

Desiring Repetition: Søren Kierkegaard's Metaphor of the Theater in dialogue with Contemporary Worship Leadership Models

by Andrew Thompson

The last several decades has seen a renewed interest in worship. There have been more hymnals and worship books published in the last 40 years than in any other time in human history. Most recently, one should note the remarkable growth in “modern worship,” - the marketing title of a subcategory of Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) which is devoted to music that is intended to be sung in a “worship setting.” At present, CCM is one of the few areas of the music industry as a whole that is growing (making a profit), and “modern worship” is the fastest growing segment within it. One of the results of this rapid rate of growth within the “Christian music industry” is a renewed interest in the question of what it means to worship. As more and more commercial musicians seek to incorporate this popular style of music into their “concerts,” and are finding commercial success as a result, church leaders are forced to wrestle with how this affects church life as a whole. What does this tell us about what people are “looking for” in worship, and can the church provide this without compromising what is essential in worship? Are the concert promoters tapping into something that the church has been neglecting?

There have been no small number of voices in the past few decades that have been encouraging a new openness in worship. New models of worship are being suggested, models that more and more of our churches are embracing. One of the appeals of these newer modern (and “postmodern”) worship models is that they claim to be more participatory than worship models of previous decades. As with previous models, congregants are encouraged to participate in worship, but in ways that are more individualistic and emotive. There is a greater openness to individual expression in worship: clapping, shouting, dancing. There is greater variety of artistic and cultural

expression. A greater variety of musical instruments and musical styles are employed. This is worship that seeks to engage all the senses and all the emotions, in new ways.

This paper will seek to engage the worship models of several influential contemporary authors. In particular, it will look at the question of what it means for an individual to participate in worship. However, this paper also adds the voice of another, a less contemporary writer, into this mixture: Søren Kierkegaard. Søren Kierkegaard was a Danish writer and philosopher who lived from May 5, 1813 until November 4, 1855. He spent the majority of his short life of 42 years living in Copenhagen. Although much of his life work was unappreciated in his own lifetime, many in more recent times have discovered, and are discovering, the wisdom in his writing.

This paper seeks to bring some of Søren Kierkegaard's thoughts on these issues into fruitful dialogue with contemporary authors on worship. In particular, this paper will focus on a small section of his 1846 writing *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*, which was first published in 1847 in *Edifying Addresses of Varied Tenor*. In a section entitled, "The Listener's Role in a Devotional Address," Søren Kierkegaard (SK) uses the metaphor of the theater in a way that is particularly helpful in the discussion. Before the discussion between SK's metaphor and the contemporary models formally begins, we should spend a brief moment considering the context and general content of *Purity of Heart*.

The Context of and General Message of *Purity of Heart*

Purity of Heart was written during the most literarily productive time in SK's life; the period between 1842 and 1848. In many ways the work follows in same line as the *Edifying Addresses* – in that it is like a sermon. It is writing with a clearly religious intent, even if it does make use of some philosophical language (some time referring to God as "the Good") It is intended to be read aloud

by the reader, as if listening to a sermon in a worship service. We are told that SK always spoke his words aloud before writing them down. His intent in the book is to “upbuild” the individual. However for SK, “upbuilding” usually meant that old ideas must be torn down so that new idea could be built up. His desire was to benefit the individual reader in the end, even if that meant he had to kill the cancerous idea within him or her before inserting new healthy ideas.

If one was to sum up the focus of *Purity of Heart* with a single word, that word would be “commitment.” Throughout the book, SK seeks to demonstrate that the only genuine commitment is a total commitment. True religious commitment, and furthermore, true human freedom requires that a person be totally committed to “the Good” – clearly referring to God. Without both total commitment, and total commitment to the right “object” (though we should remember that in SK’s theology God is both subject and object) a person cannot know purity of heart, and remains in bondage. A person must be willing to suffer, and indeed will suffer for out of relation to God, and for the privilege of personal relation to God. This, he argues, is true freedom and true earnestness: to desire God over all other things.

Kierkegaard’s Metaphor of the Theater

“Alas, in regard to things spiritual, the foolish of many is this, that they in the secular sense look upon the speaker as the actor, and the listeners as theatergoers who are to pass judgement upon the artist. But the speaker is not the actor – not in the remotest sense. No, the speaker is the prompter. There are no mere theatergoers present, for each listener will be looking into his own heart. The stage is eternity, and the listener, if his is the true listener (and if he is not, he is at fault) stands before God during the talk. The prompter whispers to the actor what he is to say, but the actor’s repetition of it is the main concern – is the solemn charm of the art. The speaker whispers the word to the listeners. But the main concern is earnestness: that the listeners by themselves, with themselves, and to themselves, in the silence before God, may speak with the help of the address. The address is not given for the speaker’s sake, in order that men may praise or blame him. The listener’s repetition of it is what is aimed for. If the speaker has that responsibility for what he whispers, then the listener has an equally great responsibility not to fall short in his task. In the theater, the play is staged before an audience who are called theatergoers; but at the devotional address, God himself is present. In the most earnest sense God is the critical theatergoer, who looks on to see how the lines are spoken and how they are listened to: hence here the customary audience is wanting. The speaker then is the prompter, and the listener

stands openly before God. The listener, if I may say so, is the actor, who in all truth acts before God.”¹

The above quote is the core of Kierkegaard’s metaphor. The church is compared to a theater – but the conventional roles are switched around. The speaker (pastor/ preacher) is not the center of attention. Instead, he or she is the person who prompts the listener (the person in the congregation) to speak. The listener, as an individual in the congregation is the one who is “on stage” (the actor). God is the audience, the one who evaluates what is done. The speaker/prompter’s role is to be concerned with the “repetition” of the listener/actors – that what is said by the speaker/prompter might help the listener/actor speak for himself or herself as an individual before God.

This metaphor turns the tables on what can easily happen in worship² – that the speaker (a pastor/worship leader) becomes the focus of the service and the hearers act as the ones who evaluate his or her performance. (I.e., “I really liked that sermon.”) In SK’s model, the focus is placed squarely on the devotional intent of the gathering in relation to the individual. If the sermon (the address) is given as it should be, with the honest intention that those who hear it might be built up in their faith to the point that they themselves are able to live out the faith proclaimed, then the speaker need only be concerned about whether the sermon is effective communication for enabling this to happen. The sermon ought to help the individual speak (and live) in faith **for himself or herself**. The one who hears the sermon stands openly before God on the stage of eternity; the crowd provides no disguise for dishonesty. All motivations and actions, both good and bad, are naked

¹Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart is To Will One Thing*, Trans. Douglas Steere (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948) pp.180-181.

²I recognize that SK’s writing focuses on the devotional address within worship, but I do not think it is unfair to extend the metaphor slightly, so as to include every aspect of a worship service. Just a few pages later, SK himself does this by moving into a discussion on prayer using the same metaphor.

before God. The test is not whether the person liked the sermon or understood it, the test is whether the sermon better enables the listener to commit themselves to will one thing – to honestly and earnestly desire God.

Looking at Current Models of Worship:

As mentioned earlier, one of the key stresses in contemporary worship models is the idea of participation. Consider these words by Robert Webber, as written in the opening chapter of his book *Worship is a Verb*. Although this anecdote comes from early in the book, it illustrates the general direction of the Webber's thinking nicely:

When the day came for me to speak in chapel, I began by emphasizing the need to rediscover the focus of worship. "The focus of worship," I said, "is not human experience, not a lecture, not entertainment, but Jesus Christ – his life, death, and resurrection." Several students in the back shouted, "Amen," which is almost unprecedented at Wheaton. I stopped my sermon and spoke directly to the "Ameners." "I like it when you respond," I said. "One of the problems of evangelical worship is the passive nature of the congregation. We just sit and never do anything except sing a hymn or two and put money in the plate." To this statement a whole slew of "Amens" resounded. The rest of my short talk punctuated by interactive remarks which made me realize that more students than I would have guessed felt the need to break through passive worship and become more active and involved.³

Webber advocates for greater individual involvement in worship. He presents a model that allows for greater expression in worship, as well as greater diversity in style and form – all of which are supposed to better help a diversity of individuals engage in the biblical metanarrative of God's story, as seen especially through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. While SK's discussion is not concerned with issues of musical styles or artistic content in the same way that Webber is (with the exception of a discussion of eloquence of speech⁴) his concern for the individual in worship resonates with Webber's model in several ways. Both would desire participation of all people in

³Robert Webber, *Worship is a Verb* (Waco:TX, Word, 1985) p. 11.

⁴See SK, pg. 179.

worship. Both would desire that worship involve active participation – though “active participation” is considered in different ways by each. Webber work is primarily concerned with aspects of external participation in worship – that each person in the congregation is engaged and included in worship in a variety of ways, cognitively, kinetically, vocally, and emotionally. SK is more concerned with the inner participation of the individual. He asks if the individual is hearing and engaged in the question, “What kind of life do you live, do you will one thing, and what is that thing?” His concern is with the inner convictions and direction of the individual, and whether he or she is personally and individually active in the faith which is being professed through the service. SK model for participation is concerned with what he calls “repetition.”

Before we go further, we should also note the differences in the intended audience between SK and the other writers mentioned here. SK is writing to the individual, and in this section of the book is giving instruction on how the individual is to listen to a devotional address in church. While his discussion of preaching (and we can perhaps imply a broader definition of “worship leading” into this) is primarily focused on how one is to listen to a sermon and participate in worship, we can extract things that he might say to a church leader planning worship. In contrast, Webber, as well as the other authors mentioned later, are all deliberately writing to church leaders about how they are to plan and lead worship. As such, direct comparisons might not be fair. However, I believe that there is still much to be gained from the comparisons. Let us now add a second noteworthy voice to the conversation.

William Willimon, coming from more of a Mainline tradition, (Webber comes from an Evangelical background) addresses similar issues in *Preaching and Leading Worship*. In the following quotation, Willimon is writing a section about “common weaknesses” in worship:

Many of the Sunday orders of worship consist of the pastor speaking, the pastor praying, the pastor reading and the choir singing, with little opportunity for the congregation to do anything but sit and listen . . . When the Sunday service is simply a time to sit quietly, hear some good music and a good sermon, sing a hymn, and then go home to eat dinner, no wonder many of our people get confused into thinking that Christ only wants passive admirers rather than active followers.⁵

Willimon suggests a direct connection between lack of congregational participation and a lack of Christian activity. I think Webber would agree with this statement wholeheartedly. People who are given no opportunity to engage in worship in some way (or fail to engage out of their own unwillingness to participate) tend to not engage in Christian activity. Given SK's metaphor I think SK might also agree with this statement. However, SK would add an important additional point to the viewpoint of the authors already quoted. The true question in worship, SK would add, is not whether a person is enabled to participate in the service physically or emotionally, the real question is whether the service has enabled the person to individually relate to God. Is the service catalytic in the process of increasing faith in the individual? Does the service present the gospel in a way that helps the individual find words to express for himself or herself to God? The point of the presentation within worship, SK might say, is not the number of players on the ballfield, or whether every player on the field has a chance to hold the ball, (I am inventing a few metaphors of my own) but whether the individual player on the field is personally and fully engaged in the game. Does the presentation foster "repetition?" Do the words and prayers of faith become one's own? Does the style of communication help a person listen in order to act on their own? SK would also add, that individual response does not depend on quality of the presentation. Quality, (eloquence etc.) is good, and a nice bonus, but it is not essential. A person can will to engage. A person chooses to participate in worship – and this choice **to** participate is of greater importance than the medium **through which**

⁵William H. Willimon, *Preaching and Leading Worship* (Philadelphia PA: Westminster, 1984) 20.

they participate.⁶

Both Willimon and Webber advocate for outwardly vocal participation by congregants. SK's Lutheran liturgical context would probably expect some of the same. But whether inwardly or outwardly vocal, the person in SK's model can still participate in worship. As a person hears something, for example prayer, he or she chooses whether to personally and individually enter into that prayer.⁷ Outwardly vocal models for prayer might be helpful in making the individual congregant recognize how even corporate prayer is an act of the individual, but again, this is not essential. A person can listen to another person pray and silently, inwardly, be a full participant in that prayer – and this is the greater goal.

Comparing Other Contemporary Models:

Let us now consider two contemporary models for worship that seem to draw from similar ideas as SK's metaphor.

1. "Playing for an audience of One."

This phrase can now be found on everything from CD jackets to coffee mugs and T-shirts. A Google search will reveal thousands of websites which use this phrase. A review of a number of sites which use the phrase shows a remarkable resonance with the original Kierkegaardian idea. In the phrase, the emphasis is on the worshiper before God, with the idea being that God is to be given your best efforts, and that God alone is the judge of those efforts.

The phrase "playing for an audience of One" is especially common in lay-oriented writing on musicianship within contemporary worship leadership. In the forward of the book, *The*

⁶See SK, pg. 179.

⁷See SK, pg. 182.

Unquenchable Worshipper, Mike Pilavachi writes these words describing the book's author Matt Redmon, "He [Matt] has always performed before an audience of One."⁸ This concept of the ideal of the worship leader standing as if alone before God is further developed later in the book. Later in the book, after telling a story of how worship is like a person being given a mission to deliver a beautiful jewel to King, Redmon writes:

Worship leaders, we're on a sacred journey. The cargo is precious and the mission is vital. If we're to really see the King's pleasure in this whole worship music movement, then there are some narrow paths we need to cling to. At times it may seem more attractive to find pleasure from the people. Many of you have a lot of gifting and could certainly impress a lot of people. If you really wanted to, you could grab a whole lot of attention for yourself. But the challenge is to stay pure and true to the cause. Always keep in mind the end of the journey – the pleasure of the King over you as you bring your unspoiled offering before Him and Him alone.⁹

As in Kierkegaard's metaphor, the emphasis is placed on the individual before God. However, given that Redmon is writing to worship leaders, it is interesting that he puts an individualistic approach even to the task of worship leadership – a concept that goes in a bit of a different direction than Kierkegaard's idea of the leader as prompter. Throughout the book, Redmon builds on the idea of the worship leader as the "lead worshiper" – that is, one who leads others in worship though a personal example of worship. This is what Redmon means by "playing to an audience of One." However, this focus takes a step away from Kierkegaard's idea of the speaker/worship leader being primarily concerned with the repetition of the listener. In Redmon's model the worship leader has less awareness of those he or she is leading, the leader's primary concern is his or her own relationship with God in that moment. The response of the individual listener, while important to the leader, is more secondary and is, to a degree, to be seen as a byproduct of the leader's worshipping.

⁸Matt Redman, *The Unquenchable Worshipper* (Venture CA: Regal, 2001) p. 13.

⁹Ibid 91.

I can see how this model is helpful. It places an emphasis in the earnestness of the worship leader, and that what is said and spoken is authentic to the individual speaking these things. However, I wonder if this model does not contain a hidden danger. Perhaps by neglecting the emphasis on repetition by the listener, it fails to fully consider the responsibility the leader has toward listener response. While it is certainly true that the leader cannot be fully responsible for how a listener receives and responds to the presentation, the leader still must consider whether he or she is communicating in a way that can be received by the listener in such a way as to prompt and invite the listener to engage with God for himself or herself. Worship leading is not just a “sacred journey,” it is also a sacred privilege, one which must be entered into with significant care. We must think not only of our own earnestness, but also whether the words we are prompting for others will enable them to respond in earnestness.

2. The Congregation as an Orchestra

Paul Dalhstrom compares the worshipping congregation to an orchestra.¹⁰ The worship leader is the conductor of the congregation, who are the instrumentalists. I think this is a helpful extension of Kierkegaard’s metaphor – a metaphor which retains much of Kierkegaard’s original emphasis, but in a way that is useful to the worship leader, who must consider also the church as a whole. As in Kierkegaard’s metaphors, the pastor/worship leader’s primary concern is enabling individual response to God. The conductor provides the cues to enable the individual musician to play – but it remains the sole responsibility of the musician to actually play. He or she could just as freely choose not to play the allotted part. However, this metaphor carries Kierkegaard’s idea to a new level for

¹⁰Paul T. Dahlstrom, *Worshipping: Present and Future Hope* (Lima, OH: Fairway Press, 1996) as quoted and referenced in Marva Dawn, *A Royal “Waste” of Time* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), pp 196-198.

it enables us to think of the interrelationship between the individual respondent and the larger community of respondents. I especially appreciate how this metaphor relates to Paul's metaphor of the church as the body of Christ, each part having unique but interrelated functions.¹¹ This is one way that the role of the individual and the role of the community can be brought into harmony, in a way that one does not supercede the other in importance. The individual is compelled to respond to the message, to speak on his or her own, but this is always done in relationship with the larger body of believers. It allows the differences in action and expression to be heterogenous in a way that remains harmonious. We do not all have to worship in exactly the same way, (though each of us must worship as individuals) but we are obligated to worship in ways that contribute and complement the larger whole.

As with Kierkegaard's original metaphor, the worship leader (conductor) functions as a prompter, enabling the listener to speak for himself or herself. In Kierkegaard's theatrical model, the prompter gives the actor exact lines to speak. A conductor does not prompt the instrumentalist with exactness in the moment, except that the instrumentalist is provided with his or her own musical score to follow prior to the performance. Instead, the conductor provides just enough prompting to enable the instrumentalist to play their own part in a way that complements the others. The direction in the moment is minimal, just enough to stay together, not so much as to stifle the music. But let us remember that a significant amount of preparation must take place before the time of "performance." Countless hours must be spent learning the parts and mastering the instruments individually before the individual can meaningfully participate in the corporate event. In this way, "repetition" happens. There is personal inner engagement both prior to and in the moment of the

¹¹1 Corinthians 12.

corporate process.

If perhaps the orchestral model could be expanded slightly to incorporate some jazz and pop arrangement methods, (this is my own variation on the idea, do not blame Dahlstrom for this) there might be space in the conducting model of worship for occasional and complementary “improvisational soloing” where a few people might, for a short time, stick out from the congregation and play a somewhat spontaneous role in worship leadership. (Here I am thinking of things like spontaneous testimony and prayer.) However, within this model, even this individualized expression within the congregation is done in such a way as to complement the movements and direction of the whole, and even in this idea, significant prior preparation is involved.

Things Kierkegaard Can Teach Us About Worship in the Contemporary Context:

1. We will to worship. SK reminds us that engaging in worship is dependant on a personal act of the will. We will to worship. An awareness of this simple fact could put several important things into greater perspective. It frees the individual to worship even in styles that might not be to his or her liking. It frees the individual to worship even if the presentation is less than beautiful.

This important reminder might help the church to avoid “worship wars.” No style (assuming that the content of worship remains orthodox) can prevent a single-minded person from worshipping. We are then freed to ask, what is the best manner of presentation to enable people to worship, without allowing being distracted to the overly individualistic approach which would argue that, “I cannot worship in this way.”

2. Desire beauty, but do not be deceived by it. Beauty (SK uses the term eloquence in relation to preaching) is to be desired in worship. But one must also remember that the arts can be deceptive,

for they manipulate the emotions. This is not a bad thing. It is just the way that things are. However, this ability to evoke an emotional reaction can cause a person who does not have genuine faith (SK uses the term “double-minded person”¹²) to believe that they do. The result in this case is that the person ends up feeling and believing that they have “purity of heart” (a wholehearted desire for God) when the truth is that he or she does not.

For the person planning and leading worship, in one sense there is not much that can be done about this except to be aware of the possibility that art, both good and bad art, can bring about an emotional response in the one viewing or listening that is stronger than the otherwise reality of the situation. Musicians, visual artists etc. should continue to strive to do their very best, and to offer these things in worship as wholeheartedly as possible, but they should also be aware of the manipulative power that they have, and seek to use those abilities in responsible ways. Earnestness is needed for the presenter and well as the listener.

One thing that can be done about this is to be very careful about the degree of emotional commitment that is present in the songs that are sung and the prayer that are prayed. When we are leading worship, we are putting words into the mouths of others. We must be careful not to insert words which speak of the subjective experience of faith which might be repeated insincerely. Here I am thinking of songs such as, “I Surrender All”¹³, or the popular chorus “Breathe” which has as its refrain “I’m desperate for you, I’m lost without you”¹⁴. In both cases there is no fundamental problem with the words – we should hope that all people would be able to say them – except in the fact that

¹²SK pg. 110.

¹³Words by Jueson W. Van DeVenter, public domain.

¹⁴Music and Words by Marie Barnett, ©1995 Mercy / Vineyard Publishing.

all people are not able to say them honestly in worship. And honestly, can any one of us say that we have surrendered all to the cause of Christ? To encourage a person to sing “worldly pleasures all forsaken . . . I surrender all” when they have not done so – and have no intention of doing so – is both dishonest and deceptive. It causes a person to say something that he or she cannot say without being dishonest. Furthermore there is the additional danger that the repetition of these insincere words could be a catalyst in enabling the listener to believe that he or she has already done what they have said they have done, (forsaken all worldly pleasure and surrendered to Christ) when the fact is they have not. Worship leaders must be very careful about what they are asking people to say. We should be calling to people to proclaim the common Christian faith (for example the creeds) in ways that extend beyond the individual experience but there is an important balance between doing this and asking someone to proclaim a personal subjective experience of the corporate faith in a way that he or she cannot personally affirm honestly. Such dramatic words are poetic and beautiful, but let us not mistake poetic beauty for sincerity.

3. Stillness is required. SK identifies busyness as one the greatest obstacles to “purity of heart.”¹⁵ Without significant time for reflection, the individual is not able to discern whether they genuinely and wholeheartedly will the Good. This seems like an amazingly accurate rebuke of our contemporary culture. People today are amazingly busy – perhaps even busier than in the time and culture out of which SK writes. This could be an important insight in something that is desperately needed in contemporary worship – stillness. If our worship merely reflects the rapid and unreflective pace of everyday life, it is unlikely that people will have the space in which needed to critically consider the questions of earnestness or authenticity of faith. While it is true that, as mentioned

¹⁵SK p. 108.

earlier, worship is an act of the will, and people should choose to find times for stillness, this reminder also has something to say for those who plan worship.

Perhaps the church at large can learn something from the Taizé movement – an increasingly popular form of worship that includes within it large periods of silence. Maybe the pace of life has gotten fast so that people are looking for a place to help them slow down and reflect.

Conclusion:

Worship is the most important thing we do as Christians. It is something that every person should be engaged in – fully and earnestly. SK provides even our contemporary models of worship with some important and relevant insights which can help us pursue our most important task with greater faithfulness.

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