

Church Worship

(full article)

What is the goal of corporate church worship?

It's 10:30am. The music band is ready, the people are gathering. But what is the goal of this (usually) first part of our time together that we call "worship time"? And is what we then go on to sing really worship? The thoughts that follow address these questions, while offering this suggested goal for our worship leaders...

**"To lead the people into the felt presence of God
through their corporate worship of Him,
thus releasing the Holy Spirit to do His work
and His will among the congregation"**

The assumption we make here is that the church (any church, both leaders and people), *desire* the Holy Spirit's presence and are willing for Him to do *whatever* He wants in ministering His power.

We often say that God is a God of order, but it has to be *His* order, not *our idea* of "order"! When the power of God comes into contact with frail humanity, the result is usually not what we would term "order" (eg shaking, falling, laughter, crying out); yet lives are changed, the unsaved convicted and often demons flee. This is the effect of the presence of God in His "Shekinah", His glory when He is worshipped in Spirit and in Truth.

The challenge to both people and leaders is, are we prepared to let our schedules and plans go out of the window and allow God to do His work in His way? If so, He will come. Are we prepared to release control of this time to Him, without conditions? If not, He will not come, because He requires absolute freedom to do the things only He can do!

These notes are the result of many years of leading, participating in and observing both worship teams and congregations during church services and asking the question, "*...but is this worship*"? Some of what follows also addresses a number of trends in "worship" in churches today that emphatically work *against* the goal above.

John Wimber once said this about the Holy Spirit as a dove. Conditions have to be just right for a dove to come and land and the dove is easily driven away. So it is with the presence of the Holy Spirit. We have to set the conditions for Him to want to be among us and move in power and at the same time the wrong conditions will cause Him to leave or not come in the first place.

If you've read this far, hopefully you are at least partly in agreement, so do read further!

Time

A group of people gathering together on Sunday morning need time to gel together and begin to travel in the same direction (towards God). At the same time, God is not in a hurry and responds to His people genuinely reaching out towards Him in worship. Both these things take more time than most churches are prepared to give.

Three set-piece songs (or four, or five) followed by moving on to the next item will not enable us to enter the presence of God (or if He begins to come, He will withdraw again)! Often we don't even have time for all the people to draw together in true corporate worship before stopping our "worship".

Pentecostals traditionally allocate a greater priority to the sermon than to the initial time of worship. We need to ask ourselves, "Who is the sermon for?" and "Who is the worship for?" The sermon is for our benefit (God doesn't need our words of wisdom, He has plenty of His own)!

The "worship time" is the only part of the service that is totally devoted to God and directed upwards to Him, yet churches regularly cut it short for the sake of the programme or sing self-centred songs that are not true worship to God!

Songs

Song choice is vital! A lively celebration song or two at the start will draw the people together and prepare them to worship. But a lively celebration song once the people have already begun to worship will cut through that atmosphere and disrupt it. Lively through reflective to worship is a good progression as it leads the people upwards towards God.

There are "we" songs, "He" songs and "You" songs! "We" songs are best at the start, to draw people together and these are good when lively. "He" songs are songs *about* God but not addressed *to* Him.

But "You" songs (including songs of surrender/consecration) are addressed directly to God, eg "You are holy", "Worthy are you Lord", "You are exalted on High", etc. *THIS* is worship - addressing God directly and expressing our hearts and our desires to see Him lifted up, glorified and exalted! And this is biblical worship, because this is what the angels, creatures and saints around God's throne express (Isaiah 6, Revelation 5 etc).

Process and Progress

Psalms 120-134 are known as the "Psalms of ascent" because they were sung by pilgrims making their way to the feasts in the temple in Jerusalem. The pool of Siloam (where a blind man received his healing, John 9), was a large pool of gently flowing water where pilgrims carried out ritual bathing to purify themselves before entering the temple. But the temple was over 600 metres from the pool and a climb of 115 metres! The

pilgrims sang “songs of ascent” as they climbed this ancient route, to prepare themselves for entering the temple and the presence of God.

Imagine approaching the temple and seeing the column of smoke from the sacrifices. The people change from a lively and joyful crowd to reflective pilgrims and once they enter the temple precincts they are ready to direct their prayers and worship towards God Himself in the place He chose to dwell forever!

We need to go through that same process and journey from celebration and joy, through reflection and thoughtfulness to outright worship in God’s presence. The human mind, coming from a week of busy-ness and usually non-Christian activity, needs a process to quieten the heart and spirit and to direct thoughts and prayers toward God.

In 1 Corinthians 3:16, Paul says (Amplified version),

“Do you not discern and understand that you [the whole church at Corinth] are God’s temple (His sanctuary), and that God’s Spirit has His permanent dwelling in you [to be at home in you, collectively as a church and also individually]?”

Any time God’s people are gathered together, we need to “discern and understand” that the Holy Spirit dwells in His temple but we are usually not prepared to perceive or receive His presence among us. That is why we need to create a journey and a process for us all to arrive in the presence of God and receive whatever He has for us.

Music and song are the two rails that carry our “train” towards God. Let’s not stop halfway, be diverted or hit the buffers suddenly before we reach the end of the journey!

Participation

Every move of God produces new songs! Back in the days of the early charismatic movement in the 1960s and ‘70s, new songs were often lifted straight from Bible verses (eg “I will enter His gates with thanksgiving in my heart...”, Psalm 100). These songs were usually short, with a simple repetitive rhythm and easy to learn by heart.

Look at any Youtube video from those days and you will see people worshipping with no words displayed, no band and often just the pastor leading them! The secret was that the people carried the words in their hearts, or possibly in a “chorus book”.

Short, simple, repetitive songs have several advantages...

- They are easy to learn and sing anywhere
- They express simple themes of worship or celebration
- They don’t require lots of preparation, so can be more spontaneous

Full and enthusiastic participation is best achieved when at least most of the songs are similar to this *and* familiar to the congregation. Many African worship songs are like this and the effect in an African service is clear.

In recent years, new songs coming from mega-churches have swamped our churches through the internet and social media. Sadly they have edged out many song-writers not part of one of those bodies and without the resources to “compete”. Furthermore, most such songs today are hard to learn by heart (four different bridges, different choruses, complex melody and rhythms...) and therefore we depend on technology to present the words for us to sing.

We have lost the simplicity of older songs and our church cultures insists on large bands, thousands of pounds of unnecessary technology and the requirement for a projector or expensive screen to make sure we read the words we can't learn by heart!!

Because of this, displaying the words has become essential! Newcomers feel pushed to the edge if everyone except them seems to have sung the song before and they are not given the words to sing.

I challenge anyone to find videos of the Chinese underground church at worship. No band (can't afford), no words (learnt by heart), no single worship leader (he's in prison)! But heartfelt worship (sometimes joyful ,sometimes tearful) *led by the Spirit* as crowds of christians pray and worship *in the Spirit* with tongues and verbally with their minds.

Today in the West we are trapped in a cage of equipment and technology, driven by the products of churches thousands of miles away and seemingly unable to get back to the simplicity of songs that lead us into true worship, or even writing our own worship songs for our own local church!

Sensitivity and flexibility

It can be exhausting leading worship! One of the main reasons is that the leader needs to be sensitive, all at the same time, to...

- The band
- Playing his or her own instrument
- The Holy Spirit
- What the Spirit is doing among the congregation

It is easy for the first two above to take precedent over the second two, but being conscious of the level of worship in the congregation is essential to experiencing God's presence. Knowing when to encourage the people verbally and when to allow silence to settle, plus having a song list long enough to allow for flexibility in choice all enable the people to experience more of God and His presence and power.

Footnote

During the 1990s, from 1994 onwards, churches worldwide experienced a powerful move of the Holy Spirit. This was accompanied by physical manifestations, such as have been experienced in every major revival and awakening in church history. It was also

accompanied by a fresh sense of the manifest presence of God, especially during times of corporate worship.

Churches and leaders who welcomed this move began to realise that previous models of tightly-timed and programmed services would not work if the move of God was to continue. The Spirit had to be allowed time and flexibility from us to do whatever He wanted to do (also common to all historical revivals).

Although (as with every move of God), the intensity of these experiences began to decline, churches were left with the overriding sense of wanting more of God when they met together. This changed normal models of “worship” to make room for the Spirit’s moving.

Throughout church history to today God is ever willing to come with His presence and power, but we have to make space for Him. We have to relinquish control if we want Him to come. Insecurity, fear of backlash from people, reluctance to change existing paradigms of church behaviour; all these cause leaders and worship leaders to deny God the freedom to move as only He can.

We need to ask ourselves this question and look inside our hearts for the answer...

**How far will we release control and what risks will we take
to see God worshipped and his power released
among His people, the body of Jesus?**