

TTT375 - Hosting Sunday Worship Series. Part 2 - Guidelines

13 August 2024

Introduction

I vividly remember the day Princess Diana died. Church was weird that Sunday. The song leaders did their best, but the congregation were dazed. My sermon did not hit the mark. We adjusted the service, including praying for Diana's family. However, it was not enough. We underestimated the emotional significance of the event. We can forgive ourselves because we were young and inexperienced and did not know better. However, the events are burned into my mind, not least because I learned the significance of context regarding public worship. In other words, meaningful collective worship is not simply about *what* you do; it's about how you think about what you are doing. That's what we're going to explore today.

Today, we continue our series exploring why we do what we do at a Sunday gathering. Last week, we introduced the concept of 'hosting' to frame the role of those leading us in public worship. We examined some New Testament examples and teachings on collective worship. Finally, we considered the aims of collective worship.

This time, we will examine general guidance for leaders of worship, including context, attitude, connection, themes, overloading, and preparation.

Guidance

What follows is guidance—not rules—and applies now, 2024, for me and the congregation in Watford. These guidelines will doubtless need to be updated in the future. They can and should be changed as needs dictate. No local practices are permanent - only the Word of God never changes!

1 Peter 1.24-25

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.”

Context

What you do and say should be affected by the time of year (Christmas, Easter, etc.), special days (Remembrance Sunday, Father's Day, etc.), visiting speakers and unexpected events (the outbreak of war, damage caused by freak weather, etc.). Paul's lesson in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16-47) differs significantly from his presentation in Athens (Acts 17:22-31). Why? Because the cultures and religious contexts of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) and Greece were very different. Context affects not only sermons but also prayers, songs (a song of lament is appropriate when there has been a death in the congregation, for example), and other elements of the service. Jesus set his teaching in Luke 13.1-5 in the context of recent events.

Attitude

In general, those speaking on a Sunday will want to have the attitude of a host. The early church met in homes most of the time. It was natural for the head of the house to be the host. For example, "Gaius, host to me and the whole church, greets you." (Romans 16.23) Good hosts do not make themselves the centre of attention but have the interests of their guests in mind and do their best to ensure things run smoothly so that people are not distracted from the purpose of the gathering.

Connections

When it is your turn to speak, do your best to connect with what has *just* happened and what will happen *next*. For example:

"That song helped me to.....and now Sarah will lead us in prayer."

"Thank you for the lesson, Charl. Your sharing about.....helps us as we approach taking the Lord's Supper because....."

Connections help avoid a disjointed service.

Themes

It is good practice for people leading parts of the service to find out in advance if there is a theme for the service that day. If so, it helps if we fit our sharing/praying, etc., into that theme. For example, let's say the theme is 'The mercy of Jesus'. If the welcome, prayers, lesson and songs are all connected with mercy, we will all go home thoroughly 'drenched' in that Biblical theme and Christlike characteristic. Elements could include songs like, 'You are merciful to me' and a prayer themed on "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions." Psalm 51:1; and a lesson on the

demoniac - "Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." Mark 5:19.

Overload

Perhaps you have experienced church services with several 'lessons' - one in the welcome, one from the sermon, another in the HOPE talk and a further 'lesson' in the communion talk.

Occasionally, one of the prayers turns into a 'lesson'.^[1] The problem, no matter how sincere each person has been in delivering their lesson, is that the hearers go away confused and overloaded. So many lessons in such a short time cannot all be absorbed. As a general habit, it works best when the sermon or equivalent is the *main* lesson and the other parts of the service support or augment that lesson.

Preparation

There is a balance between informality and formality or between spontaneity and preparation. We do not need a rule, but let us reflect on one point based on this passage:

"When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation." 1 Corinthians 14:26 NRSV

Here, we see that members of the Corinthian church had prepared what they were bringing to the service. While this passage is descriptive, not prescriptive, it speaks to the value of thinking about what we will say (or sing) in the days leading up to the service. Preparation is no barrier to spontaneity or informality. When you get up to speak, you can add to what you have prepared or change it, but some preparation is wise. If nothing else, you can more fully participate in the worship before you speak. If you are prepared, you can relax, listen, pray or sing wholeheartedly before it is your turn. Indeed, you will find it easier to incorporate anything relevant that has happened before you step up to speak. That said, we must always leave room for the Spirit to redirect us as he sees fit.

Questions for reflection & discussion

Where are you on the preparation/spontaneity spectrum? The extremes are unhealthy. Over-preparation is a by-product of controlling perfectionism and leads to deadness. Over-spontaneity is a by-product of indisciplined impulsivity and leads to confusion. What will help you to avoid the extremes?

Ecclesiastes 7.16-18

“Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise— why destroy yourself?
Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool— why die before your time?
It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. Whoever fears God will avoid all extremes.”

Summary

The six points above spell "C.A.C.T.O.P.". Not catchy, I grant you, but could the acronym be useful? The next time you are asked to do something public on a Sunday, why not run through the C.A.C.T.O.P. points as a checklist and see if it improves your helpfulness to the congregation?

It's time for the challenge of the week. The next time you lead in some form on a Sunday, pick one of the six points and make it the focus of your preparation.

Next week

Next time, we will consider the details of preparing and presenting various parts of the service, starting with what is often called 'The Welcome'. You will find out why I dislike that phrase!

Please add your comments on this week's topic. We learn best when we learn in community.

Do you have a question about teaching the Bible? Is it theological, technical, practical? Please send me your questions or suggestions. Here's the email: malcolm@malcolmcox.org.

If you'd like a copy of my free eBook on spiritual disciplines, "How God grows His people", sign up at my website: <http://www.malcolmcox.org>.

Please pass the link on, subscribe, and leave a review.

“Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.” (Psalms 100:2 NIV11)

God bless, Malcolm

1. For more on prayer-preaching, see my article [here: https://www.malcolmcox.org/should-we-pray-with-an-agenda/ ↩](https://www.malcolmcox.org/should-we-pray-with-an-agenda/)