

THE CHURCH IS GOD'S FAMILY HOME

Don't you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you? – 1 Corinthians 3:16

In the Garden of Eden, God came to walk with his people in the cool of the evening (Genesis 3:8-9). In the desert of Exodus, God came to accompany his people in their wanderings (Exodus 29:45-46). In the Promised Land, God moved in with his people in glorious fire and smoke (2 Chronicles 7:1). When the people of Israel turned away from God, he pleaded with them to change their ways so he could again live with them (Jeremiah 7:3). Since the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, God lives among and within his people (2 Corinthians 6:16). And at the end of the age, God will live with his redeemed and restored people forever (Revelation 21:3). From Genesis to Revelation, from the beginning of creation to the end of time, **God's desire is to live with his people** – his family.

We know that God is everywhere, all the time. Ephesians 1:23 says Jesus *fills all things everywhere with himself*. Yet somehow God wants to be with us, his children, in a special way.

Sometimes the presence of God is more than a theological concept. Sometimes it's almost tangible. I bet you've said it yourself: "I could feel the

touch of God.” Or, “God really visited us today.”

I don't know about you, but I don't want to settle for just a touch from God, or even a visit. I never want to treat God as some kind of cosmic mailman who stops by just long enough to deliver some gifts. Those experiences of God are better than nothing, but as far as I'm concerned, when God shows up, I don't want him to leave. I want him to move in to stay. I want my church to be the place where God decides to come and live, at least part of the time.[i]

So how do we get God to move in with us? What kind of place attracts him? What kind of people?

God Rests on Our Worship

Psalm 22:3 says of God, *You are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel*. When God's people worship him, their praises form a spiritual throne. They provide a place for God to sit and rest.

In your church's times of worship, are you giving God a strong, thick, comfortable throne of praise? Or is your praise throne kind of thin and flimsy, maybe with holes in the cushion where some of your folks aren't joining in? Maybe they're afraid they don't sing well, or they're distracted or grumpy about something. Maybe they just don't understand the concept of praise.

Whatever the reason, if we don't give God a comfortable place to sit down, can we really blame him if he doesn't stick around?

Good, strong, God-honoring praise doesn't come automatically to most people. As church leaders, we need to train our people to give God the kind of worship that will make God say, “Now there's a throne fit for a king. I think I'll go rest there for a while. I might even move in with these folks!”

Did you ever have a new neighbor move in near you? Some neighbors move in very quietly and you may not even know they moved in. Others throw a big party and everyone knows they are there.

When God moved into the temple Solomon had built, he was more like the second kind of neighbor. Here's how the Bible describes it:

So Solomon finished all his work on the Temple of the LORD . . . the priests carried the Ark of the LORD's covenant into the inner sanctuary of the Temple . . . Then the priests left the Holy Place. All the priests who were present had purified themselves, whether or not they were on duty that day . . . The trumpeters and singers performed together in unison to praise and give thanks to the LORD. Accompanied by trumpets, cymbals, and other instruments, they raised their voices and praised the LORD with these words:

“He is so good! His faithful love endures forever!” At that moment a cloud filled the Temple of the LORD. The priests could not continue their service because of the cloud, for the glorious presence of the LORD filled the Temple of God.

Then Solomon prayed, “O LORD, you have said that you would live in a thick cloud of darkness. Now I have built a glorious Temple for you, a place where you can live forever! . . . And now, arise, O LORD God, and enter your resting place . . . ”

When Solomon finished praying, fire flashed down from heaven and burned up the burnt offerings and sacrifices, and the glorious presence of the LORD filled the Temple. The priests could not enter the Temple of the LORD because the glorious presence of the LORD filled it. When all the people of Israel saw the fire coming down and the glorious presence of the LORD filling the Temple, they fell face down on the ground and worshiped and praised the LORD, saying,

“He is good! His faithful love endures forever!” – 2 Chronicles 5:1,7,11,13,14; 6:1,2,41; 7:1-3

This was not your ordinary church service. God's presence was so overwhelming that the priests could not even enter the Temple. There was something there that all the people could see, and when they saw it they fell face down on the ground.

This kind of manifestation of the presence of God was not limited to Bible times. In the mid-1800s in America, people riding in their buggies to hear evangelist Charles Finney fell under the power of the Holy Spirit as their

buggies crossed into the county in which he was preaching. In the Welsh revival of 1904-1905, farmers in their fields fell to the ground under great conviction of sin without a preacher anywhere near.

In the late 1990s I often attended evening services at a church where God's presence was powerfully felt. I heard one of the pastors there tell of his brother-in-law, a skeptical unbeliever. One day this pastor picked up his brother-in-law at the airport. On the way home he stopped by the church for something. The brother-in-law decided to go in with him. As they went in the door, the brother-in-law suddenly fell to the ground, crying, "What is this?" The power of God had overcome him. The skeptic became a believer.

Obviously, this kind of thing doesn't happen very often, and we shouldn't expect it to. Most of the time, God moves in more quietly. But when God wants to make a commotion, who are we to try to stop him?

So what kind of worship invites God to sit down and stay a while?

God wants worship that is free

In America, and perhaps other places as well, many churches seem to give the impression they think maybe God has a headache, or maybe he's asleep, and they better be as quiet as they can so as not to bother him. Obviously there is a place for quiet reverence, and there is a place for silent waiting on the Lord. But when the Bible talks about praising God, it's usually describing something quite a bit noisier. Listen to Psalm 150, for instance.

Praise the LORD! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heaven! Praise him for his mighty works; praise his unequalled greatness! Praise him with a blast of the ram's horn; praise him with the lyre and harp! Praise him with the tambourine and dancing; praise him with strings and flutes! Praise him with a clash of cymbals; praise him with loud clanging cymbals. Let everything that breathes sing praises to the LORD! Praise the LORD!

Trumpet blasts, loud clanging cymbals, strings and flutes and tambourines

and dancing – sounds like a party going on!

Please understand that **this is not specifying a particular style or format of worship**. A traditional liturgy of written prayers and responses can be expressed with tremendous joy and enthusiasm. And dancing and weeping in worship can become a dry repetition of expected responses. The issue is not style, but passion.

Every time of praise doesn't have to be loud and exuberant, of course. Your praise and worship must be led by the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit will lead differently at different times. But you need to **train your church to feel free to cut loose now and then**. Teach them to give God the same kind of praise they give their favorite football team when they score a goal. Otherwise God may say to himself, "If I go visit them, I can't stay long. There's no place for me to sit down!"

God wants worship that is true

Jesus said,

The time is coming—indeed it's here now—when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for those who will worship him that way. For God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth. – John 4:23-24

The kind of worship God is seeking combines true teaching with the freedom and power of the Holy Spirit. That's a delicate balance that requires you as a leader to be constantly seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

People may say, "But what if I don't feel like praising God? How can that be true worship? Won't I be a hypocrite if I sing words I'm not feeling?"

Obedying God when you don't feel like it isn't hypocrisy, it's faith. This is particularly true of praise.

Listen to Habbakuk, the Old Testament prophet:

Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vines;

*even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren;
even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD!*

I will be joyful in the God of my salvation. – Habakkuk 3:17-18

When your body just wants to sit, and your mind just wants to sulk, your Christian spirit still wants to praise God. Choosing to follow your spirit in praise is a God-pleasing act of faith. It strengthens your whole person and puts it in proper order.

Just about every passage in the Bible that describes worship mentions music. Whether your music ministry is one person valiantly trying to get your people to sing, a choir accompanied by piano or accordion or guitar, or a whole band with the latest sound equipment, they must set the example in worship. **Your worship leaders should be your lead worshipers.** Musicians must know at least as much about worshipping God as they do about singing or playing. Musicians who are more concerned with showcasing their skills than with bringing people into God's presence are like sharp rocks in the middle of your church's cushion of praise. God isn't going to want to sit there very long!

Of course, as human beings, our motives are never 100% pure. Don't let a fear that you might have hidden ulterior motives stop you from serving God. And there's nothing wrong with a singer or musician feeling good about how they sound – or a preacher, for that matter. A solo can be as much an offering as a prayer. Don't stifle God's gifts. Let the praise flow!

God wants worship that is shared

In his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul spends a lot of time talking about different aspects of public worship, starting in chapter 11 and going all the way through chapter 14. Near the end of that segment he summarizes what a worship service should look like.

Well, my brothers and sisters, let's summarize. When you meet together, one will sing, another will teach, another will tell some special revelation God has given, one will speak in tongues, and another will interpret what is said. But everything that is done must strengthen all of you. – 1 Corinthians 14:26

Many Christians, and many Christian leaders, seem to have the impression that a worship service is a performance put on by the people up front, and the rest of the church is the audience. The fact is, **there is only one person in the audience of a worship service, and that is God.** All the people (the Greek word means “each” or “every”) should be actively involved in expressing worship, in whatever way the Holy Spirit leads them. As pastor or leader, one part of your job is to train your people to recognize the Spirit’s leading and respond properly.

It doesn’t come automatically. Some people are hesitant to open their mouths in public, while others are only too happy to claim the center of attention for as long as anyone will let them. As Paul advised Timothy, *Patently correct, rebuke, and encourage your people with good teaching* (2 Timothy 4:2).

Be sure the structure of your church service provides an opportunity for people to participate in these ways. And be sensitive to the flow of the Spirit so that as these things begin to happen, you can be sure that *everything is done properly and in order* (1 Corinthians 14:40).

God Wants Us to Be Good Hosts and Hostesses

If we want more than just a brief touch from God we have to make ourselves ready. We need to be good hosts and hostesses to the presence of God.

Each week as you plan for church next Sunday, prepare yourself. **You are going to be leading a group of people who are inviting the God of the universe to come in and rest awhile.** As pastor or church leader, your job is to equip your people to do that. What does that look like?

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I have had the honor of sharing meals in Turkish homes many times, and every time I am impressed with what gracious hosts and hostesses the Turkish people are. They always put my needs and desires ahead of their own. They are careful not to do anything that would make me feel uncomfortable or offended.

This kind of gracious hosting comes from an attitude of hospitality combined with a careful attention to the needs and desires of the guest. We need to cultivate this same attitude and attention in our churches for our Sunday morning visits from God.

But it's more than that. **We don't want God just to visit us now and then. We want God to dwell with us**, to live with us. It's like being a real estate agent for the divine: "Lord, you're going to love this place. The people are so nice and friendly, just your kind of people. You'll feel right at home."

How do we teach our members to be the kind of people God will want to live with?

Preach and teach divine hospitality

Talk to your folks about the honor and privilege of welcoming God among you. When the praise and worship seems especially welcoming to God, point it out. Let the people know when they are doing well. Gently correct them when they aren't. It may seem obvious to you, but they are just learning.

Celebrate signs of God's presence

Discerning the presence of God is another learned sensitivity.

Solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil (Hebrews 5:14 ESV). It's by training and practice that we learn to discern in the spirit.

A few years ago I was on a retreat with about fifty Christian men. One evening the music team started off just having fun with the songs, and people were laughing and talking. Gradually, the music took on a more worshipful feel. Suddenly, the presence of God was there in as powerful a way as I have

ever known. I almost expected people to start falling down under the weight of God's glory.

In the midst of the awesome silence that followed one song, I became aware of two voices. Two men were sitting in the back of the room, still talking and joking and laughing as they had been at the beginning. These were both good Christians, respected in the church. But they seemed to be completely oblivious to the change in the spiritual atmosphere. **They had no idea that God had come into the room in an unusual way.**

I wish someone had stood up and pointed out what was happening. I don't think these brothers were deliberately being crass. I think they had never experienced God's presence in this way, and they didn't know what it was. Probably many others in the group were equally ignorant. They didn't know God was answering the invitation of their praise and worship. They didn't know what to look for, and they didn't know how to act when it happened.

I was not leading this particular retreat, so I didn't feel it was my place to intervene. Perhaps I should have been bolder, pointing out what was happening and celebrating it, so people would learn how to recognize God's presence and how to encourage it. But no one said anything, the two kept on talking and laughing, and the presence of God soon lifted – not just from them, but from the whole group.

Let God do what God wants to do

1 Thessalonians 5:19 says, *Do not quench the Spirit*. Yes, the Bible says to do all things decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40), but God's idea of that may not always be the same as ours. In the same chapter we find directions for multiple prophecies, speaking in tongues, and even how to interrupt the speaker! (See verses 26-30). God does strange things sometimes – just read Daniel or Revelation. If God seems to be doing something, and you can find a similar thing described in the Bible, go with it, even if it threatens to mess up your standard order of worship. If God gets the idea that he won't be allowed to speak or act, why should he show up?

Teach your people not to offend God

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption (Ephesians 4.30 ESV). Another translation puts it this way: Do not bring sorrow to God's Holy Spirit by the way you live (NLT).

What kind of living brings sorrow to God's Holy Spirit? Unholy living, of course.

When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God. – Galatians 5:19-21

Let there be no sexual immorality, impurity, or greed among you. Such sins have no place among God's people. Obscene stories, foolish talk, and coarse jokes . . . Don't be fooled by those who try to excuse these sins. – Ephesians 5:3, 4, 6

In 2 Corinthians 12:20 Paul describes what he does not want to find when he visits a church: *I am afraid that I will find quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, arrogance, and disorderly behavior.*

Be honest, now: do these things ever happen in your church? If Paul is offended by a church where these things occur, how much more will they offend God?

God will love us even when we do these things, and he will visit us to try to help us change. But God won't make his home and resting place in a church where people persist in doing things that make him uncomfortable. It's like trying to get somebody to buy a house that has a bad smell. When we do these things we just smell bad to God.

Worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness (1 Chronicles 16:29; Psalm 29:2; Psalm 96:9 ESV). Living holy lives is such an important part of our worship

that the Bible repeats it three times. We need to teach our people that God won't even listen to our worship if we are not at least trying to live right.

Points to Remember

- God is always everywhere, but sometimes there's a special presence.
- God rests on worship that is free, true, and shared.
- Learn to discern God's presence, and celebrate it.
- If God does something unusual but something similar can be found in the Bible, go with it.
- If something offends God, get rid of it.

[i] Tommy Tenney has written about this in excellent detail in his book, The God Chasers. I am indebted to him for many of the ideas in this section.