

Article reprinted from *CrossWay* Issue Spring 2008 No. 108

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LEADING CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

By Arthur Rowe

The worship wars in some churches have rivalled Star Wars for the attention of some congregations over the past generation. If truth be told dissension about the proper way to worship God goes back to New Testament times and we find the apostle Paul trying to bring peace and order to chaotic Corinthian worship. But it is timely to explore the question of the principles of leading Christian worship, even when those principles are translated into different forms and programmes of worship. It would be encouraging to know that the people entrusted to lead Christian worship are working to certain principles and not simply improvising as they go along.

Christian worship?

As far as this discussion is concerned I am not concerned with the growing literature which informs us that worship in the NT was much more than what Christians did when they met together – if indeed they met for worship at all¹. I am taking it for granted that today churches meet to offer praise, thanksgiving, prayers, confession and the rededication of themselves to God to love Him and serve Him with the whole of their beings. It is our corporate response to God for all that He has done in creation, revelation and salvation.

From these two sentences we can see that the direction of worship is, or should be, towards God. He is the central focus of attention and everything is done for him and to him. This is in contrast to the ethos in some gatherings where the focus appears to be on the people and their ‘needs’. One test of the meeting for worship is often heard in terms of whether people were blessed, or enjoyed themselves, or had their needs met. But this is idolatry, putting people in the place that should be God’s alone. The blessing of the people in true worship is a God-given consequence which is seriously diminished when pursued as the goal of worship. It’s a bit like happiness, something which comes as a by-product of pursuing something else well. Such meetings are not for entertainment or demonstrating someone’s skills at playing musical instruments, whether organs or guitars. It is interesting that churches frequently speak about morning and evening services. They should be focal points of our service of God. This is the first and most important principle.

The role of leaders

The second principle concerns how leaders see themselves. Leaders of Christian worship are frequently tempted to think of themselves more highly than they ought to think (compare Romans 12:3; Philippians 2:3). After all they are up the front and everyone else is looking to them and will judge their performance (significant word!) as leaders, sometimes congratulating them afterwards. But we should remember that our Lord taught that true greatness lies in serving others and his example involved self-sacrifice (Mark 10:35-45). The role of leaders then is to serve the Lord and his people. It seems to me grossly inconsiderate of some leaders to expect people to stand for three quarters of an hour before sitting for a further three quarters of an hour to listen to an address. It is totally inadequate to reply that people can sit or stand ‘just as they feel like it’ because Christian worship, when the body of Christ is gathered together, is supposed to be corporate worship – something we do as a body together. But some leaders seem oblivious to the idea that their role is to lead the congregation into a deeper awareness of the presence of God and appropriate responses. The role of leaders of Christian worship is to serve the interests of those they lead.

On not ‘leaving it to the Spirit’

Leaders whose style is dubbed ‘contemporary’ or ‘charismatic’ often try to create an illusion of freedom on the grounds that the Holy Spirit prompts contributions from different members of the

congregation in the gaps provided between the songs or during a period of ‘open prayer’. This betrays a poor theology of the Holy Spirit, a superficial understanding of human nature and a disregard of the interests of most people present. Why should the inspiration of the Spirit be assumed to operate in formless and empty spaces of the service rather than in the leaders’ whole preparation of the service? Paul told the Corinthians that not every claim to being inspired by God is the work of the Holy Spirit and that God is not a God of disorder but of peace (1 Corinthians 12:1-3; 14:33). And what about the idea that the ability to lead a congregation is one of the God-given gifts to the church and by that very fact it is not given to everyone? Not everyone is capable of leading a congregation in prayer. There is no guarantee that only the gifted will speak if the leader invites anyone. This ‘freedom’ also ignores human weakness and ambition to make an impression. In addition some who speak cannot be heard by the rest of the congregation and are seldom offered a microphone – an essential piece of equipment for the main leaders these days. To lead congregational prayer or worship in worthwhile ways requires God’s gifts, prayerful preparation, a servant heart and a recognised role within the church.

But how then should worship be planned? What are the key components of worship and how can they be put together in ways which help people express their worship? Can services be both traditional and contemporary or is there a middle path? What is the role of the leaders and the musicians? These are some of the questions which continue to recur in the minds of those who are concerned about the worthwhile nature of Sunday services. The second part of this article will attempt to address these questions and the two parts together suggest six principles which could shape and inform Christian worship to the greater glory of God among His people.

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- 1) For example David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A biblical theology of worship* (Leicester: Apollos, 1992).