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A Pastor's Perspective on Worship and Church Growth

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"A Pastor's Perspective on Worship & Church Growth"

Dr. Glen Martin

Some of you may be wondering how in the world a guy from Southern California gets to speak at the ASCG meetings. Well, I have always wanted to speak in to this elite group of leaders and so I decided to contact Gary a year or so ago about any opportunity. He said, "Glen, this is a pretty prestigious group. We don't invite just anyone to speak. Why don't you send me some tapes and let me see how you do."

So, I sent some tapes and called a few months later. He was very kind to me and said, "Glen, I got the tapes, and I don't know how to tell you, but, you're just not ready yet." I felt really bad and didn't know what to do. So I said, "If I practice, do you think I can get ready?" And Gary said, "Give it a try." I knew I'd get plenty of practice because we have four services at our church.

Well, I practiced for six months or so and sent him another batch of tapes and called him. He said, "Glen, I've listened to your tapes and you're making great progress. I just want you to know if you keep working, one of these days ... you'll be ready for us. But not now."

Last year I became desperate. So I called Gary and told him, "I've done the best I can. I've practiced and practiced, and I'm probably not going to get any better. I want to come to Kansas City so bad, I'd come for free."

He said, "Now you're ready."

It is indeed my distinct pleasure to speak to such a group of leaders in the field of Church Growth this year. I believe our country is at a turning point. We must determine if we will ex-

amine what God is doing through what Richard Mauw in his book *Consulting The Faithful* calls the “hermeneutic of suspicion” or the “hermeneutic of charity.” Will we look at what God is accomplishing doubtfully and through the eyes of criticism... or will we accept the fact that God is doing a new thing through the eyes of love and gratefulness? One of the areas under great scrutiny today is the area of worship. I think we have forgotten how vital the ministry of worship is to church growth.

The Role Of Music In The Church

Everyone has their own idea, and their own opinion as to what music in the church should be. I bet I have read at least a dozen books this year concerning this topic. Even C.S. Lewis had an opinion when he said, “What I, like many other laymen, chiefly desire in church are fewer, better and shorter hymns; especially fewer.” We have seen the rise of different worship services and Christian worship events. But not everyone agrees on the need for worship of the style of expression

I remember speaking at a Promise Keepers pastors conference this past year and entering into the stadium, I passed by a man who was picketing the Promise Keepers movement. The sign he was carrying expressed his chief concern. His placard read, “TOO MUCH MUSIC!”

My goal in our time together is not to belittle one style or the other or to criticize one preference over another. I simply want to draw us back, as leaders, to apply what the Bible actually says about the role of music in the church. But let me begin by identifying a few wrong or incomplete ideas about the role of music.

1. *It kills time until the message.* Some will conclude, “Preaching is what really matters.” Music then becomes just a filler for the first half hour.
2. *It provides entertainment until the message.* Granted it can appear that way with the spotlights and performances. “Let’s at least keep their attention until the sermon.”
3. *It allows people to arrive late w/o missing the message.* This is the “take it or leave it” attitude toward music and worship. “Oh, good, Glen hasn’t started preaching yet.”
4. *It prepares people to receive the message.* Yes, it does. But the music and worship is also the message of the day.

There is a passage in Colossians 3 that provides some great

insights into the worship dilemma we face today in the church. I want you to see a string of positive exhortations in this passage that describe how we should live as believers. Colossians. 3:12-16,

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. (NIV)

Now, for the sake of time, I only want to focus on verse 16. Unfortunately the grammar and structure is not real clear in the NIV, so I'd like to give you what I consider to be a literal translation of the text. *"Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly...in all wisdom...teaching and admonishing one-another...{with} psalms, hymns {and} spiritual songs...in {His} grace...singing to God...in your hearts."*

Let me just walk you through these phrases so we can see what are the implications of this incredible text. *"Let the Word of Christ dwell in **you** richly..."* This is a present imperative. A command, not a suggestion, to be continually obeyed. And "you" is plural, indicating this involves the entire body...the church.

"Word of Christ" can either mean "the words spoken by Christ" but most likely, "the word concerning Christ" or what we would understand as "Christian teachings."

That's what this book of Colossians is all about the sufficiency of Christ. These truths are to dwell in you, abide in you richly, so that you joyfully teach it, warmly welcome it, clearly understand it, joyfully obey it, and boldly share it. Everyone of us want that to happen in the church. God tells us how to do it. Paul tells us two things that will enable us to fulfill this command he just gave. It's found in two participial phrases introduced by two prepositional phrases. The way you let the word of Christ dwell

in you richly is by “teaching and admonishing one-another” and “singing to God.”

The phrase “...teaching and admonishing...” is next. The preachers job...right? Certainly, but Paul adds “one-another”. How are we supposed to teach and admonish one-another? “In all wisdom” meaning in a wise and tactful way.

The next part of the text says, “with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” . . . with our singing together. Ephesians. 5:19 reminds us, “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord.” (NIV) Now, obviously this is not the only way to do this but Paul felt very strongly concerning the importance of music in the church.

The second way to let the word of Christ dwell in you richly is “...singing to God.” Fellow leaders, it seems to me that our singing is to be directed to one-another for instruction and encouragement while at the same time, directed wholeheartedly to God in worship. And what about that term, “in your heart”? That does not mean to sing silently in your heart, but that our singing, our worship, should originate in the heart and be the sincere expression of our personal devotion to God. Our voices should express the praise of the heart if the singing is to be really directed to God. Now, having said all this...what are the implications for the church entering the 21st century.

First, music in worship has both horizontal and vertical dimensions. As we sing, we must keep that balance in mind. There is the horizontal encouraging one-another and there is the vertical worship of God almighty.

Second, music in worship is vital to the strengthening of the church. “...teaching and admonishing **one-another**...” Look what Paul shared in I Cor. 14:26 - “What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.” (NIV) The media world knows this fact that music adds an emotional force that helps us to remember.

Third, music in worship is to be primarily verbal in character. The word of Christ is more important than the emotional impact of a melody. “But Glen, I don’t like the drums.” Let the word of Christ dwell in your richly. “But Glen, I don’t like the rhythm.” Let the word of Christ dwell in your richly. Eph. 5:19 - “Speak (not hum!) to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing

and make music in your heart to the Lord." (NIV) So make the Biblical lyrics understandable and all accompaniment should enhance the words.

Fourth, Music in worship is to involve the entire congregation. "...teaching and admonishing one-another..." Our churches should not be filled with people who just sit there or stand there not singing. Ps. 95:1 - "Come, let us (Not a band or choir) *sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.*" (NIV)

Fifth, music in worship is to include a rich variety of songs. The next part of the passage says "*...with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs...*" Some in the church will claim to only be a "hymn person" while others are only the "spiritual song" people. What's scripturally interesting is how these terms are used interchangeably in the New Testament.

Sixth, music in worship is to be expressed with sincerity and devotion. "...singing in your hearts to God." What's your attitude while you're worshipping? Why did you come to church today? Matthew 15:8 - "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." (NIV)

Seventh, music in worship is encouraged by a proper understanding of God's grace. The last part of Colossians 3 reminds us how to sing "*...in His grace, singing in your hearts to God.*" Ps. 63:3-5 - "Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you. I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands. My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you." (NIV) Ps. 103:1-5 - "Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love & compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's." (NIV)

Friends, this is God's attitude towards us. And if we could simply understand with greater clarity what this passage really means, we'd have far fewer discussions and disagreements within a church family in regards to the worship experience. Now, having said all this about the ministry of music, let me share with you, from a pastor's perspective, why I believe worship is vital to the growth of the church, and what I have seen God doing in the arena of worship and church growth.

A Pastor's Perspective On Worship & Church Growth

1. *Worship enables the church to grow as it enhances the spiritual growth of the believer.* One of the larger criticisms of the Church Growth movement from the intellectual community has been what has appeared to be a lack of depth and a failure to bring about significant change in the life of a new convert. But as a pastor, I am becoming more and more convinced that a church will only grow when the significance of worship is discovered and made a priority. Think of Jerusalem and the mess they were in as described in the book of Nehemiah. God called Nehemiah to leadership and to turn around the plight of this great city. How did Nehemiah's ministry begin? Prayer! Then halfway through the rebuilding process, revival broke out among the people. This revival is described in Neh. 8. Ingredients included a returned to the Word of God, obedience, unity and worship. Nehemiah 8:6 "Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, 'Amen! Amen!' Then they bowed down and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground" (Neh. 8:6).

Friends, when we obey and seek God's Word and truly desire to make a difference for the kingdom, to reach people for Christ, you can't help but desire to worship. It's easy to see a revived spirit and a revived church that is growing, they love to praise God. God desires our worship. "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks." (NIV) "And we must teach our people not to be afraid to worship publicly at church" (Ps. 22:22). "I will declare your name to my brothers; in the congregation I will praise you" (Jn. 4:23). "But thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel" (Ps. 22:3 KJV). God is right in the middle of our praises. But with all the attitudes and opinions floating around out in the church world today, I believe that more than ever, we must be ready to define the role of worship in the church, and give direction so that the church will grow.

2. *Worship is a major contributor to the assimilation process.* When Dr. Gary McIntosh and I wrote the book, *Finding Them-Keeping Them*, we identified five specific mechanisms necessary to assimilate people into the church:

- a. Friendships

- a. Responsibility - tasks and roles
- b. Small groups
- c. Identification
- d. Spiritual growth

I don't know where it would fit in, but I think I would have to add worship services in the funnel model Gary and I used.

Today, in our age of excellence, people are expecting the best music, the best sound system, the best drama, and the best communication. If an environment is not created where the people sense the presence of God and where they not only learn about God, but desire to meet with god...they will find it very difficult to stay. I was teaching a new members class at my church last month. I asked each of the people to express how they found out about our church. One young couple shared, "Everyone's talking about this church. Everyone of my friends were saying, you've got to check out their services."

I have discovered that people who are excited about their church do things that they don't normally do...like give, serve, and invite friends. Our worship services will directly inhibit or enhance church growth because people will become quickly incorporated to a church they are excited to attend.

3. *A positive experience in worship services will allow the leadership the freedom to try new things.* If people believe that theirs is a great church and the pastor is convinced that they are serving in a great church, they will try great things for God. We attempt to maintain what we call an experiment attitude at CBC. Some experiments work and some don't. I remember hearing the story of a church in Atlanta which simply wanted to try something new. On their platform, there had always been four chairs and now the new pastor had decided to remove two of the chairs, (which I might add were never sat upon), and add some plants and color to the platform. He immediately received mail reminding him, "Dr. Stanley has four chairs on his stage."

I have personally found that the worship experience and services are a great place, probably the best place, to cast vision. Friends, I really believe that one of the major reasons that 80-85% of the churches in this country are plateaued or declining is because they have no sense of urgency. As a pastor, I truly believe that is a pastoral responsibility. Change demands risks. People at church, who are excited about what the church is doing and its vision will take risks. I believe worship services are the best place

to cast that vision, One of the new things that we have begun to use often in our church is video. The church was a little fearful at first, but as people have come to Christ and the church has grown, the use of video has been validated and blessed.

4. *Worship styles allow the church to grow by targeting different audiences.* Gary McIntosh has called our church, "The Multiple Track Model". Let me describe CBC to you. Our Saturday night service is attended predominantly by busters, singles, and collegians. I preach in Levi's and tennis shoes. The first two Sunday morning services have predominantly young families attending and I wear dockers and a casual shirt. These two services take place at 8:15 and 9:30 am. These first three services are lead by a full-blown worship band. Now, the 11:00 am service on Sunday morning is a traditional service with full robed choir, pulpit, organ, piano, and I go and change into a suit for this service. Each of these services actually have different audiences by design as they target different groups. Because of the diversification of today's society and because everyone has their own personal preferences, worship services provide an ideal place to target the three major generational differences.

Biblical knowledge is important. We need substance in the church. But where Biblical knowledge is the nutrition of the church, worship styles are the flavor of the church. There are too many churches today that are very nutritious, but they taste so blah that no one wants to eat there. "For when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep" (Acts 16:36a). When David had completed the eternal things of God in a temporal way, God told David he was finished. When he had finalized the timeless things of God in a very timely way, God told David to come on home.

Listen, not every person likes the same style, enjoys the same formats. The more variety and options, the greater chance of reaching the broader community.

Conclusion

What is the role of our worship? To glorify God and edify one-another and reach the lost enabling church growth to naturally follow. Sadly, there are too, too many churches in this country that are just trying to fake it. Let me share with you an excerpt from a personal diary that really portrays the struggle many churches are having today.

My ship, the West Virginia, docked at Pearl Harbor on the evening of December 6, 1941. A couple of the fellows and I left the ship that night and attended a Bible study. About fifteen sailors sat in a circle on the floor. The leader asked us to each recite our favorite Scripture verse. In turn each sailor shared a verse and briefly commented on it. I sat there in terror. I couldn't recall a single verse. I grew up in a Christian home, went to church three times a week, but I sat there terrified. I couldn't recall a single verse. Finally, I remembers one verse-John 3:16. I silently rehearsed it in my mind.

The spotlight of attention grew closer as each sailor took his turn. It was up to the fellow next to me. He recited John 3:16. He took my verse! As he commented on it I sat there in stunned humiliation. In a few moments everyone would know that I could not recall from memory even a single verse. Later that night I went to bed thinking, 'Robertson, you're a fake.'

At 7:55 the next morning I was awakened by the ship alarm ordering us to battle stations. 360 planes of the Japanese Imperial Fleet were attacking our ship and the other military installations. My crew and I raced to our machine gun emplacement, but all we had was practice ammunition. So for the first fifteen minutes of the two hour battle, we only fired blanks hoping to scare the Japanese air planes. As I stood there firing fake ammunition I thought, 'Robertson, this is how your whole life has been-firing blanks for Christ.' I made up my mind as Japanese bullets slammed into our ship, 'If I escape with my life, I will get serious about following Jesus.'

Roy Robertson went on to help Dawson Trotman found the Navigators. Robertson led the follow-up ministry for the 1990 Billy Graham Crusade in Hong Kong. That Crusade found more people hearing the Gospel at one time than any other meeting in history.

How many of our churches are just faking it? How many of the churches in this country are really a threat to the devil. Worship restores the passion. Worship renews the spirit. I am more and more convinced that worship will rejuvenate the church to create an environment, where church growth can't help but take

place as God is honored.

Writer

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