Liturgical Lessons from the Decalogue: Angry Worship?

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most have been peaceful; nearly all have been angry -- as have so many responses to them. In fact, anger has been everywhere, dominating the 24-hour news cycle, Facebook posts, blogs and many face to face conversations. I’ve been angry. To be honest, I still am. So what am I -- what are all of us who claim to follow Jesus -- supposed to do with this anger? How can we respond? And how can we prepare to worship a God of peace, love and justice?

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Worship and Pastoral Ministry
by Timothy P. Nixon

Responding to Ferguson: "Sheep Without A Shepherd"

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I have been asked to reflect on how I would respond to the events of Ferguson as a Minister of the Gospel. My humanity touches the despair of my community, a community that has seen the death of so many young African Americans finding no justice and being criminalized. When human systems fail, our only alternative is God. And the place where people come to seek answers is the church.
Worship and Society
by J Nelson Kraybill

A Robe Dipped in Blood

"Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True . . . He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. . ." (Revelation 19:11-15)
Today a life-size statue of Archbishop Romero stands at the spot where he delivered his last homily in the chapel of Divina Providencia hospital. When he finished speaking, he stepped to the altar in the background and died from a bullet fired from the rear of the sanctuary.

In October an unscheduled airline layover in Central America gave me a day to explore sites related to the life and death of Archbishop Oscar Romero. I saw a robe dipped in blood-vestments worn by Romero when he was assassinated in 1980 for daring to confront abuses of a right-wing dictatorship in El Salvador.

The nation was in civil war, its military government aligned with the rich. Romero used sermons and radio messages to denounce death squads and other means of intimidating the poor. On March 24, 1980 he said this at the Divina Providencia hospital chapel in San Salvador:

"I would like to make a special appeal to the men of the army, and specifically to the ranks of the National Guard, the police and the military. Brothers, you come from our own people. You are killing your own brother peasants when any human order to kill must be subordinate to the law of God which says, 'Thou shalt not kill.' No soldier is obliged to obey an order contrary to the law of God. . . In the name of God, in the name of this suffering people whose cries rise to heaven more loudly each day, I implore you, I beg you, I order you in the name of God: stop the repression."

As Romero stepped to the altar to celebrate Eucharist, an assassin's bullet cut him down. When I visited Romero's nearby humble house this week, a nun showed me his vestments still stained with blood. Romero confronted powers of oppression and violence with nothing but the "sword" of the Word of God. He charged into spiritual and political battle with inspired words and changed the course of Salvadoran history, helping end dictatorship and war.
Alexander the Great charges into battle against King Darius of Persia in the fourth century BC. This mosaic found at Pompeii is at the Naples National Archaeological Museum.

A mosaic from Pompeii (ca. 100 BC) shows Alexander the Great also charging into battle—in this case against the Persians. But Alexander has a literal sword in hand, and he intends to kill. Roman emperors in the first century routinely put similar images of themselves on coins.

Such Greek and Roman military propaganda—and Old Testament precedents—stand behind Revelation 19. But John of Patmos completely transforms the imagery! An equestrian Christ in John’s vision wears garments splattered with blood—his own blood shed at Calvary. Like Romero two millennia later, Jesus confronted powers of death and violence with the Word of God—not physical violence—and laid down his life in love.

Never underestimate the power of the spoken Word of God to bring down oppressive powers and point the way to healing of the nations.
Editors note: J. Nelson Kraybill is Lead Pastor at Prairie Street Mennonite Church in Elkhart, Indiana and President-elect of Mennonite World Conference. He will be a featured presenter at the upcoming Andrews University Music & Worship Conference, February 26-28, 2015.

See more articles by Kraybill on mission, peacemaking and Bible interpretation at www.peace-pilgrim.com.

CALLED Convention Features Seminars on Worship
by Dave Gemmell

NAD Ministerial believes that the knowledge and practice of worship is one of the core competencies of effective pastors. Therefore many seminars on the topic of worship will be presented at the June 28-July 1 CALLED convention for pastors and their families. Click the highlighted names below to find out more about the presenters. The password is 'pastor.'

Some of the presenters include Pedrito Maynard-Reid who will present Multicultural Worship: Melting Pot or Fruit Salad; Derek Morris, Powerful Biblical Preaching: how to maximize the impact of your preaching ministry; Mansfield Edwards, Worship Matters: Reflections on Worship; JoAnn Davidson, A Beautiful Sabbath: Worship and the Sabbath; and Dwight Nelson, Preaching that Connects: preparation for preaching to current times and generations. These are just a few of the many seminars on worship. Registration for the CALLED convention is now open.
Conference Preview
by Alain Coralie

Worship Guidelines from Revelation 14: 6, 7 for Worship Leaders

The successful marketing of worship music has introduced new dynamics for worship leaders in our local churches. This new development should encourage us to examine more carefully the essence of congregational worship. Revelation 14:6, 7, a key text in our self-understanding as Seventh-day Adventists, provides an illuminating perspective for worship leaders. It offers a theological ground to forge authentic worship services by providing a solid biblical framework. It is the purpose of my presentation at the upcoming Andrews University Music & Worship Conference to examine how that is in fact the case.

First, two key characteristics of worship are highlighted: its Gospel-centeredness and its global necessity, forming its theological foundation. Second, three imperatives ('Fear God', 'Give him Glory', 'Worship him') are focused upon, outlining clear guidelines on the nature and form of true worship. I will demonstrate how Revelation 14:6,7 can directly help worship leaders connect with the purpose for which they were created -- to worship God and lead others to do the same.

Editor's note: Alain Coralie will explore this topic and more as a featured presenter at the upcoming Andrews University Music & Worship Conference, February 26-28, 2015.

Worship Music
by Elia King
Leading Beyond the Style Wars (Part Two)

In part one of this article, we talked a bit about how easy it can be to lose sight of Christ, the object of our worship, when we allow ourselves to get caught up in debating stylistic details. Without proper perspective, our discussions about the details can take precedence over the purpose of our worship, and we can find ourselves entrenched in debates over how we worship rather than why, or more important, whom we worship. History has shown that we can become so focused on the "how" that the practice of our worship itself becomes idolatry (see Amos 5:21).

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Featured Worship Conference

Andrews University Music & Worship Conference
February 26-28, 2015

Hosted across the Andrews University campus, this Conference will provide Biblically rooted training opportunities for church musicians, pastors, worship leaders, and anyone involved in worship ministry.

This year's theological focus will consider biblical worship through the lens of the Book of Revelation.

Registration and further info is available through the Andrews University Music & Worship Conference website.
Featured Gathering
by Japhet De Oliveira

The ONE Project, San Diego, February 8 and 9, 2014

During a recent elders board at our church, Jim Christianson was kind enough to share some of the details about the upcoming One project gathering in San Diego next year. He was part of the very first gathering in Atlanta 2011, which inspired him to challenge our congregation:

"For me, the One project was a reminder and an example of what our Church can be if Jesus is central in everything. Jesus. All. This is cannot just be a nice platitude we think and say on Sabbath mornings. We need to be a church that understands that ALL things flow from The One who gave everything of Himself for us. A church where people come and say, 'I was cold and alone and scared...and I came to this place and I found what I needed, His name is Jesus.'"

As I write, I am about to attend the 16th One project gathering, in Auckland, New Zealand. This movement, which focuses on our mission as disciples of Jesus Christ, has gained momentum around the world, with thousands of participants testifying to the life-changing effects they've experienced as they return to their local communities.

Please join the One project in conversation on February 8 and 9 (Sunday and Monday) this coming year. Together, we will explore the vision of church as an expression of worship as well as an integral part of daily life. The San Diego gathering will be based on the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7).

For more information and to register, visit us online.

To the Point

"From start to finish, Revelation gives a resounding call for believers to avoid giving ultimate allegiance to any power other than God and the Lamb."

J. Nelson Kraybill, Apocalypse and Allegiance: Worship, Politics, and Devotion in the Book of Revelation
By Nicholas Zork

“You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not commit murder’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court;” (Matthew 5:21-22 NASB)

This past week has been one of the angriest weeks I can remember. Anger over a tragic killing, a grand jury decision and ongoing systemic injustices in the United States has spilled out into the streets of Ferguson, Missouri and cities across the nation. Some protests have been violent; most have been peaceful; nearly all have been angry—as have so many responses to them. In fact, anger has been everywhere, dominating the 24-hour news cycle, Facebook posts, blogs and many face to face conversations. I’ve been angry. To be honest, I still am. So what am I— what are all of us who claim to follow Jesus—supposed to do with this anger? How can we respond? And how can we prepare to worship a God of peace, love and justice?

The Gospels offer relatively few explicit instructions about Christian worship, but fortunately one of them deals directly with the issue of anger. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is appropriating the teachings of the Decalogue and challenging assumptions about them. The traditional Protestant understanding is that Jesus is basically shifting the emphasis from outward observance to inner attitude—adultery becomes lust, murder becomes anger—raising the proverbial bar of righteousness to a level that no one can attain. This, the interpretation goes, serves to highlight the universal need for God's grace. Ethicists Glen Stassen and David Gushee, however, convincingly challenge this understanding in their book, *Kingdom Ethics*. They argue that this collection of Jesus’ teachings are, in fact, intended to teach not impossible ideals but very doable and significant practices. They contend, in short, that Jesus is greatly concerned about adultery, murder and the many ways we mistreat one another. He's so concerned, in fact, that he gets at the underlying issues. Namely, our problematic thoughts and attitudes are not simply bad in and of themselves. The real problem with anger is that it leads to mistreating and, at times, even killing one another. For this reason, Jesus offers a way to break the destructive cycle of anger and violence, which relates directly to our worship practices:

“But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court…if therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.” (Matthew 5:22-24 NASB)

Jesus teaches us that if we are angry with someone or if they are angry with us, we should stop whatever we’re doing and go reconcile with them. But, importantly, He specifically mentions worship: “if you’re presenting your offering at the altar, leave your offering there before the altar…” Why single out an act of worship? This is one of Jesus’ few statements about worship, and He’s telling us to stop! This might surprise us. But as a Rabbi rooted in the prophetic tradition, Jesus is actually echoing the ancient prophetic sentiments found in Isaiah 1: “Bring your worthless offerings no longer…Learn to do good; Seek justice, Reprove the ruthless, Defend the orphan, Plead for the widow.” Jesus, like Isaiah, knows what we often forget: the reconciliation with a holy God that we celebrate in worship is only possible when we are reconciled with our fellow human beings. Anger is unavoidable. Indignation at the injustices of this world is needed! But anger that goes unchecked by practices of reconciliation will never bring healing. You may have offended someone in your anger this week. I’m sure I have. Before we bring another gift of praise to the God who welcomes all, let’s seek out those with whom we need to be reconciled.

Sometimes the best worship practice is the lived worship of leaving the service early—or not going at all—if that’s what we need to do to reconcile with someone and break the cycle of anger and violence. May we be reconciled with our brothers and sisters just as God has reconciled with all of us through Jesus Christ so that we might participate together in God’s healing work in this broken world.

Responding to Ferguson: “Sheep Without A Shepherd”

By Timothy P. Nixon

“When Jesus heard what had happened, He withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, He had compassion on them and healed their sick.” (Matthew 14:13,14)

“When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, He had compassion on them, because they were like SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD.” (Mark 6:34)

I have been asked to reflect on how I would respond to the events of Ferguson as a Minister of the Gospel. My humanity touches the despair of my community, a community that has seen the death of so many young African Americans finding no justice and being criminalized. When human systems fail, our only alternative is God. And the place where people come to seek answers is the church.

I find great comfort and instruction from a powerful experience in the life of Jesus, at a time of deep despair in His own ministry. The occasion was the beheading of John, His cousin. When He received the word of his untimely, unjust death, the Bible says, Jesus withdrew to a “solitary place.” No doubt this news greatly disturbed Him. He must have thought of the injustice of such an act. The thought of His own future must have crossed His mind.

At that moment of personal mourning and grief, He is confronted by myriads of people who are also filled with despair. Why John? Why now? What should He do? How should He respond? Should He place His questions, His needs and His concerns ahead of others? The Bible says, in the midst of His own pain and concern for the injustices and questions that bombarded Him, He felt compassion for the people because they were like SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD. They needed His care, concern and direction.

It is at times like this, when the systems of humanity fail; when injustices happen; when people are wandering in the streets, filled with unrest, like sheep without a shepherd; that we as ministers of the Gospel must provide teaching, guidance and healing to the community. We cannot think of ourselves but must minister to them. And as we minister to their needs, miracles will take place. It is significant that two of Jesus’ greatest miracles, the feeding of the 5,000 and His walking on water, both happened when He ministered to the needs of the people. God brings triumph out of human tragedy.

Beheadings will happen; hasty trials, trumped up charges, and crucifixions all will occur again and again until Jesus returns. And if the Bible is true, as time advances, the incidences will only become more blatant and progressively worse. We must expect that. And when they do, we have no other alternative but to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. When societal breakdowns create human despair, we must be the Oasis of Love and Citadel of Hope that God has called us to be. God’s Church Militant must be God’s Church Triumphant.
Leading Beyond the Style Wars (Part Two)

By Elia King

In part one of this article, we talked a bit about how easy it can be to lose sight of Christ, the object of our worship, when we allow ourselves to get caught up in debating stylistic details.

Without proper perspective, our discussions about the details can take precedence over the purpose of our worship, and we can find ourselves entrenched in debates over how we worship rather than why, or more important, whom we worship. History has shown that we can become so focused on the “how” that the practice of our worship itself becomes idolatry (see Amos 5:21).

In other words, when any element of our worship becomes more important that connecting our fellow worshippers with Jesus, our services become a sort of self worship, where we are doing little more than satisfying our own preferences. We could easily start to evaluate services based only on how they make us feel without considering whether or not we are being prompted to follow Jesus more closely.

The dilemma for many of us is that our services fall within a continuum that feels totally self-serving on one end and completely void of meaning on the other.

To help cope with this, the following are a few suggestions that have served me well in service planning. These are certainly not the only approach, and I can't claim any of them as "best." I am intentionally steering the conversation a bit away from style, because as long as we're trying to win that argument on behalf of one side or another, no one really benefits. Be that as it may, I believe these are still practical suggestions in that they can help us to find a healthy place on the spectrum that pulls us away from self-serving worship and also help us to connect with the realities that face the individuals and families in our congregations.

First, remember that the goal is to connect people with Jesus. That can feel like a long-distance target sometimes, especially when the style of service becomes a point of contention. It can feel like you're sacrificing something personal to pull a service together. It's easy to forget sometimes that Jesus called us not to pick up our preferences but our crosses. It may be tempting to ask, “when do I get to enjoy worship?” I have found that keeping the long-term goal in mind helps me to hold smaller points of contention at a healthy distance. It also helps me to consider what is really at stake when conflict arises. And for that matter, it has also been very useful in determining what elements of a service are worth fighting for. In the long run, our strategies may change, elements of the service may come and go, but the purpose behind what we do in our services is always to connect people with Jesus. Period.

Second, remember that meaning transcends style. Consider where the scripture is leading, and choose your songs and arrangements accordingly. Don't be afraid to try something new if it helps to strengthen the connection between the song and other elements in the service. Consider that when the hymns in our hymnal were written, they were sung with the same force and passion (and met with some of the same opposition) as modern worship music. Don't be afraid to try something new. At the same time, be confident enough to take something outside of your sphere and make it your own musically. I have long been an advocate of the idea that a song that can stand on its own with just an acoustic guitar can be successful with more complex arrangements. I think the same principle applies when it comes to arranging worship music. There are some really grand hymns that work really beautifully with a simple guitar accompaniment (I'm thinking specifically of "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing," but there are countless others). There are also some modern hymns, like "In Christ Alone," that are versatile enough for a wide variety of styles. I would love to hear Israel Houghton's "Jesus at the Center" with an intimate string arrangement or even the organ, but it also works well with a worship band. These are just a few examples, but the bottom line is that we often allow ourselves to be limited by the style something is "supposed to be" instead of considering how the content might actually connect to lives and hearts in our congregation.

Third, stop using “like” as the standard of success. You are a worship leader, not a Facebook page. Learn to be ok with the thought of someone not loving — or even disliking — what you do. I have to admit that this is really challenging for me sometimes because I want to know that what I’m doing resonates with people. But the reality is that just as there is no singular genre of music that embodies worship, there is also no catch-all category that resonates with all people equally. Furthermore, experience will show that some people simply don't know how to give feedback without being negative. Working to produce services that everyone likes can
create a really toxic, fickle working environment where we chase approval instead of leading people to Jesus. In contrast, leading with conviction and purpose is almost guaranteed to rub a few people the wrong way. Consider that Jesus spent his entire life and ministry teaching people how to love each other better, but it wasn't an easy task. It takes some practice, but as you spend time getting to know individuals and families in your congregation, and as you prayerfully craft services to connect those people with Jesus, you will start to learn what works and what doesn't.

I realize that these "solutions" may seem a bit anti-climactic. But in reality, it would be impossible to provide a single solution that will "fix" worship forever. I firmly believe that as long as we try to prove the merits of one style over another, no one will win. A healthier model is one that recognizes and validates diversity within the church — even if it proves to be a challenge within a single congregation. If we are willing to lead our churches to follow Jesus, recognizing that each person will play a specific role as they serve their individual communities, then I believe it really is possible to become the kind of church Paul described in his letter to the Corinthians:

"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body...If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body." (1 Corinthians 12:12-19)