

Exalt – Sing! Colossians 3:16

October 7, 2007
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I'd like you to think about what you might consider a memorable moment of corporate worship in your life. If you happen to be brand new to Christianity or perhaps today is the first Christian worship service that you have ever attended, you've picked a really good day to come as I hope that when I am done you understand why we believe Christians getting together for corporate worship is so important.

You also might want to know that we are doing a series on the life priorities of a healthy Christian. *Exalt* means worship is a priority; *All of life lived all for Him*. *Experience* gets at Christianity as a community thing. Our lives have been transformed by Jesus Christ and His love for us. Healthy Christians transfer that love toward one another in what is known as fellowship. We have so many opportunities for relationships to be grown and loved here. Should you be lonely, and many people are, maybe the opportunity to be in an environment of care and love sounds appealing to you. It does to me. The third priority is serving Christ, or *Engage*. Jesus served us by dying for us on the cross. As His followers, we now want to serve Him by serving His church and the community with tangible expressions of God's love to us. *Exalt. Experience. Engage*. Healthy Christianity. We're glad you're checking it out here at Bethel.

Back to my beginning question: What is your most cherished memory in corporate worship? What was going on in the service and in your heart and mind that made it the special time it was? Let me guess a few things. I would imagine somehow you were feeling the greatness of God. His majesty. His love. His power. His mercy. Something in that corporate worship time created wonder in your heart at how great God is. Think about how that truth got there. That truth got to your mind and into your heart either by it being preached from God's Word, sung about by another Christian, realized in prayer with other Christians, or rejoiced over as you praised God in song. In each case, it was something that happened in corporate worship. Things happen when we are together that rarely happen alone. That something is absolutely vital for a healthy Christian.

Christians have always gathered like this for worship and mutual encouragement. In Acts 2, when the church began, the first thing they did was get together (Verse 42). When we are spiritually healthy, Christians want to worship God with other Christians. When things aren't healthy, they don't. It's not that important. Hebrews 10:25 gives this exhortation, *Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching*. One of the means to our perseverance in the faith is the spiritual enrichment that we get when we praise God and hear His Word in corporate times together. This is all over the Scriptures. Praise is mentioned 332 times; singing unto Him 287 times; playing musical instruments 317 times; rejoicing 288 times; giving thanks 135 times; shouting 65 times.

What is also obvious in the contemporary Church is that many Christians have not thought deeply about what corporate worship really is. I remember meeting with a group of people once who were urging me regarding a musical program they were passionate about in the church. I finally got a little peeved and said, *Could anybody here tell me, what is worship?* That stopped them up. They were too busy thinking about their music to think about what worship really was. Think of how many churches across the country are filled with people

trudging to worship services to do their duty and they do this week after week for years. Their worship of God is flat, dull, a ritual, a tradition, and there is no spiritually significant dynamic that happens within them. It has been our desire to never be that kind of church and for our services to be as conducive to allowing you to express to God how valuable you think He is and to speak meaningful and doctrinally rich love language to Him.

So how is corporate *Exalt* to happen in the church? Colossians 3:16 will tell us: *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.*

Our aim is the latter half of the verse, but the first half is important too. *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.* What is this describing? The Word of Christ is a broad term for the gospel and the Scriptures. The gospel is the story and message of who Christ is and His work on the cross and in redemption. It's the story of man's sin. God's grace and love. Christ's incarnation. Death. Burial. Resurrection. Ascension. Justification by faith. His future return. All of it is the gospel; the Word of Christ or the Word about Christ.

It also describes the Scriptures. This book is the revelation of Jesus from start to finish. It's all about Him. These are both "the word of Christ" which is to "dwell in us richly." The Greek word for dwell means, *to live in or be at home in.* It's used regarding the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in Romans 8:11. How is it dwelling in there richly? By hearing it (preaching), reading it (private study), meditating on it, memorizing it, talking with others about it, and many other means. That's not the point of this message other than to see that the corporate worship described at the end of the verse begins with the word of Christ richly abiding with in me at the beginning of the verse.

Exalt Truth #1 - We Bring our Worship with Us

"The greatest cause of inhibition among the saints in corporate worship is that we try to do in public what we have not first done in private." (McMinn, D., Practice of Praise, p.114f.)

It is impossible to walk into the auditorium and magically turn on worship. We must bring our worship with us. We bring our joy in God, our belief in His greatness, our trusting Him in sorrows, *and we bring our worship with us.* I am a firm believer in the old practice of Saturday preparation. I've read of families that make sure everything is set on Saturday so they don't have any distractions on Sunday morning. The clothes are ready, meals are as ready as possible, gas is in the car, etc. They don't want any distractions on Sunday morning. They want to focus on God.

This is in sharp contrast with another approach. I spoke on this some years ago and I had someone tell me they were walking behind a couple as they left church that day, and the husband said to the wife, *I felt convicted by today's message. We've got to stop yelling at each other on the way here!* That's a good start – a no screaming policy on the way to church. But the ideal is to have the Word of Christ dwelling richly in you as you come; thinking thoughts about God; having spent time in confession that morning or the night before; asking God to be blessed by your worship and for Him to bless you in it. You bring your worship with you. The quality of our worship service has less to do with what is done up here and more to do with what is done in here (heart) long before we get here.

I would compare corporate worship to a bonfire. All of us come with our wood and we are all here in a pile. The pile of us together should create a giant fire that actually heats each piece hotter than it could ever be alone. If we don't bring fire with us, there is no bonfire. When we are done today, we take our blazing wood back home and do life for another

week, looking forward to the heat of being together the next Sunday. Was your heart on fire when you came in today? Or are you expecting Pastor Steve or the worship team to somehow light your fire today?

The verse continues: *...As you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.* (Verse 16)

Exalt Truth #2 - Singing/Worship is the Overflow of Joy in God

The Greek word there for sing is defined in the Greek books as *making melody with your vocal cords*. That's not a bad definition. However, anybody can sing. Worship is different than singing. Worship doesn't come from the vocal chords; it starts much deeper within. It begins in the heart. Something has to be there for my singing to God to actually be worship. Colossians 3:16 says that we must sing with gratitude or thanksgiving in our hearts. Gratitude and joy in God in my heart rises up to my vocal chords and expresses itself in a song or prayer or shout that God views as true worship.

Worship is the verbal expression of heart joy in God. If you have heart joy in God, praise is the natural expression of it. Singing or praying that doesn't flow from joy in God is a charade. It is saying something verbally to God that isn't true in my heart. Now in saying that, our hearts are never perfect and we shouldn't expect them to be this side of glory. None of us has ever worshipped God from a totally pure heart. That's not what He is expecting. Rather, thankfulness here [in the heart], imperfect as it may be, will find seek expression here [verbally]. If there is no joy here [heart], then there will be no expression here [verbally].

This is how Jesus described the Pharisees: *These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.* (Matthew 15:8) Some might protest, *No, it's not that. I am just too manly to sing. I'm too cool to sing.* Yeah. Put these same people at the Cubs rally this week, which I watched, and they enthusiastically sang with everyone else, *Go cubs go! Go Cubs go! Hey Chicago, what do you say, the Cubs are gonna win today!* Why is there enthusiastic praise at a ballgame or race? Let's just say it the way it is. That's what we're really excited about down here [heart], so we sing to the Cubs. And look what it gets you. So I can only conclude from this that the cure is quite obvious. True joy in God overflows in praise to God.

The key to great exaltation in God corporately is great personal exaltation in Him. Our worship services do not depend so much on the quality of the music or sound or direction (not that these are unimportant); this entire thing is dependent on the real joy and thankfulness genuinely existing in our hearts. If our hearts are right, we could worship in a dungeon and it would be powerful.

Wait, don't we have an example of that? Paul and Silas in chains, having been beaten, sitting in a dungeon at midnight (Acts 16:25). *About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.* I don't know about you, but if I had been beaten, imprisoned, and having a sleepless night, I don't think I would be in a singing mood. Joy in God can't help but sing.

That is why Christianity has always been a singing faith. This is in sharp contrast with other religions of the world that by and large, don't sing. And can you really blame them? If you really thought your salvation was dependent on your own good works, you wouldn't have much to sing about either. But a salvation that is received, not by works, but by grace through faith; and not just any salvation, but this great salvation and this great Savior and this great future and this great hope, how can we not sing? The verse tells us to sing

psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. You can try to figure out the difference in those songs; there isn't much. I think he's just expressing the diversity of praise songs offered from a heart of gratitude.

So Christianity sings. Healthy Christians sing. Healthy churches sing really well. Why? Because healthy Christians and healthy churches have a healthy dose of joy in their hearts. How are we doing? Is there joy here? By way of encouragement, our new Pastor Paul Daulton has a daughter Haley that just turned two. She calls our church, *the happy church*. The happy church. I think she's got some really good theology going on there. Can we grow in this? More joy here [heart] and more praise here [mouth]. Not manufactured. Not manipulated, but real. Genuine. Enthusiastic. The verse gives us one more worship truth....

Exalt Truth #3 – In Worship, God is the Audience

...As you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.
(Verse 16)

Worship has an object; a focus. It's vertical. At least it ought to be. When it is not, it can be fun, uplifting and evangelistic, but it's not worship. That is why the songs we try to sing in our services are man-to-God songs; songs that allow us to speak to God and praise Him for His worth and His work in redemption on our behalf.

This is vitally important in corporate worship. We have to realize that God is the audience in every worship service. Kierkegaard famously made that point. The people on stage are not the performers, they are the prompters; the leaders. But they are not performers. You are not the audience. Audience comes from the word, *audio*. It means *listeners*. Too often you see people who come to observe worship; to listen; to be a spectator. Do that and you'll not worship for one second. Worship is a verb. It is participatory. This is not a performance. God help us from ever thinking that for a moment. I have been to churches where there are performers on stage and everyone else watches. They "worship" by watching. There is no such thing. Even when someone or the choir is singing, they are not performing for us, they are pointing us to God, and as they do, through song and melody, my mind hears the words and my heart hears their joy in God and my soul is energized for more joy in God myself. So that I turn the song into a personal worship experience as my heart delights in what is said about the God I love.

This also keeps us from evaluating a service based on whether we liked it or not. That really isn't the point. The question is, *What did God think of it? The fact that so many Christians gauge their personal estimate of the worth of a worship service on the basis of their personal enjoyment indicates that they do not really comprehend what is involved in corporate worship.* (Rayburn)

The measure of corporate worship isn't what we think, is it? God is the audience. He is the judge. Just this point alone would squelch so much of the wars in the American church about worship. So many people are convinced that God only likes their kind of music. A quick read of Psalm 150 shows the opposite. God can be praised in many ways and in many cultures and in many styles. Listen:

Praise the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens. Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness. Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with tambourine and dancing, praise him with the strings and flute, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with

resounding cymbals. Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD. (Psalm 150)

Many years ago when we formed our worship philosophy through a teaching series, we studied this passage and charted a course for simply being a Psalm 150 church. To enjoy the variety that God enjoys. There are so many different beautiful forms of expression. We live in America where there are cultural expressions just like there are in South Africa. We express our praise through our cultural music just like they do. Let's enjoy the diversity that God enjoys. It's all praise to Him when it comes from the overflow of our joy in Him. *Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. (Psalm 150:6)*

Let me tell you one of my cherished worship moments. I took a group to Israel a few years back and we were in the city of Nazareth. It was heart moving to be in the very place Jesus grew up. There is a bluff that overlooks the city and there is a Catholic chapel on that bluff not far from our hotel. We went there one night with the city below. It was a beautiful view. There were all hard surfaces in this chapel, so every sound resonated. In the chapel was a group of Koreans. I think they might have been singing a song or something. So we went up to them and asked, *Are you Christians?* As I recall, they hardly spoke English, but we were able to figure out that they were a group of Korean Presbyterians. So I think I was the one who came up with the idea to sing a song together - us in English, them in Korean. Somehow we came up with *A Mighty Fortress is our God*. I probably got some sick humor out of singing a reformation song in a catholic chapel. But they knew it and we knew it. So we started. *A mighty fortress is our God* (we sang)... while they sang it in Korean.

And we sang that song together, and it resonated through that chapel. It was beautiful. Have you ever sung a Reformation song with Korean Presbyterians in a Roman Catholic Chapel in the Middle East? You should try it. Our hearts were stirred with joy in God and our voices lifted higher and the cultural barriers were gone. We were two cultures worshipping one God. When we stopped and the chapel reverberated with our final note, we all felt a holy hush. Joy in God, flowing through vocal chords that turn the joy into melody that expresses itself in praise. It's special. That's *Exalt*. That's worship.

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