

Worship (3) Worship and Entertainment

Much of the battle regarding worship has to do with one fact: the church no longer knows the difference between worship and entertainment.

Let me say from the outset that, in one way, entertainment is a part of life, and since all of life is to be our worship of God, there is a sense in which entertainment can be part of our worship. But this merely says that entertainment is like sleep. Sleep is an important part of life. God made sleep. But sleep is not something you do when you want to worship God directly and personally. Entertainment can serve a purpose of resting our minds, when it is in a limited place. But when it dominates our lives, and we seek for all of life to be entertaining, it has become idolatrous, and it perverts our worship.

Why is it important to know the difference between worship and entertainment?

1) Because one is pleasing to God when offered as worship and the other isn't.

This is the most important reason. As we have seen, we were created to worship God. We were created for His pleasure. Worship is God-centred. Entertainment is man-centred. It is about amusing, exciting and keeping the audience happy. If you spend your time making the audience happy, while displeasing the one to whom worship should be offered – God – you are doing something very damaging.

Imagine an orchestra performing a Crown performance for the king which increasingly upsets the king, but at the same time 'works' the crowd. The performers are in trouble for three reasons:

- [they are angering the king,
- [they are actually performing for the crowd,
- [they are deceiving the crowd into thinking this pleases the king – which further angers the king.

2 Cor. 5:9 *Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him.*

2) Because the modern church largely doesn't know the difference.

The air we breathe is entertainment. Our culture lives on entertainment. But just like you don't notice your own accent, or notice your eyeballs, we don't notice our own culture. And our culture is an entertainment culture. It is not just that we live to watch TV sitcoms and sports and 'soapies' and TV series; it is that that is how we want all of our information. The news must be entertaining (beautiful newscaster, short inserts, good images, and then fun ads in between). Political debate must be entertaining (the candidate who is most likable and attractive on TV wins). Education must be entertaining (documentaries must be filled with beautiful images; the information must be easy to remember, fun puzzles, quizzes and activities). The judiciary must be entertaining – O.J Simpson, Judge Judy. Even emergency services and crime investigations must be entertaining – Rescue 911. In fact, we've come full circle – to where life itself must be entertaining – hence the craze of reality TV shows. And no surprise – religion must be entertaining too. Church must be entertaining. And if it isn't, we just won't go – we'll stay at home and switch on the TV, and be entertained.

The modern church largely doesn't know the difference, and has, for the most part, completely sold out to the idea that church must be entertaining.

Philippians 1:10 *That ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ;”*

Consider some of the things being used by the church today: staged wrestling matches, pie-fights, punk-rockers, rappers and any other form of secular music used to perform some kind of vaguely Gospel song, ventriloquists' dummies, dancers, weight-lifters, knife-throwers, body-builders, comedians, clowns, jugglers, show-business celebrities, prominent businessman, politicians or sportsmen giving their testimonies, restaurants, ballrooms, roller-skating rinks, special-effects systems that can produce smoke, fire, sparks, and laser lights in the auditorium.

A missionary told me of his experience in a seeker-friendly church service where, at a certain time during the service, a line of beautiful girls dressed in Western outfits with big cowboy hats marched out and then stood at the edge of each row. At the given signal, they took off their cowboy hats, provocatively shook their long blonde hair, and then their hats served as collection plates.

If we do not know the difference, as it is happening all around us - we will end up bringing the world into the church.

3) Because we must know what to aim for and what to avoid; what to expect and what not to expect.

When the church does not know the difference between worship and entertainment, you may think you have one when you actually have the other. Many Christians think they are worshipping, when they are, in fact, merely amused. Many churches think they are busy with great worship of God, when they are in fact busy with a grand and slick performance.

If you don't know the difference, you don't know what you are trying to do, and moreover you cannot judge if what has been going on has been good.

Many a believer is being entertained in church, but says, “The praise and worship is awesome” or “God is really present” – when in fact they were really impressed, amused, their emotions were tickled, and they have learned to call that ‘worship’. Now, take the same people into a place where real worship is happening, and what will the reaction be? They will be bored and say “That place is cold.”

Imagine teaching law students about law this way: you play them hours of Matlock, LA Law and Perry Mason; you give them special legal computer games; you teach them the laws via rap songs and music videos, and every lesson you learn in the lecture hall has to be illustrated with a game. Finally, the big day arrives, and you take these law students to court to watch a real trial. Do you know what they are going to say about ‘real law’? They will say it is boring. And you would have two choices – make the courtroom a place where the Judge becomes a rap star, the lawyers are clowns and dancers, and the whole place becomes like a stage; or you could retrain your legal students to understand what real law is about.

Unfortunately, the church is seldom retraining its people to understand that focus on entertainment is the wrong focus, it is mostly dressing up in clown suits and continuing the game. One way to overcome boredom is to understand what worship is.

4) Because if we don't, we could be guilty of idolatry

Many people think that it does not matter what you do, so long as you do it in a church, and say you are doing it for the Lord. There is this idea that if I put it on the altar, so to speak, if I present it to God – then God must and will accept it?

But the Bible is very clear that if both the motive and the material of your offering are displeasing – God will not accept it:

- [Cain and Abel – Cain's sacrifice was of 'faulty' material – not as instructed by God.
- [Nadab and Abihu – Leviticus 10:1-3 – offered 'profane fire'

God cares about what is put on the altar. You cannot offer anything and believe God is going to accept it. In Malachi the priests offered blind and lame sheep.

And I believe that much of what goes on in churches today is idolatry, plain and simple. It reflects either a people who do not know the nature of God very well, or a people who do not know Him at all.

Tozer said: "The essence of idolatry is [to think] thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him"

If the president came to meet you, you would not give him leftovers. Nor would you pull faces at him to try to make him giggle. And when we think we are in God's house, and are instead making music from the nightclub, and clowning around, and using special effects, and cheering each other and presenting false things on the altar, and saying – 'This is for the Lord' – that is idolatry.

If we are not careful, we can confuse idolatry with worshipping God.

In **Exodus 32:5-6** - Aaron and the Golden Calf - what was going on was sensual, idolatrous and very displeasing to the Lord. But who was it dedicated to?

So then, what is the difference?

The Difference between Worship and Entertainment:

1) Entertainment is about Amusement; Worship is about Engagement.

Amusement comes from a word which literally means 'diversion'. That's what it is. You can suspend your thinking, your reasoning, your pondering. All your rational powers can be shelved, because you will be fed any number of images or sounds or experiences which you will enjoy. That's the nature of TV – an image doesn't stay for much longer than 3.5 seconds at a time. There's a visual feast to excite, absorb and keep you interested. You don't have to think or imagine, to respond or debate, to remember, or figure out – you can just remain fixed, and your eyes will be delighted with one new interesting image after another.

Amusement, in all its forms, seeks to have you in the passive mode, while it supplies you with visual or audio food to keep you absorbed, engrossed and basically – entertained.

Worship is not about amusement, it is about engagement. Worship is not being supplied with exciting images or sounds that will keep you absorbed. Worship is the opportunity to engage God Himself in acts of delighting in Him. That means worship will require that you do some things.

Think about this - when you meet with someone, are you there to be amused, or to connect with them? If you sat down for coffee and just stared at them, hoping that they would do a magic trick, or jump on the table, or change into a frog, you will be disappointed after a while. They will also be disappointed! They will actually be annoyed that you met them, and are just passively staring at them.

Worship is a verb in Scripture.

2) Entertainment has performers and consumers; Worship has only participants

The nature of entertainment is that there are professionals who are paid to do it. People pay huge sums of money to be entertained. And whoever the entertainers are – actors, sportsmen, weathermen, DJs, talk-show hosts – they see their job as entertainment – they are the performers. And then there are the consumers. The consumers pay for and watch, or listen to, their performance. And this is the agreement. I pay you to entertain me; you get wealthy from me and provide me amusement.

Worship is not that way. Worship has only participants, people who participate in the worship of God. But unfortunately, the performer-consumer mentality has entered the church. So, very often, you have the ‘worship team’. And what are they except performers? They sing well, or play well – by certain standards. Supposedly, they are there to help you sing, but you can’t miss the fact that they are also there to be seen. They are the performers, and the congregation are the consumers. Sure, you sing along, just like you sing along at a rock concert. But we all know who is really doing the singing.

The preacher is to be the comedian, story-teller, actor, motivational speaker. He is the performer. The people in the congregation are the consumers, the ones who pay him, and who expect him to be interesting, lively, funny and charming. Sure there is some listening going on, but very few churches consider the time of preaching as a time of participating in worship – where you engage your mind, your reasoning, your thinking to know Christ all the more. The preacher is judged by his entertainment value – the more he entertained, the better his preaching.

3) Entertainment is Trivial and Fun; Worship is Serious

As we have said, entertainment is not about getting you to think, it is about getting you to not think. Everything about entertainment is designed to be lightweight. Every TV producer knows that if TV becomes too much of an exercise in thinking, you will change the channel.

Can you remember the last time you watched something on TV where the discussion gave you some time to ponder, to work something out, to consider? No – because that’s not what entertainment does. The show must go on; it must keep moving. It might maintain the illusion that we are thinking, but that’s part of the game – in reality no one is thinking very seriously.

As such, it is not serious. It is all make believe. It's all in fun. Nothing is really to be taken very seriously. You can't really take anything seriously on TV – even the news is interrupted with ads for margarine and Coca-Cola.

Entertainment is about fun. It is about excitement. It is about getting the audience stimulated. Keep it brief, and keep it moving.

But worship is nothing like that. Worship is the most serious thing in the universe. As we saw, it is why we were created; it is why we were saved. Worship is not about surface level stimulation; it is entering into the deepest personality of all – that of God. Worship does not aim for applause. Worship is successful, not when people applaud, but when God is pleased, and His people are delighted in Him.

Entertainment is about excitement, worship is about depth. Entertainment aims for applause, worship aims for reflection.

In the Bible you find worshippers telling you of great joy, or great pleasure, in God, of great satisfaction in God; but not of great fun, of great silliness, of great amusement in God.

If you had seen Jesus, and were asked to describe Him, I don't think 'fun' would be the word. Joyful, yes, devoted, yes, committed, yes – but not anything trivial.

Today, for many, worship is about excitement, fun and triviality. The church has almost bought wholesale this idea that if it isn't fun and exciting, then it isn't good. Consider, even in children's programmes – the songs have to be zany and silly, there must be loads of games, and prizes and rewards; the only way we keep them coming, right?

Church ministry must be packed full of fun activities all calendar year long. If you don't have that, then you are not family-oriented. Church services must be upbeat, zippy and artificially enthusiastic. There must never be silence or times of reflection – that is what they call 'a dead spot'.

Prayer must be casual and friendly, like we are recording a friendly message on an answering machine. They can contain nothing that might have to cause us to concentrate on people's words.

The music must be exciting, rhythmical. The lyrics must be simple and repetitive. No hymns that teach us doctrine, or make us think of what we are saying. No tunes that require us to learn them; no push towards learning something of music, to know what we are doing. Just give us our words on the overhead projector, let the band play, and we'll lip synch from time to time.

What about the preacher? He, above all, must be fun. He must be full of jokes, which he can call up at any time. He must be witty, clever and good at telling stories. He must not preach doctrine, or cause us to think about the text, or consider its words. He must not press our minds to reason, to think logically, to analyse. He must not give us explanations of theology, or make pointed applications. He must be witty, he must be charming, and he must be brief.

Our culture is so amusement mad – we think that being serious is a negative thing. And we equate seriousness with morbidity.

The fact is, worship has both seriousness and satisfaction; gravity and gladness. It does not have silliness and superficiality.

I believe it is impossible to be too serious.

4) Entertainment is Immediate and gives Instant Gratification; Worship requires Cultivation and Exercise.

Have you ever watched a nature documentary which warned that unless you had studied something of this before, it would not make sense? Did you ever watch a political show that gave you a reading list that was compulsory before you could understand it? No, because entertainment doesn't work that way. It doesn't require that you have any preparation, any prior knowledge, any pre-entertainment training, to appreciate it. The whole thing about entertainment is that you can pick it up anywhere at any time. It is immediate. It requires no context, no pre-learning.

Entertainment is instantly accessible. As such, it also gives you instant gratification. You can turn on a TV programme and pick it up, grasp it, pretty much immediately. And so, it will immediately entertain you. Precisely because it is shallow, it gives quick enjoyment.

But worship is not that way. Worship requires cultivation and exercise. Worship is responding to the Person of God. And that requires a whole life's relationship – a growth in knowledge, in obedience, in understanding. There is a life's work of cultivating the knowledge of God, recognising His presence.

But today the church does not realise this. Instead, people approach a church service the way they approach a TV programme. They believe they can ignore God all week, remain outside of His presence, not pray, not meditate, not seek to obey Him, and come on Sunday, and 'do worship', like a channel you switch on. Like everything else in their life – like microwaves and fast cars and instant coffee and ADSL – it must be instant. They do not think it requires continuity, or faithfulness, or continuance or perseverance. No – just switch on worship on Sunday, and switch it off on Monday. Just like you pick up a magazine programme on this topic, or watch a Discovery channel programme on this topic – so when we see worship as entertainment – we see it that way.

And, if the church that people attend is in fact simply into entertainment, then it all feels right. They pitch up on Sunday; the music, lights, sound, entertain them; they get some good spiritual thoughts for the week, and they go home. And they feel good, because they call their entertainment 'worship'.

If you don't worship Monday through Saturday, you cannot worship on Sunday. Worship is not immediate, instant.

Nor does worship give you instant gratification. Worship involves times of learning, of reasoning, and being confused, of battling, of working hard.

5) Entertainment is judged by its Popularity and Morphs according to the audience; Worship is about Beauty and is fixed on the Nature of God.

Entertainment has been successful when the audience applauds. Entertainment is about popularity. It aims to please its consumers - the more the better. As such, entertainment really has no ethics. It will shape-shift and morph and change to meet the desires of its audience. If they want more violence, they'll get it. More sex, more nudity, more

explosions, more special effects, less talking, less involved plots, less complicated dialogue. Entertainment is about wants, not need. Entertainment is fickle – it responds only to what people want. If the people change, then entertainment changes to meet those needs. Radio channel 5fm is not playing today what it played 20 years ago. The cinemas cannot play the same movies again and again. Entertainment has no loyalty to an absolute – it just does what will please the audience.

Worship is the opposite. Regardless of the popularity, it is based on the nature of God. And God does not change. Therefore, worship has a steadiness and constancy about it. We may grow in our understanding of God, but the fundamental nature of God, and therefore the way the human heart responds to Him will be fairly consistent.

Now when the church swaps worship for entertainment the focus is on how the audience is responding? How many people are coming? How are the people responding? Are they thrilled? Are they excited?

An entertainment based church decides what it will do based on ‘What do the people want?’ ‘What do they want in their church?’

- [Many churches today take surveys of their neighbourhood.
- [The seeker-friendly model wants to strip church of anything that might even faintly intimidate an unbeliever.

But in contrast, look at **1 Cor. 14:24-26**:

²⁴ But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all. ²⁵ And thus the secrets of his heart are revealed; and so, falling down on his face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you. ²⁶ How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.

As someone has put it, ‘Are we to entertain the goats or feed the sheep?’

This is a very real and very large problem. And the only way to deal with it is one Christian at a time, one church at a time. We need to see the clear difference between the two. Worship is not amusement. Worship is not trivial and lightweight and fun. It is not immediate and instant. It is not about what you want. It is about an unchanging God. It demands you cultivate the knowledge of God. It means you must engage with God. It means you must be deadly serious in your pursuit of joy. It means you will have to apply yourself, all of yourself to it. It also means you have to begin to break free of the entertainment mindset – wanting everything in your life to be entertaining.

The danger is not in seeking entertainment, the danger is in seeking it in every part of your life. God is not an entertainer. God is to be worshipped. There are no performers, whose worship we can buy for our own consumption. You are either a participant or you aren’t.