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Worship and Evangelism

Terry Cartwright

The evangelistic theology characteristic of the Churches of Christ has come of age. Since our movement was born in the age of revivalism, we have always believed that our public assemblies could be effective tools for evangelism. Today, more and more evangelical groups are rediscovering that Sunday morning worship can be used effectively to reach the unchurched. The question is at what price?

Recently the Lakewood church went through a visionary planning process designed to rekindle a dream of evangelistic vision. With the aid of Kennon Callahan's, *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church*, we discovered eleven characteristics which make churches healthy. Paramount among those was that a dynamic corporate worship is critical to spiritual and numerical growth. As Callahan states, "Worship is extraordinarily important in the unchurched culture in which we are engaged in mission. That is, it is highly likely that many unchurched persons will find their way first to the service of worship" (Callahan, 54).

Given Callahan's analysis the leaders of the congregation concluded that certain aspects of the congregation's worship would have to change if spiritual and evangelistic growth were to begin to occur. The congregational singing, the sermons, the atmosphere, and the facility would have to undergo some modification to meet the standard of a healthy, effective congregation.

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Until this evaluation process began the most casual observer could see that the congregation's format for Sunday morning worship was predictable, traditional, and stereotypical of mainline Churches of Christ. Rarely did the Sunday morning service vary in its format. The typical Sunday morning consisted of greetings, opening announcements, two songs, a prayer, another song, the Lord's table and the offering, another song, the sermon, the invitation song, a closing song and prayer. Simply stated our theology of worship generally was based on five aspects of worship as determined by certain biblical examples and commands. Our congregation's experience reflected a general lack of teaching and a resultant lack of theology regarding the purpose and expectation of congregational worship. For the Lakewood church two needs became apparent. We needed to develop a biblical theology of corporate worship, while enhancing the quality in such a way that both the members and non-members could draw closer to God.

Surprising Results

Our intent to develop a more meaningful and evangelistic worship created some interesting new ideas. In assessing how to conduct the congregation's worship the inclination was to use the modern cultural tendencies of the local community as models, a trend which has been greatly influenced by Bill Hybels, Frank Tillipough, and Rick Warren. These men have had great success in reaching "baby boomers" by adapting Sunday worship to relate to the cultural setting of young professionals. Sunday morning worship becomes an evangelistic service geared toward the non-believer. There are fewer prayers,

songs are arranged in a more contemporary style, there is often drama or panel discussions, and no contribution is taken.

The congregation was exposed to these prototypes because the "baby boom" emphasis of these men closely coincided with Lakewood's cultural context. We attempted to make stylistic changes in our worship to make them more contextually accessible. Both members and the unchurched were given the opportunity to evaluate the changes which took place in worship.

The evaluation process included the presentation of three different worship styles to be

evaluated. First, the members and the unchurched were asked to evaluate Lakewood's traditional method of worship. Next, three services which added a contemporary dimension to the worship — contemporary music, preaching,

and additional input at the Lord's Table using readings, symbols, and prayers which express a more modern mind set. Finally, a more traditional style was employed using a structured liturgy and traditional songs, preaching, and prayer common to many Protestant churches. At the end of each, analyses were done by both members and unchurched attenders to determine whether there had been a significant change in the spiritual experience of the participants.

The results were surprising! Thirty unchurched participants participated in the evaluation process. The average age of the unchurched participant was thirty-five. Prior to their experiencing the different styles of services we discovered that singing, the Lord's table, silent meditation, and public prayer were not very important to the unchurched. This was in keeping with much of what Warren and Hybles had expressed. However, we were surprised at how meaningful these activities were once the unchurched experienced them. While these individuals initially came to participate in a series of sermons on marriage, in the end they were moved by the other activities which took place during the services.

In addition, we discovered that both Lakewood's traditional style and the contemporary style of worship received a rating of eighty-five percent satisfaction from the unchurched while the more traditional Protestant style received only seventy percent.

It must be pointed out that while Lakewood's traditional services were predictable for her members, the unchurched discovered the style of the Lakewood Church refreshing and different. Accapella music, the Lord's Table, and silent meditation were all commented on in a positive way. I must also add that Lakewood's traditional services, while limited in imagination, always had an air of informality and friendliness. No doubt these aspects aided in the comfort of the unchurched. In subsequent interviews over half of the unchurched expressed strong interest in returning to the worship of the congregation. Why? We believe we gave them a meaningful experience.

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In this project it became apparent to me that while entertaining worship was an initial expectation and desire among the unchurched, most of them were really looking for a public worship which was both engaging and meaningful. For that reason, I

believe the call must come forth to provide public worship which is intent on giving the member and unchurched alike an experience which engages them in the reality of God.

If we are to reach the unchurched, time must be dedicated to understanding the "why" of public worship. Emphasis in the history of the Churches of Christ has been on "what" needs to be done when Christians assemble. Due to lack of instruction and an aversion among many fundamentalist pioneers of the Churches of Christ to discuss theological issues, there is a lack of understanding regarding "why" worshipers do what they do. As a result, we have been deprived of exploring the depths of meaning embedded in forms or "acts" that are culturally meaningful. To foster a meaningful and theologically significant worship environment church leaders must balance biblical understanding with the role culture plays in theological development.

The Place for Culture

While a great deal of an individual's personal theology is developed through traditional educational means, it seems that most people come to theological understanding primarily through their personal experiences in a given context. This would seem to hold true with congregations as well. F. Ross Kinsler, who was a pioneer in theological education, states the premise this way:

The institutions and structures that have evolved in Europe and North America can no longer presume to hold the key to theological understanding, prophetic insight, or spiritual vitality. Genuine spiritual, prophetic, and theological life emerges from the basic church as 'ordinary' Christians engage in their daily vocation (DeGruchy, 135).

Since much of theology is learned through the context and experience of both individuals and groups, it stands to reason that theology which is practiced is learned primarily through these means. Such is certainly the case with worship, because worship is not simply an intellectual exercise but, more precisely, an experience. Thus the strength of the theology is largely dependent on the strength of the experience. Neither individuals nor groups can begin to develop a group theology of worship based solely upon the reading of scripture since the experiences, history, and culture of the individuals affect both the interpretation of scripture and the faith experiences of the individuals. This is especially true if one believes that the Holy Spirit ultimately interprets situations and experiences for the believer. For these reasons churches must take into consideration the insights, especially the cultural insights, of those who will participate.

This mood was certainly present in the first century when the new Christian faith was being formed. Roger Beckwith reminds his readers of the probability that first century Christian worship was culturally influenced by Judaism (Beckwith, 65). Scripture further verifies the adoption of cultural practices into the church, especially to the assembly, because these adopted practices caused considerable confusion between the Jewish and Gentile Christians (Romans 14:1-23).

Theological Foundations

While much can be said of cultural adjustments, if we are to reach the unchurched in our assemblies we must do so through honest theology and biblical understanding, and not solely or primarily upon the cultural climate of the day. However, as Ralph Martin points out this is easier said than done. "Christian worship as we know it today has gathered a sizeable encrustation of practices, traditions, and procedures with which the New Testament is entirely or nearly completely lacking" (Martin, 190).

For the balance of this article I wish to examine a way which might engage both the church and the unchurched, without abandoning our tradition. I will draw much of my insight from the traditions of the Churches of Christ at large. My focus will be around those particular activities of public worship which have been adopted by the Restoration Movement—

singing, the ministry of the word, the Lord's table, and prayer, and how these traditional aspects can provide greater meaning for both the Christian and the unchurched.

Four questions must be asked. (1) Who is the focus of the worship? (2) What is to be accomplished in worship? (3) For whom is worship designed? (4) How do the traditional activities of worship in the Churches of Christ accomplish their task?

The Focus of Worship

Regarding focus of worship, it appears that most contemporary writers, when discussing the concept of liturgy, focus on God the Father (Critchton, 7). It is this writer's conviction, however, that Christian worship should focus on all three personalities of the Godhead. Based on the promises of scripture which unite God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit with the life of the believer, one cannot separate these three from the worshiping response of the Christian community. This is especially true since the unchurched have not had a strong exposure to Christ or the Spirit. Scripture gives precedents for worship to focus not only on God, but on Christ and the Holy Spirit as well.

The Christ is a fitting focus for worship. Matthew's gospel reports that the disciples worshiped the risen Jesus (Matthew 28:9). Burkhart states that one finds great difficulty in trying to separate Christian worship from the saving acts of God through

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Christ (Burkhart, 18). Worship activities such as the Lord's Supper, the declaration of the gospel, and baptism are unalterably tied to the person and work of Christ.

When one considers the Holy Spirit one finds that the activity of God and his Spirit cannot be separated, especially in the worship experience. According to Martin, "God is holy, yet he seeks our communion . . . we are presented with a momentous task. How can we offer to God a [worship] pleasing before him? . . . Exactly at this point we need the Spirit. He is the answer to the church's agenda for worship" (Martin, *The Worship of God*, 173, 175).

The Work of Worship

A trinitarian focus informs the church as to what is to be accomplished in worship. Because of the identity of the Godhead worship must be experienced on two different planes: the vertical (the Godhead and the eternal nature of humans, both of which have a transcendent quality) and the imminent (the incarnate Christ, the indwelling Holy Spirit, and humans in the flesh). In these two dimensions (the imminent past, present, and future, and the transcendent or mysterious) the church has its existence and must

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center its worship. These imminent and transcendent planes are significant. They serve to remind, to make relevant, to offer hope in Christ, and allow the worshipers to participate in the divine nature (II Peter 1:4). They allow the worshiper to fully experience the reconciling work of Christ on the cross in its past, present, and future dimensions. To emphasize imminence or transcendence at the expense of the other robs worship of the full range of possibilities in encountering God.

Our movement has stressed the imminent in worship. Churches of Christ replaced the liturgical theology of transcendence associated with the established Protestant churches with the practical theology of evangelism. The mystery and holiness of God were substituted for an emphasis on human response and fellowship in worship. As important as the imminence of God is, it is more important to understand that he is a God of transcendence (an emphasis now receiving more attention among Churches of Christ).

If we are to consider the place of evangelism in worship of God, these realities must be kept in mind. The focus of our worship (the triune God), and the work of worship (the human encounter with a transcendent and immanent God) must be prior considerations to the question concerning the nature and characteristics of the worshipers.

For Whom is Worship Designed?

From the biblical point of view one cannot argue against the notion that worship is primarily for the church, or believers. As Karl Barth once stated, "Church law has an original connection with the particular happening of christian worship. It is here that it has its original seat" (Barth, 330). It is apparent from both scripture (Acts 2:42ff) and early Christian history that Christian worship is designed primarily for Christians (the Diadache prohibits the administration of the Lord's Supper to anyone who has not been baptized) (Bettenson, 64).

One can argue, however, that from the beginning it was not exclusively designed for Christians. When Paul discusses the need for assemblies to "build up the church" and to be conducted in an "orderly way," he argues that one of the reasons for doing so is in order that the unbeliever "will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you!'" (see I Corinthians 14:12-40).

At the very heart of the Restoration Movement is a revivalist liturgy which focuses both on the believer and the unbeliever. William Willimon states,

Revival represents the greatest single "liturgical" contribution of American Protestantism. It was a creative response to the problem of a vast unchurched populace, a response which was tailored to the needs of a rough, young and dynamic nation (Willimon, 102, 103).

This dual focus was at the heart of the Disciples of Christ and was one of the reasons the church grew during the nineteenth century (Willimon, 103). Since so much of what takes place in the corporate worship is subject to culture, context, and time, a blending of the believer's response to God and an evangelistic outreach in the corporate worship is appropriate as long as the focus and work of worship are kept in mind.

Our Acts of Worship

How, then, do the traditional activities of worship in the Churches of Christ accomplish these tasks? For a thorough theology of public worship to develop, a congregation must focus as much on what God is doing as what the people are doing. Singing brings one into the presence of God (Psalms 100:4). Through the songs individuals are exposed to the messages of God as He speaks of his work in the past, present, and future (Colossians 3:16). Christian psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs reveal both the transcendent and immanent qualities of the Godhead. Not only does God speak in song, but the fellowship of Christians speaks as well as people are allowed to tell their stories of God's love and guidance in their lives.

The ministry of the word reveals the nature of God in the life of the Christian and the Christian in the life of God. While the message of the kingdom is expressed in earthly terms, it is by its very nature a transcendent kingdom—"not of this world." The teachings of Christ and the apostles are not only full of salvation and hope, but of relevant instruction for the conduct of Christians, thus making the ministry of the word both practical and "supernatural."

The Lord's Supper is simultaneously a memorial of the historical events of Christ's death and resurrection, the present reality of Christ in the church, and a forward glance "until he comes" (I Corinthians 11:26). The present reality is expressed in Paul's reminder: ". . . is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And, is not the bread a participation in the body of Christ?" (I Corinthians 10:16). Prayers of praise acknowledging the transcendent quality of God, prayers of thanksgiving acknowledging what he has done for his children, and requests which state present and future needs all touch on the five dimensions of the church's existence and bring the unbeliever into the presence of reconciliation.

What then is the human response to God's presence, work, and power? The response can be simple or complex. It is not the purpose of this article to dictate how one should respond, but it must be noted that worship in scripture and throughout history pays testimony to the fact that people do respond whether they be mature Christians or unbelievers. Martin

Luther saw the response as a simple one. He understood the events surrounding the cleansing of the ten lepers in Luke 17:11-19 as an example of "true worship" (Burkhart, 18). It would appear that this event in the life of Christ does have the foundational elements of a worshiping human response. One finds in it request, charge, grace, praise, and thanksgiving; however, one of the most sought after elements for the modern searcher—mystery—is not confronted with the same intensity as it is elsewhere in scripture. This search for sacrament, transcendence, and mystery seem to be leading many to find a place where they can respond to a powerful and awesome God, not simply for what he has done, but for the power that he is (Newman, 77). For that reason records of human encounter with God as the one found in Isaiah 6:1-9 would appear to be a more appropriate model for the human response to the mystery of God. In those nine short verses one sees the human response to God. Indeed, much of what God and humans look for in a spiritual encounter are present. There is the mystery and activity of God, praise, awareness of the human need, redemption, challenge, response, and charge. These elements are not contrived or manipulated, they are instead the natural reaction of human being brought into the presence of God. Thus, a theology of worship must have as its foundation not a contrived response to the presence of the Almighty, but rather an infrastructure resolved to bring the worshiper, Christian and non-Christian, face to face with the mystery and power of God.