

“Worship: What’s It All About?” (Part 1)

Today and next week I want us to think about worship, and worship services. A congregation’s life and ministry involves much more than just worship services. But what happens when people gather to worship is a huge factor in determining the strength and vitality of a congregation.

Before we talk about our worship services, it’s good to ask a fundamental question: ***what is worship?*** The word “worship” is derived from an Anglo-Saxon word “weorth-scipe” – which then became “worth-ship”, and finally “worship”. It means *to ascribe worth*. To worship God means to ascribe supreme worth and value to God. 1 Chronicles 16:29 says, “Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name”. Worship is giving God the glory and honor that’s rightfully His!

As sinful human beings, we are prone to glorify and attach ultimate value to the wrong things: money, pleasure, self, possessions, another person. Christian worship is a corrective for that – it moves us to give to *God alone* ultimate value and worth!

This helps us understand, then, the purpose of worship services. ***We come here primarily to give God glory, praise and honor!*** This is where a lot of us get off track: We think in terms of what we *get* from our worship time. Have you ever said, or heard someone say, “I went to church, but I didn’t *get* anything out of it.” This could mean we didn’t like music, or we didn’t get anything from the sermon, etc. But primarily we are here not to *get*, but to *give* God the glory He deserves! The mood of true worship is found in 1 Chronicles 16:23-28: “Sing to the Lord, all the earth. Tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples. For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the Lord made the heavens. Honor and majesty are before him; strength and joy are in his place. Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.”

We’ve been created to glorify and praise God. Deeply ingrained in our DNA. Robert McAfee Brown speaks of this: “We can, with no thought of self, give all thought to Him. Whether this moves us, or inspires us, or changes us, is for the moment beside the point. For the point is that we fulfill our true destiny as children of God when we give God glory.” When you think about it, many of us are simply not very skilled and practiced at worshipping and glorifying and praising God - having our thoughts and feelings to move beyond ourselves – and bowing before the Lord in awe, and wonder, and adoration.

So one thing we should ask about any worship experience is this: Does it move me to praise and glorify the Living God? Evaluating a worship service on the basis of how enjoyable it is, or whether it makes us feel good is missing the point. The question is: Does it give me a sense of the awesome holiness of God, and move me deep within to praise Him? Is our worship time centered on God and His glory, or on me and my wants and needs?

But there is more to worship, and what should happen in a worship experience. If I’m truly brought into the presence of the holy God...and I bow before Him in awe and wonder and adoration...I am going to be changed!

If one looks at Hebrew worship in the Old Testament, and Christian worship in the New Testament, part of worship is **telling the story** of what God has done! Whether it is the Israelites recounting how God worked in their history to deliver them...or Christian believers hearing preaching about Jesus and how God was acting in Christ to redeem us.

For instance, see how the Story of God is told in 1 Chronicles 16:12-22: “Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he uttered, O offspring of his servant Israel, children of Jacob, his chosen ones. He is the Lord our God; his judgments are in all the earth. Remember his covenant forever, the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations, the covenant that he made with Abraham, his sworn promise to Isaac, which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute, to Israel as an everlasting covenant, saying, ‘To you I will give the land of Canaan as your portion for an inheritance.’ When they were few in number, of little account, and strangers in the land, wandering from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another people, he allowed no one to oppress them; he rebuked kings on their account, saying, ‘Do not touch my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm.’”

In genuine worship, as we hear about what God has done for us, it should motivate us to want to change the way we live – to turn from sinful, self-centered living, and dedicate ourselves to God and His purposes. Romans 12:1 expresses this clearly: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is true worship.” *True worship is offering up and dedicating our lives to God!* Someone has remarked, “What matters is not whether worship makes us feel good or happy; what matters is whether it makes us Christ-like.” William Temple, when he was Archbishop of Canterbury, gave a classic statement about worship: “To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God; to feed the mind with the truth of God; to purge the imagination by the beauty of God; to open the heart to the love of God; to devote the will to the purpose of God.”

So, the *primary* purpose of worship is to glorify and praise God. But the end result should be that it moves us to want to dedicate ourselves totally and completely to the Lord. Here’s something else...***authentic worship must spring from the heart.*** Old Testament prophets scorned people who went through the outward motions of worship, but whose hearts were far from God. The prophet Isaiah lamented, “This people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me” (Isaiah 29:13).

It’s easy, isn’t it, to come here, sing the songs, read the responses, put our money in the offering, but our minds are elsewhere, or our hearts can be cold. We’re not really seeking God. Maybe even we participate in worship services, but we haven’t yet given our lives over to Christ. *Genuine worship emerges from a heart and life that’s surrendered to Christ!*

Then too, our worship services should be marked by a spirit of celebration. The first Christians set aside Sunday as the “Lord’s Day”, to *celebrate* Jesus’ resurrection on the first day of the week. So, *every Sunday is Easter!* We are here today to celebrate, and praise God, for Jesus’ resurrection, and all that means for us! *But how often that sense of celebration is missing in our worship.* A man who was a pastor for a number of years got an administrative position with his

denomination. As a result, he spends most Sunday mornings worshipping in various churches as a worshiper, not a leader in the service. One of the things he noticed most as he traveled from one church to another was the lack of a sense of *celebration*, an absence of a mood of *excitement and expectancy* in most of the worship services!

Kathryn Kuhlman for years carried on a marvelous ministry of healing. I once read a newspaper reporter's account of a Kathryn Kuhlman service in Los Angeles. He wrote that before the meeting, there was an atmosphere of excitement, an air of expectancy. There was a sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Once the worship service started, he noted how the Spirit of God would move in power – people would be healed, others would be converted to Christ.

There is a lesson here! Often our services are well-planned and proper, but devoid of spirit and life. We come expecting little or nothing to happen, and usually we are not disappointed! A small elderly lady who loved God and enjoyed her faith was visiting this large, swanky, “proper” church one Palm Sunday. As the service progressed she was really moved by the majestic organ, the well-rehearsed choir, and the beautiful hymns, and every once in a while she would let out with a “Praise the Lord!” After a while, a well-dressed usher came over to her and whispered, “Madam, I’m sorry, but we don’t do that in here.” A bit embarrassed, she meekly apologized, but while the pastor was in the middle of the sermon, she got so caught up in what was being said that she forgot herself and burst out with a “Halleljuah! Amen!”

Well, the pastor got flustered, the eyes of the people in the pews kind of zeroed in on her, and two sober-looking ushers walked up the aisle, picked up the lady, lifted her tiny frame about 6 inches off the floor, and carried her out between them. All the while down the aisle she said, “Thank you Jesus! I am unworthy! Thank you Jesus!” When they got to the vestibule, one usher said to her, “May I ask, why were you thanking the Lord?” “Well, sir,” she replied, “my Lord had one ass to carry Him into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and I’ve been fortunate enough to have *two* to take me out of church.”

What’s wrong if the Spirit of God moves us here in such a way that we cry...or say “Praise God”...or get enthusiastic about the love and power and glory of God? A famous preacher once told of sitting in a service in a very sophisticated church, and hearing the pastor warn his people of the danger of emotion in religion. Yet the visiting pastor commented, “I observed that the pews in which they were sitting were more emotional than the people!” The Apostle Paul had to warn the Corinthian Christians to calm down in their worship because they were getting too rambunctious. He told them to do everything decently and in order. That is hardly the problem with most churches today! Those of you who were here for our Country Christmas night last month may remember, near the end of the service, as we were singing a spirited version of “O Come, All Ye Faithful”, a lady sitting near the front got up, and began to do a slow liturgical dance near the altar. Now perhaps some may have felt annoyed, but I think it was a beautiful, spontaneous way of giving glory to God. I talked with this lady as she was leaving the church, and she said she had been involved in a ministry of liturgical dance in a former church. Praise God for her and the way she expressed her adoration of our Lord!

The mood of excitement and celebration is good in worship, but there is also a need at times for quietness, and even silence. We have this strong tendency in our noisy culture to want to fill every space with noise. Quakers have a lot to teach us about the value of silence in worship!

There are also those times in worship when a more somber mood is appropriate. Hebrew worship in the Old Testament was exuberant and celebrative, but there were times when God's people would gather to mourn, or as a faith community to confess their sins. We see this in some of the psalms, which were part of ancient Hebrew worship. I still remember the Sunday after President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. I was a young pastor, perhaps 20 years old, in my first church, and it was difficult to try to lead others in worship in that time of national mourning. The same holds true of when we gathered to worship following the terrorist attacks of 9/11. We held an impromptu worship service that same night, and obviously the mood of that gathering was somber and mournful. Likewise as our congregation worshiped the first Sunday after the attacks. Or perhaps if there is a death or a tragedy in the congregation or community, the spirit of that worship time will be different from more normal times.

Yes, there are situations when gathering to worship enables us to share a common grief, and to once again look to God, "our help in ages past, our hope for years to come".

Another consideration regarding worship experience is this: ***Worship should engage both the head and the heart, both the intellect and the emotions.***

There are some churches whose worship services appeal more to the mind and the intellect. In those churches, worship tends to be more formal, restrained, unemotional. The pastor's sermons are usually more propositional, cerebral - appealing to reason and logic. One of the positive things about this style of worship is that worshipers may leave the service challenged to think deeply about the content of our faith, or how it informs our approach to life. But what may be lacking is that it hasn't touched us at an emotional or feeling level – we don't walk out of those worship experiences feeling our heart "strangely warmed" (to use John Wesley's phrase).

But there are other churches where worship appeals mostly to one's feelings and emotions. Some years ago I took a vacation Sunday and visited a nearby church. I knew the pastor and respected him. As we arrived at the church the place was crawling with teenagers and young adults! A band, with guitars and drums, led us as we sang lively contemporary songs (that was years before this became more common as it is today). People gave testimonies. There was an altar call. The pastor preached with much enthusiasm, preaching without any notes! But for me there was very little *solid content* to any of the service. It was more like just trying to get us to an emotional high. I walked out of that worship time feeling warmed by the music and the service – but it did nothing to challenge me to think more about my faith, or grasp some new truth from God. ***The most effective worship, the most relevant worship, grips both the intellect and the emotions – and helps us to love the Lord more with our heart and soul and mind and strength.***

In next week's message I want us to look more specifically at our worship services here at

Community UMC - why we do what we do, and ways perhaps where we might consider making changes. We'll look at Isaiah 6:1-8, and see how that Scripture can shape what should happen in worship.

Before I finish today, let me share just a few quick thoughts on *what we can do to be better prepared to worship God when we come here.*

First of all, worship God privately through the week. *Private prayer and praise* can condition us for worship here. It's difficult to feel God's presence Sunday morning if we have taken no time to seek God and praise Him through the week.

Second, pray in advance for the worship service. It's really not fair to come here and criticize the music, or the preaching, or the worship leaders if we haven't prayed for the service ahead of time. If we will pray regularly that in our worship services people will be converted to Christ, healed, and have their lives changed by Christ, I believe we will see a lot more happen on Sunday morning!

Third, try to come to worship rested! I know, some may work Saturday night, or may be up with a sick or restless child during the night. And I say God bless people who still make it to church the next morning. But others of us stay up too late Saturday night, then perhaps flop out of bed, and come to church tired – and are in no frame of mind to praise and glorify the Lord! Yes, it's better to be here tired than not to be here at all – but try to get some rest!

Then, finally, come expecting to meet God here and anticipate God doing something special!

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