

I began this brief series on the theme of Corporate Worship by referring to a Magazine article which I read last year.

Let me read it once again and refresh your memories.

“Some churches have become engaged in ambitious experiments to accommodate themselves to the market-driven expectations of the world. The principle seems to be that if you want to get your share of the audience you must offer them something they want. The church can be popular if its prepared to trivialise preaching, and some think it is a price worth paying....

It is all being done in the name of progress...

Are evangelical churches reaching the point where methodology is displacing theology as the arena of competence over which a pastor must have expert control? Romans 10:17 tells us. ‘Faith comes by hearing the message ...,

We would do well to remember that there is a message that must be told, and a method ordained by God for that purpose. Paul’s instruction to Timothy applies to us and has not been rescinded. ‘Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season..’” (2 Tim 4:2) BT Magazine May 2003pgs 14-17

Very significant changes are taking place in the Christian Church with respect to the manner of its worship.

Men are devising their own ‘methodology’, ie., how worship is performed a devising, with very scant attention paid to ‘theology’, ie. without regard to what the Bible/God says as to how worship is to be performed!

In the context of that sermon I quoted some words of the puritan minister, Stephen Charnock describing biblical worship in these words,

“Worship is an act of the understanding ,applying itself to the knowledge of the excellency of God, and actual thoughts of His majesty ... It is an act of the will, whereby the soul adores and reverences His majesty, is ravished with His amiableness, embraces His goodness, enters itself into an intimate communion with this most lovely object, and pitches all his/her affections upon Him.” J.Packer

For Charnock, and any who would worship God biblically, God Himself must be the focus of our affections.

Worship is not about meeting our felt needs; it is about pitching all our affections upon Him!

In the second sermon we considered more closely the matter of the ‘theology’ of corporate worship with respect to the Apostolic ‘regulation’ set out in Scripture ie., the principle that the Apostles/Bible does establish clear guidelines for public worship. We saw that we are not at liberty to ‘do as we please’ in public worship; God has set the agenda, and clearly prescribes what we are to do so that our approaching of God in worship is acceptable to Him. We can have big meetings of supposed ‘public worship’, very popular and heavily patronised, but it does not necessarily mean that such worship is acceptable to God! I’m not saying that God does not use such churches, but very dangerous precedents are being established/encouraged that are explosive of error! In concluding that sermon I said, “Are churches today taking seriously this Regulative principle that has been part of the ordering of the church?”

In other words are they taking seriously the necessity of obedience to what God's Word says about public worship?

What does true worship 'look like'; what are its observable features?

Before we consider those questions in more detail on another occasion let me close with some words of C S Lewis quoted by an author on the matter of Christian worship: Lewis wrote, "As long as you notice, and have to count, the steps, you are not yet dancing but only learning to dance. A good shoe is a shoe you don't notice. Good reading becomes possible when you need not consciously think about your eyes, or light, or print, or spelling. The perfect church service would be one we were almost unaware of; our attention would have been on God." And the author continues, "In a sense, that is what the regulative principle achieves for us in worship – a way of enabling us to be free from the whims of unwarranted (unregulated) structure so that our attention can be given to God, a way of maintaining "decency and order" in such a way that God approves and blesses."

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Unregulated' worship, ie., patterns of public worship that do not have biblical warrant or authority – no matter how popular – are dangerous departures from that path of worship that God approves and blesses.

In public worship our attention needs to be on God: His revelation in Christ.

Such 'attention' can only occur when we are following the pattern God establishes; a pattern to which I have previously referred in broad outline; a pattern that encompasses praise, prayer, and preaching; a pattern that is contained within our own liturgy.

I am not saying that the Anglican liturgy is the only pattern that is biblical; there are other patterns.

But public worship which is poorly arranged/led, where leaders in public worship are obviously unprepared, where the congregation is at the whim of the leaders' fancies, where the words of praise/hymns are a form of entertainment and a psychological stimulus to give us a 'high', where prayers do not follow what the NT establishes, where there is little or no Bible reading and no biblical preaching of any substance; these are places where 'methodology' is replacing 'theology'!

It is these 'new' approaches to worship that are rapidly constituting an obstruction to true biblical worship. Let me, in the remaining time I have available, tease out and identify some of these obstructions or obstacles to true worship. I read recently the following words. They come in a book dedicated to the memory of Dr James Montgomery Boice who was himself deeply concerned with maintaining true patterns of biblical worship.

The author says, "In Dr Boice's view, the result of God's dramatic disappearance from Christian worship could only be a catastrophic loss of divine transcendence, not only in our worship, but in every aspect of the Christian life. The Cambridge Declaration he helped to produce gave voice to his concern: Whenever in the church biblical authority has been lost, Christ has been displaced, the gospel has been distorted, or faith has been perverted, it has always been for one reason: our interests have displaced God's and we are doing His work in our way. The loss of God's centrality in the life of today's church is common and lamentable. It is this loss that allows us to transform, gospel preaching into marketing, believing into technique, being good into feeling good about ourselves, and faithfulness into being successful."

p. 7 'Give Praise to God' The great obstruction to biblical worship is when 'our interests displace God's and we are doing His work our way.'

The Cambridge Declaration gives us a number of insights as to how biblical worship is being obstructed. Let me refer to the five briefly.

1. Entertainment

The loss of God's centrality (ie., the loss of the totality of God's revelation about Himself; the ignoring of much of the Bible as no longer relevant).. allows us to transform 'to transform worship into entertainment' The object or aim of those who are devising new patterns of public worship is strongly focused on 'entertainment'. The aim of the exercise is to make people feel that they have been 'given' an experience; an emotional high. Before a meeting I had in the city this week, I met a couple at a very small coffee bar on Town Hall Station.

They were spending three days in Sydney and were amazed at the 'changes'.

As conversation continued the couple indicated that their future was secure.

The opportunity was too good to miss! I asked if their eternal future was also secure?

To which they replied that they were Christians and knew the Lord.

They continued to tell me that they were finding it difficult to find a group with whom they could worship; things had 'changed' so rapidly in the church.

One church they told me of in the Coffs Harbour region (where they had come from) had extremely loud music and changing colours in the lights during the worship. A very definite shift has occurred in contemporary corporate worship. The focus of the congregation in these new forms of worship is upon what 'they receive', rather than what they offer to God! There is also in such worship an increasing emphasis upon individuals or groups contributing musical items. The congregation is increasingly more a 'spectator', rather than participator.

The focus in such services is ostensibly upon God, but more subtly it is upon ourselves.

The degree of such 'entertainment' may vary from church to church, but the clear objective of the organisers is that people leave worship feeling that they have had a good time. Now, I am not saying that we should not feel good after worship/during worship, but our feeling good should be because we are excited about the God we worship, and not about the emotional high we experience because we have been 'entertained'.

2. Marketing

The loss of God's centrality.. allows us to transform

'gospel preaching into marketing' We are all familiar with the term 'marketing'; the packaging of a product that makes it appealing and attractive to the consumer. How has gospel preaching become a marketing exercise?

The gospel is preached in a way that makes its look very attractive to the prospective buyer. Biblical quotations are arrayed so as to emphasise those aspects of God's character that appeal ie., God's love and forgiveness; 'grace' is so emphasised that obedience to God is an optional extra; there are no demands made upon the individual in living the Christian life! No mention is made of God's 'judgement' and the reality of 'Hell'. And if 'Hell' is mentioned it is defined in terms of annihilation, not endless suffering/torment.

The gospel is sanitized; the offence of the gospel is removed; Jesus does not make hard demands on His followers! The 'cross' is for Christ to carry, not us!

3. Believing

The loss of God's centrality.. allows us to transform 'believing into technique'

A technique is a procedure or way of doing something. Much current worship encourages a simple procedure to belief. It may be 'signing' a card in a worship service to indicate that you believe. The technique reinforces in the new believer that if he/she has followed the procedure, whatever that be, then you can be certain of your salvation for eternity. These 'techniques' are fundamentally flawed because they are simplistic; they indicated that believing is merely an intellectual act/decision at one particular moment in time. Believing in the NT is never simplistic. Let me read to you some words of the puritan minister Richard Baxter concerning the true biblical nature of believing with respect to Christ's command for baptism..

"Sometimes we are called believers, and said to be justified by faith, as if it were faith alone that were our Christianity; and yet when it comes to church entrance and to the solemn profession of our faith .. we must do more than profess that we believe with the understanding; we must give up ourselves absolutely by a vow and covenant, to God the father, Son and Holy Spirit, renouncing the flesh, the world, and the devil; which is the act of a resolved will: and to will is rationally to love and choose. By which Christ tells us, that the faith ... He requires to our justification, is not a mere assent or act of intellection (the intellect); but it is also the will's consent, and a practical affiancing (as if we are wedded to God);" That Baxter is saying is that Christ's ordinance of baptism spells out the meaning of believing. Believing in Christ does not mean that one signs a card or says 'I believe', and then ignores the church when they choose, or is heedless/indifferent or turn his backs with regard to the searching significance of Christ's commands. Baptism is the act of a covenant; a solemn choice to love Christ and pour ones affection upon Him as one would do with a fiancé. It is the commitment of serious obedience to serve the one loved; to give ones life for them! Believing has come to be a technique, rather than the turning of ones lives over to Christ with an all embracing/all consuming love that yields implicit obedience to the totality of Christ's commands!

You are my friends if (only if) you do what I command you!

Who said those words? Jesus!

The N T is not interested in your claim to 'conversion'(believing) unless you CONTINUE in the faith of obedience!

The N T is all about CONTINUING!

4. Feeling The loss of God's centrality.. allows us to transform 'being good into feeling good about ourselves'

Feeling good about ourselves is allied with marketing the gospel.

If corporate worship has a liturgy that refers to the confession of sins such references make people (newcomers) feel uncomfortable. Who wants to hear about guilt and talk about sin; that is morbid. So these things are conveniently 'left out' of modern worship services! Look at the number of television 'worship services' that make reference to sin/or its confession!!

They are as scarce as hens teeth! But friends, before we can 'be good' (ie., be God's holy people) we must hear about sins so that we can changed our behaviour.

5. Successful The loss of God's centrality.. allows us to transform

'faithfulness into being successful' The world is obsessed with success; the media/TV are full of it!

The Church has caught the same fever!

Jesus is not intimidated by the church being small! It was Jesus (not me) who said that there "was a narrow road that led to life and few are on it." That does not mean we sit back and wring our hands as if evangelism is a failed enterprise before we begin.

No.

Evangelism must be defined in terms of purpose, not results! God requires faithfulness in His followers, not success in terms of scalps!

If we are faithful to the gospel, God will use that faithfulness in sowing the seeds of eternal life; just as those same seeds were sown in our lives!

Now, there are many other applications of these 'obstructions' to true worship.

But where the church is dominated by these aspirations or driven towards experimenting with these new changes corporate worship becomes a parody of the praise it ought to be.