

Is worship more like a cycling club or like an orchestra? You can cycle alone, or you can cycle in a group. This is not worship - “I worship alone, but it’s great to get together with others too.” Corporate worship is a lot more like an instrument which, while you can play alone, really comes to life with others.

Hebrews 12:22-23 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, ²³to the general assembly and church of the firstborn *who are* registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect,

God did not plan to save individuals who would remain independent, individualistic and loners.

Apart from corporate worship, a believer’s growth will be severely retarded. They will lack balance in their interpretation of Scripture and, lacking gifted teachers, they are liable to believe heresy or false teaching. With a lack of visible submission to authority, they will lack a submissive spirit in the home, in their workplace, and ultimately to God Himself. With a lack of opportunity to serve, their gifts will lie dormant, which will cause frustration, and even depression. Without the opportunity to be ministered to, they will lack much spiritual health which could have been supplied by other members. In short – a believer’s individual worship will hobble on, but will not grow, enlarge or be truly blessed by God. Their walk with God will become a limp.

It is clear we are to worship corporately. In the Old Testament, we keep reading, “Let **us** praise” “Let **us** magnify God”. When the Psalmist says, “O worship the Lord **with me**”, then he is calling for a plurality of voices – for corporate worship.

And then we keep seeing the following words in the Psalms:

Multitude - **Psalm 42:4, 109:30.**

Assembly - **Psalm 89:7, 107:32; 111:1**

Congregation - **Psalm 35:18** *I will give thee thanks in the great congregation: I will praise thee among much people.* ‘Congregation’ is mentioned fourteen times.

And moving into the New Testament, there is unapologetic transition from the Old Testament congregation of Israel, to the New Testament church. You see the transition happening, starting in the Gospels and finishing in the book of Acts. What changes is not the concept of God’s people being together, but the make-up of that group. It is now no longer simply saved Jews – it is saved Jews and Gentiles. And the same words come over into the New Testament. In fact, the word translated church – ‘*ekklesia*’ - simply meant assembly. Those called out to a gathering.

While the Bible changes who constitutes this gathering, it literally takes for granted that this is what the New Testament believer will do. The New Testament knows nothing of a non-church attending Christian. The epistles are all written to churches – Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians – to a number of churches, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Titus and 1 and 2 Timothy are written to pastors of churches. James, Peter and John write their general epistles to be sent to all the churches. Hebrews is written to specific believers in churches. Philemon, Luke and Acts are written to individuals who were part of churches. Revelation is written to seven churches.

Corporate worship takes place in the church.

Eph 3:21 *Unto Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.*

When am I in the church?

Now many take the idea of the universal worldwide church and say – as soon as you are saved, you are in the church.

Is it like being a South African – once born in, you're in, and therefore whatever you do in South Africa is part of corporate South Africa. Once you're born again, you're in the church of God worldwide, so all you do is part of corporate worship – because all of life is worship right? Therefore you might never be in a local gathering of believers, but you know some Christians that you get together with occasionally – and perhaps you do some evangelising – and so you are in the church, and you are worshipping, right?

No, that cannot be for at least two reasons:

- a) A number of acts of corporate worship described in the New Testament cannot be performed by the worldwide church – baptism, Lord's Supper, singing, corporate prayer, church discipline, giving. These presuppose a gathering of believers. For you to participate in these acts of worship you cannot be a lone ranger, meeting sporadically with some Christians here and there.
- b) The Body illustration of **I Corinthians 12** breaks down if it means the church worldwide. How can the members truly suffer and rejoice with people they do not know? How can every member edify all the other Christians across the globe? For the members to have the same care for one another – this must be a local assembly of people who know one another. Clearly the Body refers to a local church.

So, corporate worship is not simply being saved and part of the church universal.

Is it whenever believers get together? Is that the church, in which corporate worship happens?

Mat 18:20 *For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.*

Now that verse is really abused. Jesus certainly doesn't mean that He isn't present when a Christian is by him or herself; as if it takes two Christians to bring Christ's presence. Nor does He mean as soon as two or more Christians are together, a local church is in session. The two or three He is talking about goes back to the previous verses where He speaks of rebuking a sinning Christian with two or three witnesses. Again, if two or three agree on something regarding church discipline – then it is a decision heaven endorses. In other words – He is talking about church discipline – really the very opposite of what some people try to make that verse mean.

But based on that misinterpretation you have loose fellowships, home Bible studies, para-church ministries, university Christian groups and all manner of Christian meetings calling themselves 'fellowships'. Now this is obviously better than people who claim to be Christians but never gather, but we still have to ask – is this the church? When people gather in these ways – are they in fact going to church? Is this where corporate worship takes place? When is a local church a local church?

I believe we can see a basic minimum of a local church in the New Testament. I suggest it is this: *'Born again believers regularly gathering under the headship of the Lord Jesus Christ, organising according to the New Testament pattern, to hear His Word and to carry it out'*.

It is certainly more than this, but it can never be less. If it is less than this, then it is not a local church according to the Bible, and thus it is not a place, however helpful it might be on other fronts, where corporate worship can take place.

Acts 2:40-47 *And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation." ⁴¹ Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. ⁴² And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. ⁴³ Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, ⁴⁵ and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. ⁴⁶ So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.*

'Born again believers' (2:41)

Almost every epistle begins with the words "To the saints who are at..." A church must be made up not of Christians only in name – but those who have repented of their sins and confessed Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. They have been called and regenerated. They are new creations and sense the Spirit in their heart, crying Abba, Father.

'Regularly gathering' (2:42)

A local church is not a haphazard gathering, but a regular gathering. We see in **I Corinthians 16**, Paul expected the church to gather on the first day of the week. It might gather more, but a church gathers at least on the Lord's Day.

'Under the headship of Jesus Christ'

This is the crucial thing. A church is a church when it is His sheep submitting to His authority. A bunch of sheep going along on their own way might all be headed there together, but if they are not following the Shepherd's leading, then they are not, in the strict sense, a Shepherd's flock. They're just a group of sheep.

"According to the New Testament Pattern"

The church is a NT entity, and the NT gives instruction for its ordering: two offices, two ordinances, autonomous churches, worshipping according to prescriptions, calling for involvement and responsibility from each believer.

When a group of sheep are following a shepherd, they are his flock.

Now, what is the Shepherd's voice for us? How do a group of gathered, born-again believers hear the voice of their Saviour? Where is it found?

It is found in The Word of God –

Acts 2:41-42 "apostles' doctrine"; "gladly received his word".

Word of God faithfully declared. Not simply the Bible taught. The Bible accurately taught; not edited, not watered down, not warped, not used to teach man's ideas, but truly taught by letting it speak.

IN particular, the church is to hear God's pattern for the church taught in the New Testament.

By qualified spiritual leadership. **1 Timothy 3**, and **Titus 1** give the qualifications of an elder. All through I Timothy, the emphasis is to be devoted to conveying Christ's Word – teaching His doctrine. That is His rod and His staff. And He delegates that rod and that staff to under shepherds who declare that Word with their lips and their lives.

When a gathering of believers does not have an under shepherd(s), wielding The Great Shepherd's Rod and Staff in the form of clear preaching and teaching – you do not have a church. You might have a gathering of believers, but to be a church, Christ's authority must be present. It must be present in the form of accurate exposition of His Word, done mainly, but not only, by elders whom He calls. You might have one sheep in there bossing the others around. But if he is not called, and he is not delegating Christ's commands – it is not a church. The last two parts of this definition follow naturally.

To hear His Word

A local church gathers to hear what our Lord is like, and what He expects. If believers gather to simply enjoy one another, to have social welfare programmes, to perhaps do some ministry to the Body of Christ, to do evangelism to the lost – those things might be valuable – but if that is all they do when they gather, then that gathering is not a church, because Christ's authority is not present.

And to carry it out

- Baptism, Lord's Supper, holiness of life, evangelism, reverent worship, serving one another.

Now, as I said, the church is more than that (prayer, praise, meeting needs, informal fellowship, Lord's Supper and baptism, evangelism), but it can never be less.

When you are in such a place – you are in a local church, and you can worship corporately.

So then, what must we do? However God leads you in the future, it is your duty to be worshipping God corporately somewhere. You must always seek to be in a Biblical local church to worship Him corporately.

1) Find a local Biblical church.

Use this definition – born again believers regularly gathering under the headship of Jesus Christ to hear His Word and to carry it out.

Ask: What is their understanding of the Gospel?

Meet the people.

Who are the leaders? Do they meet the qualifications of I Tim 3, Titus 1?

Do they preach what God has said? Is the emphasis on pastoral preaching?

Does the church carry out God's Word? Baptism, Lord's Supper, holiness, evangelism, reverent worship, love for one another.

2) Join that local church.

It is Biblical to come to a church once you are happy with it and say – “I wish to join. I want to submit and serve”. Consider for a moment **Romans 16:1-2**. Why was it necessary for Paul to write this church a letter of commendation for Phoebe? It was necessary because a letter of introduction was used to commend her to the church so as to be accepted into the church. Why do that, if it was okay for Phoebe to just pitch up and keep on pitching up? Clearly Phoebe wanted to join the church, and to join she needed a ‘reference’ so to speak, and Paul gave her one. The inference is that there is a difference between people who simply attend and people who join.

I think the best way to see it, and we'll come back to this in a few weeks – is the idea of a covenant. A covenant is an undertaking by one or both parties to do something for the other, even to their own harm. That's why most covenants were sealed with blood. A covenant is entering into a deep bond – to say, I am committed here. I am committed to you all, and I ask you to be committed to me. It says to the Shepherds – count me in. If I stray, get me back.

Example of an extract from a Church Covenant:

Having been led, as we believe, by the Spirit of God, to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour, and on the profession of our faith, having been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, we do now in the presence of God, angels, and this assembly, most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another, as one body in Christ.

2. Believing our chief purpose is to glorify God and to exalt the Lord Jesus Christ, we covenant to worship the Lord together in the power of His Spirit and the light of His truth.

This is the difference between merely dating someone and entering into the marriage covenant.

3) Submit to Christ's authority as exercised through the preaching and leadership of the elders.

Worshipping Jesus Christ must be done His way, according to His instructions. So how will you know how to do that, except if you listen to His voice? And where will you hear His voice? In His Word faithfully declared by the pastors – publicly and privately. Let all things be done decently and in order (**1Co 14:40**).

Worship is supposed to take place according to God's order. When that order is not followed, worship is either limited or impossible.

10 Believing in the divine conception and preservation of His Church, we covenant to regularly participate in worship, and support the church's discipline, doctrine, and its God-ordained leadership; furthermore, to give it a sacred pre-eminence over all institutions of human origin.

4) Attend regular informal and formal meetings.

We see in **Acts 2**, the church met 'daily'. We also see them meeting house to house. There were formal meetings, and there were informal meetings. And those who joined were longing to be with each other as much as possible.

How often would you like an opportunity to praise a King?

Surely you would want to avail yourself of as many opportunities to worship your Lord as possible. If worship takes place when believers gather, then gather as often as possible.

5) Serve – one another ministry.

We have seen before that worship is not a performance you watch, it is an activity you engage in. Corporate worship means functioning as an active member, not as a passive spectator. Don't be a 'hitchhiker' Christian.

As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God (**1Pe 4:10**).

I treasure my individual audiences with the King. But nothing is like the public celebration. But it doesn't take place any old how. He manifests Himself to believers who live under His authority. That means gathering together under His headship to hear and carry out His Word.