

Honoring God with your lips but not with your hearts?

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For a number of years I have been writing about issues that affect the church such as zoning, property rights and religious rights, all of which exert external forces upon individual congregations and the church as a whole.

I don't often write about the internal issues. When I began writing for the Tulsa Beacon over ten years ago, I decided from the beginning that this was not going to be one where I offered advice about how to design a church.

I also decided that I was not going to use scripture to justify my own beliefs or opinions. Out of the hundreds of articles that I have written, there have only been a handful of times that I have quoted scriptures. When I have done so, I have been careful to use them in a context that is scripturally correct. I find it irritating, and certainly dangerous, when I read what others have written, who formed an opinion and then set out to find a scripture to justify it.

I don't always succeed, but I try to read the Bible every day. I have been studying the Bible since I was a small child. Though I don't consider myself a scholar, I do have a good practical knowledge of scripture. And while I can't always quote scripture off of the top of my head, I generally know what the Bible says and where to find things in scripture.

I also read books about the Bible. For example, one that helped me form a clearer mental image of God was *The Knowledge of the Holy* by A.W. Tozer, a small but meaty book that explained the attributes of God.

Several days ago, I listened to a presentation by an architect who specialized in church design and a technician who specialized systems for churches. The presentation was supposed to be about how to create a meaningful worship space, but as I listened and waited for their advice, it never came. In fact, during the one-hour presentation, God was mentioned only once, and Jesus was mentioned only once, and in both instances the mentions were in passing. As I recall, the Holy Spirit was not mentioned at all.

According to the presenters, the key to a worshipful space began in the parking lot. It was all about greeting people, making them feel welcome and inclusive, and giving them a Third Place experience. (For those of you who have not heard that term, a Third Place is like the bar in the sitcom Cheers – a place where you are accepted as you are and where everybody knows your name.)

The advice they gave was good advice for the practical operation and design of a church facility, and it included advice that I would normally give to my church clients, except it never addressed the issue of worship.

Scripture is remarkable in that we are never given instructions how to build church buildings or even to build them at all. What we do find are concepts about God that should make us fearful to trivialize our methods in an effort to elevate people to where we believe they should be at the expense of elevating God to his rightful place.

The trend in worship services now is to focus the congregation's attention on God through music. Scripture tells us to make a joyful noise to the Lord, to sing hymns and to sing new songs to God. The obvious reason is that music can help a person focus on God through the lyrics. But scripture also tells us to be still and know that God is God.

We also design worship spaces to focus their attention on God, using every design method and technology available to optimize the worship experience.

There is nothing wrong with either one, assuming it is done with the right attitude. But what if the people in a worship service don't really know who God is? I'm not talking about unbelievers, but believers? Jesus, in Matthew 15:8-9, quotes a scripture in Isaiah that says, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship is a farce, for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God."

We have all heard that the church is in decline. At the risk of being as guilty as others, I'll ask the question, are we dumbing down our own kind by not insisting that we learn who God really is? Are we architects, pastors and others trying to accomplish a noble thing without insisting first that believers know who they are worshiping?

In America, the trend is for people to assume that everything must be done for us and that every goal can be achieved through proper planning and execution of the plan. Is that train of thought spilling over into our churches and into the minds of believers? Would we conduct our services and design our buildings differently if we truly understood the real nature of God? Perhaps so.

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