

The Rest of the Service: Worship Continues Even After the Music Stops

by Rowland Forman

Awhile ago, my wife and I attended two entirely different worship services in Texas. The first was at Oak Hills Community Church in San Antonio. Their service was quiet, dignified, reverent and reflective: Scripture readings, several unaccompanied worship songs, the Lord's Supper, a collection, and a short message by senior pastor Max Lucado on the gentleness and humility of Christ. The whole service was over in an hour.

Prior to Communion, Max Lucado asked a series of questions that has stayed with me: "Do you have reason to be grateful to God this week? Have you been able to swing your legs out of the bed each morning? Many people would give anything to be able to do that. Have you seen a sunset or sunrise this week? Many people would love to be able to do that."

Then he paused and said something like, "Have you had any sins forgiven this week and cleansed by the precious blood of Christ? Then you have every reason to be very grateful. Let's be thankful to God as we take the bread and cup in remembrance of Christ's death, and as we anticipate His coming."

I wept tears of joy and gratitude. I worshipped God.

The following week we visited Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship in Dallas. What a contrast! The worship service was exuberant, lively, and interactive. There was a talented choir and worship band, an extended time of enthusiastic singing, several moving solos and instrumental pieces, a Scripture reading, a collection, and a powerful message by Tony Evans, their senior pastor.

The sense of celebration and joy in God in that congregation moved me to worship in a different way that day. Although I'm not a very demonstrative

worshiper, I found myself caught up in the sheer enthusiasm for God of the mainly African-American people around me. It felt as if the clock didn't matter.

My worship experiences in those two churches on two successive weekends became pages in a new chapter in my experience as a worshiper of God in a corporate church setting. For years, as a pastor, I'd been intimately involved in praying about and planning worship services. Now, as a member of a congregation, I view corporate worship differently.

Previously, along with worship leaders and worship team members, I'd sweat over the various elements of corporate worship we should include in a service that might give people a meaningful encounter with God. Now, apart from some services where I'm preaching, I'm on the receiving end.

God got my attention on those two memorable weekends. The music styles in both churches were not exactly my thing — yet I worshipped meaningfully on both occasions. There were aspects of those worship services I had no control over. But there were three things I could attend to that reflect the primary elements in biblical worship.

My Focus: God's Supreme Worthiness

Worship is realizing God's supreme worth, followed by a response that reflects His worthiness. It is declaring, by word or action, what we believe to be true about God. It means giving God all He's worth.

The more expansive our view of God, and the more this view is in harmony with His revealed will, the more likely that we will engage in authentic worship.

Worship is recognizing that the Lord is great and most worthy of praise (Psalm 145:3). In my two recent worship experiences in Texas churches, God's grace was the focus of one service, and His majestic power was the theme of the other. God was the center of our attention. That's why the reading of the Word of God and messages that direct our hearts to our incomparable Savior are such basic elements in corporate worship

Nehemiah 8 tells of when Ezra the priest read from the Book of the Law to the Israelites for hours and “praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, ‘Amen! Amen!’ Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground” (v. 6).

What does this mean to us attending a typical worship service? It means we are there to focus on God. Any reading, song, prayer, testimony, or sermon that makes us center on God can potentially elicit heartfelt worship. That releases us from the need to grade the quality of the music or the style of the songs.

My Attitude: A Grateful, Unselfish Heart

Worship is also the overflow of a grateful heart in response to God’s grace in Christ. That’s what Paul is getting at in Romans 12:1. He says, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship.” I like this simple outline of Romans:

— Chapter 1-11: For all God has done

— Chapter 12-16: I give all that I am.

Worship of this sort is not something you switch on and off at a church service. It is all-of-life worship. In response to God’s magnificent mercies, we gladly present all we have and all we are to God in our times of daily prayer, in our homes, our workplaces, and corporately in our church gatherings.

As I approach a worship gathering with an expectant, grateful heart, I am living out the truth of Psalm 100:4 — “Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name.” I’m less likely to criticize the way a service is conducted if I come with a grateful spirit. A grateful heart is not a judgmental heart.

Picture a church where people arrive early for public worship so they can spend a few minutes praying for the people who enter. They see someone whose shoulders are drooped, and they ask God to give him an encounter with Himself that day. Picture people coming with broken hearts to God, confessing

their sins to Him, repenting of harsh, unbending attitudes and the failures of the week. Imagine a church where, in the process of confession, some people leave the sanctuary to reconcile with a person they have hurt. They are so touched by God's grace that they treat others graciously.

The people in that church, to use Anne Ortlund's analogy, would be more like grapes than marbles. They would not be abrasively bumping into each other; they would be mingling into one another. They would be authentic worshipers — loving God with all their hearts and their neighbors as themselves.

In this new chapter of my worship life, I am being released from my selfishness and a critical spirit, as I ask, not "What will meet my need?" but "What kind of worship does God delight in?" and "How can I best serve and bless the people around me?"

My Response: Enthusiastic, Reflective Worship

I love singing and instrumental music. And I'm convinced that biblical faith is a faith that sings. Consider these biblical examples:

- At least 78 references in the psalms show singing as the natural response of grateful worshipers.
- On the night of His betrayal, Jesus sang a hymn with His disciples before He went to the Mount of Olives (Matt. 26:30).
- Paul and Silas sang praises to God while stuck in a Philippian jail (Acts 16:25).
- One day, with the redeemed in heaven, we are going to sing a new song to the One who is worthy of our worship (Rev. 5:9).

But there's more to corporate worship than singing and music. In *Real Life Real Worship*, Tony Beckett tells of a pastor at Soul Survivor Church in Watford, England, who decided to put a stop to instrumental music in their worship gatherings — for a period. Their church had state-of-the-art music and great singing, but they had become mere spectators, connoisseurs of praise

rather than wholehearted worshipers. By temporarily banning the band, they were able to realize that worship is more than a song — it's a heartfelt response to the supreme worthiness of Christ. It is worshiping the Father in spirit and truth.

The other day, I was walking behind a young couple after church. One said to the other, "What did you think of the worship?" The other person replied. "It wasn't that great. The lead singer was off key."

In addition to mistakenly equating worship with music, my friends were thinking of *worship* as a noun rather than a verb. Worship is something you *do*, not something you observe or analyze. Psalm 95 has two calls to worship. Verse one says, "Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation." The second call is in verse 6, "Come, let us bow down in worship; let us kneel before the LORD our Maker." One response is verbal and exuberant; the other is quiet and submissive.

One experience of corporate worship is etched on my mind. Admittedly it wasn't in the local church, but it does capture something of the essence of worship.

The occasion was a missions conference in London. There had been times of discussion, relaxation, and reconciliation. Then came the worship time. The service was simple: a prayer; Isaiah chapter 40 was read; a 20-minute message was given on God's greatness; then a response took place that was not contrived.

No one moved. We sat in silence in God's presence and appreciated and enjoyed Him for what felt like 30 minutes (it was probably five). Some left their chairs and knelt on the floor. Genuine worship took place that day. There were tears and—most importantly—an overflow of grateful hearts in response to God's glory.

I've often returned to the memory of that missions conference experience. It reminds me that in one sense, worship is something the Holy Spirit initiates. Yes, we did things that day: We listened to an inspiring message on God's greatness, we confessed our sins, we prayed silently, and we knelt. But it was also something that God graced us with. It was as if heaven had come down.

Next time you meet to worship God in church, don't get hung up on things you can't control. Instead, be alert to any facet of the service that helps you focus on the worthiness of Christ, be vigilant to maintain a grateful and unselfish spirit, and be open to respond in a way that reflects God's worthiness.