

“Worship as Entertainment”

by Mark Roberts
via “Abundant Life”

Romans 1 challenges us with its chilling words "*they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man*" (vv. 22-23). Man has the propensity to change God and the worship of God into what he desires. Instead of doing what the Lord says we easily and quickly do what we want, and then dub that "honoring God."

Worship is particularly susceptible to this process. In the Old Testament Israel struggled to maintain fidelity to God and His structured, ordered, reverent worship. Idolatry, with its outrageous sensuality and pagan prostitution was much more interesting. Time and time again Israel found they could not resist idolatry's exciting allure (see Numbers 25:1-2). The Old Testament ends with Malachi's testimony that the people found God's ordained manner of worship to be, in short, boring (Malachi 1:13).

Things have not changed much. As denominational churches have drifted further and further from the Bible they have lost their place in people's lives. Why should someone go to church if there is no such thing as right and wrong, sin or righteousness, heaven or hell? As churches emptied out some bright lights hit upon the answer: you should come to church because it is fun.

We are now squarely in the church-as-entertainment era. Here are a few representative quotations and anecdotes that clearly describe what this is about. Barry McMurtrie is the Senior Pastor of Crossroad Church in Corona, California. Their attendance runs over 6500. How do they get those kind of crowds? Barry recently described his basic ministry philosophy in an article in Vision magazine (Fall 2005). "Then I went to Godspell ... Godspell was based on children in a playground acting out the stories from the gospel of Matthew. At first I thought, 'This is stupid.' Then it started to get to me. I looked around at all these pagans responding, laughing and even weeping and I thought, 'this is our job.' When we left, I'm feeling elated. I said to my wife Gay, 'Why can't we leave church feeling like this?' Sadly, Mrs. McMurtrie didn't say "Because the church isn't here to entertain people and make them feel elated. That is not our job. Our job is teach people the truth

about Jesus so they can be saved." Nope, that didn't happen! Instead "she looked at me and said `Why can't we?' (p. 13).

Max Lucado, preacher for Oak Hills church in San Antonio (formerly the Oak Hills church of Christ before they changed their name) said this about entertainment: "No longer can we afford the luxury of thinking that the people who are sitting in our pews are going to be there every Sunday. We have to arrest their attention. We have to use every device possible to reach them and to teach them and we need not be so apologetic about entertaining them. I mean, they been entertained all week long, every time they turn around. I have no apology for putting a good singer in front of them to entertain them if they're not Christians. You've got to do something to reach them ... " (Preaching magazine, July-August 2005, p. 14).

Ed Young, pastor of Fellowship Church in Grapevine, Texas (a church that draws over 15,000 to its weekend services) said in an interview "I want people at Fellowship Church saying `What is coming next? I'm not sure what's going to happen next.' He is famous for keeping people guessing, doing everything from driving a Ferrari on stage to showing a video clip of him ordering a hamburger at McDonald's during his "sermon." Once he brought out an espresso machine and told the "parable of the coffee" while making a cup of espresso. Ed is very good at entertaining a crowd, and lots of people go to Fellowship church to see what exciting and entertaining thing will happen next.

What do we make of this thirst for entertainment that has infected worship in so many places?

First, it's all about numbers. Max's quote makes this clear: "you've got to do something to reach them." Whatever it takes is the dominant philosophy at churches all across the country. We're going to get pagans in here any way we can! Since Americans love to be entertained let's roll out the entertainment! If you entertain them, they will come.

Unfortunately, this thinking is built on the false premise that God wants big numbers. That is a distinctively American way of thinking but it is not God's way of thinking. Notice in John 6 that Jesus gathered a large crowd to Him but when He discerned they were not interested in spiritual things He literally drove them away with stern teaching: "*From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more*" (John 6:66).

This Jesus would certainly not be welcome at many churches today! "Come on, Jesus, make more bread, do a bigger miracle, because You've got to do something to reach them." Perhaps Jesus would respond that entertainment doesn't "reach" anybody. It just entertains. The truth is what changes people, not fun and games (John 8:32). The idea of doing anything and everything to draw a crowd simply won't work: crowds that come for the wrong reason have been attracted under false pretenses and will leave as soon as the entertainment is better somewhere else. John 6 proves this and today's churches that find they need an ever better show to hold their numbers confirms it.

Second, there is a huge amount of confusion about the purpose of worship. Worship is for God. It is not to please us but to please the Lord. *"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord"* (Psalm 19:14). In contrast, look at what McMurtrie thinks worship is about: "When we left, I'm feeling elated. I said to my wife Gay, `Why can't we leave church feeling like this?" Church is about a feeling, about an emotional response. If I go to church and I don't get all excited and feel charged up then something is wrong. Church is supposed to make me feel a certain way. Incidentally, you will note that no one wants church to make them feel bad about their sins. The feelings people pursue are those great feelings that can best be described as an emotional high. That is precisely what people want. Ever heard someone say "I don't go to church there any more - I just didn't get anything out of it" or "Church just doesn't do anything for me?" I wonder how many people would judge a funeral service on such criteria? Saying "I don't like funerals, I just don't get anything out of them" or "I'm not going to go to that memorial service because they are so depressing" sounds simply selfish and self-seeking don't they? The purpose of funerals is to honor the one who has passed away and encourage the family by being there. It is not about what I can get out of it. I should go to a funeral with the expectation that I'll not get anything out of it but instead can give something to others without thought of return for me. Don't misunderstand: I am not saying worship should be as doleful as a funeral. Worshiping God should be a joyous occasion (see Psalm 9:2, 33:1). However, emotions are just not the primary purpose of worship, or our main incentive for gathering together. We worship because God commands it, and it is the right thing to do. We worship because God commands it and because He deserves it! It is not about what we can get from it. It is not about being jacked up on some emotional high. Worship is for the Lord, not us.

Third, entertainment directly contradicts the biblical admonitions for worship. Worship in Scripture is to be controlled and carefully done. Ed Young boasts that he can keep his audience wondering what will happen next, but 1 Corinthians 14:40 positively forbids such. "*But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner*" (NASB). There is some order to worship, a quiet and reverent decorum, that excludes wild displays and uncertainty. How can worshipers fix their mind on God when they are constantly wondering what will occur next? No one is saying that the order of a worship service is fixed and can never be changed. What am I arguing is that constant change, constantly mixing it up to keep people on the edge of their seats, is unscriptural and actively fights against the very mind set needed to worship. People must know what they are doing, how to do it and then be constantly reminded to keep their focus on God (note the detailed worship instructions in Exodus and Leviticus). Then worship can occur. Yet that kind of thing is not very entertaining. Thus, we see that entertainment and worship are two very different animals, forever at odds with one another and unable to co-exist. Invariably, entertainment "eats up" worship because worshipers prefer it, find it easier and more enjoyable. God gets lost, and worshipers gratify themselves.

American religion is a genuine fix. How long until people weary of the entertainment churches provide? No church can compete with the devil in the game of "fun." Sin is always more fun than doing right! If we are appealing to people to come to church because they will enjoy it what do we do when people find they enjoy sleeping in, watching the NFL pre-game show, or just doing nothing a lot more than church? When you make the wrong appeal wrong results must follow. Instead, let us drop the pretense that worship is fun. It is not. it may be fulfilling, and it should be meaningful. But it cannot be entertaining and be worship. "*I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go into the house of the Lord' . . . To give thanks to the name of the Lord.*" (Psalm 122:1,4).