

Dear Pastors/Leaders:

I have over the last several months been writing a series of articles on the subject of church health/revitalization. I began with *How does a church know if it needs revitalized?* In my second article I addressed the *Essential Qualities of a Revitalization Pastor*. In the third article, I addressed the fact that *Church Decline is a Spiritual Issue*. The fourth article dealt with the lack of biblical contextualization as I discussed the need of *Contextualization without Compromise*. Finally, in my last presentation I discussed church health as the root of church revitalization in an article entitled *Revitalization is a Church Health Issue*. With this next article, I want to approach one of the most controversial topics that pertain to revitalization – *Worship and Revitalization*.

In this article *worship* for the most part is used as it pertains to the musical part of the Sunday worship service. Obviously, we understand that worship is much more than what we do thirty minutes on Sunday morning. Worship is all of life...in fact, we are worshipping whether we realize it or not. Our hearts and affections are being directed to someone or some thing. The question is: to whom is your heart directed through the week? One of the reasons we war over worship preferences is that we've reduced worship to a 30-minute time frame in which we have such a personal stake concerning styles and outward expressions. I'm convinced that the temperature would be lowered in our congregations over worship styles if our people were living lives of worship through the week. When we posit all are so called "worship" on Sunday morning then it's no wonder we're so invested in our preferences.

Is worship essential in moving a church toward health and revitalization? On the one hand it is a serious mistake to believe that changing the music will revitalize the church. Too often that kind of simplistic thinking only covers up more profound spiritual issues that is causing decline. However, it is also a mistake to not address the Sunday corporate worship gathering as part of leading a church to health. In fact, in many churches, you'll discover that the reluctance to adapt and be flexible with musical styles and service preferences is rooted in deeper spiritual problems that damage the health of the church. Therefore, I believe for theological and practical purposes that it is essential to address worship in the church health/revitalization process. Therefore, here are some ideas as it relates to worship in the church health and revitalization process.

First, we must teach a *biblical view of worship*. Worship is first and foremost a theological reality before it is a practical expression. The problem is we've made the practical preference of style, techniques, times, and forms of worship the focus and not the triune God. The Bible doesn't give us much about styles of worship, but it is replete with revelations about the nature of the God we worship. We must reemphasize the first principle of worship – our hearts oriented toward the worship of God all day, every day-not just Sunday morning!

Second, focus on the *content before contextualization* of your worship. Contextualization is important and will be discussed. However, worship can be relevant but superficial and even misguided. The fact is, some of our worship songs are unbiblical and more directed

to move our emotions than direct our focus to the God as He is rightly revealed in Scripture. This is true of both some traditional hymns and contemporary praise songs. God is not honored nor worshipped properly if our worship is not saturated with the gospel and our lyrics are not scriptural.

Third, worship conflict can have at its root *idolatry*. The fact is when preference to a certain style, whether contemporary, traditional, liturgical, southern gospel, etc. takes precedence over unity in the body and the mission of God, then it's idolatry cloaked in personal preferences. In revitalization, this idolatry has to be brought to the service and dealt with in personal and corporate repentance. Don't let your style of worship become your idol.

Fourth, in developing a worship service *seek unity through consensus rather than compromise*. We often plan our worship services with the thought of having songs that will please certain patrons in the church. But this is a market-focused (where the church members are the market) approach to worship. Compromise between different factions in the church rarely pleases anyone and it actually feeds the preference idolatry that causes disunity. It is not music or style that brings unity; it is the worship of God! As Ed Stetzer remarks,

"Pastored well, a healthy congregation will seek consensus on the positives of God's glory and mission rather than settle for compromise on the negatives of personal preferences and styles."

Fifth, *be culturally discerning, but biblically grounded*. That is, although the Sunday morning worship service is primarily for God's people in the church, we must also think about how relatable the worship is to our particular community. Like it or not, getting worship right is one of the ways we better position our churches to receive the people we're connecting to in the community. In fact, we'll not be able to hold the people we're trying to reach (especially younger generations) if our worship is completely out of step with the community. Our goal is not to be cool, but to be rightly contextualized in a way that is reverent toward God, but relevant toward our community.

Sixth, *don't allow our southern heritage to hinder connecting worship to our context*. This is similar to the previous principle, however, as Southern Baptists in NWI, our churches have their roots in the south. Branching from those southern roots was a stream of music that was relatable to the many southern transplants of yesteryear. However, it may no longer be relatable to a Chicagoland culture devoid of new southern transplants. Just as the gospel must be communicated in a language that people understand, so does worship need to be connected in a way that can be received by the actual culture that exists, not the one we once had or wish we had. If our churches cleave to an unfamiliar cultural pattern of worship and refuse to adjust, they will eventually become irrelevant and ineffective.

Seventh, in the corporate worship of God, *atmosphere is important*. Obviously, in corporate worship, it is the heart of the people that is paramount. However, good

Christian theology teaches that the spiritual and the physical are interwoven – unlike the ancient gnostic heresy that separated the spiritual part of man from his/her body. So by implication, the physical atmosphere of our worship settings has an effect on our worship. A facility that is dated, stale, unkempt, and unattractive can have a negative impact on the worship of God (sometimes without realizing it). That’s why a part of any revitalization process must be to look at the update of facilities, especially the place of worship.

Eighth, the focus of the Sunday corporate gathering is to be Jesus, not church members. One observable weakness in some of our churches is that we make our corporate gathering of worship like a Sunday School class. Time that needs to be set aside to worship the eternal Son of God is often given to a variety of things that need to be happening in our small groups, e.g., taking numerous prayer requests, recognizing birthdays and anniversaries, etc. These are things that are important, but should have other places of expression, e.g., small groups. Our corporate gathering of worship is not about us, although there can be sweet intimate fellowship with one another. But that intimate fellowship comes as we direct our focus on Him – as we make the “worship service” an actual period of God directed worship.

In closing, you cannot ignore worship if you want to effectively lead your church. However, be careful about how you change worship. It doesn’t necessarily need to be the first thing you do in addressing church health/revitalization needs. You may need to go slow. Start with the quality before changing the style. Do what is appropriate for your church and your community...contextualize to your situation, not for another church in another community. Be aware of your own preferences that may be dictating the direction of worship in a way that doesn’t connect with the congregation or the immediate community. Above all, direct the hearts of your people toward the true worship of God!

In His Service,

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