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THE WONDER OF CORPORATE WORSHIP

BY COREY ABNEY '98

Have you ever sent a picture of an overwhelming experience to someone, only to have them respond in an underwhelming fashion? I recently visited some scenic and beautiful locations within the Rocky Mountains just outside of Denver, Colorado. The views were absolutely breathtaking: snow-capped mountains, expansive valleys, jagged cliffs, and awe-inspiring sunrises that looked like the sky was on fire. My wife and I live in a flat, sandy community just outside of Tampa, Florida, so the mountains, valleys, cliffs, and sunrises were especially astounding.

I found myself taking countless pictures as I gazed at the immense beauty that was evident at every turn. Of course, I sent the best pictures to my family back home, hoping to share the overwhelming artistry of God's creation with them. The problem is, they couldn't fully grasp the majestic views I experienced. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but my photos couldn't fully capture the beauty of what I saw with my own eyes. A picture or video, no matter how excellent in quality, cannot fully communicate the majesty of a mountain range that is experienced in person.

We run the risk of settling for a picture of corporate worship.

A PICTURE OF WORSHIP

Similarly, we live in a time where the landscape of Christian worship has shifted dramatically due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many Christians are worshipping at home on televisions, mobile devices, tablets, and computers out of necessity, not just convenience. Thankfully, we have the technology available to facilitate corporate worship and small-group gatherings during a global pandemic.

These digital platforms provide avenues to connect with other believers when we can't connect in person, either due to government mandates or health and safety concerns. However, an inherent danger exists with the online options that are so readily available to us: We may be tempted to think that such options are a permanent substitute for corporate, in-person gatherings. That is a very real concern for those of us who are now accustomed to the convenience of worshipping in the comfort of our homes.

We run the risk of settling for a picture of corporate worship instead of seeing and savoring the enthusiasm, energy, and encouragement of being there in person. We risk missing out on the blessings of seeing it with our own eyes, sharing in it with other believers, and joining in with our hearts and voices. We can easily overlook the profound difference between observation and participation.

PERSONAL AND MUTUAL

God has called each of us to worship in a manner that is both personal and mutual. We are made to fellowship with God and others so that our worship reflects a growing up (fellowship with God) and a growing out (fellowship with others).

We can easily overlook the profound difference between observation and participation.

We see a beautiful description of this shortly after Pentecost and the establishment of the church: "And they

devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). The early church began to meet together regularly, on the first day of the week, for worship, teaching, communion, prayer, and fellowship. People from various backgrounds, ethnicities, and social demographics assembled as one body to grow in their faith and encourage each other.

The weekly gathering of such a diverse crowd for such a unified purpose was a beautiful reflection of the Gospel. These gatherings are described as something more than an event or activity; rather, they are characteristic of a body whose parts are working together to ensure greater health and viability. The Apostle Paul reminds us, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:12–13).

Let's gather with grateful and cheerful hearts, delighting in the God Who saved us and Who is worthy of our praise.

WE NEED EACH OTHER

As members of Christ's body, we are made to worship and fellowship with other members. One member cannot say of another, "I have no need of you," because we need each other!

Yes, we need each other. We need fellowship. We need corporate worship. We need to gather together with other members of the body of Christ. As the author of Hebrews encourages us, "Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (Heb. 10:24–25). Therefore, as our country opens up, and it becomes safer to meet together, let's gather with grateful and cheerful hearts, delighting in the God Who saved us and Who is worthy of our praise. When it comes to the privilege and blessing of collective worship, don't settle for a picture or a video, because there's nothing better than being there in person.

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DR. ABNEY'S COUNSEL FOR PRACTICING COUNTER-CULTURAL KINDNESS

Robert Putnam published a well-known book in 2000 titled, "Bowling Alone," in which he claims that Americans are far less social than in years past. He offers some intriguing statistics to bolster his argument: club membership is down 40%; full-service restaurant patronage is down 25% while fast food dining is up 100%; and perhaps most troubling, personal engagement with neighbors and friends is down almost 50%. Therefore, Putnam concludes that Americans are "bowling alone."

Without question, our society is more individualistic than ever before, and the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the problem. We have more challenges to social engagement today than at any other point in our nation's history. But even with the obstacles in our culture, Christ-followers have tremendous opportunities to build meaningful relationships and establish Gospel on-ramps with our friends and neighbors.

In fact, the decline of kindness and hospitality in our society presents an opportunity for Gospel neighboring to stand out all the more. We have incredible opportunities to invite others into our homes and our churches. We have the privilege of being counter-cultural with a hospitality and generosity that is Gospel-centered. Therefore, as Jesus illustrated in Luke 14, let's go into the highways and the hedges to invite everyone we can! Our kindness and hospitality are needed now more than ever before, and, without question, God will use them to bring others into His Kingdom.