

# Life Together...



CALLED INTO  
THE COMMUNITY  
OF FAITH

## Worship: The Apex of Our Life Together

Psalm 84:1-12; 149:1-2

**Psalm 84:1** *How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! <sup>2</sup> My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God.*

**Psalm 149:1** *Praise the LORD! Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise in the assembly of the godly! <sup>2</sup> Let Israel be glad in his Maker; let the children of Zion rejoice in their King! <sup>3</sup> Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre! <sup>4</sup> For the LORD takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with salvation.*

**Psalm 35:18** *I will thank you in the great congregation; in the mighty throng I will praise you.*

Those who, by the inspiration of God's Spirit, composed the Psalms had an affection for, a yearning for the corporate worship of God.

Worship, then and now, is the essential priority for the people of God. Indeed, the pinnacle, the apex the high point of life together is worship – the week-in and week-out gathering of the people of God for the purpose of praising and exalting

the one living and true God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "The whole common life of the Christian fellowship oscillates between Word and Sacrament, it begins and ends in worship. It looks forward in expectation to the final banquet in the kingdom of God." A. W. Tozer echoes the same sentiment, "A local church exists to do corporately what each Christian believer should be doing individually – and that is to worship God."

Worship is unlike any other activity on your schedule. It is not like a Mavericks game or mowing the lawn or balancing your checkbook. Worship is an encounter with the One Living and True God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We meet the One who dwells in transcendent glory in Word and Sacrament. In worship we come into the presence of Him who is infinite and eternal. Worship is life's top priority for the man or woman of God. It is the highest act of the human soul. In worship we express our love for God, our dependence upon God, and our joy in God. Worship sets the tone for all of life. It is woven into the fabric of creation itself that life is to revolve around the day and the event of worship. Listen to these words from one of the prayers in *Valley of Vision*:

"O LORD, we commune with thee every day, but week days are worldly days, and secular concerns reduce heavenly impressions. We bless thee therefore for the day sacred to our souls when we can wait upon thee and be refreshed ... We rejoice in another Lord's Day when we call off our minds from the cares of the world and attend upon thee without distraction" (p. 209).

What is this event we call worship? *Worship is the reverent, joyful, intelligent response of the righteous man to the person, power, and presence of the God of the Bible.* Worship is ... *response*. The word "respond" means to say or do something in

return. When you respond to something or someone you show some effect in return or as a result of a stimulus. If worship is a response, what then, stimulates, provokes, rouses it? Our definition suggests that it is the person, power, and presence of God that prompts worship. *Person* comprehends the infinite perfections of His being. *Power* comprehends the mighty deeds of God in creation, providence, and redemption. *Presence* comprehends the idea of our covenant God meeting with His people. In the beautifully simple words of Edmund Clowney, "God's glory attracts worship" (*The Church*, p. 118). Like a sunset so stunning that one is compelled to stop and soak it in; like a night sky so full of stars that one is constrained to look upward; like a geological phenomenon so magnificent that one stands speechless struggling to comprehend its grandeur ... God's glory attracts worship. This dynamic has been all but lost in the practical ordering of worship in our day.

Indeed, underlying most errant views of worship is the supposition that worship is a means to something else. It is good, old, American pragmatism. Worship is the aim of worship. The purpose of worship is not to entertain the worshipper. Charles Spurgeon said, "The devil has seldom done a cleverer thing than hinting to the church that part of their mission is to provide entertainment for the people, with a view to winning them" (*Feeding Sheep or Amusing Goats*). The purpose of worship is not to excite the worshipper. Excitement is never mentioned as a motivation for or a product of the true worship of God. The purpose of worship is not to meet any particular need of the worshipper. No longer are we asking what pleases God but we are doing research to discover the preferences of men, and unregenerate men at that. Someone has said, "what the modern person needs more than anything else is to gain a clearer vision of the majesty of God." The primary purpose of worship is not even to make converts. Worship cannot

be reduced to simply another *method* of evangelism like door-to-door evangelism, crusade evangelism, or personal evangelism. By no means are unbelievers the primary audience in the worship of the people of God.

Worship is the aim of worship! The living God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – is the object of worship. God is the focus of worship? True, Biblical worship is always God-centered. It is widely agreed that this is the heart of Reformed, Biblical worship. But someone may reply, “Isn’t all worship ... Baptist, Pentecostal, Catholic, Bible Church, whatever ... Isn’t all worship God - centered?” My answer is a resounding “No!” God - centered worship presupposes that the event itself - like a sponge soaked in water ... like a piece of meat marinated in a delicious sauce - is *saturated* with reminders of God’s majestic person, God’s infinite power, and God’s fatherly presence.

Such worship demands two things. First, it demands that the liturgy of the service be saturated with the truth of God. The music, the prayers, the sermon, the confessions of faith and of sin, the sacraments, and even the offering ought to direct us to God. **Second**, it demands that the minds of the worshipers be saturated with the truth of God. Like attics or garages, our minds get cluttered with all manner of things during the week - the urgent, the routine, the temporal; deadlines and diapers, meals and mowing, school and sleep, exercise and emergencies, professions and problems, marriage and money, and on it goes. But for one hour each week the thinking of the child of God is elevated to consider and dwell on the glorious perfections and benevolent purposes of God. On previous occasions, I have suggested four characteristics of God-centered worship that, I believe, merit frequent repetition.

Worship is God-centered when it is understood as being *offered to* God. True worship always moves in the direction of God. God is the audience; the recipient. **Psalm 40:16** ... *Let those who love Thy salvation say continually, "The LORD be magnified"* / **57:9** ... *I will give thanks to Thee, O Lord, among the peoples; I will sing praises to Thee among the nations*

Worship is God-centered when it is based upon a true *perception of* God. In other words, we worship God according to His self-revelation in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. We do not worship a god who is the product of our own darkened imagination or syrupy sentiment. We worship the living God according to the light of His own self-revelation. Joseph Stowell observed, "Our evangelical culture tends to take the awesome reality of a transcendent God who is worthy to be feared and downsize Him so He could fit into our 'buddy system.' The way we talk about Him, the way we pray, and, more strikingly, the way we live shows that we have somehow lost our sense of being appropriately awestruck in the presence of a holy and all-powerful God."

Worship is God-centered when it flows out of genuine *affections for* God. **John 4:24** ... [Jesus to the Samaritan woman] *"God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."* What does *in spirit* mean? I confess my fondness for Piper's view: "worship must be vital and real in the heart" (DG, p.65). God condemns heartless worship. He spews it out like foul-tasting, brackish water. **Isaiah 29:13** ... *"Because this people draw near with their words and honor Me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts far from Me, and their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote."* Piper writes, "If God's reality is displayed to us in his Word or his world, and we do not then feel in our heart any grief or longing or hope or fear or awe or joy or gratitude or confidence, then we may

dutifully sing and pray and recite and gesture as much as we like, but it will not be real worship. We cannot honor God if our *heart is far from him*" (p.72).

Worship is God-centered when it is offered in the manner *prescribed by God*. **Exodus 20:3-5a** ... *You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God.* John Calvin states succinctly, "In short, every chance invention, by which men seek to worship God, is nothing but a pollution of true holiness" (Book IV, 26, p.1204).

Why must worship be God-centered? I offer three reasons. First, there is but one God and He alone is worthy of worship. This principle flows out of the first and second commandments. **Exodus 20:3, 5a** ... "*You shall have no other gods before Me ... You shall not worship them or serve them.*" There is an *exclusive* character to worship. Compliments, consideration, and care I give to all men. I am called to give to both my physical and spiritual kinsmen all the compassion of which my fallen heart is capable. But my worship - the adoration, the praise, the obedience, the gratitude of my eternal soul - is reserved for God and God alone. God alone is absolutely perfect in Himself. God alone is infinitely good and powerful. God alone inhabits eternity and dwells in unapproachable light. God allows no competition for loyalty and affection. **Deut. 6:5** ... "*And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*" Only one person is to be sanctified as LORD in my heart (**I Pet. 3:15**). No one else gave me life. No one else bore my sin. No one else preserves my soul. He is the first and the greatest object of my love and adoration. I am so made that true delight is

found only in knowing and loving Him. True joy is found only in glorifying the Living God. True happiness is found only in fulfilling His will.

Why must worship be God-centered? Second, every man is under obligation to worship the Living God. **Ps. 33:8; 67:4a** ... *Let all the **earth** fear the LORD; let all the **inhabitants** of the world stand in awe of Him ... Let the **nations** be glad and sing for joy.* There is a universal duty, incumbent upon every man who has or ever will breathe, to worship the Creator - the God of the Bible. But some men suppress the witness of creation and their own conscience and refuse to worship God rendering themselves the objects of *the wrath of God*. Worship, then, is an issue of life and death; of heaven and hell.

Third, worship is the redeemed soul's greatest delight. In regeneration the elect sinner who was *dead in trespasses and sins* is given life by the Spirit of God. **Psalm 30:11**(GN) describes the effects of this new birth upon the soul. *You have changed my sadness into a joyful dance; you have taken away my sorrow and surrounded me with joy.* The child of God knows new longings, new appetites. **Psalm 42:1b, 2a**, *So my soul pants for Thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.* He knows new desires. **Psalm 73:25b**, *Besides Thee, I desire nothing on earth.* He knows new capacities. Maybe the most pronounced is his new capacity for joy; his new capacity to delight in the things of God. **Psalm 16:11** ... *In Thy presence is fullness of joy.* Now it is in worship that the believer gives vent, give expression to these affections. **Psalm 30:12a** (GN) ... *So I will not be silent; I will sing praise to you.*

Friday afternoon I gave some thought to this last idea. Worship is designed to give vent to the deepest longings of the soul. We have on occasion been criticized for not building entire Sunday services around events such as the 4<sup>th</sup> of

July and Mother's Day for example. In fifteen years we have never used this hour on the Lord's Day for any promotions, or concerts, or the like. Now, there is nothing inappropriate or unlawful about such special times. They arouse meaningful patriotic and familial sentiments. But by substituting them in the place of God-centered worship we run the risk of starving the souls of the saints. In doing so we run the risk of withholding life-sustaining water from the saint who cries, "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God."

And so we deliberately pursue a certain atmosphere in worship.

Worship ought to convey some sense that we are in the presence of the living God. We are invited to come near to our Lord. Jesus says so compassionately, "*Come unto Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest*" (**Matthew 11:28**). Jesus is our loyal Friend. He is our understanding Elder Brother. The Spirit is both our *Helper* and our *Comforter*. We call God *Our Father*. But God is not only Father and Friend, He is also *a consuming fire* (**Hebrews 12:28-29**). We are invited to *draw near* but our approach is to be appropriately tempered with respect, honor, and submission. Our God is King, Creator, and the Sovereign of all that is. And so He has every right to require in **Leviticus 10:3** ... "*By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, and before all the people I will be honored.*" A service void of reverence and awe is not worship.

While it is true that acceptable worship is God-centered, this point is not the end of the matter. We worship the One, Living and True God but we worship Him in a corporate context. Worship ought to recognize and reflect the fact that we come together as the family of God. We are not strangers. We are not mere acquaintances. We are the covenant people of God. We are the body of Christ.



See **Romans 8:15-16; I Corinthians 10:17; I Timothy 3:15, 5:1-2**. The atmosphere when we gather as the people of God ought to be warm. We should manifest Christian love and affection (**John 13:34-35**). The atmosphere ought to be personable. Cordial attention should be given to individual men and women. The atmosphere ought to be one of acceptance. Paul instructs us in **Romans 15:7**, *“Accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.”*

Once more the key is balance. We need to ask two questions. Have we shown God the respect and honor that are His due? At the same time have the people of God been edified as they have praised God together, encouraged one another, enjoyed one another’s company, inquired into one another’s welfare, prayed with one another? True worship will reflect and cultivate both dimensions.

“The public worship of God requires all the people to give it their reverent and undivided attention and to join wholeheartedly in the entire service” (*Covenanter Witness*, Jan 92, p.5). If all that we’ve said is true as a congregation what ought to mark our worship together? I want to cite four important characteristics. The first is **enthusiasm**. We are to engage in worship in a manner that is, in the words of Jack Hayford, “refreshingly energetic” (MW). Let’s use a few adverbs here to describe what we mean. God’s desire is that we sing heartily, give generously and cheerfully, pray earnestly, confess sincerely, listen intently, receive the benediction eagerly, receive the Lord’s Supper gratefully. Second is **sincerity**. Because God knows our thoughts and the intent of our hearts, we are left with no option but to come into His presence honestly; without pretense. Remember God’s word from **Isaiah 29:13** ... *“because this people draw near with their words and honor Me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts far from Me, and their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote.”* The third

characteristic is **gratitude**. This motive is at the heart of all Reformed, Biblical worship. **Psalm 97:12** ... *Be glad in the Lord, you righteous ones; and give thanks to His holy name.* **Psalm 100:4** ... *Enter His gates with thanksgiving.* What do you do when you feel particularly grateful to someone? You give them a gift or write them a nice note don't you? Worship is such an expression of thanks to God. Beloved, we are here right now to give. Primarily because of the boundless mercies which are ours in Jesus Christ. The fourth mark is **wholeheartedness**. **Deuteronomy 6:5** says, *And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.* Our expression of this love ought to be done with the same concentration. Listen to **Psalm 111:1**, *I will give thanks to the Lord with all my heart.* There is a sense in which the worship of God is a blood-and-guts affair. The Christian is called to bring his faculties and energies to bear on the overwhelming fact of God Himself. The process is not unlike a magnifying glass focusing the sun's rays on a dry leaf and causing it to smolder and ignite. In **Psalm 103:1**, David penned these words, *Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name.* Do you worship like that? Is this hour truly the pinnacle of the week?

I want to return to the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "The whole common life of the Christian fellowship oscillates between Word and Sacrament, it begins and ends in worship. It looks forward in expectation to the final banquet in the kingdom of God."