

WHAT IS WORSHIP RENEWAL?

A Study in the Signs of a Renewing Worship



Participatory worship—to achieve it, we must break through the barriers of passive worship. Coming to an understanding of worship renewal will help us move toward our goal.

THE NEED FOR WORSHIP RENEWAL

I first became aware of the need for worship renewal in my local church in the late sixties. I was involved in a church that I could best describe as formal and distant. While my best friends were in this church, friends that I clicked with on a personal and social basis, there was something lacking when we gathered together for the purpose of worship. Inexplicably, the camaraderie, the animation, the joy that we experienced when we did things together were lost when we assembled for worship.

I'm not sure that I can put my finger on what was wrong. I only know that *something* was amiss. How is it, I asked myself, that this same community of people can have so much fun at a church outing, a church picnic, a potluck dinner, or social gatherings in the home, but become so rigid, so lifeless, so formal and cold when gathered for worship?

SIGNS OF A WORSHIP IN RENEWAL

I left the church that I just described and went in search of a church with a renewed worship. Because I couldn't find what I wanted, I joined with several like-minded people to begin a home church that met in my house. (I'm not recommending that you do this.)

Our goal was to get as close as possible to the early church experience of worship. We wanted a comfortable and casual atmosphere, we wanted to include the children in an experience that would be enjoyable and life changing, we wanted sermons

that were relevant to our needs, and we wanted to celebrate the feast of the Lord's table weekly.

We did all of these things and found a great enjoyment in our worship. Our little house-church experiment ended two years later when we all returned to established churches seeking the renewal of worship in communities of faith that had connections with historic Christianity. Nevertheless, as I have reflected on my experience in the home church, I have been able to think more clearly about the subject of a renewed worship.

DEFINING WORSHIP

I'm convinced that worship renewal is ultimately a gift of the Spirit, a gift for which we need to pray. But I also think we can exercise our will and our mind as we approach worship renewal. I've found, for example, that it is really helpful to establish a definition of worship.

Most people don't seem to be aware that worship begins with God, not with us. A lot of people seem to think that worship is exclusively what the people do. What they miss is that worship begins with God. In worship God does what God has done in history. That is, God comes to us. God initiates a relationship with us in worship. Our job is to respond, to be open to God, to receive God's work in us and for us.

The shortest, perhaps the best, definition of worship I have ever heard is the simple statement that "worship is a celebration of God's mighty deed of salvation in Jesus Christ."

In this definition we can see two things at work. First, God speaks and acts through the proclamation and enactment of the divine saving deeds. Second, we respond to these deeds with praise and worship.

Worship renewal, then, is the celebration of God's saving deeds that results in a much clearer sense of the power of the gospel at work in the assembly of people who have gathered to worship. It is also the reception of God's power in our own lives as the gospel takes root in us through our receptivity. The result is a congregation of people who continually experience the power of God in their lives—a power that brings healing and empowers their lives and ministry.

OPENNESS TO CHANGE

I am convinced that worship renewal cannot happen in the local church unless that church and its people are really and truly open to change. Unfortunately, many

churches are very divided over the issue of worship renewal. Let me give you an example.

About ten years ago, I decided I needed a year of experience leading worship in a local church, so I thought really hard about where I could get this kind of experience. Finally, I chose a church that had a reputation for being progressive and forward looking.

I called the pastor and said, "I'd like to offer my services to your church as worship coordinator for a full year. Would you be interested in letting me work with your congregation and experiment in worship renewal? It would give me the experience I need and it would give your church the opportunity to move toward worship renewal. It could be a win/win situation for both of us."

The pastor, an acquaintance of mine, responded favorably right away. But he said, "I've got to get this passed through my board."

The proposal was presented and the board, not certain they wanted to do this, asked me to come and talk to them.

Our meeting was not a pleasant experience. The first question was asked by an angry person, "Don't we worship here? What makes you think we need worship renewal?" This very closed-minded person dominated the discussion, killed the proposal, and persuaded the board not to let me come.

The point is clear. A church that is not open to change will probably not experience worship renewal. On the other hand, the church open to change is good soil for the seeds of renewal.

CONCLUSION

In this session we have explored the question, What is worship renewal? This is a very difficult and involved question that cannot be addressed in a superficial manner. It requires (1) an understanding of a worship in need of renewal, (2) a good grasp of the signs of a renewing worship, (3) an understanding of worship as a celebration of God's saving deeds, and (4) an openness on the part of the church to the renewal of its worship.

STUDY GUIDE

*Read Session 1, "What Is Worship Renewal?"
before starting the study guide.*

PART I: PERSONAL STUDY

Answer the following questions on your own.

1. *Life Connection*

- ◆ Was there a point in your life when you first became aware of a need for worship renewal? In the space below tell the story of that experience.

2. *Content Questions*

- ◆ Below is a list of fourteen signs of a church that needs worship renewal. If a statement describes your church, check yes. If it does not, check no.

1. The congregation is passive and lacking in enthusiasm and a spirit of joy. Yes No
2. Visitors do not feel welcome or drawn into the community and its worship. Yes No
3. Worship is cerebral and oriented almost exclusively toward teaching. Yes No
4. Worship is evangelistic and oriented almost exclusively toward conversion. Yes No
5. Communication skills in preaching and leading worship are weak. Yes No
6. Sermons tend to be long, didactic, and lacking in application. Yes No

7. Communion is celebrated infrequently and when celebrated seems to be tacked on to the end of the service, often bearing the characteristics of a funeral.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
8. People sit in a typical classroom formation with the back of another person's head as a major object of sight.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
9. Singing lacks life, and the range of music is limited.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
10. There is no sense in which the order of worship moves the congregation in a pattern that rehearses their faith and thus establishes, maintains, or repairs a relationship with God.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
11. The Christian year is not practiced, or if it is practiced, it is not characterized by a sense of its gospel nature or used effectively as a means of ordering congregational spirituality.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
12. The use of arts is shunned except on special occasions such as Christmas or Easter.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
13. The people are not involved in responses, antiphons, prayer, ministry to each other, or the passing of the peace.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
14. The senses are not adequately engaged in touch, smell, sight, or hearing.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
◆ Below is a list of twenty-one signs of a church that is experiencing the renewal of worship. If a statement describes your church, check yes. If it does not, check no.	
1. Restoration of a Christ-centered focus (worship celebrates the living, dying, and rising of Christ in which the powers of evil are overthrown, a sacrifice for sin is made, and an example for living is set forth)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
2. Characterized by a good balance of order and freedom	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
3. Rediscovery of Christ's active presence in both word and table	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No

4. Appropriation of the arts as servants of the text	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
5. Use of a wide range of music drawn from the history of the church and from various contemporary cultures	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
6. Heightened communication skills in both preaching and leading of worship	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
7. A space for worship that works for the participation of all the people	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
8. A worship that is intergenerational	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
9. A worship characterized by intimacy and pageantry	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
10. A warm and hospitable environment	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
11. Rediscovery of the evangelical nature of the church year	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
12. Aliveness of the people through active participation	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
13. An experience of joy, celebration, love, victory, and peace	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
14. A rehearsal of one's relationship to God	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
15. The engagement of the whole person—mind, heart, will, body, and senses	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
16. The experience of spontaneity	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
17. A feeling of personal involvement and corporate relatedness	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
18. The ministry of people to one another in worship	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
19. A growing concern for and commitment to evangelism and social outreach	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
20. A heightened spirituality, both personal and corporate	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
21. The experience of Christian community	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No

- ◆ How do you respond to the definition of worship used in this session (“Worship is a celebration of God’s mighty deeds of salvation in Jesus Christ”)? _____

- ◆ Explain both the divine and the human aspects of this definition of worship:

- ◆ Define “worship renewal.” _____

3. *Application*

- ◆ Read and think about the answers you gave to the statements above describing the fourteen signs of a worshipping community that needs worship renewal. Would you say that your church needs worship renewal?

Yes No Explain: _____

- ◆ Look again at the fourteen signs of apathetic worship. Name what you think are the three most severe problems or impediments to worship renewal that your church faces.

a. _____

b. _____

c. _____

- ◆ What can your church do to overcome these problems? Comment on each of the three issues identified above:

a. _____

b. _____

c. _____

- ◆ What one characteristic of a renewing worship would you *most* like to see recovered in your worship? Choose one from the list of twenty-one characteristics of a renewed worship. _____

- ◆ How would you go about restoring this aspect of renewed worship in your local church? _____

PART II: GROUP DISCUSSION

Write all of the group members' answers to the questions in each section on a chalkboard or flip chart.

1. *Life Connection*

- ◆ Begin the group study by asking several members of the group to share the experience that first made them aware of the need for worship renewal.

2. *Thought Questions*

- ◆ Walk through the fourteen signs of a church in need of worship renewal. Poll the group to find out how many were answered yes and how many were answered no. Encourage a discussion on the questions of greatest importance to the group.
- ◆ Walk through the signs of a church experiencing the renewal of worship. Poll the group to find out how many were answered no and how many were answered yes. Encourage a discussion on the questions of greater importance to the group.
- ◆ Ask for a response to the brief definition of worship used in this chapter: "Worship is a celebration of God's mighty deeds of salvation in Jesus Christ."
- ◆ Ask, "How do you define worship renewal?"

3. *Application*

- ◆ How did each student answer the question, Would you say that your church needs worship renewal?
- ◆ Ask the students to comment on the three impediments to worship renewal in their church. Is there general agreement?
- ◆ Encourage the students to talk about how these impediments may be overcome.
- ◆ What is the *one* characteristic of worship renewal that each student would most like to see recovered in worship? Is there any agreement?
- ◆ Ask, "How would you go about restoring this aspect of renewal worship in your local church?"