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16

Can Worship Leaders Worship?

Pastors, as player-coaches, must both give instructions and follow them at the same time.

—BEN PATTERSON

Some of the things the apostle Paul said scare me. For instance: “I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, *I myself will not be disqualified for the prize*” (1 Cor. 9:26–27 NIV, emphasis added).

That makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up—spiritually speaking, that is.

It is an occupational hazard of the ministry, is it not, to have spent our time and energy trying to get others to love, obey, and worship Jesus Christ, only to discover in the end that we ourselves have not. We have been so occupied with coaching other runners that we ourselves have never actually run the race!

Pastors have an extraordinarily difficult job, one filled with great spiritual peril. We are player-coaches. We must both tell others how to be Christians and be Christians ourselves. We must both preach what we practice and practice what we preach. The difficulty is the tension between the two. The great pastoral peril is to succumb to the temptation of being just a coach.

Nowhere is this problem more apparent to me than in the Sunday worship service. I can get so preoccupied with trying to get the congregation to worship that I don’t worship.

It doesn’t take much to get me to forget why I am there in the first place. Sitting as I do, up front on the platform, I can see most of what is happening in the sanctuary. I can see if the ushers are botching their job. I will notice if the junior highers sitting in the back are nudging each other and giggling. I will be more aware than I want to be if a young woman is imprudently wearing a low-cut sun dress to worship. If the choir sings poorly or an associate goofs a cue or the congregation seems half asleep, then I am distracted or dismayed or disgusted or all of the above.

In any case, the player-coach becomes only a coach. His attitude and tone cease to be “Let *us* worship God,” and becomes “*You* worship God.”

This peril presents itself in its purest form when I preach. Every good preacher I know is a bit of a ham. He or she enjoys standing up front and having people listen. There is nothing wrong with that pleasure in itself. When pressed into the service of God, it can make for effective communication. When left to itself, it can sour and cause us to worship not God but ourselves.

I can’t count the times I have felt the sweat running down my back as I struggled to hold on to a congregation I felt was slipping through my fingers. I was losing not only them but also my focus on why I was there. If you’d asked me after one of those services how the worship went, I would have said, “Terribly!” Why? Because my sermon didn’t cut it.

The same can happen in reverse when I feel the sermon clicked. Then I believe the worship service was a grand success because I performed well.

Both are cases of the worship leader ceasing to worship in the act of leading. Instead of the sermon being itself an act of worship, it becomes a performance. In one case, a performance that failed; in the other, a performance that succeeded. But in either case, it was a performance *for the people*.

When I preach for God before the people, I am a player-coach. When I preach for myself before the people, I am just a coach.

What do I do about this? I have developed a few mental and spiritual exercises, none of which, alone or in combination with the others, have been 100 percent effective in making me a worshiping worship leader. But they have helped.

Prayer

I pray specifically, throughout the week, that what I do on Sunday morning will be pleasing to God. I also ask God to let that singular desire be my motivation as I lead worship.

I try to make Sunday morning, before I enter the sanctuary, a time of quiet before the Lord. This is hard, because although I give thoughtful and rigorous preparation to my sermons, I cannot make myself come up with the final product before 6:45 Sunday morning. We worship at 8:00 A.M. If we worshiped at 8:30, I wouldn't be finished until 7:15. I'm not sure why this is so, but I think it has something to do with wanting the sermon, when it's delivered, to be "hot off the press" with all the late-breaking news items, spiritually speaking.

Whatever the reason, Sunday mornings before worship are often my least prayerful days of the week. I hope that what I have done Monday through Saturday will make up for that lack. I pray throughout the week with that in mind.

Good preparation

The more thought my staff and I put into planning worship during our Tuesday morning staff meetings, the better able I am not to worry about worship details on Sunday. The less worried I am, the more emotionally able I am to worship as I lead in worship.

I realize this may not sound helpful to pastors of congregations that prefer a distinctly nonliturgical, unstructured approach to worship. But I offer it, nevertheless, as an apology for the great benefits of planned worship. I believe the Holy Spirit can speak as

clearly on Tuesday morning as he can on Sunday. In fact, I think he can speak more clearly when the pressure is off and we are quiet and prayerfully thinking through the service.

Planning does not rule out the immediacy of God speaking in the present tense. My experience is that preparation provides a vehicle for these things to happen. It certainly helps enable the worship leader to worship.

Specific worship behaviors

I do a couple of little things during worship to keep me focused.

After the people are welcomed and before they are actually called to worship, we have a few moments for quiet preparation. Usually the pianist plays a reflective prelude. During this time I make it a point to really pray. I studiously keep my eyes closed—very important for not noticing all the things that may be happening in the narthex!

When I sing hymns, I do something my friend David Mains once suggested. I do not look at the congregation, but above them. I imagine Christ standing there physically, and I sing the words of the hymns directly to him. That in itself not only radically refocuses my attention on the reason for our gathering together, but it can also be very moving. More than once I have been moved to tears as I imagine singing directly to Jesus words like "Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart" or "My God, how wonderful thou art, thy majesty how bright!" or "Alas, and did my Savior bleed, and did my Sovereign die? Would he devote that sacred head for sinners such as I?"

Attitude

I try to enter the sanctuary recognizing that the service is in God's hands now. Of course, it was when we planned it on Tuesday, too. But now I want to jump in and participate, mistakes and all, and entrust the outcome to the Lord. I don't want to hesitate or worry. It is

time to forget about how smoothly our plans are progressing and simply worship God.

When I was playing high school football, we lost the second game of the season—one we shouldn't have lost. Films of the game revealed that many of us were hesitating at the line of scrimmage because we were not sure who to block. All the next week, we practiced firing off the line. The coach drilled us to knock somebody down, *anybody!* "Do something, even if it is wrong!" he shouted.

That may not be the most felicitous metaphor for worshiping God, but it helps me. I want to go into worship ... and worship! Even if I sing when I shouldn't, forget to pray when I should, or preach a mediocre sermon, I'm going to concentrate fully on God. If the sermon is weak, I want it to be zealously and earnestly weak! A. W. Tozer was right when he said it is not *what* we do that makes a thing sacred, it is *why* we do it.

Grace

Finally, I remind myself that only by the grace of God are we here to worship him, and it will be by his grace that our worship will be successful.

When we stop to think about worship, just who do we think we are, walking into the presence of the almighty and holy God, the Ancient of Days, presuming to invoke his presence and offer him anything—even the praise and thanks that are his due?

Annie Dillard once wrote:

Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? The churches are children—mixing up a batch of TNT. One Hasidic slaughterer, whose work required invoking the Lord, bade a tearful farewell to his wife and children every morning before he set out for the slaughter house. He felt, every morning, that he would never see any of them again. For every day, as he stood knife in hand, the words of his prayer carried him into danger. After he called on God, he feared God might notice and destroy him before he had time to utter the rest, "Have mercy."

Mercy! It is only by his mercy that we can walk into his presence and call upon his name. It is only by his mercy that we *may* worship at all. It is only by his mercy that we *can* worship at any given service. All our plans and preparation, all our prayers and meditations, are no more than widows' mites cast into the temple treasury. Only the Master knows if what we did was worship. Only his Spirit will make it worship.

Pastors, of all people, should be aware of what is at stake when the people of God come to worship him. There is no higher and nobler task. There is therefore nothing capable of greater debasement and sin. It was in worship that Cain purposed to murder Abel.

We talk disparagingly of the congregation "just going through the motions" in worship, and well we should. To do so is to become cauterized to the things of God. But what of worship leaders who are just going through the motions? Even motions of leading worship?

Is not the peril even greater?

Indeed, Lord, have mercy!¹

¹ Shelley, M. (1995). *Changing lives through preaching and worship : 30 strategies for powerful communication* (1st ed.). Library of Christian leadership (163–168). Nashville, Tenn.: Moorings.