

What should we emphasize in worship?

By Bob Young

The obvious answer is that we should focus on God and Christ. Through the years, the church has found this emphasis hard to maintain. The Catholic Church identified seven sacraments (sacred actions which sought or affirmed God's presence).¹ The Reformation questioned penance, and most Protestant churches today retain only two of the seven—baptism and the Lord's Supper. While these are not always described as sacraments, they function to provide an initial and continuing connection with the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

The Reformers sought to restore the Bible as authoritative in the church. If the Catholic Church saw itself as standing over Scripture ("the Bible says and means what The Church says it says and means"), the early Reformers saw Scripture as standing authoritatively over the church. They believed that the Bible could be studied and understood—thus the Enlightenment efforts to apply human reason and wisdom to the understanding of Scripture. While such study came from good intentions, the result was that human reason often came to stand over Scripture. When human reason stands over Scripture, another danger arises—the message may be individualized so that my reason determines what it means to me.

Largely in reaction to Catholicism, the Reformers sought to restore the importance of the Word and the preaching of the Word. The pulpit as a piece of furniture came to have equal or even higher significance in church architecture than the Lord's Table and the baptismal pool. The original effort was not to exalt preachers but to exalt the preaching of the Word of God in the belief that God is present through his Word. Luther said that the church is the place where the gospel is preached. One unintended result has been that the person speaking is sometimes exalted above the message spoken. A second negative development was that the "preacher" becomes the authority rather than the Word.

As congregations grew numerically, it became necessary to organize and provide order to assemblies, and virtually all "leaders" during worship occupied the pulpit. This tended to make church activities seem vertically-oriented (toward God) more than horizontal (fellowship with one another). That the church is to be involved in mutual fellowship during the Supper, singing, prayer and giving is often not in view or ignored.

The solution is to restore worship as described in the New Testament. The focus in worship is on God and Christ—worship is directed toward God, and must be consistent with his nature and his will. God is actively involved in worship as his word is proclaimed and as he communes with us at his Table. Some songs are sung to God, prayers are directed to God, and the contribution is response to God's generosity. Equally important is that the church communes member to member in meaningful fellowship through song, prayer, giving, the communion service, and the hearing of the Word.

¹ These were baptism (infant), confirmation, penance, communion, marriage, anointing the sick and dying, and holy orders.