



God is spirit, and those who
worship him must worship in spirit and truth.

John 4:24

On Worship
with Pastor Steve

The Dynamics of Corporate Worship

Some time ago I received an e-mail from a lady wanting to know the difference between personal and corporate worship. The answer I gave was this: Personal worship is often a term used for private worship or devotion. It would be the time a person spends alone with God. Whereas corporate worship is a term used to describe the time a church body gathers for worship such as Sunday morning.

Even though both types of worship have God at the center and may consist of the same expressions, the dynamics are somewhat different. For instance personal worship or devotion is meant to be an intimate time of fellowship between the worshiper and God. Though this does exist in corporate worship, worshipers not only interact with the God but also one another during corporate worship.

The Apostle Paul addresses this interaction in some of his letters to the churches. He wrote, *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.* (Colossians 3:16-17) . . . *speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord. . . .* (Ephesians 5:19) *How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.* (1 Corinthians 14:26) (To learn about psalms, hymns and spiritual songs read my article "Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs).

Worship is for God. However, when we worship together as the corporate church, with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, there is an element of teaching, admonishing, speaking and edifying that takes place.

Paul's passage in 1 Corinthians 14:26 also gives evidence that much more than singing should be taking place during our corporate worship gatherings. The New Living Translation reads like this:

Well, my brothers and sisters, let's summarize what I am saying. When you meet, one will sing, another will teach, another will tell some special revelation God has given, one will speak in an unknown language, while another will interpret what is said. But everything that is done must be useful to all and build them up in the Lord.

1 Corinthians 14:26 NLT

The apostle gives further instructions in 1 Corinthians 14 as to the order of corporate gatherings. He ends the chapter with this admonishment; *Let all things be done decently and in order.* (1 Corinthians 14:40)

Many pastors and church leaders are so concerned about their services being "decent and in order" that they won't allow "all things be done." Too often corporate worship services are so structured that time is not given for spiritual gifts such as prophecy, tongues and interpretation. In some denominations and churches these gifts and others have been abandoned all together. However, scripture teaches that these gifts have importance in corporate worship.

Our fast pace lives here in America almost dictate that we structure our worship services to move quickly from one phase to another. However, corporate worship should never be hurried. Pliny the younger wrote to the emperor Trajan that the first century Christians would frequently worship far into the night singing chorus after chorus for hours at a time. I am not suggesting that each time we gather for

corporate worship we should run a marathon. But, time should be given to allow the Holy Spirit opportunity to speak or give direction.

Over the years many bible teachers have introduced various models for corporate worship or song services. The common thread in these models is that worship is a progression. Though I understand that concept I am not totally convinced it's 100 percent accurate. I even hesitate to mention worship models because even the best models can become traditions that are so structured they actually hinder their intended purpose. And such models are not the emphasis of New Testament worship. Even though we use the term "worship services" to describe our corporate gatherings, corporate gatherings in the New Testament are never called "worship services."

Worship is not a song service; it's a way of life. It's not something we do but who we are. The song service is an avenue which helps facilitate our expression of worship. Song services can no more produce true worship than listening to a sermon or reading the bible can produce true believers. Only an encounter with the living God can produce true worship. Worship can take place without a song service. This doesn't diminish the importance or power of song or a song service but puts it in the proper perspective. We should keep this in mind as we study various worship models.

Many models liken the corporate worship service to a journey. (I suppose I'm speaking here of a contemporary free-flowing song service, which I am partial to, as opposed to a more traditional or liturgical service).

The ancient Hebrews would travel from their homes to celebrate certain feasts commanded by God. Many theologians believe these pilgrimages were accompanied with songs. In the Psalms there is a section titled Songs of Ascents or Degrees. It is thought by some that these were songs that were sung as the pilgrims approached the holy city to worship. Thus, when the corporate body gathers for worship they begin a pilgrimage that changes their focus from themselves to God. There is a hint of this progression in Psalm 43:3-4 that says, *Oh, send out your light and your truth! Let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your tabernacle. Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy; and on the harp I will praise you, O God, my God.*

In these verses the psalmist seems to mention three phases in the progression of worship; the holy hill, the tabernacle and the altar. The holy hill could be referring to Mount Zion, the tabernacle referring to David's tabernacle and the altar referring to the ark of the covenant. The goal of the psalmist was to get to the glory of God. He doesn't seem satisfied just to get to Mount Zion or to stand outside the tabernacle. If he can get to the glory, the altar, he can get to God.

The goal of the worshiper is not just to make it to church on Sunday or even to the worship service. It's not enough to simply sing songs about God or necessarily songs to God. The goal is to have intimacy with God. In my opinion that should be the goal of our corporate worship services. Yes, this can and should happen in private or individual worship times as the above psalm suggests, however, when the corporate body reaches this level of intimacy in their worship the presence of God seems to intensify.

I understand that where two or three are gathered in his name he is in the midst of them. I also understand that God never leaves nor forsakes us and furthermore that his spirit is present in every believer. However, it has been my experience and the experience of countless others that when a group of believers are worshipping there seems to be more of a concentration of God's presence. At the very least, the awareness of God's presence increases. I don't believe this experience contradicts anything written in scripture or that scripture, neither implicitly nor explicitly invalidates this experience.

Some worship models compare corporate worship to that which took place in the Tabernacle of Moses. In the Tabernacle of Moses there was an outer court, a holy place and the Holy of Holies. The worship that took place in the outer court was preparatory to the worship that took place in the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies.

The thought in these models is that outer court worship consists of songs which are meant to help the worshiper focus on what God has done; his deeds. Some would call this part of the song service "praise" which would consist of more up tempo music. Unfortunately, in many cases this part of the song service is used as "filler" that precedes the announcements or to allow time for latecomers to arrive. It usually takes some time for individuals to leave behind the baggage they brought with them to worship and focus on God. This time is vitally important in preparing the worshiper to enter the next phase of the song service.

The next phase of the corporate song service should change the focus of the worshiper from what God has done to who God is. In this phase the worshiper begins to sing songs to God not about God. These songs are usually slower in tempo and focus more on God's person than his performance. The

service has moved from the outer court to the holy place; from the holy hill to the tabernacle. Now it's time to move on to the altar; the Holy of Holies.

During this leg of the journey the worshiper seeks an intimate encounter with the Father. This phase is characterized by an interaction with the worshiper and the one being worshiped. Not only does the worshiper speak of his deep love for the Father, but the Father in turn speaks to the worshiper. In a corporate setting there might be prophetic utterances or spiritual songs in which the Father might speak of his love for his bride. There might even be times of silence where the congregation basks in the awesomeness of God's presence.

I mentioned earlier that I hesitate to write about worship models. The reason is that in over 20 years of leading worship I have witnessed countless times when using these models would have hindered what God wanted to do in a corporate gathering. Many times I have sensed God's direction to begin a service with intimate love songs only to end the service with celebration and praise. I have also witnessed God speak prophetically to the congregation during times of celebration and at the beginning of a service. The moment we put God in a box, the box becomes our god.

If not understood properly worship models can be interpreted as worship itself. Worship models should never be substituted for worship. The focus of our worship services is GOD not our models. The last thing we want to do is worship our worship. That would be idolatry.