

TEN MORE WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR CHURCH'S WORSHIP SERVICE

The enthusiastic response to *Ten Ways to Improve Your Church's Worship Service* has encouraged me to write a sequel. If you are unfamiliar with the *Ten Ways* article, you should read it first. While there are some exceptions here, the suggestions in that article, as a whole, are more important than these. You can link to it by clicking [here](#) or by pointing your browser to www.BiblicalSpirituality.org/10ways.html.

1. **Plan worship only for people who *can* worship.**

Many churches plan their worship services as though unbelievers can worship. But the Apostle Paul makes plain in 1 Corinthians 12:3 that "no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit." Anyone can utter the words, of course, but unless the Holy Spirit indwells a person they cannot say such things as a sincere expression of true worship. In other words, those who do not know Jesus as Lord (and thus do not have the Holy Spirit) cannot worship God, so why design the worship of God for those incapable of worship? We plan evangelistic services and events for unbelievers; worship services are for believers.

In this same letter to the church at Corinth, the apostle criticized some of their worship practices and asked, "Therefore if . . . unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad?" (1 Corinthians 14:23). Whatever may be said about this passage, since Paul considered the entrance of unbelievers into the worship service only a possibility, he clearly expected worship to be a gathering for believers. And when Paul instructed these Corinthian believers further about the elements of worship, he concluded, "All of these must be done for the strengthening of *the church*" (1 Corinthians 14:26, NIV, emphasis added). Thus the worship of God is an event to be planned primarily for the church of God. While it's good to be sensitive to the presence of unbelievers when we worship, we shouldn't design the service for them.

2. **Keep technology on a leash.**

I'm referring primarily to the use of computerized audio-visual technology in worship. Be wary of its beguiling power. While technology can be useful and effective, the limitless possibilities of experimentation with it can siphon off time better spent preparing the content the technology will present. It's often more fun to prepare a PowerPoint presentation than a sermon. But the result can be a dazzling presentation of drivel.

Make sure the technology calls attention to the message, not to itself. You don't want the computer savvy people in your congregation wondering how you developed that clever PowerPoint slide instead of absorbing what it says. Also take care that the tools do not distract from the messenger. The Spirit of God falls upon people, not technology. So be

certain that the hardware and software serve and enhance the human relationship between the messenger and hearers instead of depersonalizing it. Also beware that a spirit of professionalism does not accompany the growing use of technology and foster a performance mentality on the part of those who use it.

It's easy to become overly dependent on audio-visual technology. As the influence of technology grows in our culture, so its use in the church can demand increasing amounts of time and resources (human and financial). It's true that poorly used technology can be just as distracting as that which is overdone. With even a state-of-the-art audio-visual system, worship is impossible when there's ear-piercing feedback or a frantic flipping through the PowerPoint slides to find the right one. The technicians need to be as skillful as the musicians and other worship leaders. But as the latter can call too much attention to their role in worship, so can the former. Don't get into a position where a software glitch, hard disk failure, or unexpected absence by a technician would cripple the worship of God in your church.

P.S. If your worship service is on TV or webcast, keep all cameras to the rear of the congregation (and stationary if possible), *even if* this significantly reduces the quality of your "production." Your responsibility for the worship experience of those present should never succumb to the seduction of "excellence" in packaging the experience for viewers elsewhere. Nothing can divert focus from God more than a roving cameraman in the worship service. And nothing so conveys the impression that people are watching a performance instead of participating in worship than the presence of cameras between the worshipers and worship leaders.

3. Move the announcements, welcome, and time of greeting to the beginning or the end of the service.

The first two ways to improve your church's worship service that I suggested in the initial article were "Focus on God in Every Element of Worship" and "Have Clear Biblical Support for Every Element in Worship." How can the announcements stand either test? Historic confessions of faith as far back as the Westminster (1647) and the Second London Baptist Confession (1689) have recognized that there are "actions common to human societies" which are permissible in worship under the guidance of "the general rules" of Scripture. All "human societies," including the church, must have announcements. It is not always possible to print every announcement, and even then some are so important as to require verbal emphasis. And usually the best time to announce important matters is when the greatest number of people in the society are present. In the church, that time is the worship service. It is also "common to human societies"—including churches—to welcome guests to the gathering of the society. In addition, many churches have a practice of greeting one another during the course of the service, and some find biblical support for this in texts like Romans 16:16, "Greet one another with a holy kiss."

At any rate, it would be hard to argue that these activities are as God-focused as elements of worship such as Scripture reading, prayer, and singing praise to the Lord. Therefore, in order to make way for as much time of unbroken focus on the Lord as possible, move the announcements, the welcome of guests, and the greeting of one another to either the very beginning or the very end of the service. Some will say that announcements, etc., before the service distracts them from worship preparation. Others will protest that having these things at the end diminishes the impact of the sermon. But some announcements are inevitably necessary, and interrupting the flow of worship for them is worse than opening or closing the service with them.

4. Prepare the congregation for worship.

Just before the worship service begins, does your congregation sound like the crowd at a basketball game? That used to trouble me a great deal, especially after a visit to a Korean church where worshipers entered silently and prayed individually until the start of the service. Although I desired the same for our own church, I came to realize that the noise before the service was the sound of a family reunion. I like that too. It's a good sign when church members are glad to see each other. And it's spiritually healthy for them to want to speak with each other, particularly in a church where the members are so widely dispersed that they never see each other between Sundays.

Our solution was to enjoy the family reunion before the service, but then to transition into a time of silent and thoughtful preparation. In summary I said something like this: "Welcome to the worship of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. This is the Lord's Day. And our great privilege and responsibility on this day is to worship Him with His people. Let's spend the next few moments in a time of silence as we prepare our hearts and minds to worship Him."

Without guidance, most worshipers won't prepare for worship. Remind them what they are about to do, and give them some time to prepare themselves for it.

5. Construct a call to worship.

Worship begins too abruptly in many churches, even in some that observe a time of silence beforehand. "Welcome to our church. We're glad that you're here this morning, especially if you are visiting with us. Please take a hymnal and turn to"

A clear commencement of the worship service with what is known as "the call to worship" helps people transition from preparation into actual worship. It goes beyond the welcome and the announcement of the first song. Instead it explicitly notifies the people that worship has begun and focuses their attention on the person of God, not merely the next thing they are supposed to do ("Please take a hymnal and turn to").

Examples of calls to worship abound in the Psalms, as in Psalm 95:6-7:

Come, let us worship and bow down,
Let us kneel before the Lord our Maker.
For He is our God,
And we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand.

Texts like these are sufficient to stand alone as a call to worship. But they can also serve as patterns of calls to worship that you compose. Notice in this text both a *call* to worship the Lord and a *reason* to worship Him. These are the simple, essential elements in a call to worship.

This passage also shows how the introduction of worship can be very brief. While this one epitomizes economy, sometimes a good call to worship extends into two or three short paragraphs which begin with the events of the world or the season and translates them into a call and reasons to worship God.

6. **Introduce new music wisely.**

Because congregations occasionally discover good hymns previously unknown to them and because new music will always be written, the worship repertoire of every church must always be expanding. So while a healthy church is often learning new music, new music should be introduced wisely. Too much new music too quickly is overwhelming and distracting. Even one new song each month is more than many churches can joyfully bear.

But *when* you introduce new music is as important as *how often*. Sunday morning worship is rarely the best time for it. People usually find it much harder to focus on God when singing an unfamiliar song than with one that's well known. Sunday morning worship should flow easily, not hesitate with uncertainty. So if you must introduce new music on Sunday morning, have an individual or group sing part or all of the song so the congregation can hear it before trying to sing it. Better yet, teach it in another service first, such as Sunday or Wednesday night, or when your small groups meet. I know of one large church which meets at location than the church building one Sunday night per quarter just to sing together, and that's when they learn new music. They have unhurried time to learn about the background and theology of the song, how to sing the tune, and they experience a unique occasion of fellowship as well. It's an enjoyable way to learn new music, and then when the song is first used on a Sunday morning most people don't stumble through it.

7. **Don't hide the ordinances.**

A growing school of ministerial thought believes that the nature of baptism and the Lord's Supper makes unconverted people feel excluded and that such feelings make them less responsive to the Gospel. As a result increasing numbers of churches intentionally observe the ordinances only at times (such as a midweek gathering) when few unbelievers are expected. But unbelievers *should* feel excluded from the family of God, for they are. Both Jesus and the Apostle Paul referred to them as "outsiders" (see Mark 4:11, 1 Corinthians 5:12-13, Colossians 4:5, and 1 Thessalonians 4:12). In fact, any feelings of separation from the life and family of Christ are often the means the Lord uses to create longings within them for what they are missing.

In addition, both ordinances are designed in part to present the Gospel. Regarding the Lord's Supper, for example, 1 Corinthians 11:26 says, "For as often as you eat the bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." And the proclamation of the Lord's death is exactly what unbelievers need. Many of them are never more attentive than when watching new believers testify at their baptism of the saving power of Jesus Christ. Don't withhold the blessings of the ordinances from the Lord's people on the Lord's Day, and don't withhold the presentation of the Gospel given to the unconverted through the ordinances.

8. Use confessional material.

I was invited to preach in a fairly large church in a county seat town near a major metropolitan area. The associate pastor was my host, and I asked him what statement of faith the church embraced. He didn't know. He had been on staff there for seven years and didn't know the church's confessed beliefs. Moreover, he wasn't sure how to find out. After much searching through literature given to visitors and other church publications, he finally discovered a document deep in a file cabinet where the church's confessional position was identified. When even long-term staff members don't know the doctrinal statement of a church, how important do you think right doctrine and confessional integrity are to that church?

One way to keep your church's statement of faith from being forgotten is to read from it congregationally on a regular basis. Take a paragraph per week and read it aloud together, possibly taking the opportunity to briefly explain or illustrate the meaning. You may want to cycle through it continually, or each time you finish it you may add a catechism (use a question or two per week), your church covenant, or ancient statements of faith like the Apostles' Creed into the mix before returning to your doctrinal statement. In so doing you will not only keep these vital documents visible, you'll also fulfill the biblical mandate Jesus gives us to teach His people all that He commanded us (Matthew 28:20).

9. Lead in the corporate confession of sins.

When was the last time you heard someone leading the church in prayer during Sunday morning worship and saying something like, "Lord, both as a church body and as individuals we sin against You, and so we pause now to silently confess our sins and ask Your forgiveness"? The same major elements of private prayer (such as praise, thanksgiving, asking, etc.) should be present in prayers offered on behalf of the church. Therefore, just as we confess sins when praying individually, so we should confess sins when praying corporately. Agreed? But does this regularly happen at your church?

I do not mean that the prayer leader should always attempt to *name* the sins committed by the church together. That should be done only when the church agrees together on its sin. Nor do I mean that the confession of sin that is done when we are alone is any less important than sin we confess silently to God during a worship service. Rather I am emphasizing that just as private worship is usually characterized by the confession of sin and asking forgiveness, so the same spirit should mark our worship of God with others.

The words originally inspired for the people of God to use in corporate worship (that is, the Psalms) teach us by example to pray this way (see Psalm 51, for instance). The Model Prayer given to us by Jesus (in Matthew 6:9-13) is another case in point. And whenever we pray this in church, we are saying to the Lord *together*, "And forgive us our debts." Incidentally, in a day when sin is seldom mentioned in worship, a public expression of humility before the Lord such as the confession of sin and asking His forgiveness may be a means of convicting the lost of their need to do the same.

10. **Scripturalize routine prayers.**

I was in a worship service in suburban Chicago one Sunday when "Joe" was asked to pray, something he had done in that church many times. As he spoke, a five-year-old boy near the front began to pray with him, speaking the same words in unison with Joe. Like a prayer duet, the two continued as if they were reciting the Lord's Prayer together, except that they were using "Joe's prayer" instead. Joe repeated the same prayer so often that a child of only sixty months was already able to recite it verbatim.

We've all heard—and perhaps offered—such "spontaneous" prayers in worship. Any repetitious prayer *situation* tends to breed repetitious *prayer*. For example, when I found myself in the situation of offering the pastoral prayer in worship each week year in and year out, I was tempted to repeat the same words and phrases since the purpose and goals of that prayer were almost identical each time. And the number and kind of prayer situations (such as at the beginning or end of the service, before the offering, etc.) in Sunday worship rarely change.

So changing the content of these routine prayers could immediately and noticeably affect worship. And there's no easier or better way to continually change their content than to "scripturalize" them. Use the words of Scripture as the basis of your prayers. Take part or all of a prayer found in the Bible (and I'm including the Psalms among the prayers found

in Scripture) as the words you voice in public prayer. If you were praying through Psalm 23, for example, after reading it you could begin to pray with, "Lord, we thank You that You are our Shepherd. You are truly a Good Shepherd. Please shepherd our church, especially in the matter of _____." You would continue praying in this manner through the Psalm until you came to the end of the chapter or felt it was time to conclude the prayer. Another option is to pray your way through a few verses of a New Testament letter, again using the passage before you as the framework of what you offer to the Lord on behalf of the congregation.

In using this method you will not only pray about the matters you always want to pray for in these customary situations, but you'll be praying for them in stimulating ways you've never expressed before. Moreover, the Scripture will prompt you to pray about relevant matters that you otherwise would never think to mention. No other approach generates such potential for every prayer offered in the service—from the pastoral prayer to the spur-of-the-moment one requested of a layman—to be fresh and alive with the power of the Word of God.

You could incorporate some of these changes into your worship service this coming Sunday. A number of them call for discussion and coordination with others first. A few require some teaching and perhaps a Sunday morning explanation before implementation. Regardless of the order in which you pursue them, may the Lord bless you with His wisdom and the grace to move forward. He is worthy of the best worship your church can offer.

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