

How Many Christians Does it Take to Praise God?

The Worshipping Church Part 1 Selected Passages 1-1-2012

Summary: Praise is the emotional expression of delight in God. Scripture instructs us to do corporate praise; corporate praise is greater than individual praise because of the added voices and variety and joy. And the church is the best context for praise.

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Introduction to the Series: Worship Wars

If you type the phrase “worship wars” in quotes into Google, it gives you 190,000 results. Articles from Christianity Today with that title, books, seminars – even whole websites devoted to the topic of how to deal with worship wars in the church. There is so much fighting and arguing and bickering in churches over how we should carry out our public worship services – the type of music, song selection, instrumentation, tempo, volume, lyrics – fighting over those things is so common that the phrase “worship wars” has become a standard part of Christian vocabulary. Can you imagine how God feels about that?

“Our God is so great and so worthy – let’s fight with each other over how to worship Him.”

I cannot tell you for sure if God prefers drums or no drums, organ or no organ; but I can tell you this for sure – He is not pleased or honored by “worship” that involves His children fighting with each other over their preferences.

But on the other hand, how do you think God wants us to feel if something is being done that we think hinders corporate worship? If you come to church every Sunday and the music style is not your favorite, you can overlook that. But what about if you come every week and something is being done that you are convinced displeases God and hinders the corporate worship? Should that bother you? And if so, what should you do about it? And how can you be sure that it isn’t just you assuming God is most glorified by your preferred style? What does the Bible say?

That is the bottom line, isn’t it? The issue is not what you enjoy or what I enjoy – the issue is, what does God enjoy? And the only way we can possibly know that is if He revealed it to us in the Bible. Did He? Did He tell us how it is supposed to be done?

As far as I know, we have never had anything resembling a worship war at Agape. There have been some disagreements here and there on the best way to do things, but nothing that even remotely

Exalt – to lift up or magnify
Exult – to rejoice or take delight in

resembled a war that I have seen. So if it has happened here, it was under my radar. But you know it is coming sooner or later, so I want to make sure that everything we do is driven by the instructions God has given us in His Word. And that is why I want to do this study. Today is part 1 of a series on corporate praise. I should also say this - this is not going to be a study of worship in general. That is a much broader topic. Worship is anything you do to honor God as God. Scripture is clear that everything we ever do is supposed to be worship (Ro.12:1). The focus of this study is specifically the topic of corporate praise – the singing and music part of our service.

Definition

Let's begin with a definition. A great number of problems in corporate praise are caused by a failure to understand what praise actually is. Praise is an emotional expression of delight in God.

Luke 10:21 At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, "I praise you, Father...

He was full of joy and so out of His mouth came praise - praise is the expression of joy in God. Something about God delights you, and so you express that delight in song or with a shout or a poem or prayer or some kind of mode that not only expresses your joy, but amplifies it. That is praise.

Praise is not merely stating true things about God. "God, You are great; God, You are merciful; God, You are holy" – that is not praise unless it is pushed out of the heart by feelings of joy. Praise is always connected to joy.

James 5:13 Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing praise.

Praise is what happens in your mouth when you are happy. When you are thrilled or moved or amazed or enthralled with something – the things that come out of your mouth to express that are called "praise."

Another way to say that is this: praise is a combination of exultation and exaltation. To exalt means to lift up, magnify, elevate, or honor. So to *exalt* God's name means to hold it in the highest regard and to showcase it as being especially great. To *exult* means to rejoice or take delight in, or to revel in.

Exulting is the emotion, exalting is the action. Exulting in God that means I am cultivating joy in my heart over God, and the result is I will exalt Him with my mouth in praise. So praise is exultation that causes exaltation. You see His glory, you exult in that glory in your heart (rejoice in it and take delight in it), and that causes you to open your mouth and exalt His name with words and songs and gestures of praise.

This is a very important principle to understand – joy is foundational. In fact, delight in God is the foundation not just of praise, but of all worship. Every kind of worship is driven by joy one way or the other. Either you already have the joy, and so you express it to God – that is praise; Or you do not have the joy, and you long for joy, and you worship Him by making Him the object of your longing and desire. Either way, worship is all about delight in God. We saw that last week with the Magi. Why did they travel one thousand miles across the Arabian Desert into enemy territory? Because they wanted to. They did it not out of duty, but out of desire. And when they finally got the chance to worship Jesus, what did they do? Check it off their "to do" list? Congratulate themselves for how devoted they were? No, they responded by rejoicing with great, unbounded, overflowing joy! They were the first

worshippers of the Lord Jesus, and they are a model for our worship. And there are other things about their worship we will see later on in this series, but for now I just want to point out that it was all driven by desire and delight. They had learned certain things about the Messiah – wonderful, marvelous things, and those things made them so happy they could not wait to express their joy.

Should We Even Do Corporate Praise?

OK, so now we know what praise is, but what about corporate praise? There is lots of corporate singing in the Old Testament system, but what about in the New Testament? In the New Testament, there are all kinds of instructions about preaching and prayer in the corporate gathering, but what about music? Is that even something God calls us to do? If not, then we should drop the singing altogether – amen? If the Bible does not instruct us to come together and sing corporately in the New Testament age, then we should not be wasting the Lord’s resources doing something He never called us to do. And if you cannot say, “amen,” to that, then you need to re-adjust your way of thinking about the Church. We are not here to carry out cultural traditions. We are here to do whatever the Bible says and nothing else. So if we find that Scripture does not call us to corporate praise, then we will eliminate it from what we do – amen?

1. Corporate Praise is Commanded for the Church

So, let’s take a look and see what the Bible says.

Ephesians 5:18 be filled by the Spirit. 19 Speaking to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs; singing and making music in your heart to the Lord

We are commanded to be filled by the Spirit, and one of the results of that filling is the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Now, is that personal, individual singing, or corporate? What does it say? It says we are to do all this singing, **to one another**. You are not fulfilling Ephesians 5:19 when you sing in the shower, or alone in your car. We are to come together as a church and sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making music in our hearts to the Lord. So yes, corporate praise is indeed something we are supposed to be doing.

In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul is giving instructions for the worship service. We know it is about the corporate gathering because he tells us that what we do in the church is different from what we do when we are alone. The use of the gift of tongues when you are alone is different from the use of that gift in the church worship service. So he is talking about the corporate worship service, and here is what he says about music:

1 Corinthians 14:15 ...I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind. 16 If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying?

He is talking about singing, and the importance of doing so in a way that the others in the worship service can hear it and understand and say, “amen.” No doubt about it, God does want singing to be a part of our corporate gathering. It is part of His design for the Church as a holy priesthood.

Holy Priesthood

1 Peter 2:5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

The corporate worship in Old Testament times involved sacrifices in the Temple. In our day, we

are the new priesthood, and sacrifices are still a key part of our worship. But in our time, it is no longer animal sacrifices. We offer spiritual sacrifices – one of which is corporate praise.

9 But you are ... a royal priesthood ... that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Hebrews 13:15 Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise

In Peter's metaphor, we are not a bunch of individual temples. We are each a stone. A brick is not a temple. On Sunday morning, when just a few of you have showed up, the temple is not here yet. Three bricks are not a temple. But when you all come, He builds us into a temple and a priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices – not sacrifices of animals, but sacrifices of corporate praises.

Amen

So we need to come together corporately in order to fulfill our function as a temple and priesthood. And one reason for that is the fact that God wants the praises that are offered to Him by one mouth to be affirmed by other mouths, so that we build on one another's praise. Paul is giving his slam dunk argument against speaking in tongues without an interpreter in the worship service.

1 Corinthians 14:16 If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying?

What does that tell you about what God expects of our worship? It tells you that God expects "amen's."

Amen is a fascinating word. It is a Hebrew word that means "Yes – so be it!" It was used in the Old Testament mainly as a congregational response to give a strong affirmation or agreement.

Nehemiah 8:6 Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

"Amen" is an exclamation that means, "From the bottom of my heart I agree with what was just said. I agree with it and I love it!" And sometimes those who led in worship would say, "amen," to their own statement as an invitation for the hearers or readers to join in with our own amen.

Psalms 72:19 Praise be to his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen.

So that is the Hebrew word. Then in the New Testament, the writers do not translate that Hebrew word. Instead of using the Greek equivalent, they just use the Hebrew word, "amen" – spelled out with Greek letters. And we do the same thing in English. Instead of using the English phrase, "so be it," we just use English letters to spell out that same Hebrew word, "amen." In Spanish, German, Russian, French – wherever you go it comes out, "amen." God has given us this wonderful, trans-cultural word that we can all use as shorthand when we want to affirm and celebrate something that was just said.

Now, there are some of you who do not ever say, "amen," because you grew up in a church tradition where that just was not done. Nobody would dare say, "amen," or anything else unless it was written in the liturgy. So you think that when someone just spontaneously pops off with an "amen" – that is just some kind of latent Charismatic influence, or it is their expressive personality type, or whatever. If you think that way, think again. This is not about personal taste or tradition. It is about

God's will for corporate praise. It is about the way God has told us He wants to be worshipped, and the way He wants us to interact with each other as we worship. He does not want us to be isolated, silent, encapsulated individuals in corporate praise. If something resonates in your heart at all, you should give expression to that out loud. That does two things. It encourages the people around you and increases their joy, and it amplifies and increases your own joy. Again - if you are a little bit pleased with something, and you verbalize that, that act of verbalizing it actually makes you a little bit more pleased than you were to begin with.

Football fans at the stadium cheer more than they would if they were watching the game all by themselves. And they enjoy the cheering more. And it honors the players more when they hear thousands of voices rather than just one voice. This is the way God designed praise – it is greater when it is corporate. And an important part of making it corporate is responding with the word “amen” when something resonates in your heart. If a family member came bursting in the door one day, all excited about some amazing thing he just saw, and you just respond with dead silence – that is bizarre and unnatural. Especially if you really are impressed with the thing he is talking about. How much more important to share in the enthusiasm of people who are talking about the greatest things – a point in a sermon that you feel especially passionate about, or a line in a praise song – or a prayer. Someone is praying out loud, and when he says something that your heart especially desires, you whisper, “Yes, Lord,” or, “amen,” or, “please, God,” or maybe just, “mmm,” – some kind of verbal affirmation and joining in. Nothing so loud that it would draw attention to you. Just enough to resonate verbally with the prayer to let the other person know, “Yes – I am longing and aching for God to answer that prayer as well.”

God says Amen

If you want to know how important this is, did you know that God says, “Amen”? He makes promises to us and then says, “Amen,” to His own promises. And He says it with the loudest, most emphatic voice possible.

2 Corinthians 1:20 For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God.

That word, “yes,” is the Greek equivalent of “amen.” Christ Is God's "Amen!" The Father says, “amen,” to His own promises by sacrificing His Son to die on the cross. And the end of the verse says that we speak the “amen” back to Him to His glory. God says, "Amen," to us through Christ in the cross, and we respond with "Amen" to God through Christ by verbally affirming glorious truths about God in corporate praise. And it is not just God and New Testament saints and Old Testament saints. Heavenly worshippers make heavy use of this word as well.

Revelation 5:13 “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!” 14 The four living creatures said, "Amen”

When God designs exalted creatures who are created just for the purpose of worshipping Him, those creatures say, “Amen.”

So all that to say two things: First, we should be saying, “amen”. If you do not ever say, “amen,” then start. But beyond that, the point for our purposes in this study is this: saying, “amen,” is such an essential part of corporate praise in 1 Corinthians 14 that anything that people cannot say “amen” to is ruled out. That is Paul’s argument against un-translated tongues. And the fact that our amens are so essential to corporate worship shows us that praising God involves an interaction between the saints.

2. Greater Numbers = Greater Praise

So, does God command corporate praise in the New Testament? Yes! And that really should not

come as any surprise. There is lots of corporate praise in the Old Testament, and lots of corporate praise in heaven in the book of Revelation, there is no reason to assume that the praises of our God would go silent during the Church Age. In the Old Testament, God is both a private God and a public God. In the New Testament, does He become less public? No – just the opposite. In the New Testament His praises are to be published even more widely than in the Old Testament. As we found last week – this is all part of the Father’s plan to glorify His Son. The more voices praising together, the greater the glory – which means, corporate praise is greater than individual praise. It honors God more. One person praising God is great, but when the whole church does it together, the offering is far greater. You see that repeatedly in the Psalms.

Psalms 22:25 From you comes my praise in the great assembly; before those who fear you will I fulfill my vows.

Not just in the assembly, but **in the great assembly**.

Psalms 40:9-10 9 I proclaim righteousness in the great assembly; I do not seal my lips, as you know, O Lord. 10 ... I do not conceal your love and your truth from the great assembly.

Psalms 35:18 I will give you thanks in the great assembly; among throngs of people I will praise you.

And we see the same thing in the New Testament.

Hebrews 2:12 He says, "I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises."

That is a quotation from the Old Testament about the Messiah. It was important to Jesus that when He sang praises to the Father that He do it in the presence of the congregation. And not just Jews, but all the nations.

Romans 15:9 as it is written: "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name."

Crescendo

History is the story of continual increase in the number of voices praising God. You see that in the book of Revelation, where there is a lot of praise, and no solos. I love chapter 5. It is the ultimate, final worship service, and the whole thing is one, giant crescendo. (A crescendo is when music starts soft and gradually builds louder and louder. That has a lot more impact than just coming in with full volume right away.) And that is what you see in Revelation 5. The worship of Jesus Christ in Revelation begins with a quartet with the four living creatures. Then the elders joined in, so now we have twenty-eight *a cappella* voices. Then background instrumental music is added at the end of verse 8. It is building and building in a gradual crescendo up to that point, but then Jesus takes the scroll, and when that happens heaven just explodes into worship.

11 Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders.

(That’s a big circle!)

12 In a loud voice they sang: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"

Now this worship service is off the hook. But the crescendo still has not reached its climax – it gets even bigger.

13 Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!"

Psalm 22:3 says that God enthrones Himself on the praises of His people. And that throne keeps rising higher and higher as the choir of praises gets larger and larger. That is one of the best things about coming to church – a whole crowd of unanimous voices praising the Lord. And it is one of the huge advantages of a large church – more voices! If hearing a large crowd of godly people singing praises to the Lord Jesus Christ does not move your heart in a powerful way, something is wrong.

If you look back over your life so far, what would you say is the greatest highlight? What time period would best fit the description of being your “glory days”? Was it your college years? Or in your thirties? Or some time when you were on stage, or you took first place in some event? When David got older and he thought back on his glory days, what do you think he thought of? How good it felt when he killed Goliath and was the big hero for the whole nation of Israel? Or one of his other big military victories? When he became king and his popularity was through the roof? What memories do you suppose he most enjoyed pulling up in his mind and re-living in times of discouragement?

Psalm 42:4 These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng.

David’s glory days were times of corporate worship. We all know how much he loved private worship. He had devotions where he would just sit down by himself and write something like the 23rd Psalm! He loved his time alone with God, but what he really loved was having his voice be engulfed in the deafening shouts of the festive throngs of worshippers. So one reason for corporate praise is the simple fact that God instructs us to do it. A second reason is the fact that corporate praise is greater than private praise because more worshippers equal greater praise. We lift our voices together with the greatest numbers possible because in corporate praise the product is greater than the sum of its parts.

3. Greater Variety = Greater Praise

Now let me give you a third reason. Corporate praise is greater than individual praise because God is honored by having a wide variety of worshippers unified in the common cause of exalting Him.

Revelation 5:9 And they sang a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.

Notice – part of His worthiness comes from the variety of worshippers. The fact that there are worshippers from every tribe and language and people and nation is part of what makes Him so worthy. When you praise God by yourself there is zero variety (because you are exactly the same as you). The only way to have ethnic and cultural variety in worship is with corporate worship. Do you realize what a privilege it is to come here and sit among blacks and whites and Asians and Hispanics, rich and poor, young and old, executives and farmers, red necks and ... Do you realize what a glorious thing it is to come here and witness first hand a place where there is no culture animosity, no division

over skin color or background – every person fits in just as well as every other person? And it happens, not because of some program of multi-cultural tolerance, but because we all have one thing that is the most important thing in our lives. The world can try to counterfeit that kind of unity but it is not real unity because they do not have a common passion like we do. I know people complain about lack of unity in the Church, but if you think about it, the degree of unity we have is breathtaking. Let me show you what I mean: If the most important thing in your existence is the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, and you care more about that than anything else – raise your hand. Isn't that amazing? Can you think of any other setting where someone could say, "Raise your hand if the most important thing in your existence is..." and then say something where every single person would raise their hand? That cannot happen because there is nothing in this world so great that it can transcend all cultural differences. The only thing that great and that marvelous is the Lord Jesus Christ. So when we come together with a diverse group and we overlook all our differences and with a single voice shout unanimous praise every Sunday – that glorifies God!

4. Greater Joy = Greater Praise

So we have corporate praise because God commands it, and because God is honored by a large chorus of voices praising Him, and because He is honored by a wide variety of people's uniting to praise Him. Now let me give you a fourth reason for the importance of corporate praise. Not only do greater numbers and greater variety mean greater praise, but so does greater joy. God is honored when our level of joy in Him is increased – right? The greater the joy the greater the praise. And corporate celebration has more ability to increase your joy than private celebration. That is why when you get some really great news you immediately want to call your spouse, or post it on Facebook. Our joy in celebrating something is increased when others join our celebration. And praise is the same way.

Psalms 34:3 Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together.

When we praise God together, and I hear your voices, the little joy I started with is doubled and tripled. And that makes me more joyful and enthusiastic, which increases the joy of those around me, and it snowballs upward.

5. There's no place like the church for praise

One final argument for the importance of corporate praise: the church is the ideal place for praise. There is just no place like the church for praising God. There are a lot of aspects of praise that come easier in church than elsewhere.

Preparation

When you worship with praise music on your own, you might listen to whatever CD is handy, or whatever is next on your iPod, or whatever happens to come on the radio, but when you come here on Sunday morning there is a group of songs that someone has labored to think through - grouping them together in a certain way to build from one concept about God to another; there are Scripture readings specifically chosen that go with those songs, comments from the stage to draw your attention to various aspects – all that preparation to put together a group of songs and Scriptures and prayers that cohere in relationship to one another. There is very little that comes off the top of anyone's head on stage during the worship time. We write out prayers, think through comments. I have made a point to the worship team that when I preach, I spend about thirty minutes of preparation for every one minute of speaking. And I expect that same kind of preparation for those who would pray or make comments during the singing time, because our praises are just as important as the preaching. So we have carefully selected songs, carefully thought out comments, carefully selected Scripture readings. There are so many things designed to assist praise. When else do you have a live worship band, and a room

and atmosphere designed to assist praise, and prayers and readings selected specifically for this particular church family? When else are you surrounded by one hundred other voices joining you in praise?

Shouting

I praise God every day in my prayer time. But there are a lot of aspects to praise that I do not have much occasion to do except here. For example, shouting for joy before the Lord. Sometimes I sing when I am by myself, but I do not shout. There is really only one time when I shout before the Lord, and it is here. Normally we try to keep the volume of the music low enough so that the voices of the congregation can be heard, but once in a while it is great to have a loud, exciting, celebrative sound coming from the band that enables you to shout for joy to the Lord without it scaring the bejeepers out of the person sitting next to you. An example of that is the song, “Here for You.” That song starts low, “Let our praise, be Your welcome, let our songs, be a sign, we are here for You...” Then at the next verse Mike Brunstetter jumps up an octave: “Let our shout, be Your anthem, Your renown fill the skies...” And then the other part: “We welcome You with praise, we welcome You with praise...” You belt that out in the high octave and you are basically shouting. I can only stay with Mike for about two lines, then I have to quit – otherwise there will be no sermon. But it is great to sometimes be able to just cut loose and shout for joy to the Lord.

Another example is clapping. Of course you can clap when you are by yourself, but it is just not the same as when we do it corporately. I am not one who is really big on clapping, but there are certain times when it can really be moving. For example, when we sing that song, “Glorious Day,” very often there is spontaneous applause when we get to the part about the Second Coming. (It only happens first service – second service folks tend to be more reserved. But I love it when it happens.) When we get to that part that says, “One day the trumpet will sound for His coming, One day the skies with His glories will shine,” there is a spontaneous applause and cheering throughout the congregation as we sing that part. I cannot tell you the impact that has on my heart. Unplanned, unorchestrated – just spontaneous, genuine expression of joy in the Second Coming. When I hear that, it wakes up my dull, groggy heart to the fact that I am singing about an ultra-glorious truth. There is just no place like the church for singing praises.

Conclusion

OK, so now that we know what praise is, and we know for sure that it is something we are supposed to be doing corporately, how do we go about it? There are a thousand different traditions – which ways of doing it are biblical? How are we supposed to make decisions about which instruments to use, or whether to use instruments, which kinds of songs to use, how much structure, how much freedom – all the kinds of things people fight over – what guidance does God’s Word give us for those things? And more importantly, what does the Bible teach about how to lead worship? What kinds of things can the leaders do to make it more likely that the congregation will offer true praise? There are a thousand answers to that question that people will offer, but I want to know what the Bible says. There are three key passages in the New Testament that help us with those questions, and we will plan on diving into those next time.

Benediction – Psalms 102:21 So the name of the Lord will be declared in Zion and his praise in Jerusalem 22 when the peoples and the kingdoms assemble to worship the Lord.

18 Let this be written for a future generation, that a people not yet created may praise the Lord