

WHERE IS THIS SERVICE GOING?

(Excerpted from [Vertical Church](#), pages 186-192. Footnotes correspond to the book end notes.)

Someone has rightly said, “If you don’t know where you are going, any road will take you and you won’t know when you get there.” How many Christians attend weekly worship services where this saying is lived out? Songs flip between testaments, between testimony and ascription, between themes and genres and every other manner of back and forth with frequently no discernible rationale. Again, the Scriptures provide our model for how service content should flow. My goal here is not a thorough exegesis of the finer points of temple furnishing, though each is surely filled with significance, but only to show progression. For that reason the simplicity of the tabernacle that preceded the temple makes my point more clearly. An ascent, a gate, a courtyard, the Holy Place, and the Holy of Holies make up the five separate spaces in a tabernacle worship experience. This was the sequence followed by worshippers approaching the tabernacle and later coming to Jerusalem for Passover. For an illustration of this see www.verticalchurchbook.com/chapter5. Obviously the worship would reflect subtle differences in each of the spaces culminating in the Holy of Holies. That Holy of Holies experience is the goal of every worshipper every week in a Vertical Church. While the priest went behind the veil only annually on the Day of Atonement, we understand that the curtain that kept the ark isolated was torn top to bottom in the death of Christ. How awesome that we can all enter boldly through the **“veil, that is, His flesh.”**³⁷ In fact, we are not only **allowed** to come into the Holy of Holies, but we are also welcomed as sons and daughters through faith in Jesus Christ. Experiencing the glory that is only found there should be the goal of every New Testament worship service. For many years we have found great profit in building our “worship sets” around the progression of worship reflected in these progressive spaces.

1. Worship as We Arrive

“I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD.’”³⁸ The psalms of ascent make it clear that worship was beginning even as the OT saints made their way up

to Jerusalem. We have no reason to doubt this same pattern existed in the time of Moses. The frequency of weekly worship marks the cadence of our lives and forces reflection upon God's activity since the last time we stood in this place. An energetic service opening should stir participation and promote exuberant praise to the God who has gotten us back to His house after another week. Whatever starts the service should call attention to God's sustaining activity since we were last here. The psalms of ascent direct our gaze Vertically by lifting up our eyes, looking to the hills, etc., and provide the rationale for beginning every service with a similar call to worship. Worshippers back then could not be expected to voluntarily or automatically shed the patterns of thinking that prohibit full engagement with God just because they arrived at the tabernacle, and today is no different. A good call to worship echoes the psalms of ascent with their analogies to God surrounding His people like the mountains surround Jerusalem or the vanity of seeking to build anything apart God. The call to worship can include a Scripture reading of confident exclamations regarding God's faithful provision, a brief exhortation about the priority just ahead, a creative reading or a song that captures people's attention and connects them fully to what is about to begin. A call to worship can also be directed to the LORD, inviting His glory to come down and His presence to be manifest. **"Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness!"**³⁹ We must not assume that everyone who enters the worship center is ready to offer praise and the call is the part of the service plan that elicits engagement at the fullest level from the totality of those present. Every step forward in service content must be chosen to advance the goal of manifest glory. Notice in this scripture how the worshipper anticipates the place of God's presence. **"Come, bless the LORD, all you servants of the LORD.... Lift up your hands to the holy place and bless the LORD!"**⁴⁰ A Vertical service seeks to reflect biblical patterns of worship progression so that the experience can be most helpful to the worshipping community and most welcoming to God.

2. Worship at the Gate

Each of us knows the joy of reaching a destination after an arduous journey and entering the place we envisioned during our travel. The excitement peaks as we begin to engage with the One in whose honor we have gathered. After the call to worship, the service should include a

jubilant expression of thanksgiving, echoing the psalmist prescription, **“Enter his gates with thanksgiving”**⁴¹ in our hearts. We must view such scripture as more than random verbiage without impact on today’s service planning. The tempo here is upbeat and enthusiastic as one might expect in an initial celebration of arrival. Scriptures read at this part of the service should parallel those themes. We generally use six to eight different elements in a worship service plus announcements, offering, sermon, close. I can’t overemphasize the importance of thoughtful progression through those elements. We need to stop shuffling service parts randomly and set our sights on a goal, something we are moving toward in every service element. If that goal is not a life-altering encounter with the God of the universe, then what is it? If that is our goal, then we have to ask ourselves where that would happen, what content would get us there, and what our participation looks like upon arrival? Start with a call to worship that gets everyone on board for the journey ahead, then engage the soul of every worshipper with celebratory gratitude: **“Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.”**⁴²

3. The Courts of Testimony

We arrive at worship as individuals or biological families and discover afresh as we begin that we are part of the larger family of God. Together in Christian community we have the incredible opportunity to testify to one another about the faithfulness of God from our current experiences. During this third segment, the songs are testimony songs. It is unfortunate and distracting when worship leaders do not recognize the difference between a song of exulting thankfulness to God and a song of testimony to His works among us. If you think about it carefully, you will recognize that “How Great Is Our God” is a very different song than “Lord, I Lift Your Name on High.” Both are incredible gifts to the church, the former is suitable to arrival at the place of worship and the latter a song of testimony perfect for progression in community toward the Holy Place: **“One generation shall praise Your works to another, and shall declare Your mighty acts.”**⁴³ Here our worship team frequently stops the singing and has some element of “body life.” It could be a live testimony or a powerful story enhanced by onsite video that reminds everyone of the real-world God we are exalting. The congregation may stand through the story and burst forth in further

fervent praise as it ends. (Follow the links at the end of this chapter for actual examples.) It could be worshippers lining up at microphones to read a scripture that has proven true in recent experience. It might be an invitation for people to come to the front kneeling over burdens they carry in prayerful submission to God. It might be groups forming circles across the sanctuary and praying on a common theme or spontaneously for one another. During this time, we also frequently give the announcements the believing community needs to hear and receive the offering as further expression of worship: **“Ascribe to the LORD the glory of His name; bring an offering and come into His courts.”**⁴⁴ I picture the courts of the tabernacle as the coming together of worshippers in community and unity then heading together to the Holy Place.

4. The Place of Preparation

The Holy Place was the private area where the priests prepared the sin offerings to be taken into the Holy of Holies. The Holy Place had several significant pieces of furniture that focused upon the faithfulness of God to His people and prefigured the glorious truths of the gospel. Further it was here that the priest washed, dressed, and readied *himself* for the Holy of Holies where the ark of the covenant waited. After the focus upon testimony in phase three, the content of what we sing and say in this part of the service again turns to the Vertical. The songs are noticeably more about God Himself and laying hold of sovereign God and His sufficiency. Just as the priest had to follow a carefully prescribed preparation before going behind the curtain, so we must make sure we have wrapped ourselves afresh in the robe of Christ’s righteousness. Songs of repentance and cleansing as preparation for the Holy of Holies express our holy fear of going any further into His manifest presence unprepared. This is a wonderful place in the service for the Lord’s Table and creative elements about our identity in Christ and His finished work on the cross: **“Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? And who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart.”**⁴⁵

5. The Place of Holy Presence

After a recent flood in my basement and generous insurance settlement, I set about to rebuild what had to be torn back to studs and a concrete floor. Though I have woodshop experience and like to make furniture and toys for the grandkids, I knew my sincerity was not sufficient skill to make our basement a welcoming place of beauty and relaxation. Simply put, I had to admit that someone with refined talent and proven ability in finished carpentry could greatly exceed what my sincerity alone could accomplish.

There is a skill in service planning that ushers people into the manifest presence of God, and sincerity is not enough to succeed. We must stop giving this job to a single person or to an inexperienced staff member without enough theology to even understand what the goal is. Nowhere is that lack more apparent than in the vast majority of services that never come close to level-five adoration.

In Holy of Holies worship, we experience what the hymn writer described as “lost in wonder, love, and praise.” Here there is not a syllable of testimony or even a small scrap of “what God has done for me.” No one is clapping anymore as the joyful exuberance has been eclipsed by the awesome presence of almighty God Himself. Many of the songs sung in this climactic portion of the service we have had to write ourselves. Very few songs are written today or have ever been penned that are true Holy of Holies, throne-room songs. Nothing about me, everything about God; nothing about God’s actions on our behalf, only about His exalted splendor and surpassing beauty. No benefit to us other than the joy of being lost in who we’ve found, the ultimate satisfaction we were created to long for. The fulfillment that can be found only when God is rightly adored in whole-person worship by the entire congregation and glory comes down. The outcomes of this are predictable after twenty-three years of going for glory every week. We don’t always “get there”, but it’s what we shoot for every time we meet. When we do “get there,” people weep and wonder how they lived without it. People get saved, sin gets confessed, and humility flows like a river restoring marriages, reconciling relationships, and spreading the unity of the Spirit. To be in that presence is to be gladly small, reduced to the reality of my minute existence and relieved to admit the truth about myself in the presence of glory.