

The Christian Assembly

Concepts, Trends, and Leadership with Purpose

- I. General and Conceptual**
- II. Music**
- III. The Spoken Word**

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Introduction

It has been called many things. The assembly of the saints. The gathering of Christians. Devotionals. Worship. Goin’ to meetin’ (a phrase from yesteryear). Church.

Regardless of the label, the significance of the Christian assembly is unquestioned by most believers. Or is it?

Have we reached a time when we are so tired of hearing Hebrews 10:25-26 (quoted in order to inflict guilt on those who had skipped, or who were thinking about skipping . . . a kind of enforced attendance) that we rebel—in practice, if not in our hearts? Do we find ourselves just attending without comprehending the purposes? Submitting to the activity without experiencing much of what God had in mind?

Even those of us who have the habit of church attendance may find ourselves minimizing the importance of the assembly; this phenomenon is related, I think, to good habits with bad reasons and/or bad execution. In other words, we would not find ourselves having to advertise the assembly to the fringe element if the activities had been carried out with more depth, intentionality, and, well . . . *quality*. Not only would we continue to be there when Christians are gathered, but the contagion of our feelings about the value of the assembly would affect all those around us. More people would be present, and all those present would be engaged. In my wildest dreams, there would be no fringe element.

In the passages/paragraphs/pages that follow, I affirm the importance of the Christian assembly by offering comments, opinions, reflections, and suggestions. What you will find here are thoughts on various topics that relate to *the Christian assembly*.

These thoughts and words spring largely from my own experiences in dozens of churches whose signs read *Church of Christ*, and some of this material may apply only to those churches. A good proportion of the section on music deals with “traditional” *a cappella* churches that use hymnals and/or hymn-style music more than contemporary songs, yet the latter category carries with it some unique issues that I have also dealt with in some detail.

I do believe that those from multiple church traditions will be able to gain from reading. Since the first edition of this material, written in 2005-2007, I have added and revised based on continued experience, thought, and study. Much of the additional material was first made available on my blog (blcasey.wordpress.com). Substantial editions were produced in 2010 and again in 2011.

May God be honored.

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Section One: General and Conceptual

The Purposes of the Assembly 1: Arrows

Many of us have heard the question *What is the purpose of the assembly?* asked in Bible classes, and the first answer given is usually “to glorify God.” Second, “to edify one another . . . to build one another up.”

Those answers really are not bad. But let me elaborate just a little, drawing from notes taken at a talk by Everett Ferguson.

Purposes of the Christian assembly could be summarized with arrows pointing in various directions. (If I could draw, this would be easier.) The upward arrow signifies the purpose of worshipping God. The ones that point side to side indicate that we are there for our sisters and brothers—to build them up, to encourage, to teach, to discipline, etc. And the ones that point forward and backward have to do with the commemoration and proclamation of God’s redemptive work in us. Together we look back to the mighty evidences of His deliverance, and together we look forward, saying with one voice, “Lord, we long for Your return and for Your culminating, saving act of taking us into Your eternal presence.”

There is perhaps less reason to focus inward than upward or outward while in the assembly, 1 Corinthians 11:27-29 notwithstanding. Similarly, outward arrows also may imply a mission to those outside the group of believers, but the assembly itself doesn’t really have that purpose. The assembly is for the saints. If true “seekers” are present, that’s great, and by virtue of what the church does, the seekers may be caused to know God is with us. But that is a by-product; the mission of the church is primarily carried on when the people are *not* gathered together.

The Purposes of the Assembly 2: Common Misunderstandings

Everett Ferguson comments on a few common misunderstandings around the Christian assembly:

- ◆ Viewing the assembly as a sort of task that, when it is completed, has had its intended effect. *It is not just our physical presence that is the issue; it is the involvement of our hearts.*
- ◆ Viewing the assembly as a time for personal meditation or for personal acts of worship performed without regard for those around me. *After all, I can meditate anywhere, and I can worship anywhere.*
- ◆ Viewing the assembly as a time to be uplifted. The primary focus should be on spirits other than my own. I must not view the assembly as a time to get benefits.
- ◆ Viewing the assembly as a performance by a few. Leaders are present, in some form, but it is not about them.

Insightful, spiritually minded leaders of the assembly can provide for activities that make the assembly what it should be.

Journey to the Center of the Worth

<p>wor-ship, <i>n.</i> 1. to show religious homage or veneration to . . . [Old English <i>weorthscipe</i>, honor, dignity, or respect shown, from <i>worth</i> + <i>ship</i>]</p>
--

Let us move toward the *core* of worship. The center of the worship experience is expressing the *worth* of God. And the *Worthy One*—the One of absolute excellence—is God. He is of priceless *value*, of ultimate *worth*.

Often I pick up on a certain line of thought among certain good sisters and brothers. Some seem to think that those of us interested in deepening and expanding *vertical* worship of God are also somehow tied to the erroneous *5 Acts of Worship* model . . . as if the two must go together.

I reject the *5 Acts* paradigm soundly! (It is foreign to the Bible, and its simplisticness hinders the conceptualization and enactment of genuine worship.) I also affirm that true worship will be accompanied by a whole-life sacrifice, the nature of which is spoken of in Romans 12:1-2.

But one can believe in the viability and validity of special times for direct focus on God without believing that those times comprise the sum total of Christianity.

Believers should worship God. By this I mean that those who want to honor Him in all they do *should make special effort to honor Him in specific, intentional ways* . . . such as calling attention to things He has done and speaking/singing adoringly to Him.

If you want to call these things *acts of worship*, that's fine. In doing so, you will not be negating the notion that the life of *continual* sacrifice is also, in another, related sense, an act of worship. Instead, the recognition that certain acts and actions are clearly and definitively worshipful allows you to affirm an eminently Biblical concept—a concept that is at the heart of what God wants from His children.

Though there are numerous specific directives in the pages of the Bible for God's people to worship Him, it is often simply *assumed* in Scripture that both privately and corporately, we will naturally be found magnifying God, worshipping in word and in action. While we *should* worship, the focus is not so much on the *must* as on the *want to*—the natural outpouring of a soul to God.

The Priority of Worship 1: What Comes First?

As one who has been part of congregations in seven states, in the Mid-Atlantic, the South, the Midwest, and the West, I have experienced quite a few inspirational, God-centered assemblies led by gifted leaders. I have also noticed disparities in the understanding of worship in our assemblies. I suppose the differences are natural and acceptable, in some cases, but I do wish that—in an arena as central as worship—appropriate, general conceptions and practices were more widespread.

While the Christian assembly should include much more than worship—and worship should occur much more often than weekly!—if Christians do not extol and adore God when they are together, something is amiss.¹

The “worship style” wars pale in comparison to the more significant ideological question of *which comes first* in assemblies—the reaching upward to God, or the reaching outward to one another. While many scholars and many more qualified writers than I have expressed the opposite, I find that Jesus rearticulated the proper priority order (Mark 12:29-31) most clearly. Christians are most naturally, lastingly edified when God is given top attention. There is no attempt here to downplay the edification angle, I hope you understand . . . only to say that we are *naturally* built up when God's honor is the *top* priority.

May we all strive to do more than punch the time clocks when we meet our Christian family members on Sundays. We have not necessarily worshipped when our songs have all been exhortative or sentimental, and our mere presence in a church facility does not equate to worshipping.

Though the honor of our great God with all kinds of heart-expressions may seem to be an inevitable occurrence, worship does not always occur in church assemblies, and there is ample rationale and precedent for us to worship when we gather together, just as when we are elsewhere.

¹ Though there is little New Covenant “proof” of congregational worship—and here I mean worship in the strict sense, not merely “doing church”—for me, it is a given that the early Christians worshipped when they were together. Witness the centuries-old Jewish tradition of praising God; the first-century Christians drew heavily on their Jewish roots by using the praise-filled Psalms as texts. Perhaps the reason there is really no biblical command for early Christians to worship is that they were intuitively worshipping at home, at every assembly, etc., and they needed no such instruction.

The Priority of Worship 2: Texts—John 4

When you think of New Testament passages that relate to worship, chances are that, before long, Jesus' discourse with the Samaritan woman in John 4 will come to mind.

Truly, this is a mountaintop passage for Christians as we seek to understand the nature of worship, and yet many sincere Christians have drastically misunderstood the import of this passage. For instance, three main elements of John 4:24—the words “worship,” “spirit,” and “truth”—have been commonly understood to mean “living a sacrificial life,” “attitude,” and “doctrinal correctness,” respectively. I think there's so much *more* to the concepts in this verse.

I firmly believe that if I “get” John 4, I will have made a quantum leap toward understanding New Covenant worship. First, I need to understand that the word “worship” in this text derives from *proskuneo* and that the concept is a specific one. I also need to be clued in to the meaning of “in spirit.” Since Jesus calls attention to the nature of God's existence (“God is Spirit”), it seems to me that this expression pertains to communication in the spiritual realm—involving both the Holy Spirit and my spirit.

And the phrase “in truth” does not appear to refer directly to accuracy, “doctrinal” correctness, towing the line, or living up to a certain set of expectations which are commonly transmogrified into some nebulous body of material that some dogmatically call “truth.” (See Rob McRay's comments below.)

This position doesn't deny that there is a set of expectations on God's part. It's just that “in truth” has been used by many of us to mean “within our schema of interpretation.”

Certainly, God desires certain things from those who would worship Him. He is looking for those who will actually “proskuneo” Him spiritually. He wants us to bow before Him sincerely and spiritually.

The Priority of Worship 3: Texts—Romans 12

A sincere soul who questions the priority of worship for Christian believers might appeal to Romans 12:1. Her textual source—a/k/a her preferred Bible *version*—has led to many a confused moment in Bible studies. Misleading translations include “spiritual act of worship” (NIV) and “spiritual service of worship” (NASB). I call these misleading because without reading commentaries and footnotes and such, one can easily emerge with the notion that vertical ideals in worship are all but eradicated under the New Covenant.

Romans 12 is clearly a pivotal passage in a monumentally significant letter by the inspired Paul. Here, Paul moves from the theological rationale to practical advice for daily living. But he is not dealing with worship or the assembly per se, and the mistranslation of the “latreuō” Greek root in some versions obscures Paul's focus on daily living here.

He is saying that when we, being transformed by God, offer ourselves in service-acts to others, it becomes, *in a manner of speaking*, our “worship.” (Picture Paul using the now-familiar “quote mark” gesture with two fingers on each hand.) The thrust seems to be that of giving *oneself* instead of giving something else (e.g., animals or grain as sacrifices, etc.), and I affirm that notion wholeheartedly.

But this verse does not support the sometimes-popular notion of “whole-life worship,” which seems to me to blend unhealthily both the idea of holy living, which is primarily horizontal in our epoch, and the idea of worship, which is primarily vertical. For me and for countless others, there is no question of which comes first.

The vertical priority should be manifest in our assemblies as well as elsewhere.²

² For more scholarly treatments of this subject, please see Appendix A, “Worship, Service, and the Christian Assembly,” by Cliff Ganus III; and Appendix B, “Defining Worship and Service,” by Rob McRay.

The Priority of Worship 4: Texts—Ephesians and Colossians

Questions about the meaning and grammar of Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 have existed for decades. Biblical scholars (one of which I am not) have not agreed, and I will not attempt to move us toward much harmony here. I am not equal to that task.

I will, though, point out that, for a first-century mind, the delineation of “types” of songs in these passages would not have been the same as our delineation today. “Hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs” are *text* types, primarily, and not musical types. The latter term is probably the most elusive, but it really cannot be considered a reference to “spirited” songs, i.e., “gospel songs,” or “camp songs,” “contemporary songs,” or anything with a quicker tempo than the quickest stuff your church currently sings.

The hymn and psalm categories are a bit easier to define; again, the definitions have more to do with text than with musical construction. A psalm is, well, a psalm. And a hymn is a text addressed in worship to Deity.

The Priority of Worship 5: Texts—Hebrews

Hebrews 13:15-16 offers a succinct, eminently clear delineation of the same top two priorities articulated by the Christ, i.e., God first, neighbor second:

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

It seems to me that if we act in accord with these priorities in our assemblies (and in the rest of our lives), everything else will fall into place. Though this statement may seem a trifle naïve, I think the issue is more with the “acting in accord with these priorities” than with the falling into place.

The Priority of Worship 6: Texts—Psalms—General

We know that the Psalms were used as worship material for Israel and that David, who of course wrote many of them, was the “sweet singer of Israel.” We have also been told that the Psalms served as a hymnal, of sorts, for the early Christian church. Mark Roberts (*Worship Leader*, March/April 2006) reminds us that regular, meditative reading of the Psalms is a uniquely wonderful resource for songwriters today.

To what extent those tidbits hold truth, I am not sure, and the point of this is not to treat such things from a scholarly point of view so much as it is to bolster and advance Christian worship today, in practical ways.

For starters: know that the Psalms are relevant. Eminently relevant. And rich, and deep, and inspiring. Psalm expressions can serve readily as springboards for worship-filled prayer—both in private and in the assembly.

“We have come to worship You, Lord. In our hearts we kneel before You, our Creator.” (from Psalm 95).

“Your love is better than life, O God. Earnestly our spirits seek You.” (63)

“The skies seem to pour out the knowledge that You created it all. The skies declare Your glory. Every day, there is a new evidence of You, and every night, the beautiful stars and moon remind us that You are in control of the universe. Your name is so excellent; Your authority is absolute in the world. And yet You have called us Your children. You have given such attention to humankind. Who are we, that You should be attentive to us? . . .” (19, 8)

The Priority of Worship 7: Texts—Psalms—Lament

For many readers, this will be old news, but perhaps not for all. *There are many different types of worship expressions contained in the Psalms.* It is not all “praise and worship” (as many think of those terms today, anyway).

Again, Mark Roberts (*Worship Leader*, March/April 2006) encourages, “If you read through all the Psalms, and not just a few greatest hits, you’ll be astounded by the variety of expressions you’ll find. . . . Psalm 22, for example, runs the gamut from deep despair, through desperate lamentation, to confident hope.”

A few years ago, I began to read some things that encouraged “lament” in worship assemblies. So what is lament, and does it really have a place in worship? Well, if we take the Psalms as our model, and if we presume that both Jewish and early Christian worship used a cross-section of the Psalms as their “worship text,” then surely some “negative” emotions had their place.

But are they ultimately *negative* emotions? Perhaps our modern tendency to binary (strictly *two-sided*) classification hinders the potentially full expression of human worship today. We may be rejecting any material that appears at a glance to be *not positive* or *not upbeat* because, after all, we say, we don’t come to church to sing funeral songs or to be discouraged. Some might think that “Praise the Lord, ye heav’ns adore Him,” “I love You, Lord,” “The Lord is my Shepherd,” and “Make a joyful noise to the Lord!” span the gamut of appropriateness, but those worshippers are surely limiting themselves if they reject other types of expressions.

There can be positive in the “negative,” and vice versa.

O God, the nations have invaded your inheritance; they have defiled your holy temple, they have reduced Jerusalem to rubble.

Is your love declared in the grave, your faithfulness in Destruction? Are your wonders known in the place of darkness, or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion? But I cry to you for help, O LORD; in the morning my prayer comes before you. Why, O LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me?

O Lord, You have been faithful for all generations, or so the scriptures tell us, but we are discouraged as a congregation today. Why, oh, why have you let Jane’s count rise . . . and just when we thought you were going to deliver her from cancer? Her spirit has been such a positive influence for the Kingdom on all those who have been attending her, and it is to Your glory that she has offered herself. Why could you not continue to show that glory by effecting her healing? We cry to You for reversal of this trend, for the sake of Your glory.

Is there a place for this type of praying today? I affirm that there is, and yet it would seem to be so awkward to infuse our whole-church assemblies with such emotions. I can not say that I have ever been in a place where such was done, though I myself probably tried at some points.

Perhaps a more significant question than “can we lament?” is “*when* should we lament?” Rather than artificially creating a sorrowful or burden-stricken emotional tone in an assembly, it might be better simply to allow the realities of congregational life to influence the directions of worship activities.³ In the next section, I will suggest a few real-life situations that would call for congregational lament.

³ A tremendously spiritually minded, lifelong friend adds, “When grave announcements are shared or someone ‘comes forward’ confessing burdens and/or sin, we are too quick to transition back to ‘meanwhile, back at the ranch . . .’ announcements. . . . Wasn’t this the problem with the disciples in the garden while Jesus faced the cross and needed them? They needed it, too!”

The Priority of Worship 8: Texts—Psalms—Lament 2

“Lament” used to be a term reserved for a few less-than-popular Psalms. The “Psalms of lament” were not often read or studied, and we barely knew they were there. Perhaps we should return to those Psalms in order to help us realize that life’s situations sometimes call for similar types of Godward moans and mournings.

When a teenager has run away from a good Christian home, and those parents are fearful and anxious, and the whole church feels with the family, don’t let the worship activities ignore that reality.

When a beautifully spirited woman who has taught everyone’s children in the 5th grade class for 20 years is diagnosed with advanced-stage lymphoma, don’t sing “I love the Lord; He has been so good to me” without acknowledgment of the present circumstances. Yes, God can be glorified in the pain, but it seems weird not to concede that the people won’t really feel like praising God at times like that.

Not many worship songs use the language of lament, and that’s OK, I suppose. Let the scriptures express our fears. Let a spiritually sensitive soul articulate a connection along these lines: “O Lord, You are the giver of life, and in your infinite wisdom You have allowed this life to be finite. Many of our hearts are anxious today because of Sarah’s cancer. We don’t want her to leave us. We don’t feel like worshipping as much as we did last week, when You brought new life into our family in the birth of Brenton. We *want* to trust in Your lovingkindness, but it doesn’t come naturally to us today. We fear for Sarah’s next few weeks, and we beg you to take care of her. Don’t let her life pass now.”

To sum up: Let us consider a broader range of emotions in our worship expressions.

And one more thought . . . perhaps we don’t need to wait for a major event that impacts the whole congregation with negative emotion to include some less-than-praise-filled expressions in our assemblies. Truth is, in any church (with more than one family in it, anyway), someone will not be feeling so upbeat, and that person might appreciate some opportunity to grieve.

The Priority of Worship 9: Texts—Psalms— Praise Mountaintops

Some of the best and brightest worship texts do come from the Psalms. Here is a list of Psalm numbers that contain some mountaintop passages. When these Psalms are read aloud, or when they are set to new music (after all, they were songs originally!), let them not be intoned with pervasive, convincing boredom as the guiding principle.

8, 16, 18, 19, 21, 22, 24, 27, 42, 46, 51, 63, 66, 77, 84, 89, 90, 92, 93, 95, 96,
97, 100, 103, 104, 105, 107, 108, 113, 115, 121, 124, 130, 134, 139, 145, 150

Now, how to steer away from boring intonations? This is difficult to describe in prose, but it is worth practicing. Please see the installment in Section Three titled “Scripture Reading 2: Practice and Preparation.”

Not to encourage a lack of preparation or of deeper insight into what is needed in each particular worship situation, but hey, when you’re in a rush and are looking for some material for worship, you could just page through those Psalms. You’re guaranteed to find something from the heart of someone who was reaching to God.

Let the public readings of worshipful and/or praise-filled Psalms be wings for the flights of the people’s deepest, most God-honoring expressions . . . non-stop to the heart of God Himself.

The Priority of Worship 10: Texts—Revelation

I remain fairly well convinced that most of Jim McGuigan’s interpretations of Revelation, as taught in a videotaped series more than 20 years ago, are correct. One of his tenets was that

Revelation presents not a future-only image of the spiritual place known as Heaven, but that the book reveals a timeless picture of the eternal kingdom of our Lord.

A *timeless* picture would seem to span the past, present, and future, right? It includes the here and now!

And the scenes of Revelation chapters 4 and 5 are important components in that timeless representation. I believe Jesus wanted us to know, through the messages and visions revealed to John, that worship is integral in the Kingdom. Every conscious being will ultimately worship God, and we who are willing subjects now (i.e., we who are in the Kingdom before it is fully established for all eternity) would do well, I think, to realize that we should be caught up in worship regularly, just like the “24 elders” and the living creatures who never stop saying, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty.”

The Priority of Worship 11: An Altar for YHVH

In the Old Covenant writings, we often find God’s people sacrificing on an altar for Him. From Noah on through Moses and Aaron and Joshua . . . from the judges through the kings and beyond . . . worship under the Old Covenant seems to have been located, in large measure, on the physical altar.

As mentioned above, Paul emphasizes in his letter to the Romans that we now offer ourselves—as opposed to the blood of animals—in service-acts to others. Symbolically, these offerings become our “altar worship.”

Yet there is an aspect of the old physical altar that may go unnoticed: its *visibility*. I wonder about that. Certainly, we worship One, without regard for human observers. Perhaps, though, there should be something about our offered-up lives that leaves a visible manifestation that worship of the Almighty has occurred.

Just Who Is God?

In a Wilmington, Delaware *News Journal* article by this title, a book by a Jewish rabbi was reviewed. Jack Bemporad, the author, called the book *Stupid Ways, Smart Ways To Think About God*. Along with Bemporad, with whom we share a good deal of spiritual heritage, we can benefit from examination of our concepts of God.

A couple of decades ago, J. B. Phillips also wrote a book along these same lines entitled *Your God Is Too Small*. Although this title may elicit images of the proverbial “your daddy isn’t as strong as my daddy” childhood arguments, the intent of Phillips’s book was to bring inadequate concepts of God to light. “If the god you serve is not as ‘large’ as the real and living God,” he was saying, “I won’t be interested in serving him myself.”

Both of these men have delineated, often humorously, many false notions of Yahweh. Ponder these from Bemporad:

Cosmic Bellhop—ratifying our every desire
Master of Ceremonies—leading weddings, funerals, “services”
Eternally Smiling One or **Little Mary Sunshine**

And these from Phillips:

Resident Policeman—haranguing us for minor “infractions”
Grand Old Man—sitting in a heavenly rocking chair
God-in-a-Box—championing the cause of a party or particular point of view;
pigeonholed by human, provincial minds

On the other hand, there are some smart(er) ways of thinking about God. Bemporad suggests that God is the beginning of the beginning of everything—before the big bang, before the time-space continuum. Or think of Him as “the ultimate prodigy,” the Supreme Intelligence whose

workings are seen from creation down to the “sequencing of DNA and the dance of atomic particles.”

In my loftier moments, I conceptualize God (and perhaps that’s just the problem with us humans—we conceptualize instead of just letting God speak for Himself!) as the utterly transcendent One, the holy *Other*. In a very real sense, I am like God since He made me in His image; but on the other hand, whatever I am, He is not. That He is transcendent is just one reason He is worthy of worship!

Worship—Ritual vs. Relationship

“Relationship.” An overused word in our time, perhaps. Yet it can scuff at the root of what life — both temporal and eternal — is about. When considered in juxtaposition with ritual in the context of worship, relationship may be even more crucial.

A preacher in Delaware wrote this for his bulletin recently, springing out of Heb. 9:1-5:

In these opening passages, the author briefly takes his readers into the highly ritualized worship of the Jewish Tabernacle. . . .

. . . Almost everyone still has some rituals in his/her life and worship. (We sit in the same pew, order the same foods, sing the same songs, etc.) But more importantly, these rituals of Tabernacle worship serve a valuable purpose as summary of the first covenant God made with His people. They describe a system in which a Holy God is inaccessible to His people except through a series of sacrifices made by High Priest for himself and the people he represents. Sin has separated us from God and the idea of an intimate relationship with a Holy God is unthinkable under such a system.

That all changed when Christ came and ushered in a new and better covenant with God. This new covenant still involved a blood sacrifice but this offering was the blood of the Son of God, delivered to the eternal dwelling place of God. As our High Priest, he continually dwells in God’s presence providing us an opportunity for an intimate relationship.

The preacher’s comments above show something I concur with, believing it is significant: a fundamental difference between Jewish and Christian worship lies in the difference between the “series of sacrifices” on the one hand, and the spiritual attitude of reverence, adoration, and homage on the other.

Under the New System, worship ~~may~~ *must* not be confined to ritual acts. Rather, our worship of God is based on a more intimate (can anyone say “Incarnation” and not think there’s a different approach to God now?!) relationship. *Latreuo* is the Greek word that appears to refer, more often than not, to the former, Jewish rituals (≈things done) and is found in Romans 12:2; *proskuneo* is the word that renders the attitude of obeisance, homage, reverential adoration (John 4, Revelation 4-5). Hebrews 13:15-16 nicely sets these two word-concepts together, simultaneously differentiating and relating the two.

The above paragraph is an oversimplification, but I present it for thought and comment nonetheless.

Sometimes It’s Not Easy: On Personal Effort and the Will To Worship

When we experience personal doldrums and phases of life in which we feel frantic and scattered, worshipping truly and spiritually is not easy.

Attention span seems to be one problem for some of us. Even (or perhaps *especially*) in private, I have found myself starting and stopping songs and prayers at an alarming rate. I just shake

my head in disgust, and sometimes I apologize to God and start trying to worship and commune again.

In corporate assemblies, though there has probably been at least the usual amount of opportunity for true worship, it is difficult to worship in my spirit—no matter the setting.

How should we view times of worship? How should I appraise my own efforts? What is good enough, and what requires more effort?

In one way of thinking, nothing is good enough for our God! There is **no** effort I can make in worship that is sufficient to honor His marvels. But on the other hand, I am confident that every sincere effort is received with pleasure by the Lord.

It's important here to emerge from the theoretical to deal with daily and weekly realities. "At church," the songs may be humdrum or sentimental, without much God-consciousness. The praying may be too general and without focus. The comments may seem inane and irrelevant. Can I expect to worship despite all this? Just as school children's prayers can never be prohibited by external factors, neither can my worship be stifled in the institutional blahs *except by my own lack of will to worship*.

Like poor Michael Fay who, according to his mommy, finally took responsibility for his butane-sniffing habit instead of blaming it on the need to forget the Singapore "caning" a few years ago, **I** must take responsibility. It is *my* will that is the gateway to worship. Other people and physical surroundings and various distractions have no power to curtail my praise if I am determined to worship in the Spirit!

I am trying not to judge my own worship by how I *feel* afterward. That's not always easy. Many of us no longer deal with the "I didn't get anything out of that 'service'" routine, but still, I fear we are held captive by our respective feelings and levels of "inspiredness." "I was really uplifted today" translates in our minds into "the worship was good." "I was so inspired by the worship" becomes "God was pleased."

Could it be that God is most pleased by worship offered to Him by believers who aren't feeling like worshipping—by those who command their wills anyway?

True worship is not inextricably tied to our feelings. With David, who praised even in the midst of great persecution, may we impel our spirits to worship our great God *regardless of our feelings*. In His time, He will again bless us for giving Him glory even when we didn't feel like it.

Humility and the Honored Pursuit

When I am humble before Almighty God, I worship. It's as simple as that.

Pride, on the other hand, is the antithesis of contrition, and prideful self-reliance will **always** keep me from worshipping.

Why would one pursue something before which he then willingly trembles? I suppose that's one of the mysteries of the Creation! It doesn't make human sense (in our culture, at least) to subject oneself to anyone or anything, regardless of whether there is a loving, intimate relationship.

But with God, along with the subjection comes a safety and security that transcends. Even fearing His awesomeness, I can be at peace.

And so I continue along a path that, even through twists and turns, pilots me toward God. Though I often waver in believing that He is near, I cannot—for long—stop reaching, seeking, pursuing, stretching for such a great God.

Jeremiah 29:12-14 reminds us that when we call on God and pray to Him, He will listen to us. "If you will seek Me with your whole heart," He says, "I will be found by you."

Proof of that promise is found in the life of Cornelius. As related in Acts 10, he pursued the God he believed in. God responded, showing esteem for Cornelius's humble pursuit by listening and acting. He rewarded one who diligently sought Him!

And humble seeking continues to be a catapult into lasting relationship with the One who is worthy. He is worth the time and effort, and He, who is the attainable Goal of our most important pursuit, will honor that pursuit with His very Presence.

Where Do You Worship?

In the Stone-Campbell churches, the question “Where do you worship?” is frequently heard. This question appears equivalent to “Where do you go to church?” or “Which church are you a member of?”

Over the years, I’ve surmised that the inclusion of the word “worship” in this type of query has to do with the deeply held value of “biblical” worship patterns. In other words, since Churches of Christ and Christian Churches (and, much less so these days, Disciples of Christ) claim to find patterns for congregational worship in scripture—and only in scripture—asking about where one worships has been sort of a code-phrase that indicates

- ◆ our interest in the other person’s belonging somewhere to another church of our stripe, and
- ◆ a tacit presumption that the person we’re talking to feels the same way about biblical patternism as a basis for acknowledging what is true worship and what isn’t

My own deeply held worship values have for years led me to shy away from referring to church membership in terms of worshipping—worship is too important to be lost on thoughts of membership rolls. This reluctance also stems from an annoyance with in-house lingo in general, and also from a more strict definition of worship. I suppose this literalness makes me more of a conservative than many of my Restoration Movement siblings, which might surprise some of them! Being more conservative in this arena is also a categorization I’m very comfortable with.

In his book on worship, my grandfather Andy T. Ritchie, Jr., decried the lack of worshipful content in assemblies of the church: “How can worship with dimension be built when there are no hymns?” (In the term “hymns” he referred to textual content, unlike today’s common use of the word to mean that older, respected style that is something other than “contemporary.”) He listed songs about heaven (not hymns in any real sense) that constitute some churches’ complete song diets and contrasted them with the likes of “Holy, Holy, Holy,” “For the Beauty of the Earth,” and others (Andy T. Ritchie, Jr., *Thou Shalt Worship the Lord Thy God*, 1969).

I might mention here that our church in western NY does frequently worship—both through song and through the spoken word—but not everything we do is worship. It is a misappropriation of the term “worship” to apply it to the assembly as though the two were one and the same. “Where do you go to meet with other Christians on Sundays?” is a better question.

A truer response to the question “Where do you worship?” might be one or more of these:

1. I sometimes worship with the Main Street Church, because they inspire me. My church is East Side, but it doesn’t seem that we worship a lot there ... our strength is more in the horizontal plane.
2. Umm ... I really don’t worship much right now. I’m feeling distant from the God I believe in.
3. I tend to worship a lot in my car, on my commute to work.
4. My worship occurs fairly regularly as I walk from ____ to ____ and when I’m mowing the lawn (or riding my bike, or walking with my baby in the stroller, or working out on the stair-stepper, etc.).
5. Gotta tell you ... I have a lot of trouble actually worshipping in my church because of the leader’s salesmanlike demeanor. I’m really distracted, and I get most of my worship time elsewhere.
6. Among other places, I worship at the East Side Church. I’m so thankful that authentic worship is a part of every Christian gathering at East Side!

Is There Sacrifice in Worship?

“Lord of all, to Thee we raise this, our sacrifice of praise.”

So proclaims the “refrain” to an otherwise hymnic⁴ song familiar to many in various evangelical traditions: “For the Beauty of the Earth.” I probably sang it a hundred times in my growing-up years and with the dawning of adulthood began to wonder what “sacrifice” implied. I still sing the song sometimes and am planning to sing it again on Saturday, so I thought it was high time I probed its meaning a little more than I have previously.

“We bring the sacrifice of praise into the house of the Lord.”

That’s half of the text of a more contemporary song—probably 30 years old now—composed by Kirk Dearman in the not-so-grand tradition of “24/7” songs that have about 24 words repeated 7 times. The music didn’t strike me as particularly sacrificial or meditative when I first heard it, and it still doesn’t. It’s one of those opening songs that takes little effort and can be used to “sing ‘em in” (until you can get ‘em all quieted down for those ever-important announcements . . . you know).

I’ve never really explored thoroughly the notion of the *sacrifice* involved in praise, but I think it deserves a little thought—not because *songs* sometimes use the phrase or deal with the idea, but because sacrifice in worship or praise seems to be a concept found in *scripture*.

First, there’s the entire Old-Covenant sacrificial system. I don’t know about you, but when I hear the word “sacrifice,” I don’t think immediately of the loss caused to a household, or of the messy blood of a goat or a lamb. Through the centuries, the notion of “sacrifice” has been sanitized, but back when the practice was begun, it was no church ceremony.

The inspired writer of the letter to the Hebrews exhorts,

Through Him, then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God—that is, the fruit of our lips—acknowledging his name. And do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for God is pleased with such sacrifices.

In these two short “verses” (13:15-16), we have received two reasons—and in the NEW Covenant, no less!—to relate **praise** (Gk. *αινεσεως* / *aineseos*, sometimes translated “thank-offering”) and **sacrifice** (here, Gk. *θυσια* / *thysia*). Sacrifice, I have just learned, may also be translated “victim.” The lamb or other animal-offering of the Old Covenant, then, was the victim/sacrifice; these instructions to a group of Jewish Christians of the first century seem to carry forward, in some respect, the idea of sacrifice . . . transmuting the old notion into something more appropriate under the New Covenant.

And so I would ask myself and all of us Christian believers this question: what is it that we are *sacrificing* when we praise? What is our “victim”?

The notion of religious sacrifice is many-faceted and possesses a long history. I don’t claim any real handle on it, not adhering to the predeceasing Jewish religion that makes a practice of bloody sacrifices, not having ever offered a single such sacrifice, and not having pursued the matter with any sort of scholarly bent. (Cults, spiritist religions of the third-world, and satanic religion also sometimes include sacrifice, but that’s more than a little afield.) Considering the idea of sacrificed in worship seems worthwhile because of its frequent appearance in scripture, if for no other reason.

A blogger on hymns and Christian songs, writing about “Trust and Obey,” recently wrote about giving one’s entire life as a “sacrifice”:

The Christian life involves daily faith and obedience, exercised in many different situations. But there is an underlying commitment that provides a foundation for this. The Apostle Paul talks about it in Romans 12:1.

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God [because of all that God has done for you], that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.”

⁴ By definition, the presence of a refrain or chorus musically categorizes a song as other than “hymn.”

The Greek verb tense for “present” indicates it’s to be a once-for-all action. We are to yield ourselves to God as “living sacrifices,” forever and for all. That is what [the author] is referring to in [st. 4] of our hymn, when he says, “We never can prove the delights of His love / Until all on the altar we lay.” Then, hundreds of daily acts of faith and obedience grow out of that, as described in [st. 5].

– Robert Cottrill, <http://wordwisehymns.com/2011/03/28/trust-and-obey/>

In attempting to be circumspect about the Christian life, it’s helpful to apprehend Cottrill’s words on the Greek tense of the word “present”: a welcome freedom comes from not having to devise some way that every keystroke, every dish rinsed, every word, every mile driven, every test graded, every tooth brushed, and every bit of garbage carried to the curb is “worship.” Not to denigrate any of those actions! They are part and parcel of life, and the Christian believer’s life is no more lofty than anyone else’s. We need to have our heads in heaven but our feet on the earth, as someone⁵ has said.

Yet some days, it’s easier to think of more of my actions as sacrifice and as “worship” than others; whether you resonate with me on this or not, this very idea of sacrifice—whether it’s to be thought of as once-for-all or as continuous and all-pervading—is something to be contended with . . . in due time.

Let’s think next about the translation of a key phrase in Romans 12:1. Whatever the living sacrifice is or does, Paul says it becomes something.

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God [because of all that God has done for you], that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.” (NKJV)

The NKJV translation renders the Greek *logikan latreian* as “reasonable service.” Now, words are just words—*concepts* are more important—but words are still worth pursuing, and I question “reasonable.” The way I read it, “reasonable” is a downgrade of “logical.” In other words, “logical,” a more literal translation, would have constituted a more firm rendering. However, either “reasonable service” or “logical service” clearly improves on the more commonly heard “spiritual worship”: the term “spiritual” is as vague today as it is ubiquitous, and to use it in this passage is at best *wispy*, and at worst *misleading*.

By “wispy” I mean to imply that the idea that everything is worship unhelpfully ethereal (ethereally unhelpful?); in the use of “misleading,” I’m suggesting that this idea may lead us *away* from Paul’s inspired intent. The idea that the presentation of the Christian’s body is the sum total of “spiritual worship” weakens both the philosophy and the reality of Christian worship.

Here are a few varying translations of the expression at the end of Romans 12:1, with my commentary on the right.

NET, KJV, NKJV: ... <i>which is your reasonable service</i>	“Reasonable” is close enough to “logical” to be a reasonable approximation!
ESV: ... <i>which is your spiritual worship</i>	To the 21C mind, “spiritual” can suggest something Eastern and transcendental. Worse, the New Covenant word-concept “spiritual” is absent from this text.
NIV: <i>This is your spiritual act of worship</i>	The rendering “spiritual act” compels me, I’ll admit, but see above comment on the word “spiritual.” The NIV does better than the NASB with this phrase, implying the very sort of morphing from physical to spiritual that I infer from Paul. I think he was suggesting that the

⁵ The saying is attributed to Benedict and/or Augustine (whom I respectfully refuse to call “saint,” because that would imply a special status for them) and re-appropriated by many over the years.

	Christian’s life-service (sacrifice) becomes, in a way, “worship.” Also see comment on the BBE version below.
NLT: <i>This is truly the way to worship him</i>	The NLT translators often play fast and loose with texts in order to make things sound contemporary. This is no exception. This translation is no translation at all; in my opinion, it’s an ill-begotten, ill-fated, dynamic non-equivalent!
BBE: <i>... which is the worship it is right for you to give him</i>	The Bible in Basic English is a translation I’m not familiar with, so I looked up a few passages. It seems to do a pretty good job, in general, but this rendering, not unlike that of the NLT, is too loose for a Bible that purports to be a translation. It’s more of a commentating paraphrase. I don’t disagree with the import here, although I would add quotes around the word “worship,” but it’s nowhere near <i>translation</i> status: “it is right for you to give him” doesn’t appear in the text at all.
NASB: <i>... which is your spiritual service of worship</i>	Although I’m typically a champion of the NASB in terms of its literal renderings and careful translations, I think the Lockman Foundation missed the mark on two and one-half fronts here. Again, “spiritual” is not in this text at all. “Service” is, but “service of worship” would at a glance imply the presence of two words, and the single word is <i>latreian</i> . While “service” is a reasonable single-word translation of the Greek, it is not altogether sufficient to convey the concept, which may be why the NASB translators felt the need to take a further step in English. Unfortunately, they chose an institutionalized church-ese expression ne’er found or implied in the NC scriptures: “service of worship.” Brethren and cistern, there is no such Biblical animal as a “service of worship.” Translating to match the institutional status quo makes the NASB guys no better than ol’ King James’s men.

Whole-life Worship—An Unhelpful Concept

Introduced by a well-meaning young believer to some of David Crowder’s thoughts, I was recently reminded of how common the “whole-life worship” idea is. It has been assumed and/or advanced by countless Christian songwriters and authors, and is pervasive—not only in pop Christian culture, but also in some more reputable, and perhaps dated, Christian writers. A 1990 work of J.I. Packer, and his reference to Puritan interpretation, is referred to in this clearly well-intended, although overstated and often misstated, sermon transcript that I found in a quick search.

Another example: Mike Root’s *Spilt Grape Juice*, a 1993 look at the assembly, is one I believed to have traveled the no-worship, all-horizontal path. I never read it, but I quickly found a reviewer who differed with Root “on the subject of Godward, vertical praise being abrogated in the New Testament.” The reviewer acknowledged that “Worship in all of life” is Root’s mantra . . . and demurs, as I would.

It’s not as though whole-life worship is a bad idea, in essence, but two aspects cause me to take exception to its ramifications. First, speaking from a pragmatic, realistic point of view, the notion of giving oneself wholly to God at every moment is, at best, captivating but unattainable. I’m reminded of a most respected brother who, in a Christian musical enterprise in which we shared, was reluctant to arrange the Avalon song “Testify To Love” that used over-the-top expressions such as

“with every breath I take I will testify to love.” (Later, he politely gave in to filial pressure and did arrange it, but that’s beside the point.) These kinds of thoughts call us higher; on the other hand, they can depress us even as they expound on lofty, unattainable ideals.

For every women’s conference that encourages sisters to look at all the dishes and consider that each one washed is an act of worship ... for every Promise Keepers “totally sold out” and “go all out for God (and your wife and kids)” event ... for every youth function that has featured speakers encouraging youth to do every single thing for the glory of God, we could find 99 believers who’ve been *inspired* and then have nearly *expired* trying to live up to all that. Again, it’s a great idea, and one to which God seems to want us to aspire (but not to attain fully)—or else Rom. 12:1-2 and Col. 3:17 and 1 Cor. 10:31, etc., wouldn’t have been scribed. Essentially the “everything for God’s glory” as a *raison d’etre* is a high, worthy calling, but it is ultimately frustrating for us sinners, and it does not quite touch the actual idea of worship.

While I believe that (vertical) worship must not be confined to the assembly but, rather, should surface regularly—i.e., on *all* days of the week in the heart and voice of the Christian—considering *every* deed to be Christian worship is neither logically warranted nor helpful. This idea has the potential to leave many in its idealistic wake, and it also obscures the meaning of certain passages such as Romans 12:1.

There are also exegetical and doctrinal reasons to steer at least one lane away from “whole life worship” ideas. I once discovered this helpful passage from a somewhat unlikely source—a southern Restoration church bulletin that quoted the *Gospel Advocate*:

... much discussion has taken place about something called whole-life worship. Perhaps you have heard some describe the daily walk of a Christian as worship. What follows this description is an emphasis, which is correct in and of itself, on the spiritual sacrifice of living a godly life. Nothing could be closer to God’s will for man than to live our lives in such a way that everything we do in word or in deed is in the name of the Lord. We should live our lives in such a way that Christ — not ourselves — is seen in us (Galatians 2:20). Worship, either private or corporate, is not something that encompasses one’s whole life but is a specific spiritual event, an event with specific instructions to govern its observance and uniquely identified from all other activities and events of Christian life.

The misunderstanding comes with the mistranslation of some key scriptures in this discussion. The New International Version, for instance, translates the Greek word *latreuo* as “worship” in Romans 12:1. By this rendering, it would appear that the day-to-day service to God is, in fact, worship. Nothing could be further from the true meaning of this text. . . .

Christian life includes worship and service, and it’s not as though the two are unrelated, but the concepts are distinct. If we begin to think of our service *as* our worship, we forget what worship is. The converse is also true: if we begin to think of our worship *as* the sum of our Christian existence, we may effectively ignore the essence of living.

Personally, I need to attain to higher levels of devoted living and service to others. Even when I am at my husbandly and fatherly and householderly best, giving my words and actions to Jesus and being sacrificial and such, I may not be worshipping, nor need I be. Worship is something else, and it is something not discussed directly in Romans 12.. No, this passage deals with *living*—with the *sacrificed living* that becomes, in an utterly significant sense, worship-with-quote-marks. And in order to begin to grasp what the sacrificed Christian life is, I need to understand more of the history of sacrifice in the predeceasing Jewish religion.

Prior to the Egyptian captivity, Jacob/Israel exemplified sacrifice:

Then Jacob offered a sacrifice on the mountain, and called his kinsmen to the meal; and they ate the meal and spent the night on the mountain. (Gen. 31:54)

Prior to the great exodus, the Hebrews made a request of the Egyptians that referred to their desire to sacrifice:

Then they said, “The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Please, let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God, otherwise He will fall upon us with pestilence or with the sword. (Ex. 5:3)

Something about *sacrifice* seems to have been calling the Hebrews spiritually. What role did sacrifice play in the Hebrew religion, and how is it, or is it not, significant for us today?

A description in Exodus 24 of a sort of high-priest-originated, ceremonial worship—which I take in contradistinction to worship of the New Covenant—has Moses sprinkling sacrificial blood on an altar and over the people.

Later in Exodus, sacrifice is dealt with in chapters 8, 10, 12, 13, 20, 23, 30, and 34. And Leviticus and Numbers are filled with references to sacrifice. (No surprise there.)

As the period of the judges drew to a close, could it be that sacrifice was so uncommon (only mentioned once in the book of Judges) that Elkanah’s practice was, because it was at this point atypical, worthy of note?

Now this man would go up from his city yearly to worship and to sacrifice to the LORD of hosts in Shiloh. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests to the LORD there.

Here, as in the Genesis account of Jacob, I notice a curiosity: “sacrifice” apparently wasn’t total, because the humans ate the meat. (Hannah got a double portion!) And I wonder about this ... was the element of sacrifice, of *giving up something*, to be more conceptual or spiritual than physical?

In 1 Sam. 15:22, Samuel warns David that *it is better to obey than to sacrifice*. I have to wonder whether sacrifice had lost some meaning and had become a mere salve for the conscience. Psalm 51’s reticence (“You do not delight in sacrifice”) also deserves mention here, and in Hosea, God delights in loyalty rather than sacrifice (6:6).

Psalm 50 mentions the “sacrifice of thanksgiving.” Was something changing in the Hebrew religion? Or were the non-fleshy sacrifices assumed, alongside the animal ones, from the patriarchal era through the Mosaic one?

Famously, Elijah and the Baal prophets dealt with sacrifice (1 Kings 18). In this case, if indeed the “offering” is truly to be considered a sacrifice (sarcasm and conflict drip from the parchment-paragraphs of this story!), it was completely burned up. No humans ate the meat of the bull.

In Zephaniah 1:7, “the LORD has prepared a sacrifice.” Strange. Maybe this mention is metaphorical, speaking cryptically of the readiness for something to happen spiritually? In other words, to a Jewish reader who prepared sacrifices for a spiritual purpose, perhaps ascribing such preparation to God made the mind and heart expect something to happen.

Against the backdrop of the longstanding practice of Hebrew sacrifice appear Romans 12:1 and the whole of the Hebrews letter. Jesus offered Himself as the once-for-all sacrifice (Heb. 10:12), and there are implications for our lives (Heb. 10:26). Our “sacrifice,” metaphorically speaking and according to the writer of Hebrews, is the sacrifice of praise (Heb. 13:15, and cf. Psalm 50, above). The blood-symbolism is complete in Christ, and the need for repeated physical sacrifices is no more.

Paul personally exemplifies self-denial (e.g., Philippians 2:17; 3:7-8; 2 Timothy 4:6), and this seems related to personal sacrifice. After extensive treatment in the Romans letter of the Old way, which masterfully concludes with more discussion of the relationship between Jew and non-Jew, Paul doxologizes God and follows with this passage, which does not speak of worship *per se*, but which does speak articulately about the wholly devoted, sacrificial Christian life.

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is, logically/rationally speaking and by extension, your way to serve God.

A song I learned at camp asked this of ourselves: “Would you be poured out like wine upon the altar for me? Would you be broken like bread to feed the hungry?” Immature, we sang these words, and some of us even thought about them for a few moments, maybe ... but never really changing. As much as we might “understand” sacrificed life, it strikes me squarely that no one I’ve ever known really lives it out.

It seems that the primary New Covenant sacrifice is just this—the devoted life, “offered” acceptably to God. This type of sacrifice, of course, creates much less mess than knifing lambs and bulls and putting them on the fire ... but the wholly sacrificed life is much more likely to go unattended to. We may live three-quarters of a century of a Christian life without ever really being poured out ... offered ... laid down on the altar, as it were.

I make no claim to having given sufficient treatment to Old Covenant sacrifice. I merely suggest that there were a lot of sacrifices back then, and that sacrifice also plays an important role in the New Covenant, although it is now *sans* specially designated priests and blood and physical altars and such. Now, it appears to me that I am “called” by Jesus’ transcending sacrifice to do two things in response:

- ◆ “sacrifice” my spirit in worship and praise, vertically “loving God,” as it were
- ◆ consider my whole self to be “sacrificed” in life, serving others — and, by extension, serving God

In other words, I should 1) love the Lord my God, and 2) love my neighbor.

Perspectives in Romans 14

Caveat Lector: while I think Romans 14 (and I Cor. 8) were probably intended to illuminate daily living more than they were intended to apply to the Christian assembly, the sad fact is the assembly represents almost the totality of most Christians’ contact with each other. Resultantly, my thinking on these passages arises more out of experiences and insights around the assembly than around anything else in Christian experience. And this is why I’ve categorized this post under “assembly” as well as in two other classifications.

Once upon a Bible class, we studied from Romans 14 and referred to I Cor. 8, among other passages. The commentary—both from our prepared shepherd-teacher, and from those like me in the pew—was helpful and on target. I think our class approached the import of the text fairly well.

It strikes me, though, to comment here that in all my years as a Christian in various churches in several states, I have not once dealt with a bona fide application of the “stumbling block” principle of Rom. 14:13.

Now, I’m not claiming that I have a sense of even half of the problematic issues that elders deal with behind the scenes. But I don’t have my head in the sand, nor am I oblivious. In fact, there have been times that I’ve been the focus of someone else’s gripes. But not a single time has the complaining party been alleging much more than botherment or annoyance. It’s been about preference and opinion, not core doctrine, and no one’s faith has been at stake.

These topics brought to my wife's mind the wording of the late Chris Bullard, once the preacher we listened to weekly. The way Chris put it? We need to decide whether the issue is about to a) destroy or b) annoy before we make it a "stumbling block" issue.

Distractions for a Would-be Worshipper

What do dim projector bulbs, changed lyrics, altered harmonies, carelessly prepared slides, last-stanza organ variations, different leaders' personalities, poorly pitched songs, and bored congregants nearby have in common?

They all have the capacity to distract me from worshipping.

And what can I do about this? As my Delaware friend Judy once emphasized, nothing can really keep me from worshipping unless I let it. That's a hard lesson to learn. And it's an even harder one to apply.

Below are a few thoughts, then, of a would-be worshipper who was once remembering, and trying faintly to emulate, this older friend's expressed resolve to worship no matter what is going on around her. I wrote this prayer a few years ago, and the only ones who heard it at the time were God and I.

Despite slides reversed, despite distraction from leadership ineptitudes, and despite rhythmic pulling apart and inaccuracies, *how great Thou art*.

Despite awkward harmonizations and outright mistakes in the writing, despite un-great limitations of my voice, *You are great — a mighty fortress*.

Despite sorrow and negative feelings that are a result of Adam's, Eve's, and my choices, *it is well with my soul because of Your choice*.

Despite the distraction of missing words and expressions because someone wasn't paying attention, and despite the absence of underlying rhythmic feel, *now really is the time to worship*.

Despite the lack of beauty in my strained, impotent tenor and in the quasi-melody-only around me, *You are the Beautiful One ... the One to be adored*.

Despite my annoyance with bad songs that are thought of as good—poor construction that, in the hands of someone with a modicum of training could be better than passable—*all praises be to the King of kings. The Lord our God is omnipotent. He is wonderful*.

Truly and Spiritually Also Means Freely

I believe God delights when we worship according to His will. That will, though, nests in the fundamental pleasure He takes in His loving child's free expression. It is unfortunate that tradition, while helpful at times, has locked some of us in a playpen—a concocted collection of rules which God never set forth in any of His communication with humankind. These rules, imagined by sincere souls, inhibit free, childlike expression in worship.

Any sincere, adoring act of esteem shown to God will be heard and will please Him. It is time that we accepted this principle without always hastening to add a footnote about the absolutes that are in the Bible and about the dangers of following our own desires. (It is understood that the sincere heart spoken of here will be attentive to what is written.)

The silence of Scripture may generally be seen to be permissive, not restrictive. Where there is no injunction against something, it can be legitimately assumed that the thing is acceptable, when it is clearly in accord with the principles of a Spirit-filled life.

Going forward, with the presupposition that we have liberty to express ourselves to God truly in our spirits, what is our aim? Is there anything to which we can appeal in order to appraise our worship? *To pour our love out to God extravagantly* is a worthy goal in worship; spontaneity is also key to achieving viable and vibrant worship.

On the other hand, when we consider the Scriptures a "blueprint" which supposedly lays out a pattern for every Christian action, we presume that there is a Christian *Leviticus*, and we dismiss

innumerable passages in the New Covenant writings which reiterate that now, the basis of approaching God in good conscience is Jesus . . . not adherence to a list of laws.

Besides that it is contrary to the Scriptures, insistence on specific “authorization” for acts of worship robs God of pleasure in our unconstrained, growing, childlike efforts to love Him.

In the Hour of Trial: Having Been Transformed by Worshipping the Lord

When one is engaged over the long term in truly worshipping the Lord (John 4:24) and in contemplating His character, he is often *transformed* over that same period of time.

Witness our Elder Brother and Savior’s experience in the wilderness. One inference to be made is that Jesus spent those 40 days in deep meditation on His Father’s precepts—they did seem to be fresh on His mind when the direct temptations came:

“A person does not live only by eating food. True life comes from the words that God speaks.” (NCV)

“Worship the Lord your God, and only Him. Serve Him with absolute single-heartedness.”
(*The Message*)

How can **we** be ready for being tried severely? How can we ever expect to endure the worst Satan has to throw at us?

A devil-can-sit-on-a-tack attitude just won’t suffice. Can you imagine Jesus just biding the time in the deserted places, chucking rocks across the sand, and waiting? During that crucial time in His earthly existence, Jesus was preparing Himself or, more correctly, was *being prepared by* the Spirit. He was completely mindful of the Father, totally absorbed in His will, supremely conscious of His existence and His character. Our Example was not bored! He was constantly occupied with the ever-strengthening contemplation of the God and Father of us all.

We too are so loved—and can be so nurtured by—the Spirit of God that He will prepare us for sore trials. He will see to it that we have ample opportunities to worship Him fully, spiritually, and truly. He will manifest Himself to us regularly, strengthening us with His immanence.

Our God is such a God that He will carry us through periods of spiritual fasting, of barrenness, of utter isolation. He will be *with us* then, perhaps in a more recognizable way than at other times. He will not leave us alone.

Have you been subjected to seemingly undue temptations lately? Have you been in a wasteland? Perhaps you’ve already emerged, and you know how your life’s experiences with God prepared you to withstand the fiery darts of the Enemy. But even if you happen to be in the middle of the desert, even as you read this, know that you are really **not** alone. (“Footprints”!)

God is surprising! Worship may not have a noticeable, immediate, dramatic effect on you. But, if not now, you will in His time discover how you have been transformed into His nature. God knows you thoroughly and knows just exactly the facets of His character you need most desperately to experience in order to persevere through sore trials.

May we have eyes to see Him. And may we not be satisfied with just “getting by”; but may we, like the Risen One, overcome most powerfully in the full comprehension of the nature of God.

Terms for the Place We Gather

Most of the Christians from my heritage call it an “auditorium,” and I’m pretty sure that term developed partly out of a desire not to be like other religious groups. The term is also clearly related to listening or *auditing*; for me, auditing is not a terrific idea to be connecting with the Christian assembly—an event that should be actively participated in by all. Listening is good, but we are not there primarily to audit; we are there to encourage and to worship and to share and to learn and to contemplate, together with the saints. We are gathered in order to *participate*.

Ever call the auditorium a “sanctuary”? This term may connote a full-blown denominational institution, but has its good points. “Sanctuary” has the connotation of “safe place” and place “set apart.”

These days, a church that builds a new building may call it a “worship center” or “celebration center.” Labels such as this are limiting at best, or even inaccurate, although they do convey the sense of worship’s priority. Not all that goes on in the room is worship, even in the non-literal sense (please refer to earlier sections titled “The Priority of Worship” 1 and 2), nor should it be. And if we make it crystal-clear by our “Celebration Center” sign that we are only to be *celebrating* in that room—not *confessing* or *lamenting* or *asking God for guidance* or any number of other, less “upbeat” activities—the terminology sends a message to someone who doesn’t feel like celebrating on a given day.

Terms aside—we all know that the place we gather is not as important as either a) *that* we gather, or b) *what we do* when we gather. Leaders, expand your consciousness of the place where you lead. Allow for a broad range of possibilities when the believers are together there.

Other Terms

I encourage the definition of some terms such as “old songs” and “contemporary,” if and where such terms are used. A new song to my church may not be new to a church three miles away; the same song will be “old” to our church in five years, though another church may not hear it for 20 more years. Is “Jesus Is Lord” a contemporary song? “Here I Am To Worship”? “Holy, Holy, Holy”—which may have a new lyric line or chorus that’s made it even more popular since Matt Redman or Michael W. Smith recorded it? I find that the term “old song” means something slightly different, in terms of chronology, to just about every person who uses it.

What do you mean when you say you are going to have a “devotional”? For some, that term means a sequence of songs and prayers and/or scripture readings. For others, it is a mini-Sunday-morning set of activities, including a “sermonette”; and for still others, “devotional” is equated to the “devotional talk” or sermonette itself.

The words “worship” and “praise” carry specific meanings in one way for some, almost opposite meanings for others, and the two words are essentially synonymous for yet others. Some seem to have very little idea that not everything we do in the assembly is *worship* (nor should it be). . . or that worship can and should be an activity for believers to engage in outside of the assembly.

Though I think there is less a definition issue with *praise*, this word may also connote different things for different believers. For some, praise may be limited to chipper, boisterous expressions that celebrate God’s acts, but for others, it may also include more sober expressions that emanate more from the purposeful will than from the happy mood.

Perhaps being absolutely linguistically correct in our usage of such words is not so important as being consistent and intentional with our use of them.

The Term “Praise”

Is anyone else ever grammatically bothered by the use of the word “praise” as though it is a solitary object? I sometimes hear invitations for people to share “prayer requests or praises”? Our preacher (whom I prefer to refer to as “preacher,” since that is his primary role in my life, as opposed to “minister” or “pastor” . . . no offense intended to this man of the cloth who has been in my home, but he’s certainly not “reverend”!) Peter has used the term “praise point,” and I happen to appreciate that phrasing.

Moreover, what about the suggestion that one’s life, or one’s words, or something, can be “a praise” to God? Not really. Praise is not a thing in that sense, is it?

Through Him, then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God—that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. (Heb. 13:15)

Enter His gates with hanksinging and his courts with praise. (Ps. 100:4)

Now, our God, we thank you and praise your glorious name. (1 Chron. 29:13)

Seems to me that praise is more a verb than a noun, although there is an “abstract noun” sense in which the word can certainly be used. But praise is not an item, so we can’t legitimately say that my “A” on a test is “a praise.”

More significant, though, is the call: regardless of off-base terminology, I should praise Deity more than I do!

Praise and Worship

Nearing completion of this manuscript, I was curious about something, so I searched through the entire document and found *no* instance of the phrase “praise and worship.” While that doesn’t give me particular concern, I thought I might be wise to include something on this—if for no other reason, because someone might search for it because it’s so ubiquitous, then might end up reading more!

I remember that a Missouri music colleague once made a comment about the music in her church—to the effect that she “just hated this ‘praise and worship’ music.” Being a choral person from a high-church tradition, with a fair education and loads of experience, she certainly was not consciously denigrating the notions of praising and worshipping God. The overuse of such terms and phrases causes them to take on lives of their own, though, so clarification and thought are in order.

A blog reader once commented that not all congregational singing is worship, and he is of course correct. In fact, it seems to me that much less of congregational singing is worship than most people assume. Simply because it’s done in a time of “congregational worship” doesn’t mean it *is* worship. Not everything done in the congregational assembly is worship, nor should it be. Worship, I believe, should get top billing, and the horizontal aspects stream from worship.

There is a distinction between the word “worship” and the word “praise,” and I think it’s a helpful delineation that the former has more to do with adoration of God and God’s character; the latter has more to do with God’s acts and abilities. However, I’d caution that the English words we use are limited. Hebrew and Greek words for such concepts are more specific and varied; I think we often miss the concepts because of relying solely on the English words. Case in point: *sebazomai* is a relatively rarely used word in the New Covenant scriptures, but it may have specific implications where it is used. *Latreuo* is not *proskuneo*, and *proskuneo* is not *doxa*, and *doxa* is not *eulogeo*, and *eulogeo* is not *leitourgia*.

One or more of those might match the English “praise” fairly well, but not completely. An English word might match the Greek *proskuneo* fairly well, but not completely. You get the point. Hebrew, from the little I know of it, has even more nuances. I remember that there are nine or ten words translated “praise” in the Old Covenant scriptures!

“Praise and worship” is not a new thing. It’s millennia older than the contemporary “praise and worship” movement. I’m not meaning to denigrate the relatively large outpouring of God-oriented songs in the last 10, 20, or 30 years. But I twitch a little when an under-informed, classically trained “minister of music” expresses a preference for a choir offering over a “worship song.” The church universal has been praising for centuries, and those who believe in God have been worshipfully aware of His presence since Adam. “Worship song,” then, is not a category that includes only songs written since Michael W. Smith wrote “El Shaddai.”

Assembly activities should be labeled aptly, toward more thoughtful, meaningful participation in every activity. If it’s praise, let us praise with abandon. If it’s speaking to one

another, let's do that with thoughtfulness, sensitivity and love. If it's worship, let's do that with humility, reverence, and genuine passion.

“Worship music” is a label not limited to the past 20 or 30 years. (If it weren't for Michael W. Smith and Twila Paris & Graham Kendrick & Marty Nystrom and such, who have been around for nearly 20 years, we could have a whole sub-generation that thinks worship music was invented only in the last 5 or 10 years!)

I usually make it a goal to lead in our congregation in such a way that the above things (and more) occur with distinction, thought, awareness, and spiritual effect in as many as possible.

It's Worship and Service (Not “Worship Service”)

I willingly admit to being a language person. I think a lot about words and how they communicate.

Toward understanding and acting out the words *worship* and *service*, may I make the suggestion that we move away from using the term “worship service”? This expression tends to obscure the distinction of two distinct aspects of Christian activity, relegating what should be a dynamic and transforming occurrence to the realms of ritual ceremonies like “funeral services” and school graduations. Since “worship services” typically (and rightly) contain much that is not actually worship, the meaning of true worship may be lost through the use of this contrived term.

Essentially, worship is one thing, and service is another. The two are certainly related: clearly, a devout worshipper of God will manifest a life of service to others; stated in the converse, a servant's heart and actions tend to emanate from close, vertical communion with the Servant Master. But service and worship are distinct concepts, and the less we use the illogical, unbiblically concatenated, fabricated term “worship service” to refer to the Christian gathering or assembly, the better!

We might say that “vertical” worship (Greek *proskuneo*) arises out of horizontal service (Greek *latreuo*), but also, *latreuo* can arise out of *proskuneo*. They just go together, chicken-or-egg discussions aside! Though I believe *proskuneo* is prioritized higher by Jesus (in the stating of the 2 commandments), I doubt that over-comparison of the two will net us much; the point is that in the devoted heart, both worship and service will occur.

Please consider the following terms:

Prayer service
Praise service
Funeral service
Graduation service
Preaching service
Song service
Revival service
Devotional service
(and the most common of all ...)
Worship service

Perhaps you could add more to the list. I would ask this: what does the word “service” in each of the above word-pairings suggest/connote? After you answer that question for yourself, perhaps you would, with me, engage in a three-step process:

7. **Elucidate** by clarifying the core meanings of the words “worship” and “service.”
8. **Gravitate** to the intentional, more accurate uses of each word.
9. **Eliminate** (gradually) inappropriate uses of the two words.⁶

⁶ Please see Appendix A, “Worship, Service, and the Christian Assembly” for a more thorough treatment of the terms “worship” and

By “elucidate,” I mean to clarify the core meanings, e.g., of the words “worship” and “service.” In the second guideline, I hope to suggest gravitating toward more intentional, more accurate uses of both words. And by “eliminate,” I indulge in fanciful dreaming: that by the end of my lifetime we might eliminate inappropriate uses of such erroneously concatenated terms as “worship service.”

Of course, if your preconceived ideas on the connotation of “service” aren’t anything like my preconceived ideas, then you won’t dream along the same lines at all. :-)

Worship and Service 2: Further Delineation of Terms

We are conditioned to think that we have worshipped merely because we have found ourselves physically located in a place in which worship rituals have occurred.

Nonsense.

We have worshipped when and only when our spirits have paid homage, have adored . . . have magnified God’s Being. Worship occurs independent of Sunday morning activities that are customarily associated with worship of the saints. Those activities may help, or they may hinder.

If we find more Biblically appropriate ways to describe Christian meetings (other than calling them “worship services,” that is), we will come to understand more and more the nature of *all* the components of said gatherings—worship, “family business,” service, and all the rest.

One of the problems found in calling our assembly a “service” is the connotation of a set, ritualized program such as that which often characterizes funerals and weddings. While there certainly is meaning in those occasions, it is a different type. It is advantageous to move away from facile programs and procedures and toward open, flowing adoration of Deity that allows for both spontaneity and the personalities of the worshippers.

When we label an assembly a “worship service,” it seems to me that we crystallize all the heart, all the variety, all the individuals, the entire dynamic—and all the Spirit, really—into a hardened, well-defined mass of programmed *stuff*. The worship is lost in the list. It becomes a liturgy rather than a living, vibrant experience in the adoring, intimate relationship of creature and Creator. The *meaning* is effaced by the *event*.

Can “worship service” ever be a helpful label? I suppose so. It is in some ways appropriate to think of our worship activities as “serving” God—not because He needs what we can give, but because we strain to bless Him in some way, to do something for Him. In a limited sense, our worship is “service” or ministry to God. But it is better, as a general rule, to use the terms distinctly: **Worship** is the spirit-response to God that often is manifest by speaking praiseful acclamations, singing songs of adoration to God, and humbly communing with Him. **Service** is the things we do for others, the actions of sacrifice and compassion and ministry on God’s behalf. There is a connection with God in each case — and some overlap of the concepts—but the more we grow to understand the distinction, the clearer the twofold Christian life-pattern (love the Lord your God, love your neighbor) will become.

New Covenant Worship vs. the Typical Church of Christ Assembly

I find that the Church of Christ (and the Independent Christian Church) has traditionally made less-than-valid assumptions about the New Covenant teaching on congregational worship.

And I’ve recently been seeing anew that the 19C American Restoration Movement leaders were even more interested than I thought in shucking denominational trappings. Such passion for moving away from human inventions—a passion I share!—would naturally lead a movement to look ardently for lists and blueprints and requirements and laws among the New Covenant writings, wouldn’t it? No Calvinism, no Baptist doctrine, no synods or enforcements of associations, no creeds — no superimposed, divisive doctrinal statements. Only scripture!

But when ya git ta lookin' (I'm writing this while in Arkansas), there's so little found in scripture about assembly protocols . . . so little that unequivocally, specifically relates to what God wants of His people when they're gathered. 1 Cor. 14 gives us a bit, but Eph. 5 and Col. 3 really don't, despite the protestations of many of my RM siblings who look to those brief passages out of context to support preconceived ideas. It would be easier if He had specified more what we were/are to do together on Sundays. (Or would it?)

Although I am interested in etymologies in general, when I challenge the a-biblical term "worship service," I emphasize not the derivation of the term but the ramifications and implications of what I believe is an errant concept: I suspect that the term "worship service" prods some of us further down the path of thinking the inspired writers of the New Covenant documents intended to dictate specific orders and "acts" and such. And yet there is so little written about the assembly!

Thinking of the activities of assembled Christians as a "service" relates, for me at least, to the human invention of "five acts of worship." Since we can find no such list of "five acts," I think we may rightly question whether God has many specific expectations around those five activities.

Some have objected that a Christian should not perform two "acts of worship" simultaneously. Years ago, I remember reading what I consider to be the seriously misguided opinion of a rather strict-minded elder statesman on this (and I can nearly quote verbatim, because the silliness of this wording has stuck in my memory for more than a dozen years): "Not only should a Christian not sing and participate in the Lord's Supper simultaneously, but such is a gross corruption and perversion of both acts of worship." This kind of narrow thinking originates in sincerity, I think, but its off-base legalism is evident. If we think we must do this, this, this, this, and that, we tend to want to see the things discretely—as items to be checked off—rather than as the integrated responsiveness of an adoring heart toward his benevolent, worthy God.

We in Christendom generally know what we mean when we say "worship service," but I suspect that that thing—the stuff we identify as "worship service"—is an inherently flawed thing. Therein lies my problem with the term: it belies an errant assumption that there is an established (whether by God or men) order to be followed. The more we use the term "worship service," the more we pump up the balloon and let it hover over us.

I wonder how many issues would dissipate if we relaxed into a more biblical view of the assembly, without the smoke-colored glasses that interpose a kind of hazy lens—the entity known as the "service" or "ceremony," complete with its liturgical expectations.

A Bad Sunday

Today was a really bad Sunday. Caveat lector: this installment is a rant. Skip it if you tend to be annoyed or offended by strongly critical thoughts.

Because of scheduling, we were unable to be with our church, and we instead visited a church we had last visited about two years ago. I'm sad to say that this church appears to have regressed in its mindset. Or maybe we just wanted to see more when we were last there, and it wasn't there at that time, either.

A gentleman has apparently taken over the Bible classes and sermons and is functioning, more or less, as the church's hireling . . . when they had not previously been encumbered by a staff minister. This new guy is a transplant from the South, and his drawl was equaled by his detrimental speech-slurring.

Much worse than his manner was the content of his sermon, which was stuck in the mire of yesteryear. Ostensibly he was preaching out of John 4. (When he announced the text, noting carefully [3-4x] that he was reading out of the New KJV, I knew what was coming.) Despite the fact that the text concerns worship, he didn't speak an ounce about worship. Somehow, as certain Church of Christ preachers are inclined, he got the topic of *obedience* out of "worship in spirit and truth." Brethren and cistern, obedience just ain't there. (Not to mention that obedience, in this old line of thinking, means "do the assembly like *I* think you should, and like *my tradition* says it should

be,” not “be obedient to the Lord God.”) The true worship of God in the realm of the spirit would seem to be the topic here, not “doing things according to patterns” that you or I might find.

Now, we could discuss what is meant by *en pneumati* (“in spirit” ... I think I recall the correct form of the Greek there), and I don’t claim to know. But I know enough to know that “in spirit and truth” doesn’t mean “an attitude of mind,” as was asserted today. The mere fact that the mind was brought into the discussion above the soul or spirit belies an emphasis on human (il)logic over God’s interaction with the human spirit.

Somehow this poor excuse for a John-4 sermon made it all the way from *worship* (not really) to *false teaching* (other people’s, not his own) to the *Lord’s Supper* (as ritual, not as meaningful memorial) to *circumcision* (huh?) to *authority* and *obedience* (whew!). I have no idea how the connections were made, but we were told that worshipping in spirit and truth was equivalent to adhering to the “word of the Lord” (read: “the word of us”). It’s just not the same thing. This old party line is just plain dumb.

This was no study; it was a lame series of disconnected ramblings parroted from mealy-mouthed, mean-spirited preachers of the past. Logical loopholes were in evidence. Careless applications abounded. It was false teaching, if you ask me, and he had even spent time decrying false teaching among others.

It wasn’t just the objectionable, presumptuous manner of the sermon and the Bible class. No, indeed. Perhaps even more upsetting was the fact that—on a day in which the sermon came from a text on worship, no less!—there was not an ounce of worship content to be found anywhere. (Actually, I can’t say I attended to the brief prayers much. Could be that someone said, “Hallowed be Your name” once, or maybe muttered a “thank You.”) The songs we sang were—count ‘em—*three* in number. I think liturgical Catholics sing more than this. We sang these:

Sing and Be Happy (before communion)

Sing to Me of Heaven (before the sermon)

When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder (after the sermon)

That was the sum total of the congregational involvement. I suppose at least two of those songs have a place in congregational life once a year or so. (Personally, I don’t like making God out to be a country schoolmarm calling the roll, but some find value that song.) Regardless, there’s not an ounce of worship in any of the three.

All of this made it all the more sweet to share deeper thoughts of the Lord with our Mark study group later that day. After all this superiorist ranting, I want to be quick to add that I know I don’t have a handle on things all the time. For instance, I just don’t understand contextually the passages (middle of Mark 9 through the middle of ch. 10) we were attempting to deal with in the study.

This I know: Jesus’ life and teachings were unique.

This I trust: He was the Son of God and is the risen, reigning Lord.

This I fall short of daily: following Him on the Way.

Is There Worship in This?

Not everything done in a Christian assembly is worship, despite the misbegotten umbrella term “worship service.” When the saints get together, various activities may be a part of the meeting, and rightly so. Some activities--both private and corporate--do tend to foster true worship (*proskuneo*) in our hearts, but not necessarily all.

In the Campbell-Stone tradition of churches, a legacy list exists that is probably as ill-conceived as the term “worship service.” Many of us came up knowing the list of Five Acts of Worship. Nevermind that there were variations on the list. (Hmmm. Is it *preaching* or *listening to the*

supposedly articulated Word of God that qualifies for The List?) We were instructed, and taught by example, that five things, and five things **only**, were authorized as corporate acts of worship.

Aside: A hermeneutic of authorization, set over against *fear of doing anything not expressly authorized by God*, no longer seems adequate to me. While some attempt (operative word: attempt!) to do those things God specifically instructs them to do, refraining from things He appears to be silent about, I have learned not to trust “arguments from silence” and have become generally comfortable with a bit more open view of God’s will. This doesn’t mean I’m a liberal—far from it. I’d say that, in this context, I’m a different kind of conservative.

Now, I learned early on—owing to decent parental and grandparental heritage!—that worship is much more than a list, and more than performance of activities associated with said list. Yet it serves a purpose, I think, to consider various activities that frequently are a part of congregational assemblies. Ponder these actions/media and the essence of each:

- ◆ Singing . . . sometimes worshipful, sometimes exhortative or instructional
- ◆ Praying . . . sometimes worshipful, sometimes petitionary or confessional
- ◆ Pouring expensive perfume on Jesus’ feet and wiping them with hair . . . adoringly worshipful, sacrificial, vulnerable
- ◆ Preaching sermons . . . mostly exhortatory/didactic, sometimes worshipful
- ◆ Listening to sermons . . . sometimes meditative & worshipful, introspective
- ◆ Observing the Lord’s Supper . . . sometimes edifying, sometimes introspective, sometimes worshipful
- ◆ Speaking praise-filled thoughts . . . worshipful, with an exhortation element present
- ◆ Meditating on His grace . . . worshipful w/elements of introspection & self-examination
- ◆ Serving others . . . edifying, perhaps evangelistic, redemptive, and, indirectly, perhaps worshipful
- ◆ Sharing information about illnesses of church members . . . caring, merciful, probably not worshipful *per se*
- ◆ Contributing money . . . depending on the person, perhaps worshipful, sacrificial
- ◆ Calling a sister to discuss what God’s been doing in our lives this week . . . edificational and worshipful, if the focus is on GOD, calling attention to His goodness

The above list may help in showing how the traditional *acts of worship* fit in with a more adequate concept of worship. The list is certainly not exhaustive; I could not begin to provide a full description of the realities present in each *act* I named. Worship is no simple thing. It defies analysis in terms of checklists of things to do. Much better to worship than to discuss worship, anyway!

And yet, I like to discuss it, too. What about you? What could you add to the list?

Choosing Public Leaders: No Gifts, Please

Two Pauline passages, combined with church history, appear to point to male spiritual leadership in certain church activities. *Women* generally do the tough stuff in churches like caring for crying babies, fixing food for potluck dinners and families in need, and deep-cleaning the restrooms. But if a man is to be considered an active Christian, it is assumed that he will at least sometimes lead publicly. When I say “lead publicly,” I am speaking primarily of leading musical worship, leading congregations in spoken prayers, reading scripture, teaching groups of adults, and making announcements.

Sometimes I’m caused to wonder how certain people took on certain roles in certain churches. Is *desire* the only qualification to lead? It’s almost as though we discourage consideration of true gifting in selecting church leaders at times—perhaps thinking it contributes to elitism if only the quote-unquote gifted lead in church. Why not just let anyone do it? Then we could “keep it

real,” dude. More people can relate to it if it doesn’t seem as if the leader is any better than you, right?

I would affirm that *not every man is by nature a public leader*. Some have more natural giftings in these areas than others. And the churches ought to recognize these capabilities when choosing leaders for the assembly. Those who actually can *lead* should be entrusted with those roles! (Did that really need to be said?)

It is not becoming for men with speech impediments, obvious nervousness, or overwhelming shyness to be used regularly in public roles. It just doesn’t work. These non-gifted men dread speaking publicly at all, and they are pushed into it by the momentum of legacy. And the whole church (those who aren’t asleep—or falling in that direction) is embarrassed when publicly inept men are paraded, week after week, in front of crowds of saints in the pews. We’re eager for the stumbling reader to be finished, and of course, we hear no voice of God in the reading, because we are focused more on the stumbling than on the content. We couldn’t hear the mumbling prayer anyway, so it was a waste of time. Or the halting manner of speech was distracting. Or the monotone voice was flat-out boring. Or the pitch of the song was a half-octave low, or two steps too high, and the sopranos screeched, and the teenagers giggled, and everyone knew that the worship leader had no idea what he was doing . . . which begs the question of why he was doing it in the first place!

These less publicly “ept” men are not lesser Christians, of course. They just have different kingdom areas in which they should be working. Perhaps the problem is our inordinate emphasis on assembly roles, over and above other roles.

It might take a paradigm shift of royal proportions to make non-publicly-gifted men, their wives, and all who respect them comfortable with their *not* being asked to lead publicly. I don’t expect to see this shift in my lifetime—even if Jesus does not return before I’m eighty (which I hope He does)—but I’d love it if I were wrong.

The Sabbath—Not a Christian Doctrine

I would like to state clearly that this essay will be about an *abiblical* doctrine. That doctrine is that of the “Christian Sabbath.” In order to wax pugilistic with this all-too-common teaching that dances glibly around the ring, I will list some facts without much explanatory comment. Consider each one a jab, or a hook—or a roundhouse knockout punch.

1. “Sabbath” is by definition Saturday, the Seventh Day.
2. Neither Father nor Son is ever documented as having rested on Sunday.
3. Neither Father nor Son is ever documented as having blessed Sunday.
4. No law was ever given to enforce the keeping of Sunday as “Sabbath.” (In fact, no laws of the nature of the Ten Commandments were given, period.)
5. The New Testament nowhere forbids work to be done on Sunday; no penalty is provided for Sunday’s “violation”; no blessing is promised for Sunday’s observance; and no regulation is given as to how Sunday ought to be observed.
6. Sunday is never in scripture called the Christian “Sabbath”; it is never called a rest day; it is never even unquestionably called the “Lord’s Day.”
7. Neither God, Jesus the Messiah, nor inspired men ever said one word in favor of Sunday as a sanctified or holy day. No sacred title is applied to it.
8. The Roman Catholic institution transferred the thinking from Saturday to Sunday. According to a catechism document, this occurred because Christ rose from the dead on

a Sunday, and the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles on a Sunday. These provide a reasonable basis for moving away from Saturday observance, to be sure, but why did the Catholic Church feel it could or should make this new law that Sunday is now the Sabbath? Because of the “plenitude of that divine power which Jesus Christ bestowed upon her,” it is said.

I would like personally to support the notion that Sunday is indeed a special day in the Christian church. I do believe Sunday should be special. I am no Seventh-Day Adventist or any other kind of Seventh-Day advocate. I believe in Paul’s message to the Galatians, certain messages of Hebrews, etc.: the New Covenant has rendered the Old obsolete and of no current effect. I believe there should be Christian gatherings on Sunday, and on every Sunday except one or two in my entire life, when I wasn’t sick, I have been part of one or two such gatherings. I believe we should remember the Lord Christ’s rising, and I believe that that occurred on Sunday (even though the scriptures aren’t explicit about the exact time). I also believe that the removal of worship gatherings from Saturday to Sunday is entirely appropriate, but this supposition comes more from informed conjecture than from scriptural fiat.

And now, in support of the Sabbath principle (but not of the Jewish law): We need rest. I need rest. (I worked 70+ hours last week.) God wanted the Jews to have a regular rest day. It’s probably a good idea for me to set aside some time these days, too. That is my prerogative, as I believe it’s a good idea during a particular week/day, and Sabbath is not — repeat **not** — a law God has continued under the New Covenant.

Invite me to consider more, or even more *regular*, rest if you sense that I need it. But do not tell me that Sunday is the Sabbath. Do not tell me I can’t stack wood or unload the dishwasher or mop the floor or lift my horse out of a ditch or change my oil in the afternoon or (gasp) catch up on a couple hours of work, in order to make my Monday feel a little less crazed. Do not tell me I can’t do something meaningful on a Sunday afternoon because it violates some ethereal, legacy-notion of Sabbath .

Sabbaticals

In tacit, largely unwitting deference to the original practice required by the Lord God, and secondarily, to the practice of the Jews and some Christians, many institutions of higher learning provide for sabbatical rest. As with some other Old Testament-derived injunctions, in my view, the principle is more important than the perpetuation of the exact method. People need rest and refreshing, but not necessarily on the same, weekly schedule.

Should leaders in the assembly be given sabbaticals? At least two benefits might be seen:

the opportunity to infuse the assembly with the freshness that comes from the leadership of others

the opportunity for the leader to gain a perspective from the pew

What it feels like to be led during this or that activity may well have a positive effect on the leader’s capabilities when he is leading again. For those churches that use the same musical leader most or all of the time, I might suggest a sabbatical of one Sunday every two months, or one month of every six. The church will benefit, and the leader may benefit even more directly by seeing things from a different vantage point.

Shepherds as Public Leaders

Just as I do not believe that deacons must be leaders (some areas of deacon-type service do not require leadership “gifts”), I do not believe that every spiritual shepherd must be a public leader. Effective shepherding structures may well have each shepherd with a sub-flock, as opposed to considering the shepherds collectively, as though they are all “over” the entire flock.

However, surely a shepherd will have something to offer the gathered saints from time to time. I think it is important to use the shepherds to speak words of admonishment, words of response to lessons and scriptures, and words of worship.

If the shepherds are not able to lead musically and are not naturally inclined along the lines of public leadership, they still might be given opportunities to share orally. It is important that the congregation actually be *led* by its spiritual leaders, and that includes influence in the assembly. By all means, don't let it be only the song leader, the preacher, and the guy who makes announcements doing all the public stuff.

Announcements, by the way, when they spring from the heart and voice of a caring shepherd, can be transformed into more than mere church business: the sharing of such information can powerfully unite a gathered family of believers when the communication is handled by a genuinely spiritually oriented shepherd, or by any sensitive "announcer" who has the pulse of the church in his heart.

Servant Leaders

As we consider leading in the assembly, let us never forget Jesus' abiding principle of servant leadership.

It may go without saying, but I am saying it anyway: Those in public leading roles should never be thought of as having positional authority; nor should they manifest traits of exertion of force because of the roles they fill. Rather, they should be known as servants of the Lord and servants of His people. Leaders are those who work, who "get their hands dirty" doing things for the Kingdom.

Some have particular gifts for public, "up-front" leading, but these roles are best filled by those who *serve*, regardless of the locus of that service.

"The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not this way among you . . . the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve."

What Impacts the Assembly Experience?

One Sunday morning, before I led in the assembly, I wrote this meditation.

Today's corporate worship and edification will be a function, to an extent, of my planning.

Today's corporate worship and edification will also be a function, in a different sense, of the frames of mind and spirit in which the saints enter the hall. Will we be ready to stand in the throne room? Will we be malleable? Will we be inspired by community? Convicted by God of the need to change? Influenced by words of songs and scripture toward loftier vertical and horizontal concepts and realities?

Today's corporate worship and edification will be influenced, to whatever extent all of us allow, by the Essence (Spirit) of God. I, for one, hope for a heightened sense of community as we consider coming together to praise collectively with such expressions as those above.

God, be with us.

Ding-ding

Even weeks after the closing night for the musical *Meet Me in St. Louis*—a delightful, innocuous show for which I was privileged to direct the pit orchestra in our little town—I couldn't get the tunes out of my head for weeks. I have often reminded myself of the trolley song. "Clang, clang, clang went the trolley!" (Ding-ding went my head.)

One Friday night time after the musical, we were watching a Charlie Gibson special on the oil scenario in the country and the world. At some point, just before or after a commercial break, I heard a once-familiar "ding-ding" sound.

It took me several seconds to realize what it was, and why it registered on me. Do you know?

It was the sound you used to hear when you drove up to a gas pump. You would drive over the black cable that hid the signal tripper, and the bell would ring inside the mechanic's bay, and the attendant would come out to give you "full service." (These days, "full service" means "I take your money and pump your gas." A long time ago, it meant washing the windshield and checking your oil, too. And your tire pressure! Anyway. . . .)

I think you'd have to be my age or older to have heard this first-hand. Or maybe these "dinging" devices lasted longer in other parts of the country. I was intrigued by the inclusion of this sound-byte in the TV special and wonder just how much thought went into it. Were they intentionally targeting an aging population, or was it a simple-minded nostalgia?

I also wonder how many things we do in church register on only a segment of the population, and whether we are intentional about those inclusions. Do we realize it when a method, a song, a phrasing is meaningful only to those who used to hear such things long ago when "full service" was in vogue? Do we ever do things that are more nostalgic than intentionally meaningful?

Meaning: In Beholders' Eyes

Do we think He just wanted to force us into a habit? Do we really, truly think He would ask us to get together weekly, merely for the sake of ritual?

No sane Christian would answer "yes." Why, then, saints, do we persist in appearing that we are into ritual more than we are into meaning?

The topic of meaning in the Christian assembly is of high significance. ("Let not many presume to become teachers" comes to mind, but I have virtually no fear of divine retribution for leading people astray here!) My concern is only that those in planning, guiding, and leading roles act with more sincerity and purpose . . . for the sake of God.

Sincerity is, to some degree, in the eye of the congregant. I remember distinctly, when listening to some discussion of a political debate a few years ago, a feeling of incredulity that two intelligent relatives could emerge with such radically different perceptions. Based on their respective biases, the debaters' points registered differently on my relatives, and they viewed the outcome differently. Similarly, one Christian may find a given leader dignified, effective, and spiritual (whatever that is); another auditor may experience the same leader as boring, uninvested, and ritualistic.

Yet we can surely do better in our leading . . . surely no one in the pews or chairs should be left thinking we are just "going through the motions" when we are leading prayers or reading scripture aloud, for instance. I recall once asking a worship leader friend to read from a Max Lucado chapter on Easter morning. My friend did so with great effect, with reverence for the miracle of the resurrection, and with marked dramatic interpretation. (After all, the events of the crucifixion and resurrection are patently dramatic.) Another man was heard criticizing the reading later: "That's not worship!" he nearly screamed. "He was trembling as he read!"

And my heart sank. For though I admit it was a jarring experience . . . certainly not within the sphere of "normal" for that church . . . I knew the man's heart was utterly caught up in the wonder of the feeling of that Resurrection Morning, of the God who gives life, and of that Lord Jesus who was alive. And I knew he had led me in worship.

Not everything will speak to everyone. But as we attempt to lead others in worship in the assembly, may the things we do be done with intentionality and with careful, heart-filled, spiritual attention to meaning.

Going Through the Motions 1: Preparation

One suggestion would be to encourage leaders to spend time in preparation for their "assignments." Even a simple prayer for the sick can be more than it typically is. Make it a spiritual activity. Pray a scripture aloud—James 5, something from Acts or the gospels about healing or Jesus' touch, a Psalm.

Or ponder a new approach to the "same old, same old." Instead of asking God to "be with Mary in her battle with cancer," as has been asked each week for the last 64 weeks, consider something like this (off the top of my head):

All-powerful God, we confess aloud Your creatorship and Your life-sustaining, dynamic influence in this world. As we pronounce the names of those we know with specific medical needs, would You now hear the heart-expressions of those gathered here. . . . Mary . . . Jason . . . Tom . .

Out-of-the-routine approaches come fairly naturally to me (I confess a slightly-right-of-center brain hemisphere orientation), and maybe for you, too, but many will need to be encouraged to consider these things early. No spur-of-the-moment "I'll ask, uh . . . Ted to lead us in prayer in just a moment" will do if we want to experience meaningful prayers of this type.

Going Through the Motions 2: The Sanctified Order

I'm pretty sure I understand why some people get upset when "the order" is changed. It threatens the sense of equilibrium, but not so much because of the order of the activities *per se*. Rather, they fear that these surface-level changes may indicate something subterranean. Who knows but that an insidious plot is at work to bring "denominationalism" into "the church"!

Frankly, I am tired of our insipid winks at the sanctity of the routine. Whatever it may be in your church—announcements, two songs, a prayer, a song, a scripture, the sermon; or three songs, a scripture, two songs, the Lord's Supper, etc.—*any* established order that is slavishly followed, week after week, leads to a dulling of the spiritual senses.

Cliff Ganus has pointed out that though there are some common elements among assemblies described in the New Covenant writings, there is no “consistent pattern or liturgy for these meetings.” Ganus asserted that we do find “that the church was poured into the mold of local culture, adapting itself as necessary to the circumstances.”⁷

In rehearsing the principles of the New Covenant as presented in scripture, we do well to recognize that the freedom theme surfaces regularly. Since the Father of Life has freed us from lists of regulations and codified instruction manuals, He calls on us to serve “in the new way of the Spirit”—“with the full rights of sons”! Now, though we do not depend on our own efforts for salvation, we are liberated to let our lives flow freely as a river of praise to Him. The fear of treading on supposedly sacred ground (men’s traditions) may be lost in the glorious mode of God-pleasing, continuous adaptation.

I’ll say it again: we should plan assembly activities with attention to meaning and to the *anticipated result*—that God’s essence will bathe the hearts of the gathered saints. Anything less may be mere ritual that does not please the Lord.

Connecting With All

While we are on the subject of what works and what doesn’t, let’s talk about connecting with people. I take as my foundational text here the Acts 2 record of Pentecost. On that occasion, it was important to the Spirit of God that each one should hear in his own language.

Some speak of “heart language” in the context of styles of songs. The “heart language” may defy definition, but that does not mean the concept is insignificant.

You may think that it is a bit of a stretch to connect Parthian and Cyrenian to the heart language of sub-groups in our churches today, and I will grant you that. I do not suggest that we must phrase things in certain ways if we are to be effective with people at all. No, it is not that dire a situation, generally. And our leadership is certainly hindered if we are constantly assessing and second-guessing our own words, never free simply to let them flow.

Yet if we speak exclusively King James English because three older saints are most inspired by that language, we are discounting the need to connect with the majority. If we speak with the expressions that only today’s teenagers understand, what we say may be lost to most others. What can we do in order to facilitate the safe transport of the assembly’s messages to the heart’s interior?

If you have ever been in a foreign country where English is not the language of choice, you know how weary the mind and soul can become when every communication is a struggle. If the language you hear is not the language you best understand, the experience is dreadfully tiring and cannot be as beneficial as if you were communicating in your own language.

About one-sixth of our church in Colorado was ethnically Hispanic. I believe about a third of them had notable difficulties communicating in English. What should we have done with that? Just force them to listen in English? If we did that all the time, these dear ones will never hear the words of the Kingdom in their own language and therefore will have more of a barrier to receiving.

If a church has the resources, I think it should provide for at least the bulk of assembly time to be in the native language. I may be personally irked when I am forced to take the time to choose Spanish or English at an ATM, or when I punch through a telephone menu, but we are not talking about political issues. We are talking about the work of God, and the Acts 2 record shows that Kingdom messages tend to convict people deep in the heart if they hear in their own languages. (Probably, most of those in Jerusalem on that day could have understood Koiné Greek, at least on some level, but not as readily as in their own languages.) I suspect that even those Spanish-speakers in our church who spoke good English tended to be lifted and inspired and instructed on a higher level when they communicated in Spanish—if for no other reason, because they do not have to expend any mental energy on translation.⁸

⁷ Cliff Ganus III, “A *cappella* Congregational Singing in the First and Twenty-First Centuries: Reexamining the Tradition,” 7. Typescript.

⁸ Please refer to the Section Three entry on bilingual assemblies.

We might do well to concern ourselves less with language than with communication in general, though. (After all, we certainly can not effect the miracle that occurred on Pentecost.) By that I mean we should simply *be aware of all the people* and how they are—or are not—receiving and sending messages during the assembly. If we sense ourselves gravitating toward the young marrieds, for instance, we might do well to turn our attention consciously to the singles. Do we pick up that some of them are feeling “left out in the cold”? If we *always* cater to one segment of the church, unaware of the rest, we may not be connecting enough. On one hand, everyone needs to feel “at home,” to some extent. On the other hand, everyone needs to be lifted higher than dialect.

Connecting. It is an elusive thing, but something we cannot afford to ignore.

Change 1: A Once-Ailing Word Is Healed

“Change? Why? You’re just asking for trouble. Whaddya wanna do—upset the apple cart?!”

Before us stands our never-shifting God—transcending our sociological as well as our vaguely Biblical, deeply ingrained tenets. Ultimately, He does *not* change. But somewhere within His eternal identity, paradoxically, is the source of our deep-down drive to change.

“Be holy as I am holy,” He had a servant write (and *rewrite* hundreds of years later). Surely the power to be **transformed** into someone holy emanates from Someone Who already **is**. And similarly, the reason for changing anything—daily habits, personal attitudes, methods, ways of worship, any church routine—is rooted in the God of the Universe.

The worship of God is not a rule of safety—it is an adventure of the spirit, a flight after the unattainable.

— A. N. Whitehead

As we are compelled and convicted by our God, we change . . . if we are disciples of integrity, that is.

The changes we make are sometimes costly in terms of human relationship, human security, and human affirmations received. But we change not for humans—not for others, and not for ourselves.

Change. The concept is viable and credible. Once ailing, it has been nourished and treated with the Great Physician’s pure Word and with a guiding Spirit. It is healthy, whole, and ready to do its work.

Lord, where we need to change, we commit to changing for You and You alone. We will adjust our worship practices in order to honor and glorify You better. We agree to modify all our behaviors because You need them modified. And we wish to be servants who will never, never hold onto anything **we** originated if it means relinquishing something You originated.

You are worthy of our attention, our submission, our devotion, and our constant worship. Transform us daily into Your image—so we can be more like Your Incarnate Son, and more like the eternal spirits we will be because of Your marvelous grace.

Change 2: Now Hold On There . . .

It does a soul good to have this question asked of it periodically: What am I holding on to?

In twenty-plus years of congregational life under my belt as an adult, I have often observed a strong tendency to hold on to things that do not merit such tenacity. I have been guilty, too.

There is One worthy of our clinging, though . . . one holy Being that deserves our stretching, our grasping, and our gripping. The past, the present, and even the future are not to be iconized. Only our God should be clutched tightly to our hearts.

Change, as we all know, is often resisted. Though many of us are in favor of Godly change, even *we* tend to resist it.

It is unfortunate that change is so uncomfortable. Change requires energy, devotion, and thought. But Godliness is not inextricably associated with comfort, and true discipleship is not a bedfellow of lethargy, lukewarmness, or mental inactivity.

God needs us to be adaptable. He needs vessels of a malleable material.

And so change should be a mode, a habit. (If we are ready at any moment to adapt as we hear Him saying important things to us, then we will have no trouble being flexible with less important matters such as assembly patterns and other weekly, congregational matters.)

Hold on to God! Be willing to let go of anything else if He wants you to. Be changeable and open. But hold on to God.

Change 3: Specific Corporate Changes

Might there be changes I'd like to see in churches that already feel they are doing things differently? It's a good bet!

Let's start with the Lord's Supper. Those churches that feel (perhaps to our surprise?) they are already pretty progressive in this area might be doing something like coordinating the preceding prayers with a song or two ... or maybe the church is now "innovatively" separating the collection from the Lord's Supper when for years these events have come in uninterrupted sequence.

Progressive developments I might look for in this sphere:

- ◆ opting for the entire congregation to walk toward the table to receive the bread and juice, avoiding the "officiating server" element altogether
- ◆ the intinction method as a variant
- ◆ consciously including aspects of communion time that have not recently received focus ... for example, if the church always thinks about remembering Jesus a la 1 Cor. 11 (which is read in probably 30% of Church of Christ buildings on any given Sunday), then add a horizontal consciousness of the currently human Body of Christ, or encourage a future-look toward ultimate redemption
- ◆ following the example of the so-called Last Supper by
- ◆ meeting in the evening, in an upper room
- ◆ relaxing around tables in small groups
- ◆ eating a traditional meal together, pausing for observance of the sacred Body and Blood, and/or
- ◆ singing a hymn before the congregation goes out to pray (preferably, *not* with a Judas involved in each communion time!)
- ◆

In worship planning, for those churches that have members gifted and interested, I would like to see effective teams of heads and hearts working mutually on content, sequences, and methodologies. "Worship team" would then taken on a new significance—not a group of somewhat talented performers who can lead musically, but a group of people whose hearts are given to core worship experiences, and who desire earnestly to help provide others with deep experiences.

In ordering "the service," I might go so far as to suggest that all churches accustomed to printing/projecting the order would cease and desist. (Believe it or not, some churches seem to think they "get" worship merely because they print an order, appearing more "orderly" than they have for years.) Churches that have never done so might just try it. Some congregations need more spontaneity, and others need more thoughtful, ordered planning.

Assemblies as a whole would contain more worship content—in song, in prayer, in spoken word, in times given to meditation. Any traditional liturgies employed should be transcended by real meaning. While there might be a few samenesses—such as one leader's always closing things or leading most of the music—rarely, if ever, would the order of events be the same this week as it was last week.

Small groups would be the place where most of "church" happened (instead of being an add-on time-taker in the lives of us too-busy saints). Shepherds (elders/pastors/bishops) would

sometimes bypass standard-business meetings, dedicating themselves rather to the care of souls. Few paid preachers would exist, and sermons would be more special and focused, because they wouldn't occur all the time. When sermons were heard, there would be mutual response time, guided by a shepherd. Deaconesses and deacons would deac, and elders would eld. All would minister to one another. Families would plan devotional experiences for the church. Christian living would be pondered in community, and lives would be changed for the better each week. Men and women would reach in, out, and around in small trios and quartets, devotedly holding each other accountable for changes needed in each life.

OK, I went a little crazy there. I won't retract the dreamy generalities, but I'll move now into a bit more specificity.

I've been in churches that think they're really innovative when they have a sermon broken into two or three segments, with scripture readings preceding or following each segment. OK. That's probably good, as far as it goes. Those churches might be encouraged to expand on this idea for a period of a month or two. Each spoken lesson (sermon) could be tied to a scripture that was a) read orally by a capable reader, b) prayed over by a shepherd who knew both the context of the scripture and the focal point of the succeeding message, and c) silently meditated on prior to the sermon, d) exegeted by the preacher, and e) prayed about again.

And one more ... this time, showing how much of a curmudgeon I can be, but truly with a view toward more connectivity in our assemblies: I would that church leaders would avoid speech crutches like "Good morning!" before every comment of substance. This simple omission would only go so far, but we could replace the over-used "good morning" greeting with a spiritually sensitive, connecting or focusing phrase . . . something along these lines, after the singing of "A Mighty Fortress":

Yes, as Luther wrote, our God is truly a mighty fortress. As I begin to pray, may I encourage you to stand before this strong, impenetrable God, amazed in your spirits at His grandeur.

How's that? (I could go on.) Does any of this resonate in the experiences of others out there, or is it just my over-sheltered soul that needs these kinds of changes?

Careless Worship

Ever notice how non-Christians will use the word "hallelujah" in mocking tones?

The geeky 14-year-old in a baseball uniform draws a walk instead of striking out this time, and the team leader says, "Hallelujah! He didn't strike out this time."

Uncle Frank finally comes home for dinner, and Aunt Ginny says "Well, hallelujah! He didn't stay out for happy hour!" under her breath.

Someone in a group conversation attempts to draw appropriate attention to Jesus, and an uncomfortable not-yet-believer bursts out with "Hallelujah!" (perhaps mocking a typical televangelist's mode) in a vain attempt to refocus attention on humor instead of on the expectations of Deity.

Perhaps worse is the careless way some religionists fall back on the word "hallelujah" when nothing else comes to mind. "What a great song—hallelujah!" "Good to see you all here today—hallelujah!" "I got out of my car and the rain stopped long enough for me to get into the church building—hallelujah!" We're gonna have a great time tonight—hallelujah!"

A mocking or perfunctory "hallelujah" doesn't seem to bother many Christians, but it bothers me. "Hallelujah" is a sacred word.

Singing worship songs without care or thought or engaged spirit doesn't seem to bother many Christians, but it bothers me. Singing is a sacred act.

The happy-go-lucky song "Ha-la-la-la-la-la-le-lu-jah" doesn't seem to bother adult leaders of Christian camps, but it bothers me. Training young believers to worship is a sacred responsibility.

Those who knew Nadab and Abihu (see Leviticus 10:1 -3 and Num. 3:4) learned pretty decidedly what God thought of careless worship. (More on this to come.)

Creativity 1: The Imperative

God is creative. He made us in His image. Humans naturally have creativity. Being creative is important.

We should create worship material. We should create artwork for the lobby and for the main worship room and for the classrooms. We should sing newly composed songs. We should experience the freshness of dramatically presented scripture. We should give creative writers opportunities to say things in compelling language—both in poetry and in prose. All these things, though some may be individual expressions and not corporate worship media *per se*, can be viable, valid communications of worship from creature to Creator.

That said, again, I would remind all that not everything we do is worship, in the strict sense. Yet, in some cases, the offerings of service can be transformed into worship. We do well to remember the lavish offering of perfume, the sincere tears, and the love that flowed along with the liquids. None of these were required or specified, but when offered sincerely, they were accepted (and how!).

Enough said. (Or maybe not. Is anyone thinking of Nadab and Abihu right now? I will presume, with some trepidation, to comment on them in the next section.)

Creativity 2: The Pitfalls—a New Look at Two Non-Heroes

Many believers wish to pay great attention to Biblical details, and that desire certainly comes from an intent to please the Lord; but in the Nadab & Abihu incident, for example, it is not necessary to assume that their demise was based on their violation of specific details or rules. On the contrary, viewed in harmony with other Bible teachings, God's reaction may be read as His censure of *carelessness shown toward Him*.

To find the crux of the Nadab and Abihu story in man's having violated God's *specifics*—which to me implies a set of rules to be followed without variation, regardless of the setting—downplays the many Biblical examples of spontaneous honor, devotion, and worship. For instance, consider David, who danced a celebration of God. And remember Mary, who poured the perfume on Jesus' feet. And reflect on the blind man, who worshipped after having been healed; the leper, who returned to give thanks; and others. What do we say about those? Are they to be condemned in their spontaneous homage-offerings? Since God had not said, for instance, "Every leper who is healed by my Son between Pentecost and the Feast of Booths must turn after 50 paces and approach Him in order to give thanks," are we to assume that the leper's worship of Jesus was inappropriate?

I find no textual reason to think these examples constitute "disapproved" worship. On the other hand, there is every logical reason to see these examples as acceptable and *approved*.

In some Scriptural accounts, the details of submitting to the will of God seem utterly important, and in other accounts they do not. The Nadab and Abihu text does not require that we assume the specific fire was the root problem. How would we understand the text if it appeared this way in our Bibles?

"Nadab and Abihu took their censers without thought, quickly put fire in them (from a different flame, since it was closer to them than the usual flame) and added incense; and they thus ministered in the Lord's sanctuary via a thoughtless, haphazard offering, according to their own whims and convenience. Then these sacrificers who were *going through the motions* of offering something to God for His consumption ended up being consumed themselves by an altogether different sort of fire—the fire of God's anger. This punishment gave evidence of God's extreme displeasure with Nadab and Abihu's general carelessness and irreverence."

That is a lot of verbal interpolation, but if the text had come to us rendered that way, I do not think any of the real import would have been stripped away. **I propose that Nadab and Abihu were punished for their lackadaisical attitude in approaching God,** not for the specific “violation” of using a fire other than the “authorized” one.

No, the texts do not speak directly to the condition of Nadab and Abihu’s hearts or attitudes, but Leviticus 10:3 shows that Moses interpreted the events as having to do with the people’s *treatment* of God. They must show respect, fear, and honor to the holy God, and the act of approaching Him must be well-thought-out and careful:

Among those who approach me I will show myself holy;
in the sight of all the people I will be honored.

The seemingly endless details in Leviticus 9 and 10, too, can be read contextually as support for the utter importance of doing “God” things with great intentionality and care.

Leviticus 15:1 gives us another clue: “The LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died **when they approached the LORD**” [emphasis mine, bc], and then God gives a pronouncement to Moses (for him to relay to Aaron) about careful, intentional, anything-but-haphazard approaches to His presence.

Numbers 3:4, like Leviticus 15, does not appear to draw a conclusion on the exact cause of the deaths. All we have is a connection between the *occasion* (“when they approached the Lord” or “when they made an offering”) and the *deaths*. No, this text does not act as coroner but emphasizes that a careless attitude toward Yahweh simply will not suffice.

I realize that some of this is conjecture. Yet the texts do not state specifically that “the reason God killed them was that He had said to use Fire A, and they used Fire B, thereby committing an infraction of Rule 443.” There seems to be *more* to this whole incident than an emphasis on rules and violation of protocol.

God does have a pattern of making sure that people are humbled if they attempt to take some of His glory for themselves (remember Uzzah, Nebuchadnezzar, and others). Nadab and Abihu carelessly trivialized the worship of the Almighty, which dethroned God, in a sense. On the other hand, the healed leper and Mary Magdalene just the opposite—offering purposeful, spontaneous outpourings and love and adoration in order to magnify God.

May we, like the latter group, always approach God intentionally and with ardent passion for Who He is—the glorious Lord, on the throne.

Selection of Material for Worship

Warning: the following applies to non-pastor-driven churches, which is a model that receives my thoroughgoing support.

Visions of song leaders flipping the pages of hymnals at 9:56 a.m. before the assembly begins at 10:00 may haunt me for years to come. God deserves better, and the saints deserve better, too. This kind of carelessness may add up to near-blasphemy.

Historically speaking, far, far too little time and energy has been spent on selecting worthy material for worship in the assembly. This is a key, if not *the* prime, task for the leader! More people than song/worship leaders, too, should be involved in selection of material and planning the sequence of activities.

It is often advisable to include in the worship planning those who will be leading prayers and reading scriptures. Not that every activity has to line up perfectly in terms of theme and sub-theme, but it is helpful, if I am leading thoughts and praying before distributing bread for communion, to know the general plan before and after the activity for which I am responsible. Phone calls and e-mails may represent a step in the right direction, and praying together in advance can also be helpful in unifying the various leaders, yet these types of preparations may also be ritualized rather than serving as connecting, spiritually concentrating activities.

That said, it is my feeling that each assembly activity—whether song, spoken thought, scripture reading, prayer, sermon, or other—should be able to stand on its own. Each scripture may be a word from God; it does not have to tie in with the sermon or with the next song. Each song can be a worshipful expression of the human heart to its Creator, or a yearning for holiness, or a wish for the Body of Christ; the songs do not have to subscribe to a theme. Themes and tie-ins can be very inspirational, and I use them myself more often than not, but they are not the end-all.

In selection of worship material, be intentional. Be thoughtful. And be aware that through that reading, through that song, or through those prayed thoughts, you will be leading the saints in worship of the Almighty.

Reverence in the Assembly

The song “The Lord Is In His Holy Temple” was sung relatively often in my early years. Although leaders in my congregation were relatively thoughtful in the use of this song, it was mocked in other circles—as though its only purpose were to guilt people into being quiet.

What do we think of quietude in church assemblies? It’s really not such a bad thing, despite the contemporary emphasis on so-called (noisy) “fellowship”!

It seems common to feel that it’s untoward or perhaps irreverent to enter a room where a prayer is being offered to God. Just yesterday, this idea was floated in my hearing—“What’s the problem? We could go in, couldn’t we? I mean, it’s not like he’s praying or anything.”

I’d like to suggest, as was once suggested to me by an elder sister in Delaware, that it may be even more significant that we treat the reading of scripture with such reverence. After all, prayer is our voice, but scripture is, in one very real sense, the voice of God.

On Coming Into God’s Presence

What does it mean to *come into God’s presence*? Are we not always there? Are we not assured that both as individuals and as the Body of Christ, Deity lives in us? We *are* the temple, right? God surely is wherever we are!

It takes practice and experience, though, to be aware of the Presence that is so assuredly there.

We need to learn the “tuning in” requisite to the cognizance of His presence. We might say that God never goes off the air, but that we must tune in to His frequency in a special way in order to be fully aware of His majesty. We must consciously align our spirits with His Spirit in order to see Him.

Did God ever take His presence away from Elijah? To ask if Elijah *felt* as if God had left is to ask a completely different question. Remember the story after Mount Carmel (I Kings 19)? God saw a need, on that occasion, to direct His servant into a fuller experience of the Almighty. God prepared Elijah, helping him to tune in, for the most inexpressible experience of his earthly life: to witness *God passing by*.

Elijah was *always* in God’s presence—*always* watched over by his God. But during this unique moment, he experienced God as never before. He was keenly aware of the essence of the Creator. Earthly existence was left behind in favor of a greater reality. Human senses took a back seat to an encompassing spiritual perception. The presence of God had been “amplified” so that the created could perceive it. Elijah beheld his God.

There is a natural, human inability to be continually aware of God, “connecting” with Him, though He is always there. The God-seeker must *intend* to move in a spiritual plane toward gazing on the splendid Reality of God Most High; this motion we call *coming into God’s presence*.

May we, as leaders, move 1) ourselves and 2) others in this mode.

Visual Symbols of the Presence

Although we know God is always near us, at times we may need reminders. Many of us are from backgrounds that have instilled in us a fear of symbols and other visual representations of God.

There can be great value, though, in visually artistic items such as banners, majestic nature scenes, and the like, in leading the minds of would-be worshippers toward God spiritually. John Gallen notes the following:

A symbol is not the pointer to something that is absent.
A symbol is the expression of something that is present.⁹

It seems to me that some exposure to visual stimuli—whether art created by members of your church, judiciously selected movie clips, or commercially produced wall hangings, for example—may be well used to facilitate the motion of the spirit in worship of God.

On the “Church Year”

On the one hand, there’s history. History should be heard and heeded. History tells us much about where we (or they) *have been*; therefore, it tells us much about where we (or they) *are*.

On the other hand, there’s History. It seems that some people don’t distinguish between **h**istory and **H**istory.

On the one hand, Christian history has “confessors,” monks, nuns, and popes; leaders, movements, and denominations; and doctrines and creeds.

On the other hand, Christian History has God who a) acted in the human sphere from Adam onward, with the denouement seen in the person of Jesus the Christ—and who b) saw fit, graciously, to document said acts through inspired men. I stand on this: *that Scripture relays all that is necessary in terms of what lasts eternally.*

Two thousand years of history seems often to cloud what’s necessary and what’s authorized. While I would have much to learn about Christian history if I wanted to pursue it relentlessly, and while it would doubtless teach me more than I’ve been willing to expend the effort to learn so far, I am just fine without it and have no pangs of conscience about my lack of effort. I prefer to put my meager efforts into study of God’s revealed will in Scripture.

A nearby pastor-type wrote this:

The seasons of the church year help us to remember to shape our lives in God’s rhythm of time rather than our own, which is important and necessary because we tend to be forgetful people, especially about Easter.

Hmmm. If the so-called church year *did* represent God’s rhythm of time, I would buy in to it. Being forgetful about Jesus’ resurrection would be inappropriate, but not heeding the “church year” is neither here nor there. Observing it is a choice one may freely make, I suppose, but one may not look down his nose at me, unchallenged, for simply ignoring the church year.

With that said, I am in some measure drawn to ideals like “God’s rhythm ... rather than our own.” I do long, when I am at my best, to be drawn into the transcendent.

Most of us were raised to celebrate Easter Day. The church calendar reminds us that Easter is bigger than one day; in fact, Easter, which is 50 days, is central to all that it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

⁹ Interview with *Worship Leader*, Dec/Jan ‘94, © CCM Communications.

The “fact” of Easter, as presented here, is relatively insignificant, as it is nowhere mentioned in scripture. I’ve never before heard the assertion that Easter itself is more than one day. My lack of hearing doesn’t mean I’m right; it just means the 50-day Easter is unfamiliar to me. Whatever Easter has historically been or not been, the main thing is Jesus’ resurrection . . . which brings to mind a famed quote from one Leslie Newbigin: “I am neither an optimist nor a pessimist . . . Jesus the Christ is risen from the dead.”

We should pay attention to Jesus’ resurrection (and death and burial, for these are the core of the good news, the Christian *kerygma*/message) every Sunday, and every other day of the week, too!

Can’t Help It

I admit that a subcutaneous listlessness sets in every time a sentence begins with “In this Lenten season . . .” I didn’t grow up with Lent or Good Friday “services” or such, and they are not part of my yearly rhythm now. They’re not covered in scripture, so I can do without them. I’ve been going about my business fairly normally, given that this is a Break week for me. Saturday, I worked at the office, and it was wonderfully quiet. I got so much done that I wouldn’t ordinarily have accomplished.

But I can’t shake the remembrances. This is significant time in the year, and whether the body of Jesus went into the tomb on Thursday or Friday, and whether He was in the grave for 72 hours or 51, His death, burial, and rising are cataclysmic events.

I find myself looking for songs whose lyrics briefly pass through my consciousness. Talbot’s “On the third day” comes to mind.

I find myself feeling a twinge of guilt for doing things glibly during the time in the year that commemorates my Savior’s death.

My ears perked more when a friend prayed about “Jesus” in my son’s hearing tonight at the table.

I’m looking forward to church more than usual, and looking forward even more to home church soon after.

I can’t help being turned off by liturgy, but neither can I help being inspired by Jesus. All that was accomplished on the cross by Jesus the Messiah makes the difference. Praise Him.

Flow and Connection 1: Here’s One Way To Do It

Let’s talk about *flow* in the assembly. By “flow” I mean the perceived, or at least subconsciously experienced, connectedness of one activity to the next. I take as a given that meaning and depth are enhanced when there is flow in the assembly activities.

(As I wrote these thoughts, I realized anew the importance of this topic, based on a very positive experience one Sunday morning. When flow is not attended to as well, we hardly notice, because we subconsciously expect the normal, and we are lulled into a stupor by the habitual. But when the flow from activity to activity, from song to prayer to song, etc., have been spiritually considered, the effects can be so inspiring!)

It helps the human heart (and, for you who are more Campbellites than Stoneites, the *brain*) to sense meaningful connections. Not all of the activities in your assemblies will be worship, nor should they be, but you can help to connect one thing to the next. It does sometimes take advance thought, especially if your church is among the few who have graduated to a state of not being slave to a “sanctified order” of activities.

Someone . . . how about *you*? . . . can take the lead in coordinating among all those involved in leading. For instance, don’t let Jim, who has the closing prayer assigned to him, be uninformed that there will be an immersion that day. Make sure, as far in advance as make sense, that Chip has some idea that the main scripture reading will deal with sin and confession. In this way, you would

reduce the risk that he will speak glibly and abruptly in his prayer about sunshine and beautiful days and joy in the Lord and being a light for Christ without some consideration for what has gone before.

Just think how the activities might fit together, when everyone is “in the know” . . .

- ◆ The “call to worship” uses Ephesians 1:3 as a springboard, inviting the gathered saints to join their hearts in praising the Source of every spiritual blessing in Christ.
- ◆ The first two songs praise a) the Father for sending the Son, and b) the Son.
- ◆ Someone leads a prayer that draws attention to specific spiritual blessings, such as relief from guilt, the freedom to love as God loves, forgiveness, grace, and joy.
- ◆ The church sings “For all that You’ve done I will thank You . . . for all that You’re going to do. . .” (with one chorus only)
- ◆ Two people—the one spiritually closest to the one about to be reborn, and a spiritual shepherd who also knows him well—take microphones and share something of the person’s recent spiritual walk, emphasizing a need or two from the past, and focusing on the implications of the new life about to be birthed.
- ◆ The immersion is witnessed by all in attendance.
- ◆ A couple of songs—“Buried with Christ” and “Firm Foundation,” for instance—and spontaneous comments remind everyone of new identity in Jesus and of the solid relationships in the Christian family.
- ◆ The sensitive preacher who had planned a sermon on the life of Joshua, makes mention during the lesson of the similarity of the names of Joshua and Jesus—they both mean “deliverer,” and he also takes time to comment personally on the decision just made for the side of the Lord, i.e., “choose ye this day whom you will serve.”
- ◆ Following the sermon, an announcement about a birthday in the church is also tied to the new spiritual birth that just occurred.
- ◆ The closing prayer—again, led by Jim, who knew in advance that the immersion was to occur—takes all this in, revisiting the concept of spiritual blessing, thanking God for the relationship we all have with Him and with each other, asking for guidance for the newly committed life that represents a choice to serve the Lord, praising our Deliverer, and honoring both the spiritual and earthly birthday.

Here’s another possible “flow”: you clue Jesse in that your communion focus this week is *horizontal* awareness. That way he will either decide not to read Isaiah 53, since it has a vertical focus, or he might be able to tie the two together, showing consciousness that something else is happening now. It could go like this:

- ◆ You sing the lines “No one is a stranger here. Everyone belongs. Finding our forgiveness here, we in turn forgive all wrongs. . . . Come take the bread, come drink the wine, come share the Lord.”
- ◆ Jesse gets to the mic and begins, “When we take the bread and drink the wine, what is it we are taking in? What does it mean to share the Lord? I’d like for us to think soberly today about the suffering of our Lord, so that we can truly commune together, as His body, in realizing the extent of His suffering.”
- ◆ Jesse reads from Isaiah 53 (preferably without announcing the scripture reference . . . this is for inspiration and devotion, not for teaching purposes that require rustling pages, breaks in the train of thought, and following along on the printed page).
- ◆ People in the pews now are more inclined to think spiritually about the meaning of Jesus’ flesh—its reality, its torture, its death—and can now more aptly extend its meaning to the body of gathered saints.

Be careful in trying something like the above, though. It might just net you even more benefits, like causing someone to think tenderly and with reconciliation in mind about a brother or sister she has wronged. Just think: unity can begin within a local church’s assembly, in communion.

Flow and Connection 2: Slavery Really Is Undesirable

On the other hand, two equally well-intentioned but disparate lines of leadership thinking may quickly and decisively cancel each other out when activities are not coordinated. Imagine moving toward a lesson on faith in troubled times . . . singing of God’s holiness and praying through Psalms of faith . . . praying contemplatively, and with intense focus, for a “faith that will not shrink” . . . meditating on the spotless Lamb of God . . . singing “My Faith Looks Up To Thee” . . . and then being encouraged by an insensitive man at a microphone to “raise your hand if you believe Jesus saved us . . . great! . . . look around you, now! Isn’t it nice to have a bunch of us all in one room?!”

Can you imagine proceeding into communion after that chain of events? The cheerleader was enslaved by his own line of thought. (The *non sequitur* event begs the question, “Was the second man informed in advance of the other activities so he would have opportunity to prepare some thoughts along the same lines?” If not, why not?)

In reality, either of those lines of thought has some value. But not when the two are used in combination.

Perhaps, in a different extrapolation of the same situation, a different “leader” decides, at the same point, right after singing “O For a Faith That Will Not Shrink” and “My Faith Looks Up To Thee,” to have everyone stand up and shake someone’s hand or give someone a hug. Again, he would appear to be controlled by his own thinking . . . or he might be a slave to the PowerPoint slide show that had the “greeting time” programmed in.

This kind of slavery does not help to maintain a helpful, spiritual flow of thought in the assembly.

Flow and Connection 3: Silence/Letting It Sink In

An outgrowth of what I call the “agitated style” of musical leading (detailed in another section) is rushing from activity to activity. It is unhelpful to move from one song to the next song, or from fellowship/greeting time to worship, so quickly that no single activity has the opportunity to sink deeply into the heart. And it is far too easy to get into this mode of pushing from one activity to another too quickly—desperate not to lose any time or to risk allowing a soul to have two seconds to meditate.

Though in our age it seems to be, silence is *not* the enemy. Silence may be just what is needed, in order for the last thought, the last song or prayer, to sink in.

In silence comes all loveliness. The dawn is ever still.
No noise accompanies the dew that glistens on the hill.
The sunrise comes up quietly; the moon is never heard.
And love that animates the eye surpasses any word.
And prayer is best in solitude. It seems so very odd
That long before I did not know in silence I’d find God.

(author unkown)

Can we agree that it sometimes takes less sound for us to “hear” God? If you are using silence in your assembly for the first time or two, it will be wise to communicate clearly that is intentional and not the evidence of lack of coordination or of someone’s falling asleep.

Give your prayers, your songs, your spoken words, your scripture readings a sense of living and breathing. Give them space. Give them life.

Flow and Connection 4: Specifics and Pet Peeves

Make no mistake: It takes great effort, and convincing *flow* is not necessarily easy, or even possible, to achieve. Some more things we can do to heighten the sense of flow:

- ◆ Be ready when you are “on deck” as the next leader. This does not mean you have to rush to the stage/microphone when it is your turn to speak or read. It does mean that thoughtful leaders will appear to be ready and aware of their responsibilities.
- ◆ Consider carefully the placement of announcements of a purely businesslike nature. I am no purist when it comes to what we do in the assembly; I certainly think there is a time and place for such things as announcing potlucks, committee meetings about parking lots, people’s new jobs, and such. These things are family business, and families need to stay in touch by considering even mundane items. But perhaps the more significant items—newly discovered cancer, and even milestone wedding anniversaries and birthdays of the old and the young—can be augmented by isolating them . . . giving them extra attention, comments by shepherds, or focused prayer instead of mere mentions in list form.
- ◆ In your efforts to heighten the sense of “flow,” do not let songs become functional accompaniments, rather than meaningful activities in and of themselves. In other words, no song should be used purely to accompany another activity, e.g., for the children to go out for “children’s church,” or to “sing ‘em in” at the beginning of the assembly, or to get ‘em pepped up for the sermon. Songs used this way are cheapened, and their impact is lessened.
- ◆ One ice-breaking “good morning” is more than sufficient. By the time the greeter or “caller-to-worship,” the worship leader, the first prayer leader, the scripture reader, the sermonizer, and each of three communion prayer leaders have said “good morning” to the gathered saints before they perform (ahem . . .) their assigned duties, doesn’t it seem a little ridiculous to break the ice yet again when you’re making announcements after the sermon at 11:52 a.m. with another “good morning”? Rather, why not begin with a statement that shows you are conscious of what has just occurred? You have presumably worshipped the Lord of Hosts together; you have communed in mutual re-experience of the Christ’s sacrificial death; you have likely been instructed in the ways of holy living, or enlightened about some deep Christian truth. You have reflected personally and might have shared in the immersion of a newly committed believer. You have perhaps even agonized together over egregious sin that has surfaced among you. Why, after all that, is the next guy that gets up to do something in front of the church going to say, “Good morning!” before he says what he is really there to say? Show your awareness of “flow” after a baptism, for instance, by saying something like this:

God has just brought another to new life in our family here. Wonderful! Our family is certainly a living organism, and I have a lot of “family business” items here to prove it!

- ◆ Or follow the immersion not with one more greeting or an insecure “How’s everybody doing out there today?” but with a spiritual word of acknowledgment of the significance of new life. Perhaps you could recognize an expectant mother and relate the coming of a new baby into the world to the new spiritual birth. Something other than the insipid “Good morning” that shows very little, other than the lack of anything better to say. (End of sermonizing on this particular pet peeve!)
- ◆ Show that you understand the significance of the song “Jesus Is Lord” (as sung after a lesson on Philippians 2:5-11) by suggesting that the entire congregation now consider ways to *show Jesus’ lordship in their lives* this week.
- ◆ Such a large segment of the population seems to be engaged in football that public mentions of Super Bowls, and of local teams’ failures and successes, are inevitable. Take care, though, not to destroy the flow of spiritual activities. Imagine singing the lines “Light the fire in my heart again” or “even “Revive us again,” and then having

some guy stand up to make announcements (probably misplaced to begin with), starting off with a battle cry of “Hey, I see a lot of blue and gold out there! No gridiron fans today, are there? Heh, heh, heh.” And may I dare to suggest that die-hard football (or other sports) fans rarely need encouragement by public leaders in churches. There is probably enough momentum in the fans’ souls without giving attention to games in church meetings. If sports are mentioned, at least refer to Paul’s “running the race” or “buffeting the body” imagery, in order to try to bring some spiritual thoughts into your guys’ heads, alongside thoughts of football or other sports.

Flow and Connection 6: Comments¹⁰

Some assemblies will benefit from succinct remarks to aid connectivity. Other sequences, perhaps, need more thorough teaching or inspiring commentary. Sometimes, if things work just right—and this may be a worthy goal—no additional words are needed at all.

Connecting comments can be wonderfully inspirational but can also betray the inherent weakness of conceptual connection in a given set of songs, scriptures, etc. Comments, in other words, may be well intended, well placed, and effectively executed, but if the people realize there was really no connection whatsoever between the last song and the next, they will see through a lame attempt to fabricate a connection.

Liturgy tends to arise out of stronger conceptual notions of what will occur, and why. In more formally liturgical church assemblies, people may be more accustomed to conceptually tied assemblies and may not need much commentary between songs, prayers, readings, lessons, etc. In other words, if you just turned to a page from the lectionary that was headed “Readings for Advent,” and then you sing a song from the Advent section of the hymnal, and then someone begins a prayer with “Lord, in this season of Advent, . . .” you hardly need to be made more aware, through a long, connecting comment, that it is Advent time. (Let alone, for now the question of whether Advent, a fabricated notion, deserves Christian attention. You get the point about high-church liturgy.)

Comments may also merely be a gratuitous opportunity for someone to speak. When planning comments, or when making them spontaneously, it is good to be judicious, thoughtful, and sensitive to the reality of the moment.

Flow and Connection 7: Computerization

Besides a) saving time and b) taking time, computers have contributed at least cosmetically to many churches’ worship. Many leaders these days take more than a few minutes, immediately before the assembly, to plan the sequence of activities. Computers can be effective aids in preparing song lists, handouts, PowerPoint slides, and more. Record-keeping on a computer can also assist leaders in ensuring that there is sufficient variety over a period of time.

On the down side, assembly plans are often prepared in a vacuum, and one person’s advance ideas—whether computerized or not—can rarely be sufficient for a whole group of gathered saints. During the actual assembly, sensitive leaders will often feel a pull in a certain direction, or they might be impressed on the spot to share the Word of the Lord, or an additional song will present itself in the mind.

Whatever the format of your plans—computer projected, worship bulletin, or song list on a napkin—allow for the spirit of the moment, and the Spirit of the Lord, to modify the plans. Do not be a slave to a prefab song set.

Great Expectations?

One Sunday, our sermon had had to do, in part, with what we expect when we meet on Sunday mornings. I confess low expectations most of the time. In fact, I can’t remember the last time I really expected God to “show up” and do something in hearts—mine or anyone else’s.

¹⁰ Please refer to the Section Three entry on Bilingual Assemblies.

This is not to say I have no faith; it's only to speak "aloud" the dilution of that faith, figuring that most of you out there can relate.

We go through the motions by getting ready, driving, walking in and shaking hands, opening our Bibles, lifting our voices, listening respectfully most of the time, etc. But do we really expect something spiritual to happen?

God, save us. (And I mean that). Save us from mild, namby-pamby churchianity, and set us apart for something truly significant in the Kingdom.