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Considerations For Leaders In Worship



By Austin Emery

When the church assembles to worship God corporately, members in the congregation are usually designated to lead in various aspects of the service. Whether it be leading in prayer, singing, reading scripture, serving communion, or preaching, leaders are asked to implement and enhance this opportunity to worship the Lord.

There have always been disputes about peripheral matters in worship. The brightness of lights, the volume of singing, and other environmental factors are often discussed. But do these concerns really involve the truthfulness and genuineness of worship? When these matters occupy our attention, the nature of worship as adoration of God and praise offered to him is obscured.

But there are considerations that deserve attention: How can those who lead Christians as they worship really enhance genuine worship? Are there specific matters that need the attention of worship leaders? How can I, when asked to lead in worship, really make a positive contribution to the occasion? Some suggestions follow.

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The Leader's Self-Preparation

All who lead in worship need to be aware that they are co-worshippers with the congregation. Worship is not the time for a "performance." We are all equally participants in the worship offered to God.

Leaders, as fellow worshippers, will be better equipped to lead if their personal difficulties, in so far as possible, are taken care of in advance. Confession should precede worship. Communion with the Lord, in and through his word, ought to precede the assembly. This personal preparation for leading in worship will enhance the worship of the leader.

Leaders, as fellow worshippers, need to remember the diversity of the community being led. That diversity includes the differing theological understandings brought by those attending. Also, in the same congregation will be the celebrant and the bereaved, the lonely and the busy, the homemaker and the executive, the single parent and the childless couple. They will assemble following a week in which some have enjoyed triumph while others have been depressed. The leader, insensitive to this diversity, will be inclined to direct only a few.

The preparation of self is a vital element in leadership of God's worshippers. Since God is the audience for worship, we should be aware that our best is but the least we can offer.

The Preparation of the Congregation

If each worshipper made the same preparation as we have suggested for the leaders, worship would be grand indeed. Such is but a dream, for worshippers do not always make preparation. But there are ways that leaders can help.

Some means of effecting a "call to worship" is needed. Worshippers need to understand that corporate worship has begun. This is often done with announcements and information sharing, but the congregation might be better assisted to begin their worship through some appropriate remarks, scripture readings and/or prayers. There is a need to "come before our God" with offerings of our worship and to direct our minds, hearts and lives toward God.

A formal time of greeting can also prepare the congregation for worship. In some churches all are asked to stand and greet those about them. Many feel an increased consciousness of the fellowship aspect of worship in so doing. The congregation worships as a community and this time of greeting can help increase the awareness of congregational togetherness.

A thematic focus can enhance worship. When there is a coordination of songs, prayers, scriptures, and messages there is a greater likelihood for genuine worship. I do not suggest this as a binding method but as one means of calling us to awareness of the emphasis in the given assembly. Themes of grace, love, forgiveness, evangelism, and many more can be suggested as a particular focus of worship.

Since the eye is the avenue of most distraction while worshipping, the use of symbols can be of help to those who worship God. Reminders such as doves, crosses, and others can aid in focusing attention.

Prayers need to be appropriately prepared for all who are worshipping to be able to say the "Amen" as they conclude. Concerns of the congregation need to be remembered in prayers. Some leaders find it useful and helpful to write out the prayers and others use "cue" notes to remind them of specific concerns to be included. Often elements of the worship theme can be incorporated in the prayers. Above all, prayers need to turn us toward God and increase our awareness that we are addressing deity.

Even the posture of the worshipper can prepare the mind and heart for honoring God.

For instance, the act of "kneeling" in prayer can add an increased awareness of the sacredness of the event. Standing to hear the word of God read can bring a reverence to the assembly and enhance our awareness of the holy. The Bible may not demand anything in the way of posture, but the leader who involves the whole person in worship prepares the congregation more completely to worship God.

Leaders can help focus the attention of the congregation on God. Not the preacher but the preaching; not the song leader, but the singing; not the one praying but the prayer are worthy of our attention.

Some Further Suggestions

Distraction or enhancement? The leader can be both. No leader intends to detract from God. But there are things that leaders do, or fail to do, that have that effect. While worship need not be doleful and is not always solemn, it is to be taken seriously.

Leaders should always be aware of the impact of deportment. The manner in which one approaches the pulpit or table communicates something of the attitude anticipated for all who are worshipping together. The way one stands and holds a Bible or hymnal communicates something, as does the bowing of head for prayer.

If seated in view of the congregation, the leader needs to be aware of this visibility. The attention, or lack of, given to portions of worship led by others will influence those being led. For example, preachers who do not participate in the singing may communicate something negative that has carryover to the preaching that follows.

Concerning dress, rules cannot be universally applied because local standards differ. Those who lead, however, need to be aware that their dress may communicate the level of seriousness with which they approach their task.

Language and tonal quality are also important. Leaders can lead only if they are clearly understood. Matters mumbled or not clearly stated contribute to confusion. Speak hymn numbers clearly so all will hear. Give directions simply (e.g. "please stand") in as few words as possible. The use of "inside" information, especially of a joking nature, might amuse the leader but probably will not contribute to worship.

There are many more suggestions which

could be made. None will assure worship in spirit and truth. Anytime something is viewed as a “gimmick” to assure true worship, it is wrongly viewed. Nothing leaders do will assure absolutely that all present truly worship. It is wrong, however, to assume that nothing we do can enhance worship.

To worship God is our aim; to help true worship occur is our purpose; to glorify God is our goal. Unless all that we do must be to his honor and glory it is in vain.

Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the
nation,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his
name,
Bring an offering and come before him;
Worship the Lord in the splendor of his
holiness.

I Chronicles 16:28-29

*O Lord, save thy people and bless thine heritage,
Govern them and lift them up forever.
Day by day we magnify thee,
And we worship thy name ever world without end.
Vouchsafe, O Lord, to keep us, have mercy upon
us.
O Lord, have mercy upon us, have mercy upon us.
O Lord, let thy mercy lighten upon us, as our trust
is in thee.
O Lord, in thee have I trusted, let me never be
confounded.*

*from To Deum, a traditional hymn of the
Western Church, 4th or 5th century*
