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**Evangelistic Worship:
The Front Door of Church Growth
in the New Millennium**

Alvin L. Reid

*NOTE: This article is adapted from Reid's book *Radically Unchurched: Who They Are—How to Reach Them* (Kregel, 2002).*

A few years ago I met a remarkable group of musicians at a national conference. As they played, they demonstrated a genuine passion for God that transcended their significant ability. I interviewed one, a man named Steve. The church whose praise team he was now a member, the Church at Brook Hills in Birmingham, Alabama, was used of God to lead him into a wonderful, obvious relationship with Jesus. See if his story touches you as it did me:

“As a musician, I happen to have been led strictly and solely to my devotion to God through a church I knew nothing about. I knew nobody that went there. I knew people that went there, but I didn't know that they went there. It was a church that was perfect for me to have, because I'm a professional musician, and now am able to serve in that area. I don't know how to fix plumbing, so I can't work on plumbing. I can't drive a nail straight, so I don't contribute that way. But I can play music.

“I grew up in Selma, Alabama. We were made to go to a downtown Presbyterian church as a child that was quite dull—ritualistic, rote, joyless, totally devoid of Spirit, totally devoid of any celebration and edification. I stopped going as a child just as soon as I was old enough just to win the argument. At about the age of twenty-nine, I lost my first wife in a car accident. I was married again five years later and suffered a gut-

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wrenching divorce. That same week, the church at Brook Hills was founded. In between and amongst all those things were quite a few, a lot of sin, disobedient behavior, a lot of things that simply were the result of being apart from God. In the fall of 1996, I entered into a personal relationship with a woman which fell apart rather traumatically. It was about a three month period of the most absolute stark, total, painful darkness that I could ever have imagined. I went to therapists, anything for help I finally decided I would go to church because I had run out of places to go for help, and I somehow knew that was what I needed to do.

"I had one friend that plays in the band with me that went to the Church at Brook Hills. I thought he was playing as a gig for money. I had decided to go to ten different places, ten weeks in a row to find some place that would help me heal this hurt. So I went to Brook Hills. The pastor walked out with a big smile on his face. He said, "Folks, I have good news for you."

"Over the process of the next several months I attended, and asked Jesus to come into my heart. My life began all over and is totally new in all things. It is true. It is real. It is tangible. It's the most concrete thing that there is. My entire life, up until I met Christ, I think of it as being black and white. When I met Christ, it went from black and white to color. On January 11, 1998, I was delivered. It took God picking up a 2 by 4 and clubbing me half to death with the world, but I'm glad He did it. I praise Him and worship Him for it. If you are a person who is wandering, searching, you want to believe it, but you don't, let me tell you, it's true. It's real."

I asked Steve to tell me the one thing about Brook Hills that causes folks like him, unchurched guys and ladies who don't have a background of faith, what is it about that church that see so many come to Christ? His reply:

"It's God. It's not what we're doing. It's what God wants. It's a very, very special place where the emphasis is worship and developing a passion for God and the place where people get filled. It's a hospital emergency room. We should have a red cross painted on the roof. It's a place where people go to get healed, saved, and renewed, and reborn. Anything other than is peripheral at best and unimportant." In this statement Steve gives a clearer understanding of the purpose of the church than many who have been Christians far longer than he.

When the Unchurched Come to Church

The American church must focus more on intentionally penetrating the unchurched culture, to reach those who do not come to our churches. However, some unchurched people do at times attend church; and the more evangelistic your church is, the more they will come to your church. Eventually you want them all to come to your church. In fact, hopefully part of your strategy to reach the unchurched is to invite them to a community of faith to meet Christ. What will they find when they get there?

I have literally been in churches that I would have been embarrassed to invite an unchurched person to attend. Maybe it is because they are unfriendly. I heard about a guy who visited a church. No one spoke to him or to his wife. They looked at them rather oddly. It was clear they were “visitors,” for they didn’t belong! Even the pastor failed to speak to them after the service. They went to a restaurant afterward. They were greeted at the door by a smiling face. They sat down and were treated special. They were visited again and again to make sure all was well. As they left the restaurant, the husband told his wife he would rather join that restaurant than the church they just visited!

When a church gathers on Sunday for corporate worship the main focus should be on God. But that does not have to exclude the lost. Worship is a wild card which trumps our differences and our prejudices. People whose lives are focused on worshipping God overcome all sorts of barriers. A hillbilly from West Virginia found himself serving the Lord at Armitage Baptist Church in Chicago. He began to go into the neighborhood inviting children to church. Betty Cherry was the mother of some of the children—a black lady who spent her life in the city, who had nothing in common with a West Virginia hillbilly. But through his influence, this former prostitute who lived in drunkenness for 18 years came to Armitage New Year’s Eve, 1982. She was saved through the witness of a lady named Dawn who had been a prostitute as well before coming to Jesus. Now Betty heads the ARMS (Armitage Reaching Many Souls) evangelism ministry.

Her story: “Right away I was disciplined. The church became a second home and a second family—at times my first family.” Through her ministry at ARMS Betty has reached hundreds with the gospel. One lady was from Puerto Rico—she came to Christ, then moved to Milwaukee, where she began an ARMS minis-

try—the Mong people group. Imagine that—a hillbilly touched a black, drunken prostitute who reached a Puerto Rican, who reached Mongs—how? Because truth and love trump our differences. And that is why true worship is so vital. Genuine worship will trump the differences in any congregation.

When someone comes to seek God at a church, they should be able to find Him. Remarkably, in the present day we see a shift in who attends church and why. In the past, on a given Sunday morning the vast majority of people attending were members of that church, with a few guests. Typically, people were reached through the Sunday school and incorporated into the life of the church. Today, however, especially in newer churches who are aggressively evangelistic, on a given Sunday you may have a large number attending who have never joined. My church currently has about sixteen hundred attending on Sunday morning services, yet our membership is between six and seven hundred. Unchurched people are coming to many churches.

What Is Worship?

Just what do we mean by worship? Worship occurs on many levels, although at this point I am considering the corporate worship service of a local church. Worship is more than praise, although that is one element. Worship is more than singing, although singing is one way to worship. The primary words for worship in the Old Testament and the New Testament have to do with bowing or humbling ourselves toward the Lord. Worship truly focuses on God Himself. Isaiah 57:15 describes those God seeks; the contrite and humble. Notice those God seeks do not have to be seminary trained or musically gifted. They can be former drug addicts, pagans, atheists, homosexuals, or even backslidden Baptists! What they must be is broken before the Lord.

Worship, in my simplest of definitions, means to meet God and leave changed. It is seeing Jesus in all His glory, magnifying Him in His resurrected splendor; it is acknowledging the greatness of God in the face of our struggles. Worship means we reflect on our life from God's perspective. It is the cure to a multitude of human woes. Fundamentally, worship implies a focus on God, not on us. God is the audience, and our efforts at worship should be intended to bring honor and pleasure and glory to Him.

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Worship occurs on a number of levels. Most of us think of the time on Sundays or other occasions of united, corporate worship. It also includes personal worship, family worship, or any other time believers gather to give praise or adoration to God. But worship means more than praise—it includes obedience. That is why true worship goes hand in hand with evangelism. No matter how wonderful your service is on Sunday, if it does not lead to a life daily focused on the things that matter to God, you have not truly worshiped. After the ten days of worship and prayer recorded in Acts 1, the disciples shared Christ in Acts 2. In the midst of worship at the church in Antioch, God led the believers to send out their best and brightest, Paul and Barabus, the mission field (See Acts 13). One of the marks of a truly worshipping church is an external focus on reaching the world.

Substance

Biblical worship focuses on God, not us. If we are not careful we become the object of worship—we sing about God, but if we only sing about how He blesses us, we have limited God to a divine Santa Claus. No, worship is about giving ourselves to God more than receiving from Him.

Shifting from singing “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty,” to “Holiness is what I long for,” illustrates a subtle shift. Both songs offer biblical truth. The danger comes when the focus shifts too much from a God-focus to a personal focus.

A service of worship should reflect both the greatness, the transcendence of God, and the intimacy we can have with Him. The height of worship is not the singing, but the preaching, for in effective worship services the music opens hearts so that the Word of God can fill them. Some churches have lengthened time of singing and shortened the message time. I don’t think we need less Bible content in a biblically illiterate world! This is why the invitation still plays a vital role and I believe should not be abandoned as some have done in the name of being “sensitive” to the unchurched. If worship is an encounter with God, and if meeting God brings changes in a person’s life, then we should offer them a time and a place both to acknowledge that in the context of the body of Christ, and give a place for them to seek out further counsel or prayer.

There are certain features of worship that do not change, a form to follow. I do not mean a set liturgy, for the New Testament does not set a specific form. However, the early church fol-

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lowed a form similar to the synagogue, so some features are timeless, albeit the fact that the implementation of such features, from music to preaching to prayer, can be altered and adapted in different cultures. As stated in Chapter Six, however, expository preaching most honors God and most clearly presents the greatest need people have-to hear a clear, consistent word from God.

Honestly, in more traditional churches, the services are dead and lifeless because of the secondary issues that plague them. For example, the announcements. I don't know how many churches have I attended where the announcements killed the spirit of the service. But worse than that is the simple lack of preparation. God is worthy of our best, and those of us leading in worship, whether it is the one giving announcements, leading music, saying a prayer, or preaching the Word, should offer Him our best. Unchurched people who come to our churches will notice if we trivialize the character of God by our actions in a service. Notice the rise of Pentecostalism, which gives much attention to worship and seeking the wonder of God. While marked by excesses throughout its history, there is still much to learn from a movement like Pentecostalism, which has risen from its birth at the end of the nineteenth century to 450 million by the beginning of the new millennium.

But biblical substance need not be sacrificed in a more contemporary worship service. I have been in many churches, and am a member of such a church, that is more contemporary in musical style, in approach, and appearance, but still features expository preaching, evangelism training, and so on.

Style

I believe style is overrated. Some suppose that if you get just the right style, you can reach the unchurched. You may reach some, but without substance, you won't keep them long. I really believe substance, style and spirit form a beautiful trinity that can no more be separated than the holy Trinity we worship. Style is another place we must separate preference from principles. I prefer a more blended, even contemporary style. You may prefer a traditional service, or perhaps a very contemporary one. I believe style is overrated, but it does matter.

In fact, few things get people stirred up more than a debate about worship style. Should we raise hands or not? When is clapping appropriate? How do we balance spontaneity with form? Some argue that the emotionalism inherent in the singing

of choruses leads to a gooey kind of pietistic feel-good session rather than a worship service. That indeed is a real danger, and music leaders should stay keenly aware of it. But is that any worse than a dead, anemic, intellectual service devoid of any fervor? I doubt it. Both are wrong. Just the other day someone asked me which side of the horse I would fall off of if I had to choose—too much experience or too much dogma? I said, “When I ride on a horse I don’t plan on falling off!”

People should have freedom to encounter the living God. In the cultural context of the Middle Ages, freedom meant stained glass windows for an illiterate population to assist in communicating biblical stories. In the 21st century, stained glass is lovely, but not integral to the worship experience. Fifty years ago a vast pipe organ enhanced worship for many, whereas a keyboard and drums does the same for lots of GenXers. Still, there are cautions. We need to avoid amusing people. The word amusement comes from a which means “not,” and “muse or ponder.” In other words, no evaluation, no critical thinking. We should not shy away from seeking a real, genuine experience with God in worship, but we do not have to compete with MEV videos to accomplish this.

I do believe every worship service should be contemporary. By contemporary I mean relating truths of God in a way people can understand. It does not mean trying to look like the world. For example, in many churches pastors no longer wear a three piece suit and tie. They may go with a sport coat and an open collar, or a tie and no coat, or simply business casual. If the purpose is to relate to the listeners, and attempt to remove any barrier a suit, or for that matter a huge pulpit, or other unnecessary features might give, then fine. But if the purpose is to look cool, that is not so fine. In other words, I do not believe an earring and a tattoo on every pastor will suddenly revolutionize our ability to reach the grunge crowd.

I was impressed by the Church at Brook Hills, the young, rapidly growing Southern Baptist megachurch near Birmingham I mentioned earlier, when they came to lead in worship at a conference I attended. In the mornings the singers dressed casually, which was appropriate for the setting. Yet, none of the young ladies dressed in a way that called attention to themselves. So, they were free to lead people to the throne of grace in worship.

There are pros and cons when considering a more contemporary style. Positively, it keeps music fresh, easy to sing and

learn, so participation is encouraged. Our chapel services at Southeastern Seminary are the greatest chapel services on earth. God receives great honor as the seminary community gathers for a time of worship every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. Still, I marvel at the difference in the spirit of the services when we move from singing a couple of hymns to a combination of hymns and choruses with more of a flow. The warmth, the richness is apparent when the latter takes place. On the negative side, more contemporary songs tend to be softer in doctrine, and tend to emphasize personal blessing over the greatness of God. Fortunately there is a growing trend of contemporary hymns with greater depth on the horizon. The second most likely place to get theology is our singing. In a given service, what do the songs you sing say about God? In six months in your church, can a person have a significant understanding of the nature of the faith? Or do they leave just knowing they "feel good" when they sing their songs?

The issue is not tradition or non-tradition. Songs five years old can become traditions. Some sing recent songs because they like them, while criticizing older believers for longing for the old songs because they like the old tunes! And, it is not hymns or no hymns, as many recent, contemporary hymns are not being written which have a depth of theological truth unlike many choruses. My president, Paige Patterson, recently made the profound and accurate observation that most believers today have not rejected hymns, they have rejected hymnals, thus bringing the rise in screens and projectors versus the hymn book.

Spirit

Worship style does not have the highest priority. In fact, even the substance can be overemphasized, as even truth can be poorly communicated. The most overlooked aspect to vibrant, even evangelistic worship, is the presence of the Spirit of God. Give me a church where when the people sing you can sense a conviction about those songs, a tear in the eye, a fervor in the voice, and I care less about whether it comes from the 18th century or the latest CD, something about worshiping like that brings honor to Christ.

This reality can be seen again and again in history. When one examines the mighty movements of God in the past—the Evangelical Awakening in England with the Wesley brothers, George Whitefield, Howell Harris, and others; the First Great

Awakening in America with Edwards and Tennent and Frelinghuysen—people worshiped God with an intensity and enthusiasm unrivaled by other periods. Evangelism springs forth from such movements as naturally as a fountain yields fresh water. The key component in these times is not style, but the presence of the Spirit of God in power.

We desperately need awakening in America—a God-intervention that calls believers back to authentic, Christ-honoring worship. Such a movement inevitably invades the lives of multitudes of the unchurched as well.

We should give attention to the content of our songs. And, to the content of the entire service. And, the style does matter, to a significant degree. But, neither of these matter without life.

The Power of Corporate Worship—Experiencing the Manifest Presence of God

When we take seriously the Great Commission seriously and begin to penetrate the unchurched culture, one-by-one, bit-by-bit, we will find many among the unchurched who will come to our services. By no means can one say that all unchurched people will militantly reject offers to come to church. If invited by a trusted friend or associate, many will come. When they do, we want to do more than provide a wonderful experience. We want them to find the Author of our worship.

Read the story of Judy:

Judy, 39, a single sales manager, Connecticut:

“The last time I went to church I stood in the back and cried. I thought about the baby I aborted when I was 24. I thought about other choices I’d made and how lonely I was. Everyone there seemed to be with someone and have their lives together. I do have my professional life together. I make a six-figure income, . . . But I just knew, as I stood in the back of that chapel, that no woman there had ever killed her own baby. I had no right to be in that holy place.”

Judy sensed her need of God. Worship, when depicting fully the character of God, can both convict, and lead to conversion. This worship, which seeks to exalt our great God while simultaneously demonstrating the power of the gospel to the lost, has been called worship evangelism.

Sally Morgenthaler offers features of worship evangelism:

Nearness—a sense of God’s presence.

Knowledge—one should leave a service of worship having

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gained substantive knowledge about God and our relationship to Him.

Vulnerability—opening up to God. Lost people are sick of believers who oversimplify tough questions all people, inside the church and outside, face. Unbelievers seek people who are real, who open themselves up before a holy God and will make it clear that they are not God, they are simply seeking to worship Him. Maybe we need to talk about being sinner friendly than being seeker friendly, since Jesus was known as a friend of sinners. Worship, if genuine, includes honesty. Interaction—participating in a relationship with God and others. This relates to the longing for community in the lives of the unchurched. In this culture we need kinesthetic worship. For example, an effective speaker can do that with his delivery. I almost never preach without asking for some physical response from the listeners—lifting a hand, a verbal response, and so on. Object lessons, the use of video, the rise of power point, testimonies, dramas, and other means can help to involve believers without compromising the focus on preaching.

The reason the church must change is because culture has changed radically. All churches are contemporary. Some are contemporary to the 19th century!

The Power of Music to Communicate

Music is a language that can help cross generations. Billy Graham, far removed from the youth culture by age, still speaks to huge crowds of teens in his crusades. He had said he needed an interpreter to communicate with today's youth, because at times they seem to speak a different language. "Contemporary Christian music sometimes acts like an interpreter for me," Graham said. "Although the message remains the same, our methods often must change in order to communicate that message. New tools of outreach and forms of expression must be used."

Many of the changes in worship services stem from the early 1970s, when the Jesus Movement swept across the nation touching the lives of countless young people. No, this was not a great awakening, but it significantly affected the lives of many, including this writer. If the First Great Awakening corresponds in impact to the First World War, the Jesus Movement would be more on the level of the Viet Nam War. Both movements are significant, but vary in scope and degree. The Jesus Movement also could be called a revival for the unchurched. So many young

adults were radically converted from completely unchurched backgrounds. A major factor in reaching these young people was music—both from the rise of indigenous youthful music out of the coffeehouses of the day, and from the many youth musicals written for the massive movement of youth choir tours in the 1970s.

Here are some principles for worship and evangelism:

1. Never worship primarily for the unchurched, but for Almighty God. Worship should not be done for believers either, for that matter. Also, do not worship without thinking of the unchurched. I have gone into churches where choruses were sang that I did not know. No song sheets with words were provided. It is sort of hard to worship when you are clueless about the songs!
2. Focus on substance over style, but do not forget the power of the Spirit as well. Style does matter. Contemporary churches do reach more unchurched people. Still, the substance must be given preeminence.
3. Always seek to be changed, not to be entertained. If the people of God, when at worship, are being changed, that will spill over to any unchurched in the congregation.

Our nation's spiritual level can be compared to a land deeply parched from drought. The soil is fertile; the seed is abundant. What must be added is the rain. Worship opens the heavens for the Spirit's rain to shower the parched land.

We need a fresh rain.

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