

7. The Centrality Of Jesus Christ

Chuck Smith:

**"For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord..."
II Corinthians 4:5**

One of the important characteristics of Calvary Chapel is the centrality of Jesus Christ in our worship. We don't allow any practice or behavior that would distract people from focusing on Him. For example, we don't allow people to stand up individually when we're singing in the church. The moment a person stands, those near him become aware of him and begin to wonder, "Why is he standing?" The focus is taken off Jesus and placed onto the person who's standing.

The eye is interesting because it's attracted to motion. In many cases, I've seen those, who stand up by themselves in worship, conclude they're not getting quite enough attention so they raise their hands and start to sway. That's eye-catching. But it's also a distraction, and suddenly people are wondering why they're standing there. "What are they thinking? Are they aware that they're drawing attention to themselves? What's going on?" I believe that it's important for these things to be dealt with because displays like these will cause you to lose prospective members to the church. If I went into a church and that was happening, I might think that the sermon was great, but I can't quite handle all these other things.

I was in a Calvary Chapel a while back and they did allow the people to stand individually. Unfortunately, what one does, others usually do. They had one fellow every night who was down in the front row, and he was more than just standing. He was really dancing down there. It was obvious that the fellow didn't have all of his marbles, and he no doubt had certain psychological needs. He found an environment where he could do his little weird things and be accepted, but it was extremely distracting. I spoke to the pastor about it, and he defended the practice, so I thought, "All right, stay small".

At Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa, if someone does stand up, the ushers approach them and invite them back to the foyer, then one of the pastors talks to them there, gently and in love. They usually say, "We don't practice this because we've discovered that it draws people's attention away from worship. And surely you wouldn't want to take the person's attention from Jesus Christ and put it on yourself, would you?"

We tell them they are drawing attention to themselves, and people are losing the central focus on Jesus. We talk to them in love and suggest that they not do it, and if they get upset it shows that they were in the flesh the whole time. If they're really in the Spirit and walking in the Spirit, they will take it in the Spirit. They'll say, "Oh, I didn't realize that. I'm sorry." But if they get all huffy, then you know that they were in the flesh.

Jesus said, "Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven." (Matthew 6:1). He then illustrated how people sought to bring attention to themselves as they performed their righteous acts of worship. Like it or not, if you're standing and swaying when everyone else is sitting it will attract attention to you.

I was in another Calvary Chapel where they had these ladies dressed in granny outfits with bonnets doing interpretive dancing to the worship choruses down at the front. Now, if ever there was anything that was distracting to me, that was it. They were pretty good as far as graceful movements, but I found that I really didn't get much out of the worship choruses that night. I watched these ladies and their graceful movements, just trying to understand their interpretation of the songs. So, again I spoke to the pastor afterwards, and he got the picture and has since stopped this interpretive dancing, realizing that it was distracting.

We had an affiliate church in Basil, Switzerland that was probably one of the most exciting churches in Europe. As far as potential, and as far as what was happening, I believe it was perhaps the largest Protestant church in Europe at the time. Every year I would go over to Basil and speak in their fellowship. It was really exciting. They had caught the whole Calvary Chapel vision. They had choruses, a great worship group, and the teaching of the Word. They had hundreds and hundreds of young people who were coming on Sunday nights to the beautiful gothic style church. The state church had allowed them to use the facility. The state church was using it only on Sunday mornings. Since only six elderly people attended, the Bishop said that our Calvary Chapel could use it on Sunday nights. It was jammed to the rafters and really had a great outreach doing a vital work. They had opened up a coffee shop. They had a great program going. They were dealing with the hippie, drug-oriented kids. The church was located in the center of a drug-infested area, and the kids that were being saved needed

housing, so the church provided it for them. The church had also developed factories to manufacture various types of novelty souvenirs, and that was a successful venture, too. The kids were employed and those with artistic gifts were able to use their painting ability. It was going great guns.

The last time I was there they had gotten into interpretive dancing with a couple of gals in leotards. They had brought in an assistant pastor from a Pentecostal background, and they had gotten into this business of standing. The pastor was not strong enough to deal with it. I talked to him after the service and I said, "This stuff has to go. It's going to destroy you." Actually, he wasn't even in control of the meeting. I noticed that when the time had come for me to be introduced to speak, these gals went up, whispered in his ear, and then they sang one more chorus and performed one more dance. The dancers were in control of the meeting, not the pastor. So I talked to him about it, but he was reluctant to really face up to the issue. As a result, we don't have any church in Basil today. He left, the Pentecostals took over, the church kicked them out, and now there is no work going on there.

So it's important that we keep Jesus Christ as the central focus and keep distractions to a minimum. When distractions do take place, deal with them and if necessary publicly talk about them.

When I was in Bible College, there was a fellow who would always sit down in the front row. Usually at one of the most powerful moments in the service, when the Spirit of God was really working in the people's hearts, he would lean down towards the floor, and then he would stand up, hands raised, yelling, "Hallelujah!" Everybody would laugh. But then everybody's attention was on this character crying, "Hallelujah!" The point of the sermon was lost. He destroyed so many sermons because of his actions. So I determined I was going to stop it! I sat in the row right behind him, and when he leaned over to go into his "Hallelujah" bit, I grabbed his shoulders and began to pinch a nerve, and held him down on his knees. Nobody else had the courage to stop him. They just let it go on and on, and it was such a distracting thing!

A few years back I was in Colorado Springs at a retreat, and there was a man down in the front who was sort of a simpleton. You could tell just by looking at him. While we're all singing worship choruses, this man was dancing up and down in the aisle. I asked the pastor, "Why do you allow that?" He said, "Well, they wanted to have freedom..." I replied, "Look, that isn't freedom. If I were a stranger coming to your church for the first time, and saw this guy down there, I wouldn't come back. I'd think your fellowship was weird!"

We get to the place where we accept things that are wrong because we don't have the courage to stop them. We're afraid of being accused of quenching the Spirit. I will quench that kind of spirit! Not the Holy Spirit, but the spirit that is seeking to bring attention to an individual, distracting people from the worship of the Lord.

In the past (and this has not happened at Calvary for a long time) we've had people get up during the service and try to give an utterance in tongues. Again, the ushers were right on top of it. They invited them back to the foyer, and the pastors explained to them that at Calvary we don't allow public utterances in tongues or public prophecies, as in the Charismatic or Pentecostal churches. From the pulpit I then explained to the congregation that the gift of tongues is valid in the New Testament, and that there is a proper place for tongues. I explained that Paul pointed out that, in his personal experience, he would rather speak five words in a known tongue than ten thousand in an unknown tongue when he's in the church. Yet, he was thankful that he spoke in tongues more than all of them. In your private devotions, it's a very edifying experience. It's a means by which you can praise God and worship God. But with a church the size of Calvary Chapel, and some people not being able to hear the interpretation at all, it's not edifying in our public services to exercise this particular gift of the Spirit, even with an interpretation. It isn't edifying or convenient, so we don't do it. We don't allow it during the public services, but we encourage the person to use and exercise the gift in their own personal devotional life.

If you have a group of believers and you're gathered for prayer to seek the Lord, then the use of the gift of tongues is allowable with interpretation. But I believe, that when there are unbelievers present, it creates confusion and questions. Therefore, it's best to confine it to believers who are gathered together specifically to wait on the Lord, like we do in an afterglow setting. It's edifying and allowable there. People are simply seeking the Lord and the fullness of His Spirit, so in that environment it's allowable.

Paul said in I Corinthians 1:29, "No flesh should glory in His presence." I wonder if we realize just how serious a thing it is to try and bring attention to ourselves in the presence of the Lord? Do we really want to distract peoples attention away from Jesus Christ and draw it to ourselves? I think that's a very serious offense. And I surely wouldn't want to be guilty of it.

In the Old Testament we find a very interesting case of just how serious this is. When Israel had completed the

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Tabernacle and all of the furnishings for it, they gathered the people together to dedicate and to begin offering sacrifices. The congregation of Israel was assembled and everybody was in place. Aaron was in his priestly robes, as were his sons, and the whole scene, according to the plan of God, was all in order. Then, suddenly, as the people were there waiting to start things, the fire of God came and kindled the fire on the altar. It was spontaneous combustion. All of the people saw this sign of God's presence and broke forth with great shouting. There was great excitement everywhere, and boundless emotion at the realization that God was present among His people. Then the two sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, took false fire and put it in their incense burners. They started to go in to offer this incense before the Lord inside the Holy place. Then Scripture says that fire came from the altar and consumed Nadab and Abihu. (Leviticus 10).

It's my belief that they got caught up in the emotion and the excitement of the moment. They were going to demonstrate to the people their position as priests and how important "we are." As a result, they were consumed.

I'm very leery of strange fire. You also want to be very careful about strange fire - those emotions that don't stem from God Himself, and the kind of service that doesn't originate with God. It's an endeavor to draw attention to the instrument rather than to the Master.

We see this in the early church with Ananias and Sapphira. Here again is an attempt to draw praise and glory to the individual. Ananias and Sapphira had sold their property and brought a portion of the proceeds they received to the church, but they pretended they were giving everything. I believe this was to draw the praise and the awe of the people, who would then say, "Look at that, they're giving everything to God!", when in reality they were holding back.

We all like that kind of attention. We like it when people think we're spiritual. Be careful! Our flesh is so rotten. I want to be known as a deeply spiritual person. My flesh revels in people thinking that I'm really more spiritual than I am. Sometimes we purposefully try to give off this impression, and I think this has been one of the curses of the church. Some pastors seek to present an image of deep spirituality that just isn't real.

It begins to affect their actions. They begin to get a voice that sounds so holy, they hold their hands in a special way, and then they say, "Oh, dear sister, tell me all about it." Their whole manner changes and their demeanor gives off an impression of a holy man. And they love it. They love people to think they're spiritual giants. They want people to want to know the Word like they know it, or to think that they spend hours in prayer. They just smile and say, "It takes a lot of commitment, you know."

We really need to be cautious about creating an aura around ourselves and loving the adulation that comes from people. In the case of Ananias and Sapphira, they were zapped because they drew the attention and glory to themselves, the glory that should have been going to the Lord. And they paid a severe price. God doesn't want to share His glory. Be careful! Don't allow things that can distract. We want to keep Jesus as the central focus for the people. It's very important to keep Jesus Christ as the central focus in our worship.