

The Heart of Worship

“Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus declared, “Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.” **John 4:19-24 (NIV)**

And Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me--holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers.” **Luke 1:46-55 (NIV)**

What is worship? Exactly what is the “heart of worship”, what is the purpose, the focus, the reason we gather to “worship?”

If you were to ask the majority of adults attending Christian churches what worship means; two out of three would not be able to provide an appropriate definition or description of worship. Many who attend church believe that the purpose for attending is to have a pleasing experience or something you do for personal benefit or pleasure. IE: Worship is something we do to satisfy or please us, not God!

Good worship is often defined as singing hymns/songs we know; hearing a sermon that we understand or agree with, that is either comforting, comfortable or helpful; getting to interact with friends or somehow to have placated God through voluntary attendance (or in the case of some being forced to attend because they were restricted if they didn't).

32% of those who consider themselves regular attendees of Christian Churches have NEVER experienced God's presence in worship. Another 11% have experienced God's presence within the past 12 months and thankfully 41% have within the past 30 days. (Barna, The Habits of Highly Effective Churches, pg 76)

Within our own congregation, in the survey that 150+ of you completed you gave the statement, ***“I encounter God in this congregation and feel that God is actively guiding what we do”*** a score of 4.19. That's a good score!

So how do we evaluate the worship service? Are there components that make our worship time effective and passionate?

Let me first give you a list of those things that ought **NOT** to be relied upon to assess the worship time.

- i. Number of compliments given to the pastor as you exit the service
- ii. Number of visitors present or increase in attendance from previous weeks
- iii. Size of the offering
- iv. How smoothly the service ran
- v. Number of people who appear to be singing the hymns, choruses or those who recite the congregational responses
- vi. Number of people who come forward for prayer or holy communion
- vii. How many people appear to be taking notes during the sermon

We face a challenge in the church today, shifting the understanding of worship from focusing on us and our needs to God; from what people do to see with eyes of Afaith what God does.

God uses “worship to transform lives, heal wounded souls, renew hope shape decisions, provoke change, inspire compassion and bind people to one another.”
(Schnase, pg 34)

Highly effective churches, fruitful congregations often incorporate several approaches into their efforts to educate the congregation about worship.

Establish that **worship is about us focusing on God, not God focusing on us:** most adults attend worship with one dominant person on their mind: themselves. Before we can truly worship God, we must see how crucial it is to focus on God who we have allegedly come to worship.

Provide adults with a **compelling reason to engage in worship:** the vast majority of people who attend church today do not come to worship unless they have a good reason to do so. Fruitful congregations, churches where worship is passionate and touches people is worship that is relevant to them. It may be formal liturgical worship or what appears to be unstructured informal contemporary worship...the key component is that it provides a reason for people to get out of bed on Sunday mornings rather than staying in bed or visiting “Bedside Methodist Church.”

Explain how **worship is both an attitude and an action:** Most people are accustomed to thinking that worship is something they “DO” or worse a place that they “GO” or an event they “ATTEND”. But for true worship, passionate worship to

take place we must understand that worship is a “verb” it is an action, engaging ourselves in an intentional effort to glorify God and an attitude.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism begins asking:

Q. 1. *What is the chief end of man?*

A. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

That is the attitude of worship, an attitude where we feel privileged to give God glory and honor; where we acknowledge our own sinfulness in contrast to His purity; and it is an attitude where we view worshipping God to be one of the most incredible opportunities we may experience.

Facilitate the **ability to become intimate with God:** Churches that are marked by passionate worship have people who don't merely show up and sit passively in their pews; they are actively engaged, genuinely connected, personally addressed, and deeply challenged. The message touches them, the music moves them, the service changes them; people make spiritual progress; they make a connection with God and view worship as the most important hour of the week for themselves and for the church.

Encourage **people to come to the worship event prepared to worship.** When you got ready to come to the service this morning, I would presume that many of you took a shower/bath; picked out what clothes you were going to wear; checked your watch to be sure what time it was and ensure you had plenty of time to get to the service before it started. You probably had breakfast, or maybe a cup of coffee.

But how many of you prepared for worship? I want to challenge you to prepare for worship before you come to the service every Sunday.

While two-thirds of all church-going adults (68%) said they always “look forward to worshipping God,” George Barna, who conducts research in the realm of religion reports that millions of churchgoers struggle to clear their minds to focus on God in worship. According to Barna only four out of ten adults claimed to have “prepared themselves for worship,” yet even less than half that number actually made any effort to get themselves mentally or spiritually ready before arriving at the service of worship.

The large percentage of adults do not enter the worship event with a mind or heart focused on God or tuned into worship. As a result it often falls to the worship leaders to expend a great deal of energy just to get people into the “mindset” to worship and by that time we are half way through the service.

When people take seriously the time to read the scriptures, pray or engage in other spiritual preparation PRIOR to arriving, worship becomes much more meaningful and passionate.

Place the **burden of success in worship upon the individual, not the institution.**

How many times have you heard people say as a condemnation of the pastors and professional staff of the church, “Well, I didn’t get anything out of the worship today.”

Once people understand what worship is about, why they would bother to worship God, and who bears the responsibility for making worship happen, the chances of authentic, passionate worship occurring are hugely increased. Without people taking the responsibility for their part in “worship” worship services will always be a hit-or-miss prospect. (Barna, pg84)

Have you ever read the “Directions for Singing” written by John Wesley in 1761 and included in the UM Hymnal? Wesley encouraged the early Methodists to **“sing lustily and with good courage. Be aware of singing as if you are half dead or half asleep, but lift your voice in strength...Above all, sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing Him more than yourself, or any other creature.”**

Now replace the word “sing” with the word “worship” and it reads, **“Worship lustily and with good courage. Be aware of worshipping as if you are half dead or half asleep, but lift your voice in strength...Above all, worship spiritually....”**

The truth is that the level of electricity in worship is related not just to the people in the chancel. We come to worship and expect the music to be inspiring. We expect the prayers to move us. We hope that the sermon will stimulate our thinking and shape our living. But if all the people here in the chancel do our part well, that’s not going to make worship passionate without you, and the way you arrive, and what you expect, and how you prepare, and how you participate.

If our worship is to be passionate, it’s heavily dependent on how you come, how you arrive, what your expectations are.

Eugene Peterson is one of the great preachers and Bible scholars of our time. Peterson tells a story about a young man in his congregation. The young man’s name was Johnny Bergman. Johnny married, and he and his wife were in worship all the time, at least for a while. Then the children started to come, and they got busy, and Johnny had some great successes at his work. They became extremely affluent, and they bought boats, and vacation cottages, and the fast cars, and had more kids. They

got so enthralled with, and involved with all of those things that they fell away from worship in their lives. They disappeared for two or three years, and then one cold winter morning, there was Johnny in the pew. After the worship service, Gene Peterson went to him and said, “Well Johnny, what brought you to worship today?” The young man’s response was, “I woke up this morning feeling so good, so blessed, so alive, so created, that I just had to say thank you, and this is the only place I could think of to say it adequately.”

Passionate worship begins with our love for God, our desire to open ourselves to God’s grace, and our eagerness for relationship to God. What kind of attitude and eagerness do you bring with you to worship?

The spiritual vitality of a congregation results from viewing passionate worship as the essential gathering of the people of God and as a place where God changes hearts, redeems souls and transforms lives. But the spiritual progress of a congregation and the membership depends on more than what happens during a weekly period of worship.

Worship is not meant to be simply a Sunday morning activity. It is not something that you turn on at 11am and switch off at noon, never to be touched again for the next 167n hours. Worship is meant to be a regular part of our daily life. Public and private opportunities for worship complement one another. Neither one is intended to stand alone by themselves.

If you want passionate corporate worship.....practice worshipping privately....intentionally work at developing your spiritual life.