” In verses 12 and 13 we are told that some folks mocked upon hearing the apostles praise and preach, but others were disturbed and asked, “What does this mean?” Then Peter very specifically explained the gospel, and in response to a second question, “What shall we do?” (v. 37), he explained very specifically how to become a Christian. Historically, it has been found effective to offer such meetings to unbelievers and seekers immediately after evangelistic worship. Convicted seekers have just come from being in the presence of God, and they are often most teachable and open at this moment. To seek to get them into a small group or even merely to get them to return next Sunday is asking a lot of them. Yet they may be “amazed and perplexed” (Acts 2:12), and it is

¹⁴ An example: “Heavenly Father, I admit that I am weaker and more sinful than I ever before believed, but through your Son Jesus I can be more loved and accepted than I ever dared hope. I thank you that he lived the life I should have lived and paid the debt and punishment I owed. Receive me now for his sake. I turn from my sins and receive him as Savior. Amen.”

best to strike while the iron is hot. This is not to cast doubt on the teaching that God is infallibly drawing his elect! The knowledge that conversions are not dependent on our eloquence helps us to relax as we do evangelism. But the Westminster Confession tells us that God ordinarily works through secondary causes, normal social and psychological processes. Therefore, to invite people into a follow-up meeting immediately is usually more conducive to conserving the fruit of the Word than it would be to let them go.

After meetings may consist first of having one or more persons wait at the front of the auditorium to pray and talk with any seekers who come forward to make inquiries right on the spot. A second after meeting can consist of a simple question-and-answer session with the preacher in a room near the main auditorium or even in the auditorium. Third, after meetings should also consist of one or two classes or small group experiences targeted to specific questions non-Christians ask about the content, relevance, and credibility of the Christian faith. After meetings should be attended by skilled lay evangelists who can come alongside newcomers, answer spiritual questions, and provide guidance for their next steps.

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