

Thoughts about a “Call to Worship” By Jim Higgs

My first remembrance of a “Call to Worship” was when I was eleven years old. Our family had moved from Dierks, Arkansas to Pueblo, Colorado. My father had accepted the pastoral call from the Park Hill Baptist Church. What a culture shock! Not only from the sometimes cold rainy walk to the outhouse but also from bathing in two galvanized tubs each Saturday night to a house that had one and one half bathrooms in the parsonage. Even the church service was radically different. In the Holly Creek church there was the singing from a song book with shaped notes and a very definite twang of gospel music. I remember the casualness of it all especially the entrance each Sunday of a large Collie dog who felt very comfortable sleeping in front of the communion table. The Sunday morning service in the new congregation began with a prelude from the organ and piano and the marching in of an organized choir. Then the choir would sing very softly and solemnly the “Call to Worship” which was “The Lord is in His holy temple.” I must say it was a bit scary to my little mind. When I attended Dallas Seminary one of the professors intent on getting our hymnology more correct took aim at this call to worship by singing the words in a quivering trembling voice, “the Lord is in His hooollly temmmple...Let all the earth keep silent...keep silent!” He made it sound spooky like Halloween. Then he said that these words were from Habakkuk 2:20 and spoke of judgment. He claimed that this was not about worship but the impending wrath of God.

I have been observing worship as a pastor for over 50 years and I don’t want to be cynical like Andy Rooney, but genuinely concerned about elements of worship. After all Jesus indicated that this was the ultimate goal of salvation. He said that the Father is seeking worshippers. It appears to me that the worship service should begin with some invitation or explanation of why we have gathered.

Since my last assignment as an interim pastor concluded several months ago Joyce and I have been visiting various churches in the Antioch and Brentwood section of California. There are a number of churches in this area of some 200,000 people. I have come to believe that the “Call to Worship” is mostly like an out dated men’s tie. These are a few examples:

- As the praise leader moves to the platform and straps on his guitar he loudly asks, “Are you ready to worship?” There were a few soft “amen’s” and some mumbled “yeses.” Then he follows with

“Let’s worship with enthusiasm, let’s hit this sucker with all we’ve got.”

- At another gathering the auditorium is dimly lit and at the announced time the lights go on and the praise leader’s guitar strums from 0-60 as fast as a Ferrari race car. All are expected now to stand and sing words on the large screen.
- In one church the emphasis it seemed was “hugging” everybody for 15 minutes and then the praise group moved to the stage and a man with his guitar ambles in front of the audience and says, “Anybody have a birthday this week?” Since there was none he began to lead the group in a song that few seemed to know.
- The pastor of a contemporary church started the service bemoaning the fact that his vacation was not as satisfying as he desired. It was about the changes in flight times and the seating. To say the least it was less than a serious explanation of why we were gathered.
- I was somewhat surprised at the orderly, reverent and spiritual entrance into the worship time of three churches we visited. The Church of Christ, the Seventh Day Adventist Church and the Lutheran Church.

(Please do not assume that Joyce agreed with all my assessments, because we did differ in our responses to some of the churches we attended.) But I can honestly say thus far, worship formats are a hodgepodge of elements often without a flow or connectedness. I am wondering if congregational worship is a casualty of today’s absence of a “theology of worship.” I found that phrase after I thought I was being original in the writings of Ralph T. Martin in his book, *The Worship of God*. He notes that there has been a failure to construct a systematic theology of worship. The result in his words is that “Every person is left apparently to his or her own best ideas and emotions, resulting in a veritable kaleidoscope of patterns and forms of worship throughout Christendom, In fact, there is far more variety and flexibility in regard to the meaning and practice of the corporate worship of God than in relation to what Christians believe about God, the world, or the person of Christ—even these days of doctrinal latitudinarianism.”

In 1998 Donald Hustad tuned in by writing that, “Many churches today have little corporate prayer and almost no reading of Scripture. Calls to Worship

and Benedictions are considered to be timeworn and irrelevant”—even those whose words come directly from the Bible.” *True Worship* by Donald P. Hustad

Why should I be concerned? There are several reasons.

- A “Call to Worship” is embedded in many Scriptures, Worship is deeply embedded in the Book of Psalms.

Psalm 66:1-4

Shout joyfully to God, all the earth; Sing the glory of His name; Make His praise glorious. Say to God, "How awesome are Thy works! Because of the greatness of Thy power Thine enemies will give feigned obedience to Thee. "All the earth will worship Thee, and will sing praises to Thee; They will sing praises to Thy name."

Psalm 95:1-3

O come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; Let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving; Let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms. For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods.

Psalm 96: Praise him, all creation

Leader: Sing a new song to the Lord.
Sing to the Lord all the earth.
Sing to the Lord, bless his name.

All: Proclaim his salvation day by day,
Tell his glory among the nations,

Leader: Tell his marvels to every people. The Lord himself made the heavens;
In his presence are splendour and majesty,
In his sanctuary power and beauty.

All: Ascribe to the Lord, families of the people,
Ascribe to the Lord beauty and power;
Ascribe to the Lord the glory due to his name.

Leader: Bring an offering, bear it before him,
Worship the Lord in the splendour of holiness,
Tremble before him, all the earth!

All: Let the heavens rejoice and the earth be glad,

Let the sea thunder and all that it holds,
Let the fields exult and all that is in them,
Let all the trees of the forest cry out for joy.

Leader: At the presence of the Lord, for he comes,
He comes to rule the earth,
To judge the world with justice
And the nations with his truth.

(Taken from *Be Our Freedom, Lord* prepared and edited by Terry C. Falla)

Psalm 96:8-13

Ascribe to the Lord the glory of His name; bring an offering, and come into His courts. Worship the Lord in holy attire; Tremble before Him, all the earth. Say among the nations, "The Lord reigns; indeed, the world is firmly established, it will not be moved; He will judge the peoples with equity." Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; Let the sea roar, and all it contains; let the field exult, and all that is in it. Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy before the Lord, for He is coming; for He is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in His faithfulness.

Psalm 100

Shout joyfully to the Lord, all the earth. Serve the Lord with gladness; come before Him with joyful singing. Know that the Lord Himself is God; it is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; we are His people and the sheep of His pasture. Enter His gates with thanksgiving, and His courts with praise. Give thanks to Him; bless His name. For the Lord is good; His loving-kindness is everlasting, and His faithfulness to all generations.

A PERSONAL CONFESSION: With no negative reflections on my professors in seminary, "I missed the boat." We seemed to have moved through the Book of Revelation as though we were charting the course of end times. Years later my spirit was refreshed by Eugene Peterson's commentary on that book which he entitled *Reversed Thunder*. He saw the main goal of the book of John as portraying the worship of the Triune God. Let me just give a brief outline of Revelation four and five to illustrate that the whole book can be seen through the worship filter.

4:1-3—the vision of God.

4:4-8—the vision of the Throne

4:9-11—the worship of God

5:8—the prayers of submission

5:1-5 the Sovereign One

5:5-6 –the Only One

5:7-14—the three great choruses, vv. 9-10; 11-12; and 13.

- A “Call to Worship” is to readjust our thinking. One student of worship articulates this better than I. Let me share a few sentences from C. Welton Gaddy in his book, *The Gift of Worship*. “Assuming that all the people present in a worship service are ready to worship is a serious misperception. Minds and bodies, attitudes and interests, may be miles apart. A businesswoman cannot seem to get her mind off a sales presentation scheduled for eight o’clock the next morning. A married couple sits together seething with anger at each other. They fussed all the way to the door of the sanctuary. White-hot wrath does not dissipate quickly. A middle-aged man sits in grief. His mother’s funeral was the previous afternoon. Several people are wondering if the service will conclude in time for them to race home and see the opening kickoff of a televised foot ball game. A few people are whispering to each other, inquiring about the absence of some of their friends. Students from one high school are squirming with excitement thinking about their past Friday night’s basketball victory over a big rival and wanting to “rub it in” on church members from the losing school. A cluster of adults is buzzing with low-voiced complaints about the temperature of the room. A church leader, who has scanned the printed order of service for the day, comments to a friend, “I don’t like the voice of the soloist for today.” So I believe reality demands that some reflection and attention needs to be allowed for the congregant to turn to God in a reverent and meditative way. It’s not as though each person commits temporary amnesia, but it helps to bring their burdens before the God they worship.
- A “Call to Worship” can prepare our minds to consider the theme of the service. During the eighteen months of my last interim pastoral assignment I became increasingly concerned for the “the call to worship.” I began to give serious thought to prepare that aspect of service each week. I didn’t put my ear to the keyhole to find out what the parishioners thought, but I did draw some encouragement in my spirit that it was a healthy discipline. I would like to give a few examples of the “calls” I prepared.

Example One:

Good morning people loved by God!
Cared for by the angels!
Prayed for by Joyce and me and other brothers
and sisters in Christ.

Jesus visited seven first century churches in Asia Minor.

Jesus told five of them that they needed to clean house. The seventh one was asked to open the door so that Jesus might be welcomed.

Let me read Revelation 3:19-20. That message applies to all who meet this morning in churches world-wide.

Then the call to worship was given, Revelation 4:1, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.”

The following verses reveal what happens in heaven all the time, verse 8. (The worship leader will read this verse.)

Many a congregation when it assembles must look to the angels like a muddy puddle sea shore at low tide; littered with every kind of rubbish and odd and ends—a distressing sort of spectacle. And then the tide of worship comes in, and it’s all gone; the dead sea urchins and jelly fish, the paper and empty cans and the nameless bits of rubbish. The cleansing sea flows over the whole lot. So we are released from a narrow selfish outlook on the universe by a common act of worship.

Let’s take a deep breath and spend a minute reflecting on that sentence from the model Prayer, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth and it is in heaven.” Then Marlon and the praise group will prompt us to worship in song.

Example two:

When worship should begin or can begin is not always when worship does begin.

Motives play a big part about why we have come to church. Sometimes those motives need time to be changed from “have to come” to

“I’m glad I came.”

Couples on the way to church almost there
and the wife says, “I think I left the iron on.”
or the children in the back seat trying to land a knock
out punch to their sibling. Then the worship
leader finds that three of the singers failed to
tell her they won’t be there. Or the pastor was
just been told before the sermon that the deacons want to
meet him as soon as the service is over. There are a
myriad of things that might hinder the person to say,
“I’m ready to sing, 'Oh how I love Jesus.' ”

So it is good to assemble and take a deep breath and say
I am here to focus on my Heavenly Father, a Loving Savior
and be submissive to the blessed Holy Spirit.

So in Psalm 95 we hear the invitation to worship

“We come in joy.” Vv. 1-2

“We come in reverence.” V. 6

“We come in faith or expectation.” V.7-8.

Take a moment to search your heart.

We come with different needs and moods.

Chuck Girard put it this way. (1974)

Sometimes alleluia

Sometimes praise the Lord.

Sometimes gently singing

Our hearts in one accord.

Example three:

Call to Worship

Good morning everyone. All of us are objects of the Heavenly Father’s
love, His angel’s care, and the prayers of one another.

We have been preparing for your attendance to day.

Josette Pinto “Josie” and Jocelyn worked in the flower garden this
week even though it was cold. The landscape helps to draw our
attention to the Creator God. Give a hand of praise to God for these
two women.

Lina S, has prepared this worship bulletin and communication piece to let us know what's happening. Give a hand of praise to God for these dear women.

What is the call to worship? I suppose it is something like the gavel used by the Mayor, Speaker of the House or the Sergeant in the Army "Attention!" It calls us to a spiritual huddle so that we can focus our attention on the target audience who is God.

Psalm 27:8 "My heart says to you "Seek his face!" "Your face Lord, I will seek, Do not hide your face from me."

Take a moment to understand where God likes to live. I am reading Isaiah 57:15, "For this is what the high and lofty One says—he who lives forever, whose name is holy; "I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite."

Turn in your hymnbook and let us read together number 407 (Jesus Calls Us), vv.3-4

In our joys and in our sorrows,
Days of toil, and hours of ease,
Still He calls, in cares and pleasures,
"Christian, love me more than these."

Jesus calls us; by Thy mercies,
Savior, may we hear Thy call,
Give our hearts to Thine obedience,
Serve and love Thee best of all.

So, let us take a deep breathe and quietly prepare our heart for worship. After one minute Marlon will lead us in worship music.

- What have I done in this regard?
I have been faithful for the last six months of pastoral ministry to spend at least an hour each week in thinking and praying for "The Call to Worship." That kind of time is necessary in recognizing the theme of the service and how to prepare the hearts for it. During that time there was the death of eight near our church in the horrible San Bruno fire. I knew what was on the hearts of the people and tried to wade into their feelings which bordered on "Why would God allow that?" So we were on the same page as I shared in the sermon that Jesus gave in Luke 13

- Where can I find resources for calls to worship?
Hymnals, if you can find one. Many of them had editors who were very cognizant of “Calls to Worship.” One of my favorites is *Hymns for the Family of God*.

The Media, hardly a week goes by without a national or international event that becomes the talk at coffee time. While the iron is hot use it. You will be preparing the way for the listener to look to God for some comfort and hope.

Use the Christian Calendar. Advent, Easter, Pentecost and others offer the worship leader such a joyful way of beginning the service. “O Come All You Faithful” “Gladly with aye we adore thee.”

Use the National Calendar. Thanksgiving, July 4th, Labor Day, Memorial Day, Martin Luther King Day, Mother's Day and Father's Day.

In a study guide prepared by Dr. John Shouse of Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary there is a section entitled: 38 Ideas For Calls to Worship. With his permission I am noting three of the creative ideas.

1. Have a silent observance of the Lord's Supper at the beginning of the congregational service.
2. Following the prelude, initiate the call to worship with the congregation standing and joining in silent prayer while the organist chimes the hour. The chiming may be followed by the congregation repeating the Lord's prayer.
3. Enlist several persons in advance to stand and quote from memory or read a stanza of a favorite hymn to begin the service.