

REFRESHING OUR WORSHIP ASSEMBLIES

By Bob Young

Church work by its very nature is cyclical. Nothing is more cyclical than those activities that are repeated week after week. I am thinking about our worship assemblies. In many churches, every week repeats the same order, includes the same things, and follows a predetermined pattern. Our worship is the very same thing every time. The danger? Worship becomes routine. Repetition invites action without thought. Worship becomes ho-hum. What comes next is expected. Nothing challenging occurs. Nothing requires thought. Nothing interrupts the nothingness of my brain on automatic pilot.

Routine worship can be done routinely. Worship easily becomes mechanical. I used various phrases above because no one wants to admit to mechanical worship. But who has not had the experiencing of “awakening” during the assembly and realizing that the mind was not tuned in to what was occurring.

When worship becomes insipid and passionless, when repetition reigns, when prayers are normal (and many times not focused on worshiping God), when the order is normal, when the sermon is normal, when everything pretty much follows the same pattern and outline each week—we are in need of refreshing!

Two observations, some thoughts about “how” to bring freshness to the assembly, and some questions.

First, the repeated rhythms of worship are helpful. I like sameness; being able to anticipate what comes next is healthy. When changes are made, those changes must be clearly orchestrated and communicated. New things must not be inserted randomly and spontaneously for the sake of newness. Interruptions in worship—too often and too radical—can make worship difficult for some.

Second, the rhythms of worship determine the focus of worship. Worship without rhythm loses focus. Thematic worship can help develop new rhythms. Think about an assembly that focuses every prayer, announcement, Scripture reading, the words spoken at the Table and from the pulpit—everything—on one specific aspect of Christianity. For example, if the focus of a worship assembly is on the Lord’s Supper, perhaps the table is given a more prominent place, the furniture is re-arranged, the order is changed, and the sermon topic focuses the minds of the worshipers on the Supper.

How can worship be refreshed? Here are some ideas that are very practical and easily implemented. These are examples of things that I have recently experienced in my visits to churches.

- Prayers that are not ordinary or expected; for example, a closing prayer that was a doxology.
- An assembly that opened with a doxology recited together; an assembly that closed with a blessing upon the worshipers.
- The use of a call to worship to focus the minds of those present on God.
- Extended scripture reading focused on a specific theme.
- One of the shorter books of the Bible read aloud in its entirety.
- Times of meditation, thoughtful silence, directed silence. A time of personal praying.
- Prayers for needs, illnesses, etc. as part of the contribution, suggesting additional ways to contribute and participate, shared by the shepherds.
- Shepherds praying regularly (I am amazed at how many people have never heard a shepherd pray specifically for them).
- Mission focus items, interspersed, apparently random but thoughtfully included.

Questions. Is the Holy Spirit present in the worship in your church? Or is it all about God and Jesus? Or is it all about us? I am not suggesting a focus on the Holy Spirit that eliminates God and Jesus—I see that danger in some of the literature I read from the larger Christian community. But the Holy Spirit is at work in hearts and minds and lives. It is true that our God is a God of order, but in my years in ministry, I often prayed for eyes to see what God was doing in the assembly. I prayed in anticipation, believing that God would be present, that God would be active, recognizing that God works through his people. My prayer was for sensitivity. I remember the comment of a visitor when I asked her what she thought about our assembly: “I was hoping God would be here.”

I too want to see God when I worship. I appreciate the rhythms of worship, I also appreciate the freshness of the unexpected. I appreciate things that make me think, things that focus my attention. I want to see God. That includes seeing the presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit. I want God’s people to leave knowing that they have encountered God, grateful for what Christ means in their life, and recognizing that they are filled with the Spirit.