

Passionate Worship
Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, Part 2

Romans 12:1-2

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
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I

Oxymorons are figures of speech that are inherently contradictory.

We use many oxymorons in our everyday speech without thinking about it—
phrases like “clearly misunderstood,”
“seriously funny,”
or “unbiased opinion.”

Some oxymorons are related to occupations, like...

“criminal lawyer,”
“legal brief,”
“working vacation.”

Many oxymorons are political in nature:

“united nations,”
“government organization,”
or “congressional action.”

Unfortunately, for some married couples “wedded bliss” becomes an oxymoron.

Linguist Richard Lederer points out that even the word “oxymoron” is oxymoronic,

because it is formed from two Greek roots of opposite meaning—
oxys meaning "sharp, keen,"
and **moros**, meaning "foolish" or “dull,”

In his book “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations,” Bishop Robert Schnase writes,

“Vibrant, fruitful, growing churches offer Passionate Worship that connects people to God and to one another.”

The word *passionate* expresses an intense desire,
strong feelings,
a sense of heightened importance.

Passionate describes an emotional connection beyond mental assent, involving eagerness, anticipation, expectancy and deep commitment. (Englebreth)

Great worship is passionate worship!

What do you think of when you hear the term “passionate worship?”

A televangelist with a big production?

African drumming and dancing?

Pentecostals shouting and waving the hands in the air?

A Taizé folk service with guitar and everyone singing quietly?

The majestic liturgy of the Roman Catholic cathedral?

Which of these is passionate worship?

The answer: all of them can be!

Passionate worship has nothing to do with the style of worship.

*For the LORD is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.*

Today if your experience of worship is anything but passionate...
if you don't feel gladness and joy at the prospect of coming to church...
if worship for you has become unsatisfying, dull, and boring...
here are three ways that you can make your experience more
passionate...
no matter who is doing the preaching or the singing.

III

To develop passionate worship, first **say your prayers.**

Great worship is always undergirded by prayer.

We have to be spiritually prepared in order to worship well.

Trying to worship without preparing in prayer is like trying to run a marathon without stretching your muscles first—you might pull something!

Do you pray for the pastor, the music ministry, the Sunday school, and your own openness to God before you ever show up on Sunday morning?

If you sincerely pray to have a great worship experience,
God will hear your prayers, and you will be filled with spiritual
expectancy even before you enter the church doors.

The result will be meaningful, uplifting, passionate worship.

At a Methodist church back in the 1920s, the pastor had averaged two professions of faith every Sunday for something like 20 years.

Another pastor who was visiting one Sunday morning asked him how he achieved this remarkable rate of professions.

Was it his preaching, the music, the beautiful sanctuary, what?

The home pastor asked his guest to follow him. Below the sanctuary there was a large room. In this room there were about 80 men praying for the worship service that morning.

The pastor explained:

“When these men go up and sit in the sanctuary, they are so warm with the Holy Spirit that they will thaw out any frozen heart that sits close to them.”

When we pray before worship and pray during worship that God will enter this place and melt the hearts of his people,
then the spiritual warmth in the sanctuary will impassion the people, and fruit will grow.

*Before the service, speak to God.
During the service, let God speak to you.
After the service speak to one another;
tell somebody about the goodness of God.*

IV

Secondly, to have passionate worship you have to **know who your audience is**.

We have a tendency, in our consumer culture, to view the worship service as a form of religious entertainment.

Some churches buy into this culture by calling their worship space an auditorium.

This is not a new phenomenon.

The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard was also a great theologian who was very outspoken on the subject of worship.

He was very critical of churches in his native Denmark whose worship had become routine and boring.

He developed the idea that Christian worship is a drama and that the churches had it backwards...

where God was the prompter,
the worship leaders (musicians, readers of scripture, preachers, etc.)
had become the actors in the drama,
and the congregation had become the audience in the drama.

This understanding of worship is still practiced in many churches in Europe and in America today.

When the congregation is viewed as the audience, it creates a passive congregation, and it leads the audience members to critique the performance of the worship leaders on the stage, as though it really is a performance.

“Well that was a good sermon, but that last story was really dumb...”

The choir sounded nice, but that one lady is always a little too loud...

My piece of bread at communion was stale...”

If we're not careful, we end up with the attitude reflected in the Dennis the Menace cartoon: Walking out of church, Dennis says to the pastor,

“Pretty good show for a quarter!”

Kierkegaard proposed a different understanding of how worship was to work.

The worship leaders (musicians, readers of the scriptures, preachers, etc.)
were to be the prompters in worship...

the members of the congregation are the actors in the drama of
worship..

and God is the audience for the drama.

Passionate worship is directed at God, our heavenly Father.

We do it for the glory of God.

We have an “audience of one.”

The ultimate standard for good worship is that it pleases our Audience.

One pastor told of a church member who greeted him at the door of the sanctuary saying, “I did not like that last hymn.”

The pastor replied, “We didn’t sing it for you.”

Years ago Bill Moyers, the famous PBS journalist, was press secretary to President Lyndon Johnson.

Moyers, as you may know, was also an ordained Southern Baptist minister.

Once at a state dinner, LBJ had Bill Moyers say the invocation.

As he was praying, the President interrupted him and said,
“Speak up, Moyers, I can’t hear you!”

To which Bill Moyers replied,
“With all due respect, Mr. President, I wasn’t talking to you.”

In passionate worship, our audience is always God.

V

The third key to passionate worship is to **engage your heart**.

Every worship service needs to address three areas of our lives—
our intellect,
our emotions,
and our actions.

Passionate worship engages the heart as well as the mind and then calls forth a response.

Bishop Schnase writes:

“To worship speaks of devotion to God, the practices that support honor and love of God. Passionate describes an intense desire, an ardent spirit, strong feelings, and the sense of heightened importance. Passionate speaks of an emotional connection that goes beyond intellectual consent. It connotes eagerness, anticipation, expectancy, deep commitment, and belief.”

Does that describe your heart for worship?

Matt Redman is a contemporary Christian song writer who has reached people around the world with his worship music. In the early 1990s he was leading worship in his church in England with his band.

The band was very proud of how good they were. One day their pastor confronted the band and declared a season of no music—the church would sing a cappella until they got the right spirit back in the church. His point was that they had lost their way in worship, and the way to get back to the heart would be to strip everything away. He wanted to challenge the band and the church to focus on pleasing God, not putting on a good show.

Insulted, all the band members left the church—all except Matt Redman. He looked deep inside himself and came up with a song which has become one of the best-loved songs in contemporary worship. It’s called “The Heart of Worship,” and some of the lyrics are:

*I’m coming back to the heart of worship,
And it’s all about you, all about you, Jesus.
I’m sorry, Lord, for the thing I’ve made it,
When it’s all about you, it’s all about you, Jesus.*

When we gather for worship, it’s not about us.

It's about giving honor and glory to the One who is Lord of the entire universe.

VI

Friends, passionate worship will **transform your life**.

If you say your prayers,
 direct your worship to God as your Audience of One,
 and engage your heart,
 something's going to change.

Bishop Schnase calls passionate worship the “optimum environment for conversion.”

This is our challenge: to worship God in a way that brings transformation to our lives.

When we worship God in spirit and in truth,
 we will be moved to respond in a concrete way:
 to change our direction toward God's purpose for our lives...
 to commit ourselves more fully to the Lord...
 to give of ourselves in service to others.

This is what St. Paul is talking about when he wrote to the church in Rome:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

When we are transformed by passionate worship,
 every day and every place becomes a sanctuary—
 a place of worship—
 as we live out our lives before our divine Audience,
 our hearts engaged in love for Christ.

Pulitzer Prize winning author Annie Dillard writes:

“Why do we people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute?...Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it?...It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should hand out life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake up someday and take offense, or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return.”

I don’t mean to worry you or increase your anxiety this morning, but I just want to prepare you, because in walking into this sanctuary on Sunday morning, you are taking a risk that you might just encounter the presence of the living God.

And when you do, your life will be transformed,
and you will wonder what took you so long.

VII

A pastor and his wife were leading a group from their church on a tour of England. One of the stops was St. Paul’s Cathedral in London.

If you’ve been to St. Paul’s you know it is an awesome structure, as beautiful inside as it is impressive on the outside.

As the pastor’s wife was standing gazing at the majestic artwork, she found herself standing next to an elderly British gentleman. He was looking up at the magnificent dome of the cathedral, and tears were running down his wrinkled cheeks.

After a moment he spoke these poignant words:

“I live less than twenty miles from here, and this is the first time I’ve ever seen this cathedral since I moved here over 50 years ago.”

He just could not imagine how beautiful and inspiring it was, and so for 50 years he had denied himself the exquisite experience, even though he lived just minutes away.

Don’t deny yourself the experience of passionate worship.

Say your prayers.

Know who your Audience is.

Engage your heart.

Encounter the presence of the living God.

It will transform your life...

you will bear fruit for the kingdom...

and so will this church.

Amen.

Sources:

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