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LEADING CHRISTIAN WORSHIP – Part 2

By Arthur Rowe

Planning a service as a beautiful event

In some churches an established liturgy provides the form which everyone knows. Even in free churches the form may be familiar by custom. There are distinct advantages in working with an established form. It allows the leaders, when they plan, to concentrate on the content of the service rather than facing a blank sheet of paper and wondering what to do next. It is also an advantage to the congregation because they too can concentrate on the content without wondering what is coming next. However in those gatherings where there is no regular form laid down the leaders have to give considerable thought to the main ingredients and the order in which they come. Alas in some 'contemporary' worship they simply begin at the beginning and sing / pray one item after another until sufficient time is thought to have passed or they run out of ideas.

So, if we must start from scratch, let us examine the contents and structure that are appropriate for Christian worship. We can begin by listing possible component parts and examine them before thinking about how they might be put together. A service of Christian worship is likely to include: hymns and songs, Scripture readings, prayers, opportunity for offering money, a sermon, a blessing. In some services an opportunity to think during an instrumental interlude or simply a time of silence can facilitate worship, reflecting on God. Since all these are means of offering worship to God in my view they should be employed in the best ways and of the highest quality possible. We will not offer the Lord what costs us nothing (compare 2 Samuel 24:24).

With reference to the hymns and songs the words should be well crafted, express sound theology and fit the tunes like a hand fits a glove. Words and music should be appropriate to each other, fitting vehicles of praise which are well sung. We need to be able to be thinking about what we are singing and the truths should lift our hearts and thoughts in gratitude and love to God. This is not simply a matter of traditional hymns against modern songs. There are some excellent hymns and songs by living writers. But some congregations in their passion to be contemporary are in danger of seizing the latest CD with much that is of fleeting popularity and losing many of the treasures of the past. A church which never sings Charles Wesley's hymns is losing a valuable part of the Christian heritage and a poorer church as a result. It has often been said that many congregations get their theology from what they sing! Lord, forgive us. Maintaining 'contemporary' worship alone is a bit like running on the spot. It doesn't get you anywhere and you do not stay with any one song long enough for it to become part of you.

The public reading of Scripture is something which should receive much more serious attention. People need to practise reading aloud, at the right speed to be heard and understood (compare Nehemiah 8:8 where a possible meaning is that the readers read clearly). Far too often readers accept the assignment but only look at the verses when they are reading them to the congregation. I have already commented that leading the congregation in public prayer is not something to be undertaken lightly but responsibly by those gifted by God's Spirit to do it. Such prayers express praise and thanksgiving, sorrow for sin and repentance, rededication to God's service, and make requests for other people to our Heavenly Father. We offer praise, we offer prayer, we offer money and we offer ourselves again to God. Offering is the language of sacrifice and should be the term used for these actions. The sermon, like the readings from Scripture, is the occasion where we listen for God to speak to us and the service concludes with his final blessing.

Using a clear format

It is not necessary to suggest one format that will commend itself to everyone for many different patterns can embody the same principles. The whole service is best followed by the congregation when it moves through an orderly series of movements allowing people to change their physical position between the movements, in most churches by standing and sitting, or perhaps kneeling. It helps people to maintain their concentration and involvement if they are not left in one position for too long, especially standing. In some parts of the world the congregation sit to sing but stand for the reading of Scripture. It is worth considering the significance of this use of posture. The general pattern should be simple and clear enough for most of the congregation to follow. It should have a kind of logical sense of progression, some direction, some meaning and purpose.

At the planning stage leaders will ask themselves how will the service begin and it is most helpful to the congregation if they are reminded who God is into whose presence we are now assembled. One description of the Israelites at Mt. Sinai is, the people of God assembled in the presence of God to hear the word of God, and that is not a bad thought with which to begin. Following this the movements of proclamation and response can be put together in a way which is helpful to the congregation. A planned order of service is a bit like a musical score and our prayer is that the outline on paper will spring to life in a symphony of worship as God's Spirit leads us through the different movements. As Paul concludes 1 Corinthians 14 everything should be done 'gracefully' or 'elegantly' (the meaning of the Greek word often translated 'decently') and in order (v.40).

A self-effacing manner

The best 'worship leaders' make the congregation forget about them and direct the attention of everyone to God himself. This includes not only the leader who is speaking but those playing in the music group or band, or accompanying the congregation on the organ or piano keyboard. There is no need for excessive volume to draw attention to the presence of the musicians. They are there to accompany the singing, not to dominate or drive it. When God is the centre of attention none of these people distract attention to themselves by their ways of playing. The congregation feel caught up into the presence of God.

This is why a reading from Scripture is preferable to an opening which draws a response from the congregation, such as 'Good morning' for that implies that our meeting with each other is the primary purpose we have come together. Instead the proclamation of God reminds us all that we have come to worship him. This most naturally introduces the first movement of worship in which we praise God and pray to him. The second movement might be the offering of ourselves, including our money to him, and offering prayers for other people. The third movement might be listening to God's word in Scripture and sermon. A period of silence after the sermon may increase the possibility that a word from the Lord springs to life in the mind and heart. A final *coda* perhaps expresses commitment to God and hears his blessing.

The most dangerous time for leaders is that which follows the close of the service because people will insist on thanking them for 'a wonderful service' when what is really required is opportunity to think about it. One possible response to congratulations for the sermon is to point out that God spoke through an ass once before (Numbers 22:28-30). Still, when God speaks and his voice is heard, he will not let his word fail in his purpose (Isaiah 55:11). Some leaders have let it be known that they will be available after the service for people who want to talk to them about the sermon away from the crowds at the church door. In some larger churches the deacons are available too. Serious discussions take place when personal help is given and people can pray together.

I have tried to identify six principles which I believe should govern the leading of meetings for Christian worship. The congregation should be directed to God, both leaders and led coming before him to pray and praise and hear his word. Leaders should think of their role as servant leaders

sensitive to the responses of the congregation they are leading. There should be a pattern of order previously designed by prayer and the leading of the Spirit and the different component parts should be carefully put together to create a beautiful service, well-pleasing to the Lord. For the intelligent participation by the congregation – and we are called to love and worship God with our minds – there needs to be a clear format and leaders should play their parts in self-effacing ways. And everything should be to the greater glory of God alone!

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