



FACE . . .

How Far Can We Go in Recreating Worship? Asking the Right Questions

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THE STORY OF THE INCARNATION, AT LEAST TO A CERTAIN EXTENT, IS ABOUT how far God will go to become accessible to us. The story of worship over the last 2000 years has been, in part, about that same issue: "How far will we go to make worship and the gospel accessible to people? Will we stop using Latin and move to German? Will we move from German to English? Will we use the King James Version of the Bible or the New Revised Standard Version? Will we add a service that takes advantage of contemporary forms of music or stick to songs 500 years old or older? Will we continue to sing out of the hymnal or put the words up on a screen? Will we wear vestments or 'street clothes'?" Questions like these have not always been easy to answer. Sometimes they have even split churches and denominations and led to martyrdom.

So how far can we go in using the culture of today in order to communicate with the culture of the day? Let me suggest a few questions to ask as congregations and leaders wrestle with this question:

1. *What is our mission?* Is our mission to nurture life-long Christians and continue to enculturate them into the styles and language of traditional liturgies? If so, then perhaps straying even a little from the standard service book will be going too far. Is our mission to share our best understanding of the gospel with people who have never been to church before? If so, then the styles and elements used must connect with people who have no clue as to what we are talking about. In other words, to reach them, we will have to use their language and music and pour the gospel into it. That means radical change. So the mission of the church will help inform the congregation as to how far they should go in changing worship.

2. *Do the changes reflect the character of the gospel?* Does what we are proposing to do in the service value Christ and bring honor to him? Does the style or method used reflect a gospel of compassion, integrity, invitation, inclusiveness, and forgiveness? Does it point people to Jesus or does it bring attention to the method?

3. *Do the changes grow out of a biblical and confessional context?* It is important to

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TO FACE

How Far Can We Go in Recreating Worship? Knowing the Basic Purpose

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HOW FAR IS TOO FAR IN SHAPING WORSHIP FOR THE UNCHURCHED? IN considering this question, we approach worship as presentation, as participation, and as a culture. We cannot go far without also addressing the basic purpose for public worship.

There is a clear difference emerging in the contemporary worship movement between those who approach worship, especially the music, as presentation and those who want to offer opportunity to participate. Presentation has much to contribute in specific circumstances. But I think participation fits existing congregations better.

Willow Creek Community Church is the progenitor of contemporary presentation music, as well as winsome drama and a forceful message to attendees from whom little is expected. The intent is that they find the presentation of Christian faith and life attractive enough to explore further.

Labeling this approach entertainment evangelism, as suggested by Walt Kall-estad, was unfortunate. There is value in the concept according to the dictionary definition of the verb “to entertain”—to show hospitality, to capture and hold one’s attention for an extended period of time. Surely all worship planners would aspire to achieving this objective weekly. But the word is heavily loaded in relation to worship and conjures up images of comedy or staged floor shows. “Going too far” usually means that the worship service has lost the reverence expected by the complainer. Then we are off into subjective definitions of “proper reverence.”

But “reverence”—as normally understood—is not the issue. It is quite possible to show reverence to a false deity (Acts 19:27). In fact, biblical scholar David Peterson observes, “When Christians imply that reverence is essentially a matter of one’s demeanor in church services, this shows little understanding of the Bible’s teaching on this subject.”*

In the New Testament, “proper” reverence means to be in fear and awe. Wor-

*David Peterson, *Engaging God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 73.

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remember that neither the Bible nor the Lutheran confessions dictate one certain style of worship (see *The Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration* 10:9). Having said that, the confessions and the biblical witness do call us to forms of worship that are beneficial, edifying, and evangelical.

4. *Does the change take into consideration those already in the church?* While more traditional kinds of worship may not resonate with non-church-going people, they still have value for those raised in them. These people also matter to God. Creative worship leaders don't take away from those already present but offer new forms at new times for new people.

5. *Finally, does the proposed style or change reflect the character of God?* Does it reflect the creativity of God? (God didn't stop inspiring new music, for example, after the reformation!) Does it reflect the passion of God to lay it on the line to reach a lost and dying world? Does it put the needs of others (i.e., those who don't yet know Jesus) above the needs of the churched (the essence of discipleship)? Does it reflect a God who comes down to our level, who used (and uses) the stuff of the present culture to reach us, and who becomes the customer he wants to reach? Or does the worship experience suggest that we have to understand certain rites, rituals, symbols, music, and the language of a sixteenth-century European culture before we can understand and experience God?

So how far do we go? After reflecting on the above questions, the answer is ultimately found in the incarnation: "Christ was truly God. But he did not try to remain equal with God. He gave up everything and became a slave, when he became like one of us" (Phil 2:6-7 CEV). If God is willing to go that far to reach us, we as Christians should be willing to do whatever it takes, within the context of the above boundaries, to make the gospel accessible to people living in 1997, listening to 1997 music, speaking in 1997 language, impacted by a 1997 culture. For new styles and forms of worship are not gimmicks; they are ways to connect modern people to a God who is still relevant. 

ship planning is off the mark when it does not help worshipers experience through proclamation of his word God's demanding and forgiving relationship to them and their responsive relationship of awe and thankfulness to him for all he has done.

My view comes from the assumption that public worship is an event intended to express the two-sided relationship between God and those gathered in his name. The event needs to be assessed according to how well it facilitated and enriched participation in that relationship, and it is the worshiper who ultimately determines how well this was accomplished.

Participation is the key word. Then the issue is no longer "have we gone too far," but rather, "are we supportive enough." Worship music, witnessing, and prayer come out differently when planned for extensive participation rather than for an audience of passive observers.

How does this relate to outreach to the unchurched? The attraction is for them to witness others, people like themselves, expressing the relationship with God in ways that are spiritually moving and meaningful. Some call this worship evangelism. Simplicity is valuable, as is a sense of authenticity that is hard to impart through symbolic ritual.

If participation rather than presentation is the key word, then why not stay with the carefully planned and well rehearsed interactive ritual of currently conventional worship? While ritual can be powerfully moving to some, it goes past many without bringing them into personal engagement. That is why there is a desire for alternative worship forms. Whether or not a worship style increases attendance is not the point. How well it engages even beginning Christians in spiritually moving worship is. Then attendance will take care of itself.

What about movement in the opposite direction? How far is too far in adding liturgical layers of ritual and symbolism to the worship event? Thomas Schattauer advocated this in his presentation to the Luther Seminary Convocation in January 1996. He provided one of the best formulated visions for liturgical advancement that I have found, including a challenge to form a wall that separates through word, action, and senses the churchly culture from all that is wrong with everyday culture. This calls for worship with "ritual and symbolic density."

It is in the density that the problem lies. Schattauer does acknowledge that this understanding of worship "presumes a lot" for the local church: a knowledge of the Bible, an active personal and family spiritual life, ritual and music capacities.

In the real world, these foundations are rapidly crumbling. Thus for all but the rarest setting, that far is too far. The most solid foundation for worship is a living relationship with God, not layers of symbols about God. 