

Equipping the Saints for Worship

March 9, 2017*

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In a school whose purpose is to raise up leaders for the church and Christian leaders in communities around the world; to train people how to think about Scripture and society; how to read ancient languages in order to correctly interpret God's word; how to preach well; how to teach well; and how to effectively advocate for children in the world, what is my role? What am I doing here, and why does it matter? Why is music and worship important to the purpose of APNTS?

In a theological school, it is easy to focus on reason; on words and ideas. It is not as common to shine a light on the affective aspect of our faith, because it is much harder to pin it down. Because it is affective, it is different from person to person. It deals with emotions, personal experiences, cultural influences, and movement of the spirit within an individual's heart. It is hard to describe, and even harder to quantify. My field, music and worship, sits squarely in the middle of the affective side of our faith. We can describe how to conduct corporate worship in the church, and I try to help my students do that; we can teach better musical technique, which I try to do with the choir; we can even talk about the science behind music, which I have also done. But we cannot describe the exact experience each person has when they engage in corporate worship, or when they participate in a song of praise to God. How, then, can we say when we are doing it right?

My burden and my calling is for the church. Not just for the Wesleyan Church, of which I am a member, but for the Body of Christ in all its forms around the world. Specifically, my burden is to see people's lives changed for the better because of what we, the Church, do. Historically, this is the goal of holiness denominations—not just to save sinners for heaven, but to help people find a relationship with Christ that will transform their lives and will empower them to be agents of transformation in their world.

Our scripture from Ephesians four talks about using the leadership gifts

* This paper was presented by Rebecca Davis on March 9, 2017 on the occasion of her installation as Instructor in Music and Worship at Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary.

given by the Spirit to equip the Body of Christ for works of service. I teach worship and music in the church, not only because I enjoy those things, although that is true, but because I believe corporate worship and the music used in corporate worship can be instrumental agents in transformation. I believe there is a need for church leaders to recognize the power of worship and the responsibility we carry for the content of our corporate worship experiences. When we ask our congregations to participate in the worship service, we are literally putting words into their mouths. The ancient Latin formula, *lex orandi, lex credendi* is true. The rule of prayer is the rule of belief. Or, what we speak, we will believe.

Constance Cherry, author of *The Worship Architect*, recalls hearing a student ask Robert Webber, a pioneer in worship renewal, “How do you know if you have worshiped?” His answer was, “You know you have worshiped if you obey God.”¹ In other words, if we are not being transformed to become more Christlike; if we are not becoming more obedient followers as a result of the time we spend in doing what we call worship, then we have not really worshiped. True worship is a response to God’s great acts of salvation in history and in our lives. We may respond in awe, in gratitude, in repentance, and in joy, but if those things do not lead to a change in the way we live our lives, our worship is incomplete.

When I think about bringing a positive change to the church, it seems like a very big task. I will never be the next great evangelist, bringing millions of people to Christ. I will never be the next great Christian singer or songwriter, inspiring people with my music all over the world. What I am is a teacher. In the past, I have informally taught people in churches about worship and music in the church, encouraging their involvement, and helping them to be more effective. The opportunity I have here to teach pastors, teachers and leaders in the church is beyond anything I could have imagined doing. I see my calling as equipping those who will be equipping others. I am an equipper of equippers. Together, we have the ability to bring people into the presence of God so their lives can be transformed, so they in turn can equip others.

There are some things that trouble me about the Church. I am troubled when I see “Christians” who display hatred towards people who are different; people God loves, people for whom Christ died. I am troubled when I see “Christians” who are more concerned about acquiring material things and

¹ From Constance Cherry’s keynote address at the “Festival on Worship,” College Church, Marion, IN, May 19, 2015.

being comfortable than they are about their relationship with God and about the needs of others. I am deeply troubled to see “Christians” outwardly worshipping God on Sunday, but displaying no evidence of that worship affecting their lives outside the walls of the church. I understand that the church is full of people at all different places in their walk with Christ. What disturbs me is seeing people attend church for years with no apparent change.

The big question is, “Can the way we do corporate worship in the church change these things?” Am I expecting too much from a few songs, a sermon, and a couple of prayers every Sunday? If that is all worship is, then yes, I would be expecting too much from it. But true worship is so much more than that. If that is all we are giving our congregations on Sunday, we are starving them.

You might say, “Worship does not do those things—the sermon is where we teach people about holiness and transformation. The rest of the service is just preliminaries.” It is true, the sermon should be teaching the Word of God to the congregation. But wait, there is more! I love to tell the story of what Phil’s aunt told me. Aunt Margaret has no idea that I have been talking about her all over the world. Some of you may have heard this story because I used it in the Christian Formation class, and I have used it in my Worship and Music class. I even used it when I spoke in Myanmar a couple of weeks ago. Aunt Margaret is now internationally known. What she told me was that, in her almost 80 years of church attendance, she cannot tell me the specifics of any sermon she has ever heard. But she remembers the words to every hymn she sang growing up in church. Now, I am sure she learned things from all those sermons, and some of them even caused her to change her life, and many of them brought her closer to the Lord. But where did she get the theology that has stayed with her? What are the specific words she has repeated and learned? For good or bad, her Christian life has been shaped by the words that have been put into her mouth through the songs she sang with the community of believers.

When people with dementia and Alzheimer’s can no longer remember their spouse or their children, and can no longer speak, they can often sing every word of the songs they grew up with. For Christians, at this point in time, it is the hymns they remember. They cannot quote sermons or even scripture. Something about music goes past the synapses in the brain and creates memory in places not affected by the damage caused by dementia. Think about that. What will the young people growing up in our churches today be

singing when they can no longer speak? I do not mean to say that we only need to sing the old hymns because they teach good theology. There are some old songs that taught bad theology. There are new songs that are very deep and teach good messages. We just need to be careful about what we choose. And when we find good songs, we need to sing them often enough for people to remember them. We need to put true words into their mouths.

I have another story of a long-time church member. When my husband was the minister of music at a Wesleyan church in the U.S., we sang the hymn “I’ll Go Where You Want Me to Go.” It says,

It may not be on the mountain’s height, Or over the stormy sea;
 It may not be at the battle’s front my Lord will have need of me.
 But if by a still, small voice He calls to paths that I do not know,
 I’ll answer, dear Lord, with my hand in Thine, “I’ll go where You want
 me to go.”
 I’ll go where You want me to go, dear Lord,
 Over Mountain, or plain, or sea.
 I’ll say what You want me to say, dear Lord.
 I’ll be what You want me to be.²

This lady, who had been a faithful church member all her life, told us that she would not sing that song, because she was not willing to do what it said. She would not sing a song that was a lie for her. While I appreciated her honesty, it bothered me that she could be in the church for such a long time and not be willing to follow God’s calling, whatever it might be. I wonder what she did when they sang “I Surrender All” or “Take My Life and Let it be Consecrated, Lord, to Thee.” She was a good Wesleyan—she believed in sanctification. And yet, somehow, over all those years in church, her life was not transformed enough to include full surrender to God’s will.

Her story brings up another point. Although it is our responsibility as leaders to offer a worship experience in the church that has the potential to transform the worshipers, the worshipers have a responsibility as well. There is a saying in English, “You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink.” We can design and lead worship services that take people into the very presence of God, but it is up to them to allow the Holy Spirit to change them. The Spirit will not change us without our permission. All we can do as leaders is offer them a means of grace. John Wesley defines “means of grace” as “out-

² Bible, Ken, ed., *Sing to the Lord*, (Lillenas: Kansas City, MO, 1993), 438.

ward signs, words or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end: to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to people preventing, justifying or sanctifying grace.”³

Corporate worship in the church is a channel through which God can convey grace. For the means of grace to be effective, the worshipers must submit themselves to it. But if we want them to submit themselves to it, it better be something worth submitting to.

It is my contention that teaching pastors and church leaders to plan and lead a worship service well is as important as teaching them to preach well, or to teach well. Not all of you who study at APNTS will be pastors, but the very fact that you have come to study at a seminary will make you leaders in your churches. You will have influence, and you may be thrust into leadership roles you did not expect. A good understanding of the place and importance of corporate worship in the body of Christ is important for leaders, whose job, according to Paul in Ephesians 4, is to “equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” If we, as those with gifts of leadership in various capacities, are to help our people attain the “whole measure of the fullness of Christ,” we must give them every opportunity to do so. And one of those opportunities is worshiping together as the body of Christ. We must take the responsibility seriously, and not squander the opportunity. By taking on these roles, we are the servants of the Church. Yes, we serve God, but we do so by serving his people; by giving them all the tools they need to grow in Christ.

Obviously, this morning I cannot describe the entire scope of how to do worship properly in the church. The truth is, there are many ways to do it properly. There are as many ways as there are individuals planning and leading worship services in local communities of believers situated in cultures and sub-cultures around the world. The important thing is to invite worshipers to participate in a conversation with God that (1) is theologically grounded in scripture, telling God’s story; 2) is a response to the revelation of God in history and in our lives, 3) turns our eyes toward Him instead of ourselves, and 4) gives us His vision for the world around us. These things will only happen when those who plan and lead worship do them intentionally, understanding the reasons behind what they are doing. Doing worship the way we have al-

³ John Wesley, Sermon 16, “The Means of Grace,” 11.1. Quoted from Constance Cherry’s address at the “Festival on Worship.”

ways done it because that is the way we have always done it is not good enough. Changing the way we worship for the sake of change is not good enough, either. We need to understand why we include certain things and exclude others.

I do not want to leave this message completely in the realm of theory, even though my purpose this morning is not to teach you how to lead worship. But I would like to offer a few general pointers that may be helpful. If our worship is going to be transformational, it will take some work and it will require time for prayer, planning, and practice.

How do we insure that what we offer in worship is good? The first thing to do before any planning, is to pray. Prayer is essential. I hope you remember this more than anything else, and not just about leading worship. When you plan to write a sermon; when you plan to teach a class or a seminar; when you plan to write a paper or an article for a journal—whatever you plan to do for the Kingdom—PRAY! Everything else is secondary. We want the Holy Spirit to inspire us. The truth is, whether we plan one service at a time, or if we plan a whole year of services, the Holy Spirit can be at work in our planning. The Spirit is not limited to working on Sunday morning. Our preparation should be Spirit-infused and led. When I plan a worship service, I often pray about it for a week before deciding anything.

Second, plan ahead. We are generally good at planning which songs we will sing, but what about everything else? What will you pray about in the service? What will you say between songs? What will you do other than singing that invites the congregation to participate? Which scriptures will you use? How much scripture will be read? Who will read it? How early will you give it to them to practice? How will you handle the offering? Can you think of any creative ideas that will inspire the church? How many people will be involved in leading the service? When will you get them together? These things do not sound very spiritual, but they are necessary if we want to provide an experience that will open an avenue of conversation between God and his people.

Finally, practice. Not just the music. Practice what will be spoken. Practice actions that will also speak to people. Practice practical things like running a PowerPoint presentation or running the sound system. The people who do those things should not be learning how to do it on Sunday morning during the service. Keep your purpose in mind while you are practicing: we are here to equip the people of God for works of service. We are servants of the church, and we need to do the work to become the best servants possible. When the

people running the sound system practice, it is not so they will be noticed. In fact, it is the opposite. When everything works as it should, no one even notices the sound system. The same goes for every other aspect of worship. The leaders' job is to focus attention on God and glorify Him, not themselves. If everything is well-planned and well-executed, the mechanics of what is happening will not detract from the message.

Sometimes the Holy Spirit takes over a worship service without our permission. If that happens, it will not matter if things are not as smooth as we planned. But we cannot presume that He will take over to rescue us when we failed to prepare.

Going back to my opening question, "What am I doing here, and why does it matter?"

As you study to prepare for ministry or to become more effective at the ministry you already have, you should know this: You have no idea where God will take you when you say, "I will go where you want me to go." I never would have imagined myself teaching in a seminary. But now I find it to be one of the most fulfilling things I have ever done. When I imagine students in my class pastoring churches, teaching young leaders, evangelizing people who need to know God's love, and all the various other things that you do and will do, it gives me great joy to think that maybe, just maybe, something I said will be helpful to you. Maybe the fact that I went to the ends of the earth will mean that someone can be more effective in equipping God's people for works of service somewhere in the world where I will never go. I can only pray and believe that God wants to use even me, and even the seemingly unimportant subject I teach, to be an agent of transformation in the lives of His people. I am here because God brought me here, and it matters because you matter, and the people your lives will touch matter. I am here to equip the equippers.