

## *The Church – The Importance of Gathering*

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### **THE CHURCH'S WITNESS**

Ephesians 3:10 tells us that the church stands at the very center of God's purpose in the world:

His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The glorious mission of the church is to display before all the heavenly hosts the remarkable wisdom of our God, and we can take comfort in knowing that not even the gates of hell will prevail against it in that mission. One day, the whole world will bow before our God in worship and praise. Every eye will behold him, robed in splendor's majesty, and every tongue will praise him for his glorious work in redeeming a people for himself.

But we're not there yet. For now, God has left the task of displaying the glory of his *perfect* character to the world through the very *imperfect* people of his church. There are at least five ways that He does this:

#### ***First, Christian Unity in the Church Is a Powerful Witness to the World***

Above all, it is our unity that displays the power of the gospel to a watching world. Just as God's wisdom was displayed in the early church by Jews and Gentiles coming together as members of one body, so it is displayed in our church today when people who are different in so many ways unite in the body of Christ.

The life of the church shows Christian unity to the world in a way that personal evangelism cannot. Jesus said the world would believe our message when they saw our unity. In John 17:20-23, Jesus prayed,

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

In a world full of war and constant conflict, the supernatural unity of a church family bears witness to the power of the gospel. It's much easier for someone to dismiss your individual testimony than it is to discount the testimony of an entire group of people living together in unity under Christ.

One implication of this is that we should always be careful to protect and preserve unity in our church. Your relationships with other Christians in this church can impact the reputation of Christ in this city.

### ***Second, Christian Love in the Church Is a Powerful Witness to the World***

Francis Schaeffer calls the love of Christians for each other the ultimate answer, the "final apologetic," that we can give to the world. What marks us out as Christians in the eyes of the world—more than sound doctrine, more than passion in worship—is our love. "By this all men will know that you are my disciples," Jesus said, "if you love one another" (John 13:35). When Christians love each other, it is a reflection of how God has loved us in Christ.

Our love is often shown in good deeds. So, in Matthew 5:16, Jesus says, "Let your light shine before men, that they may *see your good deeds* and praise your Father in heaven." Similarly, Peter states in 1 Pet. 2:12, "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us." Christians' good deeds are a window through which the world comes to see and glorify God.

### ***Third, Christians in the Church Can Help Each Other Witness***

Another great advantage of evangelism in the context of a congregation is that we help each other witness. As we've already seen, God has given Christians all kinds of different gifts. That diversity can be invaluable in the task of evangelism. One member may be particularly good at initiating a conversation with a non-believer. Another might have a particularly powerful testimony. Yet another may be gifted at making people feel at ease in the conversation.

In this way, various members of the body support each other in displaying Christ to non-believers. This is a really powerful idea. Talk with people who have become Christians through the ministry of this church. Quite often, an initial contact was made by one person, but then others contributed to the process. Ultimately, the person was converted not through *one-on-one*, but through *group* evangelism.

### ***Fourth, the Church's Corporate Witness Glorifies God in a Unique Way***

God is uniquely glorified when we bear witness to him together. An assembly of believers can give glory to God with greater volume and variety than the individual can alone. The broader the testimony, the more God is glorified.

### ***Fifth, Christians Work Together Through the Church for Global Missions***

Christians can work together through the church to advance the gospel around the world in a way that individuals cannot. In the local church, Christians can pool their wisdom, experience, financial resources, and prayers, directing them all to the common purpose of making God's name known among the nations. Proclaiming the gospel around the world should be an end and purpose for every local church.

## **HOW TO USE THE CHURCH'S WITNESS**

How then, can we take full advantage of the church in our evangelism?

### ***First, Expose Non-Christian Friends to Our Life as a Church***

Invite non-Christian friends and co-workers to church, and plan ahead to make good use of the church body during their visit. Ask a couple of other members to pray for your friend. Invite your friend to a baptism or arrange with a few other members to go out to lunch after the service, so your friend can interact with a group of members.

For that matter, help to make this church a place where members will be excited to bring their non-Christian friends:

- Make your love and care for other Christians evident.
- Greet visitors warmly and quickly, and express an interest in their lives.
- Invite visitors to lunch after the service or to some other social event where they will be able to interact with the body.

### ***Second, Talk to Non-Christians About Our Life in the Church***

Sometimes it's just not possible to introduce our friends and colleagues to our life in the church. Perhaps schedule, location, or circumstances make it impossible for them to attend a service or a social event right now. Or maybe they're not interested. How can we use the witness of the church under these circumstances?

The simple answer is to talk to them about the church! People naturally talk about the things that are most important to them. As Christians, that means we will want to talk about this church. Look for ways to talk about activities or ministries that you're involved in. Talk about a sermon you heard that addressed an issue of particular interest to your friend.

Maybe it's as simple as asking your co-worker about his or her weekend. That's a great way to get to know more about that person, and perhaps even gain an insight into their mindset and worldview. And then maybe your friend will ask about your weekend, too. If so, don't just talk about the game you went to on Saturday. Talk about the church! Sometimes, that exchange will naturally lead into a conversation about the gospel.

## **THE CHURCH'S WORSHIP**

There is a strong connection between worship and unity. For one thing, worship is one of the sweetest and most valuable fruits of the unity we've been discussing. Also, true worship will naturally foster unity. When we focus our hearts and minds on Jesus Christ, finding our greatest satisfaction in him, the Holy Spirit also fills us with a desire to love those around us. That contributes mightily to unity.

Exactly what is it about corporate worship that makes it different from several hundred individual quiet times happening at the same time and in the same place? What can we do to help others glorify God during our weekly worship service?

## **WHAT IS WORSHIP?**

First, we must understand what worship is. Developing a biblical definition of worship is not easy. There is no one-to-one correspondence of any Greek word to our English word "worship." It's clear; however, that worship extends far beyond what goes on in a church building on a Sunday morning—and certainly far beyond praise in the form of song.

### ***Worship in Spirit and Truth***

One of the most important biblical passages about worship is John 4, when Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well. After Jesus alludes to the sin in her life, she invites him (as a diversion) into a debate on worship. Should believers worship in Jerusalem, as the Jews said, or at the twin mountains Gerizim and Ebal in Samaria? Jesus responds by telling her that one day worship will not be constrained to either place (verse 21), and then he says something quite remarkable:

"A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23-24).

The words "in spirit" and "in truth" are important for understanding true worship.

- "In spirit" means that true worship is not limited to some physical location, whether a church or a temple. Worship takes place in the human heart—the human spirit—and is not confined to any particular "holy" place. "Spirit" is the meeting place between God and man. To worship God in spirit is to worship Him in the realm of God.
- "In truth" is in correspondence with reality - both in regards to the manner and the object of worship.

### ***Worship in the New Testament***

Other New Testament passages also teach about worship. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (10:31). Thus worship is a matter of a Christian's whole life, not just one "holy" time of the week.

To the Romans, Paul writes, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship" (12:1). Christ, the perfect Lamb, is the one sufficient sacrifice for us, and his death fulfilled the Old Testament temple worship system. Thus, the sacrifices we offer now are not burnt offerings; rather, we offer every aspect of our lives to God. We are called to offer our whole selves to the Lord, always and continually.

Indeed, worship is at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian. Revelation 14:7 sums up the demand God makes of the human race: "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and the springs of water."

### ***Defining Worship***

So then, how might we define worship? D. A. Carson defines it like this:

Worship is the proper response of all moral, sentient beings to God, ascribing all honor and worth to their Creator-God precisely because he is worthy, delightfully so. This side of the Fall, *human worship* of God properly responds to the redemptive provisions that God has graciously made. While all true worship is God-centered, *Christian worship* is no less Christ-centered. Empowered by the Spirit and in line with the stipulations of the new covenant, it manifests itself in all our living, finding its impulse in the gospel, which restores our relationship with our Redeemer-God and therefore also with our fellow image-bearers, our co-worshippers. Such worship therefore manifests itself both in adoration and in action, both in the individual believer and in *corporate worship*, which is worship offered up in the context of the body of believers, who strive to align all the forms of their devout ascription of all worth to God with the panoply of new covenant mandates and examples that bring to fulfillment the glories of antecedent revelation and anticipate the consummation.

Tim Keller defines worship simply as "obedient action motivated by the beauty of who God is in himself." In other words, it is something much more than being moved in our affections, but it is certainly not less.

Given all this, here are five things we can say about the nature of worship:

**First, worship is God-centered.** It is our proper response to the magnificence, the splendor and majesty of God's character—a God who is, as Carson writes, "delightfully worthy" of our praise. Worship goes beyond simply *knowing* what God is like; it means that we take *delight* in the perfection of his attributes.

**Second, worship is Christ-centered.** We see this very clearly in Revelation 5, where the Lion of the tribe of Judah, who is also the slain Lamb, is the only one in creation who can open the scroll of history. So Christ "stands in the very center of the throne," one with God himself (v.6), and is praised as the one who was slain, who is worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals. From then on in the book of Revelation, worship is addressed "to him who sits on the throne *and to the Lamb.*" Worship is no less Christ-centered than it is God-centered.

**Third, worship is Spirit-enabled.** Paul says it most clearly in Philippians 3:3—"For it is we who are the circumcision, *we who worship by the Spirit of God.*" In its own power, the human mind is incapable of perceiving or delighting in the excellencies of God. It is the Holy Spirit who regenerates us, gives us spiritual sight, and brings us from spiritual death to life. When we worship, we do so not by our own power, but by the Spirit's power.

**Fourth, worship encompasses our entire lives.** Worship is not merely singing praises to God; it involves both adoration *and* action. Worship does not end with what we *say*, but includes what we *do* as well.

**Fifth, worship is delight in the beauty of God and of Christ.** It is not delight in the *experience* of worship. In our evangelical culture, *worship* too often refers to the emotions we experience while we sing about God, and we can end up adoring that experience more than we adore God. True Christian worship involves both the mind and the emotions. Thus, if our worship of God is so emotional as to be devoid of thought—or so cerebral as to be devoid of passion—then we are not truly worshipping. True worship is both thoughtful *and* passionate. True worshippers worship in spirit *and* truth.

### **WHAT IS CORPORATE WORSHIP?**

So what about corporate worship? Is it simply worshipping God with a group of people? Does it matter what we do in corporate worship?

What if our church decided to go hiking together in the mountains every other Sunday morning, instead of gathering in this building? We'd still be assembling together, and we'd be worshipping God, too. So would that qualify as corporate worship? Or what about a church picnic—is that corporate worship? After all, we're doing things for the glory of God, and we are doing them together as a congregation.

But no, surely there's something more to corporate worship than that.

### ***Doing What God Wants Us To Do***

The fact is, corporate worship is not simply doing worshipful things together as a church. It is doing the things God *wants us to do* when we are gathered together.

God cares very much about the *way* in which we worship Him. Even at the very beginning, God looked with favor on Abel's offering, but rejected Cain's offering (Gen. 4:4-5).

In the second commandment, God prohibited worship through images, making it clear that he alone regulates how he will be worshiped (Ex. 20:4). When the people made the golden calf in Exodus 32, they didn't intend it to be *another* God. They were worshipping the God "who brought them up out of Egypt" (Ex. 32:4-5). However, they were worshipping Him in a way he had forbidden, and the consequences were disastrous (Ex. 32:19-28).

When Nadab and Abihu offered up "unauthorized fire" to the Lord, "contrary to his command", God struck them dead (Lev. 10:1-3).

When Uzzah reached out to steady the ark, his intentions were good. Yet he was trying to "serve God," so to speak, in a way that God did not want to be served. "Therefore God struck him down and he died there beside the ark" (2 Sam. 6:7).

Jesus rejected the worship of the Pharisees, quoting from Isaiah that "They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men" (Mark 7:7).

The point is that God does not leave us free to improvise in our corporate worship. Indeed, He has told us in the Bible what ought to happen when a congregation gathers publicly for the purpose of worshipping God.

Here are some of the things we see congregations doing together in the New Testament:

- Publicly reading Scripture (1 Tim. 4:13; Col. 4:15, 16)
- Listening to preaching and teaching (Acts 2:42; 1 Tim. 4:13)
- Sharing the Lord's Supper and celebrating Baptism (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 11)
- Encouraging each other and praising God in song (Eph. 5:19)
- Praying together (Acts 2:42)
- Publicly confessing their faith together (1 Tim. 6:12)

Therefore, we might say that *corporate worship is a congregation's act of praising God together through the forms and elements commanded and exemplified in Scripture.*

### ***Worship is Not Singing***

One important implication of all this is that corporate worship is much more than singing, as when people say, "Now that we're done worshipping, let's listen to the preacher." In fact, the *center* of our corporate worship—the *most* important worship we do—is the hearing from God through his preached Word. Of course, singing is part of our worship, and God has made us in such a way that music deeply engages our hearts and stirs our affections. That's why Scripture commands us to do it. But while singing is worship, we should never fall into the trap of thinking that worship is singing.

### **HOW CORPORATE WORSHIP IS UNIQUE**

What does corporate worship do that our own private worship does not?

There are many things, of course, but here are four:

#### ***First, Corporate Worship Displays our God-Glorifying Unity***

Personal quiet times are wonderful and worshipful times, but there is something special about gathering publicly with the entire church and praising God together. By singing, praying, reading and preaching Scripture, and confessing our faith *together*, we show the world in a unique way that we are united by our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

#### ***Second, Corporate Worship Allows Us to Help Each Other in Worship***

One of the great advantages of worshipping together as a church is that we can help each other to grasp the glory of God and to respond joyfully. That happens in the structure of our worship services, in the musicians' playing their instruments, in the swell of voices as we sing together, in the work of men who have studied hard to prepare a sermon, and in other ways as well.

Here are a few things we can do to help each other worship God when we gather together:

- Regularly attend the services.
- Sing joyfully and loudly.
- Discuss the sermon after the service.

- Express joy to each other during the service.
- Welcome those around you who are unfamiliar.
- Be attentive; take notes during the sermon.
- Foster a culture of prayerfulness.

The author of Hebrews tells us to "consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds" (Heb. 10:24). That certainly includes helping each other to worship.

### ***Third, Corporate Worship Is Edifying***

Corporate worship is an opportunity for us to edify each other. You might be surprised to discover that in Scripture, God is not the only one we address during times of corporate worship. Paul writes to the Ephesians, for example, "Speak to *one another* with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord" (Eph. 5:19).

When we sing on Sunday morning, or read Scripture, or pray, we are communicating not only to God, but also to each other. Why is this important? Because we are weak people, who need constant reminding of the great truths of Scripture. As Peter wrote, "So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have" (2 Peter 1:12). We need to be reminded to persevere in this life, and our corporate worship time is perhaps the most important way we do that for each other.

### **CONCLUSION**

Despite the brokenness of this world, we are made for eternity—and the more we act in light of that truth, the better we will use this life for the glory of God. Thus, we need to be reminded every Sunday of what it will be like to praise God forever with His people.

Life can be difficult, and when we walk through hard times, our Lord's promises and the final dwelling He has prepared for us can seem far away, almost like a fairytale. So savor the moments when you are surrounded by brothers and sisters in Christ, who are enraptured with His greatness. Relish those times when heaven feels real, because you know that you will worship with these brothers and sisters—and millions more—for all eternity.

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Note: This document is edited from a combination of two documents. The section on "spirit and truth" has been changed from the original.