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The Harmony of Worship

JACK HAYFORD | **POSTED** MAY 19, 2004

Our worship leaders don't make a god of harmonious worship, but we do want to lead a service that runs smoothly and in which the parts blend, because orderly worship is worship that most helps our people.

—*Jack Hayford*

Ultimately, I don't know that God cares if our worship runs smoothly, but people do. For that reason, among others, I want to lead a harmonious service.

Although worship leaders should give their best to God, polished worship isn't necessarily worthy worship. God looks first for contrite hearts in the worshipers.

Yet, understandably, people expect a certain professionalism or quality in worship. Their standards have been shaped by television, where performances are well-timed and segments blend into each other with the audience hardly noticing. When people come to church and find services disjointed and haphazard, they are distracted from worship. They may dislike worship that is nothing more than a stylized production. But neither do they appreciate sloppy services fashioned in the cause of "spontaneous" or "spiritual" worship.

People have been created by God with a desire for order. Only in an ordered environment can we respond creatively and faithfully. Basketball is a joy to play and watch because it's bounded by rules that create order. Life is most fulfilling when bounded by the order of the Ten Commandments.

Disorder, on the other hand, undermines joy and meaning. For example, children raised within an emotionally unpredictable environment created by an alcoholic father or parents who constantly argue often struggle in school or remain psychologically troubled for years.

So, when worship is disjointed or disorderly, seeming an unconnected patchwork of activities, it leaves people uneasy. Disorder creates a barrier that makes it more difficult for people to praise and respond fully to God.

Our worship leaders don't make a god of harmonious worship, but we do want to lead a service that runs smoothly and in which the parts blend, because orderly worship is worship that most helps our people.

What Makes for Disjointed Services

Services sometimes falter simply because of unfortunate circumstances. A singing group doesn't show up on time. The microphone goes dead in the middle of the sermon. An usher drops an offering plate. We cannot prevent such accidents.

Yet many disjointed services are made so by the worship leaders themselves. In particular, two practices can put a service out of kilter.

- *Too much silence.* Silence can be a powerful means of worship—when it's purposefully included and people are prepared. But silence and "dead air" are two different things. Worship leaders would be wise to think about those parts of the service where "nothing" happens.

For example, in many services, after the congregation sings a hymn and before the pastor stands to make announcements or read Scripture, there is a noticeable break. Instead of the service moving smoothly from one part to another, it halts so that people stop their worship and begin asking themselves, *What's happening next?* If that happens at every transition in the service, worship jerks along.

That jerkiness can be prevented if, for the example just mentioned, worship leaders plan to move toward the pulpit during the end of the hymn. For me that means timing the last few bars of the hymn with my walk from my seat to the pulpit. When I first began ministry, I actually practiced this on Saturday nights. Although experience precludes practice now, I still think about what will happen at the end of every segment of worship.

Often this requires coordinating with other worship leaders. The choir director and I talk about the timing of my introduction and the beginning of the choir's anthem. When I say a certain phrase, the director knows it's time for him to move into directing position. If the piece includes a musical prelude, I'll give a hand motion behind my back to signal when to begin as I'm concluding my remarks, so that when I sit down, the choir begins singing.

Again, we're not trying to dazzle people with a smooth performance. We're simply trying to make worship an orderly and, therefore, meaningful experience for people.

Some dead time cannot be prevented, but it can be put to good use. After I've asked people to look up a passage of Scripture, it usually takes them a minute to find it. Sometimes that can become an awkward gap, filled only with the sound of rustling pages. If that's the case, I will use that time to repeat an announcement: "Incidentally, while you're opening to that verse, let me reiterate that today is the last day to register for the marriage seminar." Or I will give background for the text: "As you turn to the verse, let me remind you of what comes before it."

- *Too much talking.* My goal is not to fill every moment with noise. In fact, too much talking also makes for disjointed worship.

Special music doesn't always need to be introduced. To say, "Jeff is going to sing this morning for us" or "Now the choir is going to sing" clutters the service with something people can figure out for themselves.

If we're going to introduce a segment of worship, better to talk about how it relates to the sermon or Scripture reading. Even then, people often will notice the connection without our waving it in their faces.

Other times, a simple gesture will say more than words can. While I'm leading a song from behind the pulpit, singing, let's say, "Holy Lord, most Holy Lord, you are worthy of our praise," I will move out from behind the pulpit. Just changing position can accent the verse or hymn we're singing in a way a verbal explanation can't.

Other times, after the choir sings an especially moving song, I'll move slowly to the pulpit, letting the impact of their song fill the room. Instead of saying too much—"Thank you choir for that wonderful piece. It was a blessing to hear a reminder of ..." —I'll simply say a quiet "Amen" or nod at the choir in obvious appreciation.

Knowing when to talk and when to be silent comes with experience. Sometimes, in fact, the Spirit leads me during the service in ways I hadn't planned. But in most cases, it's not something that happens haphazardly. Under the Spirit's guidance, I trust, it's carefully thought out ahead of time.

The Harmonies of Worship

Leading harmonious worship begins with understanding what exactly we aim for.

- *Harmony of attitude.* If the words of worship describe God's acceptance of people but my attitude suggests I'm frustrated with them, worship will be out of tune. In leading worship, then, I try to communicate the love of God not only with the content of worship, but also by the way I lead it.

When we introduce the Lord's Table, for example, we don't flinch from recognizing that Jesus died on the cross; that nails were driven into his hands, thorns into his head, and a spear into his side; and, most importantly, that he died because of our sin. We thankfully acknowledge the sacrifice of Christ and humbly accept responsibility for our transgressions.

But I especially communicate, both with my words and my demeanor, that he died for us because he loved us, because we were treasured by the Father. So we partake of the Supper not with heads hanging low because we are unworthy (though we are), but with faces lifted high with thanksgiving, because he thought us worth saving! It becomes not a somber memorial of sacrifice, but a joyful celebration of new life.

- *Harmony of the parts of worship.* Over the years, I've become increasingly convinced that worship is more than a good sermon. The other parts of the service are not mere preliminaries to the main event of preaching. That view puts an imbalanced emphasis on the mind. Instead I see worship as a harmony of emotion, intellect, and will.

Worship includes the joyful praise of God, the serious listening to his Word, and the obedient response to his will, but not necessarily in that order. I've found it is better to mesh the sermon into the service, and the service into the sermon, calling for people's response at both times. Then, instead of the service seeming like two disconnected parts, it will be a unity that calls people, in both heart and mind, to respond to God.

The Sermon in the Service

The sermon will be better integrated into the service, and therefore into the lives of the people, if it is "preached" elsewhere than during the sermon slot. Here are some ways I do that.

- *Let the people start the sermon.* After I've greeted the people, I might say, "In a few minutes we'll look at 2 Peter, the third chapter, where the Bible says God is never deceived. We'll be looking at God's wisdom and how we can be made wise by it. As we greet one another this morning, say to each other, 'We serve a wise God' or 'God's about to make us wiser!'" "

Another sermon centered on "Embracing the Truth," so we greeted each other with embraces.

Doing this too often would get old. But many weeks, by the time the greeting is through, the people have already begun my sermon.

- *Pray the sermon.* Sometimes the sermon theme can become the theme of the church's prayer time. Recently, I was preaching on Jesus' statement, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." To introduce "ministry time" (the segment of the service when people gather in small groups to pray), I said, "People are bound by many things this morning. Some people here feel their backs against the wall financially. For some the bondage is physical; they feel bound by a disease or disability. Some people feel bound by marriage or troubles with children or parents. Let's pray for these and others, that the truth of God's promises will set each of them free from their particular needs."

Again, this wouldn't work if used every week. But occasionally it's a way to plant seeds for the sermon.

- *Give the first part of the sermon elsewhere.* Sometimes I use ministry time to introduce the sermon. I'll tell the opening story, for example.

One week I told of a humorous encounter I had with our garbage collector, and I took four or five minutes as I led into ministry time. Afterwards, I said, "When I mentioned meeting the garbage man in front of the house

the other day ... " and moved into the body of the message.

Others could use the time before the pastoral prayer or the Scripture reading in the same way. It not only frees up more time for the sermon, it integrates in another way the sermon and the service.

- *Warn people about controversial sermons.* If the sermon topic will be controversial or make people uneasy, it's likely to draw a great deal of attention. That will make the service seem unbalanced. So, when the sermon theme might dominate a service, I try to integrate it early into the service, and with a little humor if possible, thereby diffusing unwarranted surprise.

If I were to preach about sexual purity, for instance, I might say something like this at the greeting, "Incidentally, this morning I'm going to be dealing with the subject of sexual purity." Then I'll pause and ask, "How many people are wondering if they'd better get out of here right now?" The people will laugh, and I'd tie it into the greeting: "Greet each other with 'Wow! I can hardly wait to hear this sermon!' "

Sometimes, of course, humor is not appropriate, but people can still be forewarned. During Sanctity of Life Sunday, I let people preview the sermon in the invocation. I prayed, "We praise you, God, for your creative works, especially that you created each one of us." Then, speaking more slowly for emphasis, I said, "Today, Lord, we are mindful that we are part of a culture in which innocent human life is taken daily. So we come with repentance. But we also come with joy, knowing every single one of us has been given the right to exist and in Christ to find you. God, and to discover himself or herself fully."

The controversial sermon introduced early, then, will not stand starkly when it is preached.

- *Integrate to the end.* In our service, after the sermon, we're nearly done. But we don't want the service simply to trail off.

After the sermon, we take the offering and sing a closing hymn, and then I dismiss the people. But I dismiss them in a way that pulls together the rest of the service. I may send them off with a joyful exhortation to live their lives in a way the sermon suggested, such as, "As you leave today, love one another as Christ loved you." Or I may ask them to turn to one another and repeat a key phrase from the sermon.

Even if the service has been laced together neatly up to this point, I think it's important to tie it together at the end.

The Service in the Sermon

Although the sermon is a one-way street, the entire sermon time doesn't have to be. Here are some ways we integrate the response of the people into the sermon.

- *Have people repeat key ideas.* Sometimes in a sermon I'll ask people to repeat a phrase or verse I've just spoken. I might say, "The main point of this first paragraph of our text is this: God loves us without condition. Say that with me...." In addition to reinforcing the sermon theme, this gives people a way to interact with me during the sermon, as they would during a responsive reading. It also helps prevent the sermon from becoming a long monologue.

I've had some people object when I do this, saying it's a technique for teaching children, not adults. But I've noticed that major corporations use it in their sales seminars and management training. It's a common practice because having students repeat key ideas helps them remember.

In the context of worship, it's also a way to help people participate in the sermon as an act of worship.

- *Have people reinforce the sermon to one another.* Once when highlighting the truth that, because Christ has made us righteous, all Christians can be called *saints*, I asked people to turn to one another and introduce themselves to each other saying, "Hello, my name is Saint —," inserting here their first name. So people turned to each other and said things like, "Hello, my name is Saint Luke" or "My name is Saint Helen" or "My name is Saint Buddy." It drew a few chuckles, but it highlighted my point. And it got people talking to each other, so that afterward they were worshipping together.

- *Ask for commitment along the way.* Instead of waiting to ask people for a commitment at the end of the sermon or at the conclusion of the service, I'll sometimes ask for one or more commitments during the sermon.

If the sermon encourages people to be thankful for God's goodness, I might invite people to turn to each other and mention something for which they are especially thankful.

If I feel the middle of the sermon is reaching disturbingly into people's lives, I might say, "The Holy Spirit tells us that if we repent, he will change us. I sense some of you want to repent. Let's take a few moments to pray. Go ahead and tell him right now. Say, 'I am sorry God. Begin to change me even now.' "

After a few moments, I might move them to praise. "Now let's lift our heads and tell Jesus, 'Thank you for forgiving me and for your promise to make me new.' " And then I'll get back into the sermon. At that point not only have people had an opportunity to rededicate themselves and praise God, but I've been given a fresh start for the next part of the message.

As I've suggested above, such practices can be overdone. But when used wisely, they allow me to preach longer, rivet each point I make, and help people participate in worship while they listen to the sermon.

The Best Laid Plans Are Not Enough

I mentioned that one service I asked people to turn to one another and introduce themselves, saying, "Hello, my name is Saint ——" That exercise helped most people think about themselves in a new light. All except one man.

My wife Anna was sitting next to him. She turned and said to him, "I'm Saint Anna."

The man paused, and then said, "I can't say it."

Thinking him shy, she prompted him, "You don't have to feel awkward. Remember, we're saints because of Jesus, not ourselves."

"I know. I believe that firmly," he said. "Well, just say it, then."

"No. I'm not saying it." Then he paused, smiled, and lowered his voice. "My name is Bernard."

This humorous incident reminds me that even with the best of planning, I'm not in charge of worship. I cannot guarantee everything I do will help everyone enjoy harmonious worship.

In fact, although some of our services tie everything together neatly under one theme, many deliberately don't. The main thing is that worship be tied together in tone, and that praise, teaching, and response weave through the hour.

When that happens, even if one or two parts don't go as planned for everyone, the service still has an effect, moving people to see and respond harmoniously to the love of God.

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