

Creativity in Worship: Novelty, Necessity, or Neither?

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Not too long ago, some friends and I attended a conference hosted by a large, fast-growing congregation. The topic of the conference was creativity in the church, and our goal in attending was to be challenged to think more creatively about our worship services and the way we approach our ministries. We weren't disappointed.

Everywhere we turned we encountered state-of-the-art video, sound, lighting, drama, and production. Clearly marked signs, cheerful greeters, and ample refreshments made it obvious someone had prepared for our arrival. We marveled at the level of talent, gifting, and humility (an unusual combination) in those who were sponsoring the event. We also learned that such creativity doesn't come easy. The members of the church invest multiple hours each week to ensure that the four meetings they hold each weekend are worth coming back for. Everyone we met from the church seemed to overflow with enthusiasm for what was taking place.

Riding home on the plane, I had mixed feelings about what we had experienced. While I was stimulated to approach my role as a worship leader from new perspectives, I was grappling with some foundational questions. Does God even care about creativity in worship? For whom, or for what reason, are we seeking to be creative? Is it possible to be "too creative"? Are we even asking the right questions?

The current emphasis on creativity in worship has friends and foes, and opinions run deep. Musicians and artists often view the church as a wasteland when it comes to artistic creativity. They can feel stifled, unencouraged, and misplaced. On the other hand, pastors can feel that appeals to creativity often result in services characterized more by worldliness and novelty than by God-glorifying creativity.

Technological advances provide another area of potential conflict. The church, like every other institution, is being changed by technology. More and more, people are turning to their church's web page for information, or maybe to download an MP3 file of last week's sermon.

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If technology serves us so well throughout the week, why not on Sunday morning? For some sincere Christians, it's perfectly obvious that worship services ought to include the latest in video, sound, and lighting. Others feel just as strongly that worship is about the Word and Sacrament, not how impressive or modern we can be with technology—in the simple acts of proclaiming God's Word and breaking bread together we acknowledge our dependence on the grace of God, and live out a truly alternative culture in the midst of a godless society.

We'll be looking at these and other issues involving creativity in the worship of God. Is it novelty, necessity, or neither? We'll begin by defining creativity from a biblical perspective. From there we'll examine both the benefits and drawbacks of creativity. Finally, I'll propose some guidelines for using creativity for the glory of God.

Because in the end, being creative isn't something we do, but a way we do something. And that something is the reason for our existence—worshiping our Creator.

Creativity in the Bible

No true artist would be considered a success if his or her work was just like everyone else's. Artists strive to produce something original, unique, and fresh. Generally, we place a high value on such work, and call it "creative."

But do creative people really "create" in the literal sense, or in the sense it is used in the Bible? Do they make something where before there had been...nothing? Of course not. Every time the word "create" is used in Scripture it refers to activity performed exclusively by God, never by humans.

No one could say to God after creating the heavens and the earth, "That's good, but it's just like something else I've seen." There was no "something else" to compare it to, because up to that point nothing but God had existed. And what a diverse universe he has created! Elephants and flamingos, raspberries and redwoods, galaxies and blades of grass. All these originated in the creative mind of God. What can we do that compares with his handiwork?

Nevertheless, when we understand the term properly, we find that God actually invites us to be "creative"—in a secondary way—with his creation. Our creativity consists in an understanding and exploration of what he has created. Computers, supersonic jets, and laser eye surgery were no surprise to God. It just took humans a while to realize they were possible, and a little while longer to figure out, with God's sovereign guidance, how to make them work. All the while, God has been inviting us—and still invites us—to

mold, design, connect, rearrange, discover, uncover, reshape, and organize what he has created.

In Genesis 1:28 God gave us this charge: “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” God creates the basic elements and allows us the joy of uncovering and arranging what has always been present in his mind. We are stewards, arrangers, and cultivators. For instance, we take the components of music—melody, rhythm, harmony, dynamics, and timbre—and arrange them into compositions that sound new and can alter our emotions. God creates the raw materials that make up the earth, then inspires us to make cars, clothing, antibiotics, and a million other products that make life more beautiful, enjoyable, and appealing.

God is not indifferent to our role in the creative process. He not only inspires our creativity, but enjoys it as it is used to bring him glory. An artisan named Bezalel was chosen to head up the design work on the tabernacle. In Exodus 35 we’re told it was the Lord himself who “filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding and in knowledge and in all craftsmanship; to make designs for working in gold and in silver and in bronze, and in the cutting of stones for settings and in the carving of wood, so as to perform in every inventive work” (Ex 35:31–33 NASB). Although it’s not always evident in English (many nuances can be lost in translation), the Psalms provide a stunning example of sophisticated literary and musical devices including acrostics, parallelisms, rhythmic variety, and more.

We learn in 1 Chronicles 23 that David made instruments for the worship of God at the Temple. Clearly, creativity and artisanship have a place in worship. Our goal in this series will be to see how it best functions for the purpose it was intended.

Some Benefits of Creativity in Worship

Creativity, rightly understood, is something God not only inspires, but actually enjoys as we use it for his glory. While not essential to congregational worship, creativity can nevertheless serve us in a number of ways.

First, because people were made to respond to fresh sounds and sights, new forms or mediums of communication can help us see the truth from a different perspective, causing words to have a deeper impact on us. Being creative in this way doesn’t have to be costly or take much time. For instance, in my church we’ve been trying to incorporate different ways of reading God’s Word during the meeting. We’ve used everything from a ten-year-old girl, to three dramatic readers, to responsive readings by the congregation. Each form has a different effect. We vary them with one purpose in mind—to heighten

the meaning and impact of the Word of God. The same process can be applied to music. Songs can be sung by a choir, a soloist, a duet, or a full praise team. They can be accompanied by an orchestra, a contemporary band, a string quartet, or a lone acoustic guitar. Changing the sound will often give the congregation new ears to hear what's being sung.

Creativity is also a way of faithfully using the resources and gifts God has given us. Worship is not meant to be mindless repetition or ritual. We should be asking ourselves, "Is there a more effective way to present this?...or say this?...or sing this?" The absence of such questions kept church services in an uncommon language for hundreds of years until men like William Tyndale, Martin Luther, and others gave congregations the Bible and songs in their native tongues. In a similar way, God has given to today's church men and women who can use their gifts and talents to make services more meaningful for the participants.

Another way creativity can serve us is by bringing the non-negotiable elements of worship into clearer focus. The Word of God, the gospel, the Lord's Supper, preaching, singing, prayer—clearly biblical elements like these will always be part of our meetings. Some would be tempted to place additional elements, deriving from their own religious tradition, in the category of Essential Elements. People from one background might emphasize kneelers, hymnals, vestments, and pipe organs, while those of another tradition might emphasize guitars, overhead projectors, and an unspoken rule against wearing ties. It's amazing what we can begin to assume are the God-ordained elements of our gatherings! Thinking creatively and biblically about the various aspects of our worship services can help us remember what is truly important and what is optional in the worship of God.

Finally, wisely applied creative thinking can make the truth more accessible to our culture. Given the right circumstances, there may be good reasons for using rear-screen projection, TV monitors, or sophisticated video equipment. Without adopting the mindset and values of those who are of the world, we can serve the unsaved by communicating in ways they find familiar and appealing. We need to remember that any new form of communication takes time to get used to. Telephones, talking movies, and electronic instruments all had their detractors when they first arrived on the scene. Rather than simply dismissing technological advances as "worldly," isn't it wiser and more pleasing to God to discover how we might use them, in the right way and at the right time, for his purposes and glory?

Some Drawbacks of Creativity in Worship

My seven-year-old daughter, McKenzie, loves to play with flashlights. In her hands an otherwise commonplace object becomes whatever she imagines—a monster, a torch, an x-ray machine—pretty much anything other than a simple device for helping people see in the dark.

Creativity in worship can be a lot like a flashlight. It's a tool. Its purpose is to help direct the eyes of our heart to God and his Word, making it easier for us to see some truth about him. But if, in preparing a worship service, we allow ourselves to become overly intrigued by the tool, we will likely create a service that focuses attention on our shiny new “flashlight,” rather than on the truth about God it was intended to illuminate. When that happens, the congregation goes home saying, “Wow, that was creative!” instead of “Wow, I understand God better now.”

When a church becomes more excited about creative approaches to worship than about the Word of God, something serious and harmful is going on. Creativity and skill are not being rightly employed. The truth we're seeking to express has taken a back seat to the novelty of our approach.

What we win people *with* tends to be what we win them *to*. When members of our congregation leave the meeting disappointed that it wasn't as flashy, fast-paced, interesting, or dramatic as it “usually” is, we've developed a culture in which creativity has become master rather than servant, the end rather than the means. We've nurtured a dependence on creativity, and have “won” people merely to our ingenuity. In biblical terms, creativity has become an idol.

Jesus didn't say, “If you lift up your technology, innovation, and creativity, I will draw all men unto me.” It is the Word of God, enlivened by the Holy Spirit, proclaimed in the gospel, that ultimately changes lives. We must never think otherwise.

Art and creativity must always serve the greater priority of communicating God's character and actions in a way that edifies those present. In the Sunday meeting, we are seeking to exalt, encounter, and respond to God and his Word. If I'm doing anything of a creative nature that doesn't serve those ends, it has the potential to get folks off track.

Problems can emerge when people want to exercise their creativity apart from a solidly biblical framework. Artists do not have some innate need to express themselves that is independent of the Word of God and the spiritual leaders God has placed over them for their own good. While it may seem “artsy” to use a particular effect or technique in worship, we must always ask ourselves if that effect or technique truly serves the goals of the meeting as set forth by church leadership. I've been in the “creative camp” for more

than 30 years, but I've learned that when it comes to creative approaches to worship, a good rule of thumb in this area is, "When in doubt, leave it out." Sure, let's be as creative as possible! But let's also be as wise and as biblically motivated as possible.

At the end of the nineteenth century, some gentlemen in Britain attended a Sunday morning service to hear one of England's finest preachers, and came away deeply impressed with his oratorical skills. That night, they attended another meeting and heard Charles Spurgeon, the "Prince of Preachers." They soon realized that Spurgeon was a far superior orator in every way. Yet they left the morning meeting saying "What a great preacher!" and left the evening meeting saying, "What a great Savior!"

Excellence, gifting, skill, and creativity are tools, not ends in themselves. They are given by the Giver that he might receive all the glory.

Guidelines for Using Creativity Wisely (Part 1)

We've been taking time to look at the place of creativity in corporate worship. I'm aware that those who value an historical liturgy might view this entire discussion as a non-issue. They see corporate worship as an opportunity to deepen their connectedness to the faith of their forefathers through incorporating words, songs, or gestures that have been used for centuries. They point out that many liturgies have been painstakingly constructed over time to reflect the essential components of coming before God to worship him.

Others are at the opposite end of the spectrum, discounting any practice that started before they were born. They respond to any discussion of innovation and creativity in worship with an enthusiastic, "It's about time!"

I believe that God intends us to value both tradition and innovation in worship, providing each is properly understood. Perhaps in a later series we'll look at liturgy in greater depth. For now, I'd like to suggest guidelines for using creativity in worship in a way that pleases God.

First, we must have as our goal the glory and purposes of God. At a minimum, we gather corporately to exalt God, proclaim his Word, respond to his truth, enjoy fellowship with him, and glory in the gospel. In order to stay on track with these purposes, we need a more substantive, biblical goal than simply "Hey, let's be creative." Pastors ought repeatedly to draw attention to why we come together. If in these ways we "keep the main thing the main thing," we will be much freer to explore fresh and innovative ways to communicate timeless truths.

Second, the structure of our meetings should give proportional weight to those things most emphasized in Scripture regarding meetings. By implication or direct command, Scripture commends such things as preaching the Word of God, corporate singing, prayer, the Lord's Supper, and fellowship. Other elements such as drama, banners, and dance receive relatively little emphasis. Let's not major on the minors in an effort to attract more people to our church.

Finally, as people respond to Spirit-led originality, let us never imagine that creativity per se can change lives. I once heard a pastor share a unique illustration he had used to motivate his church to generosity. Months later, a young couple sent him a note remarking how affected they had been by this particular illustration. Along with their comments, they enclosed a sizable check. In recounting this, the pastor attributed their gift to the power of "creativity and innovation." Not true. It is not our musical arrangements, the new order of service, or the PowerPoint presentation that is ultimately responsible for moving hearts. It is the Spirit of God, working through God-given means. God can use our creativity, but he doesn't need it.

Guidelines for Using Creativity Wisely (Part 2)

While seeking to be fresh and innovative, it's important that we don't end up despising tradition. We have much to learn from godly saints before us who apparently had deep and rich relationships with God. Fortunately, there's been a recent trend to look back in time for new ideas. People are realizing that the age of an idea has nothing to do with its value or usefulness. New life is being breathed into ancient practices such as responsive prayer, the recitation of creeds, and corporate confession of sin. This would never be possible without an openness to traditions which some might see as stale or irrelevant.

Of course, it's difficult to be innovative unless we know what resources and options are available to us. This takes time and study. Many artists, writers, and musicians in churches remain unused simply because leaders have never found out what they are able to do. Rather than run from creative people, wise pastors find ways to mentor them, especially in regards to humility and servanthood.

Also, in most churches there is probably at least one computer guy, engineer, or general "techie" who can keep pastors abreast of recent developments in technology. Whether it's wise to use a particular technique can only be determined when we have sufficient information.

In this area of creativity, one of the most important lessons our pastoral team has learned is never to stop asking questions. What can we alter, change, or improve to better achieve the purposes for which God calls the church together? What has become too familiar for

our people? Our tendency as leaders and as congregations is to lapse into unreflective repetition. Why? We're creatures of habit. We do it "this way" because we've always done it "this way." C.S. Lewis once said that liturgy should feel like an old shoe, comfortable and familiar, so that we can concentrate on the meaning behind our actions. That's true—to a point. But repetition can just as easily produce contempt as it can understanding. We must continue to ask ourselves what fruit is being produced by our meetings.

A final guideline to using creativity in corporate worship is never to allow yourself to become overly dependent on planning. Our goal is not a perfectly executed meeting, but the genuine worship of God in spirit and in truth. Even the most creative planning can be overridden by the leading of the Holy Spirit in the midst of a meeting. Let's be sure we're listening.

Most of all, we need to remember that creativity isn't something we do; it's a way we do something—a way we pursue honoring and exalting God through effectively communicating his greatness and glory to the gathered church. Can there be any higher purpose for creative gifts?

May God raise up many artistically gifted men and women who are committed to using their talents, in humility, for the glory of God in the local church!