

# A PASSION FOR APPLAUSE

## What to Bring to Worship Series (Part 1)

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:1-13

### I

I want to think with you this month about what it is that we are doing when we come here to this place. What is this thing we call “worship” really all about? Why do we do it? And, given the amount of time we spend here, is there something we could tweak or maybe even change completely about the way we approach it that might make the experience something more than it currently is?”

Let me begin by acknowledging that many of us tend to regard worship as just ONE of the possible activities on the great Menu of our week. Some of us come to worship because we have a taste for it. Others of us are trying to develop such a taste because we’ve been told that, like broccoli, it is good for us. Judging by the empty seats here, many people seem to prefer to avoid this menu item altogether.

But what if that frame is all wrong? What if – properly understood -- worship is not just one option in human life but actually THE primary purpose of human existence? Long ago, some of the greatest leaders and thinkers of the seventeenth century gathered at a conference and debated the question: What is the primary purpose of human life? Their final answer was: “The chief end of [humanity] is to glorify God and enjoy him forever” (The Westminster Shorter Catechism, 1646, Answer #1).

As Rick Warren put it more recently in *The Purpose-Driven Life*, you and I were “planned for God’s pleasure.” We were created to exalt our Creator and exult in him with the whole of our being. Properly practiced, worship is the chief way our small existence gets gathered up into the staggering significance of who God is and what God is doing today and for all time. Worship is the way we begin to learn the occupation of angels -- to start doing now what those in eternity are doing all the time. And, if THAT is true, then we would be crazy not to evaluate from time to time how our worship is going and how it might become more.

So, here’s the question I want to reflect on with you this month: What do you bring to worship? I don’t mean your Bible or your offering or even your loved ones or neighbors – though bring those too! I really mean, however, what expectations and attitudes do you bring with you when you come to worship on the weekend?

### II

It strikes me that many of us bring to worship one of THREE TYPICAL MINDSETS or motivations. Some of us come with an expectation of experiencing Worship as Entertainment. I’m not saying we come expecting to hear Taylor Swift singing or Brad Pitt preaching, but we often come hoping to be enthralled. Think about it. We have

lived for so long in the midst of the most ubiquitous entertainment culture in human history. There is no way we can have watched the number of movies, plays, concerts, acts, and athletic contests we have and not have this shape our expectations. After awhile, your orientation is subconsciously conditioned by your very position in this place: "O.K., I came here with all these other people. I've taken my seat down here. Something's going on up there where the lights are brighter. So, entertain me!"

I notice this attitude in myself when I visit other churches. I'll come out afterwards, get in the car, and Amy will ask me what I thought of the sermon, and I answer like I'm a judge in one of the entertainment contests so popular on TV today! "Well, I'd give him an 8.2 for originality with that sermon title; maybe a 7.4 for degree of difficulty on that text he picked; but I'm, sorry, he only gets a 5 on his delivery. Did you see how poor his eye-contact was?"

I know, you're nowhere near as crass as I am. You never have car conversations like that. You've never scored me above a 3! OK, so maybe you don't think of worship in terms of entertainment. Maybe you slip into thinking of Worship as Enterprise. What do I mean by that? I mean that I bet a few of us have an almost economic attitude towards worship. The internal conversation goes something like this: "You know, I could be a lot of other places this morning. But I've chosen to come here; I've given up some precious time; I've shelled out some hard-earned cash into the plate or the PushPay app. Is it too much to ask to get something back for my investment? I mean at least give me the kind of music I like, or the seat I want, or get me out of here on time. That should be the deal." Can any of you admit to that sort of sentiment?

If I'm still not pegging you, then maybe your mindset isn't so much Worship as Entertainment, or even Worship as Enterprise. Maybe it's Worship as Edification instead. Perhaps you come to a service of worship to be edified -- you know, inspired or instructed. You think to yourself: "Look, my life is hard and it's complicated. I've got some pressures on me you wouldn't believe. I need help. If I can't find inspiration to lift my mood, or get some practical instruction to help me handle my life better, then what's the use of worship?" You tend to ask yourself as you go out on Sundays: "Did this service meet any of my needs?"

I'm not throwing stones here. I know about these attitudes because I find them in myself. I think it is hard in today's cultural context not to become a "Consumer Christian." More and more pastors today are developing their VISION for worship services by asking: "Will the people like or feel comfortable with this?" And more and more attenders are judging the VALUE of the experience they have in worship by asking: "Did I GET anything from that?" Be honest. Isn't this true?

### III

Let me be quick to say: I think there's something natural and healthy about this trend. At least in part. Worship ought to be emotionally vital and practically relevant. There's no virtue in music or liturgy, sermons or prayers that fail to connect with people. I think of the Native American chief who attended a church service and was asked afterward,

"So, what did you think of our service?" The Chief said: "Big wind, lotta dust, no rain!" Worship should never be dry like that. We who design worship services have a responsibility to pray and work towards the goal of helping people find the living water of God's Spirit that addresses their deepest needs.

But there's a danger to regarding worship only in that way -- as primarily a human-centered practice, driven by human tastes and fashions. I think that's what the Apostle Paul was aiming at when he addressed the following pointed words to the Christians at Corinth, concerning their worship practices: **Now in the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good (1 Cor 1)**. Not a great review. What bugged Paul about the Corinthians' approach to worship?

Well, to make sense of his concern requires that you understand something about the way worship was done when the Church of Jesus first began. Worship in those days often took place in peoples' homes. A small band of believers would gather to sing, pray, listen to some teaching, and then almost always to share a meal. That meal had an immensely practical and spiritual significance. It became a time when each believer had an opportunity to transcend him or herself and join in something and Someone greater. People would bring to that meal whatever they could from their own pantry and put it on the table for all to share. For some poor believers -- that potluck supper was the only square meal they might get in a week. For some affluent believers, the discipline of bringing something to that meal to share was the kick-in-the-pants they needed to be reminded that everything they had was really only a loan in trust from God -- to be used in ways that pleased him.

Rich or poor, that meal was a place of communion with God and community with others. It was a time when people reconnected themselves to and honored the Lord who had told them to remember him in the breaking of the bread. It was a moment when every participant was invited to look beyond self-interest and remember that he or she was part of a new kind of family. It was a time to focus upon and glorify the unseen Host who met with them whenever two or three were gathered in his name.

That's how it all began," says Paul. "But now **I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you... When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk (1 Cor 1)**. Paul is saying: "I don't get it. Or maybe you don't. Worship is not mainly about GETTING for you. It's about GIVING for Him and for others. Christian worship is not some kind of spiritual food fight, where everyone scraps for their own musical styles and liturgical tastes to be satisfied. It's about creating a shared experience in which Christ is exalted as Lord of the Table and all are fed.

It seems to me that there is an immensely important lesson to be drawn from this teaching of Paul. A congregation whose life is human-centered, whose worship is consumer-driven, is at great risk of developing a fellowship where some go thirsty and hungry while others' tastes are over-supplied. It is happening all over our country today as churches fragment over the question of how they will worship. People are fighting

over whether the music will be played with guitars or organ, in a classical or a contemporary style. They are criticizing each other for the clothes the other chooses to wear. One generation decries the blindness and shallowness of the other. And, just as Paul predicted, the eventual result is the destruction of the unity of the Body of Christ.

#### IV

But that is not going to be a problem at Christ Church. Even though we have a variety of different worship styles and services here, at the core of everything we do in them, will be a performance mindset of a very counter-cultural kind. Let me illustrate.

Some years ago, the brilliant conductor, Arturo Toscanini, was leading one of the world's great orchestras through the playing of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. At the conclusion of the magnificent performance, the audience shot to its feet with an explosion of applause and cheering. Arturo Toscanini whirled around to face the crowd. But rather than bowing humbly as everyone expected, he began waving his arms violently, motioning everyone to stop. Turning to his orchestra, Toscanini shouted hoarsely: "You are nothing!" He pointed to himself and shouted: "I am nothing!" Then he cried out: "Beethoven is everything, everything, everything!"

This is something like what the Apostle Paul was trying to say when he called the Church at Corinth back to the very beginnings of Christian worship in that upper room on the night in which Jesus was betrayed. Christian worship must remain utterly focused on remembering and honoring Christ. For He is everything, everything, everything! Let's bring to worship a mindset that asks not "What's-In-It-For-Me?", but "What's-In-It-For-Him?" How can I please and honor him here?

The Danish theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, once said that one of the greatest dangers confronting the church is our tendency to grow confused about our different roles in worship. We think of people in the seats as an audience; the people up front as performers; and God as the prompter. The truth, however, is that those of us up front are actually the prompters; you who are in the seats are the most significant performers; and the awesome Creator of the Universe -- HE is the Audience of One.

Everything we do when we come together here -- our praying, preaching, and singing, our processing up and down, our giving money, our celebration of the sacraments -- all of the ways we play the instrument of our lives HERE and OUT THERE is fundamentally for one purpose alone: for the delight of God. At the end of each service -- and every preacher tries to remember this when she or he is tempted to water down the gospel, or speak to one or another group's tastes -- at the end of each service The only ovation that counts is THE APPLAUSE OF HEAVEN.

Do you understand this? Then bring to worship a passion that demonstrates you know WHO is watching and listening. When songs or being sung to God, do your best to join in, even if your voice is lousy or you don't know the music. When some prompter up here prays, let their words become your words to Him. When the offering time comes, exalt God with your gifts. When you are so filled with enjoyment that you just have to

clap – and you don't have to so much -- make sure it's not toward those of us who are just up here playing His symphony. When an element in the service is not to your particular taste, take delight that it is feeding that teenager down the pew or that old lady sitting behind you – because Jesus wants no one to depart hungry. When you get up to go, greet the people around you as if they were God's precious children, because they are. And when you are out there between weekends, live to please Him. Remember that your witness is simply your worship walking.

Do this and I believe that somewhere in eternity those two great hands that formed the cosmos... those two beautiful hands that were pierced upon a cross for your sake and mine... those two strong hands that restored me when I was a prodigal and even now stretch out in love towards you... will come together with a CLAP of joy.

Please pray with me...

Gracious God, you know how easily we fall into the popular trap of thinking that we are the center of the circle of life... how readily we come to judge the worth of people and events by whether or not they please us. We shudder at the thought of arriving at the end of our life, standing before you one day, and only then discovering that all along it was our behavior, our passions and performance whose quality was being assessed. We give you thanks that through the grace you've extended in Jesus Christ, you do not require perfection of us so much as the right orientation and genuine effort – in spirit and in truth. We thereby renew this day our commitment to seek to try to live in such a manner and worship in such a way, that heaven echoes with the sound of your applause. For this we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.