

PLANNING THEMATIC THEOCENTRIC SERVICES

Study the biblical theology of worship and you find a strong case can be made for worship services that are theocentric rather than anthropocentric. The dominant focus should not be on how we can receive a blessing from God, but rather on how we can give blessing to the triune God in response to his attributes and acts. How can we implement this theology in planning services of worship? One helpful way is to plan thematic theocentric services.

Suppose we were sitting down at our desk or computer to plan a thematic-theocentric service. Where would we begin? Our pivotal point would be the passage of Scripture on which the sermon is to be based.

1. Read through the scripture passage and look for words and phrases that offer praise and glory to God. Look for any explicit or implicit references to the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit. What does the text say about the character or works of God? In other words, what's the dominant doxological note of the text? Select the dominant divine act or attribute that would then serve as the unified theme for the entire service.
2. The next step would be to plan the elements of the service to correlate with the God-centered theme. Any calls to worship, prayers, hymns, songs, musical selections, and Scripture readings would all be related to that God-centered theme. Each part of the service would direct the attention of worshipers to the God who has created us to glorify and enjoy him forever.

The object is to unite the worshipers "so that with one heart and mouth [we] may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 15:6). The thematic guide sheets on the acts and attributes of God in the following pages are designed to aid in the selection of elements for a service that center around a particular divine attribute or act. You may supplement this by making use of the indexes (scriptural and topical) found in most hymnals and song books.

Using thematic theocentric worship services can produce several beneficial effects in the life of a congregation. The most obvious effect is that it enables worshipers to focus on the triune God and his glory rather than on

humans and our needs. This approach enlarges one's view of and appreciation for the triune God. A.W. Tozer in his classic book *The Knowledge of the Holy* (p.12) says "So necessary to the Church is a lofty concept of God that when that concept in any measure declines, the Church with her worship and her moral standards declines along with it. The first step down for any church is taken when it surrenders its high opinion of God." Weekly services that focus on various aspects of God's works and character can counter such tendencies. The congregation grows in knowledge and appreciation for the fullness of the biblical revelation of God.

This method also helps guard against the excessive use of subjective, man-centered songs and hymns. If the theme of the service is one of God's acts or attributes and the music is coordinated with that theme, one is less likely to overemphasize the more subjective and experience-oriented songs.

Another beneficial effect of this approach is that it can increase the impact of the sermon. That which precedes the sermon can prepare hearts by focusing on God who has revealed himself in his word. Elements of the service are not designed or regarded as mere preliminaries or time-fillers; rather, the parts flow together and are directed to the glory of God in response to who he is and what he has done and will do. The sermon is not isolated but is an integral part of the whole service.

With these thoughts in mind, may the following resources prove helpful to those who have the awesome responsibility of planning and leading God's people in divine worship. "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). May the company of those who declare the praises of God's acts and attributes multiply throughout the earth!