

# TEN WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR CHURCH'S WORSHIP SERVICE

Because of the traveling part of my preaching and teaching ministry, I worship the Lord in a different church most Sundays of the year. My experiences in churches nationwide, together with my years of teaching a seminary course on worship, cause me to think a great deal about the worship of God in the local church.

One observation I have made is that most churches could make dramatic improvements in the quality of their worship event by making some changes that are relatively simple. After a quarter-century of pastoral ministry and leading worship services, I do realize why "simple" changes are sometimes difficult to make. However, if you are a leader who senses the need for freshness in worship, you should consider these recommendations because (a) they each have a direct or indirect biblical basis, (b) they are specific enough to be practical, and (c) they can be accommodated to any church, regardless of size, location, culture, or worship style.

## 1. **Focus on God in every element in worship.**

Worship is, by definition, the worship of *God*. So why would you include something in your worship service that doesn't focus on God? Go through your order of service and ask of every element, "Does this focus on God?" If not, either remove that element or push it to the beginning or end of the worship gathering. Specifically, items like the announcements, the welcome of guests, and greeting one another may have a legitimate place, but they should be accomplished in a way where they won't break people's focus on the Lord. Schedule them just before or after the time when God is the exclusive focus.

## 2. **Have clear Biblical support for every element in worship.**

Go through the order of service once more and ask of every element, "Is there a Biblical basis for doing this in worship?" (An *element* of worship is a worship activity, such as singing, preaching, praying, etc. This differs from a *circumstance* of worship, such as the time the service begins, its length, the color of the carpet, whether you use air conditioning or microphones, etc. The Bible doesn't speak to these issues, but it does address the activities of worship.)

Don't settle for generalities like, "The Bible tells us to reach people, and I think this aspect of our worship helps us do that." Require stronger scriptural warrant than that. God knows better than we how He wants to be worshiped, and He hasn't left us to guess what He wants us to do. Come before the Lord with the confidence that everything you do in worship has a Biblical command, example, or clear inference which supports it as a worship activity. Discontinue every part of your public worship for which you can find no solid scriptural foundation. If churches practiced just these first two principles, great reformation would occur in their worship.

3. **"Offer to God an acceptable service [i.e., worship] in reverence and awe" (Hebrews 12:28).**

The Bible not only tells us the "what" of worship, but also something about the "how." Worship that is acceptable to God involves more than just doing the right things. To offer them "in faith" (Hebrews 11:4), "in spirit" (John 4:24), and "in reverence and awe" is equally important. And while none of these can be coerced, the worship leader can do something to contribute to an atmosphere of "reverence and awe."

Cultivate a serious-minded pursuit of God; exclude flippancy and superficiality in worship. Smile, even laugh when it would seem that Jesus Himself would do the same. Spiritual joy in experiencing the Lord is good and testifies to the desirability of God, but do not let true joy be confused with frivolous levity about a joke, a sports rivalry within the church, or the pattern of man's tie. One of the best ways of nurturing "reverence and awe" among worshipers is simply to insure that each element of worship focuses their attention on God (see recommendation number one).

4. **Preach expositionally.**

Many Bible-believing men *think* they are preaching the Bible when they are not. There is a difference in preaching that is consistent *with* the Bible and preaching which evidently comes *from* the text. For example, a man who announces Psalm 23 as his text, and then preaches about the importance of baptism and the evil of abortion may be proclaiming truth that is consistent with the Bible, but he is not preaching the message of Psalm 23.

While some may differ about the details of definitions of expository preaching, Mark Dever's way of putting it is simple, memorable, and consistent with all definitions: "expositional preaching is that preaching which takes for the point of a sermon the point of a particular passage of Scripture" [Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2000), page 26.]. Preachers, whether your passage is a single text, a paragraph, or an entire chapter of Scripture, preach in such a way that your words are obviously exposing, illustrating, and applying the point of *that* passage.

5. **"Give attention to the public reading of Scripture" (1 Timothy 4:13).**

It amazes me how many men who fight (and rightly so) for the inerrancy of Scripture do not read the Bible publicly, except perhaps for their brief sermon text. I have observed that ironically it's often the most conservative of churches where this command to "give attention to the public reading of Scripture" is ignored, despite their repeated affirmations of faith in God's Word and of their desire to obey it. Conversely, it's common for the most liberal churches, because of their traditional use of a lectionary, to have four Scripture readings (one each

from the Old Testament, the Psalms, the Gospels, and the Epistles) in every Sunday morning worship service. And while the pastor may then stand to preach and in effect deny what's just been read, more of the Word of God may have been spoken than in many churches who pride themselves in their stand on Scripture.

One of the easiest ways to go about giving attention to the public reading of Scripture is to read consecutively through books of the Bible. Choose a book and read a chapter each week. If a chapter is particularly long, take half this week and the other half the next. Without obedience to this Biblical command of reading Scripture in worship, how many people in your church will never encounter the message of God's Word in, say, Malachi, unless you read it to them?

By the way, learn to read the Scriptures well—expressively. Practice. Ask for pointers. When you hear people on radio who read naturally but well, identify and learn from what makes them easy to listen to. Read the Bible in such a way that reflects "reverence and awe" for the Lord and His Word. Words well read are appealing. Those read poorly and heartlessly are not.

## 6. **Pray!**

I was in an hour-and-fifteen minute worship service recently which had two minutes of prayer. A friend told me of attending a well-known, evangelistic church which had two prayers totaling less than thirty seconds. Prayerless worship may be an oxymoron, but it is increasingly common in the contemporary evangelical church. True, unbelievers present will find prayer boring, but why should we let the spiritually dead dictate the prayer life of the body of Christ? Can you imagine the apostles and the first century church having worship without prayer? If prayer isn't worship, what is?

As you think of rebuilding the public prayer life of the church, keep in mind that the worship experience of everyone in the congregation probably could be improved by one short session of training on praying publicly.

## 7. **Transition smoothly between elements of worship.**

This is an application of the inspired words of the Apostle Paul, "But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner" (1 Corinthians 14:40), which is a command in a passage on worship. Without a smooth and orderly transition between them, too many worship elements are often left to stand alone, unconnected to anything else in the service. A hymn is sung, then we're told, "And now turn to page 325." Following that selection we hear nothing more than, "And now turn to page 227." A good transition between those two hymns explaining *why* we are singing the hymn on page 227 would help us worship God better as we sing.

When making transitions, remember that briefer is usually better. When planning them, think sentence or paragraph-length at most. Above all think "purpose and flow." In other words, as concisely as possible, help the movement of worship flow from one element to the next, and do so by giving a reason for the next element. For example, having just sung *Amazing Grace*, you could transition with, "Let's continue worshiping our gracious God by singing number 329, *Grace Greater Than Our Sin*." In that one sentence the congregation has been instructed what to do next (prepare to sing the hymn on page 329) and why we will be singing it (we've chosen this hymn because we want to continue praising God for His grace), and in a way that helps people's thoughts *flow* from one element to another without losing their Godward focus.

Not every element needs a transition into it (the sermon, for instance). Some transitions need not mention the previous activity. After singing a hymn, it would be appropriate to say, "Take your Bible and turn to Matthew 10. The Bible tells us to 'give attention to the public reading of Scripture,' and so we read God's Word publicly each Lord's Day. In our consecutive reading of the book of Matthew we have come to chapter ten. Please listen as I begin reading at verse one." Thus good transitions can also remind us that there are reasons for doing what we do in worship.

You do want to improve the worship services at your church, don't you? Then consider these next recommendations:

**8. Do as much as possible congregationally.**

Our entertainment saturated culture has soaked into the church. In growing numbers of churches, the congregational worship of God has been degraded into a parade of individual religious performances to be applauded. I've attended services where the congregation sang but twice yet listened to more than half-a-dozen musical presentations. Do not let the sound of solo, small group, and/or choral music characterize your church's worship more than the voice of *all* your people lifted together in the worship of God.

Biblical worship involves the whole congregation, prompted by worship leaders, focusing on and responding to God. Every believer present should engage in worship, not observe it. So sing God's praises together, read Scripture together sometimes (as in responsive readings), and pray together (recite the Lord's Prayer, pray in small groups, or place microphones throughout the worship space for all those willing to pray publicly). Never let worship decompose into a vicarious experience where the many in the congregation merely watch the few on the platform who at best are worshiping, and at worst are performing.

**9. Have congregational singing with musical accompaniment, not music with congregational accompaniment.**

The music is so loud in some churches I've visited that I can't hear myself sing, much less hear the congregation. A few of the Psalms provide Biblical evidence that sometimes it's appropriate for worship music to be loud. But let's remember our priorities: the musicians are there to accompany the congregation, not vice-versa. Parenthetically, drums are especially problematic in this regard. If you have them, keep them from dominating the music.

#### **10. Evaluate your worship service each week with several leaders.**

On at least two occasions I've participated in the weekly worship evaluation meeting of the staff and interns (often with spouses) of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. Over a snack together on Sunday night, each person is required to make at least a brief comment about every element in the worship service(s) of that day. The result is a constant vigilance and care about the quality of their worship experience. The evaluation also fosters an ongoing thoughtfulness and intentionality about everything in the service. As a byproduct, some future worship leaders (i.e., the interns) are getting unparalleled training in the theology and practice of worship.

Customize the idea to your own situation. Sunday night may not work for you, but waiting too long dims the memory. Instead of staff and interns you may need to choose trusted lay leaders, or even an ad hoc group each time. Make sure to involve as many of the worship leaders as possible as often as possible, for they all need reinforcement or redirection now and then. And sometimes hearing more than one person make the same comment or hearing a familiar comment from a different person makes a deeper impression. Yes, you'll be surprised and disappointed by a few of the remarks on occasion, but over time you'll also see some improvements in your worship service you hardly thought possible.

If anything is worth doing well, it is the worship of our glorious God. If anything in the life of the church is worth the cost of reformation, it is the worship of our holy God. We shouldn't expect to see changes in worship without prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit, but neither should we expect to see our worship enhanced without taking initiative.

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