A Guide to Preaching and Leading Worship

William H. Willimon

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Contents

Introduction

Pastor, preacher, administrator, teacher, counselor, interpreter, organizer—we clergy now wear so many hats, fill so many roles. No wonder we are often victims of vocational confusion, becoming sidetracked in our direction and allowing the nonessentials to elbow out the essentials in our parish work.

While we do not deny the importance of all the things we pastors do, there is one role we must do well or we are in big trouble. If our time and talent are not heavily invested in the tasks of preaching and worship leadership, our congregations are correct in assuming that we have lost the central focus of our ministry.

I say this for practical and theological reasons. Practically, preaching and worship leadership must be the center of a pastor's attention because the laity expect it. Every survey of lay expectations for clergy, particularly in Protestant churches, puts preaching at the top of the list. Studies of church growth confirm that churches do not grow without vibrant Sunday morning worship.

In Sunday preaching and worship, a pastor is present with the people of his or her congregation in a more intentional, explicit, and sustained manner than is possible in any other pastoral activity. Here is where the vast majority of our people will primarily know us as faithful, caring, competent pastors. Thus, any pastor who gives insufficient time and attention to his or her preaching and worship is simply not using time well, nor is he or she ministering to the needs of the laity.

Preaching and worship leadership are also central concerns for theological reasons. The Reformed tradition defines the church as the setting where "the Word is rightly preached and

the sacraments are duly administered." The church is formed and reformed by these acts of faith. In the Roman Catholic tradition, Sunday worship is said to be "the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the fountain from which all her power flows" (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, No. 10).

Here is the church in its most basic form as well as a pastor engaged in the most basic of pastoral tasks. This handbook is a practical guide to enable you to be an effective preacher and liturgist. Too much is at stake in the life of the church for us pastors to be anything less than competent, committed, and well-informed "servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. 4:1).

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Sunday Morning

Evaluating and Planning the Service

A flag, a handshake, a kiss. These are some of the daily rituals that encompass our lives. Ritual—patterned, predictable, purposeful behavior—makes life coherent, manageable, and meaningful.

Rituals enable us to encounter and to survive potentially threatening aspects of life—death, sex, birth, God. Sometimes people say, "We are too ritualistic in our church," as if ritual were an optional experience for Christians. But all human groups, particularly human groups that dare to approach the most mysterious parts of existence, live by ritual.

As a pastor, you know that our worship rituals are ambiguous phenomena. Our rites help us to encounter the holy. Sometimes they protect us from the holy! For instance, Christians celebrate the Lord's Supper—a ritual meal. What does this act mean? Paul says the Lord's Supper is *koinōnia,* Communion (1 Cor. 10:16–17). In this meal we commune with Christ and with one another. But our rituals for the Lord's Supper often conflict with *koinōnia.* Sitting in separate rows of pews, eating bits of bread, drinking from individual glasses—this is the rite of community?

So the question for the church is not whether we should worship through ritual, but *Will our rituals enable the church to do what it needs to do when it gathers to worship?*

Time and again in our history, we have seen that rituals can be functional or dysfunctional. Our rites can edify us or enslave us. The way to reform bad rites is not simply to sweep them away, but rather to modify and replace them with more faithful liturgical expressions. Pastors are invariably reformers of worship, not because we believe in change for the sake of change, but because we know that these patterned stories, commands, symbols, gestures, and signs are the very source of our life and the test of our identity as Christians. These rites form or malform the church, so we should be attentive to what we are saying about the faith by what we do when we worship.

GUIDELINES FOR INNOVATION

The power of ritual is in its predictability and sameness. Ritual keeps calling and re-calling us to be attentive to what is important. Rituals must not be thoughtlessly tampered with, except for the best of reasons.

1. *Do not change a congregation's accustomed worship pattern until you have some clear understanding of the function of the accustomed patterns and unless you feel that the change is essential to preserving the vitality and fidelity of the congregation as people of God.* A good rule of thumb: make no major liturgical changes until you have served the congregation for at least a year.

2. *Never make liturgical changes solely at the pastor's discretion.* Include the laity in evaluating present practices, diagnosing problems, proposing the changes to be made, and evaluating whether the change should be a permanent part of your church's worship. Do your best to understand what the people get out of the present practice. Ask questions like, "You have been ushering here for many years. Tell me what your role is on Sunday morning."

3. *Be honest with yourself.* Ask yourself: Why do I want this change? Is it for purely personal matters of my own taste and liturgical preferences, or would this change truly benefit the corporate worship of this congregation? Everybody loses when liturgical innovation becomes a power struggle between the pastor and the people. As C. S. Lewis once said, "The charge is 'feed my sheep,' not 'run experiments on my rats.'"

4. *Use every means to explain the proposed change to the people.* Notes in the bulletin, a "rehearsal" before the service to help people feel more comfortable with the change, study groups in church school classes and other gatherings, even sermons can be ways to assure people that this change was proposed after much thought and for worthwhile reasons.

5. *Welcome comments on the changes.* Tell the congregation that you want to allow a reasonable period of time before a verdict is reached on whether or not the change should become a permanent part of the worship. The first few times we do something new in worship we usually don't like it simply because it is different and therefore uncomfortable.

6. *Introduce some innovation at a "special" service at a time other than Sunday morning.* For instance, a proposed change in the way your congregation celebrates Holy Communion might be received better at a Christmas Eve Communion service or on Maundy Thursday when people might expect and welcome something a bit different. If the change is well received, it may be introduced on a Sunday morning.

7. *Utilize the new worship resources of your own denomination in reforming your congregation's worship.* In most of our churches, there is little need for the pastor or Worship Committee to concoct special services individually. Few of us have the necessary verbal skills or historical and theological background required. Besides, your congregation has a right to expect that its worship will conform, at least in a general way, to the resources and expectations of your particular denominational heritage and expression of faith.

8. Finally, if your proposed liturgical changes are steadfastly resisted—even after your best attempts to involve the laity in

the planning, execution, and evaluation of those changes, even after your most skillful efforts to teach about those changes—*be willing to consider trying something else or backing off.* We only cling to and fight for those rituals that are important to us and functional for us. Sometimes misguided liturgical innovators have taken the worship away from the congregation, making the service over into their own clerical image of what ought to be, removing the liturgy from the forms and experiences of the congregation. This is a tragedy and the opposite of goals for innovation in the first place.

Now let us get down to specifics as we look at Sunday morning worship and the ways it can be improved.

In the past decade I have visited scores of Christian churches and conducted workshops and seminars for hundreds of pastors throughout the United States, Canada, and Australia. While many differences divide and distinguish the worship patterns of one church from those of another, there are a number of common weaknesses in our inherited worship patterns. These weaknesses are most common in Protestant churches (Roman Catholic parishes may have other problems). The needs may also differ from one socioeconomic situation to another because our worship is an intensely personal expression of who we are. Nevertheless, some generalizations can be made.

COMMON WEAKNESSES IN WORSHIP AND HOW TO CORRECT THEM

1. *Lack of Focus and Coherence in the Acts of Worship.* The service moves in a dozen different directions at once. A hymn on the work of the Holy Spirit follows Scripture concerning the need for deeper dedication. The sermon calls for action. The anthem after the sermon speaks of Jesus as the one who soothes our worried souls. Careful planning is needed to correct this confusion. Two resources can help give direction to the service.

Many denominations now adhere to the time-honored prac-

tice of using *The Revised Common Lectionary* to determine which Scripture shall be read on Sunday. A lectionary is a table of selected Scripture lessons for each Sunday of the year. The ecumenical lectionary is on a three-year cycle of lessons that give an Old Testament, Epistle, and Gospel lesson for each Sunday, plus a psalm. The lections relate, at least in a general way, to the liturgical season of the year. In Advent, for instance, such themes as repentance, prophecy, and expectancy dominate the lessons. The lessons are usually selected on the basis of the Gospel lesson, though not always.

By using the lectionary as the starting point for your planning of the service, music, prayers, responses, sermon, and visuals can be coordinated with a general theme for the day.

Before the beginning of each liturgical season, I list the prescribed lessons for each Sunday in the pages of a notebook; then I read over the lessons in an attempt to discern a general theme that is suggested by one of the lessons. I jot this theme down on the page for that Sunday. This practice enables me to collect liturgical materials, ideas for a sermon, and hymns with this theme in mind.

The *church year*, a round of liturgical seasons, is another resource for planning. Many of our services not only lack coherence and direction but are also too much alike in emotional tone and in theological substance. The pastor rehashes the same pet themes, Sunday after Sunday, preaching from the same limited range of Scripture, singing the same tried-and-true hymns to the point of boredom. Our spiritual lives have variety—peaks and valleys, times of unrestrained joy and times of somber introspection. Corporate worship ought to reflect some of this variety and richness. If every Sunday is a day for giddy-headed joy or else for doleful lamentation, we are not forming our worship with the complexity of the content of the Bible itself. The church year, with its round of seasons on themes based on the life of Christ, preserves us from this boredom and sameness.

Without the aid of the church year, our Sundays could lose their focus on Christ and become a programmatic year in

which the worship of God degenerates into a mere pep rally for the latest denominational cause or an expression of the pastor's personal whims. The church year includes the full sweep of Christ's life and teaching. As the colors change with each season (Advent, purple or blue; Christmas, white; Epiphany, green; Lent, purple; Easter, white; Pentecost, red), so also each season changes our focus, our perspective on the gospel. The gospel is a multifaceted jewel. The church year enables us to experience all sides of this jewel in their brilliance.

Advent anticipates the coming and coming again of Christ. During the four Sundays before Christmas, we prepare ourselves for the mystery of God coming to reign among us.

Christmas is the joyous festival of Christ's incarnation, extending to Epiphany (January 6).

Epiphany celebrates the revelation of Christ as the Savior of the world, even as he was revealed to the visiting Magi of old. During Epiphany, the mission and outreach of the church are emphasized.

Lent is the forty-day period beginning on Ash Wednesday and continuing until Easter. Lent is a time of self-examination, self-discipline, and focus on the realities of human sin that made the cross inevitable as God's loving response to our sin.

Holy Week begins with Palm Sunday, the day of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. On Maundy Thursday we remember the night he gathered with his disciples to observe the Last Supper. Good Friday is the somber day of commemoration of the crucifixion.

Easter joy contrasts with the previous days of Lent. Easter is the fifty-day season of joyful celebration of Christ's resurrection and reflection upon its meaning for us today.

Pentecost begins a season that some churches call "Ordinary Time." After the day when the church was born by an outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, there begins a long, orderly reflection upon the various themes of Christian belief.

Among the different denominations, there has always been variation in which days of the church year are celebrated in particular ways. But in your congregation, the church year and the

lectionary can be wonderful resources for planning a service in which all the various acts and media of worship are coordinated to give focus and direction to the service.

The lectionary also enables a pastor to give the lessons to musicians so that they too can plan in advance in accordance with the themes of the day. Most volunteer choirs must begin rehearsing for their choral music many weeks before they sing it in the service. It is embarrassing that many choir directors know what their choirs will be singing two months ahead while their pastor doesn't know what he or she will be preaching next Sunday!

It is wise for a pastor to meet with the music leaders and plan services a few months in advance. If the worship leaders see liturgical planning as a team effort, the service will automatically be more unified. In the last chapter of this book we discuss how a worship planning and evaluation committee might function in a parish.

2. *Inadequate Treatment of Scripture.* A few years ago we did a survey in my denomination and found that, in the majority of United Methodist churches, only one Scripture lesson was read each Sunday. Seventy-five percent of the time that lesson would be from one of the four Gospels. Yet we, like most Protestants, think of ourselves as a church that keeps the Bible central. We must expose God's people to a wider array of Scripture on Sunday mornings.

Once again, the three-year ecumenical lectionaries can be helpful here. While the lectionary is an excellent resource for biblical preaching, the main purpose of the lectionary is to facilitate the orderly reading of Scripture. We believe that the Bible contains God's Word—whether the Bible is preached from on Sunday morning or not.

Many of us must admit that we have used a limited canon on Sunday morning—mostly our favorite texts, which we use as a springboard for a sermon. Three lessons read from the lectionary every Sunday will give the people a new confrontation with the Word. When we read more Scripture, we may have to take more care in the way we read the Scripture so that the people can

appreciate its full significance. The use of trained, talented lay readers of Scripture is one way to make sure that the reading of Scripture is exposure to the true and lively Word.

One by-product of the new lectionaries is an increasing number of Christian educational materials and devotional resources that are keyed to a lectionary, which provides a linking of family devotional time or church school study sessions with Sunday worship. Check your denominational resources for the availability of such materials.

By the way, in the order of worship, the Scripture should immediately precede the sermon. When the Scripture is read early in the service, perhaps twenty minutes before the sermon, there is no apparent relationship between the read word and the preached word. When linked closely, the preaching and reading of the Bible are seen as reciprocal activities that nourish the church.

3. *Inadequate Opportunities for Congregational Participation and Response.* Many of the Sunday orders of worship feel like performances with the pastor speaking, the pastor praying, the pastor reading, and the choir singing, with little opportunity for the congregation to do anything but sit and listen.

The gospel message entails response to the Word, embodiment, incarnation. The gospel movement is incomplete without a response, a clear yes, in word and deed. When the Sunday service is simply a time to sit quietly, hear some good music and a good sermon, sing a hymn, and then go home to eat dinner, no wonder many of our people get confused into thinking that Christ only wants passive admirers rather than active followers.

What is true for the pastor is also true for the choir. Throughout the history of Christian worship, there has been a recurring tendency of choirs to take the music away from the congregation. The most appropriate function of the choir is to aid the congregation's music rather than perform for the congregation, to help make the *congregation* the choir. Many new anthems have the choir sing the more difficult parts and then have the congregation join in on the easier parts. Choirs can also help teach the congregation new hymns.

Laypersons can share in the leadership of the service—by reading Scripture, making announcements, leading prayers, and receiving the offering. Some acts such as preaching or blessing are appropriately reserved for the pastor, not necessarily because the pastor is any more adept at doing these things than the rest of us but because, when the pastor does these things, he or she does them as the representative, the official, of the whole church.

More acts of worship need to be placed after the sermon as our response to the reading and preaching of the Word. In past times, many congregations came to think of acts of worship like the pastoral prayer, the offering, the creed, and the anthem as mere preliminaries. And why not? We put all these acts early in the service, as little warm-up exercises to get us ready for the main event of the sermon. But what if we reclaimed these acts as *response* to the Word rather than preparation for the Word?

4. Insufficient Attention to the Acts of Gathering for Worship. If the people in the congregation have not seen each other during the past week, if there are things we need to do and say in order to assemble and focus ourselves in order to worship, these should be done in a time of gathering before the service begins.

If announcements are to be made, they should be made at this time, not in the middle of the service. You need not be embarrassed about beginning with announcements. This listing of the weekly activities and opportunities for service helps to underscore the need for the time of worship to be a time of motivation and renewal.

If new or unaccustomed acts of worship will be done during the service, the gathering would be a good time for an informal rehearsal. It is never appropriate to surprise a congregation with a totally unfamiliar hymn tucked within the service. We all desperately need to increase our repertoire of familiar hymns. Musicians in the congregation could help the rest of us learn the hymn during a time of rehearsal. Here the pastor could share some of the meaning of the hymn and the rationale for asking the congregation to learn this new music.

The gathering is also the best time to greet visitors. When

guests come to your home, you don't wait until thirty minutes after they have entered before you welcome and introduce them. The creation of a friendly, warm congregational setting where everyone knows what is happening and everyone feels welcome is an essential prerequisite for meaningful worship.

5. *Architectural Setting Not Always Conducive to the Type of Worship Climate We Wish to Create.* Many of us are burdened by this problem on Sunday morning, which is not a part of the order of worship but which may have a powerful effect. Take a moment and look at your worship space as if you were a newcomer. What does the architectural setting say to you? Does it speak of drabness, clutter, confusion of focus, neglect? Does your eye move naturally to a point of attention? Do worshipers and leaders have room to move about? Where is the focus for baptism or the Lord's Supper?

The architectural setting exercises a powerful though subtle influence upon us. Much of our worship does not work, not because we have planned or executed the service poorly but because the building works against our liturgical goals. We try to create a warm, hospitable atmosphere for our meeting, but the cold, dark, formalized building with heavy, forbidding furniture and row upon row of bolted-down pews works against us and shouts down any other point we are trying to make in our liturgy. Perhaps the clutter from the praise band makes it appear that we are unconcerned about the visual appearance of the worship space.

You may have inherited a building which makes a theological statement that was adequate for the past but which no longer suits contemporary visions of faithfulness. The use of an older building can be one of the most trying liturgical challenges a pastor faces. Creativity is required. An architectural consultant or designer could be helpful. The pastor and worship committee should look critically at their building and note what the design keeps them from doing on Sunday morning. Then the consultant could make suggestions for modifications.

While the alteration of a beloved old building can be a traumatic experience for a congregation, it may be essential if the

congregation is to embody new liturgical expressions sufficiently. Sometimes all that is required is the removal of some superfluous fixtures and furniture, or the introduction of new lighting techniques or color.

Generally speaking, the architectural space for contemporary worship should be light, open, uncluttered, adaptable, inviting, and warm, and it should provide for the audibility and visibility of worship leaders.

6. *Exclusion of Children.* In many mainline Protestant denominations, children have recently become a "problem" in our worship. As worship became more didactic—more verbally oriented and less action oriented—as music became more difficult to sing, and as the congregation became more passive, congregations complained that their children did not get anything out of Sunday worship. Of course, many of these worship patterns also excluded some adults who found it difficult to concentrate through a thirty-minute sermon, to sing the more sophisticated hymns, and to worship in a service that had become dull and formalized. Children are incapable of thinking in abstract concepts until late adolescence, so they were left out of the sermon—and so were many adults.

Some churches tried to solve the problem of children in worship by concocting "children's sermons," "children's church," and other devices to interest the children. I feel that most of these efforts are misguided. Many so-called children's sermons are neither sermons nor are they for children. They are usually petty, unscriptural, moralistic object lessons that children find difficult to follow because they cannot make the connection between the object and the lesson. The children's sermon is often for the parents—the preacher telling the children what Mommy and Daddy believe the children ought to hear. Younger children cannot understand the moralisms put forth in the children's sermon, and older children refuse to come forward for the children's sermon because they feel that they are being put on display and made to look foolish—which they often are. By having a children's sermon the church says, in effect, "Children, you

are incapable of worshiping with the church. The service is incomprehensible or irrelevant to you."

Children at any age *can* worship. They may not worship in the same way or at the same cognitive level as adults, but they still worship. Fortunately, being a Christian is not entirely a cognitive matter. It is also a matter of affections, symbol, story, and mystery. Most of us became Christian not by thinking about the faith and making rational decisions about Christ, but rather by simply watching our elders and then growing into faith in a natural way, the way we inherited most of our important values. How odd that we should attempt to reach children through the sermon when we know that other acts of worship—music, sacraments, actions—would be more appropriate for their stage of development.

Many of our worship practices (our abstract sermons, long prayers, and passive worship) need to be changed in order to accommodate the needs of children—and adults. Pastors who are told by their congregations, "We get more out of your children's sermon than from your regular sermon," ought to take the hint. This statement says more about the incomprehensibility of their sermons than about the value of children's sermons.

Very young children may be kept in the church nursery, but as soon as possible the church needs to let parents and children know that they belong in our Sunday worship. Parents may need to develop skills in keeping children occupied or diverted during the parts of the service when children may get restless. One church provides activity boxes for preschool children. A child upon entering the sanctuary can select an activity—a coloring book, a Bible story book, a doll—to play with. The item is returned at the end of the service. Some churches hand out children's leaflets, available from a number of church supply houses, that provide stories and activities keyed to the Scripture lessons for that Sunday.

Jesus gave little children a key place in his kingdom. We must work to restore children to a key place in our worship.

7. *Poor Formation and Leadership of Public Prayer.* Chapter 3 is devoted to the renewal of public prayer. When our prayers in

church are full of clichés and hackneyed, vague phrases, what are we teaching the people about prayer? For many, Sunday worship is seen as a time to listen to the preacher deliver the sermon. But what if we began to conceive of our worship as an occasion for prayer, a time to lift our souls in one heart and voice to God? Sunday would be seen in the way that the church primarily saw its worship for most of the centuries—as a time for the people to listen and speak to God rather than a time for the people to listen to the preacher.

8. *Many Free-Church Protestants Are Guilty of a Woeful Neglect of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.* How can we call our worship biblically based when we haphazardly and halfheartedly celebrate the Lord's Supper only a few times during the year and when we rush through baptism as an unimportant intrusion into our worship? We go into more detail concerning the renewal of the sacraments and ordinances in chapter 4.

Children learn by doing and seeing. So do adults. Perhaps Jesus knew this. He didn't just preach the gospel, he enacted the gospel around the table of friends. Jesus invited sinners not just to feel something in their hearts, but to join in the banquet, to follow him actively. As John Calvin says, God remembers that we are creatures, and so the Creator loves us in ways we can understand—in bread and wine and water. These actions of faith are too deep for words, as are most important experiences of life.

Christian worship is faith in action, belief performed and embodied in word and in deed.