

October 3, 2010

Exodus 33:12-20 / Psalm 95:1-7 / Revelation 7:9-12 / John 4:13-26  
 Pursuing and Embracing a Vision of Church Health (#3) - The God-Adoring,  
 Christ-Exalting, Worshipping Church

Last week we looked at the FIRST of the Seven Links in the Chain of Church Health -- PRAYER.

And although I know full well that most of you needed no convincing in regard to the utter importance and indispensable priority of prayer in the church, my hope was that it would simply be what most sermons are -- a helpful reminder to do what we already know we should do. And in reference to prayer, what we should do, is saturate everything we do in prayer.

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Because if there's anything that should characterize God's people, it's the fact that we're a people of faith whose relationship with God is most vividly evidenced by the fact that we spend much time with Him in prayer.

And the fact that we spend much time with Him in prayer will be evidenced by things like an inner spirit that remains calm and unflustered even in stressful times / joyful even in trials / loving even when provoked or attacked / hopeful even when circumstances look hopeless / and spiritually-minded or kingdom-focused even when the things of this world beckon for us to focus on them and clamor after them.

When any person is constantly given over to prayer, the fruit will be a more relaxed, restful, prayerful spirit or countenance that will remain with them even when they rise from their times of prayer!

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True prayer is NOT simply a daily discipline (though it often requires discipline)! It's not a ritual / or the verbalization of rote memorized phrases (vain repetition) / nor is it petitions and requests offered up to God in haste as we hurry to get on to the more pressing issues of life.

As Rosalind Rinker once put it in the first book I ever read on prayer:  
***"Prayer is a dialogue between two persons who love each other."***

A dialogue wherein we speak to God and He listens as we speak, followed by a time where He speaks to us and we listen as He speaks -- remembering, as Teresa of Avila once pointed out, that the greater portion of any time of prayer (when it comes to us) should be spent listening and not talking!

Healthy communication and beneficial dialogue is always hindered, when one person so dominates the conversation that the other person can never get a word in edge-wise! And the same is true for prayer.

Given the way that I myself and others have often prayed, has brought to mind the picture of God patiently listening, and listening, and listening, as He waits for a break in the flow of our words so He can get just one word in (and finding all too often that the only time we stop talking is when we finish praying, jump up and go on our way!

It should never be that way, of course! Because prayer where God can't get a word in edgewise isn't really prayer! It's not really conversing with God, it's having a monologue, where we not only fail to give Him TIME to speak, but often don't really EXPECT that He will.

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And by now, you're probably wondering how all this talk of **PRAYER** relates to our **SECOND** link in the **CHAIN OF CHURCH HEALTH** -- the link of **WORSHIP**.

And it's really very simple: When the believer goes to God in prayer, and by doing so shows their desire to spend time with Him, and also shows that time spent with Him is more important than all the things they need to get done, offering his or her earnest praises, and heartfelt gratitude, before the throne of grace, that act of prayer actually becomes an act of **WORSHIP**.

When Martin Luther (the great protestant reformer) used to say, "***I have so much to do today that I need to spend the first three hours in prayer,***" he wasn't simply expressing the truth that time spent in prayer makes us more effective in the tasks we engage in when we rise from it (which is true).

He was also expressing his belief that we should never let anything keep us from a daily time of WORSHIP -- since he saw the time of prayer as an expression of valuing, and thus worshipping God.

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Which brings us to our **FIRST** admonition for this morning in regard to WORSHIP. Last week I mentioned how Calvin once said, "***The principle fruit of grace is faith, and the principle fruit of faith is prayer.***" Yet I'm going to add to that or step it up a notch and go on to assert that, "***the principle fruit of a life of prayer is WORSHIP.***" I would even go as far as to say that prayer is, in and of itself, one of the highest expressions of worship.

The one who prays -- in the way Jesus instructed us to pray -- will spend at least some of his or her time in prayer, "hallowing" the Name of God (that is, reverencing it or setting it apart as holy in their heart). And the moment one does that, they have engaged in WORSHIP.

In fact, the two are so closely linked together that one can say (with very little room for disagreement) that there is an almost indistinguishable difference between a person with a prayerful spirit, and a person with a worshipful spirit.

To kneel and bow one's head in prayer / or to kneel in worship and praise God / are both acts of worship, since the Hebrew word "worship" (hawah) simply means - "to bow or bend the knee."

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And because they're both expressions of worship, it can also be said (almost without exception) that the person who is given to praying will likewise be given to worship / and the one who finds it difficult to pray will also find it difficult to worship. They are that closely related!

In fact, when Paul says in Eph. 5:20: "***Sing and make music in your heart to God, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,***" it's hard to tell whether he means when we pray or when we come together to worship! Yet it doesn't really matter once one realizes that prayer is itself an expression of worship!

Even the call of the psalmist when he says, "**Come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord our God and Maker,**" is BOTH a call to worship and a call to adopt a reverent / prayerful posture before God.

Likewise, in Ps. 100, when he tells us to: "**Enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise; give thanks to Him and praise His name,**" he's really doing nothing more than telling us to express our gratitude and praise to God into words -- which is precisely what prayer is -- communicating or entering into a verbal exchange or dialogue with God!

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The same is true of SINGING TO GOD. It can also be BOTH a form of prayer as well as an expression of worship!

When in song / we speak to God and declare back to Him things that are true about Him / offering to Him our declarations of thanksgiving and praise / whether our eyes are open or closed / standing with hands lifted or down at our side / kneeling and bowing our heads in reverence or singing joyfully with tambourine and dancing / shouting to the Lord or standing in silence with barely audible whispers of adoration pouring forth from our lips -- we are BOTH praying and worshipping. / Or better still, we are prayerfully worshipping in song.

That's why (in the diagram of my vision for church health) WORSHIP follows immediately after PRAYER. Because prayer not only leads us into worship; prayer is itself an expression of worship!

And let me say here, that that can be very liberating when it comes to both our prayer life and worship life. Sometimes I "pray" by grabbing my list of requests that people have given me and offering those up to God.

Other times I simply spend the time thanking Him for all He's done or praising Him for who He is, and offer few if any requests -- simply whispering praises under my breath.

On other occasions I'll simply kneel, go before Him in quiet, still my soul and just listen. And other times I'll kneel, open my Bible to where I have some old hymnal pages glued in, and spend my "prayer time" singing to God!

That's the beauty of realizing the interconnectedness of all those things! If "variety is the spice of life," and your prayer life has become too routine, then switch it up, remembering that singing is a form of praying / and offering your thanks and praise in prayer is a form of worship as is simply kneeling in silence before God!

As one who's prayer life had become very mechanical after a few years of doing it the same way every day, discovering that was very liberating for me!

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Which leads us into the **SECOND** thing we need to consider -- "How we can strengthen the link of worship in our church, since it goes without saying, that no church can truly be healthy if it's not being habitually fed and sustained and enriched and spiritually nurtured by authentic worship that is both God-focused and Christ-exalting and distinctly vertical in orientation.

And notice I did not say "exciting" / or "entertaining" / or "perfectly polished" / or "technically precise" / or "beautifully performed" / or "flawlessly choreographed" or "perfectly scripted." I said authentic, God-focused, Christ-exalting and distinctly vertical in orientation.

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One of my pastor friends in Honduras, who is now a bishop, used to frequently lament (in the times we got together to pray) that in his denomination: ***"The beauty of holiness (the beauty of God's consummate perfections, that is) had been replaced with the holiness of things beautiful."***

But I dare say it isn't at all limited to his particular denomination.

Across the board, "worship" has come to be associated with the inclusion of startling panoramic video clips that play in the background, mesmerizing the onlooker with its beauty / expensive architecture meant to "wow" the observer and music performed by professional musicians with such precision that one could not so much as detect the slightest flaw.

Worship services where nearly every word is scripted and practiced and rehearsed so it can be timed down to the very last minute! I know one pastor of a large church in the Chicago area who preaches exactly 26 minutes -- it never varies by more than 30 seconds - ever!

And I know there's nothing innately wrong with spectacular video clips or beautiful architecture or precise performances or perfectly scripted and precisely timed services of worship -- that is, as long as the thing we value and adore and find precious and look forward to in the service of worship is relishing and adoring and honoring the God we have gathered to praise and feed upon and adore and hear from -- and not all those other things!

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Because that's what "worship" really is. "Worship" in its truest sense (and I know postmoderns struggle with this) is not the "feeling I get" when the musical rhythm or harmonious tones make me feel in tune with the music.

David calmed Saul's spirit when he played his harp for him. But the effect wasn't because Saul was worshipping, it was simply because music can have a calming or uplifting or exhilarating effect upon us--a psychological effect that can take place totally apart from any act of worship on our part.

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You see, many today (in our entertainment-driven culture) have mistaken the "feeling" they get from music for "worship." And it's not -- unless while they are singing or listening to it they are valuing and honoring and adoring God above and beyond all other things. That's what makes worship, worship! And if you're not doing that, you're not worshipping regardless of how good you're feeling.

That becomes vividly clear when we realize that our English word "worship" comes from the antiquated Saxon word, "Worth-ship." That is, we "worship" whatever we treasure the most / or consider the most valuable / or hold to be the most precious.

***Whatever comes first in our lives / or lays the greatest claim to our affections / or stirs our soul the most when we think of it -- that's the thing we "worship." Whatever has the most worth in our eyes at any given time.***

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Which in practical terms means this: If (for instance) you're a single person, singing praises to God, but as you sing your heart is more enraptured with the pretty girl or handsome guy across the aisle... / Or if your eyes are closed in prayer, but your thoughts are focused on getting home in time to see the 1:00 p.m. kick-off for the Eagles game / Or if your hands are lifted high in praise, but

your hope is that people will think you are pious or spiritual for doing so... / If you can't "worship" because one note was played wrongly, or one person sang off key, or the timing is slightly off -- then in each and every case, what you're "worshipping" at that particular moment is not God, but that thing that consumes your heart or focus at that moment.

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LISTEN: The most important element in worship is NOT the outward form / or display / or performance / or choice of songs / or beat of the music / technical precision / or any of those things.

The most important thing (the thing without which worship is not even worship at all) is the inward focus and disposition of each heart seeking to exalt God above and beyond any other thing.

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The first of the Ten Commandments gives us the foundational key of all true worship when it tells us: "You shall have no other gods before me" (gods, that is, with a little "g").

And what's a god with a "little g"? It's ANYTHING IN ALL CREATION (including people or angels) that we at anytime value more than God. ANYTHING our hearts or minds or affections or thoughts cherish, at any time, more than they cherish God.

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So, how "worship" is strengthened in any church! Not by getting better musicians, or the latest technological gadgets, or more polished "professionals."

It is strengthened as each person present determines that in their heart they will love nothing / and crave nothing / and desire nothing / and adore nothing / and value nothing / and exalt nothing -- more than God!

Which means that whether a person "worships" or not has more to do with what their heart desires and values, than how polished or exciting or professional or inspiring the pastor's message is or the worship leader's or the worship team's performance is. It's really dependent upon YOU.

As God's representatives, the pastor or worship team owes it to God to always seek to do their best or prepare well -- for His Name's sake!

But in the end, worship is neither entertainment nor a performance. It's the exaltation of God in your heart. Which means that ultimately whether you worship or not -- is really up to YOU.

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I've been in churches in New England -- where there was no amplification / no air conditioning / the building was in disrepair / and the special music was played on an out-of-tune organ / by a lady who looked to be in her 90's, while her great-grand-daughter sang the song out of key / and the pastor preached a sermon that at points made me cringe, theologically!

Yet, I was still able to worship, because true worship isn't dependent upon any worship leader's performance! Its dependent upon the state of my heart before God. I could "worship" even if atheists were the ones leading the service! Because it's not what they're doing that matters, it's what's going on in MY heart and soul and mind!

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One time in Honduras I visited a church way out in the mountains with my friend Brett Demott. And the "building" consisted of four corner poles (logs) supporting some other tree branches, to which they nailed old rusted tin sheets. / It had a dirt floor, no walls, and chickens running under the pews (that were made of 2 x10 boards nailed onto short tree stumps)!

There was no nursery for the kids / no microphone for the pastor / no instruments for the music / no hymnals and no overhead projector. / No one had trained voices (at least from the sound of it), and there was nothing to block out the sounds of the parrots squawking, chickens clucking or babies crying and the occasional vehicle driving by.

It had NONE OF THE THINGS we typically think are NEEDED to make a worship service "GOOD" -- yet it was easy to worship there. Because despite the distractions, they all came to worship. In fact, when they prayed (which sounded like the buzzing of a beehive because everyone prayed at the same time) the dominant phrases I heard were "Gracias Jesus" / "Gracias Senor," / "Gracias Padre Nuestro, Adoramos."

It's only because we've been culturally conditioned (by our entertainment-oriented society) to evaluate worship the polish of the performance or the precision with which its carried out that we think "worship" is dependent upon the atmosphere, technical precision or showmanship of the pastor or worship leaders -- That is, how they make us FEEL, rather than how we, in our heart, TREASURE GOD, or engage the heart, mind and soul in valuing and exalting God).

It's made us all into "American Idol" judges, evaluating every little part of the "performance," from style to tone to pitch to timing to choice of song!

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What is it that YOU do, when YOU come on Sunday morning? Evaluate and critique the performance (on the basis of its precision and beauty / or the basis of how it made you feel) or do you take the time to lift God high in your heart and mind? To exalt and adore Him?

Do you take the time to worship, by putting all other "god's" in their proper place -- out of your mind and out of your heart -- and thus correctly re-orienting your soul after a week in the world that encourages to love and adore everything but God, or do you simply want to be entertained.

Because if its entertainment you want -- we can't compete with the world, folks! That's their job! They do it better than us. And we should gladly let them. Because what we come to do is not entertain, or be entertained, but WORSHIP. And if you seek to do that, we're here to help you do that.

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The **LAST**, if we are to become the God-adoring, Christ-exalting and worshipping Church, there is really only one simple thing we need to do -- we need to learn as individuals, and together as a group, to worship God from the heart. Making a conscious effort -- not just on Sundays but every day of the week -- to exalt Him to the highest place in our lives.

What happens here on Sunday morning should merely be an extension of what we do all week long! Because if it's not, then it's really just a show. Unless we do it each and every moment of every day it's will simply be something foreign and unfamiliar introduced into our week!

And how can we possibly worship every day throughout the day? What Hewitson said in regard to prayer can be said of worship as well:

***"In our mutual communion and conversation -- amidst all the busiest scenes of our earthly pilgrimage -- we may be moving to and fro on the rapid wing of prayer, of mental prayer. That prayer which lies the whole burden of the heart on a single sigh. A sigh breathed in the Spirit, though inaudible to all around us but God, may sanctify every conversation or event in the history of the day... Oral prayer, uttered aloud, and sustained long, will be fatiguing, and no believer can engage in it without ceasing. But there is an undercurrent of prayer that may run continually under the stream of our thoughts and not weary us. Such prayer is the breathing of the Spirit of God, who dwells in our hearts."***

And likewise, what Andrew Bonar said of prayer applies equally to worship:  
***"I see that unless I keep up short prayers, every day, throughout the day, I lose the spirit of prayer."***

The church that worships only once a week on Sunday's, goes a long way to explain why so many are unhealthy. So let's make it a priority to exalt God every day!