

# **Circulation of the Saints (10)**

## **Worship in the beauty of holiness**

A growing number of evangelical churches have shifted their services from their traditional printed and spoken word to visual communication, including drama, a higher level of spontaneity, applause, dance, testimonies, contemporary music, videos, power-point, and humour. They consciously target the younger generation of seekers, agnostics, and others in the hope to persuade them of the truth and relevance of the Gospel. Much is done to create a welcoming, pleasant, and appealing atmosphere so that people feel happy and entertained. Some churches advertise, "Come as you are" to cater to those who demand a more relaxed dress code. And multiple services make it possible to present worship styles that appeal to different segments of the congregation. Some churches poll their members to find out what kind of worship service they want. Consequently, one can pick and choose a worship style to suit one's taste. However, this approach to church growth may draw in the crowds but it raises many questions. In implementing their vision of church growth, are these churches primarily guided and shaped by Scripture - or by organizational skills, marketing techniques, and popular culture? The effective use of all these modern techniques and insights may mean that eventually God's authority is no longer decisive in churches. There is no longer quite the same need to let God be God. The danger is that church growth is measured in terms of wealth, power, beauty, popularity, and acceptance.

Why do we attend church services? Should our focus be on persuading the non-believer, the skeptic, the seeker of the truth and relevance of the Christian faith? Or should the focus be on the concerns regarding issues of daily living that bring people to church? Or should the focus be on worshipping and praising the triune God, the Creator of heaven and earth?

### **Worship Is Exclusive**

Rick Warren of Saddleback argues that purpose driven churches make worship the starting point - it's where unchurched people experience the church and decide to commit. In other words, seeker service advocates don't see the church as a worshipping community of saints. They view a service as a gathering of lost sinners who need salvation. The pastor is then the fisherman fishing for the lost in attendance.

Worship is not for everyone. It is exclusive - for God's covenant people only. John Calvin spoke of a church service that reflects the interaction between a transcendent and righteous God and His redeemed people. On Sunday, God meets with His people as they gather for worship so that they can go out with renewed energy into the world with the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. Christians evangelize and witness in daily contact with others. As Dr. James A. De Jong observed: "Interesting people in the faith is not the task of worship. Worship is not designed to win converts, but to strengthen the converted." Worship is God's people's expression of love for their God. Evangelism is

an introduction to the Gospel. To confuse worship and evangelism defrauds the believers of growth in depth, and steals from God the profound praise of which He alone is worthy.

## **God-Centred Worship**

We may not turn public worship of God into a matter of personal taste and time, convenience and comfort. The worst result of turning worship into a matter of taste is to lose sight of the fact that it is GOD we are worshipping - not ourselves. Worship is not convened so that church budgets can be pledged, volunteers for ministry enlisted, programs promoted, attendance goals met, or personal problems solved, and not even for the sake of music. That is why John Wesley advised, "Above all, sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to do this attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve here, and reward you when he cometh in the clouds of heaven."

Public worship is God centred. It is a conscious, deliberate, and explicit encounter with God. It is our gift to God. At the same time we must always realize that the idea of worship, the inclination to worship come only as a result of God's gift to us. He took the initiative in our salvation. He enables us to worship through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Our Lord told us to worship in spirit and in truth ( John 4:23f.) This is worship with heart, soul, and mind. The point of public worship is corporate praise of God, not private coziness or the satisfaction of our personal desires. We worship God for His own sake and not what we can get out of it. "Whoever seeks God as a means toward desired ends will not find God," wrote A.W. Tozer. "God will not be used."

## **The Holiness of God**

The sense of God's greatness, fullness, and mystery is often missing in modern worship. In 1981, John Timmerman commented on the change of attitude occurring even in Reformed worship services. He wrote, "The consensus as to how church services should be conducted has...been eroded. I can imagine how astounded a church would have been in 1912 if a minister had greeted them with 'Good Morning!' No congregation would have bellowed it back. The minister conducted everything that happened on the platform. Liturgy was fixed and spare."

In public worship the church needs to pay attention to the manner in which it approaches God. To meet God is not an ordinary thing. Just as one would shrink from overfamiliarity and frivolity in meeting the Queen or the president of the United States, so should one acknowledge the worth of the God worship. Because we are in the presence of God, worship must be dignified and majestic. We gather as God's people to adore God. The glory of God is the motivation and the goal of worship. He is the Holy One. After God had revealed to Moses a glimpse of His glory, Moses "hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God"(Ex.3:6). God's glory speaks of His utter and

absolute holiness, His magnificent splendour, the perfections of His character. "His name alone is exalted; His glory is above earth and heaven" (Ps. 148: 13). "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory" (Is.6:3).

We must enter God's presence with a deep sense of awe (Hebr.12:22). Just this fact alone should remove flippancy, silliness, the "Jesus is my buddy" approach, and many other problems in "modern" worship. On the other hand, our recognition of God's presence does not need to quench joy, fellowship, excitement and gladness. God's people are to "enter His gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise" (Ps.100:4). Our assembly is for "encouraging one another" (Hebr. 10:25).

As I have shown, worship is not about me getting my needs met by God. If we were more immersed in God's splendour and majesty, we would find ourselves thoroughly "lost in wonder, love, and praise." However, despite all the amazing space explorations and our continually expanding knowledge of the universe, many no longer recognize that if we catch a glimpse of His glory, we will be compelled to fall down before Him in adoration. The purpose of a worship, therefore, is to focus on God, to nourish the communion of saints, to form Christian character, lamenting over sin, glorying in the cross and resurrection, praising God for His goodness and abundant mercy. The well-known evangelical leader John Stott observed that:

Even in the church we seem to have lost the vision of the majesty of God. There is so much shallowness and levity among us. Prophets and psalmists would probably say of us that 'there is no fear of God before their eyes'. In public worship our habit is to slouch or squat; we do not kneel nowadays, let alone prostrate ourselves in humility before God. It is more characteristic of us to clap our hands with joy than to blush with shame and tears. We saunter up to God to claim his patronage and friendship; it does not occur to us that he might send us away. We need to hear again the apostle Peter's sobering words: "Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives in reverent fear."

Johan D. Tangelder