

HOW SHALL WE WORSHIP

Part 4

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The last Sunday nights we've been sharing on the theme, "How shall we worship together?" I want to conclude that series tonight and begin next Sunday night on the theme of the tongues. Tonight the question, "Why should we worship God together?" There are three basic reasons I want to advance with sub reasons under those. I'll start with the elementary level first.

We should worship God together because this is clearly his will for us. There are several ways we know that this is his will for us to worship together. One is the scriptures tell us to worship together. Hebrews 10:25 "Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing. But let us encourage one another and all the more as you see the day approaching." That reference in Hebrews has to do with people who were not just one in a while abstaining from worship but who were making it a practice of falling away from the faith and absenting themselves from worship. If we had no other reason I suppose it would be sufficient to meet together for worship simply because the scriptures declare that that is our duty and there is a clear verse to prove it.

Any requirement of us instantly provokes in us a desire to test it. If you tell a child, do not do that because I told you not to. Later we'll give you better reasons but for now this one will suffice. Of course we begin worshipping together out of the sense that this is God's requirement. I've often looked at requirements in scripture as sort of seeing the law of God as love's safe harbor. I believe the law in the ultimate sense is not necessarily something that restricts us. It is a barrier, which God creates around us to keep us within his corral. His body, his will.

Sometimes in sharing with a couple who are considering divorce, when they're having difficulty and beginning to entertain for non-biblical reasons the prospect of a divorce. Finally when all else fails, saying, but this cannot be God's will for you. The law is love's safe harbor, which is meant to keep you within the context of marriage to work out your differences. But once you skip the fence then it becomes a whole other matter trying to work out the differences. Stay within the compass of God's light even though you may not understand all the reasons why. Work it out within that context. So if a person is struggling with why can't I worship God alone, why do I need to come together with other believers I would start with this point. Simply it is the law of God, the will of God, love's safe harbor. In that law of God there comes to be a growing freedom.

The second reason why we ought to worship together in terms of it being God's will for us is that God's people in the Old Testament regularly met for worship. We're simply a continuation of the community that God has established. Started in the Old Testament building a community of worship with one man, Abraham, and since then he has chosen to be worshipped continually within community.

As you look at the Old Testament I would draw at least five conclusions about worship in the Old Testament.

One is that in the Old Testament almost everything in regard to worship was prescribed. Exactly what you were to do. It's all laid out. If you don't believe it's all laid out read the book of Leviticus. You will get a quick perspective of how God directed everything. Not a thing was left to spontaneity. Not a thing was left to your own creativity. All of worship was ordained by

HOW SHALL WE WORSHIP

Part 4

God. You never have freedom until you learn the disciplines well. In the Old Testament God grouped his people in certain disciplines of worship which then allowed the freedom of worship to develop within the New Testament.

Second, sacrifice was the high moment of worship. Every great moment of worship was somehow attended by a sacrifice. In the New Testament every worship that is true worship to God at some moment or the other centers upon the sacrifice or the meaning of Jesus and his impact upon our lives.

Third, in the Old Testament the priest was prominent. He stood out. He was the person who led. In the New Testament we're all to be seen as priests. Worship leaders are facilitators of the whole priesthood entering into worship.

Fourth, in the Old Testament the place of worship was important. Especially the temple was the center of worship. In the New Testament, Christ is wherever his people meet.

Fifth, in the Old Testament the Hebrew calendar was designed to help the people worship so that there were seven holy times during a year. The calendar came to the people of God whether they were ready for it or not. It was time for tabernacles, it was time for atonement, it was time for Passover, it was time for unleavened bread, it was time for Pentecost. God built into the very calendar a mechanism by which his people might have conscious reflection of him. Even built into the calendar every week a seventh day which was a holy day, a Sabbath. God's people in the Old Testament, to the degree that they kept these requirements of worship from their heart, to that degree they had great peace in the land.

The Old Testament period passes. God's will for us in worship is not only that the scriptures tell us to, not only that God's people in the Old Testament regularly met for worship but ...

Thirdly Jesus regularly participated in public corporate worship. He didn't isolate himself from the community of God. Instead we read in Luke 4:16 "On the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue as was his habit." It was a regular process of his life together with God's people.

Fourthly, the early church worshipped together. In fact when the Spirit was outpoured we read in Acts 2:44 "Everyday they continued to meet together in the temple courts."

I think a fifth reason why worship is God's will for us is that the worship of the church in heaven is pictured as corporate worship. We don't gain in the book of Revelation a picture of worship as something that is primarily individual and solitary. Worship when you read the hymns of the book of Revelation are corporate. It's the body of Christ from all ages gathered together. Revelation 8:9-10 "After this I looked and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language standing before the throne in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hand and they cried out in a loud voice 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.'"

Corporate worship is not only something been God's will through the whole history of his people in the past but it's going to be a part of our experience for eternity. Corporate worship is always God's way. It is therefore in his will. All the way from the wilderness to the new Israel in heaven.

HOW SHALL WE WORSHIP

Part 4

One we establish that as a fundamental we go on to some other reasons for worship.

Worship corporately of course is essential for our growth in Christ. I would submit that you show me a person who does not meet regularly with other Christians for prayer, for the singing of the songs, for the strength of teaching and I will show you a Christian who is going away from God and his faith or becoming heretical either in his doctrine or his lifestyle.

What happens in our growth in Christ as we meet for worship? Several directions.

There is upward growth in worship. Part of what worship does in a corporate sense is that we get together and we begin to grow upwardly as we praise the Lord. When we adore and ascribe worth to God we want to share it with someone else. As we share it we're moving upward in praise to God.

The two disciples one day on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. When the Lord appears to them and was made known to them in the breaking of bread they returned immediately to the other disciples. Why? They wanted to get together with other believers to report that Jesus was alive. Whenever believers know in their heart that Jesus is alive they'll want to meet together to experience his presence. Praise cleanses our soul and our spirit. Most of us have a tendency to let things go but coming together on a regular basis to praise is sort of a regular check in to cleanse our heart and life before God. Praise is maintenance mechanics. It's fine-tuning. It's alignment. It's upward growth.

Another facet of worship it produces outward growth or *koinonia*, sharing together, Acts 2:42-46. The early Christians "devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to the *koinonia*, the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their home and ate together with glad and sincere hearts. There is a direct relationship between participation in worship with other believers and personal spiritual vitality. A dynamic individual Christian can in no way limit their contact with other Christians to simply an hour a week in a sort of prescribed setting. A dynamic Christian life is going to flow out and we're going to seek others not only in larger settings such as this but in smaller settings where we share vitally in our faith in worship together. Without association with one another we easily get picked off. I've long felt that the reason why we need to worship together is the fact that if we try to live the Christian life alone we're subject to two dangers. One danger is an excessive feeling of we're the only one that has that problem and therefore we're worthless to God. The other danger is excessive pride where we can live the Christian life on our own and we're better than everybody else and don't need to worship with all the other people. Both of those dangers are avoided as we worship together and see one another face to face. There is a value to answerability and accountability to one another. God's people are like a flock and we get picked off when we're individuals.

Another kind of thing that happens when we worship God together is we have inward growth or edification. Building up on the inside. I am a feeder. None of my sermons are original – maybe one or two, now and then. But most of the sermons that I have, I have fed off other people of God. I haven't plagiarized but I am all the time looking for people who are feeding me. I don't get a chance on Sunday most of the time to sit down and hear people preach. I need myself to be

HOW SHALL WE WORSHIP

Part 4

reaching out to people who are reaching out to me. To be a growing person you've got to be a feeder.

I believe one of the things God can do for us in worship is help us be good listeners. Periodically you're going to have this experience. You are going to hear a sermon, which doesn't interest you. When that happens, see if you can make it a challenge to stay spiritually awake and get something on your own with God in that situation. And determine before God rather than lashing out in that moment you're going to dig in and get hold. And beyond that you're going to be an encouragement to that person who shad that. Maybe they knew it wasn't really communicating.

God wants us to be edified. I need to take not just what I like but what totally is in God's word as my counsel.

Then there's downward growth where I sink my roots in in deepening commitment to the Lord. God sometimes in our experience of worship needs to move some topsoil in our life so that he can get down to bedrock. This has been a real value in the emphasis in our circles and churches on the baptism in the Spirit. We encourage you to let God get down to bedrock in your life and remove some things that ought not to be there. To deepen your walk.

Deepening also involves God letting a worship service stabilize us when we're in a period of personal turbulence and depression. The time to come to church is when you most feel like staying away because you're depressed. That's the time when God can do a special work to deepen your commitment.

These are two broad reasons why we ought to worship together – because God tells us to and because it produces growth in Christ. Let me give a third and broad reason why we should worship. I call it serendipity.

Serendipity is a word that comes from a Persian fairy tale – the Princess of Serendipity. It meant originally the gift of finding something valuable or agreeable that was not sought for. A special thing that happens that is extraordinary. I have found that in worshipping together God is at work on some occasions doing something so special and extraordinary I wouldn't want to have missed it for all the world.

I have probably missed fewer in my life than ten Sunday mornings of worship because of sickness or any other reason and maybe fewer than thirty or forty Sunday nights my whole life. I speak as a veteran on these matters. I sort of see myself as a person in worship who is somewhat akin to Anna in the scripture who was “day and night in the temple worshipping God.” When God wanted to do a special work she was there to see it. When Mary and Joseph brought in the child she had the privilege of being there because she had stood by her post.

At the pool of Bethesda there was a man who for 38 years had laid there every day. Yet a significant day comes. What would have happened if on that day he would have not been there? God did a special serendipity that one day and brought him a deliverance in his life.

Thomas, on the other hand to use a negative example, missed assembling with the disciples on the night Christ rose from the dead. And therefore had to catch up a week later.

HOW SHALL WE WORSHIP

Part 4

I would have liked if I were a person who had lived in the first century and had I been a member at the church at Antioch, I would have loved to have been in the service at Antioch in which Barnabus brings this guy from Tarsus named Saul and he speaks for the first time. I'd have loved to have been able to tell my children and grandchildren I was there when Saul first taught.

How different would Christian history be if Paul one day when God was stirring in his heart if he had resisted that and not gone to the temple. And if he had not gone to the temple would he then have missed the experience of falling into a state of worship in which God specifically said to him, "I set you apart. Go to the gentiles."

I see each moment of gathering as a special creative moment. I see worship such as this as a hovering time of the Holy Spirit. I think each worship service is sort of like new creation. It is as though once again the Spirit of God is brooding over the face of the deep, over the waters. And he's seeking to bring about some creative new thing in the body as a whole or in individuals personally. Not every time, indeed most times, I don't see what he's doing in individual lives. Although I'm convinced that God in a deep creative sense at work in this body on an individual level.

But there are special times that God is there in a way corporately and I wouldn't have missed it for the whole world. If it happened only once in my lifetime I wouldn't want to miss it. So I have this compulsive need in my life because of the standpoint of serendipity to be with God's people when they gather. Not because it's my profession but to be with God's people because he just might do something in that service that is so special and ordinary I want to later be able to say, I was there in those beginning moments when God created that.

Worshipping God together is partly bringing out of our treasure that which is old to use the words of Jesus. It is rehearsing truth that we've known before. It is singing songs we've known before. It is saying to God words that we've said before. But it goes beyond that. It's also worshipping him from out of our treasure that which is new. Singing a new song. Hearing a new truth. Responding in a new way to God. Worship is one of if not the most important thing whether personally or corporately. I am glad that I can share these Sunday nights with you the last four weeks on the importance of worship. I pray that for you they will be more than simply a passing kind of message. But they'll imprint your life to make you understand and be a part of worship more than you've ever been before.

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