

Clear the Stage



Gary Wilkerson December 26, 2016

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As we begin 2017, I believe it would bring great pleasure to the heart of God if we would fall to our knees and ask him what he would desire to see done differently in our church and our own lives.

Like many churches across America, our church in Colorado Springs is blessed with a talented staff and wonderful accommodations. I thank God for all the gifts and means we have to create a great environment for our people. But lately I've been stirred by something I see happening in a lot of congregations across the country. I've wondered if the elements many of us employ—entertaining music, social connectedness, uplifting sermons—might have begun to overshadow the central things. In the midst of all these upbeat elements, is the cross of Christ still our focus? Is it possible Jesus' death and resurrection are getting lost amid the positive vibe we all work to create? I've spent a lot of time in prayer asking God whether we're fully living out the prophetic role he has called us to as his body on earth.

I want to bring the same challenge to the larger church today. A lot of pastors design their worship services to uplift anyone who comes through the doors. They spend the week coordinating the music, sermon and fellowship spaces to make sure the visitors and the congregation feel good. The truth is, we've become professionals at creating comfortable, uplifting, even pleasurable environments. But are we worshiping God in spirit and in truth? And is that transforming us into his living image? Is the world's view of Christ's body one of pleasure and reassurance—or of transforming lives with power that comes from beyond ourselves?

Asking these things may make me sound like nothing more than an oldschool crank, griping about how things have changed. But the Bible has a lot to say on this subject—and God takes our worship most seriously.

Scripture is filled with cautions about bringing empty worship to God. The Lord warned his prophets and priests, "You've healed the wounds of your people, but only superficially." In other words: "You made them feel good for the moment. They forgot about their struggles. But you planted a false hope in them."

If the church today is only about positive thinking and making people feel better, we offer nothing that Tony Robbins or Oprah Winfrey can't give. Church isn't about what you or I can do; it's about what Christ has done. The marvelous relationships we build aren't so we can be a great social center. The sermons and music we offer aren't entertainment. Church is God's house, and when we gather in his name he marks it with his presence. That presence always compels us to awe. According to Paul, God's presence should be so central to our worship, so palpable, that if a nonbeliever walks in he'll fall to his knees crying, "Surely God is in this place!"

The book of Revelation gives us powerful images of angels worshiping in God's presence. They cover their faces as they fall before him crying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" These powerful beings clear the stage in heaven for the One who's high, lifted up and rightly exalted as the name above all names.

God's presence is meant to bring light to our eyes. It shows us the difference between the wheat and the chaff in our lives. That's why God's Word is called a refining fire: It purifies. It's also called a sword, an instrument that

pierces and cuts. These tools are used to separate things, dividing the pure from the impure.

By definition, these aren't pleasant things—they're uncomfortable. And we naturally resist them. We cry out for comfort and pleasure in our life, our job, our pursuits, our home. As the Bible states, our hearts are inclined to cry, "Speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions" (Isaiah 30:10). And the material world is always waiting to meet our need. Now churches compete to supply us with similar kinds of pleasure on Sundays. But the Bible warns about the danger of seeking only messages that comfort instead of those that challenge. The Israelites loved being able to tolerate their idols and not give them up. The consequence was they lost their discernment.

God's first commandment is, "You will have no other gods before me." This doesn't just mean we're to prioritize God before other things. The word "before" in this verse actually means "in my presence." God is saying, "Don't bring any gods into my presence—your idols of pleasure, your ambition, your human abilities. I won't abide any of it." God is calling us all to clear the stage, that Christ may be central once more.

The first place God wants to clear the stage is our worship.

Our approach to worship today is like TV's "The Voice." The show's panel of judges keeps their backs turned so they can't see the performer. Their only standard for what they hear is, "Do I like it?"

That's also the only standard a lot of Christians bring to their church's worship: "Do I like it?" Not, "Is God surely in this place?" For a long time, a debate waged over which honored God more, hymns or contemporary music; of course, the answer is neither. We have only one standard for our worship: "But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:23-24). Yet like the judges on "The Voice," we want to be entertained rather than to bow to our knees in awe. And churches accommodate us with brilliantly staged lighting, smoke machines and choreographed worship teams.

Please don't think I'm taking shots at worship leaders. I'm aiming at a church culture we've all created. We demand entertainment, and we want our worship leaders to be pop stars. If you think I'm exaggerating, worship music now has its own best-seller charts on iTunes and Billboard. A composer or "performer" of worship songs can swipe a screen to find out where he or she ranks in popularity. But God's presence has nothing to do with anyone's popularity. He's present with those who seek him on their knees, not on stage.

In a lot of churches people are being drawn away from true worship by a spirit that isn't God's. Our focus has slowly and subtly shifted from Christ and his cross to things of flesh. A couple of decades ago worship songs began a shift from Christ-centered theology to "I"-centered worship—"I lift my hands, I sing your praises, I glorify your name." Now worship songs go even further, with lyrics like, "I love being near you." The focus isn't just on us but on what we love.

I want you to consider just one verse from a hymn by Charles Wesley. Note the awe-filled theology he packs into it: "And can it be that I should gain / An interest in the Savior's blood? / Died He for me, who caused His pain / For me, who Him to death pursued? / Amazing love! How can it be, That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?" This is the worship due our amazing God: "Lord, you're bigger, you're grander, you're greater, you're more glorious than anything known to man. We bow in reverence before you!"

I'm not just some old guy who longs for old-school worship. I've heard beautifully deep songs from young writers that send me to my knees. I'm able to worship in any environment, with any style of music, for one reason: I know I'm in God's holy presence. I've worshiped in humble churches in Central Asia where songs have the clangorous sound of silverware hitting the floor—yet if God is present, my soul always responds, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord—surely you're in this place."

God told the prophet Amos, "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.... Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream" (Amos 5:21, 23-24). God is saying to every generation, "It's not the song or the sound that I seek from you. It's the righteousness that flows from your worship and the deeds it stirs you to do in my name."

We can no longer measure a song's power by whether it entertains or any other manmade standard. We measure

it by whether it calls forth what the Holy Spirit wants for his body in that moment. Our worship is to be an ever-flowing stream of his righteous presence. Thus, we dare no longer allow on stage those “who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp...who... anoint themselves with the finest oils” (Amos 6:5, 6). This speaks of leaders we anoint based on their talent, skill and cleverness. God is calling us to clear the stage of any standard other than this: “Surely you are in this place, O God!”

God also calls pastors and lay people to clear the stage.

I speak to myself when I say to all pastors: Do we place more confidence in strategies, structures and programs than in God to lead us? If we do, we need to clear the stage of those things. Our congregations don't need consultants to lead them—they need men and women who know God. It's time to clear the stage of any mindset that rushes to the boardroom but ignores the prayer room.

If you're a lay Christian, you may be saying, “Amen! I want a pastor, not a CEO.” But do you get depressed at the thought of attending a church that may be less dynamic, less attractive to your non-Christian friends, and with fewer programs for your kids? What if your congregation slowly dwindles until only half are left? What if that's the price for allowing your pastor to be a man of prayer instead of an administrator; for following God's holy direction instead of church-growth direction; for welcoming sermons about God's grief instead of just pep talks?

We all want comfort from church. But even our Master Jesus didn't get all the comfort he desired. On the night before his death, he prayed for God to let the cup of pain pass from him. Yet when God's will became clear, Jesus drank the cup in obedience—and that is all the difference.

Churches may have all the makings of a perfectly dynamic body. We may make sure every sermon is tightly articulated, every song perfectly tuned, every espresso machine filling people's cups—but it's all worthless if God's presence is nowhere to be found. That's why Peter told the early church, in effect, “We need to leave all this administrative work to deacons. If we're to be true ministers of God, we have to spend every moment we can seeking his face.”

It's time to clear the stage of surveys that ask people what they want from church, rather than asking what God wants. If surveys dictate our direction, we may as well take down our sign that reads “church” because we won't be one. We'll be a professional organization like any other—one that seeks success based on market demands. That's not the gospel.

Here is gospel ministry, according to Paul: “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry” (2 Timothy 4:1-5). Paul is clear with Timothy: “I charge you as a minister of God: reprove, rebuke, exhort. That is fulfilling your ministry!”

I ask you honestly: Is the whole ministry of Christ's church being fulfilled? Or have we settled for a church of comfort and pleasure? I can promise you, if pastors are allowed to be pastors...if worship leaders are allowed to spend as much time in prayer as at rehearsal and sound check...if people come seeking biblical truth instead of just fleshly comfort... then our joy will return. Our purpose will return. Our mission will be clear. We'll testify with Jeremiah, “Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart” (Jeremiah 15:16). Then, when a stranger enters our door, he'll fall on his face in holy awe. He'll realize he's found the answer he's hungered for his whole life. And he'll cry, “Surely God is in this place!” Amen—may it be so, Lord Jesus.

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