



Oh, magnify the LORD with me,
and let us exalt his name together!

Psalm 34:3

On Worship Leading

with Pastor Steve

To Practice or not to Practice

One Sunday morning around 8:30 our worship band gathered for morning rehearsal. We met early because Sunday school began at 9:00 a.m. and we wanted to have some time to look over the song list and get a sound check. Some of us looked like we had just climbed out of bed with the rest of us wishing we were still in bed.

We spent some time tuning our instruments then began playing through the song list. The longer we played the more intense the presence of the Lord became. We strayed from our song list and began to worship with spontaneous song. The people coming in for Sunday school must have sensed that something different was happening from most Sunday mornings. Instead of walking straight to their classes they began to file to the altar.

By the time Sunday school was supposed to have started the presence of God was visibly touching people hearts. I wish at this point I could tell you that all heaven broke out, but the honest truth is that we stopped the flow of God in lieu of not offending the teachers who had prepared their lessons for Sunday school. Instead, we offended the Spirit of God who had come to receive our offering of worship. We failed to discern the mind of the Spirit. We thought that the same anointing would carry over to the regular worship service but it didn't. Despite our high level of expectation we never reached that same level of "presence."

God is always the one to determine when he will receive our offering. However, no amount of practice or rehearsing can move the heart of God to inhabit our praise. Does that mean that practice and rehearsal times are not important? Not at all. I believe God takes delight in a sacrifice that costs us something. And practice costs us something. It costs time, energy and money.

For years pastors and teachers have used the Tabernacle of David as a pattern for worship in the church today. As we study the worship taking place around the ark of the covenant we learn that it didn't "just happen" there was thorough preparation. 1 Chronicles 25:7 reads, *So the number of them, with their brethren who were instructed in the songs of the Lord, all who were skillful, was two hundred and eighty-eight.* The New Living Translation reads like this: *They and their families were all trained in making music before the LORD, and each of them--288 in all--was an accomplished musician.* Notice two things about these musicians; they were instructed or trained and they were skillful or accomplished.

The Hebrew word used for instructed in 1 Chronicles 25:7 means to goad, i.e. to teach (the rod being an Oriental incentive); expert, instruct, learn, skillful. A goad is a long stick with a pointed end used for prodding animals. 1 Chronicles 15:22 tells us that a guy by the name of Chenaniah was the instructor in charge of music because he was skillful. The Hebrew word used for instructor here means to chastise, literally (with blows) or figuratively (with words); hence, to instruct.

Several years ago my late father owned a trucking company that hauled pigs. Every so often I would go to the livestock barn with him. When they would begin to load the pigs on the trailers there would always be a few pigs that didn't want to cooperate. The loaders had these metal batons which resembled police batons, maybe a little larger. These batons had batteries in them and had a couple of electrodes, I guess, sticking out the end. When a pig refused to go up the ramp the loaders would prod it with his baton stinging it with an electrical current. I know that sounds sort of cruel but it worked. The unruly pig quickly got in line.

I am not suggesting that these musicians were beaten with batons if they missed a chord on their harp or clanged their cymbal in the wrong place. However, the term "being instructed" does give us the idea that these musicians dropped some sweat preparing for their shift around the Tabernacle. Why was being instructed so important? Could it have been because they were going to be offering up sacrifices of

praise in the manifest presence of God? This instruction produced skillful musicians; musicians who were in line musically and spiritually with the flow of worship.

The psalmist exhorts us to, *Sing to him a new song; play skillfully with a shout of joy.* (Psalms 33:3) The Hebrew word for skillfully is yatah. Yatah means to be or make well or literally to sound beautiful. Two other Hebrew words are used to define the word skillful. One means to separate mentally or distinguish, i.e. to understand. The other means to know; to ascertain by seeing. The Tabernacle musicians learned by being shown what to do and they practiced what they learned until they became accomplished musicians making beautiful sounds.

I believe practice is essential on two levels; individually and corporately. For those of us who are not accomplished musicians it is obvious why we need to practice. Yet, even for accomplished musicians it is important to spend time alone with the Lord on your instrument. It is equally important for a singer who doesn't play an instrument. It is during these times that God can give new melodies, new riffs and new songs that can minister prophetically to the Body of Christ. Individual practice time is a great place to learn how to be led by the Spirit and flow with worship as he leads.

I'll let you in on a secret. Before I ever sang a prophetic song on Sunday morning I sang several of them to the wall in my bedroom. As I practiced for the upcoming worship service I would inevitably detour from my practice to a time of spontaneous worship. As the Lord began to speak to me I would sing what I heard him saying. No one heard it except me and God. Spending time doing this gave me confidence in my ability to hear God and I learned how to flow musically while singing spontaneously. Some of the prophetic songs God gave during those times became congregational worship songs or words of exhortation for our church.

One of Saul's servants gives this description of David in 1 Samuel 16:18. *Look, I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, who is skillful in playing, a mighty man of valor, a man of war, prudent in speech, and a handsome person; and the Lord is with him.* How did David become skillful in playing? I believe he spent hours playing his instrument while watching his father's sheep. He was alone with the sheep and God. Did you notice the servant said that David was a man of valor and war? How did he know this? Though he had been anointed king by Samuel, David had not yet killed Goliath much less led the armies of Israel into battle.

Notice David's response to Saul's reluctance to let him fight Goliath. But David said to Saul, *Your servant used to keep his father's sheep, and when a lion or a bear came and took a lamb out of the flock, I went out after it and struck it, and delivered the lamb from its mouth; and when it arose against me, I caught it by its beard, and struck and killed it. Your servant has killed both lion and bear; and this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, seeing he has defied the armies of the living God."* Moreover David said, *"The Lord, who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, he will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.* (1 Sam 17:34-37)

David learned to kill the lion and the bear before he took on the giant and the Philistine army. Many of us want to lead the armies before we tend the sheep. We want to sing to the crowds before we sing to the walls in our bedrooms. Too often we want the rewards without putting forth the sweat necessary to achieve them.

The writer of Hebrews wrote, *But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.* (Hebrews 5:14) The definition of a person who has come to full age is one who has learned to discern good and evil. They learn to discern good and evil by exercising their senses. The Greek word used for exercised in this verse is gumnazo. Gumnazo means to practice naked or train. Mature Christians didn't just wake up one day with the ability to discern good and evil. They trained their senses by using them. I believe this dynamic applies to both personal and corporate worship as well.

During corporate rehearsal the worship team learns to flow together as a unit whether it is a contemporary band, choir or orchestra. Each member brings with them their personal practice times and together they become one voice. The more time spent together the more natural the worship flow and the more mature the group becomes.

It is much easier to take someone to a place you have already been. As the worship team experiences the presence of God together in practice or rehearsal they build a runway that helps to launch the corporate body into God's presence. Not only does the team learn to flow together musically but their spirits are joined together as well. This unity of spirit makes a huge difference when they take the stage for corporate worship.

I mentioned earlier that practice costs us time, energy and money. You may be asking, "How much practice is enough?" In my opinion individuals can't practice too much. However, corporate rehearsal or practice time may depend on the maturity and skill level of the individuals. Many bands or worship ministries require weekly rehearsals. My perception is the more the better. Weekly rehearsals are good especially when you are incorporating new team members.

During my years of leading worship I have led bands that needed a lot of practice and some that didn't need as much. Some of the bands would practice every week. Some of them would practice every two weeks and sometimes we would get together on a Saturday occasionally and spend the day learning new music and worshiping. Regardless, we always met a few minutes before church began to get focused on the upcoming service.

The worship philosophy I adopted as a worship leader in a Vineyard church years ago says that spontaneity is best when it is under girded with thorough preparation. There is not an organization in professional sports that would dare field a team having not practiced. Though a team may have to stray from their original plan during a game, they are able adapt to whatever schemes the other team may throw at them because they have prepared. Should we do less in preparing to lead others into the presence of the God of the universe?

Regardless of our skill level we should always strive to bring God the best sacrifice we have to offer. He is worthy of our best. Nothing less will do.