

# **Worship the Lord!**

**Tony Gray and Dennis Merry**

Salt and Light Ministries

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## Foreword

“What is hidden in the roots will be revealed in the shoots.”

This has been one of the lifelong principles by which I have sought to live and build. Experience tells us that what the roots of the plant are like, and what they feed on, determines what sort of fruit grows; where the foundations of a building are shaky, time and disaster will reveal it; where the most simple flaws are not spotted, dreadful disasters can follow – as when a basic defect in the fuel system of the Challenger space craft cost the lives of seven brave astronauts.

So it is with people. What we believe in our hearts will eventually determine how we live, how we build and what we end up with.

This “Roots and Shoots” series is not so much an attempt to define the distinctives of our family of churches, but rather to ensure that all our beliefs and practices are firmly rooted in the Scriptures.

Many people have asked us over the years: “Who are you and what do you believe?” While our structure may appear to be somewhat nebulous, nevertheless the understanding of our common beliefs needs to be clear and unambiguous.

We are a family of churches that believe we are to be “sons of the kingdom” sown into God’s earth. The key that transforms “the word of the kingdom” into “sons of the kingdom” is *understanding* (Matthew 13:23). In the Lord’s first parable of the kingdom (the Sower), the ‘word’ of the kingdom – the seed – when properly received and understood produces fruit. In the second parable of the kingdom (the Weeds), we discover that the fruit has become the seed, and that the seed is “the sons of the kingdom”. The word, bearing fruit, producing seed as sons of the kingdom, planted in the world! That is our prayer for this series of books.

Barney Coombs



## Introduction

Recently, while I was thinking about how to start this book, I received a phone call from one of our past students. He had been reflecting on the meeting of his fellowship that Sunday morning. His words were: “We need a *theology* of worship. It’s important to have the Word undergirding our worship so that it is an expression of mind as well as emotion. Christ is with us; worship is not a matter of stirring up his presence; it is making a proper response to his presence.”

What is ‘a proper response’ to the presence of the living God in his awesome power and holiness? If worship is the essence of that response, then much that we *call* worship must surely be called into question.

I read recently in a Christian music magazine an article which described someone as being “in the premier league of worship leaders”. Now I have no doubt that this particular person carries a wonderful anointing as a musician, songwriter and leader of congregational singing; but the language suggests that worship is some kind of entertainment to be enjoyed or experienced, rather like a football match; and that, like the football match, it has its ‘star players’. And this is just what it has become for many – an experience, a technique, something felt or enjoyed as an end in itself, preferably done for us by ‘star players’.

Now I am not suggesting that true worship is not enjoyable, nor that there is no place for the skills of musicians and singers; but simply that this subjective view of worship is inadequate and even misleading.

The commercialisation of worship music through CDs, concerts and music publications is not without its dangers too, as it creates ‘fashions’ to follow and standards impossible for local fellowships to attain to – leading them to feel that they cannot worship ‘properly’ without high quality (and expensive!) equipment and a specially anointed worship leader, albeit in a lower league than the one I read about.

Anglican theologian Tom Wright introduces his book ‘For All God’s Worth’ with these words: “How can you cope with the end of a world and the beginning of another one? How can you put an earthquake into a test tube, or the sea into a bottle? How can you live with the terrifying thought that the hurricane has become human, that fire has become flesh, that life itself came to life and walked in our midst?” (Tom Wright, ‘For All God’s Worth’, SPCK Triangle) Our response, as he goes on to express it, can only be one of “sheer unadulterated worship of the living and true God.”

Worship is not an end in itself. Worship has *an object*. We do not simply *worship*; we worship *God*. The implications of this uncomplicated fact are enormously important. Our understanding of worship must be defined, not in terms of aesthetic experience, but in terms of the nature and character of the One we worship, our Father God.

In this book, Dennis Merry and I have tried to explore these implications. In the first six chapters, I outline something of the Biblical principles for worship; in the following five chapters, Dennis seeks to make some practical applications of those principles. We have not tried to smooth out the style of writing, so the point at which there is a change of writers will be fairly clear! But then, worship can be as varied as those worshipping, or as those writing about it!

We can hardly claim this book represents a ‘theology of worship’ or a ‘manual of worship’ in any fulsome sense; but perhaps it is at least a starting point. Jesus tells us that the Father seeks not just worshippers, but a certain kind of worshipper – those who worship him in spirit and truth. Hopefully this little book will help us to become such.

*Tony Gray,  
on behalf of the authors*



## Chapter 1

# **The Root of Worship**

### **Tall Trees, Shallow Roots**

Part of the grounds of Whitchester House (the home of King's Bible College) is given over to woodlands which help to shelter the House from the prevailing north-westerly winds. The trees are mostly conifers which have grown very tall. Conifers are shallow-rooted and each winter we lose a number of them as they are torn down by the wind because they have become too tall to be kept secure by their roots.

Their outward and visible form is not adequately sustained by their hidden roots. The storm-winds of winter uncover the reality not apparent in gentler seasons.

Outward form without inner depth – tall trees with shallow roots – has been one of the constantly repeated weaknesses of the Church down through history. But this inclination did not begin with the New Testament Church.

### **Strong Words from the Prophets**

The prophets of the Old Testament frequently challenged Israel for this very failing. For instance Amos, addressing the Northern Kingdom shortly before its fall in 723BC, said this:

“I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies.

*Worship the Lord!*

Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them.

Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them.

Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.

But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never failing stream!”

(Amos 5:21-24)

Despite the fact that their ‘forms’ of worship – sacrifices and offerings, sacred assemblies and feasts – had been originally ordained by God himself, they had become meaningless to him, because they were not matched by an inner reality. This inner reality – the root that should sustain the outward form – consists of an appreciation of *who it is* they were worshipping. Their Feasts, offerings and music had become ends in themselves – exciting and enjoyable, relevant, up-to-date, employing the latest instruments and musical styles (see Amos 6:5, “You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments”); but it was all empty.

And why was it empty? Because the words and actions were not coming from hearts that *appreciated God for who he is*. Justice and righteousness are prime characteristics of God. He is righteous and just. Unless their hearts and lives recognised and reflected this, their worship, however ‘biblical’, was an empty ritual. My friend William Nisbet has put it like this “Worship is a loving response to God’s mercy and grace in our lives and it can only happen as we receive a revelation of who God actually is.” (From “A Few Words about ... Worship”)

Just over a century later, Jeremiah brought a similar message to the people of Judah. They were convincing themselves that they were safe from the Babylonian invaders because they had the Temple with all its traditions and ceremonies. Surely the LORD would never abandon those things! But Jeremiah warned them: “Do not trust in deceptive words and say, ‘The temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!’ ” (Jeremiah 7:4) They thought that as long as they performed the Temple ceremonies they were safe; God would always be there. But a few years later the Temple was destroyed, the priests killed or exiled, and the

people dispersed. They were uprooted because there was no deep root, no inner reality to sustain the outer form. Their hearts and lives did not reflect the character of the God they claimed to worship. They forgot that worshippers of a holy God must themselves be holy.

Six centuries on, the Lord Jesus would be saying the same thing about the Pharisees, of whom he once said, quoting from the prophet Isaiah: “These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain ... ” (Matthew 15:8-9). The mouth-heart gap is the problem! The outward expression, in order to be true, must reflect an inner stance – a knowledge and understanding of the one worshipped.

### **Intimacy and Intensity**

True worship comes out of *intimacy* – a buzz-word these days. But we must not confuse intimacy with *intensity* of feeling or emotion. Worship has as much to do with the mind as it does with the heart. Intimacy involves knowing and understanding – thinking as well as feeling.

Old Testament scholar T.D. Alexander comments concerning the worship of Israel as prescribed in Exodus: “Worship, to be true, must be based on a right perception of God. The book of Exodus emphasises the importance of knowing God as he truly is, and not as we imagine him to be.” (From *Paradise to the Promised Land*, Paternoster Press).

In his conversation with the Samaritan woman recorded in John 4 – which we will consider in detail in chapter 2 – Jesus says of the Jews in contrast to the Samaritans: “You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we (Jews) worship what we do know ... ” (John 4:22), suggesting that the Jews’ worship was more significant than that of the Samaritans, because, at least theoretically, it was linked to a more accurate *knowledge of God*.

The point is: true worship *knows*. It has a right perception of, and proper recognition of, its object. Indeed it grows out of that knowledge and recognition. Our English word ‘worship’ comes from the Anglo-Saxon *weorthship* – worth-ship. Our worship is an expression of the *worth* or *value* we place on our relationship with God. It is something objective, understood and thoughtfully expressed; a means to the end of yielding

ourselves to God; a recognition of our relationship with him and of his sovereign rights over us.

### **Inward before Outward**

True worship is not primarily something for our *enjoyment*. It is not even in some sense something we *do* (an *act* of worship is probably just that – an *act*). First and foremost worship is an *attitude* – an inner stance of heart and mind toward God. This attitude gives rise to a *lifestyle* consistent with our knowledge of the character of God. Only then is worship, in the sense of an expression in words, music and creative demonstration, a meaningful thing.

Outward demonstration without inner attitude and lifestyle-commitment is not real worship. It is empty ritual, regardless of whether it follows a hallowed traditional form or is expressed in a contemporary ‘free’ style.

True worship is rooted in the value we place on God himself in our hearts – an outward expression drawing on the inner reservoir of intimate acquaintance with a holy God. Anything else is a hollow pretence, a shallow-rooted tree, vulnerable and easily blown over by the cold winds of difficult circumstances, disappointments, frustrations and even lower league worship-leaders!

## Chapter 2

### **This Mountain or That Temple?**

In John chapter 4 we find the record of a remarkable encounter which led to a very important conversation. But to appreciate its significance, we first need to look back into history.

#### **How a Prejudice Began**

In the year 723BC Samaria, the capital city of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, fell to the Assyrians after a three year siege. As was their policy, the invaders deported large numbers of the people to other parts of their Empire – a move designed to break any resistance. They then brought in peoples from other lands to populate that region. These people intermarried with the Israelites who had been left behind, resulting in a mixed race who came to be known as *Samaritans*.

By Jesus' time there were strong feelings of antagonism and prejudice between the Samaritans and the Jews, so much so that Jews did not normally travel through Samaritan territory – they didn't even want their dust on their feet! Jesus, characteristically, ignored such prejudice in order to keep a divine appointment – a meeting with someone who was not just a Samaritan, but a woman and a social outcast as well. (It was not the custom for a Jewish man to talk in public with a woman; and the fact that she came to the well outside the town at noon, when the other women would not be there, indicates her non-acceptance in society.)

## A Quite Remarkable Conversation

This surprising encounter is the context for a quite remarkable conversation on our subject – worship.

Jesus initiates the discussion by asking the woman to give him a drink from the well (v7). Her surprised reaction reflects the normal state of affairs between Jew and Samaritan, between men and women: “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (v9) Jesus immediately takes the conversation to a new level with his offer of *living water*. “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” (v10) Note those words “*if you knew ...*” The woman is responding to the situation from her perception of the outer ‘form’ – a Jewish man, a Samaritan lady, a drink of water. Jesus invites her to see beyond the outward form to a deeper, inner reality – the Son of God, a sinner, eternal life.

She, however, is locked into outward form: Jacob’s well is deep – and Jesus has no bucket! (v11) So Jesus presses home the point: you don’t need a bucket for this water! “... the water I give ... will become ... a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” (v13) She begins to grasp what he is saying (v15); but note that her response is entirely *subjective*. “Give *me* this water so that *I* won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here.” Effectively she is still concerned with the outward form – how this living water will affect her experience; how it will help her to feel good.

Jesus then cuts through to the heart of her life with a word of knowledge about her relationships with men (v16-18). This stops her in her tracks! This is not ‘feel-good’, this is ‘face-truth’! She is now engaged at the level of her *thinking*, not just her *needs*. The desire for subjectively pleasurable experience is having to give place to a seeking for objective truth. Interestingly the implications of her seeing Jesus as a *prophet* challenges her ideas about *worship* (v19-20). She recognises that this encounter has to do with much more than meeting her needs; it is going to radically alter the way she understands her relationship with God. Does it mean that she will have to adopt the Jewish way of worship?

The Samaritans had the Law of Moses but not the writings of the Prophets. They believed that Mount Gerizim, in their Northern territory

overlooking Shechem, was the authentic place for sacrifice. (A tiny community of Samaritans can still be found today at the same spot, now called Nablus.) Does her acceptance of the living water mean that she will have to abandon her traditional way of worship? Is the Temple in Jerusalem a more authentic place? (v20)

Note that her concept of worship has still entirely to do with *place* – with external location and expression. She is still thinking in terms of outward form – worship according to *this* tradition or *that* tradition (or *this* ‘freedom’ or *that* ‘freedom’!). But Jesus now gets to the heart of the matter. “Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem.” (v21)

### **The Question has Changed!**

Such questions as, “Where do we worship? According to which tradition do we worship? What style of worship is best?” are not the issue. Up to that time there *had* been an issue, and Jesus recognises that the Jews had had the better understanding (v22). They had worshipped according to knowledge. But now that Christ has come, even the Temple – modelled on past revelation – will not be the measure of true worship. Something greater than the Temple is here – so Jesus declares in Matthew 12:6. If our debates about worship centre around location, conservation of tradition versus contemporary freedom, musical style or our own emotional satisfaction, then we are missing the point entirely. For none of these things is the measure of worship. Neither the Mountain of tradition nor the Temple of past revelation is adequate. A completely new understanding is required.

## Chapter 3

### True Worshippers

If ‘true’ worship – and the true worshipper – is not to be found in the context of the ‘Mountain’ of tradition or the ‘Temple’ of past prophetic revelation, then where is it to be found?

#### Outward Experience or Inward Reality?

Bearing in mind that the whole conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman focused on the conflict between the outward experience and inner reality (well water or living water; feel-good or face-truth), the central point emerges clearly: true worship is not measured by *outward* experience but by inward *reality*.

Both tradition and past revelation are surpassed by the fundamental truth which Jesus now declares: “ ... a time is coming and has now come when the *true worshippers* will worship the Father *in spirit and in truth*, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks.” (John 4:23, my italics)

*Where* do we find worship? In spirit. *How* is worship expressed? In spirit. *What* characterises true worship? Truth and reality – not ‘feeling good’. We will return to the implication of ‘in truth’ later.

If the Samaritan woman looked confused at this point, then we may well sympathise! Just what does Jesus *mean* by “worship the Father in spirit”? Here we come to the heart of the matter, as Jesus answers the unspoken question: “God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and truth.” (v24)



## **Spirit God, Spirit Worship**

There are actually two statements in verse 24:

1. God is spirit
2. his worshippers must worship in spirit and truth

What is the connection between the two? The key is in the little word “must”, meaning “it is necessary that ...”. We can translate the sentence a little differently to emphasise this, as follows: “God is spirit and it is necessary that those who worship him, worship in spirit and in truth.”

There is no room here for the uncritical acceptance of past tradition or the unquestioning embracing of contemporary relevance. The one guiding factor that defines true worship is that *it accords with the one being worshipped – the Father*.

Because God is spirit then his worshippers **MUST** worship in spirit. The Mountain of tradition and the Temple of past revelation are not significant now. They have been instructive and useful in their time – but their time is over. In the new order of things God can only be worshipped according to his true nature. Worship must accord with reality. The true nature of worship can only be understood in the light of the nature of God himself. God does not live on a mountain top, nor in a temple. God will not be located in that sort of way ever again after the coming of Christ.

## **The God who Won't be Shut In**

The Samaritan view of God kept him as the remote God of Law – the stern judge, ruling by moral code and traditional practice. The Jewish view of God, however, was based on a fuller knowledge of God as the God of the Law *and* the Prophets. For them he was the dynamic God, intervening in word and action in his people's lives. The Tabernacle, as a mobile focus for their worship, reflected this dynamic relationship well. But the Temple that replaced it, magnificent though it was, was fixed in one place, which led to the localisation of God in their thinking and so to the limiting of his power. As soon as this happened, as Jeremiah so vividly saw, God destroyed the Temple.

So the Jews rebuilt it! By Jesus' day it was a splendid and remarkable building (Mark 13 v1). But Jesus clearly pointed out that it was no longer significant and that its stones would once again be cast down (Mark 13:2 – which in fact happened at the hands of the Romans in 70AD. God's desire is to have a people who will worship him *in spirit* not *in temple* – nor in church!

Down the centuries Christians have tried to shut in God – in churches, in chapels, in sanctuaries, in “the House of God”. But God keeps breaking out! For his dwelling place is not in a building, but in the heavens – and in the hearts of his saints. Listen to what he says through Isaiah:

“Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool.

Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be?

Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being? ...

This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.”

(Isaiah 66:1-2)

God is spirit and he will be worshipped in that light.

## **Beyond Our Prejudices**

God would have us go beyond our ‘Samaritan’ prejudices – the legalism and traditionalism of much denominational Christianity. God would have us go beyond our ‘Jewish’ prejudices – the more relaxed and responsive dimension of charismatic evangelicalism. God would have us go beyond any and every of our western prejudices; beyond a worship prescribed by generational relevance, contemporary style, or free expression; beyond the outward to the inner reality; beyond the feel-good to the face-truth.

To worship in spirit.

## Chapter 4

# God is Spirit

“God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit ... ”  
(John 4:24). But what lies behind this statement?

### Getting Behind the Words

To begin to understand what it is to worship in spirit we must explore the theological statement which defines it. True worship and theological truth go hand in hand. It is difficult to worship a God we do not know or do not understand. Tom Wright puts it like this: “The closer you get to the truth, the clearer becomes the beauty, and the more you will find worship welling up within you. That’s why theology and worship belong together.”  
(For All God’s Worth)

So, what do we understand the words “God is spirit” to mean? If we can *understand* those words better, it should help us in our *perception* and *practice* of worship. So let us turn here to the theologians and their careful gathering of all the evidence of Scripture to see what help they can give us in getting to the substance of these words.

Let’s take a look at those aspects of God’s nature which describe his essential being and the implications of all that for our worship.

### Spiritual not Physical

God is a spiritual being, not a physical, material being. That means that God’s worth or value, therefore, is not measurable in material terms. In

fact, on the few occasions when the throne of God was made accessible to the sight of humans – as with Isaiah (Isaiah 6), Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1) or John (Revelation 4) – the result was so awe-inspiring, if not terrifying, that the prophets struggled to find words which were adequate to describe what they saw. The throne of God just does not belong to the realm of sight and touch. It belongs to the spiritual realm.

God is spirit. In both Hebrew and Greek the word for “spirit” also serves for “wind” and “breath”. Like breath, like the wind, God has no tangible form. He cannot be located. He cannot be *more* in one place than in another.

### **God Caught in a Temple?**

When Solomon built the first temple he actually understood this. At the building’s dedication he prayed: “But will God really dwell on earth with men? The heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain you. *How much less this temple that I have built!*” (2 Chronicles 6:18, my italics)

But later generations would assume that very thing – that God *could* indeed be contained by the temple.

We, of course, are not so naive. We do not have a holy mountain or a holy temple. But ... are we not sometimes guilty of seeing worship in material terms? In terms of outward expressions, of music, of aesthetic experience? What do we mean when we ask, “How did the worship go this morning?” or “Did you enjoy the worship last night?” True worship – worship in spirit – is not something so tangible, observable or measurable in terms of successful presentation or intensity of experience. Worship has to do with the *value* we place on God – his *worth*-ship – not with externals.

### **The Value we Place on God**

The important question is this: “What value was placed on *God* in our activity this morning?” “Did our coming together express adequately the worth of the Father?” “Did we respond properly to the dignity, majesty and splendour of the God of the universe?”

How ‘well’ something ‘went’ (that is, the musicians in tune, the PA under control and not squeaking, the worship leader getting the ‘right’ songs), or how much ‘I’ enjoyed myself are all side issues. The real issue is: *to what degree was the Father honoured as God?*

True worship belongs to the inner realm of the spirit. It is something which flows from the inner depths of our being where the Holy Spirit fuses with our own spirits to honour the Father and the Son. True worship is an *inner attitude* before it is an *outward activity*. The corporate activity we call ‘worship’ is only meaningful as an outward expression of the inner stance of a humble, dependent spirit. Our individual responses are magnified and focused in our togetherness, according the greater honour to the Father.

Out of this first and fundamental point that God is a spirit being, other aspects develop. To these we turn in the next chapter.

## Chapter 5

### **Worship in Spirit ...**

God is spirit. As we have seen, this is a fundamental truth which profoundly affects our perception of worship. The fact that God is a spirit-being implies certain qualities in his mode of existence. Let's look at these qualities now and see the implications for the way we understand what it is to worship. (For a fuller discussion of these qualities see Tony Gray's "*What is God Like?*" in the Roots and Shoots series.)

#### **God is Invisible**

God is invisible. We don't need to embellish that statement; the point here is simply that if God is invisible – beyond our physical sense – then true worship is also in some sense 'invisible'. In other words, it does not consist of visible outward actions done to impress other people or to fulfil what is expected of us. It is not measurable by volume of singing, demonstrable intensity of emotion, or physical posture.

We miss this when we assess the worship of others by such outward signs, or when we use such to convey to others the message of our spirituality. If these outward expressions are not *real* responses to the presence of God, then they are nothing. In fact, worse than nothing, they are a pretence. Equally, of course, worship does not necessarily consist of quietness, impassive faces and immobility!

The point is this: true worship is not to be evaluated by voice, face or body language. It exists, or not, in the *invisible realm of the heart*, of which

God alone is the assessor. We owe nothing to the expectations of other people, but everything to the honour of God.

### **God is Personal**

God loves us Person to person. True worship will reflect this deeply personal dynamic. True worship is personal and private before it is corporate and public. How often – honestly now! – do we sing along with everybody else, but we are actually masking the poverty of our own relationship with the Father?

Our worship *together* can only be the sum of our *individual* worship – the sum of the value we individually place on our relationship with God.

### **God is Living**

God our Father is not static, impassive or inactive. He is the Living God, interacting with his children. He is the Creator of all living things in their infinite variety and kaleidoscopic beauty. Worship in spirit will throb with the same life, the same creative power.

In most charismatic fellowships today the ‘worship’ time is remarkably predictable – almost as much as a liturgical service, and often with less substance. Passively we follow the worship-leader, heads and hands raised to the Great White Screen! Now in big Celebration Meetings it would be difficult for it to be otherwise; but all too often the same pattern determines smaller congregational and small group meetings. Most of us have become *passive responders* rather than *active initiators* of creative worship.

Thankfully, so many worship-leaders are themselves true worshippers that the barrier of passivity is often broken through. But how much better it is when our vibrant Creator God is honoured by vibrant creative worshippers whose inner heart of worship, honour, love and devotion is ready to overflow in a moment!

### **God is Self-sufficient**

By that we mean, God is not dependent on any external stimuli. He is all that he needs in himself. True worship – worship in spirit – will reflect

this independence from external support. It will not be dependent on feel-good emotions, comfortable surroundings, skilled musicians, the ‘right’ songs, or indeed, any external factors.

All the stimulus we need to worship is *God himself*. True worship flows from the spirit, from the life of God within us, regardless of feelings and circumstances.

## **God is Eternal**

God exists beyond time. He is not trapped in time. He is not limited by time. Time is necessarily an important factor for us. None the less, true worship will transcend our awareness of time for it will reflect eternal values, celebrating God’s character and virtues. Do our sacred programmes squeeze out the space to really worship? Too often our superficial expression of worship reflects our own time-hassled preoccupations rather than the serenity of eternity.

Worship in spirit will invest the time that we do have with quality. In our coming together the time taken to gain ‘lift-off’, because of our unpreparedness and our preoccupation with material concerns, is lost time. But when we come with worship in us, ready to flow out in response to God’s presence, time and eternity blend.

## **God is Infinite**

God is not limited by space. God is not held captive by circumstance or location. So worship in spirit will reflect this sense of the infinite, soaring beyond place and circumstance to the infinite room of the heavens. While ever our focus is ourselves, our own need, our own lack of ‘space’, our worship will be cramped and limited. There is incredible room in the human heart when our Father in the heavens dwells there and when he is our focus.

Because God is spirit, true worshippers must worship in spirit. There is no alternative. We *must* respond in worship to God as he really is – the God of *biblical revelation* not the God of our *human imagination*.



## Chapter 6

### **... and in Truth**

“... true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit *and in truth*, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit *and in truth*.” (John 4:23-24, my italics)

#### **The God of Integrity**

Worship in spirit, because God is spirit; worship in truth, because God is true. Our understanding of worship must not only reflect the *nature* of God; it must also reflect the *character* of God – that is his *integrity*.

In God there is no hint of deception, no trace of pretence. James, in his letter to early Jewish believers, put it this way: “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” (James 1:17) God’s constancy, consistency and integrity are fundamental to our understanding of him whom we worship. Just as our worship must be *in spirit* in order to correspond with God’s being, so our worship must be *in truth* – that is with reality and integrity – in order to correspond with God’s character.

This means that there cannot be any hypocrisy, any outward pretence in our worship. The outward expression *must* be true to the inner stance. Otherwise, it lacks integrity, and God has no more regard for it than he did for the hollow and pretentious ‘worship’ of Israel in Amos’ day when he said: “Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.” (Amos 5:23) They no doubt sang with great enthusiasm; they

no doubt played with great skill; but there was no integrity in it all, and so God could not bear to listen.

## **Dead Men's Bones**

Jesus had the same problem with the Pharisees in his day and his anger was just as sharp: “Woe to you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean.” (Matthew 23:27)

Unless the outward expression matches the inner stance our worship is just jarring noise putting a veneer over the reality of selfish hearts. We are whitewashed tombs full of dead men’s bones! The warning of the writer to the Hebrews needs to echo in our ears: “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire.’ ” (Hebrews 12:28-29)

The words we use in worship must reflect a reality that is in our hearts. The values we profess must be the values we embrace in our inner beings – and the values we live by. They must be real values and not pretended ones; living bodies, not dead men’s bones.

Our inner stance of worship and the outward expression we give to it must be in accord with the actualities of our lives, not some false construction of our minds which separates worship from ‘real life’. God is not mocked. He knows our hearts. If the brief occasions in which we gather together to sing and speak our love for the Father are the sum total of our worship, then we are poor indeed.

“Worship is a 7 days-a-week, 52 weeks-a-year giving of ourselves to God. It’s the offering up of our bodies as living sacrifices to him [Romans 12:1].” (William Nisbet, ‘A Few Words about ... Worship’) Worship is an attitude of heart and mind, a position of spirit that pervades the whole of our lives – or it is nothing.

## Living the Truth

To worship in truth is to live in truth, to live *the* truth. In the end, our lives, not just our words, constitute the truest worship. Listen to the prophet Micah:

“With what shall I come before the LORD  
and bow down before the exalted God?  
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
with calves a year old?  
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousand rivers of oil?  
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?  
He has showed you, O man, what is good.  
And what does the LORD require of you?  
To act justly and to love mercy  
and to walk humbly with your God.”

(Micah 6:6-8)

Or listen to the teacher of the law commended by Jesus as being “not far from the kingdom of God” on the basis of his words: “To love (God) with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” (Mark 12:33)

Or listen to the apostle James, the brother of Jesus: “If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” (James 1:26-27)

All of these agree that the truth has to be *lived* not just *talked about*, if our worship of the Living God, who *is* Truth, is to have any meaning. Worship, as an expression of our love for him, appreciating his worth and declaring our allegiance, demands the involvement of our whole heart, understanding and strength – emotion, mind and activity, feelings, thoughts and deeds. It involves living the truth, not just singing about it.

Appreciating all of this will help to make any individual expression of worship meaningful as the expression of a life-stance.

### **Worship as the Outflow**

Worship, in the specific sense of an activity demonstrating our love and appreciation of God and celebrating his love and grace, is the outflow of our relationship with him in a total life context. Such worship flows out of a deep respect for and knowledge of God, his character and his ways. To quote William Nisbet once more: “To worship in truth means that we love God as he *actually is* – a God of love, mercy and faithfulness, but also a God of righteousness, holiness, judgement and anger. We cannot and must not pick the ‘bits’ of God that we ‘like’ and disregard the rest – we worship him for all that he is.”

Perhaps, in this light, much of what we are accustomed to calling ‘worship’ is an outward form which covers over the real poverty of our relationship with God the Father and our shallow understanding of him and his ways.

It is time to abandon the outward show and to worship “in spirit and in truth.”

## Chapter 7

# Relationship and Lifestyle

### Pictures of Affection

It is always an interesting and revealing exercise to look at the various words and pictures that the Lord uses to describe his people. Jesus called his disciples his friends, revealing to them his heart and all that he had learned from his father. Paul's letters talk about being sons of God, the family of God, the body of Christ and of course, the bride of Christ. They are all descriptions that have to do with relationship and all have a warmth and affection about them. God's heart is for relationship. Jesus spent so much of his time talking about his Father, doing what his Father wanted, revealing his Father to people. The kind of relationship that Jesus has with the Father is the kind of relationship he came to establish with us. "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!" (1 John 3:1) The compassion that Jesus exhibited for people was motivated by the passion in his heart to reveal the Father to them, knowing that only through intimate relationship with him, would people's deepest needs be satisfied.

At the end of his encouraging talk to his disciples as he prepared them for the pain and loss they would suffer as he would be taken from them to be crucified, Jesus prayed to the Father. The prayer recorded in John 17 is a wonderful window on their relationship. There is a closeness and depth as he prayed for that same oneness that he and the Father had, to be in the disciples. Oneness is more than a *concept* that he wants us to understand;

it is a *condition* that he wants us to enter into. The most striking picture of the relationship between God and his people is surely the one that Paul uses in Ephesians 5:31-32: “ ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’. This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church.”

There is no more a vividly beautiful picture that illustrates oneness than that of a husband and wife, locked in the intensely, intimate embrace of sexual union as they express their love for one another. It is a picture of unparalleled closeness that the Scriptures use to communicate God’s longing for meaningful relationship with his people.

True worship of the true God springs out of our relationship with him and enables us to be drawn into deeper intimacy, as we adore and appreciate him with our expression of love. Love for God generates worship of God, as worship of God multiplies our love for him. The more we get to know him, the more we love him.

### **A Man with a Passion**

King David had such a love for God, which comes out with passion in some of his songs. Here are a couple of lines from one of them: “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?” (Psalm 42:1-2) There is such longing and desperation in these few words! The image of the deer breathlessly panting for water to quench its thirst expresses David’s own thirst and desire for God. The same intense longing is seen again in Psalm 63:1, as it describes the ache in David’s soul and body to be intimate with the Lord.

David had a relationship with God which produced some of the most beautiful and enduring pieces of literature ever written, known and read by millions. David was a worshipper responsible for a colossal amount of creative output as an expression of his relationship with God. David’s desire was for God himself, and his worship of him enabled his relationship to grow, just as knowing God generated a deeper love that could not help but express itself in worship. Worship is about relationship with our heavenly Father, the expression of closeness and intimacy towards the one that we

love, because he first loved us. And because it is about relationship, it will *affect how we live*. What we do, where we go, what we say, our attitudes and responses, should all be an expression of worship to the Lord. Worship must be a lifestyle.

## **Worship as a Lifestyle**

In his book, “A Body of Divinity” Thomas Watson wrote, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” There can be few statements that sum up the purpose of man more succinctly or more effectively. As 1 Corinthians 10:31 urges us: “... whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”

The whole of our lives are meant to bring glory to God; it is our *raison d’être*, the purpose for which we exist. This means that our worship of God is gauged in our behaviour and our attitudes and responses. Claiming to be worshippers of God whilst living self-centred lives is a contradiction in terms. Remember, we are seeking to worship God in spirit and truth, or, in reality. Worship is not a religious act we perform at a certain time of day, in a specific place or in a prescribed way. Worship is not primarily what we *do*, but what we *are*. It is the way we think, the way we speak, the way we act; it is how we respond and what our attitudes are like. Worship is a lifestyle.

Every time we make right choices, we worship God, because we bring him glory. Every time that we live the kingdom way, follow kingdom principles and exhibit kingdom qualities, we are worshipping God. Whenever we give to the poor or look after the fatherless, the widows, the orphans, the oppressed and downtrodden, we are worshipping God by bringing him glory. In Romans 12:1 Paul writes: “Therefore, I urge you, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship.” Our lives are our acts of worship and our very bodies are to be living sacrifices.

There is an interesting link between sacrifice and worship. When Abraham was told by God to go and sacrifice his son Isaac, he set out to do it with faith, reasoning as Hebrews 11:19 tells us, that God was able to raise the dead. But what a challenge to Abraham! Here he was, about to

kill the long-awaited, promised son who was to be the means by which God was going to bring the prophetic word to pass. Abraham was being required to offer God a living sacrifice; but he told his servants that he and Isaac were going to worship (Gen 22:5). Worship will often require sacrifice as we seek to live lives that reflect the glory of God.

2 Corinthians 3 has some rather startling things to say about glory. In verse 6 Paul talks about our being “ministers of a new covenant – not of the letter but of the Spirit.” He then goes on to contrast the glory associated with Moses and the Law with the glory associated with the ministry of the Spirit. He puts the two side by side and says there is just no comparison (v10), referring to the ministry of the Spirit as lasting and surpassing glory. As he continues to illuminate our minds to the enormity of what God has done, he brings things to a powerful conclusion in verse 18. “And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” Just as Moses’ face shone with the glory of the Lord, so too will we shine, but not with a glory that fades. The glory that we reflect is to be the glory of Christ through a transformed life. What we behold, is what we are to become; all revelation is designed to show us more of the God that we worship, in order that we become more like the God that we worship. To worship God by bringing glory to him, means sacrifice and a commitment to change, so that our lifestyle itself becomes worship, in our homes, at our places of work and play, and in our relationships with one another.

Worship is a lifestyle that flows out of intimate relationship with the God who is the source of all things, the very reason we exist. What greater purpose could we have in life than to glorify God with our whole beings and to enjoy him forever?



## Chapter 8

### **Advertising His Excellencies**

The more that we look at the nature of worship, the more we realise how all-embracing it is, involving our whole lives, reflecting his glory, as he transforms us into the image of Christ.

The purpose of worship could be defined as follows:

- to glorify God
- to make him known
- to express his character
- to become like him
- to extend his kingdom
- to be intimate with our heavenly Father
- to minister to God
- to express the image of God
- to find our life's fulfilment and purpose

There are no doubt other definitions which would be of equal value; but there is one verse of scripture that encapsulates most of the above and sums up our whole purpose for being.

#### ***That you may Declare ...***

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” (1 Peter 2:9)

The most significant word in this verse is the word “that”, because it indicates just why it is that God has saved us and made us these things. We are a chosen people! We are a royal priesthood! We are a holy nation! We are a people belonging to God! Why? *That* we may declare his praises. Our whole lives are to ring with the praises of the Living God! The root of this phrase “declaring the praises” literally means “to advertise or proclaim as a herald the excellencies of God (his character, mighty deeds and noble acts)”. To advertise the excellencies of God! What a commission! What a purpose!

We live in a world that functions through advertising. Marketing, image, corporate logos, packaging and presentation is a multi-million pound industry and is the life blood of our consumer society. Each of us is exposed to dozens of advertising strategies every day. We see them on billboards, read them in newspapers and magazines, pick them up from our doormats, watch them on our television screens and even hear them through our telephone receivers.

I once wrote to a particular car manufacturer, commending them on one of their TV advertisements. The values it conveyed reflected qualities of faithfulness and loyalty by the man in the advertisement to his wife as he resisted the flirtatious advances of other women. They wrote back enclosing a video containing three shots of the entire advert, commenting that they so rarely received positive feedback! One of the things that struck me as I watched this commercial was the realisation that huge sums of money were involved in producing and transmitting just one TV advert. In order to advertise the excellencies of their car, they had spent time and money on a theme, an image, a message, exotic locations, expensive sets, good looking actors, computer graphics, musicians, the orchestration and arrangement of a song sung by quality singers, and much much more. All this to advertise a car!

How much more should we, as the royal priesthood of the Living Creator God, “advertise and proclaim as heralds the excellencies of God, his character, his mighty deeds and his noble acts!” What effort, thought and expense should we be expending to fulfil our destinies to declare his praises? Under the old covenant the primary responsibility and purpose of the Levitical priesthood was to minister to the Lord. Now, under the new covenant of grace in Jesus Christ, all of God’s people are priests, not just a

chosen few. But the primary function and purpose of that priesthood remains the same: to minister to the Lord. It is so easy to forget this, allowing ourselves to be trapped into a mentality of service and activity, thinking that we are giving God what he wants. This happens with all of us at many levels. A. W. Tozer said this: “We’re here to be worshippers first and workers only second. We take a convert and immediately make a worker out of him. God never meant it to be so. God meant that a convert should learn to be a worshipper and after that he can learn to be a worker. The work done by a worshipper will have eternity in it.”

### **To *Him* First and Foremost**

As priests of the living God we are called to minister *to him* first and foremost, individually and corporately, in meetings and in life. The temptation to offer the Lord sacrifice instead of obedience is powerful and is common to us all. For instance, so many leadership teams of churches, under the weight and pressure of church business, succumb to this temptation again and again. With a limited amount of time in extremely busy schedules and a long agenda of business to deal with, so many leaders’ meetings offer God a quick blessing and a prayer for his help. After all, there’s too much to get through to be able to devote precious time to the Lord. But that is false economy. There is too much to get through and too much that is important *not to* devote precious time to the Lord. We need to be in touch with God, to know his presence, to be changed in that presence so that we can see things from *his* perspective and so that the blurred edges of our jaded, sin-tinted vision can be focused.

My personal experience shows me that whenever I devote myself to ministering to the Lord as my *first* priority, the pressures and demands of what needs to be done are somehow lifted. I have no more time available to do things – in fact I have less; but the clarity of thought, the peace of heart and the leading of the Holy Spirit that I experience more than make up for the erosion of time for my tasks.

I am much more effective, I accomplish much more and I feel much better when I devote myself to ministering to the Lord. You see, God knows that as a redeemed human being, I need to worship. He doesn’t *need* my

worship; I can't add anything to him or take anything from him. He is complete in himself. He is not some super ego demanding that we worship him because he needs it. He tells us to worship him because it is the right thing to do. He knows that he made us for worship, because worship makes everything of God and nothing of men. When we are worshipping him, we are extolling his virtues, exalting his nature and expressing his character. What greater thing could we do with our lives that produces so many benefits for us? Our motive is to bless him, his motive is to bless us; and he started it! Think of what we're doing by declaring his praises. We are focusing on all that is good in the universe; we're elevating goodness, faithfulness, kindness and love, generosity, beauty and purity. This is what God is. What you honour, you get more of. The more we proclaim God's faithfulness, the more his faithfulness is seen in our lives. The more we declare his love, the more we experience it. The more we advertise his excellencies, the more we live in the good of them.

To worship God is to glorify God; to glorify God develops our character and changes our heart; and that is essential if we want to be the kind of worshippers the Father seeks, the kind who worship him in spirit and in truth.

## Chapter 9

# The Conditions for Worship

### The Heart of the Matter

Someone once said that at the heart of worship is a worshipping heart. Though this is a somewhat hackneyed expression, like all clichés it is such because it is true.

God places great emphasis on the heart and is more concerned with its condition than whether or not we are ‘performing well’ as a Christian. It is all too easy to have the outward appearance of life in God, yet to have hearts that are full of mixed motives and impurities. Duty, obligation, guilt, reputation, personal preference, self-promotion and performance can so easily be at the root of what we do. When questioned by the Pharisees about his disciples not keeping the elders’ tradition of ceremonial washing, Jesus quoted Isaiah, saying: “ ‘These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’ ” (Mark 7:6-7; Isaiah 29:13)

If our hearts are far from God, then our worship is in vain. Later, in his conversation with his disciples, Jesus makes clear that the condition of the heart is absolutely crucial, and that it is from within us that corruption comes. God is very interested in the condition of our hearts. His command to us is that we love him with all of our heart (Deuteronomy 6:5). One of the prayers that I prayed regularly as a young Christian, and still do from time to time, is the prayer of David recorded in Psalm 86:11: “give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name”. It is impossible to truly fear

the name of the Lord if our heart is divided in some way, if we are not whole-hearted in our devotion to him as “a man after (his) own heart!” (1 Samuel 13:14)

### **A Man after my own Heart**

To see David as “a man after my own heart” is a staggering assessment of him, when seen in the light of some of his actions! It is a worthwhile study to compare King Saul with King David, looking particularly at the things that each of them did wrong.

The major mistake Saul made was in disobeying God when he presented the burnt offering at Gilgal instead of waiting for Samuel to do it, as he had been instructed. His reasoning seemed plausible as he declared his concern at not seeking the Lord’s favour and being worried about going into battle with the Philistines without it. But God’s judgement was swift and irrevocable as Samuel declared: “But now your kingdom will not endure; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people, because you have not kept the Lord’s command.” (1 Sam 13:14) Saul’s disobedience cost him the kingdom, and he later compounded things by disobeying the Lord in the matter of sparing a king and some livestock that God had declared should die. So, for the sake of a burnt offering, a king and a few sheep, Saul was rejected by God – even though he tried to explain that they had only kept the best of the livestock to sacrifice it to the Lord! (1 Sam 15:21-22) Saul offered God his sacrifice instead of being obedient to what he had been told.

By comparison, David’s sins seem so much worse! He committed adultery with Bathsheba, made her pregnant, and with premeditation arranged the death of her husband in an attempt to cover things up (2 Samuel 11). Yet God’s testimony of David was that he was a man after his own heart – even after all these things! In fact in 1 Kings 11:4 we read of how Solomon’s heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, *as the heart of David his father had been*. What an amazing assessment, in the light of David’s adultery, deception and conspiracy to murder!

While these are difficult things to understand, because we see things from our limited and human perspective, the difference seems to have been

this: *it was the issue of where their heart was*. Saul disobeyed God, because his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord, as his endless excusing of his actions demonstrates. David fell into sin, even though his heart was fully devoted to the Lord; but he repented quickly when confronted with his sin (2 Samuel 12), reflecting the essential tenderness of his heart. Both men were wrong in their actions, and both were judged by God; but the Lord's pleasure was ultimately in David, whose heart was fully devoted to the Lord.

In order to truly worship the Lord, our hearts must be cleansed from their impurities and mixed motives. To be the kind of worshippers the Lord seeks requires us to create the right conditions for producing undivided hearts.

## **Preparing the Heart**

As we ask the Lord to give us an undivided heart, there are three things that he has asked us to do, that will help him to answer our request:

### *1. Guard it*

Proverbs 4:23 says: "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." We guard or protect ourselves physically in a variety of ways. When we take a journey in a car we strap on our seat belt. In the West people on building sites wear hard hats and scaffolding is covered with protective netting to protect from falling debris. Sporting activities have their own regalia designed to keep us safe from injury – everything from gum shields to shin pads. We constantly take care to keep ourselves safe from physical harm.

The protection of our hearts should receive no less attention, given that it is so important. We have the responsibility to guard our hearts from wrong attitudes, mixed motives and self-centredness. When we guard something, we actually put ourselves in a position to protect it. We have to be proactive in taking practical steps to keep it safe.

A cricketer aims to score runs; but he protects the stumps by placing his bat in front of them. Guarding our heart requires us to actively protect it from harmful influences. One of the ways that we can do this is by

regularly praying the prayers of David: “Give me an undivided heart, that I might fear your name” (Psalm 86:11) or “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.” (Psalm 51:10) God answers prayer, especially when it is his Word that we are praying.

Another way to guard our heart is to have a regular spiritual stock-take or audit. We do not need to get wrongly introspective in this, but simply to ask ourselves some basic questions, such as: “How am I doing in my relationship with God? Am I keeping him central? Are my decisions God-centred or self-centred? Am I seeking first his kingdom? Am I pleasing him daily? Are my motives pure? Do my attitudes reflect Christ?” This kind of spiritual stock-taking, done in earnest simplicity, will help to guard our hearts from harmful influences.

## *2. Store treasures in it*

Jesus said (Matthew 6:21) that where our treasure is, our heart will be also. There is a scene from the Wilbur Smith novel “Birds of Prey” where the pirate captain and his son load all the treasure from their last voyage onto a long boat and row inland up an island river. They travel until they reach a long stretch of rocky terrain with sheer cliffs of rock on either side. They stop and unload the precious cargo, hoisting it with ropes and pulleys up to a ledge, hidden by overhanging vegetation. As they remove rocks and branches, an opening is revealed, leading to a cave in which is stored all the treasure from all their voyages. Year after year they have come to this cave to deposit gold, precious stones and jewellery.

We too need to store our treasures – but in our hearts! To do so takes as much time, effort and planning as if we were hiding literal treasure. Spiritual wealth consists of that which is eternal, and only that which is of lasting value is worth storing in our hearts. The way that we do this is to *seek* and *deposit*. *Seek* for eternal treasures and *deposit* them in the bank of our hearts. Once again, this takes time and energy.

If I want to deposit money into my bank account, I take the cheques or cash, write out a deposit slip, and hand it over the counter. The money is then added to my account and shows up on my bank statement later that month. The same applies spiritually. And Jesus made it clear what kind of spiritual deposits we should make. “Store up for yourselves treasures in



heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6:20-21) Only that which is eternal is worth storing up in our hearts, and the only treasures that are truly eternal are those which are found in Christ. As we focus on him, his character and his attributes, allowing ourselves to be conformed to his image, as we read and memorise his word and make it part of us, as we rehearse spiritual songs before him, we are storing up lasting treasures in our hearts.

### *3. Set it on the right things*

“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above not on earthly things” (Col 3:1-2). It is not that we do not or should not think about earthly things, but that we do not fix our thinking and our heart’s affections on them. We need to give our attention to what matters the most, to fix our affection and attention on Christ and his kingdom.

Paul gives us a comprehensive check list of things worthy of our attention and effort in Philippians 4:8: “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.” The trouble is: twentieth century living presents us with an increasing number of choices and options, and it is so easy for our lives to become cluttered. Our minds, more often than not, are preoccupied with a growing volume of practical details to be sorted out. Martha was a woman that many of us can identify with – anxious about many things and eager to get the practical business done! But it was Mary that Jesus commended for wisely choosing to spend time with him. What thoughts occupy our minds the most? Paul’s encouragement to the Philippians was to think about true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, praiseworthy things. This is not an irksome or hard pursuit. There are so many things in life that come under one of Paul’s headings, and it is to these that we should be actively giving our hearts and our attention. One of the ways that we can do this is to expose ourselves to God’s good creation,

to good literature or music or art or drama. Let us be thinkers of *good* thoughts as part of this process of setting our hearts on good things.

By guarding our heart, storing treasures of eternal value there and setting it on right things, we provide the condition for whole-heartedness, the condition most conducive to worshipping the Living God in spirit and in truth. And as we maintain his heart of worship we are free to express worship individually and corporately with an abandonment which truly glorifies God as we minister to him.

## Chapter 10

# The Expression of Worship

### What Price Dignity?

When King David brought back the Ark of God to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6), all the people were involved in a great celebration at the return of this symbol of God's presence. There was the sacrificing of animals, shouting, and the blowing of trumpets as they processed through the city. It was a wild, party-like atmosphere, rather like a street carnival. King David himself threw himself into things; he stripped off his royal robes and danced before the Lord with all his might. The word used to describe what he did is the word *raqad* which, when translated, actually means 'to leap, skip about, jump, spring about wildly'. David was praising God at this exciting moment with all his might! But when his wife, Michal, saw his extravagant behaviour, she had nothing but criticism for him and despised him in her heart (2 Samuel 6:20). But David said a remarkable thing: "I will celebrate before the Lord. I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes." (2 Sam 6:21-22)

We cannot maintain our dignity and praise God, not if we're going to do it properly! Three times in his answer David uses the phrase "I *will*". There is a *determination* in David to choose to make nothing of himself and everything of God. It is the same spirit that Paul urges on us in Romans 12:1 when he tells us to offer our bodies "as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship." *God will not extract from us what rightfully belongs to him; we must willingly offer it.* Our expression

of praise and worship to the Lord is a choice that we make out of love and obedience. Jesus made it clear that obedience to him is a clear indication of our love for him. We cannot have one without the other.

### **Not a Spectator Sport**

Again and again the Scriptures tell us, not request us, to praise God. There can be no room for personal preference, cultural standards or limiting traditions. Every one of us is required to be totally involved in offering our bodies to worship the Lord. There is no allowance made in Scripture for personality, temperament or personal preference. We are all called to abandon ourselves in wholehearted expression of praise to the Living God, because worship is not a spectator sport; it involves every one of us as players.

### **Worshipping at a Personal Level**

The quality of expressed worship in the gathered church will reflect the quality of expression that each individual gives to the Lord personally. If we each develop an abandoned whole-heartedness to praise God on our own, then surely it will affect our meetings; but if we spend no time with God during the week, we can hardly expect the heavens to come down when we gather together!

There is a verse in Colossians which talks about our “overflowing with thankfulness” (Colossians 2:7). *Thankfulness* is a precious thing in God’s sight, as it is an acknowledgement of appreciation for all that he has done for us and given to us. It can also be really encouraging for us to rehearse before God all the things we are thankful for. As the words of an old song put it:

“Count your blessings name them one by one,  
Count your blessings see what God has done;  
Count your blessings, name them one by one,  
And it will surprise you what the Lord has done.”

Thanksgiving is a pre-requisite to praise, which expresses appreciation and dependence.

Many people struggle in their relationship with the Lord when it comes to expressing worship personally, finding it difficult to maintain momentum and interest. So here are a number of suggestions which may be helpful to you:

### *1. Count your blessings*

Start by making a verbal list of all the good things God has given you, from material possessions to relationships. We will never run out of things to thank him for, especially when we start to focus on all he has done for us in Christ.

### *2. Sing*

Many choruses and hymns contain rich deposits of truth about the Lord. Words and music skilfully combined together can express worship to God and lift our spirits in faith and appreciation. If singing does not come easily, then put on a tape or CD and sing along with it. The value of singing in tongues should not be underestimated. Sometimes when we are struggling or at a loss for words, to “sing with my spirit” (1 Corinthians 14:15) can release us into a powerful realm of expression of worship.

### *3. Read out loud*

Take the Scriptures and read them out loud, especially passages describing the nature and character of God. There is power in verbalising truth. Proverbs 18:21 says “The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat of its fruit.” Words can have considerable impact upon us, and when we read the Scriptures out loud we are declaring God’s truth in our own hearing. One of the translations of the word ‘meditate’ is “to mutter or mumble”. That is why devout Jews can be heard reading the scriptures aloud at the wailing wall.

Poetry and prose can also be used and read aloud as a means of expressing our worship to God.

### *4. Use paintings and photographs*

We have a large picture of a whale in the early morning mist. Its tail is lifted out of the water and dozens of droplets of water are hanging from it with the morning sun glistening on them. I sometimes stand in front of it,

admiring the amazing creativity of God who created such a being, and it leads me to worship.

A television documentary studying the behaviour of whales highlighted a particular pattern of activity which the team of marine biologists were unable to understand. In acknowledging their inability to grasp the significance of the behaviour pattern, the narrator commented: “It’s almost as if they are playing.” They were right, for it says in Psalm 104:26 describing the works of the Lord expressed in the seas: “There the ships go to and fro, and the leviathan (whale) which you formed to frolic there”. What a God, who would form such marvellous creatures for the sole purpose of having fun!

### *5. Use your eyes*

Look out of the window. What do you see? Trees? Birds? Clouds? People? Go out for a walk and you’ll see even more! Start to thank God for all you can see of what he has made and as you do so you will find your spirit begins to rise up with you.

### *6. Listen to music*

Probably for all of us there are certain pieces of music or specific songs which move us emotionally and have the capacity to help create an environment conducive to our act of worship. Such things can be a great help to us as we sit and listen and think about the Lord.

### *7. Contemplation*

It is good sometimes to simply sit and *think* about the Lord, his way, his deeds, his promises, his blessings. To take a particular facet of God’s character and dwell on it, thinking through how it affects our lives, can be helpful in enabling us to worship him.

There are, of course, lots of other things that we can do in our personal worship times with the Lord, such as writing our praises of him, composing our own songs, or even painting a picture. *God is infinitely creative*: he has made us in his image, and in the process of redeeming us he releases us to express his creativity both in our personal and corporate worship.

## **Worshipping at a Corporate Level**

Whatever kind of church or fellowship we belong to, whatever the differences of belief or practice, the one thing common to us all is that we regularly meet together at some point in the week. And the most common element to be found in all church meetings is singing and music. Music has been called the universal language.

### *Music and singing*

Probably the one thing most common to all countries and peoples is music. There is something very powerful about music. Music has the power to move us emotionally, to touch us deep inside in a way that few things can. After watching the film “Titanic” with all the sadness and pathos attached to the portrayal of that true-life tragedy, it wasn’t until the song was played at the end that my wife cried. Something was touched deep inside her emotions. When watching breakfast TV one morning, I heard Vanessa Mae singing her latest song. I suddenly found myself sobbing into my cornflakes! The song had evoked something, touched me inside and affected me emotionally.

Music outlives all other art forms. Paintings fade with time or can be burned; buildings and statues crumble and decay; antiques will one day turn to dust. But somehow music has a life of its own because it is stored internally, inside us. It is amazing how quickly a song of thirty years ago can be remembered word for word, note for note, when we hear it again after all that time.

Recently, when the Lord was dealing with me over my attitudes in a certain situation, I decided to spend time seeking him. I wasn’t feeling particularly spiritual or tender, but as I listened to a worship album, the Spirit of God came on me as a particular song began to play. It cut right through my intellectualising and self-justification as the presence of God came upon me. I wept at the realisation of my own sin and weakness and found release in the healing and forgiveness available in Jesus. The song had penetrated my defences and touched my spirit as it unlocked my emotions.

The fact that music seems to have such a lasting impact is hardly surprising when we understand that the Creator God is its source. We are made in the image of God and carry his creativity deep within us; but while he creates from nothing, we can but start with the raw material which he provides. When God brought his challenge to Job, he asked him if he was there at creation, and painted an intriguing word picture of the time when “the morning stars sang together” over God’s creative works (Job 38:7).

The Scriptures are full of instructions about singing, making music and playing instruments as expressions of praise and worship. The descriptions of heaven in the book of Revelation contain innumerable numbers of people making music and singing to the Lord. (See, for example, Revelation 5:9-14; 15:2-4)

King David was an incredibly creative worshipper of God. He was responsible for writing dozens of songs, providing musical instruments, and instituting corporate praise on a colossal scale. 1 Chronicles 23:5 tells us that he set aside four thousand Levites to praise the Lord with musical instruments that he had provided for the purpose! One of the Levites’ responsibilities was to stand every morning and evening to thank and praise the Lord. David also set apart some of the sons of Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun, men appointed as chief musicians and singers. Their sons and relatives were set apart for the ministry of prophesying, accompanied by harps, lyres and cymbals, and were trained and skilled in music for the Lord (1 Chronicles 25:1-7).

### *Music and the prophetic*

There is a strong link between music and the prophetic. We read in the Scriptures of prophets using musicians to assist them in their prophesying (e.g., 1 Samuel 10:5; 18:10). King Saul’s demonic torment was soothed as David played his harp (1 Samuel 16:23).

When the musicians in our church meetings play on beyond a song, they are not just seeking to provide a musical interlude or a bridge to the next song, though these things have their place. Skilled and anointed musicians will seek to play ‘prophetically’ or to create a kind of prophetically musical backdrop, which can provide a platform for the gifts of the Spirit as faith is generated.



These are times when we can all be involved in singing a new song to the Lord, be it in English or tongues, individually or corporately. All too often when this happens, we allow fear, insecurity and reserve to hold us back from really entering into God's promised land in corporate praise. Sometimes we hold back out of a lack of understanding of what is possible. One of the dangers with the sophisticated development of amplified instruments, P.A. systems and worship bands over recent years, is the tendency to produce spectators and performers. There is a balance we need to be careful to maintain. Having skilled, anointed worship bands that can minister in their gifting, needs the balance of servanthood which leads and releases the body to minister. With all the correct emphasis on the value and place of music to worship God, we need to remember that it is the gifts of the Spirit which build up the body of Christ, not the gifts of the worship band!

### *Building one another up*

When the church gathers together, it does so for two purposes: to worship the Lord and to build itself up. The danger with an over-emphasis on singing songs is that the extent to which the body can be built up is limited. As Paul says in 1 Cor 14:26: "When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done *for the strengthening of the church.*" There is also an expectation from this verse that everyone within the church should be contributing in the corporate gathering – whether to the whole gathered assembly or to the smaller groups we may be broken into on some occasions. We need to be preparing ourselves when we come together by seeking the Lord for something to give – even if we do not get the opportunity to give it! The motivation for this is *love for one another*, knowing that what we bring in God is to edify or build up our brothers and sisters. 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, about the gifts of the Holy Spirit and their operation, are pointedly separated by chapter 13, which is all about the loving motivation and manner of bringing them.

### *Catching what the Spirit is doing*

As we gather together week by week, our goal should be to worship the Lord and build one another up in meetings that have variety, creativity

and spontaneity, as well as the bringing of that which is prepared ahead of time. There are certain elements that we can identify in corporate worship that will help us to understand how a meeting works and how we can 'catch' what the Spirit is doing. This is not to imply there is a formula to be followed, but to highlight some observable patterns.

Sometimes we can sense we are waiting for a particular song that carries an anointing of release. We generally don't know what song it is until it comes! But as we start to sing it, there is a definite lift in our spirits and the atmosphere of the meeting. It is really important that we listen to the Holy Spirit at this point. He may want us to stay with that song until the full potential and purpose of what he wants to do through it is realised; but equally, he may want to take us to another, quite different one, letting something quite different develop.

The repetition of songs can simply be a charismatic habit; but often, the more we sing certain songs, the more free we become. As the truth and power of what we are singing about grips us, we are drawn closer to the Lord by the Spirit as our faith is stimulated. This is something that is not always achieved by singing a song only once, for a number of reasons. We can be distracted by our circumstances, or churned up by the frantic Sunday morning dash to get to the meeting on time! We can lose concentration, or simply not be paying attention to what we are singing. Repeating the song can help us to focus our attention on the Lord and bring our distracted emotions in line with the truths we are singing.

## **Meeting Components**

### *God first!*

When we come together to worship, there is a sense in which we are metaphorically ascending the hill of the Lord. As we do this, an environment of faith and expectation is being provided for the Holy Spirit to move among us. We should expect to see and hear the gifts of the Spirit in operation as the Lord speaks to us and builds up his people. But we need to be careful to *give God what belongs to him first*, namely all our praise, appreciation and worship. All too often we move into looking for God to minister to us, to speak to us and to bless us, before we have truly ministered to him. We

want to move in the gifts, we legitimately want God's blessing; but love for someone is expressed through what we give out to them, not what we get from them. In so many of our church meetings we move prematurely, without having wholeheartedly ministered to the Lord *first*. Remember, our primary function as his royal priesthood is to minister to him!

*Vertical before horizontal*

It is an interesting exercise to observe the results of singing different types of songs at different points in the meeting. Quite often when the songs that we sing are horizontal, that is, focused on *us*, the prophetic word is released early on and we end up with purely horizontally-centred exhortation. One of the most important aspects of bringing our contributions in meetings is that of timing. Timing is crucial in most areas of life, but particularly in bringing some contribution in a meeting. More often than not we are ministered to through the gifts, long before we have adequately ministered to the Lord. We may have the spiritual goose bumps and go away feeling good; but have we fulfilled our function as priests of the Lord Most High?

As a general guideline, the songs that we begin with should be vertical, should focus on *the Lord* – on who he is, what he has done and what he is like – *not* on what *we* are going to do or how we feel or what we need. It is only as Jesus is lifted up that we are drawn to *him*. Of course, we do not only lift Jesus up by singing and music. The whole range of physical and verbal expression is open to us – prayers of thanksgiving, appreciation, declaration and petition; poetry, prose, dance, drama, and mime; testimonies about God's faithfulness or answered prayer; the reading of Scriptures; all of these draw us in to appreciate him more. There should be no limit to the variety of expressing our worship as we lift him up.

*“Magnify the Lord with me ... ”*

Remember, we take on the characteristics of what we worship; and as we magnify the Lord, he is what we experience. When you take a magnifying glass to something it grows in your vision and the details can be clearly seen. The object doesn't actually grow in size but the proportions and perspective are altered through magnification. Magnifying the Lord makes

*him* grow in our vision; *he* begins to take on his true perspective and we start to see *him* in more detail as he truly is. This then affects the way that we think and act as revelation takes hold of us. On the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit filled the disciples in such a powerful way, crowds of people flocked to where they were, utterly amazed. They heard them speaking in all their own languages, which was remarkable in that they were uneducated Galileans. What they heard was even more remarkable for they were “declaring the wonders of God” (Acts 2:11) – magnifying the Lord. And for us, our prayers and songs in our meetings should seek to magnify *him*, declaring first and foremost his *wonders* long before we ever petition him for his *works*. Ministry to the Lord must be Godward; it is addressed to him and is about him.

### *Variety!*

Worship in the gathered congregation can be noisy or quiet, lively or still, spontaneous or ordered, familiar or new, structured or free, bringing the known as well as taking risks. In other words, with great *variety*! If we major on any one of these aspects to the exclusion of others it will tend to make our meetings incomplete and they will quickly fall into empty tradition and form – no matter how ‘free’ we think we might be! Obviously, it is unlikely that every meeting will contain all the expressions of worship. However, we should be able to review things over a period of time and identify most of the elements listed above.

### *Life, not death!*

We believe that, generally speaking, we should expect our meetings to be lively and expressive, as the Scriptural descriptions and pattern tend to reflect this more than anything else. There are a lot of Scriptures that speak of singing, shouting, crying and clapping. (See the Appendix for further details.) From the descriptions of heaven in Revelation, it would seem to be a very noisy, colourful place with all of the above, plus thunder and lightning! There are few references to silence *when we come together*, though of course this does not mean that there is not a very real place to be still and quiet on occasions, either in awe of God or during times of his intimate dealings with us. But mostly, it seems, we should expect noise, movement and creative expression.

*His kingdom before our culture*

Our meetings, then, should be God-centred times of ministering to the Lord and being built up in him in the process. This should involve our *whole being* as we offer our bodies as living sacrifices as an expression of our spiritual worship to the Lord. The writer's nation of Britain has a history of emotional reservation and physical restraint when it comes to Christian meetings. (Your nation may have its own peculiar characteristics!) Unfortunately, we have no justifiable excuse that allows us to indulge our cultural heritage, whatever it might be, at the expense of giving God what belongs to him. Every culture must be subordinate to Kingdom culture, and the nature of the King of the Kingdom dictates that we are to be extravagantly abandoned in our worship of him. Worship is all about *God*; worship is *for God* and *to God*. Being drawn into intimacy of relationship with him will always release us, not lock us up, to express that love with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

As a holy priesthood, chosen to bring glory to our Creator, we can minister to him in the sure and certain knowledge that we are achieving our destinies as we delight ourselves in him.

## Chapter 11

### **Conclusion: The Lord Alone!**

While the Apostle Paul was waiting in Athens for Silas and Timothy to join him, “he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.” At a meeting of the Areopagus (the religious and moral guardians of the city) he referred to their objects of worship, particularly to one of them – an altar with the inscription “To an unknown god”. This is what he said:

“What you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else ... For in him we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17:24-25, 28)

Paul used the Athenians’ preoccupation with objects of worship as an opportunity to present them with the one, true Living God. He took them to the source of all things and said, “*This* is whom you should be worshipping – not something man-made, but the God who made everything and everyone.” He pointed them to the true object of worship, for he knew that there is something within all men and women that needs to worship.

Athens was a city full of idols; but idols are wrong because they take from us what belongs to the Living God. The first of the Ten Commandments tells us that we are to have no gods before the Lord; the second that we are not to make any idols or representations of him nor are we to worship them (Exodus 20:1-3). Implicit in this statement is the fact that God knows we need to worship. It is what we were born for. There is within all human

beings the need and desire to worship. We are *all* worshippers. The question is: *what kind of worshippers will we be? Whom or what will we worship?*

Some people worship ‘things’ – personal possessions, antiques, rare works of art, homes, cars, money. The desire for a better lifestyle can become our god if it is the all consuming passion of our life.

Some people worship at the shrine of ‘experience’ – pursuing the adrenaline rush of dangerous sports, the overwhelming desire for sexual pleasure, or the euphoric entrapment of drug abuse.

People can become idols. Probably never before have we had so many ‘heroes’ – men and women in sports, film and music, whose names and faces are so familiar through the tools of mass communication and who become idolised by millions. They are venerated as those who have somehow attained a kind of divinity, a ‘separate otherness’ as fame and fortune have elevated them in people’s thinking to a realm way beyond the rest of us. They are paid huge sums of money to reveal their glory to us as we worship at the altar of entertainment. And the most ecstatic worship of all is given to those ‘gods’ who have the misfortune to die tragically or earlier than expected. These are the idols that grow in magnitude as millions mourn their passing, some even modelling themselves on the fallen, as ‘look-a-likes’. The fact that so many of them were often morally or spiritually bankrupt, unable to make their personal lives and relationships work, seems to count for nothing. All that matters is that we worship them.

Idolatry is as prevalent today as it was in Athens all those hundreds of years ago – only now our idols are more subtle as we have become more sophisticated. But *anything which our hearts value more highly than God becomes an idol*; and the problem with an idol is that it must be *appeased*. You only have to look at all the major world religions to see how, at their centre, there is a striving for perfection by their followers through a constant seeking to appease their god to gain his favour. And even we Christians can get caught in this trap, under the guise of trying to please God! But an idol is an idol even if it has a Christian label. What we must remember is that the kingdom of God is all about *God reaching out* to men and women in Christ and about *their* being perfected in *him*, not in their own strength or efforts. It is not about what *we* can do for God, but what *he* has done for us. And the proper response to that is simply this: “Love the Lord your God

with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” (Deuteronomy 6:5) God knows that we need to worship him; it is what we were made for; it is in our spiritual genes; it is DNA molecule Number One!

If the Lord God is not at the centre of our heart’s affections, then we too will end up worshipping ‘things’ or ‘experience’ or ‘people’. Our spouse, our children, our home, our money; sex, education, knowledge, success; being beautiful, being entertained, having a ‘ministry’; all these, and more besides, can become idols for us, if the value we place on them is higher than that which we place on God.

As we said at the beginning of this book, worship is not an ‘end’ in itself. It is *God* who is the goal and object of our worship. Worship must not become another idol; we must not worship ‘worship’! But worship focuses us on the one, true Living God, who alone “gives all men life and breath and everything else.” The way to ensure that we do not worship other things is to make sure we worship what we know; and that means being in good relationship with the Father, through his Son the Lord Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Only then will what we worship be “in spirit and in truth”.