

ESTABLISHING WORSHIPPING COMMUNITIES: THE LOCAL CHURCH (II)

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INTRODUCTION:

Dr. Eldin Villafañe points out in one of his books that a church with healthy growth is a church that grows in all of the classic missional dimensions: Kerygma, Koinonia, Deaconship and Liturgy.¹ A numerical growth that does not include growth in these four functions of the church results in an unhealthy growth. Dr. Roberto Pazmiño² tells us of the five main functions of the church (adding in prophecy or intercession to the four mentioned by Villafañe) and illustrates them as a circle with four functions in the circumference and the function of liturgy as the axis or center. Pazmiño placed the function of liturgy in the center of the model indicating in this way its priority and integrative potential in the church.

The public service is where worship takes place as an expression of testimony of the presence of God in the midst of His people who adore Him and recognize Him as Lord and Savior. This worship is expressed through prayers, sacrifices, offerings, praises, songs, rituals, meditation, reverence, fasting, thanksgiving and service.³ I need to point out that although as much as in the Old as in the New Testament there is evidence that shows us the people of God worshipped in private in a personal and family manner, and also we see that the people participated in public worship. This is the worship that is expressed through liturgy, and that which we will be addressing in this paper.

A SHORT HISTORY OF WORSHIP IN THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE.

In his book about the formative years of the Church of the Nazarene, Timothy L. Smith⁴ summarizes for us five characteristics of the first Nazarenes. The fifth characteristic, which he refers to as the most important, is that their worship was saturated with joyful liberty. The people had the freedom to worship God out loud, singing choruses and popular hymns. Bresee started the custom of applauding during the choruses, which very quickly was adopted by the people and which Bresee encouraged.

According to James R. Spruce,⁵ the first Nazarenes did not have a formal written liturgy nor an established worship theology, but they worshipped and had a theology of worship. This worship was saturated with joyful freedom, which was the same that James R. Spruce

¹ Eldin Villafañe, *Seek the Peace of the City: Reflections on Urban Ministry* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 10.

² Roberto Pazmiño, *Principios y prácticas de la educación cristiana: una perspectiva evangélica* (Miami: Editorial Caribe, 1995), 48-58.

³ Wilton Nelson, *Nuevo diccionario ilustrado de la Biblia* (Nashville: Editorial Caribe), 200.

⁴ Timothy L. Smith, *La historia de los nazarenos: Los años formativos* (Kansas City: Casa Nazarena de Publicaciones, n.d.), 137.

⁵ James R. Spruce, *Venid adoremos: Una teología de la adoración* (Kansas City: Casa Nazarena de Publicaciones, 1996), 41.

remembered from his childhood in different Nazarene churches where his father pastored. In spite of having a printed order for the service there was always room for interruptions by God. Worship lacked formality and there was “freedom in the Spirit.” We can summarize the worship of the first Nazarenes with Spruce’s words: “we do not belong to a more “formal” tradition, although our worship expressions are founded in a religion in which we do not talk much about, but one that is felt.” He continues saying: “And that is how it should be among the Nazarenes! Our church was founded to express a sincere religion that trains us to evangelize the lost and teach them how to live a holy life in a sinful world.” We can see that this form of free and spontaneous worship went alongside of the specific mission Bresee had when he founded the Church of the Nazarene, which was to make a church accessible to everyone, in other words, an inclusive church. Carl Bangs⁶ tells us that for Bresee the name “Church of the Nazarene” expressed his desire that there be a church where rich and poor were welcome, where everyone could accept the message of Christ without the influence of clerics and formalism, and without feeling ashamed of their poverty or riches. In those first years, the practice of a spontaneous and free worship helped the church in its primary mission of holiness going to all, but especially the marginal sectors of the society to whom a more informal type of worship gave the opportunity to draw close to God from their own reality and in a significant way.

WORSHIP THAT WE LEARNED IN OUR COUNTRIES

The worship that characterized the first Nazarenes and was part of their initial mission to reach the poor and marginalized with the gospel of salvation and sanctification was not what the majority of our Latin American countries knew and that in a negative way affected the initial growth of the Church of the Nazarene in these places. The majority of the missionaries that came to our countries imposed a worship style totally divorced from our cultural and historical reality as a people. Also, there was a struggle to totally separate the Church of the Nazarene from the Pentecostal sector and their form of worship. Some of the characteristics of worship that began in our countries were:

- All expressions of worship in an audible voice were censored like: Alleluia, Amen or Glory to God.
- The use of musical instruments was limited to the piano or organ, discounting any other instrument. In the case of Puerto Rico, at the time the Church of the Nazarene arrived, the piano was an instrument used by the upper class and only the rich had access to learn how to play.
- Applauding during the choruses and whatever movement of the body was censored.
- The songs were mostly limited to those found in the hymnal, “Showers of Blessings” that had mostly hymns translated from English to Spanish.
- All spontaneity in worship was totally restricted.

These characteristics of worship that discriminated against our Latin culture and limited its expression, whether or not consciously or unconsciously, limited the growth of the church as many people did not accept it because they saw it as something far removed from their reality as a nation. However, we have seen how worship has been changing in a positive manner,

⁶ Carl Bangs, *Phineas F. Bresee* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1995), 184.

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transforming itself in a way that permits each nation or people to worship God from their own cultural reality, with their own instruments and in which different musical genres that in one time were totally prohibited as musical expressions of worship. This positive change in worship has resulted in a healthy growth in our liturgy. As Jesus said to the Samaritan woman (John 4:19-26), worship that pleases the Father is not what is determined by a certain place (Gerizim, Jerusalem), time (day or night), or special ceremonies or rituals (kneeling, prostrating or standing), but worship that is in spirit and in truth. Worship in spirit and truth happens when we worship God from our culture and reality and from the heart. Many factors have influenced this change, but we can show two of the most important:

1. Globalization has permitted more communication and openness to Christian music that is being produced throughout the world. For example, Marcos Witt stands out with his praise and worship music which has impacted all of the Latin American countries. From there the production of Christian praise and worship music musicians such as Juan Carlos Alvarado, Marcos Barrientos, Jesús Adrian Romero, Marcos Vidal, etc., have had a marked growth and has become the music that is used in the liturgy in our churches. This praise and worship music has the characteristic that it is written by its own performer, changing the tradition of translating songs from English to Spanish.
2. The second reason has to do directly with the Church of the Nazarene. In 1997 our General Superintendents named the United States as a mission field. This historical event brought as a consequence a search for more effective ways to reach minorities in the United States, Hispanics being the largest of these groups. In this effort on part of the Church of the Nazarene to impact all the minority groups in the United States with the message of salvation and sanctification, brought with it the realization of the importance of giving space for every group to worship from their own cultural reality, including music, audible expressions of praise, applause and moving the body to the rhythm of the music. In five years of pastoral experience in the United States I have seen evidence of increased liberty in worship. The district leaders give freedom to each group so they can express themselves in their particular way. For example, during a praise time during an activity of the Multicultural Ministries in the United States, M3-Millennium Three, one of the representations from the Hispanic sector sang to a salsa rhythm (a rhythm indigenous to Puerto Rico) although in the Church of the Nazarene in Puerto Rico this rhythm is not well accepted by the leaders as an expression of worship to God.

SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

This change in worship, that has had positive results in the fulfillment of the mission of the church to give the message of salvation and sanctification to all people, has to be evaluated constantly. Dr. James Spruce says: "Our worship time should not be considered as a refuge to hide ourselves from the world's influence. Because it is possible that it is the place where the world's influence is hitting the battle the hardest." So it is possible that in honor of fulfilling our mission, and adapting our worship to the culture and to the times, we lose our perspective of our primordial mission of presenting the gospel of salvation and transformation. Dr. Spruce presents a series of dilemmas that we are now facing and that if we don't work with them to resolve them it could bring about confusion. It is about these dilemmas I wish to comment.

1. Ambiguity in the definition of worship.

A bad definition of worship produces in us an incorrect worship. In first place, our definition of worship has to be based on the Bible, taking into account our Arminian-Wesleyan tradition and the history of the Church of the Nazarene. We need to also have the flexibility to adapt to every culture, without losing the Biblical and historical elements of our definition. On the other hand, we must have clear this definition and the role that worship has within public worship service, as to not totally substitute proclamation for worship, as some propose. As the Church of the Nazarene we recognize the centrality of preaching (*Kerygma*) in our history and in the fulfillment of our mission to preach the message of salvation and sanctification.

2. The growing popularity of the church in the world and the world in the church.

A clear definition of worship and our mission as Church of the Nazarene will help us avoid this struggle of the world in the church. We must analyze all of the musical genres without throwing them out, but understanding what is their most adequate function within the mission of the church (evangelism, worship, etc.).

3. Lack of clarity in the expression of our emotions and spontaneity.

We showed how Spruce recognized that our worship tradition is founded on a religion in which one does not speak much, but one that is felt, the reality that among the majority of Latinos is more noticeable. For example, the Caribbean that we come from is a mix of Spanish, African and Indian and we are very emotional and spontaneous. However, we need to correctly define what is spontaneous worship directed at worshipping and glorifying God, to differentiate that which is a catharsis when the person becomes a target of the “worship” and not God.

4. The appearance of the show/spectator tendency.

The purpose of liturgical worship is to bring people to find God, and it is not just a show in which a group participates and everyone else is a mere spectator. We need to differentiate musical concerts from times of public worship. Worship leaders are not representatives of the people before God in respect to worship, but are facilitators leading the people to worship in spirit and truth.

5. A vague Biblical and historical perspective.

We cannot lose our Wesleyan-Arminian tradition and our history as a denomination when we are structuring our adoration. It is important to remember that in worship we can also instruct the people in Biblical and theological aspects. Because of this, we must be careful that the content of the hymns and choruses that we sing during public worship be totally Biblical and that they be in agreement with our theology. Watch out! Not all hymns and choruses based on Biblical passages are appropriate for worship.

6. The tendency to bring to an extreme pastoral control and the subsequent paralysis of lay ministry in the renovation of worship.

Part of the job of the pastor along with the local Christian education leaders is to analyze what is being sung during worship in comparing it with the Bible, our theology and our cultural reality. Also, there need to be mechanisms so that all the laymen can participate in the process of

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analyzing the worship in every congregation and to share ideas that can help to renew worship always keeping in mind the five dilemmas discussed earlier.

These dilemmas that Spruce presents us should serve to direct us in our evaluation of our worship experience and its effectiveness in the fulfillment of our mission. We understand the need that the church has to adapt itself to the times, including the worship experience. But it is more important that in the desire to convert ourselves into a church that impacts and that is pertinent to our times, we do not lose our focus on the necessity that the changes must have a strong theological base. If we fail in doing the previous, the changes that we introduce will result in the detriment of the church and its mission, instead of stimulating its growth.