

# Corporate Worship

by Richard E. Bieber

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*Our worship in the congregation is not dependent on the atmosphere around us, but on the atmosphere we bring to it.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 27:14, Psalm 51:17, Psalm 100:2, John 4:24, Ephesians 4:3

**Topics:** "Corporate Worship", "Heartfelt Praise"

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## Description

Richard E. Bieber preaches about the Samaritan leper who, after being healed, seeks fellowship with others who love God and worship differently. He emphasizes that the form of worship is not as important as the attitude of our hearts, and that true worship is ignited by a broken spirit and contrite heart. Bieber encourages individuals to bring a worshipful atmosphere to any congregation, regardless of the external environment, and to focus on five essential elements of corporate worship: waiting for the Lord, praise and thanksgiving, reconciled hearts, unity, and continuity.

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## Transcript

The Samaritan leper who has been healed begins his new life worshipping God with all his heart. But he is alone and needs to have fellowship. Somehow, in the providence of God, this man will be directed into the company of others who have seen the glory. They too love God. They too are thankful to Jesus for his unspeakable mercy.

But what if these people express their worship to God in a different way? Should the Samaritan keep looking until he "finds the right church"? Maybe. Maybe not.

The Lord we worship in our inmost hearts leads us into the company of others who love him and, by his Spirit, he teaches us to join them in worship - even if their way of expressing their praise differs from ours.

We are tempted to run ahead of the Holy Spirit and prescribe for others a kind of worship which is more our choice than God's. The form of worship (or lack of form) is not what causes it to burn with God's life. The cloud of God's glory can descend upon any kind of worship. What makes worship live is the attitude of our hearts. Do we bring with us into the assembly an attitude of praise?

Have you ever heard a complaint like this?

One Friday evening I went to a praise meeting where there must have been a thousand people gathered to worship God. It was a foretaste of heaven! Hearts were uplifted, hands were raised, as the singing

carried us out of ourselves into the presence of the Lord. Then there was a hush, as everyone waited for the Spirit to lead. One had the feeling that the whole assembly had laid its cares at the feet of Jesus and had become children in his presence. God inhabited the praises of his people that evening. Toward the end of the meeting a word came forth. It was clear, powerful and sent us on our way charged with fresh life. My spirit was renewed.

But Sunday morning, when I went to my church, the contrast was painful. The service was stiff, weighed down with centuries of tradition. The choir offered a good anthem. Our pastor brought a helpful message. But compared with Friday evening, could you call this worship?

Many of us have not only heard such complaints, we have raised them ourselves. What do we do when our church's worship is earthbound and dull? ("Let us now sing hymn 347...." "We will read responsively Psalm 46 on page 241...." "Don't forget to support the bake sale this Saturday.") Or what do we do when the worship team seems to be turning worship into a performance? Or when two or three personalities seem to dominate the flow of the praise time?

We are told that Jesus went to the synagogue on the Sabbath "as was his custom." Jesus was a practicing Jew. As a practicing Jew he adhered to the Jewish liturgies he had known all his life. Doubtless, there were synagogues where there was fervor, and there were synagogues where the worship was dry as dust. But Jesus was always there, praying the ancient prayers, responding to the cantor with hymns and chants he had known from the days of his childhood. Jesus wasn't merely going through motions. He was worshiping Adonai, his Father, in the midst of the great congregation of Israel! If the cantor was off key, or if the lector stumbled over a word, or if the man next to him fell asleep, it was no less worship. Jesus didn't depend for his "lift" on the atmosphere around him. He brought an atmosphere of worship with him.

Can you picture Jesus coming away from the synagogue and complaining, "That place is dead! Those people don't know how to worship; they're keeping the lid on too tight!" Never. Nor could you imagine Jesus complaining, "That synagogue is out of hand! Those people are getting a little too happy. Somebody needs to bring things under control!" Jesus had plenty to say about hypocrisy and hardness of heart, when he was confronted by the scribes and Pharisees. But we never hear Jesus critiquing their worship. He joined himself to it. He stood in their midst and worshiped as one of them.

Your worship in the congregation - any congregation - is not dependent on the atmosphere around you, but on the atmosphere you bring to it. Come to that assembly with a broken spirit and a contrite heart, and your worship will be ignited. Your own attitude either welcomes the Spirit or grieves him. If you welcome the Spirit, if your heart gives praise to the Lamb that was slain, the atmosphere around you will be enriched.

The common belief is that vital worship is only possible when the atmosphere is right. No one can deny that, when the hearts around us are uplifted in praise, it is easier for us to praise God. But suppose the atmosphere around us is cold. Does this make it impossible for us to worship? Not at all. If our Lord could worship in any synagogue, by his grace, we can worship in any church. And our worship will contribute, rather than detract, as we join our hearts in love to the people around us.

But suppose you see a way in which your congregation's worship can be improved. You feel it would be helpful if the worship team introduced an occasional time of silence after a chorus, to allow people to reflect on the words they just sang or to pray. Approach the people on the worship team and share your

thoughts. If they receive your suggestion and include it in the next praise gathering, fine. If they have reservations about this change, leave it with them and with the Lord.

Shortly after revival broke out at Messiah Church and our Wednesday evening Bible study mushroomed from fifteen people to one hundred fifty, as a "bold departure" we decided to open the meeting with a song. After several months of this one-song opening (followed by prayer), Dave Yon came up to me and said, "Couldn't we have a little more than one song to open this Bible study? We like to sing. We want to worship a little." Dave had put his finger on what we lacked. The one song opening gave way to a time of worship led by a group of musicians and singers who helped us all to leave the cares of the day behind us and fix our hearts in praise to God.

Or suppose you are the worship leader or on the worship team. This puts you in a place of responsibility under God for doing everything you can to help encourage genuine worship. While worship cannot be engineered, it can certainly be aided or hindered by the people who lead it. You are called and gifted to lead these people into the presence of God, to help them "take off their shoes" as they stand on holy ground, to encourage them to believe that Jesus is once again keeping his promise to come into the midst of disciples who have gathered in his name. So you prepare for worship by having everything ready that can be made ready. The team knows and is in agreement about what it is going to do. The worship leaders pray. And then you take your place before the assembly, fully conscious that you stand before these people in the name of the Lord Jesus himself. You are going to help them find their way into his presence as they lift their hearts in praise.

Whether we are leading or participating, it is important to make sure that five essential elements of corporate worship are present every time we gather to give thanks to God. They are: (1) waiting for the Lord; (2) praise and thanksgiving; (3) reconciled hearts; (4) unity; (5) continuity.

From the booklet, "Set Our Hearts On Fire".

Available in folded booklet form sometime this summer.

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