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"Unto Edifying"

- 1 Co 14:26

It is common for people to refer to a church meeting as a "worship service." Articles appear regularly in evangelical publications explaining how to experience true worship in church. Some regard the Sunday morning worship hour with a fear and trembling similar to that felt by Israel at Mount Sinai. Others understand the worship service to be a time of celebration, joy, and praise. Which approach is warranted by Scripture? What should take place in a church meeting? Just what is a "worship service"?

All the Hebrew and Greek words for "worship" reflect one of two basic ideas. The concept of worship most commonly heard today is seen in the word *proskuneo*. *Pros* means "toward" and *kuneo* means "to kiss." According to the lexicon of BAGD this word designated "the custom of prostrating oneself before a person and kissing his feet, the hem of his garment, the ground, etc.; the Persians did this in the presence of their deified king, and the Greeks before a divinity." Thus the word means to "(fall down and) worship, do obeisance to, prostrate oneself before, do reverence to, welcome respectfully." As can be seen, *proskuneo* is an attitude of humility, reverence, appreciation, fear, adoring awe, and wonder. The emphasis is on inner love and devotion.

The second concept of "worship" is reflected in the word *latreia*, which essentially means "service" or "work." This word originally referred to the labor of slaves or hired servants. In contrast to *proskuneo*, *latreia* is an action word.

Thus, Biblically, to "worship" God is to "work" for Him in an attitude of "adoring awe." Furthermore, Jesus told the Samaritan woman that "a time is coming when you will worship (*proskuneo*) the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem . . . God is spirit, and His worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (Jn 4:21-24). Worship has nothing to do with any particular location or time; it is to be done every place the believer happens to find himself and at all times. So why do we primarily associate worship with church buildings at 11:00 on Sunday mornings?

Surprisingly, the NT never refers to a church meeting as a "worship service." Ro 12:1 does make mention of a "service of worship" (NASB), but this refers to offering our bodies to God as a living sacrifice; it has nothing to do with the church meeting! Certainly there is nothing wrong with worshipping God during the church meeting (1 Co 14:22-25; Eph 5:19b; Col 3:16b), but is this to be the primary objective of the meeting?

Many Christians go to the OT to justify making worship the chief reason for a church assembly. Under the Mosaic Covenant God's people were required by divine law to make several annual pilgrimages to the one and only temple site (the "house" of Yahweh) and there to present offerings and sacrifices. Their worship consisted of sabbaths, feast day rites, and performances done by prescribed Levitical mediators; it was scheduled, localized and ritualized. By contrast, the New Covenant introduced a radically different manner of worship. The "new" way made the Mosaic

Covenant (and its worship) "old," obsolete, and ready to disappear (Heb 8:13)

1 Co 14:26 clearly states the prerequisite for anything that goes on in a church meeting: "When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church." The word "strengthening" is from *oikodome* and means "edifying, edification, building up." Certainly as we worship God corporately we are indeed strengthened. However, the ultimate focus of the meeting is to strengthen the church. It is not the Lord who stands in need of strengthening, but the Lord's people. In this sense, the weekly assembly is for the benefit of the people present. A church gathering is to be designed to edify believers and to this end it is to be man-centered as well as God-centered.

Notice how this concept of strengthening is supported by Heb 10:4-25: "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. 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." Once again, the reason for "meeting together" is to "encourage" one another. We are to think of ways to "spur" one another on toward love and good deeds. In this sense the church meeting is to be designed to equip the believer to go out and worship during the week. As Francis Scott Key wrote, "And since words can never measure, let my life show forth thy praise."

The church meetings revealed in the NT were interactive, informal and small. Simplicity was the rule of the house-church meetings. Somewhere along the line (about the time of Roman Emperor Constantine's Edict of Milan) we moved out of homes and into awe-inspiring, majestic "sanctuaries" (which formally belonged to pagan religions). We exchanged interaction and mutual encouragement for monologue. Intimacy was lost as the masses gathered in huge lecture halls called cathedrals. Informality gave way to liturgy, pomp and ceremony. Church meetings became a spectator sport with the congregation watching a performance by the spiritually elite. In such an atmosphere, fulfilling 1 Co 14:26 became increasingly difficult. About all that could still be fulfilled was Eph 5:19b and Col 3:16b; so "worship" became the primary focus of these performance shows.

At the other extreme, just as church meetings are not fundamentally to be "worship services," neither are they to be therapy groups for the wounded. A church meeting is not supposed to be a counseling session focused on the needs of one person. For instance, to center primarily on healing is to violate the "prime directive" of 1 Co 14:26. "All" must be done for the strengthening of the entire "church." Yes, the whole church can be edified through the miracle of healing, but as with worship, this must not be an overemphasized channel through which all strengthening is routed. This would be like plucking a one string guitar!

In conclusion, all things that occur in a church meeting must be "unto edifying" (1 Co 14:26, KJV). As long as we label our church meetings "worship services," people will tacitly assume that worship is the chief reason for the meeting. If edification does occur, it will be incidental or at best haphazard. It is an axiom that institutions drift away from their original purpose for existence. Could it be that such is the case with our church assemblies?

- S.A.

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