

WORSHIP: WHATEVER HAPPENED TO “BOTH-AND”?

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Is there anything more vital to the *heart* of a church than the quality of its worship? Is there anything that has stirred up more *heat* in the church than the issue of worship?

In living with and listening to all of the opinions, concerns and urgings about worship shared with me as a pastor, I have often found myself saying, “Yes, but...” or “That’s true, however...” or “You’re right, but have you considered...?” I have concluded that, in many critical areas of the conversation, there are some paradoxical tensions at play. Often our human tendency is to lean one way or the other, and I am beginning to think that at the center of the controversy about worship is our propensity for A or B, “either–or” ways of thinking. What would be wrong with a “both–and” view of worship?

COUNTERCULTURE—EMBRACE CULTURE Is the worship culture of the congregation to be defined by life in the kingdom of God? Or is its essential purpose to be a divine encounter that counters and subverts the dominant culture of this world? How connected or how into the culture should the church as a worshipping community be? Those who focus on mission often criticize the church for being irrelevant and provincial. Yet others preferring to emphasize nurture and formation tend to judge the church for being too accommodating. They say things like, “It is a McDonald’s world, and now we have ‘McChurch.’” But couldn’t the church be both connected to the culture through ministry and still be different from it in values and actions?

COME—GO Is one of the purposes of worship to attract people by using methods often associated with entertainment? Is one of the primary worship planning questions: How can we get people to come, or how can we get the right people to come? Some would say no, worship is primarily for the believer. Yet the gospel-call heard in worship is to go! Could it be that the going occurs before we ever leave the worship building, largely expressed by the attention focused on the un-churched in recognizing who they are—people treasured by the heavenly Father? Which is it? Is it come, or is it go? Isn’t it possible to imagine going by inviting people to come?

INSIDE—OUTSIDE In the same vein, is the place of mission inside the walls of the church or on the outside? Is worship something insiders do, or is it something insiders do for outsiders? The Gospels lead us to believe that often insiders are really outsiders on the inside. It is a curious thing to note just how attracted outsiders were (and are) to Jesus.

OUTREACH—IN-REACH Is worship about reaching out or growing up? It is amazing how often it is mentioned in discourse that contemporary worshipers want the traditional folks to reach out. In keeping with an either-or

mentality, the traditional worshipers want the “happy clappers” to grow up. What would be wrong with the notion that the more we grow the further we reach? It really can be both-and!

PAST—FUTURE Working on a university campus filled with young worshipers, more than once I have reminded students that Christianity did not begin the day they were born. Some talk about “tradition” as if it were inherently evil and sinful. Yet I’ve been with some believers who seem to think that “contemporary” is a synonym for “fluff” and “worship-lite.” I thank God for the emerging young evangelicals who are convinced that we must go through the past in order to get to the future. Shame on us for those times we have treated the Good News as if it were old news. The Eternal God who was and is and will be still delights in making old things new. I just love both-and!

ME—US Pastors love to say, “It’s not about you. It’s about God!” Or, “Don’t think me; think ‘us.’” Worship is about God, to be sure. Please remind me everyday that worship is for “us” and not just me. But when you are making out the “us” list, I sure want you to put me on it. True, worship is not all about “Jesus and me,” but when I show up for corporate worship, somehow me always comes along. And with me there is baggage, history, needs, likes and dislikes. Actually, all of “us” need to come into the presence of God, who is passionate about shaping the likeness of Jesus in me and “us.” I just cannot get away from both-and.

Perhaps worship need not be so controversial. Perhaps God intended it to serve multiple purposes in various styles among many different people. Perhaps we should stop trying to define and choose what worship should be, and instead we should both accept the diversity of worship and praise God for it! ■



Norm Shoemaker

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