

## Church Worship: Doing It Together

Occasionally God allows us to meet some of his choicest servants. That's the way I remember meeting Dr. V. Raymond Edman, former president and later chancellor of Wheaton College. He was a warm Christian, a godly example, a capable leader and educator.

In 1967 Dr. Edman was speaking at a chapel at Wheaton College on the topic of worship. To illustrate to the students in chapel the grand privilege of stepping into the presence of God he told about a personal experience he had some years before when he had an audience with Haile Selassie, the long-time emperor of the African country of Ethiopia. He described what it was like—the pomp, the procedure, the protocol of standing before a king. Then he compared that to the gathering of college students in chapel and the privilege that was theirs of being ushered into the very presence of God together in worship. Before he had finished his speech he collapsed to the floor and died. At that very moment he was ushered into the heavenly presence of the King of kings!

When we gather together in church on a Sunday morning it is far more than an ordinary meeting of people to hear music and a speech. We come to be ushered into the presence of Almighty God, the King of kings and the Lord of lords. We gather together to worship. Worship is acknowledging God's worth. The Psalmist said in Psalm 29:2, "*Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name.*" Worship is centering on God rather than on self. And worship is giving rather than getting.

While worship can and should be done alone, the Bible also calls us to gather together for the corporate worship of God. Unfortunately, it is too easy to gather but not to worship. We come to meet our friends more than to meet God. We come to get more than to give. We come to listen more than to praise. We come and go in the wrong way and thereby we miss out on the highest calling we have.

***We, the congregation, are on the stage and God is the audience!***

What is on your mind when you attend a worship service? Do you think about the platform? The pews? The musicians? The people? The preacher? How does it all fit together in your mind? Did you know that worship is not a spectator sport?

Soren Kierkegaard, the famous Danish philosopher, compared corporate worship to a play. But the congregation is not gathered to see a performance. The congregation is actually the actors. God is the audience. The leader, the choir director, the minister are merely prompters who cue the actors in their lines and provide the props and atmosphere.

What a revolutionary perspective that brings to the whole process of worship! The congregation is not the audience who comes to sit back and hear the choir sing and the pastor preach. We, the congregation, are on the stage and God is the audience! We come to acknowledge his worth. We come to center on God and not on ourselves. We gather to give and not to get.

Teddy Roosevelt was no great philosopher but he got it right when he said, "Even though the preacher can't preach for sour apples, and the choir is more than a half note off-key, you can always get something out of worship if you will put yourself into it."

It is true! The more we put into our worship the more we get out. But far more than for our benefit, we gather to worship God for *his* benefit.

How does that happen? It begins with preparation. If we come prepared we worship well. If we come to church unprepared or with sin in our lives that we will not forsake we may not be able to worship at all. It all begins with our attitude.

Jesus told the woman at the well in John 4:24, "*God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.*" In other words, truth alone is not enough. Our spirit, our attitude, must be right! Before we ever swing open the doors of

any church building it is up to us to prepare for worship with an attitude of expectancy, of worship, of giving rather than getting, centering on God and acknowledging his great worth.

It is extremely important that we choose to have the right attitude and not allow others to control our attitudes for us. The argument at the breakfast table, the person who cut us off on the highway or the critical spirit we carried around all week can destroy worship before it begins. It's up to you and me to decide to have the right attitude as preparation to worshipping God together with other believers.

Right relationships are as important as right attitudes. We will not worship right if we harbor bitterness toward another Christian. We dare not pray to God or praise him if we are not on good speaking terms with a fellow church member. Before we worship we must first make our relationships right. In Matthew 5:23-24 Jesus said:

*“... if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”*

Do you have a wrong relationship with another Christian? You will never be able to worship God the way you should until you make every reasonable attempt to make that wrong relationship right. Until then there will be little joy in giving, the music will not bless your heart, the sermon will be hollow and the Lord will be displeased. So before you worship, make relationships right!

The Jews used the day before worship to prepare for worship. According to John 19:14,31 and 42 everything possible was done the day before to make worship better. In more recent times the Puritans referred to Saturday night as the “vigil” saying that it was then that they warmed the ovens of their hearts toward God so that on Sunday morning it would be easy to rekindle that flame of devotion and love to God.

When our children were young we worked at that (now we have Saturday night services so it is more difficult to follow this pattern). We made

an effort to avoid outside commitments on Saturday nights. We stayed home and had dinner together as a family. Together we read the Bible, we prayed and we went to bed early. All this was done to prepare our hearts and minds to be centered on the Lord Jesus Christ the next day.

What could you do on Saturday night to prepare for Sunday morning? Might you prepare food for Sunday in advance? Study the Bible? Go to bed early? What might you do to make that worship experience truly an offering to God?

Leslie Flynn, in his book entitled *Worship: Together We Celebrate*, put it well when he said, “Perhaps the answer to reanimated worship is not some catchy innovation, or drastic change of order, but in hearts renewed through preparatory heart work.”

Another aspect of preparation is punctuality. Can you imagine going to a play where the actors walk in five minutes late, after the play has begun? Wouldn't you, as a member of the audience, be offended? Dare we be late to worship God? It is important that we control our schedules, limit our conversations with others and hurry things up in order to be on time for our appointment with God.

Obviously, everybody is tardy sometimes. I am. You are. But ought we not give to God the same courtesy we would give to our boss, to the king of a country or to the president? Would we not be on time to meet with them? Ought we not give that same type of preparation and punctuality to God?

In fact, to be really practical about it, let me suggest that proper preparation for worship should get us to church early! We should not rush into God's presence at the last minute, grab a hymnal and start worshipping. Rather, it would be far better to come a few minutes early and quietly prepare our hearts to worship our King!

Arriving late or talking to those around us during the organ prelude can hinder the preparation-for-worship of others. Habukkuk 2:20 says, “*The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.*” To be sure, there are times to shout before God in worship but there are also times to be quiet before God. Let me

urge you to use the moments before the worship service for silent preparation to step into the presence of God himself. Save the conversation for later. Don't let those precious moments of preparation be lost. And certainly don't spoil the worship preparation of another.

What do you pray as you prepare for worship? Maybe you don't pray in preparation at all! Let me give you some suggestions. Pray in anticipation of the worship service every day of the week. I do! Ask God to prepare your heart to worship him. Ask him to prepare the choir, the musicians, the leaders and the preacher. Come early, sit quietly and prayerfully center your life on the Lord. Pray expectantly!

Here's what will happen. The worship service will come alive. The music will stir your soul. The sermon will bring you closer to God. The prayers will lift you to heaven. But most of all, you will acknowledge God's worth, you will center on him and you will give rather than get. You will worship in spirit and in truth!

Music has been a primary means of worshiping God since ancient times. The longest book in the Bible is a hymnbook, the Book of Psalms. From ancient Israel to the New Testament Church to around the world today music is a primary means to praise and adore our great God. But there are many different kinds of music. There are experience-centered hymns such as "*I have a song I love to sing, since I have been redeemed.*" This is a testimonial. It's okay, but it's not really worship. Contrast that to the words that are God-centered and addressed to him as in the hymn *Holy, Holy, Holy*: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty! All thy works shall praise thy name, in earth and sky and sea. Holy, holy, holy, Merciful and Mighty! God in Three Persons, blessed Trinity."

Worship music is addressed to God. It adores and praises him far more than it is a testimony of our experiences. Other music, like choirs and soloists, represent and assist us in worshiping God. Their careful advance preparation is also a spe-

cial offering of worship for the Lord.

We need to understand something important here. Music performed in a worship service is primarily performed to praise God, not to entertain an audience! That is why we want it to be the very best. That is also why, at Wooddale Church, we don't thank performers after they sing in a service. It's not because we are not appreciative of their music; it's because they haven't done it for us. We are not the audience. God is the audience! That also relates to the issue of applause. Clapping is wonderful and appropriate to do in a worship service. I am all for it — as long as our applause is for God and not for a singer or speaker! So, when we sing and when we listen, let's do it with God in our minds. Let's sing to him and for him. Let the music of others assist your worship, not entertain you.

Prayer is an integral part of any worship service. This often takes place several times as we meet together to worship God. Invocation is addressed to God to invite him to be the audience as we worship him together. Pastoral prayer is one person praying on behalf of the entire church to adore, love and appreciate God. Prayer before the offering is to tell God that we are giving to him and not to some human organization. In the benediction we thank God for his goodness and commit to continue our worship after the church service and throughout the week ahead. Personal prayers punctuate the service as we tell God we love him and as we dwell on his goodness and his greatness. There is a place for petitions, but the primary purpose of worship prayer is not to ask God for anything but rather to give God the praise he deserves.

Publicly reading the Bible together has marked proper worship of God since Old Testament times. When we read the Bible together we are acknowledging God by listening to him and considering his words to us as all-important.

Some people suggest that the collection of money in a worship service is demeaning and inappropriate. They suggest a box in the back or

*...before you worship, make relationships right!*

bills through the mail. I could not disagree more! Our money represents our time, our work, our priorities, our present security and our future. Our money represents us. There is a direct correlation between the way we give and the quality of our worship and relationship to the Lord. The offering is one of the most tangible expressions of our love and loyalty to God. It is easy to say *I love you* and sing the hymns but tough to give sacrificially.

How do you give? First, give to God, not to the church! If you give to the church you will be disappointed, you will raise or lower your giving on the basis of carnal motives. In addition, give prayerfully. As you put the offering in the plate quietly tell God that this is to show how much you love him. And, give proportionately. The more you have the more you give. But, give! Do not fail to worship God in this biblical way. If you are short on money because of unemployment and debt, give anyway. Put in \$1 every week. If that is too much, put in one cent every week until God gives you more to give. But do not allow any rationalization to cause you to not give. Never allow a week to go by when you do not worship God with your offering.

The sermon is also an integral part of worship and has been since the Jewish synagogues set the pattern for the first century church. The purpose of the sermon is to teach and exhort God's people from God's word. It is God's Word explained to us so that we can continue our worship with our lives. The very fact that we sit through a sermon and listen to an explanation of God's word and a challenge to live God's way is itself a further act of worship.

Some sermons are good; some are bad. Some preachers are interesting; some are boring. It's obviously easier to listen to those who are good and interesting. But, the focus dare not be on the sermon or the preacher; it must be on God. Don't ever come to hear me or anyone else. Come to meet and hear God. You will be amazed. When you come to hear God, bad sermons often turn good and boring preachers become interesting.

Worship cannot be limited to an hour or two on a Sunday morning. If worship is acknowledging God's worth, centering on God and giving to him then it must go on all week long! When the worship service concludes our worship through service begins. The corporate worship service is where we begin together. It is where our batteries are recharged and our commitments renewed. From there we go out to worship God all the rest of the day and the week to come. Think of your marriage as a means to worship God. Worship God with the way you work, the way you drive your car, the words you speak . . . worship God with everything!

*Faith Matters*® is the Broadcast Ministry of  
 Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church  
 6630 Shady Oak Road  
 Eden Prairie MN 55344  
 952-944-6300  
[www.faithmatters.fm](http://www.faithmatters.fm)  
 ©Leith Anderson