

## The Purpose of Worship

A number of years ago, I was approached by someone visiting our church for a Sunday morning service, and this individual told me that he was angry because he had come to church to visit friends from long ago but had ended up feeling accused by what I had said in my sermon. He was a son of the congregation but had moved away years earlier and was not living for the Lord. His purpose in attending church was to reconnect with some of the people he had not seen in years. He did not expect to be castigated for his sin, he told me. His hour at church had not met his expectations.

Recently someone shared a post on-line which talked about the value of a sermon. In that post, there was a lament that we rarely remember sermons and with that lament came the question of whether or not attending the worship service was really all that crucial. Someone reminded the author that while we do not remember most of the meals we have eaten, we benefitted from them all even though we could not recollect what we ate three days ago. We are often encouraged to go to church because we need to be fed.

Which of the above two examples is correct? Certainly there is an aspect of fellowship that we experience on a Sunday morning when we attend a worship service. And, of course, we do expect to grow in our knowledge of God and the salvation he has given us in Jesus. But what if we find the sermon boring and none of our friends are at church that Sunday? Is there any point in going?

Perhaps the reason for attending communal worship is not primarily to fellowship with other believers or to be fed spiritually. Perhaps the reason is simpler: it is to worship God. Someone has said that in a worship service, especially when we are singing, there is only one person in the audience, and that is God. (Since we are Trinitarians, we would argue that that is incorrect, for it is three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!) Worshipping God is the reason we attend communal worship services, for that is the point of the worship service.

If (since) that is the case, that does leave remarkable little room to excuse ourselves from the worship service. We can worship God even if we don't know anyone else in the room, and we can worship God even if the sermon is a little boring or somewhat irrelevant. If we don't like the music genre or the prayers are too long, we can still worship God. Even if the entire service is in a different language, one that we don't understand, we can worship God. In fact, the only reason for not accomplishing the main goal of the worship service, worshipping God, is because we didn't worship God. Only we can make that happen, and our worship of God is not dependent on who else might be there or what happens during the service. Worshipping God is something we decide to do, and it is something that we must do intentionally. It doesn't just happen.

But one might argue, do we really need to attend a worship service to worship God? No, we don't. Not really. Some say that they worship God better by going for a walk in creation. I do not doubt that they are telling the truth. We do have to ask ourselves if that it is equally beneficial to worship God alone in a beautiful place in creation in comparison to engaging in communal worship with others. Or, what about

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the opportunity now afforded us through technology, the opportunity to join the worship service remotely. Is that not beneficial. Again, I do not doubt that those who chose to worship remotely are blessed, and for that we can be glad. We do recognize that the opportunity to worship remotely was created so that those who cannot attend can at least participate instead of giving an opportunity for those who can but choose not to.

A few decades ago, I was living in a part of Mexico where few people spoke English. I regularly attended church, and early on in my stay in Mexico, I spoke almost no Spanish and understood less. Mostly I attended a fairly large church named Nuevo Jerusalem (New Jerusalem), a Presbyterian church, and I rarely understood anything of the sermon. I did take my English Bible so I could at least understand what was read. I also participated in the singing, although, I confess, while I sang the words, I did not know what they meant. At the end of the service I had not learned much from the sermon and I did not really fellowship with others, mostly because I couldn't understand what they were saying. But I was blessed.

Without a doubt I could have gone for a walk in the beautiful parks and countryside surrounding the city where I was living, and that would have been beneficial. But I would have missed out on gathering with God's people for worship. There was something about being with other believers who believed that Jesus had died for their sins and who sought to make him Lord of every part of their lives that strengthened me. It was beneficial to be among them.

I think that what was happening was that their worship was carrying me into the presence of God. I was worshipping God with them as I was borne along by their praises and prayers. Being part of a worshipping community encouraged me in my worship as well.

I do believe that if the sermons were always boring and irrelevant (or in another language) and if I didn't know anyone else in the building, that it would be more difficult to be motivated to attend communal worship. These things are not unimportant. But they are not the most important thing that we do when we gather as believers. The most important thing that we do is worship the God who made us and saved us, and when we do with others, their worship enhances our worship.

Our expectations regarding the worship service do determine if we will be fulfilled. If we are looking for a good sermon, we will sometimes be disappointed. If we are looking for fellowship, we may not always find someone to talk to. If we are seeking to worship God, however, we always will, and if the communal worship service does not meet that expectation, chances are that is more our own problem than anything else. God will be worshipped if we worship him, and if that is our expectation, we will never be disappointed.

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