

Leading God-Centered Worship

BY ROBERT HARTMAN

I recently listened to a preacher instructing other preachers on how to deliver God-centered sermons. The speaker pointed out that of the many things that people would like to hear in a sermon, and the many things that we think they should hear, a sermon is really achieving its purpose only when it is centered on the person and work of God.

While listening to this, it struck me that this is also true of our worship. Our worship songs and worship events should have only one objective and aim: God Himself. As Carol Wimber has said, "Worship is not a vehicle to warm up the congregation for the preacher, or to soften the people up for the offering. Worship comes from Jesus and goes back to Jesus from us. Everything He gives to us, but worship belongs to Him."

As worship leaders we have a responsibility to lead worship in a way that allows it to retain this God-centeredness. The way we lead can enhance or inhibit worship from staying properly focused on God. Worship centered on anything less will (or should) leave us and the people we lead feeling short-changed.

What Is God-Centered Worship?

I view God-centered worship as worship that informs the people about God, inclines them toward God and invites the presence of God. In other words, God-centered worship deepens our understanding of God, opens our hearts toward God and is filled with the tangible presence of God.

This definition was illustrated by my introduction to this kind of worship at a Sunday service at John Wimber's Yorba Linda Calvary Chapel in 1979. The fact is, I don't remember anything about the service except the worship. It wasn't the "music," because though I was already a musician at the time I didn't spend much time watching John and his band. I was watching the people worship in a way I'd never seen before! The people were communicating with God in an open, personal and relational way. They were inviting God to come meet them, and the song lyrics were all about God and this relationship they had with Him.

The idea of leading this kind of worship sounds good on paper, but when you stand at your next worship event ready to lead your group or congregation in worship what will you do? How will you actually lead worship so that it retains its proper focus? Will you just do what comes naturally and hope it works? Fortunately, there are practical steps you can take to insure that worship stays God-centered. What follows are a few tips to help you improve your ability to lead God-centered worship.

Know Your Intentions

Leading God-centered worship begins with our intent as worship leaders. If our primary motivation for standing up and leading is anything other than to bless God then we've immediately lost the battle for God-centered worship. I don't mean to say that only those with the purest of motivations are able to lead worship. After all, *"There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins"* (Ecclesiastes 7:20).

We will always have a mixture of motivations that include self-focused ones like wanting to "look good," but we are the ones who choose which motivations will drive and control us. One very practical step you can take that will help you look past distracting motivations is to quiet yourself for a moment before worship and recall all

that God has done for you. Perhaps He has healed your body, salvaged a relationship or rescued you from an addiction. As you remember the work of God in your life you will find your focus shifting to Him and your motivation to bless Him will increase.

Informing The People About God

God-centered worship deepens our understanding of God. In fact, Sunday morning worship sometimes preaches a more memorable, effective and powerful sermon than the words of the preacher. In an almost effortless way, people connect at an emotional and experiential level with the topic of a song. Music deposits a message with incredible staying power. So what messages about God are we depositing in the hearts of the people we lead?

One way to answer this question is to review your last several weeks of worship sets. Look over your song selections and ask yourself what you have been teaching the people. Did your song selections accurately inform the people of the timeless truths of the person and nature of God? His righteousness, mercy, justice, grace, power and love?

Also, did the songs inform the people at their point of need? For example, if your congregation is in a time of repentance did your song selections correctly inform them about what repentance is?

Hearts Inclined Toward God

God-centered worship inclines people toward God. By this I mean more than that they simply think about God. I mean that they are open-heartedly communicating with Him during worship.

At a recent Sunday morning worship service I played the final song and sensed that there was something more to do. Instead of immediately closing the worship I led the people in a prayer thanking God for all the good he has brought to our lives. I then asked the people to remain silent and allow God to remind them of specific things He has done for them and then I closed by encouraging them to quietly thank Him.

In doing this, I was very consciously following the direction of the Holy Spirit to guide the hearts of the people into direct, worshipful interaction with God. After the worship service one young woman thanked me for leading worship in this way. She broke into tears as she explained to me how good God had been to her. In the midst of worship her heart had been directed toward God and then opened to Him. For her, the worship experience had centered on God in a very real way.

We should continually ask ourselves if the people we are leading in worship are experiencing this open-hearted interaction with God. How can you tell? Open your eyes occasionally while you are leading so you can observe people and see if the connection is being made. Listen for reports, like the one that I described, of communion with God during worship. If you discover that genuine openness toward God is not occurring in worship then think and pray about how you can fix that. This may mean teaching the people how to communicate with God in worship, being more careful to choose songs that invite people to commune with God or becoming a more active listener to the Holy Spirit as you lead worship.

Inviting The Presence Of God

Though I am addressing this issue last, I believe that inviting and experiencing the real presence of God is at the core of worship. After all, the loving, adoring language of our songs is spoken to a real Person who actually hears what we say, so it should not surprise us when He "shows up" to receive our worship. In fact, think of worship as an invitation to God, not just a set of statements about Him.

When I speak of God's presence in this way I am speaking of more than just the knowledge that He is present everywhere all the time. I am talking about the presence of God that is sensed and experienced in our hearts, minds and bodies. It's something like the difference between your friend being "present" across the room or "present" right next to you where you can feel his breath and physically sense his nearness in "your space."

It is an amazing thing to see how worship deepens when God is noticeably present, to sense that we are touching the heart of God and to see people healed or delivered as a result of God simply being present in all His goodness.

So how can we work toward leading worship that invites God to join us? The answer is simple: "dial down" (relax) and be a worshiper as you lead. When you worship Him you will find that He will meet you, and as He meets you others will be drawn in as you lead.

Now, I know from personal experience that while leading worship, particularly if you lead a band, there are a multitude of things to juggle at once. However, the one thing you can't sacrifice is the worship you give to God. The worship leaders I know who are most effective are the ones who have learned to lead without giving up their own ability to worship.

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