

The Practice of Worship in Community

Live with Jesus in Community

“To worship is to experience Reality, to touch Life. It is to experience the resurrected Christ in the midst of the gathered community.” – Richard Foster.

INTRODUCTION

Worship in Community

Jesus and Worship

Early in John’s gospel, Jesus travels to Jerusalem, crafts a long whip, and lashes the moneychangers and vendors out of the temple court. His astonished disciples marvel over his “zeal for God’s house,” his burning passion flaming out over how men and women worship God together in the place he calls “my Father’s house.” They recognized that he had not come to abolish worship in community, but to purify it.

Jesus continues his ministry by frequently teaching, healing, and casting out demons in communal centers of worship. He explains, “I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together,” (John 18:20).

Jesus also habitually worships with others on the Sabbath: “And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And *as was his custom*, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read,” (Luke 4:16).

Ultimately, Jesus declares his intention to build a worshipping church, the community his Father desires: “I will build my church,” he says (Matthew 16:18). And he explains, “True worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him,” he says to the Samaritan woman (John 4:23).

Worship and the New Testament Church

The New Testament paints a full picture of the early church embodying the commitment of worship in community that Jesus established. Luke describes it this way: “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. . . praising God,” (Acts 2:42, 47).

The Christians followed the commitment of gathering weekly to embody Luke’s description of communal worship (1 Corinthians 11:18; 14:23; 16:2). The first Christians distinguished themselves from the practicing Jews in Judaism by moving their worship from Saturday to

Sunday, the day of Jesus' resurrection. Sunday, the first day of the week, became known as "the Lord's Day" (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2; Revelation 1:10).

Along these lines, Paul encourages his church in Ephesus to be a joyful, music-filled community: "Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ," Ephesians 5:19-20.

The writers of the New Testament see our life in the church as our being an integral part of Christ's body, and they see this new life beginning at baptism: "in the Spirit we were all baptized into one body," writes Paul (1 Cor 12:13).

Simon Chan describes it this way: "To be a Christian is to be "in Christ," that is, to be baptized into the one body, the church. Our Christian life cannot properly exist apart from that body," Simon Chan.

Paul goes on to speak concretely about our place in the church, Christ's body. How, then, he writes, can a foot be a foot without a body? (1 Corinthians 12:12-26) How can a hand do anything apart from the arm and the circulatory system and the nervous system? The New Testament picture of Jesus' church is his living, spiritual body where individual Christians only thrive connected to one another in him and joyfully worshipping our Father together.

Following Jesus through Worship in Community

To follow Jesus, then, we must follow him in community with his church, gathering regularly for worship. The Bible admonishes us to "not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing," (Hebrews 10:24).

When we commit to "go to church" frequently—to gather with fellow believers to hear God's word, sing praises to God, pray, receive communion, witness baptisms, profess our belief, give to the church and to mission, and share life side-by-side and face-to-face with our brothers and sisters in the Lord—we experience a number of essential things.

First, we live out the two commands to love God with all our heart and love our neighbor as ourselves," (Matthew 22:37-39).

Second, we engage in being shaped by the Holy Spirit through the liturgy and structure of our gatherings. Each week at Greenwood our worship service moves us through the core

movements of the gospel: The Glory of God, The Gravity of Sin and The Grandeur of Grace.¹ These movements, empowered by the Holy Spirit, form us together into a gospel-shaped people.

Third, when we gather for worship in community, we experience Jesus in a way we cannot when we are alone. As Jesus says, “Where two or three gather in my name, there I am with them,” (Matthew 18:20). This allows us to receive grace from his Holy Spirit—encouragement, truth, joy, comfort, correction, or exhortation, and participation in his body—that we will never find by ourselves.

THE PRACTICE

Center your life more firmly around Jesus, growing in your love for him and lovingly uniting your life with the lives of other followers of Jesus in his body, by committing to regular worship in community at your church.

Please consider:

Making Sunday Worship a Priority

- How do you currently experience life with Jesus as you worship with his community?
- Which is your favorite part of Sunday morning worship? Is there any part where you experience resistance?
- If you have commitments, hobbies, or health issues that prevent you from engaging more frequently in Sunday morning worship, what is this like for you?
- As you read this practice, what do you notice you desire from worship in community?

Preparing your Heart for Sunday Worship

- Before sleep on Saturday evening, consider for a few moments the Glory of God, the Gravity of Sin, the Grandeur of Grace. These verses might assist you:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory,” Isaiah 6:3

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” Romans 3:23

¹ The weekly flow of Sunday morning worship at Greenwood, taken from *The Worship Pastor* by Zac Hicks.

“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us,” Ephesians 1:7-8.

- If you will attend a communion Sunday, consider searching your heart before you go to see if there is something you long to experience forgiveness for or an area of your life you feel prompted to surrender to him. These verses may assist you:

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting,” Psalm 139:23-24.

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness,” 1 John 1:9.

Connecting with Others on Sunday Morning

- Is there a friend you hope to see on Sunday morning? Consider sending them a text to let them know you look forward to speaking with them.
- If you do not know anyone at Greenwood, what is one step you could take to open yourself to the possibility of creating a new relationship this Sunday?
- If you don't normally take time to connect with others after Sunday service, what prevents you from engaging this way? What is one step you could take toward greater relational connection?
- Consider engaging in Sunday worship by serving: You could be a greeter, a prayer minister, a musician, or serve in kids' ministry. If you step out in this way, you will form more relationships and experience the joy of helping the body of Jesus worship him.

HELPFUL SCRIPTURES:

“I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” Matthew 16:18

“Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” Ephesians 5:25

“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Hebrews 10:24

“Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Ephesians 5:19-20

“Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” 1 Corinthians 12:27

“Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them.” Matthew 18:20

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” Colossians 3:16

“Christ is the head of the church, his body.” Ephesians 5:23

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.” 1 Peter 2:9-10

INTERESTING QUOTES:

“He cannot have God for his Father who will not have the Church for his mother.” – Augustine

“The virtues of individual Christians are meant to create a better church, not just better individuals. In sum, Christian spirituality can be nothing other than living the Christian life in union with the Trinity in the church.” – Simon Chan

“Personalities united can contain more of God and sustain the force of his greater presence much better than scattered individuals. The fire of God kindles higher as the brands are heaped together and each is warmed by the other’s flame. The members of the body must be in contact if they are to sustain and be sustained by each other.” – Dallas Willard

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“I do want to speak up on behalf of one weekly habit that is utterly essential to any healthy, life-giving, joy-producing Christian walk: corporate worship. And it is all too often neglected, or

taken very lightly, in our day of disembodiment and in our proclivity for being noncommittal. In fact, I do not think it is too strong to call corporate worship the single most important habit of the Christian life.” – David Mathis

“The church’s worship is at the heart of discipleship. Yes, Christian formation is a life-encompassing, Monday through Saturday, week in and week out project; but it radiates from, and is nourished by, the worship life of the congregation gathered around Word and Table. There is no sanctification without the church, not because some building holds a superstitious magic, but rather because the church is the very body of Christ, animated by the Spirit of God and composed of Spirited practices. . . He meets us where we are, as creatures of habit who are shaped by practices, and invites us into a community of practice that is the very *body* of his Son. Liturgy is the way we learn to ‘put on’ Christ.” – James K.A. Smith

“In worship God gathers his people to himself as center: ‘The Lord reign’ (Ps 93:1). Worship is meeting at the center so that our lives are centered in God and not lived eccentrically. We worship so that we live in response to and from the center, the living God . . . Without worship we live manipulated and manipulating lives . . . People who do not worship are swept into a vast restlessness, epidemic in the world, with no steady direction and no sustaining purpose . . . People who do not worship live in a vast shopping mall where they go from shop to shop, expending enormous sums of energy and making endless trips to meet first this need and then that appetite, this whim and that fancy.” – Eugene Peterson

“When we participate in the worship and events of Christmas, Easter, or an ordinary Sunday worship, it is more than commemorative. We are involved in the very reality of these events. “The life of the Church, in these services, makes actual for us the mystery of the Incarnation.” – Simon Chan, and Martin Thornton

SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS

Before you try this practice:

1. Talk about your responses to or thoughts about the material in this practice.
2. What has been your practice of worship in community?
3. Do you belong to a church? If not, what makes committing to a church difficult for you?
4. If you do belong to a church, what blessings can you perceive have come to you through attending worship?
5. If you worship online or virtually, talk about this experience. How do you find it the same as or different from worshipping in person?
6. What challenges do you experience as you attempt to participate in worship at your church?

7. Do you think the Lord might be inviting you to alter your schedule or priorities to make attending worship in community a more regular practice for you or your family?
8. Pray for one another about these things.

After you try this practice:

1. What changes, if any, have you tried to implement toward the goal of attending worship more regularly?
2. What did you find challenging about this?
3. What was your experience of intentionally preparing your heart for worship in community?
4. What experiences of blessing or encouragement did you discover?
5. How do you think the Lord may be inviting you to implement this practice going forward?