

***Worship is Prepared & Purposeful***  
The Primary Purpose of Worship – III  
February 5, 2017

*<sup>42</sup> They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. <sup>43</sup> Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. <sup>44</sup> All the believers were together and had everything in common. <sup>45</sup> They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. <sup>46</sup> Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

Acts 2:42-47 (NIV)

This morning we are continuing looking at the primary of the primary purposes' of the church – worship. The first Sunday we talked about how we are supposed to worship God with our entire lives. Not just what we do on Sunday's or at church, but all the other days of the week as well; at work, at home, at school, whatever we are doing. As Christians our entire lives are supposed to be an act of worship in gratitude to God for what He has done for us through the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ. The Scripture verse that best captures that is Romans 12:1, *Therefore brothers and sisters, in view of God's great mercy, offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship.* Last Sunday Alex looked at the fact that God also desires worship to be communal at specific times. Throughout human history, ever since God's original calling of a people, first the Israelites, He has called His people to worship Him communally.

This morning we are looking at two aspects of the communal worship that God expects from His people – one, that it is prepared; and two, that is purposeful.

What does God expect from us when we come to worship Him collectively as His body, the church? Simply put God expects us to bring our best! Why would God expect anything less? If there is any doubt as to how serious God takes worship and how much preparation should go into it, all one needs to do is look back at the Old Testament, specifically in the Book of Exodus, right after he announces or pronounces the three annual festivals that Alex talked about last week (Exodus 23:14-23), he gives very specific instructions about how the worship is supposed to be – the tabernacle, the Ark of the Covenant, the tables and the lamp stands, the altars, and the exact clothing that the priests were supposed to wear, all the way down to their undergarments. At the building of the temple in Jerusalem, recorded in 2 Chronicles, God is once again very specific about all the preparations.

While God does not expect perfection, he does expect that we give Him our best. One of the most important ways that we give Him our best is how we prepare ourselves for worship, both individually and communally. That has become increasingly difficult as the speed of our lives and all the possible distractions have exponentially multiplied for us today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. How well do you prepare yourself for coming to worship on Sunday morning?

I don't mean what you wear, or whether or not you fix your hair or apply your make-up, but how well do you prepare your heart and mind? You often see a different perspective from being up front looking out than you do from the pews. What I have observed over the past 15 years is that there are less and less people here at 8:55- 9:00 a.m. and more and more coming in between 9:00 – 9:05 a.m. It is much the same in the 11:10 a.m. service. When I first came there were a number of people who would be in the sanctuary sitting quietly, listening to the prelude preparing their hearts and minds for what was to come. Today there are just a few. That is the primary reason that we have at least taken a break from offering live prelude music and replaced it with music on CD. The people providing the prelude were spending a lot of time preparing for something that few people were taking the time to listen to and taking advantage of the opportunity to prepare for worship.

We often rush in from the parking lot, often we try to talk to as many people as possible and even when we arrive in the sanctuary we'll still trying to catch up with everybody. Fellowship with one another is one of the four primary purposes of the church and it is one small part of the worship service, but it is not the primary purpose of worship. We often come in hectic and anxious and we leave hectic and anxious, and then we wonder why we haven't felt God's presence among us.

*“Be still and know that I am God, I will be exalted among the nations,  
I will be exalted in the earth!”* Psalm 46:10 (ESV)

We have replaced our live prelude with a “Song of Preparation,” which we have purposely put after the welcome and the announcements. It is designed to cause us to pause, slow ourselves down, and to try and prepare our minds and hearts to worship.

But we can prepare even before we enter that outside door on Sunday mornings. It can even begin the night before. The Jewish Sabbath actually begins at sundown on the previous evening. Many spend the evening stilling themselves and preparing for worship the following day. At the very least we should pause before entering the sanctuary doors on Sunday morning and remind ourselves what we are entering to do, to experience the presence of God collectively in a way that we don't experience His presence in other ways.

And for those who have different roles on Sunday morning's, whether it be Alex or I preaching, music leading or being on the praise team, worship leading, children's story, computer set-up or operator, sound tech, and even ushering, preparation is even more important. When it comes to worship, we owe God our best!

God not only desires worship which is well prepared, He also desires worship which is purposeful. Worship is supposed to allow us to encounter God at ever deepening levels. Both our Lord, God the Father, and our Lord, Jesus Christ said that “the greatest commandment is to Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and all your strength” (Mark 12:30). Our worship is supposed to take all those elements into account as we experience the presence of God. Do our worship services do that?

But, we need to remember, and continually remind ourselves, that worship isn't first and foremost about ourselves and our experience, worship is about God. Christian worship is about the triune God of God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit with the primary focus being on Jesus Christ and His redeeming work for us on the cross.

Is there one right or exact way to worship God and all the others are wrong? Clearly not! Often worship is divided between that which is traditional vs. contemporary, or formal vs. informal, or liturgical vs. free worship. They stretch from those which are very structured to those that have no structure at all. God can be honored in both the extremes and all those in between. Or He can be dishonored at both extremes and all in between.

The Roman Catholic Mass is about as structured as it gets. A few years ago they changed just a few words of a couple of the prayers. The response from many, you would have thought they turned the entire world upside down.

But I can encounter God just as much in a very formal liturgical Mass as I can in a very free contemporary service. Maybe it is just the way I am wired, but I personally can encounter God easier in that which has a little more structure.

Free church worship is that which has no denominational mandate which prescribes a specific order of service. Each church is free to order its service as it sees fit. The Mennonite Church falls much more toward the free church worship side.

So, are we liturgical? Well, we're clearly not when it comes to the way that word is interpreted today. But the word "liturgy" actually comes from a Greek word that means "the work of the people." It refers to the actions that the worshipers undertake to do the work of worship, to give glory, honor and praise to God.

That same Greek word which we translate as "liturgy" is also translated in English as "service." It is the reason why we often use the word "service" when we refer to our worship event. We often call it a "worship service." When seen correctly, communal worship is the community gathered to serve God with our worship actions.

In the Gospel of Luke 1, one of our primary Scriptures during our recent Advent series, it says that "Zechariah was servicing (Gk. word for liturgy) as priest before God, while his division was on duty" (Luke 1:8). //That is when the angel of the Lord appeared to him and announced that he would become the father of John the Baptist. //The story concludes, "when his time of service (again, the Gk. word for liturgy) was completed, he returned home" (Luke 1:23).

The biblical understanding of worship is related to performing certain duties as a service to God. The New Testament understanding of worship is that it is not just for certain people (like priests or pastors or worship leaders) but for all the people in attendance. How might your view of worship change if you viewed it first and foremost as a service to God? Oh, I have lots of questions for you this morning?

So we have “worship service” and then we have “order of service.” An order is a plan for a specific succession of events. Order provides direction and helps to facilitate the actions of an event so it fulfills its purpose.

That was the apostle Paul’s concern when he addressed the early church in Corinth:

*“When you come together, each one has a hymn, a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation . . . But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.”* 1 Cor. 14: 26, 40 (NIV)

Many things were and are useful in worship, but order was and is critical for the “edification,” or the “building up of others,” so worship can fulfill its purpose before God.

Sometimes people say “I don’t prepare for the worship service in advance,” or some churches don’t provide a printed bulletin because they don’t want to limit or stifle the work of the Holy Spirit. After all, Jesus did say, “worship the Father in Spirit and in truth.”

But even churches that don’t have a bulletin, or a specific order printed on the bulletin, almost all have an order that they usually follow. Most churches that I have attended that offer contemporary services follow a pretty similar pattern week after week.

Another question we need to ask ourselves is, “when does the Holy Spirit do its work?” Is it just on Sunday during the worship service or is he working throughout the week as the different people prepare as well?”

I am told of the pastor who didn’t want to do any preparation for his sermon during the week because he wanted to allow the Holy Spirit to work completely and fully during his message when he got up to preach. Do you know what the Holy Spirit’s first words were to him when he got up to preach? “You should have prepared!”

The Holy Spirit can work just as much in our preparation for Sunday morning than she does during the worship service. In both cases we need to give room and space for the Holy Spirit to work.

In the same way the Holy Spirit can work in a highly structured worship service as well as one which offers no structure at all. Though, if I was a betting person, I would go with one with a little more structure.

Why? Because God is a God of order. It is one of the most significant aspects of God’s nature. All we need to do is look to the Bible. There are many examples but none more obvious than that found in the creation accounts in the beginning chapters of Genesis.

One cannot miss the well orchestrated plan that God used to create the heavens and the earth. As God moved through the days of creation, one aspect of creation flowed beautifully and purposefully to the next.

A woman by the name of Constance Cherry, a professor of worship at several well known institutions, as well as having served as a minister of worship and pastor, writes in her book, *The Worship Architect*, “when we give some forethought to planning the order of worship, we emulate God’s approach to events. In providing for order, one creates a condition in which every part of the unit is in its right place. An order is simply a plan for a succession of events. Order provides direction for these actions.”

Is there one perfect order? No! Do we always need to keep to the same order? No! Different churches and even different worship services in the same church often have different orders. No order is perfect!

So how can we be sure of the Holy Spirit’s presence and inspiration in both our preparation and during our worship services? Well, the apostle Paul tells us in Galatians 3:14 that it is “by faith that we receive the promise of the Holy Spirit.” It is by faith that we are confident of the Holy Spirit’s presence and inspiration, both as we prepare for worship and as we worship. We are to “walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7); therefore, what God is doing with our best worship intentions is up to God. It is “by faith” that we believe our worship is inspired by the Holy Spirit.

While orders might be different, there are certain elements that should be present in most worship services. I say most because there are always exceptions. We find the important elements in Scripture.

For example, our passage this morning, “They devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching.” The “apostles teaching” would become the New Testament Scriptures. The Scriptures, the Word of God, initially revealed by God verbally and then later written down, has always been an essential element of worship for God’s people.

They devoted themselves to “fellowship,” to “the breaking of bread and to prayer.” Prayer is an essential element of worship. What prayer looks like is as different as all the different orders of service.

Twice in that passage from Acts 2:42-47 it refers to “the breaking of bread.” Many biblical scholar and commentators believe that the first one refers to that which we do in the worship setting – that which we refer to as communion – the partaking in the cup and the broken bread in remembrance of what Jesus did and commanded us to do. And the second “breaking of bread” is that what we do when we share actual meals with one another.

Then there is also the gathering of an offering. “They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.” The sharing of their possessions is further expounded upon in Acts 4.

For those of you who find singing to be such an important part of worship, I’m sorry, you’re just out of luck. No, for that we just need to look further ahead in the New Testament.

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.*  
Colossians 3:16 (NIV)

Worship is that which allows us to use all of our God given senses to experience the presence of God. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.” For many of us music is that which speaks most often to the heart. But we need to be careful, because while it is speaking to our heart it is also speaking to our mind. Just like the Word of God found in the Scriptures doesn’t just speak to our mind, it also speaks to our heart and soul. Proper worship is that which takes all our senses into account.

Mostly, worship is about the relationship between God and His people. In her book, *The Worship Architect*, Constance Cherry says that God designed worship to be dialogical, meaning a constant dialogue between God and His people.

“In its most basic form, corporate worship is a real meeting between God and God’s people. Like any meeting, this takes place through dialogue. God speaks and listens to the gathered community; we speak and listen to God.”

Throughout history God has been the initiator of the conversation. God spoke the world into creation. God speaks and people are supposed to listen. God calls and we are supposed to answer. God summons and we are supposed to respond. God gathers us together and then sends us out.

A proper worship service should begin with God gathering us together and end with God sending us out. And in between it should contain opportunities to hear from God and opportunities for us to respond. Orders of worship might be different to speak to the personalities and giftedness of the people represented by the many different bodies of Christ, but they should contain those elements – God gathering, times of dialogue between God and His people, and a sending.

So for us, we usually open with gathering (a song or songs, a Call to Worship in which we hear from God) and we respond with singing. Then we hear from God with our primary Scripture and the Sermon. Then we respond. Our testimony time is meant to be a time in which we share with one another what we have heard from God (whether in what has come before in the service or in the events of the previous week) and our response. While it comes at different times during the two services, the offering is one of the ways we respond to how God has spoken to us in our lives. The prayer times are meant to be a dialogue between us and God. Then the service closes with a sending. God sends us out to live our lives as His people, to represent the Kingdom of God in that which is not the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of the World, to be salt and light.

Closing Prayer.