What Does Worship Do?

By Nicholas Zork

There is a major assumption that has shaped Christian understandings of worship in the West since the Enlightenment (although its roots reach much further back). And this assumption is evident in Christian perspectives across the theological spectrum. The teachings of the Hebrew prophets, Paul, and Jesus emphasize the importance of ethical, embodied, practices—practices intended to restore justice, bring healing, and enable transformation. But Enlightenment philosophers marginalized Christianity—and religion in general. They perceived Christianity not as a collection of practices that shape what we do but a list of beliefs that shape what we think. As a result, daily life—our embodied practices—became viewed as a political and economic reality; and religious life—our worship and prayer—became understood, in contrast, as a fully inward, spiritual, and conceptual phenomenon. In the West, Christians from the classically liberal to the fundamentalist have largely embraced this assumption. Despite significant theological disagreements, most Christians now seem to presume that the essence of the Christian faith is not correct practice but correct thinking. And worship, within this shared paradigm, is seen as an event whose primary purpose is to communicate this correct thinking.
The problem with focusing on belief is not that it leads to an emphasis on doctrine. As Adventists, we should emphasize correct doctrine. Doctrine is vitally important. In all three Synoptic Gospels, Jesus asks Peter, “But who do you say that I am?” It matters how he and we answer that question. And it matters how we interpret the rest of God’s written Word through the lens of the Living Word---Jesus Christ. The primary problem with the assumption that following Jesus is essentially a matter of correct thinking is the false implication that following Jesus is somehow separate from our social, economic, and political practices. The suggestion that following Jesus should have economic and political ramifications involves more than a call to resist the consumerist excesses of Christmas or seek justice when we vote in elections. Truly following Jesus has practical, economic and political implications for our lives and worship that are much more local, daily and challenging.

Because of our Enlightenment assumptions about Christianity and Christian worship, we tend to approach worship planning with a central and often unspoken question in mind: what will our worship practices mean? More specifically, how will our songs, prayers, sermons, and other actions change the way worshipers think? Such questions of meaning are essential but ultimately insufficient. They fail to fully address the Biblical priority of an embodied faith that tangibly impacts our world. What if we were to add a series of questions along a related but often ignored trajectory: what will our worship practices do? More specifically, what type of participants, community and world will our songs, prayers, sermons, and other actions help create?

In forthcoming issues of Best Practices for Adventist Worship, we will consider this question more closely. For now, I want to pose some potentially provocative and, I think, troubling questions along the lines of what our worship practices do.

In addition to assessing the meaning of our liturgical words, songs, symbols, and actions, consider asking the following questions:

1) What type of hierarchy is created by the worship planning process? Is it equitable? Who is included and excluded in making decisions? How does the planning process distribute authority and, in this way, create certain power structures in the Body of Christ? How is worship planning a political act, and how do these worship politics square with the Biblical model of cultural, ethnic, racial, and gender equality? In increasingly diverse worshipping communities, what if we asked not merely whose voices are present in the worship gathering but also whose voices are present in worship planning---present in the exercise of authority?

2) In addition to the theological content of a song’s lyrics, what type economic structures and society are propped up and created by our continued use of music by major music publishers? Does purchasing and singing contemporary worship songs by prominent, wealthy Christian songwriters result in

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Worship Communities

Michaela Lawrence Jeffery is the director for Adventist Christian Fellowship in the Georgia-Cumberland Conference and chaplain at Advent House on the University of Tennessee, Knoxville campus. www.acfgcc.org

Michaela Lawrence Jeffery shares this reflection about worship ministry in her community:

"Adventist Christian Fellowship (ACF) is our ministry to and with..."
increasing the gap between rich and poor? What if instead of singing only songs by established Australian or Nashville publishers, we supported and encouraged gifted, struggling, local musicians? Is our congregation’s worship supporting or subverting the arts community around us? Might local engagement not also engender music that is more incarnationally relevant and theologically resonant with Adventist theology and mission?

3) Rather than merely asking what our worship symbols and actions mean what if we asked what type of participation they afford? Is our worship accessible to people with disabilities? Can children participate or only observe and occupy themselves with their parents’ mobile phones? Do we select musical keys to sing in that are, in fact, singable for the congregation, for men only, for women also, or just for the leader? And who is privileged and excluded as a result?

Our worship practices do not merely communicate what we think about God, our church, community and world; our practices are involved in the process of creating a church, community and world that are either more or less reflective of the just God we serve. The eschatological vision of worship in Revelation 7:9 is a gathering of “every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.” If we are by grace to begin living into this reality in our present worship, we must be willing to consider the ways our worship practices divide us. True, Christ-centered unity will come not only through common confessions of faith but through a willingness to live and worship in a way that embraces, includes, values and creates equality in a world often divided by culture, ethnicity, gender, and social status.

What worship practices do you think need to be theologically assessed on the basis of what they do?

Share your thoughts in our Facebook dialogue.

WORSHIP AND CULTURE

"Liturgy and Culture: The Joy of Holy Restlessness and the Theological Art of Cultural Engagement"

students attending public university campuses. One of the blessings of being part of an ACF chapter is gathering for a weekly time of worship.

This happens in essentially two ways. The first is on a Friday night at a church member's home. There's a more traditional 'vespers' service with singing and Bible study. The more typical, however, is midweek at either a local eatery or in a classroom on the chapter's campus. After a meal or snacks, there's prayer time and Bible study. This campus-based worship is usually 100% student initiated and facilitated.

In both scenarios, students attend out of a desire to fellowship and study, which is tremendous to see especially at schools that are commuter based.[1]

The nature of public campus life and the presence of so few Adventist public campus chaplains make the commitment of Adventist faculty to ACF chapter gatherings invaluable. There are several faculty working as sponsors to these chapters. They open their homes to students and, in many cases, become the glue that enables ACF chapters to continue growing spiritually, year after year. There are also pastors who make it their mission, and the mission of their congregations to actively engage the students. They, too, provide a consistent spiritual space that students are blessed.
Listening to the Stage Whisperer

By Manuela Casti Yeagley

In ancient times, theaters made use of figures called 'stage whisperers'. Hidden in the darkness, they reminded actors of their lines. This allowed performers to be at the same time faithful to the plot and imaginative enough, in their interpretation, to create that magic that brings a centuries-old story to life again.

Like a play, the Bible is a written text. And like a play, the Bible is not meant to be kept voiceless, but to be performed again and again in new ways, so that many diverse audiences might hear it speak to their lives.

Unfortunately, as theologian Stanley Hauerwas says, Christians tend to see their faith primarily as a text and a set of beliefs to be protected, rather than as a performance to bring that text to life in the present. This tension between those who want to protect 'the text' (sometimes at the cost of leaving it voiceless) and those who try to be creative performers (but may lose track of the plot or even start playing an entirely different drama) is frequent in our discussions on worship and liturgy.

As Christians, we are all performers of a play---the Gospel. We all need to turn to a stage whisperer to remind us of the 'plot'. Listening to that stage whisperer is the process of making theological sense of our practice as performers. Theology is not (only) in books and libraries: theology is a living thing, and we 'do' it every day, in the choices we make as we try to faithfully and creatively perform the Gospel.

Adventism is an adolescent Church, whose theology of worship is underdeveloped. This implies that we often play 'by ear' when we introduce innovations. Most of the time, in my experience, those innovations are driven by the need to keep worship 'attractive'. We do not pay much attention to the overall 'plot' and how our different 'lines' work together in faithfully representing God's story.

In a recent study, theologian Pete Ward analyzed the texts of youth songs used in his own denomination. He discovered that what his young people were singing---the theology of hymns...
chosen from the Christian 'market'---was a story where you never suffer, you are always victorious, and God is always ready to perform a miracle to save you. This was not what his stage whisperer would have recognized as a 'faithful performance'.

So what is your stage whisperer saying about your play?

Discuss this article in our Facebook dialogue.

SERMON STARTER VIDEOS

Are you looking for a fresh look for your video sermon starters? I just spent some time with the tedMedia crew of the Trans-European Division and was quite enchanted with their new Vintage Values series. This series of 12 short films set in the 1920's silent movie era. They are generally slapstick with a serious edge and a poignant message. The idea is to bring old-fashioned values to a new generation and to get people talking. The series can be used for sermon starters, youth programs, small groups and bible studies. You can watch them on YouTube.

-Dave Gemmell

non-Christians...it is perhaps understandable that rites should have become symbolic occasions.”


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