

UNAUTHORIZED FIRE

... Nadab the firstborn and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. Those were the names of Aaron's sons, the anointed priests, who were ordained to serve as priests. Nadab and Abihu, however, fell dead before the LORD when they made an offering with unauthorized fire before him in the Desert of Sinai. Numbers 3:4

Unauthorized Fire; what is it? We know that fire requires heat, air, and fuel, but what makes fire “unauthorized,” and does it matter? Since the anointed, ordained sons of Aaron were struck dead for using “unauthorized fire,” then evidently it does matter; it matters to God. We Worship Leaders handle fire all the time. It is our job to facilitate the corporate “fires” within the gathered believers, but how can we be sure that the fire comes from God, and that we are not using “unauthorized fire?”

The “Heat” of Music

In worship, music sometimes operates like a guided missile, carrying the message straight to the heart. Other times, it functions like a fountain, escorting the living water from the heart of the believer to the throne of God.

As a professional musician in the secular arena, I was accustomed to using certain sure-fire musical elements to get an audience to “enter in.” Manipulation of tempo, well-placed key-changes, groove, a flowing play-list, and repetition are tools I reached for as naturally as a plumber reaches for a wrench. It is called working the room. “Make ‘em laugh or make ‘em cry!” Are these musical elements inherently sinful? No! Do they “work” in church? Yes! Could they be “unauthorized fire?” Sometimes!

In our desire to light a fire, it can be tempting to rely on these elements rather than the Holy Spirit of God. It is safer to design worship in such a way that, if God doesn’t “show up,” things will still be cool. In contrast, Hebrews 10:19-20 says that we enter the Most Holy Place not through music, but “by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body.”

Music is a powerful fire-starter, but we must be discerning in its use. We must not let music take us where Spirit is not leading. We must not settle for somewhere that feels like the Most Holy Place, but isn't. When we rely on the "tools" of music rather than the Holy Spirit, we may be using unauthorized fire.

The "Air" of Emotion

Emotion is a powerful element, and everyone knows it; advertisers, politicians and fund-raisers. Emotions are not evil, but they burn like dry leaves: a quick flash, then nothing. Worship leaders (and Preachers, for that matter) can fan people's emotions into flame by using certain "tools of the trade" such as rhythmic speech patterns, raising the pitch or volume of the voice, or by exhausting their people. There is, however, a danger in assuming that the resulting fire is of the Holy Spirit. This "desire for fire" may cause us to manipulate our people, then carelessly declare and define the Spirit's presence based on a feeling or a mood.

A.W. Tozer says that we "can have Truth without the Spirit, but cannot have the Spirit without Truth." God's Word is Truth (John 17:17), and is able to inflame the emotions, if that is what God wants

to do that day. I believe that Truth is to Worship what Air is to Fire. The truth about ourselves results in repentance; the truth about God's activity in our lives results in thanksgiving; the truth about God's activity in our world results in praise; the truth about God's attributes results in worship.

Worship leaders are responsible to frame these Truths in authentic, relevant and usually musical ways, and to trust the Holy Spirit for their People's response. Yet, many worship leaders secretly feel that they have not done their jobs until their people achieve a certain feeling. The mere presence of fire does not mean that God has breathed it into being (I John 4:1-2). Without a good amount of solid Truth in our worship, we may be starting unauthorized fires.

The “Fuel” of Flattery

Worship leaders want to light fires. We get paid to light fires! And often the word “Celebration” is the banner under which we camp. In our haste to celebrate, however, we sometimes neglect the cost of celebration. We rush past the mystery of Incarnation in order to get to the birthday party. We tip our hat to the Crucifixion in order to get to the Easter parade. In the sprint towards the Holy of Holies, we often rush past the altar of sacrifice. In our zeal to light a fire, we sometimes forget the fuel: gratitude born of repentance. The path to “Celebration” should often begin in the Garden of Brokenness.

Reagan Courtney says that to neglect repentance is to “reduce praise and worship to mere flattery!” We don’t repent in order to insure our position with Christ, but rather, to maintain our relationship with Him (much like apologizing to one’s spouse). Psalm 51 declares that “the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit.” As a funeral sheds new perspective on a birth, so repentance yields fresh motivation to Celebrate, and should be a regular part of worship. Without a doubt, the Redeemed of the Lord should rejoice like people who have been brought from death to life. Celebration, however, is a by-product of repentance, not its acceptable substitute. A steady diet of Celebration, apart from repentance, will produce shallow worshipers who are unable to generate individual worship as a daily discipline.

Light My Fire

Where is the line between “authorized fire” and “unauthorized fire?” The lines are neither clear nor consistent, but they are serious. If the anointed, ordained sons Aaron are struck dead for using “unauthorized fire,” who, then, can minister; who, then, can lead? Worship leaders must seek to be faithful in preparation, authentic in presentation, and humble in expectation. We must use, but not rely upon, musical elements, and trust the Truth to inflame the emotions. We must incorporate repentance into our praise and worship so as not to merely flatter God. If God doesn’t light the fire, neither should we!

Dear Lord,

Cause Your Spirit to bring its weeping and convicting pain.

Scorch me before You heal me.

Condemn me for my unfaithful witness.

I have lived selfishly.

I have neglected Your cross.

I renounce my trust in possessions, and lay hold of my own
spiritual poverty.

I commit myself to a daily consecration to You.

Bring Your bitter knowledge of my own unworthiness.

Open again the wound of my humiliation.

I pray that You, dear God, would become famous for being able
to save a worm like myself.

AMEN!

(Adapted from James Burns' description of revival.)