

## THE BEST KIND OF EXCELLENCE

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One of the challenging areas in providing public worship in our churches is the questions we have about doing things well.

For some of us, we only want to do things if they are done well (even if we haven't sought to define that very clearly), others prefer to 'just get it done', where sincerity in the task is sufficient, doing it well is a bonus.

I wonder which of these sits more comfortably with your usual mode of operation? Another question ought to be raised: Does God want excellence from us in how we conduct our worship?

All of this has a very sharp point, each and every Sunday, when we, together with others gather for Word and Sacrament, in the presence of God Almighty. Do we demand excellence from everyone who participates in the service? Will you be removed from the roster if you make a mistake? Do we require excellence in how the tea and coffee are made, or just from those who participate in our liturgy?

It would appear that our thinking about excellence in worship is haphazard, and largely driven by personal style and proficiency. It would serve us well to take a few moments to get our thinking straight – I don't mean that I will persuade you of my view, but hopefully my reflections will give you something to respond to.

There is a lovely moment in the Kingship of Hezekiah, one of the few kings to demonstrate allegiance to the Lord. He wisely organized to celebrate the Passover Festival, something that ought to have happened every year – in God's design for the rhythm of the year.

By all accounts (2 Chronicles 30) it was a wonderful celebration: God's people meeting in his presence, trusting his good promises. There is a bit of a problem when people who have not purified themselves take part in the Passover meal. Hezekiah, in a prayer to the Lord, asking forgiveness on the people who do this says: "May the LORD, who is good, pardon everyone who sets his heart on seeking God..." (verses 18 & 19).

This moment in the Passover Festival of Hezekiah does feel like support for the 'do the best you can, be sincere' approach to excellence. It wasn't great that the people failed to prepare properly to meet with God – but at least they wanted to meet with God. Before this they had done most of their worship to false gods at local shrines on hilltops.

Hezekiah's prayer is based on his trust that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and has compassion on his people. And in verse 20 we find that the LORD did indeed hear this prayer and answered it.

Could we simply ask our perfect Heavenly Father to forgive our lack of excellence, since we are sincere in wanting to worship him?

You most likely know that the Passover Festival is really the opening ceremony to the week-long feast of Unleavened Bread. And when Hezekiah saw the daily worship, conducted by the Priests and Levites, he...

"...spoke encouragingly to all the Levites, who showed a good understanding of the service of the LORD." (verse 22)

It's good to remember that these musicians got their jobs because they were skillful (see choirmaster Kenaniah in 1 Chron 15.22, and the invitation in Psalm 33.3). Now we can see that being willing and sincere is good but isn't enough, there is a place for skill, a place for providing really good music.

And yet we can feel troubled by aiming for excellence, troubled about even introducing this notion. Usually this concern (rightly) comes from one of two places:

We can feel concerned about emphasizing excellence because we can end up with skill taking the place of genuine servanthood. That is, we have an organist and choir who are the best in town, but they don't want to see people and communities transformed by the love of Jesus. They are certainly producing excellent music, but is for it's own sake and not to praise the living God.

We would never ask for excellence at the cost of devotion to the one who gives gifts of music. However pushing aside the goal of excellence is no safeguard against a lack of genuine servanthood.

The second reason we can be troubled about a drive towards excellence in worship is a right concern for the casualties we might leave in our wake. Those who offer to serve the Lord in worship may not have had formal training, or years of intensive preparation. It feels wrong to turn people away from serving simply because they are not up to our high standards for excellence.

I think there are two helpful ways to respond to this situation: We can involve people at the level at which they can be excellent. We get to know people and their capacity, and so we provide them a way to offer their very best to God.

The second way to respond to this gap between desiring excellence and serving amongst frail human beings is to recall that striving for excellence is not the end in itself, but rather the means to the end, which is the glorification of God. Some times, when things fail to be excellent in worship, I am reminded that there is throne, and around that crystal see the worship will always be excellent.

Let me finish with this quote from Bob Kauflin's book, *Worship Matters*:

"...in congregational worship excellence has a purpose – to focus people's attention on God's wondrous attributes and acts. In corporate worship, then, skill and excellence are functional. They have more to do with edification and encouragement than musical

standards. I want to be the very best I can be so that I can serve others more effectively for God's glory."

Bob Kauflin Worship Matters, *Leading Others to Encounter the Greatness of God*, Crossway, Wheaton Illinois, 2008.

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