

Worship Service Etiquette

by Pastor Steve

This article is titled "Worship Service Etiquette" simply for the reason that I couldn't come up with a better title. There are probably as many ways to conduct a worship service as there are churches. The leadership of each local church is given the responsibility of seeing that God's vision for their church is implemented. However, I do believe that there are certain considerations that should be made in the implementation of a worship service vision.

A few months ago my family and I attended a worship service at a church in our community. The worship was very prophetic and spontaneous in nature and we sensed God's presence in a powerful way. The church leadership allowed a spirit of freedom to worship and many outward expressions of worship were demonstrated. We left that service knowing that we had been in the presence of God. That said, there were some things that happened in the service that I feel could have been a hindrance to some in the congregation.

The sanctuary of the church is somewhat small and the ceiling is only 10 to 12 feet high. During the worship a lady stood in front of the stage waving a large flag that almost reached the ceiling. She stood on the side of the stage where my family was sitting. Because of the size of the flag she was waving we, and I'm sure others, could not see the words to the songs that were sung which were displayed on the wall. We didn't know the words to some of the songs and it would have been nice to have been able to read them. I know her intention was good and I'm sure if she had known she was hindering someone she would have moved.

In the planning of a worship service and upon deciding the mediums that will be used we should take into consideration the logistics of the room where we worship. Flags are a great way to express worship. If flags are going to be a part of the worship service then plans should be made to use them in a way that people are not hindered in their worship. The situation in the above mentioned church could have been easily solved by using a smaller flag or by having the flags waved from the back of the sanctuary.

In a separate incident, at a conference we were attending, my wife was struck in the head by a flag pole being waved by a person standing behind us. She was not injured, but try to worship while wondering if you're going to be hit with a flag pole.

Another thing we noticed at this church was that a young man danced from one side of the room to the other banging a small drum. There were others in the congregation playing tambourines. Maybe it's just the musician in me, but this young man and most of the folks playing the tambourines were not in rhythm with the praise band. The sound was chaotic and could have made it difficult for even a seasoned musician to stay on beat. I was reminded of what Paul wrote to the Corinthians, *Even things without life, whether flute or harp, when they make a sound, unless they make a distinction in the sounds, how will it be known what is piped or played?* (1 Corinthians 14:7)

While leading worship in a Vineyard church a few years ago a well meaning man in our congregation turned five or so small children loose with tambourines in our corporate worship service. Not only was this a musician's nightmare, this small congregation became spectators instead of participators. We should teach our children to worship, but there is a time and place for all things. Each congregation should determine what those times and places are, but my experience is that corporate worship is not the best place for this type of venture.

The use of the gift of tongues may be the most misused avenue of worship I have witnessed. I realize I am about to put a yoke on someone's sacred cow, but let me emphasize that I fully believe the gift of tongues is valid for the church today. Singing in tongues or singing in the spirit is a wonderful means of expressing worship. The misuse of the gift happens when worship team members and/or members of the congregation sing in tongues out loud with no interpretation following.

Paul taught that if a person speaks in tongues in a corporate setting that the tongue should be interpreted. If there is not an interpreter the person speaking in tongues should keep silent and speak to himself and God. I believe this pertains to singing in tongues as well. Paul goes on to say, *Therefore let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful. What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding. Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say Amen at your giving of thanks, since he does not understand what you say? For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified.* (1 Corinthians 14:13-17)

Another misuse of this gift happens when a message or song in tongues is interpreted as a message from God to man. Paul plainly states that a person speaking in tongues is speaking to God not to man. It seems reasonable that if the message in tongues is spoken to God then the interpretation of that tongue should be spoken to God; most likely as prayer or worship. Prophecy speaks to man, tongues speak to God. (1 Corinthians 14:1-5)

I am not opposed to tongues, dancing, playing tambourines or waving flags, however, in corporate worship services every effort should be made to ensure that those who desire to enter in worship are not hindered. Paul wrote, *All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify. Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being.* (1 Corinthians 10:23-24) This admonition should not be ignored in our corporate worship services.

In no way am I suggesting that we should "water down" our worship to please man, but that we should order our corporate worship so that all who are present have the opportunity to engage in worship, especially those who are less mature.

There are other things that we should take into consideration while planning for corporate worship, such as; making sure that the words to the songs are easily accessible, adjusting the music to a favorable volume, and determining how the members of the worship team should be dressed. These decisions are made easier by knowing the people group that makes up the congregation.

I understand that you can't please everyone, but that is not really the goal. Some folks will be offended at how we worship; so be it. Let's just make sure that we don't get in the way of those who really want to enter God's presence with us. There will also be those who don't like any order or rules. We should help these folks to understand the biblical principles of *doing all things decently and in order*" and *"in honor giving preference to one another* (1 Corinthians 14:40 and Romans 12:10-11). We should also note that King David established an "order" of worship which was implemented at the tabernacle of David.

One practical suggestion that might be helpful would be to plan a worship service where more freedom is given for expression. Schedule it separate from your regular corporate worship service and do as often as you want. Announce the event to your congregation and let them know exactly what to expect. Let the folks bring their drums, tambourines, flags and dancing shoes. Move the chairs out of the way, crank up the sound, throw away the rule book (not the bible) and go for it. And by all means invite me; I'd like to come.

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