

When 'Flexible' Is Too Rigid

Do you desire God's presence? What a powerfully probing question, and one the modern church should be asking of itself.

It's also a question I have wrestled with for years. I'm concerned that the presence of God is undervalued, and in some cases ignored, by today's church. By reading the biblical account of the naming of the child Ichabod (1 Sam. 4:19-22), we see the consequence of the loss of God's presence. On the other hand, the account of Obed-Edom (2 Sam. 6:9-12) shows us the benefits of God's presence among us. I have concluded that if we want the blessing of God in our lives and churches, we must have His presence. The modern church in America has made attending services all about the experience rather than the encounter with God's presence.

Generally speaking, I believe that for far too long, the modern church in America has been relying upon formulas, methods and gimmicks rather than the manifest presence of God. We seem to lean more upon our social media presence than upon God's presence. We've grown more dependent upon man's ability than God's anointing. And then we wonder why the church has lost her influence in our culture. My observation is we've chosen to be cool and relevant rather than salt and light. Our clever ideas and charismatic personalities can never replace the presence of God.

Several years ago, I came to the determination that our church was at a crossroads. I felt it was time for us to reframe and refocus our perspective on the need for God's manifest presence among us. We needed to turn our attention and our energies back to creating an environment our services were seeking. And hosting God's presence was a priority. We needed the manifestations of God's presence evidenced among us in unexplainable yet undeniable ways. I desperately wanted the

wonder and amazement factor back in the local church.

As I researched, I discovered that throughout human history there have been significant, sovereign seasons of God's grace where He chose to pour out His manifest presence upon a people and a place. Those seasons often came in response to those people taking God at His word. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God made humanity an irrevocable promise when He said, "You shall seek Me and find Me, when you shall search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you" (Jer. 29:13-14). The proof of desire is in the pursuit.

Pursuing His Presence

Do you desire God's presence?

My search began in the spring of 2008 when I seemingly stepped into a new season of my relationship with God. At that time, I felt as though we, as a church, were just going through the motions.

I felt dry. I felt empty. I wanted more. I began crying out to God from a place of desperation and brokenness. In my prayer time, I would hear myself say "God, I want more of You in my life." I knew something was missing. I knew something had to change.

I know now—but I didn't know then—that this happened because I was relying more heavily on programs and processes than on God's presence. I was operating out of routine and religiosity rather than a vibrant relationship with God. I was dealing with the unintended consequences of doing church without the manifest presence of God.

Several days later, as I was praying, I sensed God say to me, "My presence changes everything." From that moment until now I have been on an up-and-down journey of sorts. I have been on a quest, a pilgrimage and have sought to lead our church on it as well.

At times distractions created detours and those detours created discouragement. We've had our highs and lows as well as mountaintop and valley moments. At times as a leader, I found myself wandering aimlessly in a wilderness or in a cave filled with frustration. At times we felt God's nearness, and at other times, we didn't. All along our journey we have experienced twists and turns, but as the psalmist said, our hearts are "set on pilgrimage" (Ps. 84:5b). We pressed on in our pursuit of God's manifest presence.

I fear that the modern church is guilty of sacrificing God's presence on the altar of numerical church growth. I know the trend today seems to revolve around being relevant and cool even if it means we must sacrifice the manifest presence of God in our services.

Once we decided to prioritize the presence of God, things began to shift in the Spirit realm. We intentionally turned our attention to creating an environment where the pursuit of God's presence was priority. It became our "one thing" as David spoke of in Psalm 24. Like David of old, pursuing God's presence became our magnificent obsession.

As a result, we scrutinized, analyzed and evaluated every aspect and component of our church services. We quickly realized that if God's presence was to be our top priority, we needed to make room in our services for Him.

One day in a staff gathering, our executive pastor, a prophetic voice in my life, said, "Being flexible is still too rigid. We must become fluid." This thought allowed us to become more open to the leadership, timing and direction of Holy Spirit. As we became more and more dependent upon Him, we noticed His gifts functioned and manifested more frequently.

As we made room in our services and gave instruction, prophecy, prophetic words, prophetic singing and worship became more commonplace among us because we created an

atmosphere for God to move. The more room we made, the more we experienced His presence in our services. We experienced a noticeable shift in our spiritual atmosphere.

Manifesting His Presence

As I continued to teach, preach and lead with God's presence being a priority, I found that our people grew in their hunger and thirst for more of God in their lives and our church. I remember many years ago hearing Dr. Kenneth E. Hagin proclaim, "The Bible says we reap what we sow. If we want to see people saved, preach on salvation. If we want to see people healed, preach on healing." From, I determine that if we wanted the presence of God to become evident in our church services, I had to make preaching on it a top priority.

I have since spent much time preaching on revival and God's presence. As a result, we are continuing to experience greater measures of God's manifest presence in our services. We are as Scripture says, moving "from glory to glory" (2 Cor. 3:18b, NKJV). God's presence truly changes everything. People are being saved, people are being healed, marriages are being restored, lives are being changed. God is moving among us and present in our services because we have made room for Him.

We discovered another key ingredient on our journey when we intentionally shifted our praise and worship environment and allowed Holy Spirit to interrupt our predetermined flow. The atmosphere shifted dramatically. Various members of our worship team began to lead out in a "spirit song" during the prophetic transitional moments in our worship. As a result, those spirit songs have given birth to new songs written and published by our team that are consistent with the season we are in. This has also led to a more robust response in worship participation by our congregation.

We learned in the process that the best way to make someone hungry is to eat in front of them. Our worship team members

demonstrate a genuine hunger for the presence of God as they lead, and this has been reflected in a more significant hunger for God's presence. We have also discovered that a partnership between those leading and those participating creates an environment that attracts God's presence. This principle is found in the account surrounding the dedication of Solomon's temple in 2 Chronicles. We realized that divine patterns produce divine results.

As the church continued to grow and develop our worship culture, I periodically found myself floundering in my pursuit. At times I had to fight off the feelings of failure as I wrestled with my own frustrations regarding the manifestation of God's presence in our services. No doubt we had some good services, but we also had some not-so-good services. I felt as though we would take three steps forward and two steps backward.

In the late spring of 2016, another principle was put in place for us. It occurred one morning while I was reading my Bible. I "happened" to be reading 2 Corinthians 13:14 in Eugene Peterson's *The Message* when my eyes focused upon his recorded words and the "intimate friendship of Holy Spirit." I paused momentarily in my reading as I heard Holy Spirit say to me, "It's time to reintroduce Me to your congregation."

I knew exactly what He meant.

Because of abuses and excesses in the church world, and to some degree in our own church, I had withheld preaching on the person and power of Holy Spirit. But on Memorial Day weekend 2016, I launched a 10-week series on Holy Spirit. We laid aside our doctrinal and denominational handbooks and picked up our Bibles to learn about the person of Holy Spirit and His activity in the local church from a purely biblical context. We sought to keep out any of our previous experiences—whether good or bad—and lean most heavily upon the Scriptures.

For 10 weeks, I prepared and presented 20 messages on cultivating an intimate friendship with Holy Spirit. I was convinced we could not attain intimate friendship until we knew Him better.

As I did, our hunger and passion for the pronounced presence of God continued to intensify. What we were soon to discover was that the more room we gave God in our services, the more He moved among us. The more time we allocated to our pursuit of God, the more we experienced His presence. We learned a powerful lesson in this season: "What we hunger for, we seek to be filled with."

Stewarding His Presence

God's presence became our spiritual craving. Jesus said in His Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, For they shall be filled" (Matt. 5:6). I found myself leaving a day of worship services hungrier than I entered, so I began telling our congregation, "I leave hungrier than I came in." We cultivated a deeper hunger and thirst for God's presence, which fueled an atmosphere of expectancy.

I experienced this in my personal journey as well. Each time I returned to my devotions, each time I returned to my prayer time, each time I sat before the Lord in soaking worship, each time I went to a church service, I left hungrier than I entered.

After attending a conference in Nashville, we followed our normal practice of conducting a debriefing to hear the takeaways from those who attended. I gave my takeaway last so as not to overtly influence the responses of others. I told them my takeaway was "We can have excellence without sacrificing the tangible sense of God's presence."

In a follow-up meeting about branding, the individual leading the meeting asked me, "What do you want Life Church to be

known for in this community?" After some brief discussion, it all boiled down to one statement. "We want to be a church that hosts the presence of God because we believe His presence changes everything."

After having read the account of young King Asa in 2 Chronicles, I was convinced that what it takes to bring people in, is what it takes to keep people in. Personalities and programs come and go, but the presence of God draws people, and we simply need to host His presence well.

Another element that contributed to our quest came our way when I was reading some historical accounts of previous moves of God. I knew there were men and women who had labored long and hard to see an outpouring of the presence of God in their generation. But once the outpouring occurred, and that generation passed from the leadership scene, the move of God was not sustained.

God then impressed on my heart this thought: In order for a move of the Spirit to be sustained, it must be stewarded. I saw in the historical records that the churches involved did not guard, protect or steward well what God had entrusted to them. Some time later, in a quiet season of soaking worship, I sensed Holy Spirit say to me, "Steward well what I am doing in your life and church. I am calling you to steward what I am releasing."

One principle we put back in place is an emphasis on pre-service prayer. Every Sunday, a large group of intercessors gathers in the sanctuary for nearly an hour before our 6 p.m. service. We talk about this gathering as preheating the oven before cooking the turkey. Now when people attend, they enter an environment that has been spiritually preheated. The Sunday evening service is our most important gathering of the week. It's not unusual for the 5 p.m. prayer meeting to flow seamlessly into our 6 p.m. service.

What I just described is where we are currently on our journey. I can sum it up best using the words of Paul to the Philippians, “Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing *I do*, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:13-14).

We’ve not arrived. We are on a journey, still learning lessons and excited at what lies around the next curve in our road. Do you desire God’s presence? If you do, remember this: The proof of desire is in the pursuit.

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