



Church Health Profile

Christ-Exalting Worship Feature Article

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The healthy church magnifies Christ by providing worship experiences that engage the whole person and lead the congregation into God's empowering presence.

Worship is not about me. It isn't even about *us* and our generation's preferences. It is about God and how we exalt Him through Jesus Christ our Lord. If today's worship is mistaken at any one point, it is in forgetting that worship is about worshipping God through Christ. The following are ten primary characteristics of excellence in corporate worship. As you read through them, think about how you could improve your worship in these key areas.

Prayer in Worship

Perhaps, the oldest element of worship is prayer. It pre-dates Scripture by several thousands of years. Only the offering (as a "sacrifice") is nearly as old. All religions pray when they worship. Prayer is built into the very nature of humans. We long to reach out and speak to God, seeking a connection with Him and making our requests known.

Prayer is, in fact, the purest form of worship. Worship at its simplest is "pledging allegiance to God" – an act showing the person's faith and fidelity to God. Can you really pray if you do not believe in God? In prayer, the church shows that the Body really believes there is a God and that He does hear and answer our prayers. We can sing to each other; preach to each other; testify to each other. We can't pray to each other. Prayer is reserved for God – it is a vertical testimony to faith in a supreme being.

Personal prayer and corporate prayer are different. When we think of prayer as an element of the church's worship, it is more than a collection of simultaneous individual prayers. When it comes to corporate prayer in worship "the sum is greater than the parts. The *church* prays. While the pastor may "lead" in prayer, the prayer is not to the people. Corporate prayer is to God and the people participate in spirit during the prayer. The visitor knows that the church seriously believes in an invisible God to the extent the visitor sees the church give time to prayer. God hears "the prayers of His people" when a congregation "lifts" their prayers to heaven. In a healthy church, prayer is far more than a segue way. It becomes a serious and frequent element of worship in which the people feel they are participating.

Responsive Worship

We do not gather to worship in order to get God to respond to us. We gather to worship as a *response* to God. God has already taken the first step in creation, sending His son Jesus Christ to earth, raising Him from the dead and establishing His church. We do not worship in order to impress God. We worship because God has already impressed us and has acted on our behalf.

Our worship is a response to God's mighty acts. Thus worship must be rooted in history. That is, worship is *remembering what God has done*. The preacher's job is to remind us what God has done in order for us to knowledgeably respond with worship. This is also the job of the worship leader. This is one reason we read Scripture, not just to get tips for living today, but to be reminded of what God has been doing through the ages.

Worship is rooted in the past and the present. God provided manna for the Israelites for which we praise Him. He is also providing our daily bread this week. While worship cannot be cut off from history – *remembering God's mighty acts* – it also must be a response to what God is doing now, this week, this day. The testimony has, at times in history, played the role of announcing what God has recently done in our midst. The "praises" that are now offered in connections with prayer requests are also such present-day recitation of God's (recent) mighty acts. However we do it, worshippers must learn to respond to God's work, past and present.

Worship is also properly focused on the future. The church gathers to worship, anticipating its eventual gathering for worship at God's throne in heaven. This forward-looking worship is the "eschatological" factor in worship.

Worship is a *response* to what God has done in the past, is doing in the present, and will do eventually in the consummation of all things when we will gather at the throne. Worship in a healthy church engages the people in this response, focusing the worshipper's attention on responding to God who has already taken the first move: an eternal God of the past, present and future.

Scripture in Worship

Worship is a conversation with God. We speak to God in song and prayer; God speaks to us in Scripture and sermon. Worship is more than a one-way filibuster on the part of humans. God has something to say in this conversation as well. Most of what he has to say has already been said in the Scriptures where we find Jesus Christ and God's record of His dealings with humans.

What does God have to tell us? What instructions does He have? What are God's values that He wants us to adopt? What are God's concerns that He wants us to take up? How shall we then live? These are the questions the Scripture answers.

Healthy worship places Scripture in a central role. We find it is easier to place a physical Bible in a central place in our churches, than to make the Scriptures central to the actual liturgy of worship. Too many evangelical churches minimize the reading of Scripture using it only as a jumping off point for the sermon. Wesley's notion that Scripture itself is a means of grace is often abandoned and replaced with sermons that try to explain Scripture without reading it.

The church has for thousands of years practiced reading from three passages per service: an Old Testament passage, and a passage from the epistles then one from the Gospels. The notion was that hearing God's word directly – not just as a “text” or “background passage for the sermon” – had merit in itself as a means of grace. That is, God's word standing alone had a powerful affect on the believer when heard. Of course, the Bible was never intended to be read alone as much as read to a church community. Hearing God's word in worship is something different than hearing a talk *about* God's word. Ironically, many evangelical churches who claim to be Bible-based have abandoned this traditional “lectionary” reading practice and replaced it with more time on a message that is sometimes more like a practical talk than an exposition of God's Scriptures to today's church.

A healthy church will practice Scripture reading in worship that considers the Scriptures themselves to be a means of hearing God Himself speak to us. While there are other ways God's speaks to us (in silence, through prophecy or a sermon) the Scriptures are the primary way He speaks. Any church that determines to be healthy will upgrade the role of God's word in their worship. More than the amount of scripture reading, this is a change in mind set. When we hear the Scriptures read we are hearing God's word to us today. If people go away from church remembering the sermon more than the Scripture, it is a sign of imbalance that needs rectified.

Engaging the Heart, Mind and Senses in Worship

Healthy worship is “holistic.” It involves the heart, mind and the body. Most churches go astray in picking one or the other of these aspects of worship and elevating it over the others.

We do not come to worship by “forgetting everything on our minds to worship him.” We bring everything on our minds before the throne as we worship God, hoping God will bring perspective and insight to those things we've been thinking about. The same is true with our emotions. We would not want emotionless worship any more than we would want an emotionless marriage. As for our bodies, we do not worship God in spirit alone. Our worship involves the physical, tangible body as well. For example, we worship by lifting our hands, partaking communion, or kneeling in prayer. Healthy worship involves balanced mental, emotional and physical elements.

Worship experiences that incorporate one element to exclusion of the others are a detriment to the whole person worshiping the whole God. Some churches are more like classrooms, complete with deep exegetical sermons. It's a lecture style preaching geared to the elevation of the mind of the worshipper. If such a church ignores emotions and the senses they might please their professor-type parishioners, but they will leave out those people more oriented to emotion and physical responses.

Likewise some churches deliver a worship experience full of emotional ecstasy. The people experience tears, joy, celebration and a “radical personal divine encounter” with God, but the worshippers leave with little mental meat on which to base their faith. They have a mindless experience.

Recent developments in education have taught us that people learn differently. Some learn primarily through hearing. Others through seeing, still others through tactile

experience. Making everything a classroom lecture leaves out too many learners. The same applies with too much emphasis on feelings or actions. Healthy worship intentionally designs worship to engage all three domains—the mind, the heart and the body.

Multi-generational and Multi-cultural Worship

God has called people of all nations and tribes into His kingdom. He has not selected one race or nation as his most loved. Neither does God play favorites with one generation over another. He does not give preference to old worshippers or to young ones. He does not prefer upper class urban professionals to lower class blue collar working people. Healthy worship does not target one “audience” while alienating all others.

Why does God insist on a multi-generational and multi-cultural church? Simply because He has gifted each generation and each culture with unique strengths, gifts and wisdom the others need. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you.” Neither can the worship-in-the-dark young adult say to the older folk “we have no need of your bright-lights-and sunny delights worship.”

God intends worship to be a great equalizer between the generations and cultures. That is not easy. It is really quite difficult in a culture ruled by personal preferences. Research repeatedly reminds us that generations and cultures tend to gravitate toward people like themselves. This may be sociologically correct, but it is not theologically correct. God intends worship to be multi-generational and multi-cultural. We should “leave no worshipper behind.”

Participation in Worship

Worship is not to be something we watch. It is supposed to be something we do. It is a series of elements arranged for the people to express their adoration to God. Worship is not an event where people are entertained or get to watch the praise team worship, as if they are some sort of modern high priests entering the Holy of Holies on our behalf.

Worship is the work of the people, not just the pastor, praise team, musicians or visiting gospel music group. Worship effectiveness cannot be measured by what happens “on the stage.” We must pay attention to what is happening in the hearts of the people in the seats. Worship is not a performance by the leaders for the people to applaud; it is a performance by the people for the “audience of One.” The worship leaders perform the role of “prompter” in this process, aiding the people in their worship.

In a healthy church people believe they really have connected with God in worship. They have heard Him speak, responded to His mighty acts, and joined with others in praise. They do not walk away talking about the people up front. Rather they walk away knowing that they have themselves seen God’s face and are transformed.

God-focused Worship

It seems to be a human tendency to put leaders on a pedestal. We tend to lift them up in the spotlight and give them praise and adoration – a “worship” of sorts. Our culture has its heroes, stars and celebrities.

We also do this in the church. We have our famous authors, television personalities, super church pastors, and itinerant speakers and musicians. We act like fans or groupies for these Christian celebrities. And this is not automatically wrong in itself.

The trouble comes when a church’s worship leaders start acting like entertainers and celebrities “performing for an audience” rather than leading the people to worship God by simply getting themselves out of the way. The audience of our worship is God. Worship leaders in a healthy church must intentionally plan to make God the center of worship and not themselves. The lighting, atmosphere, focus, audio, apparel, and especially the leaders themselves can distract us from God – the real focus of our worship. Healthy worship is led by leaders who know how to guide the worshipper to throne of God and get out of the way. They are prompters not performers.

The Sermon’s Role in Worship

God has always called up persons to deliver His messages. He called the prophets of old, the apostles in Jesus’ day, and has since been calling up men and women to declare His messages. When these called ones deliver a message, they “stand with the angels” between God and humans delivering a message from the King of Kings, as if they are the King’s herald. It has pleased God by the “foolishness of preaching” to save souls.

Today, more than ever, God needs inspired, anointed, fearless preachers to deliver His message to His people. He does not need merely clever motivational speakers and not-yet-ready-for-late-night stand up comedians. God does not need an academic lecture from a wannabe professor. What God needs today are men and women who will stand up to proclaim the truth of God as found in His word, while unafraid of what people might think or how people will respond. These preachers will work hard to communicate the message in ways it will be heard by the truth-seekers of their day. The healthy church will have sermons that grow out of the Scriptural text, are full of biblical insights and move to a clear practical application for living as a Christian in today’s world.

Meaningful and fresh Sacraments in Worship

God has chosen to pour out His grace to His people through what John Wesley called, “ordinary channels” like prayer, Scripture, gathering with other believers, fasting and the sacraments. These are “means of grace” – channels through which God actually mediates His grace as a means of “sanctifying” us. While pietistic Wesleyans have always appreciated the individual means of grace (prayer, Bible study, fasting or “devotions”), we often overlook the corporate means of grace found in the sacraments. Yet our doctrine is clear. We use the term ‘sacrament’ on purpose, to denote a means of grace different than the other ones. For Wesleyans, baptism and the Lord’s Supper are not meaningless rituals that are mere signs or an action that points to something more important. Wesleyans accept these as means of grace. That is, when Wesleyans

take communion they actually expect something spiritual to happen inside them. Communion does not point us back to the death of Christ, but it points to our needs and, when taken in faith, actually changes us. It is a “means of grace.”

It is important that our people understand the meaning of both baptism and the Lord's Supper. That is the only way to avoid these Christ-established sacred actions from becoming meaningless rituals. We need to upgrade preaching and teaching on the sacraments rooted in our denominational history and especially the teachings of John Wesley. Churches should plan for more frequent offerings of communion (again, following John Wesley's example). These services should be offered with a greater array of styles to avoid getting in a rut of boredom in an age that expects variety.

Christ established the sacraments and expected His church to perform them through the ages. In an effort to avoid their becoming a “meaningless ritual” too many churches have avoided them altogether. Yet we would never think to do this in the matter of prayer. What church has eliminated prayer from worship because it “might become a meaningless ritual?” Yet the same Christ who taught us to pray instructed us to have a Lord's Supper. When there is a revival among God's people a similar revival often occurs in the practice of the sacraments. Thus intentional planning for upgrading this important part of our worship is needed if we are going to become the church Jesus Christ commanded us to be.

Passing on the Heritage of Historical Christianity through Worship

Worship never occurs during a single slice of time. When we worship we always join a service already in progress. At the throne of God are throngs of worshippers who have been worshipping Him through the ages. When we gather to worship we always join into this ongoing worship service. Thus, there is continuity between our worship and that of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, the Israelites, and the people of the middle ages. Worship can never fully be “contemporary” or it is not worship at all, but a mirror of the current whims and values of a culture. Worship, at its best, includes both old and new, past and present, and even pulls us into the future. It can never be merely a snapshot of the last ten minutes of a culture.

In our quest to be “relevant” and on the “cutting edge” we sometimes fail to remember the past. Many of us want worship that is “new and improved” and we constantly chase the latest fad of the culture in order to be “contemporary.” Yet contemporary worship is always going out of style faster than those who promote it are willing to admit. Many churches offer services they imagine are “really on the cutting edge” when in reality they are merely reflections of what was cutting edge in the 1980's. Keeping up with culture is a weekly effort.

Few of us want to design worship completely cut off from culture. It took more than 500 years before church people grudgingly accepted the organ as appropriate for worship, yet today the organ might be considered “traditional.” Today's popular culture is guitar-driven. Refusing to allow guitars in worship would shut off a primary means of expression for people under fifty. So innovate we must, but not at the expense of all tradition.

What we aim for in healthy worship is a style that is rooted in history yet relevant to the times. We cannot toss out aged practices and symbols “because they mean nothing to a seeker” any more than we can discard baptism and the Bible because they are hard to understand. The church’s job is to make clear what is unclear not to eliminate whatever needs explained.

Healthy worship is rooted in the rich history of thousands of years, as we join with the heavenly hosts in their ongoing worship at the throne of God. Along the way, we make whatever innovations in style that enable us to reach today’s people in order to connect them with this rich past. In healthy worship we serve an ageless God in a church with a rich history and heritage to pass on. We do so, in a way in which we can “serve the present age, our duty to perform.”