

Worship as Evangelism

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Who Is Seeking and What Are They Looking For?

Scripture

Luke 15 illustrates through the parables of the Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, and Lost Son the nature of God as the “seeker” of the lost.

Luke 19:1–10 This story of Jesus and Zacchaeus records the nature of Jesus’ ministry “to seek and save the lost.”

Acts 8:26–39 The encounter of Philip and the Ethiopian queen’s official demonstrates that people may also be seekers.

Prayer

Ever-searching God, you offer grace to all people and nations. Give us the wisdom and understanding to seek out others in your name and for your sake. Amen.

Introduction

Worship is a service to God. In both Hebrew and English, the term *worship* has to do with the whole of a reverent life. Worship is not just what we do as a gathered community; it extends into our private lives as well. All that we do and all that we are is an act of worship. But it is in the context of corporate worship that the gathered community of faith gives back to God the adoration God deserves. In worship, the faithful rehearse redemptive history and celebrate God’s calling of a particular people to deliver God’s message of salvation to the world. As such, worship is an act of evangelism.

If worship is an act of evangelism, then it is important that we identify those participating in worship. This session attempts to clarify the term “seeker” as it relates to worship in the church.

The Reformed tradition more than any other has had a difficult time with the notion of seeking. The Reformed understanding is that God must move the individual to seek God. Consequently, churches within the Presbyterian/Reformed family have not been leaders in seeking “seekers” nor have they developed the fiery evangelism practices in worship that might appeal to those variously identified

as baby boomers, Generations X and Y, the 13th Generation, Baby Busters, or Millennials. Is it possible for those Christians for whom the concept of “irresistible grace” is an essential tenet to remain true to their theological tradition and also reach out to “seekers”? Must worship have the best characteristics of a Broadway show, a motion picture, a TV sitcom, a political speech, and a pep rally?

A typical Sunday morning service of a mainstream denomination today features an amazing variety of people. There are many ways to analyze these folks: by age, gender, political proclivity, income, or religious experience, to name a few. In recent years, a number of studies have examined the lives of those who attend churches in North America on Sunday mornings. These studies have different perspectives but they all recognize one basic fact: The number of church members in mainline denominations is declining.

Mainline Decline

The studies have proposed reasons for these declines. Many explanations have been proposed. A helpful way to group these explanations is to divide them into three categories: cultural factors, social structural factors, and institutional factors.

Cultural factors. Some argue that the shifting cultural scene in the past several decades in North America accounts for declining religious involvement in churches. These observers point to such factors as an increase in those who have received a liberal arts education; rises in pluralism, individualism, and privatism; as well as a growing anti-institutionalism in the minds of many people. All of these cultural elements have led to a loss of confidence in the church and have caused believers to leave it.

Social structural factors. Some point to various changes in the structure of American society during the last half-century and see in these changes the reasons why membership in mainstream churches has declined. They consider such elements as the decline of community, changes in family life and the role of women, and people switching from one denomination to another to be primary contributors to the falling numbers among mainstream churches.

“Seekers” may be present in the church, seeking answers, fellowship, or a friendly church home.

Institutional factors. Other analyses have pointed to a variety of institutional explanations as reasons for declining mainline church

membership. These include charges that churches have failed to be relevant, that they have engaged in too much social activism, that church leadership and programs have failed, and that churches have lost internal strength.

Recently analyses have pointed to additional reasons for church declines, which have taken place over a long period of time. The first reason for decline is the progressive weakening of mainline church life. Once seen as the center of the community where persons gathered for fellowship, education, and fun, the church has been replaced by community and fitness centers, social clubs, and school activities. The other reason is seen as the increase in relativism, individualism, and pluralism within the middle class.

Present along with church members may be those who are called “seekers,” those who have little or no formal involvement with the church. They may be seeking answers to deep questions of faith, or seeking fellowship or companionship, or seeking a friendly church home.

Many churches have tried to design worship experiences that will appeal to the different types of “seeker” groups. If worship is made “attractive” enough, seekers will be drawn to it and will join the church—that is often an assumption. In this view, worship is a form of evangelism that must be made appealing to the wants and needs of those who “seek.” The other aspects of the church’s life and program are geared to meet the needs of various groups within the church. Frequently, during the “announcements” period in the midst of worship, the congregation is informed of all the activities in which these groups may participate. It is easy, then, for the worship service to become a great opportunity to promote these programs. Some have seen these announcements in the worship services as resembling commercials on television—occasions to advertise a program or product.

Biblical Seekers

In the biblical account of Jesus and Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10), the story ends with Jesus saying, “the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.” Here we see the sent one not only as a preacher and teacher, but as one who fulfills the prophetic utterances as recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures (Ezekiel 34:16).

In Luke 15, God is depicted as a shepherd, an old woman, and a waiting father. In all three instances God is the one seeking. The shepherd happily picks up the sheep and places it around his neck

and goes home and calls in the neighborhood, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.” The community is also part of the second story. The woman, apparently very poor, loses one of ten coins she possesses. After seeking this drachma and finding it, she immediately calls in the neighborhood and invites them to rejoice with her, for the coin she lost has been found. Likewise the father invites the neighbors and family members to rejoice with him upon the return of his younger son.

The community is at the center of these stories where one finds the joy of discovery and the restoration of community. Jesus’ life is a living example of the parables he told. He eats with tax collectors and sinners because he has found them. They were lost. The invitation to participate in a community celebration in these parables becomes the invitation of Jesus to the church. When a person is lost the community should mourn and when the person has been found the community should rejoice. In Luke, it is the divine love of God that seeks out the sinner before the person repents.

One of the basic doctrines of the Presbyterian/Reformed faith is that we are lost in our sins and if left to ourselves we would continue to be lost. These parables point out that God seeks out the lost until they are found. The inference is that sinners belong to God, despite all appearances to the contrary. God’s grace seeks out the sinner, compelling the sinner to seek God. The heavens rejoice when one sinner repents and we are admonished to rejoice when an individual chooses to come home. Home in this case is the church.

*The Christian is to be a guide
along the path for those who
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However, there is a biblical precedent for the individual to be understood as the seeker. The story of the Ethiopian eunuch as recorded in Acts 8:26–39 shows the individual as the seeker. In this account, Philip is led, by a godly messenger, to a chariot in which an official of the Ethiopian queen Candace is reading Isaiah 53 aloud. Philip asks if the man understands what he is reading. The reply is, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” In this account, the term “seeker” may also be applied to Philip who, prompted by God, seeks out the Ethiopian. As with Philip, the Christian is to be a guide along the path for those who seek God and the church.

Worship Questions

From a purely human perspective, one could assume that the individual is the seeker. But from a theological and biblical perspective, it becomes clear that at the root is a presupposition that God began the search for the individual long before the individual sought God, even in these biblical accounts that seem to suggest the individual is seeking God. The words of the nineteenth-century hymn “I Sought the Lord” illustrate the Presbyterian/Reformed understanding of seeker:

I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew
he moved my soul to seek him, seeking me.
It was not I that found, O Savior true;
No, I was found of thee.¹

So the question “Who is seeking and what are they looking for?” becomes more complex to answer. If we are correct that there are elements of God seeking the individual, the individual seeking God, and the church seeking to guide the unchurched, then our worship must reflect these conclusions and ultimately our belief. Our study asks if it is possible to minister to and provide a worship environment that will encourage such searches.

To see our contemporary situations in mainline churches in light of these issues raises a number of important questions. These are theological questions about our understanding of such elements as culture, evangelism, worship, and the nature of the gospel.

- In what ways should our worship be constructed using the familiar elements of our culture? Should worship make use of contemporary cultural forms such as rock music, television screens, and entertainment formats that are familiar to worshipers? To make our presentation of the gospel effective, should we adopt and adapt these means to make worship most appealing for seekers?

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1. *Rejoice in the Lord: A Hymn Companion to the Scriptures*, ed. Erik Routley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), no. 162.

- In what ways should our worship be oriented for evangelism—that is, addressing the needs and interests of persons in relation to the gospel of Jesus Christ? Should worship services be focused on contemporary issues so that those “seekers” who are concerned with these issues will be drawn into the church? Can worship be “evangelistic” and still be nourishing for church members who attend worship regularly?
- In what ways should our worship maintain its traditional elements as parts of the worship service so that it may stand over against culture and not simply accept the culture’s norms? Can the traditional elements in our worship services be made meaningful to contemporary “seekers”? Can a traditionally styled worship service present the distinctiveness of the gospel in ways that are compelling to people today? Can we “reach out without dumbing down” our theology of worship?
- In what ways does our worship effectively communicate the content of the Christian gospel? Can the gospel be communicated in better ways than through the traditional worship service? In what ways must the gospel be translated into contemporary forms, which should be used for worship?

These types of theological questions arise when we consider today’s “seekers” and the challenges facing our churches in relation to worship. Other questions may arise as well.

Spiritual Practice

Write down some of the ways you have found God seeking you even as you were seeking God.

Questions for Reflection

What are some ways you and the church can be more open to “seekers”? Explore some of the reasons for the decline of mainline churches.