

Set Our Hearts on Fire Again

Have you ever experienced a Sunday morning when worship felt lifeless, rote, even boring? Has there ever been a time when worship's coals have gone cold when you began to lose your first love (Revelation 2:4)? Have you ever desperately cried out, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation" (Psalm 51:12)? There are lots of tools, resources, gimmicks, and ideas out there on what remedies the heart of worship gone cold.

But if we were to boil it down, if we were to focus on one thing, we might simply ask, "What has the power to inflame a worshiper's heart again?" "Their Hearts Burned Within Them" This language of hearts "on fire" isn't just Christianese. It's biblical. Luke 24 recounts one of the most beautiful moments in Jesus's ministry — the road to Emmaus, where two despondent disciples are transformed by an encounter with Jesus.

The scene opens with these two men on the road shortly after the crucifixion, lamenting the death of Jesus and their loss of hope. Jesus appears and walks alongside them, but they don't recognize him. Then Jesus begins a kind of Bible study, right there on the road: "Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). Jesus was teaching them how to read and interpret the Bible. And his main point? "It's all about me." Later on, when Jesus was gone, the two disciples talk about what they learned and how it affected them.

"They said to each other, 'Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?'" (Luke 24:32). What set their hearts ablaze — in the language of Augustine, what captivated their affections — was an interpretation of Scripture that put Jesus and his finished work front and center. Putting Jesus at the Center If worship is going to set our hearts on fire, it needs to do the same thing. It needs to put Jesus front and center, through the Scriptures. This understanding of Christ-centeredness is the key to unlocking vibrant, passionate worship is old, and perhaps no one has said it better than the Protestant Reformer, Thomas Cranmer.

When Cranmer unveiled the 1549 Book of Common Prayer — a collection of the first worship services that the English-speaking world had ever heard — he wrote a short manifesto on worship in its preface. In it, he claimed that the purpose of worship centered on Christ and filled with the Scriptures was to cause worshipers to "be the more inflamed with the love of [God's] true religion." Cranmer believed that worship's goal was to set hearts on fire.

And so Cranmer designed worship services that made much of Jesus. Displace and Replace How did Cranmer do it, and how can we do it? Some people have argued that Christ-centered worship simply means singing songs, praying prayers, and preaching sermons that make much of Jesus and his finished work. Reformers like Cranmer and theologians like Paul would tell us, though, that this approach is far too simplistic.

They would be more inclined to describe Christ-centered worship as a cyclical process of two actions. Let's call those

actions displacement and replacement. Every last one of us — Christian and non-Christian alike — comes into worship having spent a week consistently placing ourselves at the center of our lives.

This self-centeredness is the disposition of what Paul variously called the “old self” (Romans 6:6; Ephesians 4:22; Colossians 3:9), the “sinful” nature (Romans 7:5, 13), or sometimes just “the flesh” (Romans 7:5; 8:3-13). If worship is to be Christ-centered, it must first do the work of displacing me. It must tell me that I do not belong in the center. It must call me out for what I am — a fraud, an imposter, a sinner.

This means that worship’s first word to me must be a discomfiting, displacing word that leaves no blurred lines between who God is (perfect, holy) and who I am (rebellious, sinful). This is why Cranmer and the other Reformers were dead set on providing repeated moments in worship that highlight God’s glory through lofty words of praise. It also is why they insisted that we must have moments to confess our sinfulness. These kinds of words and habits displace “me.” They remove me from center-stage.

Then, and only then, can the words of the gospel rush in to offer the remedy of replacement, putting Christ at the center? The point that Paul and the Reformers were attempting to make is that for Christ-centered worship to have its proper heart-inflaming effects, the gospel needs to be set against the backdrop of my sin and need. For Sunday Morning Let’s get practical.

If the above is true, then singing, praying, and preaching about how awesome Jesus is, how amazing his grace is, and how marvelous his cross is, is not enough(odd as that may sound). It’s not that Jesus isn’t awesome. It’s not that his grace isn’t amazing. It’s not that the cross isn’t marvelous. But we won’t have eyes to see it until we’ve been displaced until we’ve been knocked off the throne of our tiny self-kingdoms.

Do our worship services give room for that kind of reflection? That kind of honesty? That kind of confession and humility? Words of displacement can come in many forms — songs that highlight the glorious incommunicable attributes of God, prayers that offer words of confession, Psalms of lamentation read together or responsively. But such words are needed for the replacement — the songs, prayers, praises about the finished work of Christ — to have its full effect on us. Christ-centered worship suggests a certain progression or cycles of progression.

This kind of ordering in our services can be a lasting fuel to keep the heart of worship burning.