



LAKERS FANS AND CORPORATE WORSHIP

NBA basketball aficionados, please take note: watching the Lakers play basketball and corporate worship are very similar. I know that some Lakers fans worship the mahogany floor that “Kobe the MVP” dribbles the basketball on, but that’s not what I mean. Basketball fans root for their teams in many ways, depending on their degree of interest, time and resources. My son tells me that I’m not a loyal Lakers fan because I’m only interested in watching their games when (a) they are winning, and (b) when their game is on TV and it doesn’t conflict with my busy schedule. He calls me a “fair-weather” fan (he uses the word “fan” loosely with the appropriate measure of disdain), who only cheers when the team is winning, but becomes very negative when they’re losing. I plead “nolo contendere” to that charge.

The true-blue (or purple in this case) Lakers fans attend every game at Staples arena. Year after year, they buy season tickets, regardless of whether or not they can afford it. They believe that the best way to be a Lakers fan is to be physically present in all their home games and to be totally engaged in cheering and encouraging the players throughout the game. This way, they share in the highs and lows of their games throughout the season. You can see them act like fools in the stands; but often, these fans make a big difference in the Lakers’ home game wins.

Many Laker fans cannot be present at Staples arena at every home game, so they watch the game on TV. To get in the mood of sports spectatorship, you watch the game with some friends (who are all Lakers fans, of course). You yell and scream throughout the game, cheering the Lakers (or calling the players stupid). Yes, you experience some excitement because of the “game time” atmosphere, but it’s not the same as being at Staples arena. The difference: you watch the game, but you are not in the arena to cheer on the players.

If you happen to be driving during the game, you can only listen to the radio play-by-play broadcast (“Thank you, Chick Hearn. It’s in the refrigerator, the Jello is jiggling.”). You rely on someone else’s description of what’s going on. And you can’t really be too involved in listening because you have to focus on your driving.

Then there are so-called fans who neither watch Lakers’ games on TV nor listen to the radio broadcast; they just ask, “Did they win or lose?” They don’t have the interest or the time to get involved in watching the team play, to cheer them on. And then there are those who are not really into sports (What planet did they come from?). They couldn’t care less about how the Lakers are doing (That’s right, they can’t tell Kwame from Shaq!).

Since moving to Southern California some forty-five years ago, I have experienced all of the above, depending on my level of interest, available time and cash flow. But as I reflect upon my history of Lakers “fanhood,” I’m convinced that it’s really no different from the many ways I can get involved in corporate worship. For example, I remember the time when I attended church because I had to. I was not really into worship and I didn’t care to understand the different parts of the church services. It was always

the same anyway. So, I went to church but I didn’t worship.

There was the time when my friends told me about a certain preacher, so I listened to his sermon tapes. His messages helped me make sense of my spiritual life back then. I even attended the preacher’s church to hear him speak. It was much better to see him in person, but I was oblivious to the other parts of their church service. So, I listened to the preaching but I didn’t really worship.

About twelve years ago, I heard about a worship “style” that engaged people into participating in church services. The informal format and “contemporary music” appealed to them and prepared them for the preaching. Many churches that were into this style were growing exponentially. I wasn’t experiencing this in my church, so I started attending the weekend services of a “mega-church” in Orange County. I was introduced for the first time to being “engaged” in worship. I was wonderfully amazed. I felt being in “worship mode” from beginning to end. In fact, I didn’t want the services to end. And it didn’t matter then that my personal taste in church music had to undergo a major alteration. For the first time, I was not only taking in bits and pieces of a church service, I was worshipping God the whole time I was in church.

About three years ago, Gospel Life became aware of God’s intention to take us to a higher level of worship. Many of us didn’t think that we were ready for this. We didn’t think that there was anything wrong with what we had. In fact, we had already come a long way from where we used to be. But God caused us to realize that though we worshiped in an atmosphere that prepared us to receive God’s Word, we were not really experiencing the manifest presence of God. Consequently, our worship was not a response to His presence but our reaction to a “worshipful” environment (a very important distinction now).

We couldn’t tell the difference then, but now, to me it’s like the difference between the Lakers fans who go to the game at Staples arena and the fans who merely watch the game on TV, who listen to the radio, and who just ask for the final score.

I thank the Lord for giving me the opportunity to praise Him and to desire His manifest presence in our corporate worship every Sunday morning. I don’t want to miss any part of it (beginning, middle or end) because it’s when I sense His manifest presence and feel His divine touch that I experience being in His throne room in my spirit. And that’s when I respond to Him in true worship and become open to receive His Word and blessings.

Jesus said, “*God is Spirit and His worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.*” (John 4:24) There’s a big difference between attending church services and being engaged with God in true worship. If you can’t tell the difference, you’re not a real Lakers fan or a worshiper in “spirit and in truth.” Don’t be satisfied. God’s dream for you is that you experience intimacy with Him every moment in the midst of corporate worship.