

Worship Matters Video Intensive with Bob Kauflin
Session 6: Planning Meetings
(From Chapter 13 of *Worship Matters*)¹
Transcript

Welcome to Session 6 of the Worship Matters Video Intensive. In this session, we're going to cover the second part of "combining God's Word with music" and talk about planning our meetings.

Years ago, I used to listen to sermons while I was jogging and occasionally I'd be about 20 minutes in and think, "Something's wrong here." It sounded like the preacher was kind of confused. It sounded like he'd skip to the middle, then it sounded like he was ending the sermon, and then it would kind of go back to right near the beginning. I thought, "What in the world? This guy's so off." Then I looked down at my iPod and realized the sermon had been divided into 5 minute sections and I was listening to it on shuffle, so, it was a little confusing. The sad part was that it took me 20 minutes to figure that out.

Unfortunately, sometimes our meetings can sound like they're on shuffle. Like the all the parts are there but they just aren't making sense and people have a hard time understanding if there's an order, if there *should be* an order.

I. Our Gatherings Matter.

The conviction that Christians should gather weekly is almost universally taught in the church, but what Christians do when they gather is another story. There are a lot of factors that influence why we chose to do what we do. The most important being scripture's commands, models, and inferences. But we also have traditions. They might be centuries old or decades old. Things that we've always done, so that's the way we do them. It could be our experiences affect us, so, how we're built and different things seem more meaningful to us. It could be our culture—how people understand what we do.

God hasn't given us an exact order for what we do when we're together, but there's a strong connection in Scripture between God-glorifying public gatherings and the spiritual health of his people. Our meetings matter. (2 Chronicles 29-32, 34-35)

II. Understanding Liturgy

Now the word we use to describe what we do when we gather is the word *liturgy*. I don't want you to be thrown off by that term. I was raised in a very liturgical church and for years I kind of resisted any conversation about liturgy, but liturgy is simply what we do when we gather. It literally means "a work on behalf of the people" or a "public work." It was used in the New Testament to describe the ministry that Christians have to one another, based on the unique work of Christ on their behalf. It came to be used to describe the public way a church honors

God in its gatherings. Now it's important to understand that our liturgy is really a participation in the high priestly ministry of Christ, and so involves not only our ministry to God but also God's ministry to us.

Now whether we know it or not, every church has a liturgy. Your church has a liturgy. And our liturgy has huge implications. Here are some reasons why:

A. Liturgy models

One writer said, "You can tell a lot about people's theology from what they do in church." The forms, structures, and emphases we choose model how to think about God, how to relate to God, how to pray and sing, how to relate to Scripture, how to relate to each other.

B. Liturgy teaches

Liturgy not only models, it teaches through sermons, songs, and repetition week after week, we're saying to people: these things are important! You should pay attention to these things!

C. Liturgy shapes and influences

In his fine book, *Rhythms of Grace*, Mike Cospers wrote,

*"As we plan and order our services, discerning the content to include, we shape the beliefs and devotional lives of our church members."*²

Now, that content includes not only what we say, but how we say it and what we do. Our liturgies teach people how to think about God, how to think about themselves, how to think about our world. Our liturgies—what we do every Sunday—shape people's thoughts, words, and actions. It may not feel that way, but it's true.

Someone has said, "We become like what we worship." (Psalm 115:8) Well, not only do we become like *what* we worship, we become like *how* we worship. Culturally hip, trendy services tend to produce culturally hip, trendy Christians. Dry, intellectual services tend to produce dry, intellectual Christians. Emotionally-driven gatherings tend to produce emotionally-driven Christians. And thoughtful, biblically-informed, Christ-exalting, emotionally-engaging services tend to produce that kind of Christian.

III. Worship is More than a Song Set.

Now years ago I experienced a radical change in the way I thought about meetings. I started thinking of them as one cohesive whole rather than a setlist of songs followed by a sermon.

It's one thing to put together a song set or a song list. It's another thing to weave songs together in a thoughtful, intentional, and Christ-exalting way with scripture, prayer, exhortations, testimonies, a sermon, and possibly communion or baptism to tell one story.

Songs are *part* of the story when we gather, but they're not the *whole* story. They were never meant to tell the whole story of our faith or be the primary way we engage with or worship God. Here's the problem: songs communicate truth through the emotional language of music, which limits both their theological specificity and their breadth. Songs can't cover as much ground as words can because they have to function within the confines of melodies, meter, and chord progressions.

Songs teach—and should teach—but songs aren't sermons. Songs don't unpack the Word of God verse by verse. They give people an opportunity to interact with different aspects of the Word of Christ so that we might be more deeply impacted by it. Songs need other things around them to make them the most effective.

IV. Don't Let Musical Considerations Drive Your Theology.

Now sometimes, despite our best intentions, musical considerations rather than content drives what songs we choose to do.

So, large churches with orchestras and choirs will have a smaller repertoire because they can only do songs arranged for big orchestras and choirs. Similarly, a church that only has a note-reading pianist can only do what's in a hymnal. Or, a church whose music leader only listens to contemporary worship music only uses songs from that genre. And the church is the poorer for it. Churches that are bound by centuries-old musical traditions often judge a song more by its age than its faithfulness to Scripture.

Let me say this: if your instrumental demands or limitations keep you from singing songs that are truly good for your church, that will feed and nourish your people, it's time to get the horse back in front of the cart.

Musical priorities should serve pastoral and theological priorities. And here are some of the ways we can make that change happen:

- We can ask other musicians in our church who might play a different style than who's currently leading
- We can strip down the band
- We can lead with just one instrument
- And, of course, we can pray for more musicians

God does not want our musical considerations to be driven by music alone or by certain by musical considerations that trump theological and pastoral considerations. We always want to be giving our churches songs they *should* sing and not songs that we're *able* to sing.

V. Putting It All Together

So, how do we put it all together? Well, in *Worship Matters*, I suggest ten principles for planning. I'm going to just highlight four of them here.

A. Plan thematically

I say in *Worship Matters*,

*“Our unchanging theme every week is the grand story of deliverance that God accomplished for his people through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”*³

Whatever else we direct people's thoughts to, we must show them the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. That's the story of the Bible. That's what we want to make sure they don't leave without getting.

Now, of course, we can draw a theme from multiple places each Sunday—it could come from a line in a song, it can come from a desire to teach on a certain aspect of our relationship with God. We can focus on themes like the

- Fatherhood of God
- God's mercy
- his holiness
- our mission
- comfort for those who are suffering

If you follow a church calendar, your themes are already laid out in advance and most churches at least focus on Christmas—which is the Incarnation—and Easter—which is the resurrection.

But each and every week, we want to be sure that anyone who attends our meetings understands the story of the gospel—the grand story—that God is holy and we've rebelled against him, and we need a Mediator, a Savior, a Redeemer to pay for our sins and reconcile us to him.

Apart from the good news, apart from the gospel, we have no reason to meet. We wouldn't meet. The gospel is a theme that continues into the new heavens and new earth, where the myriads are proclaiming,

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” - Revelation 5:12⁴

That gospel story is what we gather every week to rehearse, remember, revel in, and respond to. We aren't giving lip service to the gospel. God forbid that we ever talk about the gospel in a way that doesn't leave people affected or at least give them the opportunity to be affected. There is no better story. And when we talk about it we want to be rejoicing in it, expounding in it, marveling in it, being astonished by it because there's no greater news. There's no greater story.

Whatever theme we choose, we want to be sure we don't miss the greatest theme of all: God has come in Jesus Christ to save sinners from his wrath for his glory.

B. Plan Progressively

We also want to plan progressively. Now by planning progressively, I don't mean "cutting-edge." We want to plan whatever we do in a way that's like a journey. Some people call it "flow," but I prefer a "progression" because that implies there's a direction. We're starting one place and ending up at another.

For centuries, the Church has used a liturgy, a gospel-progression that walks through the gospel and our responses to it. Now, I was really helped in this area by Bryan Chapel's book, *Christ-Centered Worship*.⁵ Without getting too much into the details, a typical gospel liturgy is an unpacking of God's grace in the gospel and our response to it. So it begins with:

1. **Adoration**—*a recognition of God's greatness and grace*, proclaiming how he is holy, how he is other, how he is worthy to be praised.
2. Then there's **Confession**—when we see how great God is, we *acknowledge our sin and need for grace*.
3. And there's **Assurance of Pardon**—*an affirmation of God's provision of grace*. Jesus did pay for the sins that we have committed, he bore them all in his body on the tree
4. Then there's **Thanksgiving**—*expression of gratefulness for God's grace*,
5. Which leads to **Petition and Intercession**—*acknowledgement of dependence on God's grace*, a request for God's grace. It only makes sense that if we know God has done the greatest thing, "*He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?*" (Romans 8:32) If God has done that, well it certainly makes sense that we'd thank him and that we would bring him any other requests that we have because we know his heart is to bless those he has redeemed. And petition and intercession is followed by
6. **Instruction**—*it's a proclamation of God's grace*, we want to know more about this God and who he is and what he wants of us.
7. And then there's **Communion and Fellowship**—*celebrating the grace of union with Christ and his people*.
8. And finally, there's a **Charge and Blessing**—where we are *exhorted to live in light of God's grace*.

Now, that may have been a lot. We planted a church four years ago and sought to apply something of that gospel liturgy. We planted the church in 2012 and we followed its flow fairly closely, but after a few months it began to feel somewhat forced and unnatural, so we adapted certain portions of it which allow us both the opportunity to move in a progression and there's a degree of flexibility. So, now we begin with a

- **Call to worship** from the Word of God. Our meetings always begin with the Word of God, it's God who called us together.
- **Sing a few songs** (usually two).
- And then we'll usually **read Scripture**. Paul says to give attention to the public reading of Scripture (1 Timothy 4:13), so that's what we do. There might be a **creed**, there might be a **corporate confession**, it might be **communion** there, but we always make sure that in that time period, people become aware of God's greatness, our need for forgiveness, and God's provision of that forgiveness through Jesus Christ .
- Then we do a **few more songs**,
- Followed by a **pastoral prayer** (about five minutes),
- Then we **welcome** folks,
- Receive an **offering**,
- There's a **sermon**,
- Usually another **song** or **communion**,
- And then a **benediction**.

Now, that's not a prescription for what every church should do, but it has served us in enabling us to incorporate the rhythm of *revelation and response* as well as *planning and spontaneity* which we'll talk about in a later session.

While the progression we go through—we walk through—should be clear in itself, **transitions** can help people understand it better. They might be spoken. They might be musical. For instance, if you're going from

(♪sings)
*But this I know with all my heart
 His wounds have paid my ransom*⁶

*Jesus paid it all
 All to him I owe*⁷

You don't really need to say anything between those songs. That's just a smooth thought transition. But whenever we move from one part of the service to another, we have the opportunity to help people understand why. A sentence or two of explanation can make the all difference between two events being unrelated and building engagement.

Allen Ross in his book, *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, has addressed this. This idea of helping people understand biblically why we're doing what we're doing. He says,

“Today, in an age that seeks to simplify everything—songs, sermons, readings, and ritual of the service—the clear and powerful proclamation of sound biblical doctrine and practice in every part of the service will give spiritual depth to worship and demonstrate the vitality of the faith in the lives of the worshippers.”⁸

Amen.

C. Plan Contextually

The gatherings of the church don't take place in a vacuum. When we plan, we're wise to think about what God has been doing and saying before we've even begun planning. So, what came before us? What came last week? What was the passage on last week? What was the point? What did God do this preceding week?

You can think more closely contextually. What's happening around the songs we're leading? Is there a prayer, communion, testimonies, Scripture reading? What's coming after the songs? A sermon? A prayer? Announcements?

Between the songs or parts of the meeting, ask if an explanation would help people connect with what's taking place. Now, you shouldn't have to do that in every transition. I've seen meetings where every single break someone's saying something. If we've constructed our meetings well, we shouldn't need to fill every single space. When you do speak, seek to inform and to inspire. That's a guideline: to clarify. There should be a reason we're making a connection.

Now, if you don't think you're effective at speaking, someone else can do it. Remember, worship leading—corporate worship leading—can be a group of people. But every one of us can grow. I often find it helpful over the years to write down what I'm going to say. Someone said, “We think through our pens,” or “We think through our keyboards.” It's harder to ramble when we're looking at the words we plan to say. It can be difficult to write in a way that sounds personal. It takes practice. But it's definitely worth the investment for your own good and for the sake of your people.

Here's the point: don't let what you do become boring, meaningless, or unaffecting. While we have one message, and a few tools, we have many ways of using those tools. And this leads to fourth thought about planning and that is:

D. Plan Creatively

God is the great Creator. That's who he is and he made us in his image. So, as we pursue being creative, rearranging what he has given us—because none of us are creators, we're just rearranging what he's given us—we're bringing him glory.

And while actions repeated week to week can build a long-term memory into a congregation, when they're done unimaginatively or when they're done

without explanation, they can become lifeless. They can actually inoculate people to engaging with the living God and we don't want that. I mean, many Christians grew up in contexts like that where there was a liturgy, there were things done every single week and over time, because they weren't explained, they grew numb, they grew dull to those things. As leaders, we have the opportunity to think about communicating the unchanging, eternal God to people in ways that are clearer to people. We can't make the gospel *better* but we can make it *clearer*. So here's some things we can do. We can:

- **Learn new songs.** I know churches that aren't doing any songs that were written in the last 20 years. That's not good. There've been a lot of great songs that were written in the last 20 years. Yes, there are a lot of great songs written in the last 300 years, but we don't want to just get in a rut where we assume that, "These songs are good enough, we've been singing them for decades."
- We can **change a song structure.** We don't always have to sing a song exactly like it's been written. Now as a songwriter, I'm happy to say that because I want the songs I write to serve people. Remember songs are tools, they're not tyrants. They don't tell us, "It has to be done exactly like this." You might start with a chorus, you might do a different verse, you might repeat a verse. Change the song structure.
- **Use simpler or more complex instrumentation.**
- **Involve people from the congregation** in what you do. We've done that and have people come up and pray or share testimonies or read Scripture.
- **Read Scripture during your songs.** Find ways to incorporate scripture in your meetings—definitely.
- **Use Creeds.** Creeds can be a way of affirming our connection with Christians for centuries.
- If you have people from different nationalities in your congregation, **use different languages.** We've had a Scripture read in different languages. We've even sung in different languages at times and it enables us to see that we are part of that vast congregation of people from every tribe and language and people and nation who will be gathered around the throne one day.
- **Use appropriate visuals.** Now, I emphasize appropriate. Not every visual is appropriate. Visuals can be distracting. Visuals can overwhelm the message we're trying to communicate.
- **Use testimonies.**
- **Find different ways to praying together.**

I'm just scratching the surface. There are so many ways we can plan creatively. But I do want to say this because we live in a very creative-driven culture:

Creativity has boundaries, just like the water pipes in a house or the banks of a river or the shore of the ocean. As long as water stays within its boundaries, it's helpful and life giving. But when it overflows those boundaries: when the pipe breaks, when a river overflows its banks, when the ocean in a tsunami crashes over the shore, water's dangerous. Creativity's like that. We want to keep it in its boundaries.

Leland Ryken wrote in *The Liberated Imagination*,

*“Artists, like everyone else are the recipients of grace. They are stewards of what has been given to them. God gave them the gift of artistic ability not for unrestrained self-indulgence, but to glorify God and to serve their fellow humans.”*⁹

I’ve found it helpful to remember that creativity isn’t something we do. It’s a way we do something. And that something is help people clearly see the glory of God in the face and work of Jesus Christ and understand what difference it makes in their lives. Both are important: to see clearly and to make a connection to their lives.

So, here are three limiters that can guide our use of creativity that will help keep it within the proper boundaries:

1. **The Edification Limiter**

Ask the question: Do the creative elements we want to add meaningfully building up the church, distracting the church, or just entertaining the church?

2. **The Unity Limiter**

Do creative elements enable people from different generations, backgrounds, and classes to worship God together, expressing our unity in the gospel or do those creative elements tend to drive people apart?

3. **The Gospel Limiter**

Do the creative elements we want to add distract from, distort, or demean the gospel or do they draw attention to its uniqueness, its beauty, and its and power? Because that’s what creativity is meant to do.

And with those three questions in mind, we can and should do everything we can to help people understand that what we do every week is ultimately more amazing, thrilling, moving, humbling, encouraging, and awe-inspiring than anything this world has to offer. There are no normal Sundays.

Well in the next session, we’re going to take a look at what God intends to accomplish through our faithful leading, by his grace and for his glory.

Session 6 Discussion Questions:

1. What comes to your mind when you hear the word "liturgy"? What is liturgy?
2. Where are you and your church at in regards to planning thematically? Progressively? Contextually? Creatively?
3. How do you think your church is at using the boundaries (limiters) of creativity?
4. What temptations do you face regarding creativity (fear/hesitancy vs. eager/undiscerning, etc.)?
5. What temptations do you think the people in your church will have regarding creativity (fear/hesitancy versus eager/undiscerning, etc.)?
6. What are some other ways we can help people understand that what we do every week is "ultimately more amazing, thrilling, moving, humbling, encouraging, and awe-inspiring than anything this world has to offer"?

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⁵ *Christ Centered Worship* by Bryan Chapell. © 2009 by Bryan Chapell. Published by Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, MI. www.bakeracademic.com

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