

Mere Christian Worship

Rich Nathan

July 3 & 4, 2021

Let's Rebuild

Nehemiah 12:27-47

Have you ever been part of a wave in a stadium? If you've attended any football or baseball or basketball game in the last 25 years, somebody has probably jumped up to their feet and begun a wave.

I want to try it here at Cooper and at the campuses. This is audience participation time! If you're watching this online, you can do this by yourself or with your family. If you are at one of our campuses or here at Cooper, if you're facing the stage, starting at the left we're going to start a wave.

Do the wave.

Every weekend a wave of worship spreads across the world like a wave in a stadium. Just about the time on Saturday evening when many of us are cleaning up the dishes from dinner, the wave begins in places like Manila in the Philippines where it's Sunday morning already. And thousands of people are on their feet, lifting their hands praising God and yelling "Jesus is Lord!"

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Photo of Philippines

Then the wave spreads westward into New Zealand and across Australia, through time zone after time zone. Then the wave of worship hits China. Millions of Chinese believers join in in quiet worship services in thousands of house churches throughout China.

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Photo of Chinese house church

As the wave builds it covers India where Indian believers gather in tens of thousands of churches across south Asia.

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Photo of Indian church

Then it's on to the Middle East and Africa where believers across the African continent sing and dance and worship the Lord. All the while, historic churches in Europe are caught up in it.

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Celebrating communion

The wave of worship leaps across the Atlantic and spreads to massive Pentecostal churches throughout South America to US mega churches

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Megachurch

Around the world people line up in Catholic churches to be served the communion wafer. In Nairobi, thousands of people meet outside accompanied by lots of drums and rhythmic clapping. In Texas, a worship minister stands up and leads the congregation in the first, third and fifth verses of hymn number 242, "What a Friend we Have in Jesus". And in a store front church in Brooklyn, people fall out in the Spirit, while speaking in tongues and prophesying. So many different styles of worship!

And in churches around the world, we Christians judge each other and say, "You can't be part of this worship wave." "You can't shout or scream and call that Christian worship!" "You can't dance in the aisles or use a smoke machine and think that that's part of worship." "I used to go to a church where the leaders wore a bunch of robes and there were smells and bells. Only dead churches conduct worship like that. You have to worship the way we do to be part of the worship wave!"

In 1952, my favorite author, C.S. Lewis, published a book called *Mere Christianity*. The book was adapted from some talks that C.S. Lewis had given over the radio during the Second World War where he encouraged the English people to turn to Christ in the midst of the war. Apart from the Bible, *Mere Christianity* certainly ranks among the top five or ten most important Christian books of the last century. The reason that it's titled **Mere** *Christianity* is Lewis said, "I want you to picture a large house with a central foyer to various rooms out of this central hall. This central hall represents what we Christians have in common. Lewis called our common faith "mere Christianity". The rooms off of the foyer are where we gather in our local churches and enjoy the fellowship and different flavors of our individual branches of Christianity.

Lewis wrote *Mere Christianity* to talk about what we have in common with each other across denominational lines. Today, what I want to do as we begin to wrap up this series from the book of Nehemiah is to talk about Christian worship and the common elements that characterize all Christian worship regardless of denominations, regardless of church or cultural background. What is common about all Christian worship? What does the central foyer of Christian worship look like? I've called today's talk "Mere Christian Worship". Let's pray.

Slide Nehemiah 12:34-35a, 36b-38

³¹ I had the leaders of Judah go up on top of the wall. I also assigned two large choirs to give thanks. One was to proceed on top of the wall to the right, toward the Dung Gate.

³⁴ Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, Jeremiah, ³⁵ as well as some priests with trumpets,

³⁶ ... Ezra the teacher of the Law led the procession. ³⁷ At the Fountain Gate they continued directly up the steps of the City of David on the ascent to the wall and passed above the site of David's palace to the Water Gate on the east.

³⁸ The second choir proceeded in the opposite direction. I followed them on top of the wall, together with half the people—past the Tower of the Ovens to the Broad Wall,

Let me describe the pageantry of this particular worship service arranged by Nehemiah. The extended thanksgiving and celebration service on the city walls as they rededicate themselves and the walls and the city and the temple to the worship of God. Nehemiah arranged for two choirs – I'm not sure where they started – they may have started on the west side of the city walls. There were two choirs that proceeded in opposite directions –one going counterclockwise and led by Ezra. They went along the southern wall and then proceeded north until they got to the temple. Nehemiah was part of the choir that traveled clockwise up toward the northern wall and across the northern wall until they came south again and met Ezra's choir at the temple.

Now, what principles do we draw from Nehemiah 12 that ought to characterize all Christian worship. Whatever style we adopt, whether the worship involves choirs or a rock band or smoke machines or hymns or shouting, what is common to all Christian worship?

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What is mere Christian worship?

No matter what worship style we adopt – high church, low church, Pentecostal, Baptist, Methodist.

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Mere Christian worship is God-centered

Slide Nehemiah 12:46

⁴⁶ For long ago, in the days of David and Asaph, there had been directors for the musicians and for the songs of praise and thanksgiving to God.

There's so much discussion in churches today about creating "a worship experience". Highly paid Christian consultants come in to churches and engage in "secret shopping". They evaluate the worship experience. How singable are the songs you've chosen? How skilled are the musicians? What is the sound quality like? Does it all tie together? They help church leaders figure out whether the consumer of worship – you guys – have a great experience and will return. Many of us as church goers are like church consultants. We go home and we say, "Did you like worship today?" "I enjoyed it very

much. How did you like it?" "I really don't like the way so-and-so leads worship. I really prefer X."

I love the way one pastor responded when somebody criticized the worship. The church member said, "I didn't like today's worship. I like our old songs better." This pastor said very sweetly, "That's ok. Because, as you know, we weren't worshipping you!"

All Christian worship, whatever the style, is to be God-centered. The aim, the goal primarily is to please God, not us church goers! The worship leader exists as a kind of matchmaker, a sort of dating service in which the worship leader's job is to introduce us to God and then get out of the way. If all the attention is drawn to the worship leaders, they are doing something wrong. Ultimately, worship leading is about connecting worshipers to God. To get us to touch God, so we can be changed into his likeness as we express our love for God and we experience his love for us. All Christian worship of any kind should be God-centered, not human-centered.

Here's the second thing:

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Mere Christian worship involves singing

Slide Nehemiah 12:27

²⁷ At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, the Levites were sought out from where they lived and were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals, harps and lyres.

By singing you have the privilege of joining the wave of worship. Please don't just stand or sit watching the stage. Even if you're like me – a terrible singer – when we sing we join God himself. He is a singer. Here's what we read:

Slide Zephaniah 3:17

¹⁷ The LORD your God is with you,
the Mighty Warrior who saves.
He will take great delight in you;
in his love he will no longer rebuke you,
but will rejoice over you with singing."

We worship with songs and instruments. Third -

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Mere Christian worship requires sacrifice

Slide Nehemiah 12:47

⁴⁷ So in the days of Zerubbabel and of Nehemiah, all Israel contributed the daily portions for the musicians and the gatekeepers. They also set aside the portion for the other Levites, and the Levites set aside the portion for the descendants of Aaron.

You read down this portion of Scripture – verses 44-47 – it mentions contributions, first fruits, tithes, continual giving, universal giving. The wealthy and the poor, men and women, singles and married, all gave part of their wealth to God. The worship of God involves not just singing, but sacrificial giving. I think to some degree we've lost something in the contemporary church regarding the way we conduct the weekly giving – our financial offerings to God. Most of us these days give online and it can be like paying another bill. Those of us who have signed up online to give to the church, you might be like me and sign up at the beginning of the year and the amount is deducted monthly from our accounts. I don't even think about it. Or we text a number on our cell phones. Some of the technology has broken this connection in our minds between giving and worship.

Some of the traditional Baptists churches, after the offering plate is passed through the congregation, the deacons take the offering plates from the back of the room and they walk down the middle of the aisle and they put those plates on the altar and it's clear to the congregation that giving is part of our worship. Not just singing. Giving these gifts to God.

Let me ask you a personal question. If you are a follower of Jesus, do you regularly give financially to the Lord? Are you tithing to God? Do you need to start? Or restart giving to the Lord? You are not worshipping the Lord unless you also give financially to the Lord!

Fourth,

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Christian worship involves preparation

Slide Nehemiah 12:30

³⁰ When the priests and Levites had purified themselves ceremonially, they purified the people, the gates and the wall.

I believe that the reason why most of us most of the time don't have a great worship experience is not because songs the worship leaders chose are the wrong songs. The reason why most of us don't experience God in worship is not because of the sound system or the presence or absence of a smoke machine or the quality of the worship leaders' voices. I believe the reason why our worship experience is often so minimal is because our personal preparation for worship is so minimal. We simply have not prepared ourselves and prepared our hearts for public worship.

I'll tell you friend, if you would take 10-15 minutes before church to pray, to read a bit of Scripture, maybe to take a brief walk and give yourself to God. If you would privately worship God before you came to public worship, if you made a commitment to come to public worship on time – not 20 minutes late but on time! And your heart was warmed up and ready to respond when worship began - the atmosphere of our public worship would be different. If thousands of you, as you now return to in person worship, came each weekend prepared to worship, we would take the roof off.

Singing, giving, God-centered, preparing ourselves. What else is common to mere Christian worship whatever the worship style? Here's the fifth thing:

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Mere Christian worship involves celebration

Slide Nehemiah 12:27

²⁷ At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, the Levites were sought out from where they lived and were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals, harps and lyres.

Slide Nehemiah 12:43

⁴³ And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.

I love that phrase in verse 43, they were rejoicing because God had given them great joy.

Have you ever rejoiced with great joy? I felt that way the day my son got married. I could not have been more pleased with his choice of a bride. And then to have the privilege of standing up there and performing the wedding of my son. We're going to have the opportunity to celebrate together as a church and hopefully with our community as the church throws a block party at all of our campuses on Sunday, July 18.

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Block Party

There will be food and music and fellowship. There will be clowns and lions and tigers and balloon rides and pony rides and a fly over by the Blue Angels. If you are in town, plan on being there! That's a little bit of what worship ought to feel like = rejoicing with great joy!

You might be saying right now, "Rich, my week has been terrible. You have no idea what I'm going through. This past year has been the toughest year of my life. If you heard my story, you would not encourage me to celebrate right now. Pastor, you would

weep with me. I'm doing well just to drag myself to in person church. If mere Christian worship involves celebration, you can count me out! I can't participate because tears are running down my face right now."

The Apostle Paul has a wonderful little phrase that I think describes what a Christian ought to be like when they are going through a hard time.

Slide 2 Corinthians 6:10

¹⁰ sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

I love that phrase. Do you know, Christian friend, that it is possible to weep and yet at the same time still be able to rejoice? What we read in the New Testament is that God's people celebrate not only when the circumstances in their life, in their families, in their careers and weeks and years, are going well. In the New Testament, God's people celebrated even in the midst of severe trial and hardship. We find God's people worshipping the Lord while they are in jail. They worship God after they've been beaten. They worship the Lord after they've been persecuted. The reason they are able to rejoice even though they are sorrowful is because their faith enables them to see beyond the present circumstances to the victory achieved by Jesus Christ at the cross and by his resurrection.

If the cross in the New Testament means anything, it means victory over our enemies. It means the defeat of Satan and sin and addiction. If the resurrection of Jesus Christ means anything, it means victory over our circumstances and, yes, it means victory over death and hell itself.

Maybe you had a terrible week or a terrible year or decade. I never want you to feel like your pain is being minimized or dismissed by anyone in this church. It may be that your circumstances right now are truly awful. Maybe you can't celebrate any victories right now in the area of your health or the health of a loved one or your finances or your relationships. But when you come to church and you take communion with us each week, you take that bread in your mouth and drink from the cup. You are saying by faith, "I know that Jesus Christ has the last word!" The last word is not sickness. The last word is not heartbreak. The last word is not tears. The last word is victory! The last word is overcoming! The last word is Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead and he will raise me up! And he will raise up this sick relative who I love.

When we come to church we can celebrate regardless of our present circumstances.

Mere Christian worship involves celebration. And finally:

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Mere Christian worship involves thanksgiving

Everyone wants to hear “Thank you”. Every mom wants to thank you when they’ve prepared a great dinner. Every dad wants to hear thank you when they teach their kids to drive. Every spouse wants to hear thank you for something they did or said that was kind. The words “thank you” are wonderful to hear. Here’s what we read:

Slide Nehemiah 12:27

²⁷ At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, the Levites were sought out from where they lived and were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals, harps and lyres.

Slide Nehemiah 12:31

³¹ I had the leaders of Judah go up on top of the wall. I also assigned two large choirs to give thanks. One was to proceed on top of the wall to the right, toward the Dung Gate.

One of the things that should characterize Christian worship, whatever the style, is thanksgiving! Friends, the truth is that we’re often not truly thankful for some good in our life until the thing that we’ve taken for granted gets threatened – maybe it is our job or our health or the health of a loved one or money in the bank or a relationship we have. Until something is threatened, we often just take it for granted. Of course, somebody like us should enjoy good health. Of course, our loved ones should always enjoy good health. Of course, we should always be employed. Only when blessings in our lives are threatened and our health or the health of a loved one is threatened do we realize that nothing has to be. Everything that we have is a matter of grace. Do you know this one? That every good thing in your life is a gift. Everyone you love is a gift? Do you say thank you?

This past year, meeting together in our beloved church week after week, what we have taken for granted for 40 years as a church was threatened. We didn’t meet in person for almost a year. As we could regather and see one another in person, oh friend, that’s a gift. We have something to be thankful for every week just because we can meet together.

And you know – when we Christians come together in person and take communion each week – we are saying thank you to God! Another name for communion or the Lord’s Supper is the Eucharist. It comes from the Greek

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Eucharistia = Thanksgiving

The communion or Eucharist is the Christian’s thanksgiving meal we say thank you, Jesus for his life, for his death, for his resurrection and ascension and all that he has given us and will give us!

Mere Christian Worship

Rich Nathan

July 3 & 4, 2021

Let's Rebuild

Nehemiah 12:27-47

What is mere Christian worship?

1. Mere Christian worship is God-centered
2. Mere Christian worship involves singing
3. Mere Christian worship requires sacrifice
4. Mere Christian worship involves preparation
5. Mere Christian worship involves celebration
6. Mere Christian worship involves thanksgiving