

Designing A Transformational Worship Experience

Context

It's 11:00 Sunday morning at First Church. A piano prelude sounds slightly off key to the tune of *Give Me That Old Time Religion*. The pastor, a middle-aged man in a three piece suit, begins the service with a big smile and about fifteen minutes of announcements that especially highlight the annual potluck to follow the service next Sunday. The congregation, consisting of about one hundred people of all ages, smiles back.

The announcements are followed by the standard two old hymns and two newer choruses, all piano led. The four congregational songs focus on four different topics, including the grace of God, unity, prayer, and servant-hood. The pastor prays a brief prayer and then the offering is collected while *His Eye Is On The Sparrow* is sung by the church soloist.

This is followed by a forty-five minute sermon from the pastor entitled "Eight Standards of Splendidly Sanctified Saints," which is part one of a twelve week series called "Sanctification, Soteriology, Spirituality, and Sin." The people listen graciously to their pastor's informative sermon as they diligently fill in blanks on the sermon insert. His message incorporates a variety of Scriptures dealing with everything from prayer to Bible study to fasting to service to tithing to worship. He said a lot, but no one seems to know or can articulate in a sentence what the pastor said.

The pastor prays at the conclusion of his sermon and the congregation sings a contemporary version of *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*. A benediction is announced by the pastor and everyone is dismissed with another reminder about next Sunday's potluck. Tuna casserole will be provided but everyone should bring a dessert and a side dish to share. First Church really wants to, in the words of their mission statement, "reach out to people in the community and facilitate their transformation in Christ." Yet, they haven't had a new convert to Christ in two years and many of those who attend are hanging by a spiritually dry thread, let alone experiencing deep transformation in Christ.

Diagnosis

This worship service pattern is typical and predictable at First Church. The only time it may change is at Christmas time or on Communion Sunday. The worship service is choppy and its overall theme unclear. *People usually come away from the service with lots of information but not the kind of inspiration that might lead to their transformation.* Most people, though they are too kind to say it, feel as if the worship service is disconnected from real life; it lacks an authentic "realness" and vitality to it. Most of the people under 45 years of age attend only because their parents and/or grandparents attend. They would not choose to attend and will likely discontinue their involvement at First Church once their older family members pass on.

The tragedy in this case is that the Sunday morning worship time is, in most churches, the only occasion when the entire congregation is gathered all together for transformation. Therefore, it almost goes without say that corporate worship is the major venue for the formation of God's people in a local church. Corporate worship is the only and most frequent occasion for an all-church experience that leads to the Christian transformation of God's people. If this is true, then First Church is clearly missing the mark it needs to hit.

First Church is, in a number of ways, out of touch with people who have been shaped more by Postmodern than Modern sensibilities. The Postmodern world “is less a world of facts and figures and more a world of story and performance” (Bergquist 23). Yet, the preaching style and basic thrust of First Church’s worship service is geared toward the conveying of informational principles that are detached from the meta-narrative, or grand story of the Christian faith.

In the Postmodern world we live in, many of our stories have been deconstructed. And when people lose their story they are left with a debilitating identity crisis because “who we are-our sense of self-may have always been conveyed by the stories we tell about ourselves” (Bergquist 24). In a complex and changing world, the conversational communication of story can transcend the chaos and guide people in the meaning-making process that Postmoderns need. In essence, First Church has not been speaking the language of a large segment of people, mostly younger, in their congregation. The preaching, music, and other elements of the service are perfectly designed for the transfer of information but not for the experience of transformation that narrative sense-making tends to produce.

Remedy

How can First Church enhance their corporate worship time so that all people of all ages are engaged and transformed through an encounter with God? They can start by developing a coherent and clear theme/story that weaves itself through all the elements of the service and, thus, provides meaning for people in the midst of the chaos and complexity of our world.

Pine and Gilmore’s book The Experience Economy makes the case that we live in a Postmodern world in which people crave experiences as much or more than they desire commodities, goods, and services. This is why people will pay four or five times more for a cup of coffee at Starbucks than they pay at McDonald’s. The customer is paying for more than a cup of coffee; she is purchasing an experience that Starbucks seems to have a knack for creating. Pine and Gilmore assert that “experiences represent an existing but previously unarticulated genre of economic output” (ix) and that “work is theatre and every business a stage,” according to the subtitle of their book. People want a dramatic experience, the kind that theatre is designed to foster. People are seeking an experience that they can participate in (Pine 48). They not only want an experience for the sake of experience but for the end result of transformation. Pine and Gilmore write, “What are people really after as they enter into all these pursuits? Experience, yes. But there is more than that: we want to transform ourselves, to become something different” (164). In other words, many of us want businesses, institutions, and churches to “stage experiences that change us” (163). The church need not cater to the whims of our consumer culture, but the church specializes in cultivating an experience with God that leads to transformation.

If we begin to view corporate worship as theatre, we will consider the importance of staging an experience through which people can encounter God for transformation. The Holy Spirit through the pastor and worship team serves as the director and, of course, the script is the Scriptures. Every person who leads various elements of the worship gathering is an actor. As is the case with good theatre, there will be an obvious plot and theme that connects the parts of the service to the whole.

The pastor of First Church would benefit from gathering a diverse group of creative and theologically grounded people in the congregation to begin considering how the worship service might move from informational fragmentation to a transformational experience. This worship

arts team will also consider the importance of creating ways for congregants to participate in the experience. True worshipers are not consumers of religion but participants in the Story of Scripture rehearsed during worship and embodied throughout the week.

First Church not only wants to create a service that is experiential, but one that is also coherent and clear in terms of its theme. In the fragmented Postmodern world we live in, people are starving for something that adds meaning and makes sense of life. While the worship experience should not be simplistic, it should be profoundly clear in its theme. This happens when the different parts of the service relate to each other in such a way that a compelling theme emerges.

Seeing Systems, by Robert Oshry, suggests that one can only make sense of the whole when one understands how the parts inter-relate. Oshry's book helps organizations understand how different systems, or groups, of people relate to one another. However, his theory can be adapted to First Church's desire for a more coherent worship experience. He writes, "blindness to other parts of the system...is a source of considerable misunderstanding and conflict" (Oshry 1). Again, Oshry is describing relational conflict but his main point can correlate to the design of a worship service. When worshipers don't see how the different parts of the worship experience flow into the whole, internal "misunderstanding and conflict" caused by confusion can become an obstacle to experiential transformation through worship. So a key question for worship planning becomes, how can we allow the theme to run through the thread of prayers, songs, sermon, and other elements of the service?

The corporate worship service of any church has the potential to create meaning out of the chaos that characterizes most of our lives and the world in which we all live. Several of Robert Terry's Seven Zones For Leadership correspond well with the meaning making that must happen for God's people through their worship gathering. In *Zone 1: Serving the Past*, the church develops "the knowledge of relevant history, a clarity about core values, skills for remembering and celebrating, a willingness to face hard truths, and the ability to preserve the sacred past" (83). While Terry is not writing specifically for church leaders, Zone 1 does highlight the importance of creating meaning for the church by helping them to remember the past acts of God among His people.

Zone 3b: Affirming Shared Identity also serves as a guide to accentuate corporate worship's meaning-making ability. When the church worships together we are called to remember who we are, what we are about and that we share this identity. Terry's words ring true for the church when he writes, "With identity in place, believed and lived, an organization is a mighty force, a solid player in the world of potential chaos. Leadership affirms the shared identity, making it authentic" (160). Corporate worship develops and stabilizes our shared identity as people who are experiencing an eternal relationship with Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit, and redeemed by the Father. Being reminded of this identity gives the church a hope that perhaps, by God's grace, we can impact our world for Christ.

The final zone to be considered has a title that simply states what worship enables; it is called *Zone 6: Creating Meaning In Chaos*. Here, Terry acknowledges that our world and the organization one may lead is "unknowable and unfixable" (295). This, of course, creates a fear-filled void. Leadership, especially in the church, must find a way to fill that void and replace fear with a meaningful narrative in which people locate themselves. For nearly two thousand years Christian worship has sought to replace the fearful reality of a world that has always

seemed chaotic by inviting people to live into the story of the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and return of Jesus the Christ.

Whenever we apply research from outside the church, we must do so through a thoughtful theological lens. Some principles from the business world can contradict the heart of Christian mission and betray the heart of Christ. Such is not the case with the resources employed in this essay. Incorporating several ideas from The Experience Economy, Seeing Systems, and Seven Zones For Leadership, books not written predominately for the church, can guide worship leaders in designing a service that is coherent and clear in its theme, fosters an experience that leads to transformation, and creates meaning in the midst of life's chaos. First Church can now begin to move forward since they have a diagnosis of their problem and a framing of their solution.

Works Cited

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