My House Shall Be Called A House of . . . Announcements

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What is actually going on in worship today? This is a question that has both intrigued and haunted me in recent years. There is little remaining doubt that most churches in the United States have made significant alterations to their services of public worship. Some have incorporated change into the existing service(s) while others have created entirely new services and added them to their menu of worship offerings. Alterations to content, style, and order have ranged from modest adjustments to total renovations.

As I experienced worship change in my own church over the past decade, and as I witnessed change in the worship of many congregations, I began to have that funny feeling that something was missing. What was it? Yes, there were songs and sermons and offerings. There were video clips and Power Point presentations and children's sermons; there were choirs or praise teams or song leaders directing congregational singing; there were special musical numbers presented, mission moments and an occasional service of Communion. Why then, the empty feeling? Why the intuitive sense that though it seemed to look and smell like worship, things didn't seem quite right? Was there truly something wrong, or was I simply more uncomfortable with change than I realized?

I design, lead, and teach Christian worship as my vocation. Because of this, I naturally analyze and evaluate worship services—it is the "trick of the trade" (or a vocational hazard). Over time, I began to notice some things that concerned me. I wondered if they were indicative of local church practices or if worship services in other places were cause for concern as well. I became aware of some glaring omissions, observing that some worship elements had replaced others. How widespread were these changes? And on what basis were these decisions made? Was it intentional to substitute some worship elements for others? Or did some worship items simply slip, unnoticed, out of the order of worship? If intentional, what was the thinking? If unintentional, were they missed—and if not, why?

The Purpose of the Study. In recent months, I had the rare opportunity to visit a variety of churches in various states on Sunday mornings over an extended period of time. Realizing this was a unique situation I committed myself to intentional observation as I attempted to acquaint myself, as much as possible, with common (or uncommon) practices in worship. I was curious to observe what is currently happening in Protestant worship in a general sense.

However, two aspects of current worship practice had become of particular interest to me: the use/disuse of scripture reading and prayer. I had begun to notice that a number of congregations were spending little if any time in either scripture reading or prayer while gathered for worship. As I began to gather and calculate data from the services I attended, I found that I had reason for concern. Believing that the reading of scripture and prayer are central elements of worship, I found this puzzling and troubling.

The specific purpose of my church visits was to determine the significance given to various components of the worship service, in particular the significance given to scripture reading and prayer.

Operating Assumption. As I have reflected upon the way time is spent in worship, I have operated from the assumption that the way we spend our time is an indicator of what we consider to be important. This assumption is not unique to this worship experiment. In relation to any activity, it is generally accepted that those persons or activities that are of high priority in our lives receive greater time and attention than those persons or activities we consider to be of

lesser importance. Whether we wish so or not, those things we value are evident by simply looking at where we spend our time.

A priority is any person, thing, or event that receives the greatest attention in any given hierarchy of competing options. (What constitutes attention has several variables.) Each worship service will always have the temptation for competing priorities. Value judgments are made weekly causing some elements of worship to nudge out others when the order of service is planned. The question is what do we value? That which we hold to be a priority in worship will merit our attention. Jesus said it best when he taught his followers, "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Lk. 12.34). The central question I raise is this: Is the way we spend our time in worship indicative of what we truly believe is important?

The Particulars of the Study. The parameters of the worship experiment I conducted are stated below.

- Period of time for worship service observations: February 17, 2002 to May 11, 2003 (sixteen months)
- Number of churches in the sample: 30[1]
- Number of services in the sample: 31[2]
- Denominations represented in the study: 19
  - African Methodist Episcopal
  - Assembly of God
  - Baptist, Independent (2)
  - Calvary Chapel (2)
  - Church of God, General Conference
  - Church of God, Anderson
  - Church of the Nazarene
  - Episcopal (2)
  - Evangelical Free
  - Evangelical Friends
  - Foursquare Gospel (2)
  - Free Methodist
  - Independent (1)
  - Lutheran, ELCA
  - Presbyterian, UPUSA (4)
  - United Brethren in Christ
  - United Church of Christ
  - United Methodist (5)
  - Vineyard
- States represented in the study: 4
  - California

[1] Many more churches were visited, however some services were eliminated from the study on such things as 1) the service did not represent the "norm" for that church on the day I visited, 2) I visited some non-Protestant churches, 3) I was unable to experience the whole service, 4) the church was in a country other than the United States, etc.

[2] I chose to examine two services at one church for the purpose of comparing their traditional service with their contemporary service.

Ohio
Michigan
Florida

***The Process of the Study*.** The churches to visit were chosen randomly, meaning that all churches in the area would have had an equal chance of being included. The churches to visit were chosen to represent a cross-section of churches that varied in 1) size of worship attendance, 2) denomination, 3) style, and 4) range of theological perspective. Most of the churches were in the region of the United States where I live, southern California. However, when I traveled to other parts of the country, I included those churches in the study as well. I purposely did not determine the church samples prior to the study. I just "walked in and worshiped" from week to week at the churches that seemed to satisfy the general characteristics listed above.

It should be noted that the research I conducted is informal in the sense that I did not undertake all of the criteria necessary to constitute a formal study such as control groups or establishing visits to equal numbers of churches from each worship style. The worship visits were nothing short of serendipitous and I simply accepted each opportunity as an invitation to watch and listen. The information I obtained, therefore, must be taken in light of its limited scope. However, the process I did follow (explained below) was consistently applied and reflects accurate data. Even with the limitations of the study, I believe there are some noteworthy trends to be seen that may suggest that some theological reflection upon the way we spend our time in worship is in order.

Collecting Quantitative Data[3]

The steps for collecting quantitative data were the same for each service:

1. I recorded the length of the entire service in total minutes.
2. I recorded the amount of time given to each element of every service, using increments of time to within 30 seconds.[4]
3. I assigned each element of worship to a "worship element category." (A category consisted of all worship items of the same type, for instance, all prayers within the service formed the category of prayer. [See below.])
4. I totaled the number of minutes given to each category of worship elements.
5. Last, I calculated the percentage of time given per service to each category of worship elements.

Primary Categories of Worship Elements

All of the elements of worship were placed in one of eight categories. These are listed below along with a description of the criterion for determining the category placement.

- *Congregational singing*. All types of congregational song.
- *Prayer*. All types of spoken prayer, not sung.[5]

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[3] Qualitative data was also collected consisting of a weekly journal of observations, notes, informal interviews, etc. This information related to other issues in worship and is therefore not included in this report.

[4] All calculations were limited to within 30 seconds.

[5] The exception was the *sanctus* and *kyrie* as appropriate. Also includes prayer requests/concerns.

- *Sermon*. Included video clips if directly intended to aid in the sermon.
- *Announcements and Greetings*. Notices/spoken communication to the church and shaking hands/greeting one another.[6]
- *Offering*. The corporate collection of tithes and offerings.[7]
- *Reading of Scripture*. Actual readings of scripture texts; does not include scripture found in song texts or biblical passages read in the context of the sermon.[8]
- *Presentational Music*. All music not sung corporately, i.e. anthems, solos, instrumental pieces, etc.[9]
- *Sacraments/Ordinances*. Holy Communion, baptism, baby dedications.
- *Other Liturgical Material*. Miscellaneous activities not represented in the primary categories; elements that are typically not found in every service.[10]

Labeling Worship Styles

For purposes of this study, I labeled each service according to worship style. In many cases the church itself identified the style of its service(s), advertising them as "contemporary" or "traditional", etc, in which case I accepted their designation. When a worship style was not designated, I made a decision as to its most likely identification. Acknowledging that there is wide interpretation as to what constitutes a worship style I utilized the following general guidelines.[11]

Liturgical. Services that are highly influenced by liturgical mandates and/or expectations of denominational authorities (for example, *The Book of Common Prayer*); much of the content is specified for universal use within the denomination; consistent and frequent use of the Eucharist.

Traditional. Services that are moderately shaped by its denomination; utilizes standard "Mainline" worship elements such as historic types of prayers (i.e., Collects, The Lord's Prayer, etc.), traditional preaching styles, (often using *The Revised Common Lectionary*), standard/classic hymns, and service leadership offered by organ and choirs, etc.

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[6] Two things are noted: 1) the announcements were almost exclusively united with the act of greeting one another and 2) a greeting is considered to be the informal "hello" from person to person; a true passing of the peace is calculated elsewhere.

[7] In each case there was an offertory; it was calculated according to the category it represented (congregational song, presentational music, etc.). Since any offertory prayer lasting more than 30 seconds was counted as prayer and offertories were counted in one of the music categories, virtually no time was given to taking up the offering *per se* as worshipers were engaged otherwise during the collection of the offering. I therefore did not factor that as a separate category in the final analysis.

[8] Responsive readings, if entirely scripture, were included.

[9] Preludes were not counted if they occurred prior to the stated time of the beginning of the service; they were counted if they occurred after the stated time for the beginning of the service. Postludes were not counted.

[10] Examples of Other Liturgical Material includes such things as free praise and dance, personal testimony, various commissionings, creeds, video clips not related to sermon, invitations to conversion/discipleship, liturgical dance, children's moments, prophecies, passing of the peace, etc.

[11] For a helpful way to categorize worship on a basis other than style, see Lester Ruth "A Rose By Any Other Name," in *The Conviction of Things Not Seen: Worship and Ministry in the 21st Century*, ed. Todd E. Johnson (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), 33-51.

Blended. Services that combine traditional hymns with popular praise choruses; sometimes utilizes broader, more varied instrumentation.[12]

Contemporary. Services that have a standard two-part form consisting of extended singing of "contemporary" praise music (led by praise teams and pop/rock band instrumentation), followed by an extended time of teaching.

In this article I hope to (1) share the results of my findings along with some general observations (other than scripture reading and prayer), (2) note some patterns of particular interest with respect to scripture reading and prayer; compare/contrast the way time is used in various worship styles, and (3) raise issues for theological reflection that such information suggests.

Results of Findings.

Length of Services

The average length of service (all worship styles combined) was 79 minutes. The average length of each worship style is depicted here:

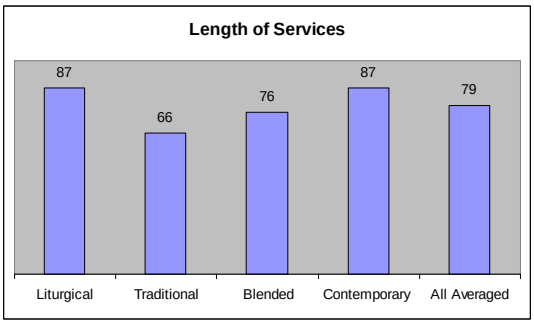

Figure 1

Observations

1. The length of time given to Liturgical and Contemporary services is exactly the same.
2. The length of the Blended services is exactly the average of the Traditional and Contemporary lengths of services (noteworthy in that Blended is generally considered to be the "blend" between Traditional and Contemporary).

[12] The term "Blended Worship" has almost universally come to mean a service that uses both traditional hymns and contemporary praise choruses, therefore I have chosen to use this common definition for purposes of this study. One is hard pressed to find blended worship described in any other way. This is unfortunate in that truly blended worship is a mixture of the old with the new in expressing *all of the elements of worship* including types of prayers, preaching styles, ways of celebrating the Sacraments, etc. For a more developed interpretation of blended worship, see Constance Cherry, "Blended Worship: What it is and What it Isn't" in *Reformed Worship* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Publications, 2000).

Liturgical Worship

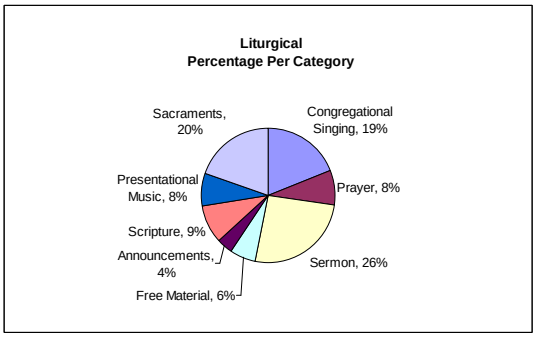

Figure 2

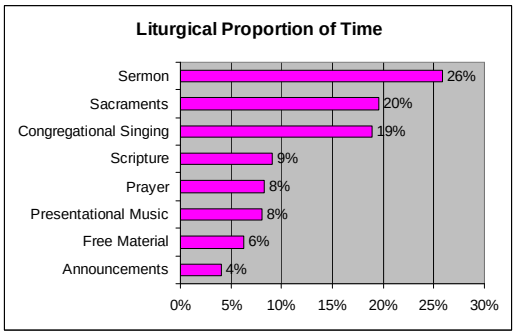

Figure 3

Observations

1. Sermons received the most time; announcements received the least.
2. The larger proportions of time are spent on three elements of worship, all of which are very close in percentages: sermon, Sacraments, and congregational singing. The average amount of time given to these three elements is 21.5% each.
3. A noticeable gap exists between the percentage of time spent on sermon, Sacraments, and congregational singing (averaging 21.5% each) and the remaining five elements (averaging 7% each).[13]

Traditional Worship

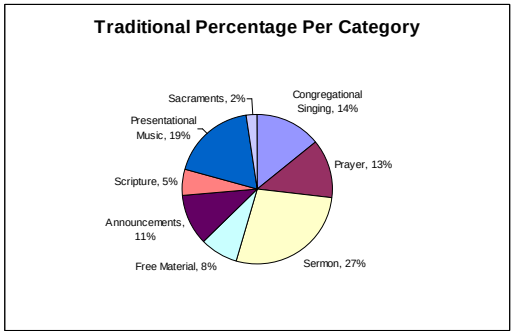

Figure 4

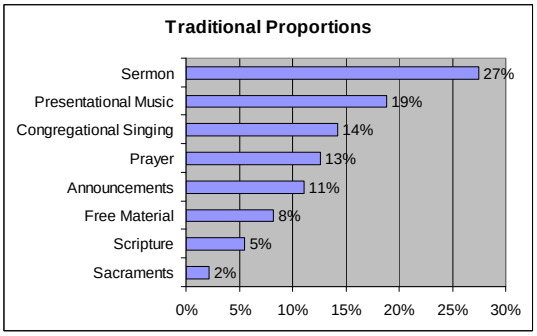

Figure 5

Observations

1. Sermons received the most time; Sacraments received the least.
2. There is a gradual spread of time per category.
3. Presentational music is given more time than congregational singing.

[13] Is it possible that the domination of sermon, Sacraments, and song in Liturgical Worship, with the remaining worship elements clustering at the bottom of the percentages, suggests an emphasis on the historic two-fold order of Word and Table?

Blended Worship

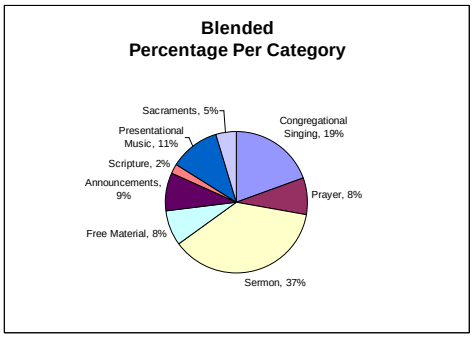

Figure 6

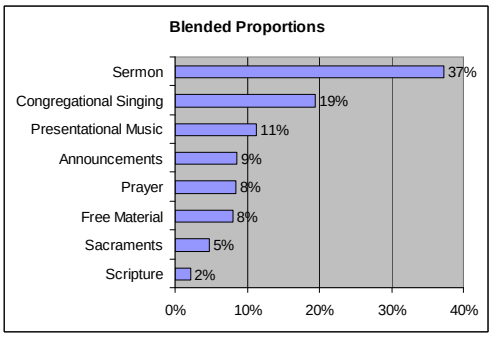

Figure 7

Observations

1. Sermons received the most time; scripture received the least.
2. The amount of time given for the sermon increases by at least 10% from Liturgical and Traditional worship
3. There is a larger gap (18%) between the category with the largest amount of time (the sermon) and the next largest category (congregational singing), than either the Liturgical or Traditional services

Contemporary Worship

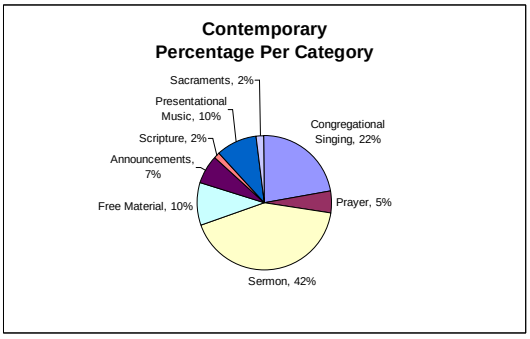

Figure 8

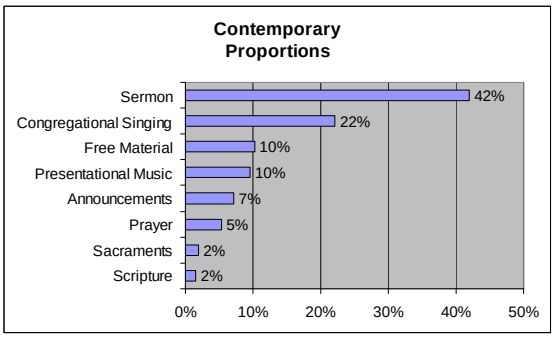

Figure 9

Observations

1. Two activities, the sermon and congregational singing, constitute approximately two thirds of the service (64%).
2. There is the largest gap of all services between the first two categories (sermon/congregational singing): 20%.
3. There is a noticeable gap between the two predominant categories (sermon and congregational singing) and the remaining six elements.

Observations of All Categories and All Styles

Using the graph below (Fig. 10), observations are made for the six categories other than scripture reading and prayer that are addressed separately below.

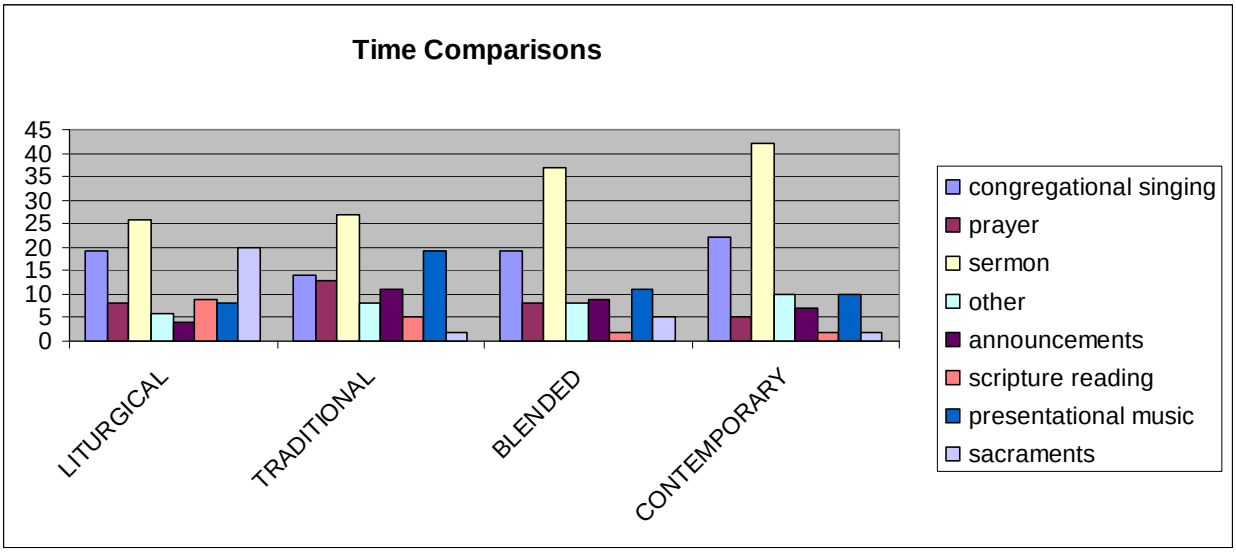

Figure 10

Comparison of Worship Styles by Category

Congregational singing was highest for Contemporary worship (22%) and least for Traditional (14%). Liturgical and Blended worship had the same amount of congregational singing, 19%.

The *sermon* was highest for Contemporary worship (42%) and least for Liturgical (26%). The sermon time increases in order of categories moving from Liturgical to Contemporary: Liturgical (26%), Traditional (27%), Blended (37%), Contemporary (42%).

The inclusion of *other liturgical material* was highest for Contemporary (10%) and least for Liturgical (6%). Traditional and Blended worship had the same amount of other liturgical material, (8%).

Time given to *announcements* was highest for Traditional (11%) and least for Liturgical (4%).

Presentational music received the highest amount of time in the Traditional services (19%) and the least in the Liturgical (8%). The time given in Contemporary and Blended services was similar (1% variance, Blended being higher).

The *Sacraments* received the most time in Liturgical worship (20%) and then decreases in time dramatically with the other three worship styles resembling each other in time given: (Blended 5%; Traditional and Contemporary received 2% each).

It is interesting to note that the averages for Blended worship in all eight categories appeared in the middle of the four worship styles without exception. In other words, in no category did Blended worship give either the highest or lowest amount of time to any element of worship, but rather represented a “blend” of the other styles.

Worship patterns with respect to scripture reading and prayer. The chart above (Fig. 11) shows the comparison of all categories. From this side-by-side comparison, I will observe how the practices of reading scripture and praying compare 1) in amount of time to other worship elements and 2) among worship styles.

The Practice of Scripture Reading

The amount of time given to scripture readings is highest in Liturgical worship (9%) and least in the Blended and Contemporary services (2% each), descending in order from Liturgical to Contemporary.

1. In Liturgical worship:
    - scripture reading ranks fourth out of eight categories (preceded by sermon, Sacraments, and congregational singing);
    - scripture reading receives more time than presentational music;
    - scripture reading receives more than twice the amount of time given to announcements.
2. In Traditional worship:
    - scripture reading ranks seventh out of eight categories (only Sacraments received less time);
    - presentational music receives almost four times the amount of time than scripture reading;
    - announcements received more than twice the amount of time than scripture reading.
3. In Blended worship:
    - scripture reading ranks last of all eight categories;
    - presentational music receives more than five times the amount of time than does scripture reading;
    - announcements received more than four times the amount of scripture reading.
4. In Contemporary worship:
    - scripture reading and the Sacraments tied for the least amount of time in the service (2% each);
    - presentational music receives five times the amount of time than does scripture reading;
    - announcements received more than three times the amount of scripture reading.

The Practice of Prayer

The amount of time given to prayer is highest in Traditional worship (13%) and least in Contemporary services (5%).

1. In Liturgical worship:
    - prayer ranks fifth out of eight categories (8%);
    - prayer receives the same amount of time as does presentational music;

- amount of time given to prayer is similar to that of scripture reading (1% variance).
- prayer receives two times the amount of time given to announcements.

2. In Traditional worship:
    - prayer ranks fourth out of eight categories (13%);
    - prayer receives less time than presentational music (5% less);
    - prayer receives approximately the same amount of time as announcements (variance of 2%, prayer being higher).
3. In Blended worship:
    - prayer ranks fifth out of eight categories (8%);
    - prayer receives less time than presentational music (3% less);
    - prayer receives approximately the same amount of time as announcements (variance 1%, announcements being higher);
    - as much time is given to prayer as to all elements that constitute other liturgical material put together;
    - prayer receives four times the amount of time as scripture reading.
4. In Contemporary worship:
    - prayer ranks sixth out of eight categories (5%);
    - presentational music receives twice as much time as prayer;
    - prayer receives approximately the same amount of time as announcements (variance 2%, announcements higher);
    - all other liturgical material put together is given twice as much time as prayer;
    - prayer receives more than twice the amount of time given to Sacraments and scripture reading each.

In addition to the information represented on the graphs above, other statistics related to prayer were extracted from the data that do not appear on the graphs. The following calculations represent all services of all styles of worship averaged together:

1. The average amount of time for any type of prayer to occur once the service began: 12 minutes.
2. The percentage of services that *had no* stated prayer of confession: 78% (24/31).
3. The percentage of services that *had no* intercessory prayer: 45% (14/31).
4. The services that *included* intercessory prayer according to worship style:

Liturgical	75% had intercessory prayer[14]
Traditional	100% had intercessory prayer
Blended	67% had intercessory prayer
Contemporary	10% had intercessory prayer

5. The average length of the intercessory prayer among churches who had it: 5 minutes.

Theological Considerations. In the beginning of this article I identified my basic operating assumption—that the way we spend our time is an indicator of the value placed upon persons or things. Having said this, I do not mean to suggest that there should be equivalent

[14] One of these services was considered to be highly liturgical by typical standards and was therefore categorized as such, however the leaders specified a commitment to appealing to postmodern individuals as a core value. This may have influenced the elimination of intercessory prayer in this case.

amounts of time given to worship elements or that an element is a priority if it receives more real time than most other elements. In other words prayer, for instance, does not have to equal the amount of time given to the sermon in order to prove that we place value upon corporate prayer.

What I do mean to suggest is that:

- we must consider seriously the worship elements that we include in our services and be knowledgeable as to why we have chosen to include these and not others;
- we must examine the amount of time given to each worship element and ask the question, "Does the amount of time we give to this worship element truly represent the value we hold for it?";
- we must consider the relationship of time given to one element in proportion to another by asking the question, "Does the amount of time given to one element indicate greater or lesser priority than to every other worship element?" (i.e., "Does the amount of time given to scripture reading in proportion to presentational music represent our worship core values?")

In an effort to reflect theologically and biblically upon the results of this study, several questions come to mind. I offer them as a means of common reflection in the hopes that worship planners and leaders are inspired to check their worship practices in light of scripture (especially in relation to the patterns of worship established in both the Old and New Testaments) and the degree to which they are informed by twenty centuries of Christian practice.

1. When worship services are designed, are there elements that are necessary to include? If so, what are they? Consistent with Temple worship, inter-testamental synagogue practices and early church worship, we have every reason to believe that there must be at least a) substantial readings of Holy Scripture, b) exposition upon the scriptures, c) substantial and various prayers, d) corporate singing, e) symbolic rites, and f) offerings.

It is true that no explicit *order* of worship is set forth in the New Testament. Yet elements of worship *content* are substantiated (Acts 2:42: teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayers; 1 Tim. 4.13: reading of scripture, exhortation, teaching; I Cor. 16.1: offerings; I Cor. 14:26-33: singing, teaching, manifestations of spiritual gifts, etc.). Are we committed to these? If not, why not?

2. If worship services are designed that do not include the full range of biblical and historical components, how is that decision made and who makes it? On what basis are some elements eliminated? What other worship components replace these and on what basis?

3. Jesus said, "My house shall be called a house of prayer" (Mt. 21.12, Mk. 11.17, Lk. 19.46). Do our corporate worship activities affirm this purpose? Based on the amount of time your congregation *currently spends* on each of the worship elements, complete this sentence: "My house shall be called a house of _____"?

Prayer is important to worship if for no other reason than that there is biblical imperative and historical precedence for prayer being a central act of the gathered community. In addition, I have long proposed that prayer in corporate worship is very important as a means of modeling the content and spirit of private prayer. Public prayer is, indeed, they way that private prayer is learned. However Michael Horton goes even further by drawing a disturbing but worthy parallel between the amount of time spent in prayer during worship and that of our individual lives. He

states, "If corporate prayer does not play an important part in our worship, it should not be surprising that it is marginalized in the individual lives of Christians."[15]

4. What is implied if/when little or no scripture is read in worship? What is the relationship between sustained passages of scripture read (or not read) and the sermon? How much "worship leader talk" is inspired by scripture? How much of the content of worship elements are based upon scripture? How content would we be if large amounts of scripture were read each time we meet for worship? Have we come to think that scripture reading "takes up time" that could be given to more entertaining aspects of worship? Have we suggested by our neglect that *our words about* the word of God are more important *than hearing* the word of God?

The word of God is *the* Story—the metanarrative that is missing in our Postmodern culture. Without the intentional, abundant, meticulous, prepared, prayerful, and respectful reading of the scriptures in worship,[16] we are living outside of the Story of God's love for us in Jesus Christ—the magnificent work of God in creation, redemption, and re-creation of all things.

Conclusion. The months of church visits have been eye opening to me as I have observed many things. This study has not only been informational, but transformational as well. With the insights has also come conviction and confession for, in my opinion, there is much to think about and some adjustments to be made in how we spend our time in worship. In many cases, correctives are needed in order to be faithful to biblical worship. My prayer is that all of us who have responsibility for worship planning and leading will submit our services to the penetrating gaze of the Holy Spirit and be led to engage in that which pleases the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ.

[15] Michael Horton, *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of God-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 156.

[16] See Nehemiah 8.1-18 for an example of how the public reading of scripture reflected each of these adjectives.