

## Evaluating Worship Services for Gospel Content

### **A. Description of the Project**

This weekly student exercise was carried out by students for six successive weeks and involved in-class discussion of what the students experienced in their Sunday church services.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Christianity is a declining religion in the United States. Baptism in the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention reached their highest number in 1973 and have been declining ever since. The total church membership in the Southern Baptist Convention has been declining for a decade which now places the SBC in the ranks of most other denominations. In 1990, Southern Baptist Churches reported that over 95% of the evangelism that took place occurred during the annual revival meetings. Since 1995, most SBC churches have stopped having revival meetings, but an evangelism strategy has never replaced the revival meeting. Since 1995, attention has been focused on the contemporary worship service as the means of attracting a new generation to church, but has this method succeeded?

### **The Background**

For almost 2,000 years, the expansion of the church across the world has come through the fulfillment of Christ's instructions to proclaim the gospel. The New Testament presents the proclamation of the gospel as a supernatural event wherein the Holy Spirit acts to draw people to faith in Christ. For almost 2,000 years, Christians of all denominations understood the gospel message to include:

Belief in a Creator God

The Fulfillment of the Scriptures in the coming of Jesus

The full deity and full humanity of Jesus

The Death of Jesus for our sins

The Resurrection of Jesus

The Exaltation of Jesus as Lord

The Gift of the Holy Spirit to all who believe

The Return of Jesus at the end of time

This outline is the content of the creeds which proclaim what Christians believe. During the last half of the twentieth century in the United States, evangelical Christian reduced the gospel to an explanation of how the atonement works, focusing on the death of Jesus as “the gospel in a nutshell.”

### **The Student Exercise**

Students are asked to evaluate the songs and the sermons of their church’s Sunday morning worship service for gospel content. They then write a one to two page summary of their analysis in which they consider such questions as:

What elements of the gospel, if any are present in the songs and sermon?

Are references to the gospel clear and understandable, or only allusions?

Would someone unfamiliar with the Bible and the story of Jesus understand the references?

Are references made with full sentences, or merely phrases that might sound familiar to people who attend church regularly?

Could a Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, or Jew sing the songs?

How likely is it that someone might understand the gospel from attending the service?

Students then share their evaluations in class discussion.

### **B. How the Project Differs from Current Practices in the Field**

The teaching and practice of evangelism since the 1970s has focused on the most current methodologies rather than on the content of the gospel. This trend began in the 1950s with the

effort by Campus Crusade for Christ to “standardize” the gospel with the “Four Spiritual Laws” tract that led to the reduction of the gospel to the atonement of Christ, while ignoring the rest of the gospel. Particular attention since the 1990s has focused on the contemporary worship experience and technique. Large churches have grown in attendance, yet Christianity has declined. This project focuses the attention of the students on how a church might have a large attendance but a weak spiritual life. American Christianity is in a crisis moment similar to that period in ancient Israel when they lost the Law, but religion went on as usual. This exercise allows students to understand that a service can be lively and moving without necessarily being overtly Christian. They quickly see how a service can attract attenders without people coming to faith in Christ.

The overwhelming number of Southern Baptist and evangelical pastors and theologians in America today would say that the gospel is just the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are now two generations removed from the historic understanding of the New Testament teaching of the gospel, and it is absent from American evangelism. This exercise helps students understand why Christianity makes no sense to the casual observer.

### **C. Evaluations of the Success of the Exercise**

Students quickly grasped the problems with much of contemporary worship songs produced by the recording industry. The exercise is not a scientific research instrument, yet from their experience, students realized that only about 20% of the songs sung in churches in the Jackson area are actually Christian songs. They refer to God, They refer to praising God. They make veiled allusions to “the blood” and other familiar terms for people who grew up in church. Unfortunately, the lyrics tend to be stream of consciousness free verse sentence fragments that

lack a unifying narrative. They may remind a Christian of a story they knew, but they do not convey the story to non-believers.

Students' eyes were quickly opened by this exercise. The problem does not lie with the musical forms, because some contemporary songs convey a clear message of the gospel. The problem lies with people writing songs that they sprinkle with religious sentiment when they themselves may not have a firm grasp of the gospel. Songs may stir feelings in the context of a large gathering without conveying the gospel.

I plan to continue using this exercise and to present a paper on its use in classes on evangelism for the Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education.