

The Goals of Corporate Worship

Bob Kauflin¹

Exalting God

As you prepare to participate in a Sunday service, what are your expectations? More importantly, do you ask, “What are God’s expectations for this meeting?” I think many people hope to be refreshed or inspired at their weekly worship. Others want to experience an intimacy with God that makes them more aware of his presence and care. Some simply want to be “pumped up” by the music and the band. But as we gather, God has specific goals for our time of worship. What are they?

It may seem obvious, but the first goal of corporate worship is to **exalt God**. It’s tragic that in our attempts to be effective, relevant, and efficient we can miss the most obvious purpose of our time together. David writes in Psalm 34:3, “Magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together!” (ESV) He sounds an even more emphatic note in Psalm 145:1–3: “I will exalt you, my God the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever. Every day I will praise you and extol your name for ever and ever. Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom.”

Why do we need to exalt or magnify God when he is so big already? Although God’s span is immeasurable, he often doesn’t appear very big to us. We rush into meetings hassled by life, burdened by bills to be paid, cars to be fixed, tests to be passed, relationships to be worked through, and projects to be started (or completed). What size does God appear to be when daily worries fill our minds? Very small.

Gathering to worship God is similar to using a powerful telescope to gaze at the stars. To the naked eye the constellations appear like small pinpoints of light barely visible against the backdrop of night. We can step out our back door and never notice them. However, when we look at them through the right instrument, we realize they are raging spheres of fire, incomprehensibly large, and brighter than human eyes can bear.

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¹ Bob Kauflin is director of worship development for Sovereign Grace Ministries. Bob also writes on worship at his blog, *Worship Matters* (www.WorshipMatters.com).

The “right instrument” with which to see God in congregational worship is the Word of God, apprehended by faith, and expressed in song. God’s Word tells us who God is, despite how he appears to be through the clouded lens of our circumstances, successes, and problems. He is the omnipotent Creator who spoke the universe into existence with a word (2Pe 3:5). He is the transcendent, majestic God who views the nations as a drop in the bucket (Isa 40:15). He is the Holy One, completely set apart in his moral purity and limitless perfections (Isa 6:1–8). He is the wise, sovereign Ruler, whose infinite wisdom oversees and guides every detail of our existence (Ps 139:1–18). He is the merciful Father who put forth his own Son on the cross as the substitutionary atoning sacrifice for our wickedness and rebellion. This last emphasis should pervade our congregational worship, because it is only through Jesus’ finished work on the cross that we are able to draw near to God at all (Heb 10:19–22). Also, in the cross we see a perfect bringing together of God’s spotless holiness, inflexible justice, incomprehensible wisdom, omnipotent power, and unfathomable love. What a God we worship!

Exalting God (Part 2)

The first goal of congregational worship is exalting God. This certainly *begins* with the declaration of objective, biblical truth about God—as we discussed last week—but it ought to *end* by affecting what we feel toward God. Scripture repeatedly teaches and models the fact that truth about God invites a response. In fact, it commands a response: “Delight yourself in the Lord” (Ps 37:4). Jesus proclaimed that the example of the woman who poured perfume on his feet would be told wherever the gospel was preached (Mk 14:6–9). To find pleasure in God, and to express it, is an integral part of exalting him.

One of my favorite authors, John Piper, says it this way in the tenth anniversary edition of his book *Desiring God*:

His goodness shines with brightest rays when we delight in all his ways.
His glory overflows its rim when we are satisfied in him.
His radiance will fill the earth when people revel in his worth.
The beauty of God’s holy fire burns brightest in the heart’s desire.

We are not simply to recite facts about God, like a student reviewing the multiplication tables. We are to *delight* in him! God is exalted when all our energies are directed to one end—being satisfied in him. Again, quoting John Piper, “The engagement of the heart in worship is the coming alive of the feelings and emotions and affections of the heart. Where feelings for God are dead, worship is dead.”²

² John Piper, *Desiring God*, p 68

Does this mean that there is always a perfect 1:1 correspondence between true worship (internal) and certain emotions or behaviors (external)? Does the external always *prove* the internal? Does the internal *always* produce the external?

During corporate worship, it may be difficult to tell from external evidence whether someone is delighting in God at any given moment. But a person who remains *internally* unmoved while singing biblically grounded, God-honoring lyrics brings no glory to God, and an argument can be made that he is not truly worshiping God at all. God is honored by the *joy* we take in reviewing his kind, gracious, and merciful acts toward us, not merely by the *process* of that review. If my professions of love for my wife never carried any hint of emotion, wouldn't she begin to doubt my sincerity? (I hope so!)

The sincerity of our exaltation is measured, first, by our commitment to truth: We are seeking to exalt the God who is presented in Scripture, not our subjective impressions of him. Second, it is measured by the strength of our affections. God expects us to express emotion in keeping with the truths he is revealing to us about himself. Everything from quiet reflection to unbridled exuberance can have a place. Other emotions might include wonder, amazement, deep sorrow, ecstatic joy, or sober circumspection. All are a natural result of being affected by who God is and what he has done, as we seek to worship him in spirit and truth.

Encountering God

We've seen that exalting God is our first priority in the corporate worship of God. Our worship must be God-focused (God is clearly seen), God-centered (God is clearly the priority), and God-honoring (God is clearly exalted). We should come away from corporate praise with a renewed understanding of who God is and what he has done.

A second goal of corporate worship is to *encounter* God. But how do we “encounter” a God who is ever present everywhere (Ps 139:7–10)?

Although God is omnipresent—equally present in all places at all times (ponder that for a while!)—he also reveals his presence to us in unique ways, especially as we gather in his name. One striking example occurs in 2 Chronicles 5:13–14, when God's people began to praise him at the dedication of the temple.

“When the song was raised...in praise to the Lord...the house, the house of the Lord, was filled with a cloud, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of God” (ESV).

God desires to come near to us as we come near to him through our praises (Jas 4:8). Hebrews 4:16 urges us to approach the throne of grace with confidence “so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” This certainly includes (although it isn’t limited to) times of corporate worship.

As we worship God, he meets with us and directly ministers to us, strengthening our faith, making us more aware of his presence, and refreshing our spirits. This is what it means to encounter God.

During these times, he may also convict us of a particular area of sin in our lives, or our sinful state in general. This seems to be the effect of the prophetic utterances in the public meeting Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 14:23–25. Regardless of your view of the gift of prophecy, this passage plainly shows that God seeks to encounter us as we gather to worship him.

In corporate worship, God encounters his people today the same way he has for centuries: through his Word and his Spirit. In one instance you may be particularly moved by a passage of Scripture that is being read. At another you may suddenly be gripped by the mercy of God as you share in the bread and cup at communion. Or, you may find yourself overflowing with joy at the glorious thought that “my sin, not in part, but the whole, has been nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more!”

I want to be clear: the primary goal of corporate worship must not be any particular emotional experience. (That is the very definition of man-centered rather than God-centered worship!) But let us not so overreact to perceived emotional excesses, whether real or imagined, that we fail to respond appropriately to God’s Spirit working in our hearts. He desires and intends for us to encounter him as we worship him. As you enter a corporate meeting, are you actively desiring to encounter God? I trust your answer is a resounding *yes*.

Responding to God

Corporate worship is more than a one-sided conversation. While we sing and pray, God wants to reveal some aspect of his character to us. As he does so, it is crucial that we respond; responding to God is the third goal of corporate worship.

There are many ways we might respond to God’s Word to us during a meeting. A reading of Isaiah 6 might bring a corporate call to repentance. Singing a song describing how Jesus’ atoning sacrifice on the cross has secured forgiveness for *all* our sins should produce profound and unqualified gratitude. A testimony of someone’s conversion might give rise to songs of exaltation and celebration. A common response in corporate worship

is prayer led by the pastor, or prayer for one another. All these bring glory to God because in them we respond to how God is revealing himself to us.

But I've been in meetings—you probably have, too—in which little or no opportunity is provided for a congregation to respond to what God is evidently saying during a time of corporate worship. We move on to the next event in the program as though we had exhausted all God had for us. I don't believe this is biblical or helpful. We need to remember that God's Holy Spirit is actually in our midst, seeking to encourage, convict, and edify the members of the church. The New Testament seems to indicate that the meetings of the early church, while maintaining a sense of order, provided opportunity for people to respond to what the Spirit was saying, either through prophecy or the preached Word (1Co 14:24–33; 1Th 5:19–21; Ac 20:7). The singing itself was to be a time of “teaching and admonishing” (Col 3:16 ESV). How could the effects of that activity be measured without some kind of response? A wise worship leader will be sensitive to the Spirit's leading and, under the authority of his pastor, help the congregation respond appropriately to God's emphases during a meeting.

2 Corinthians 3:17–18 says, “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect [contemplate] the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”

We are being transformed as we meditate and reflect on the Lord's glory. Transformation emerges from response.

Which of these two options brings God more glory—to faithfully execute our plan for the service each week, or to respond wholeheartedly when, in the midst of our plans, the Spirit of God enlightens our hearts to understand better who he really is and what he has done? I believe this is part of what Paul is referring to when he describes us as those who “worship by the Spirit of God” (Php 3:3).

Preparing for Life

Corporate worship is about exalting, encountering, and responding to God. Now we'll take a look at one last goal of corporate worship: preparing us for life.

It's easy to think of the time we spend in congregational worship as unrelated to everyday life. Have you ever experienced a moving time of worship, only to find yourself immediately after the service griping about the lunch menu or coveting someone's new car? How quickly we forget being in the presence of God.

The truth is, we're always in the presence of God. We just don't realize it. The time we spend praising God together is not meant to be an escape from reality, or a time to forget about our troubles and our cares. Quite the opposite. When we worship God, we are gaining a truer picture of reality than we'll ever have. That is the time to look directly at our problems and say, "God is bigger than you!" We aren't meant to forget our troubles; we're meant to overcome them by the Word and the Spirit of God.

Our experience within corporate worship is intended to prepare us for what we do outside that time. Singing a song about the gospel reaching the ends of the earth might spur us on to share Christ with a coworker the next morning. A fresh awareness of our sins being forgiven might lead to us spend the week meditating on a passage such as Romans 3:21–31. We might even seek to confront the sin of complaining in our lives! Proclaiming with our church on Sunday that "nothing compares to the promise I have in You" can help us at other times to battle idolatrous desires for food, approval, and illicit pleasure. All of these post-meeting responses are vital goals of corporate worship. One reason we worship together is to become more like Jesus!

In reality, many of us would acknowledge it doesn't always work that way. Times of corporate worship seem heavenly, yet we too quickly descend to the earthly realms. I believe that's due in part to how we recall times of corporate worship. We tend to think about how we felt, how the music sounded, what the worship leader was wearing, or how nice the new flower arrangement looked. Such elements can certainly encourage us, but they have no lasting authority or effect in our lives. The ability of corporate worship to affect the way we live will be greatly enhanced as we reflect on the *truths* God revealed to us about himself during that time, rather than the mere trappings of worship. This is how times of congregational praise prepare us for life. As we exalt, encounter, and respond to God, we are reminded that he is the God over our circumstances, our emotions, our finances, and our lives. He is personally involved with us and has promised that "goodness and love will follow [us] all the days of [our lives]" (Ps 23:6). Not just when we're singing, but "all the days."

Theologian D.A. Carson says, "Worship, embracing both adoration and action, is nothing but the outworking of God-centeredness in the individual and corporate life of God's people."

For each of us, may the result of corporate worship be a God-centered life.