

Wineskins Magazine

Life-Changing Worship

Volume 1, Number 5 September 1992

Contents

Life-Changing Worship By Rubel Shelly

Renewal in Worship By Mike Cope

From Tension to Understanding: Dealing With Changes in Worship Style By Randy Harris

Is Contemporary Heretical? By Ken Young

Hope Network Newsletter: Big Gulps and Damaged Goods By Art McNeese

Where God Is Encountered By Jack Reese

Confessions of a Song Leader By Jeff Berryman

Holy Mysteries By C. Leonard Allen

Resources for Contemporary Worship By Kregg Hood

Tasting Worship: Feast or Famine? By Jeff Nelson

AfterGlow: Externals and Extolling By Phillip Morrison

Life-Changing Worship

by Rubel Shelly
September, 1992

Some of the appeals being made today for change in worship may mask a hidden and wrong-headed agenda. From some quarters, it may be nothing more than frustration. From others it could even be an attempt at self-exaltation (*i.e.*, ego satisfaction as the “star” of worship) or an effort to employ worship as a means of emotional manipulation of the participants (*i.e.*, getting a particular “response”).

Worship offered in spirit and truth is neither an exercise in psychological command over an audience nor a means to the end of producing a certain feeling or response in the worshippers. Real worship is always God-centered rather than man-centered. At the same time, however, it is also true that authentic worship is a life-changing event.

I disagree with the oft-repeated dictum that a person's values and behavior can be altered only in small-group or one-on-one encounters. Again, in an effort to avoid being misunderstood, I affirm small-group Bible study, support groups and the like; life change occurs in them. I also affirm the value of what happens in Christian counselling and private teaching; they can open hearts to God. But worship that allows people to encounter God in a congregational setting of 80, 500, or 7,500 also changes lives.

In *The Service of God*, a book designed to explore the relationship between worship and ethics, William Willimon insists that “while we worship God, we are also being formed into God's people. While we are attempting to see God, we are acquiring, as a kind of by-product, a vision of who we are and who we are meant to be” (pp. 42-43).

That is my point stated succinctly and precisely. The essence of worship is praise to God, the affirmation of his “worth-ship.” But worship that truly exalts him before his creatures also ministers directly to the needs of those people.

Individuals and families who are wrestling with demons of doubt, alienation, and pain can find healing for their lives only when they shift their focus from themselves to God. When worship occurs, this is exactly what happens. With their world-view altered by the experience, something dramatic happens in these people. Christians are people who subscribe to a view of reality that runs counter to the one offered by our immediate environment. Worship draws us back to the One who is real and to the life commitments that are legitimate. It is a life-changing event!

Worship not only brings people into the presence of God but also into the experience of the community. The debilitating sense of loneliness is banished by a powerful sense of belonging. Sharing the Lord's Supper reminds us, to echo the words of Paul, that alienations cannot go unattended within the Body of Christ; indeed, it allows us to recognize one another as the Body of the Lord (1 Corinthians 11:17-34, esp. v. 29).

The very events of worship, while focused on God, affirm his drawing near to us and our coming to him. We are caught up in those events and lifted beyond our selfishness, pettiness, materialism, anger, and other life negatives to the presence of the Living God. There we are nourished, redirected, and changed.

What one man recently told me was the “worst time of his life to date” had made him apprehensive about worship on the Lord’s Day. A pain greater than death was overwhelming him. On one level, he did not want to worship for he saw no way to “get anything out of it” (or to put anything into it!). At another, he said he was strangely and powerfully drawn to worship. So he did not forsake the assembly, and there he discerned that God had not forsaken him. Hymns, communion, and a lesson that affirmed the all-sufficiency of the cross to save lifted him out of death to life. His life was changed by that event – over a year ago now – and remains different and Christ-affirming.

Whether traditional or modern, whether with old favorite hymns or contemporary ones, whether emphasizing the security of old forms or the freshness of the Spirit – worship does change worshippers as a by-product of their encounter with God. Thus worship is too important to be discounted or abandoned. For those who lead it, it must be given the same hours of prayerful planning and preparation that the preacher is expected to put into his sermons rather than allowed to become stale from indifference.

Our responsibility in worship is not to manipulate either it or the other participants. It is to create an atmosphere where people can experience the transforming presence of God.

Renewal in Worship

“Renewal in worship is a return to the redeeming, transforming cross of Jesus Christ.”

*by Mike Cope
September, 1992*

Thomas Long imagines how a university student away from home and struggling with personal and academic problems. If his minister from home knew of these struggles, what could he say in a note to the student that would be helpful? Long suggests something like this: “I want you to know that you are always in my prayers, but more important than that, you are under God’s protection and care. Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the living of these days, for the living of these days.”

The strength of this brief note is in evoking powerful images of his church at worship. He can hear familiar voices singing Harry Emerson Fosdick’s “God of Grace and God of Glory.” How many times had he sung those words – “grant us courage for the living of these days”? This memory then dominoes into other stirring pictures:

- his little sister squealing with delight when the song directory led “Jesus Loves Me”;
- his father’s head bowed and Bible open as he waited for “the fruit of the vine” to reach him;
- his cousin’s baptism after the familiar formula, “in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” and before the joyful singing of “O Happy Day.”

More than he had ever imagined, worship had shaped his life. It had given him a family larger than the five who had lived at 1427 River Oaks Drive. It had given him a story and an identity: he was part of a people who absolutely believed that God had redeemed them in Jesus Christ.

Worship is a shaping event. In worship we meet God and are changed by God. Therefore, any renewal movement – such as the one Churches of Christ are experiencing – must begin with renewal in worship. As Robert Webber has so insightfully put it:

“Evangelism is an exceedingly important work of the church as is teaching, fellowship, servanthood, missions, and the healing of broken lives. But it is worship ... that really stands behind all these activities. The church is first a worshipping community. Evangelism and other functions of ministry flow from the worship of the church.”

The act of worship helps us keep in mind who our God is: the King of kings and Lord of lords who is perfectly holy, loving, forgiving, and demanding. Before him, we become “lost in wonder, love, and praise.”

Our singing, preaching, praying, meditating, baptizing, and communing remind us of who we are: the people of God, saved by his grace. It secures our identity.

When a child misbehaves a parent might say, “We don’t do that.” The child could ask, “Why not?” But the better question – and the one that ultimately needs answering is, “Who are we?” When you say “we don’t do that,” who is this “we” being referred to?

Worship offers an answer to that question. It allows us to continually define ourselves, in William Willimon’s words, “as over against the world so that [we] might be truly for the world.”

Renewal in worship, then, isn’t so much about dimming the lights, putting the songs on an overhead screen, or listening to a small group of gifted singers – though all might have their place at times; rather, it is a return to our God, a return to the redeeming, transforming cross of Jesus Christ, a return to Christian love, and a return to kingdom values and living.

From Tension to Understanding: Dealing with Changes in Worship Style

by Randall Harris
September, 1994

Since I have not yet reached my mid-thirties and have always considered myself open-minded and forward-looking, it is somewhat painful to admit I am an old fogey. But the plain fact of the matter is that I often prefer the style of my generation over contemporary expression in almost every area. This “generation gap” is more often a source of amusement rather than real friction, but when the area of conflict is style of worship, everyone suddenly gets serious. Since churches are made of people of various ages, cultures, and backgrounds, it is inevitable that there will never be a unanimous opinion about what style of service is most conducive to the experience of worship. So how should we handle this potential source of conflict in our churches?

First, we must make a distinction between the content of worship, which is not subject to change, and the style which changes constantly. Whether worship will center on the person and work of God who redeems us through Christ ought not be the subject of debate. He is always the one to whom our worship is directed and dedicated. But how that worship is offered is quite a different matter. Furthermore, I am not interested, in this article, in questions of doctrinal innovation. I am convinced of the appropriateness of the weekly observance of the Lord’s Supper and *a cappella* music and male leadership in prayer and preaching in the assembly. While these are matters which need continuing examination in the light of Scripture, I am here concerned with other issues.

Even if we come to agreement on the content and doctrinal parameters of worship assemblies, we still must decide if the worship will be formal or informal, quiet or boisterous; whether the songs will be contemporary, classical, or depression era; whether prayers will be familiar and folksy or reverent and liturgical; whether the service will be marked by applause and enthusiasm or solemnity and the “amen.”

To restate the obvious, in all these matters, it will be difficult and often impossible to come to consensus. Are we destined then to bite and devour each other over our tastes in public worship? Surely not! I want to suggest three levels of development which will ease the strain in churches dealing with changing styles in the assemblies.

The first level of development is tolerance. No one ought to demand to have their way all the time with regard to worship style. As a member of a committee whose task is to plan assemblies, it is part of my responsibility to put together programs, some of which I like better than others. At the very least we ought to be able to tolerate those occasions when worship style is not to our taste. Congregations ought to be able to abide a variety of worship styles from week to week without one faction or another threatening to take their marbles and go home when a particular service doesn’t suit their fancy. To demand that every service must correspond in every way to my particular preferences is simply un-Christian. The great diversity in make-up which should characterize the Lord’s church demands of us a certain level of tolerance.

The second level of development is mutual consideration. I was attending a worship assembly recently in which we were singing a children's song that I particularly disliked. As I was mumbling through the song, I heard a little voice coming from the seat behind me. Pure and strong, the voice of this little grade-school girl rang out for the entirety of the song. I did not hear that little voice again for the remainder of the song service while we sang those great classic hymns that speak to my heart so well.

When we reach this level of development we move beyond gritting our teeth and putting up with things which are unappealing to us. We are now able to give thanks to God for what these "unappealing" items mean to a brother or sister. I long for the day when members will come to elders after a service that was not "their style" and thank them for planning a service that obviously meant so much to others. "Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other" (1 Corinthians 10:24).

Older Christians should not just tolerate, but insist on, services geared to the youngest Christians. Baby-boomer Christians should not just tolerate, but insist on, worship assemblies especially meaningful to their elder brothers and sisters. Only where such care for one another is present is there any hope for a church which functions as God intended.

The third level of development is appreciation. I am more and more impressed with the infinite variety of ways that men and women can express their love and devotion to God. Wouldn't we be a healthier fellowship if each of us could deepen our appreciation for each of these ways? This is not to say that we will develop an equally deep regard for every style and taste of worship but that we will set as our goal to deepen our appreciation for each one. Younger Christians should learn to appreciate the great old hymns which for so long have nurtured the Church's faith. Older Christians should learn to appreciate new contemporary Christian music, which is the expression of a rich spiritual life. White Christians should learn to appreciate the rich heritage of the worship traditions of the black churches. Those from "high church" backgrounds must come to appreciate the warmth and passion of "low church" worship as those from "low church" traditions come to appreciate the depth and solemnity of "high church" worship.

It is remarkable how much of the tension in churches is generated over questions of style. To be obstinate and overbearing in such matters is not a sign of faithfulness, but immaturity. What is needed is tolerance, mutual consideration, and appreciation.

For those who have developed the greatest level of spiritual maturity, worship style becomes a matter of indifference. In an assembly where arm waving, clapping, and shouting for joy are the norms, they worship God. When the dominating motif is utter silence and awe before the Holy One, they worship God. And when the songs are those of contemporary artists, they worship God. When the assembly is meticulously planned and highly liturgical, they worship God. When spontaneity is the order of the day, they worship God.

All of us differ in our ability to adapt to changing style, and all seek a sense of security in the face of rampaging world transformation. But the answer to such a quest is not hanging on to some transient cultural form as if it were the very truth of God, but rather by anchoring faith beyond the transitions of this age.

The key to the worship experience is not, ultimately, the outward style but the inward heart. For those who come to the assembly with full hearts, ready to offer their praise and adoration to God, worship always happens. For those not so inclined, no amount of tinkering with the forms is likely to help. Once we are thoroughly united in focusing our eyes on the cross, and once the Christ becomes the real center of assemblies, problems of style will be relatively easy to handle. As in every other matter, the real key here may be personal spiritual renewal, for it is ever true that we speak out of the abundance of the heart.

So God, give us the hearts to will one thing: to praise your holy name.

Is Contemporary Heretical?

*by Ken Young
September, 1992*

Isn't it strange how we tend to mess around with the meaning of words? One of the players on my son's baseball team hits a grand slam and his teammates say, "That was bad!" Then I hear one young fellow put down another young fellow by calling him good.

Not too many years ago if you were happy you were described as gay. But now it refers to those who are sexually troubled.

Now this one really bothers me. I have recently heard of church leaders who have had to debate whether or not they should use the expression "praise service" to describe special occasions of worship. It seems there was concern that by using the word praise, someone might think they were Pentecostal.

Can you believe it? One lady recently complained in a Bible class, "Praise! Praise! Praise! That's all I ever hear around this church. I want to know where you get all of that praise in the Bible."

And then there are the two "C" words. The mention of the first one makes the blood pressure of some go through the roof. I have heard this said on more than one occasion: "If I hear anyone mention change again in this church, my family is going someplace else!"

I guess I am puzzled because I grew up with the impression that change was very healthy. Change was primarily associated with being flexible, maturing, developing, and growing. Paul said, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22).

The other "C" word is closely related to change and is almost as repulsive to those who hate change. It is "contemporary." I have heard it called by other names: modernity, liberal, heretical, and even banal – another good word getting a bum rap.

Contemporary, by Webster's definition, simply means "marked by characteristics of the present period." It means that things are not the same as they were yesterday, or not like they will be tomorrow. They are continually changing.

I am reminded of a sweet children's song taken from Psalm 118:24: "This is the day that the Lord hath made, not like tomorrow or yesterday. He made today in a special way, so let's all sing and be glad."

Jesus was undoubtedly a contemporary Messiah. Religion had gotten in such a rut that stagnation had set in. Worship had become a mindless and heartless routine. Jesus declared to the woman at the well, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming ... and has now come when the true worshippers

will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks” (John 4:21, 23).

Jesus breathed change and new life into this world. He established a kingdom that would be new every day and sent his Spirit to empower his people with the endless capacity for renewal of heart.

In a recent book by William Strauss and Neil How called *Generations*, impressive evidence is given showing how certain historical patterns tend to repeat themselves at roughly 90-year intervals. It seems that God in his infinite wisdom has built into the design of time pivotal periods of reawakening.

In the 1500s there was the Reformation Reawakening. In the 1600s, it was the Puritan Awakening, followed by the Great Awakening of the 1700s. We in the Churches of Christ know the awakening in the 1800s as the Restoration Movement. In the 1900s it was the Missionary Awakening. In each period there has been a conflict between the passionate plea for spiritual renewal and the fear of change.

One of the inseparable companions to each awakening has been new or contemporary music. Our songbooks are still heavily adorned with music from the likes of Bach and Mozart (1700s) and Crosby and Havergal (1800s). The 1900s brought Gospel music and Stamps-baxter.

It is interesting to look back and see how the work of so many composers of church music met with initial resistance. “We must not forsake the music of our heritage for modern innovations!” has been heard time and time again down through history. Satan has been faithful in planting an abuse here and there so that “I told you so!” has always found an audience.

But God has faithfully planted new songs in our hearts to help us renew our faith throughout the ages.

When the Israelites were freed from 400 years of Egyptian slavery, they sang a new song (Exodus 15). David said, “He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord” (Psalm 40:3). The birth of Christ was welcomed with new song.

I hope by now you know where I am heading. I believe we are living at a very exciting time in history. Already another major awakening is tugging at the hearts of God’s people. One hundred years from now historians will be telling my great, great grandchildren about this awakening. Who knows, maybe they will call it the “Praise Awakening.”

When we look at the larger picture of where God has placed us in time, we should be encouraged to do several things.

1. Quit getting so steamed when our attempts to make changes we believe are vital for the effectiveness of the church in a contemporary world are met with resistance. We should expect this reaction, keep trying, and trust in God’s timing.

2. Quit beating ourselves up for all that we haven't been in the Churches of Christ, and start thanking God for even the smallest things we can see happening that are right. A good theme for an upcoming lectureship might even be "Some Good Things Happening in the Churches of Christ." We need to be positive, prayerful and expect restoration.

3. Start encouraging our song writers to get on with the new songs.

Now, back to the original question. *Is contemporary heretical?* On the contrary, it is something God uses and blesses.

Rider on the White Horse

by Ken Young

Chorus

Rider on the white horse, rider called Faithful and True;
with justice he judges and makes war,
His eyes are like blazing fire,
and on his head are many crowns;
rider on the white horse.

Verse 1

he has a name written on him, that no one but he himself knows;
he is dressed in a robe dipped in blood,
and his name is the Word of God.
The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses;
dressed in fine linen, white and clean,
and his name is the Word – is the word of God!

Verse 2

Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword,
with which to strike down the mighty;
on his robe and on his thigh, his name – is written,
King of Kings, – and Lord of Lords!

Copyright 1989 Hallal Music, Preston Christian Music, Toddler Tunes.

Exclusive adm. by LCS Music Group, P.O. BOx 815129, Dallas, TX 75381.

Int'l. copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Used By Permission.

Hope Network Newsletter: Big Gulps and Damaged Goods

by Art McNeese, Guest Writer
Introduction by Lynn Anderson
September, 1992

For several nights in a row, during the invitation song at the country revival, Jack's eyes had turned watery and his knuckles turned white as he gripped the back of the pew in front of him. But he did not move.

So I dropped by to see Jack that long-ago afternoon and found him in the cotton field. First we talked of crops and weatehr. Finally I asked, "Jack, you seemed convicted again last night. What is keeping you from giving your life to Christ?"

Jack's eyes averted mine, and his hoe moved faster for a moment. Then the hoe stopped and Jack blurted out, "There is nothing one can do. It's not that I don't want to be a Christian. It just can't be helped."

Puzzled, I explored further, "What could possibly be so big that God can't help?"

"Sarah had been divorced when I married her," Jack explained. "We've been married for years now. Wife's a Christian. We've got three fine Christian girls. I go to church with them all the time. I've wanted for years to be a Christian. Even went forward at the summer revival once. But the elders told me right then, 'twarn't no use being baptized 'cause Sarah and me weren't rightly married in God's sight. Said the only way I could truly repent was to divorce her. We'll, I ain't seen much good come to kids onc't their folks get divorced. Figured they're more likely to be Christians if we just leave things the way they are. I decided I'd just stay lost and married to Sarah, so my kids would have a better chance of goin' to heaven. Besides, I just don't have the heart to break up my family."

Some 30 years later, I still haven't fully recovered from that conversation. But we have come a long way since those days; we are learning more about God's grace and how to be redemptive congregations. Even some fallen ministers are receiving grace and not only being forgiven, but restored to useful ministry.

I commend to you the following article which I solicited from Art McNeese, who has himself been restored to ministry after divorce. Art's article is flooded with hope, not only for those who feel "damaged" but for the future of our fellowship.

Monty was a youth minister whose marriage was in trouble, and people in the church were aware of some of the problems he was facing. Many were kind to him, but they didn't want to get involved. Some treated him like he was contaminated. Like Bill Murray in *Ghostbusters*, he felt like crying out, "I've been slimed!" But one brother who was especially sensitive came to Monty's office one day with a couple of Big Gulps from 7-11. "I don't want to be nosy but I love

you and I care about you and I'm here." He was a brother who had not given up on Monty – nor given up on the possibility that Monty would some day re-enter ministry.

Sadly, there was a time in the church when roles of leadership were denied to those with some “mark” in their past. We seemed blind to the fact that Moses the murderer was used by God to champion the cause of Israel, and David the adulterer was called a “man after God’s own heart.” It made no difference that Rahab became a part of Jesus’ ancestry, or that Peter the denier became an early church leader. “Damaged goods” were refused leadership positions because they were in or near the scene of the accident, often without regard for how God might be willing to use them.

But there is hope. We seem to be a kinder, gentler fellowship – with a broader vision of God’s power to utilize those whom others might stigmatize.

The church for which Monty now preaches received dozens of applications for his position. His shepherds concede that other resumes were more impressive, but they felt that the pain of Monty’s past (a divorce a few years ago) equipped him for ministering to others with hurts. He was hired, he says, not in spite of his past, but because of the valley through which he has walked. The elders told him, “God has made you a better man as a result of your struggles. You can now empathize with the walking wounded. Most of us have lived pretty charmed lives, but you’ve walked in the shoes of people in pain.”

As Monty puts it, “If we can’t deal with our own people who hurt, how can we deal with those on the outside who are maimed and bleeding?” The possibility that we can heal and restore people in the world is nil unless we can accept and reinstate those in our church family. And while the church has often seen itself as squeaky clean, our fellowship seems to be waking up to the fact that we are fellow-strugglers, all of whom have some dirty laundry.

John, a preaching friend, says that the vast majority of our people will forgive, forget, and place in niches of leadership the spiritually scarred. “Ninety percent of our brotherhood knows the need to be healers.” After announcing his drug dependency from the pulpit, 600 letters of encouragement flowed in from Christians in 20 states and several foreign countries. Rather than consigning him to the dugout as a benchwarmer, they understood that after recovery, he belonged on the mound.

“Sometimes,” says John, “elders have assumed that the brotherhood was not equipped to restore to service. But because people recognize their own warts and trust in God’s ability to transcend those warts, they allow the fallen to resume their ministries.” Increasingly, church leaders seem better able to separate sin and the sinner.

Although there was a time when preachers and elders were selected only when they had no baggage, more and more churches are realizing that ministry does not require *flawlessness* but *faithfulness*. If a man or woman has asked for forgiveness and received it from God, dare we withhold our forgiveness and put people on indefinite suspension? Today, people sense that just as the woman who had been married five times (John 4) was able to lead a whole community to

Christ, those whose lives are checkered with failure may also be equipped to witness to the power of God.

A preacher who committed adultery years ago and has now been restored to his wife and God's service says: "I know how bad it is in the far country." It is not that sin in any way qualifies a person for leadership; sin is an insult to God's holiness. But people decimated by sin often grasp its ugliness more than most. And those who return to God are gripped by the grace that allows them to come back. Who is in a better position to describe sin and announce forgiveness than those who have seen both firsthand? There is no ministry apart from brokenness. Some are crushed by physical disabilities, some by depression, some by financial loss. But some, broken by their own sin or the sin of others, come to depend on God by walking through the valley of spiritual hurt.

Thankfully, more elders than ever before are willing to say, "I am a sinner desperately in need of God's grace." This awareness prompts them to place in positions of leadership other sinners as well, including those whose sins are more conspicuous. No longer are pulpits and podiums reserved for the perfect, but for the prodigal as well.

Some twitch when others move to accept the tarnished. "Church leaders should model character and integrity," they say. And they are right. But one would be hard pressed to find biblical leaders whose lives were exempt from failure. Even Paul could say without false modesty, "I am the chief of sinners." God's leaders seemed not to be chosen on the basis of past infallibility, but present sensitivity to his will. A few claim to be self-appointed experts in judging the hearts of others, but as a friend recently observed, "Judging is not one of the gifts of the Spirit."

Admittedly, discretion should be exercised, because those who lead need to be responsible models before the church. A person who has shown no penitence for drunkenness, for example, has no place occupying a position of leadership, but neither, for that matter, does a person who shows no sorrow for gossip, greed, or lying. However, some people once gripped by alcohol exhibit much deeper for their sin than others guilty of less public offenses.

To automatically screen the damaged from positions of responsibility overlooks what God has done with those with blemished backgrounds. Abraham fathered a great nation in spite of his dishonesty; Solomon penned words of wisdom that would inspire faith for generations of readers even though his life was less than stellar, and God assigned Peter the distinction of preaching the first Christian sermon although he blatantly denied the Lord. Since God conferred roles of leadership upon these whose lives were marred, can we automatically write people off without prayerful consideration?

While Jesus loathed sin, he saw people as the victims of Satan. Yes, they were people who had made bad choices, but also people who had been worked over by the enemy. So Jesus didn't spend a lot of time berating people for their failures. Instead, he appealed to them: "Come unto me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

John says that once he left his pulpit for a period of rehabilitation, he sat on the back steps of the hospital and wept for half an hour. "Will I ever be okay again?" he wondered. Then, a roster of

names began rolling through his mind – giants of Scripture whose sin-tattered lives were used by God for great purposes: Abraham, David, Peter, and Paul. These were people who had, spiritually speaking, sat in the sewer and bled on themselves. Their problems were of their own doing, yet they had not been scratched from God’s list.

Again, some of God’s most prolific servants were those whose lives were pocked by serious mistakes.

Kimbrough Johns is a deacon who has personally witnessed and experienced the shift in attitude toward the damaged. His words tell the story of a transition from legalism to grace, and from exclusion to inclusion.

“Until recently, we in the church placed man-made limits upon God’s limitless grace by essentially denying the ‘divorced-single’ and ‘divorced-remarried’ much, if any, real role in the body life of the church.

“I think we practiced that misguided, graceless theology with the best of motives: to preserve the sanctity of church and family, and doubtless out of fear that a broader definition of grace might actually encourage divorce.

“Until the ’70s, I was one of those who believed in the spiritual disenfranchisement of the divorced.

“Then I *became* one of the disenfranchised. I was divorced in 1973; I remarried in 1977. I was outside the church from 1973 until 1980, when God sent us to the Richland Hills church. There, an extraordinary elder named Bill New explained God’s grace in terms that thrilled me. At Richland Hills, there has been a tangible progression from *rejection* to *tolerance* to *acceptance*, and even *encouragement* of the divorced-single and divorced-remarried Christian into the mainstream of the fellowship.

“Could it be that the unconditional and limitless grace of the Lost Sheep/Lost Coin/Lost Son trilogy of parables in Luke 15 applies to the sins of divorce and remarriage?

“I believe it does. And I thank God that his grace is alive and working in the hearts of his people!”

A few years ago, I attended a dinner party one night in north Dallas. I sat in the back seat of the car as a college friend and his wife drove us home. He must have gotten a little heavy-footed, because we soon spotted the flashing red lights of a patrol car bearing down upon us from behind. You can imagine our surprise when we peered through the rear window to see the patrolman. It was my brother! Greg served as a law enforcement officer, and he had caught us red-handed. The driver had little defense; he was guilty as charged. But since the driver and my brother knew each other well, he was treated leniently. Rather than issuing a stiff fine, Greg handed the driver a warning along with a firm but friendly word about not putting the pedal to the metal. While he was guilty of having violated the law, because of Greg’s mercy, he did not have to pay a penalty, and went free.

God has treated us much the same way, as he freed us from the penalty of our disobedience to the law. But when Jesus went to the cross, he not only lifted the penalty of our wrong, he also removed our guilt.

It is this grace that mandates graciousness to others. As recipients of grace, church leaders no longer exclude people who have been ravaged by alcohol, drugs, illicit sex, divorce, and crooked business dealings. They understand that to ignore the damaged is to simultaneously ignore God's mercy. They refuse to put up roadblocks where God has put out welcome signs.

More and more, the critics are the exception. Our fellowship has awakened to realize that if God grants his gifts and the heart is right, he does not disallow the use of those gifts. "Damaged goods" need no longer be shelved – they can be put to significant use in God's service. They are not beached, but launched for ministry.

Oh yes – one thing I forgot to mention. Remember Monty's friend who had picked up the soft drinks at 7-11? Monty calls it the ministry of the Big Gulp. Thank God that more and more church leaders are exercising the ministry of the Big Gulp – a ministry that exhibits confidence in those whose lives have been marked by trouble and pain.

Where God is Encountered

by Jack R. Reese
September, 1992

Most congregations I know are facing a serious dilemma: Should we make major changes in how we approach our worship, make some minor adjustments, or just leave things the way they are? Those who want some changes are less and less why in saying why.

“Our worship is too boring.”

“The services are disjointed. Very little planning appears to be done.”

“The songs and lessons seem almost irrelevant.”

“Our traditional service hardly resembles the intense and purposeful worship of the early church.”

“I am embarrassed to invite my unchurched friends.”

“The service provides few opportunities for genuine fellowship and sharing.”

“We seem to be just going through the acts.”

But when changes are made – or even suggested – the response from others is no less strong.

“We don’t know those songs. I like the songs we used to sing.”

“I’m uncomfortable with the changes. Surely it is not the purpose of worship to make people uncomfortable.”

“Where is the chapter and verse that supports these changes?”

“We’ve not ever done it that way. What’s wrong with the traditional service we’ve followed all of my life?”

“All of this is just change for the sake of change.”

As a result, some congregations are caught in a conflict over what should be done or allowed in their assemblies, or, more specifically, what they want or don’t want; like or don’t like.

I am aware of several reasons why such change is sought. In general, the reasons are three, all of which are the result of some sort of seeking.

SEEKING OUTSIDERS

Many are concerned about having congregational assemblies connect with the unchurched in their community. When their friends find the songs archaic, the sermons filled with insider jargon, and the services generally incomprehensible, they want to do something that is relevant or at least understandable.

Some are attempting to adapt the concept of a “seeker-service” like that of the Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago. Whether or not that model is appropriate, the desire to relate to people in our community is a compelling reason to consider some changes in the assembly.

SEEKING ONE ANOTHER

Over the last 30 years, many have suggested that the Sunday assembly primarily should be a time when Christian fellowship is experienced. Reacting to a dry, thoughtless implementation of five acts of worship, advocates of the “edification model” seek a dynamic assembly in which members are built up and encouraged.

Biblical references to edification in the assembly are not difficult to find. In several places in 1 Corinthians 14, for example, Paul urges the Christians to build up one another in the assembly. “Let all things be done for edification” (v. 26).

SEEKING OURSELVES

Others are seeking assemblies where individual worshippers are stirred and moved, where something special is experienced, where not only the mind but the heart is touched. Many are rebelling against worship services which follow the right pattern but are not very open to the experience of the holy. They want opportunities to express deep-felt praise. They are drawn to the worship language of the Psalms where people are shouting, bowing, kneeling, raising their hands, repenting, and in diverse and overt ways responding to the greatness of God.

Many are seeking themselves, or God within them, through an experience – especially an emotional one – in which they feel closer to him.

BUT WHOM SHOULD WE SEEK?

These three reasons for reexamining our Sunday assemblies have considerable validity. We must be sensitive not only to outsiders in general but to the language, styles, and preferences of people in the 1990s, churched or unchurched. We should be concerned that every person present in our assemblies is edified, spurred on to love and good works. And we should expect to experience something in our assemblies, to have our souls touched and renewed.

But valid as these concerns are, their purposes are too limited. More candidly, the focus is too much on US.

Biblical worship, in contrast, is focused on GOD. In both Old Testament and New, acceptable worship is rooted in who God is.

If asked the question, “Who is God?”, the ancient Israelites would have had little trouble answering. Of course, God is many things: sovereign, lord, merciful, longsuffering. But typically they would have responded: “He is the Holy One of Israel” (1 Samuel 2:2, 2Kings 19:22; Psalm 89:18). God is Holy. That is to say, he is *other, beyond, distinct*. He is not like us.

But the people of Israel often articulated a great paradox: “The Holy One of Israel is in our midst” (Hosea 11:9; Isaiah 12:6; Psalm 46). The God who is other is with us. The God who is beyond is among us. The God who is distinct participates in our humanity.

It is important to note that the distinctiveness of Israel's worship was not in her worship rituals. Other ancient near-eastern nations had rites similar to Sabbath, Passover, new moon celebrations, harvest feasts, atonement, sacrifices, and other acts of worship. These were significant for Israel because they were associated with the actions of the Holy One who was among them.

Every response of worship and every religious and national law were connected to the work of God who acted on behalf of his people, the God who was with them. This work of God began with creation, triumphed in the delivery of Israel from Egypt, and ultimately found its fruition in the incarnation of Christ – Immanuel – God with us. It is this God who not only saw Israel in her bondage but saw us in our sin and suffered for us: the Holy One in our midst.

The handful of New Testament passages addressing the Christian assembly assume the centrality of God's presence in the midst of his people. In 1 Corinthians 14, for example, Paul blasts those who would cause confusion and chaos in the assembly. He urges them to a kind of worship that would not only build up each other but might affect any outsiders present.

At its core, the Christian assembly is not designed to seek outsiders, each other, or ourselves. Rather it is a sacramental event. That is to say, in our worship we encounter God, the Holy One among us.

The fundamental task of worship is not to attract outsiders, though we should be aware of their presence and sensitive to their needs. Nor is it to build up one another, though that will be an important and even inevitable result of meaningful worship. Nor is it to stimulate our emotions, though we may have moving emotional experiences.

Rather, in worship, as we praise God for his holiness, as we confess our unworthiness, as we thank him for his lovingkindness, as we commit ourselves to his purposes, we actually encounter God in our midst. It is not so much that we seek God in worship that we may find him but that we open ourselves to his seeking us. And being found in him, we allow ourselves to be changed into his likeness.

Christian assemblies are not simply places where right worship is done in right ways. They are not frivolous events where we thoughtlessly conform to some prepackaged program. They are not performances where we demonstrate our public gifts.

Rather, we participate in Christian assemblies to be encountered by God! It is him that we seek. We gather each week to hear again his promises and to be renewed by his presence. We offer him both our praise and our sin knowing he will receive both – for his glory and our redemption. We bolster and exhort each other to be faithful to his ways. We urge each other to persevere in the face of adversity by his power and to his ends. We commit ourselves to sharing in the death of Christ which we experience anew so that we might proclaim it until he returns. We offer all that we have so that we might receive all that he is.

So in our worship we seek the God who seeks us. By his grace we see his face – the Holy one in our midst.

Confessions of a Song Leader

*by Jeff Berryman
September, 1994*

JOY TO THE WORLD, THE LORD IS COME ...”

The Sunday quiet at 8:08 a.m. over on Fifth and Church Street (much like Fifth and Anywhere) is thick with the laziness of the weekend. Forty-five minutes from the call to worship, and residents for blocks around have no interest in being called.

I am the song leader. Today, arriving early, I selfishly pick a parking spot close to the door, rummage through my tired Toyota in search of a lonely, yellowed Bible, and silently grumble my way across the street, vacantly realizing I can't remember the name of this good man of God who waits patiently for me, holding open the door to the building.

Clutching the weekly minute-by-minute order of worship, I creep into a deserted classroom, pull up a podium (I need something to lean on), and begin warming up. Making odd noises, hums and calls, hoping my voice will survive today, my heart pounds, my innards tighten, and the challenge, the frustration, the expectation of a sacred coming returns. The sweat of private, holy war breaks out again and I pause, thinking, reaching inside, breathing slowly, praying a word or two – anything to capture some small notion of the reality that stands behind what I am about to do. Some small notion of the One whose face I seek. Whose face seeks me.

Eight-thirty-four a.m. Eleven minutes to the “go.” I know the songs, know the new tunes, know strategies to cope with mishaps, with boredom – even with prayer requests! But do I know the God who waits inside the praise soon to rise from my mouth?

THE LORD IS IN HIS HOLY TEMPLE ...”

Car doors slam. Children too young to look both ways run into the street, ignoring Mommy's warning cries, sloughing off Daddy's commands. The older folks smile warm smiles, smiles that seem mature and full, as if they belong to a sepia-toned past, a past not only distant, but perhaps irrelevant in a distorted modernity. A woman whose divorce finalizes tomorrow slips past a whispered conversation, a covert glance. An old mentor who moved out of his home just last Monday sits idly in his seat while his wife is over there, away from him ... away from him! A secretly abused child sidles up to the friend whom she loves, admires her dress, and wishes she were someone else.

JESUS IS LORD, MY REDEEMER ...”

On the podium, in front of the people, seen by the Unseen, my eyes alternately close and open, never knowing exactly what a holy moment might hold, torn between heaven and earth. My eyes sweep into the faces of those looking back at me. I see teenagers and scattered dreamers, young and old, people joyfully expecting somedays, or keening painfully over heavy never-weres. I see fiery eyes, impish glances, sensitive spirits – children who will soon crash into the devil himself.

I see elders, divorcees, twelve-steppers, widows, deacons, embarrassed illicit lovers, regular holy folk, and beaming newlyweds – all fresh from Saturday night’s living and dying.

LORD, WE COME BEFORE THEE NOW. AT THY FEET WE HUMBL Y BOW ...”

Each set in the sanctuary holds a man or woman lost in the maze of complexity that makes up the human experience – the human reality. These people believe in God, and yet ... Mouths singing “Lord, come quickly” will cuss and rant before the day ends, and will pray again when darkness falls. Minds painting the cross of Christ into their imaginations and hearts, communing with God, will burn with lust before the golden sundown.

NEARER, STILL NEARER ...”

I wave my arm. I lean on the podium. I blow my pitch pipe. All the while staggering under the implications of a God who can know each of the thoughts in the sanctuary. These thoughts, these truths, these lies, these hearts – mine among them – whirl into heaven, millions upon millions every second, and God knows ... and sees ... and hears ... everything. And yet ... And yet

O, LOVE THAT WILL NOT LET ME GO ...”

How amazing! Yahweh comes and listens to little songs sung by little broken hearts. The God who ignites worlds leans over me, leans into me – into you – and breathes fire into our waning spirits, wielding pain that cleanses and frees. The God who rumbles through waking dreams approaches and, perhaps, smiles. The God who silences centuries, who fulds out untold forevers, for whom “now” runs eternal – this God sits easily next to me, ruefully watching me watch the time that will one day be no more.

NUMBER 276 WILL BE THE SONG AFTER THE LESSON THIS MORNING ...”

And now, God speaks.

“Oh,” I hink, “that’s true.”

And always, his voice speaks on and on with these truths so true, and they are beyond me. Not just beyond my comprehension, but beyond me. What has this to do with me? I must live, decide, fight, believe, go on, bear up, endure. I must suffer and find meaning. I must cope with dying – my own and everyone else’s. I am no god. I am a sinner. I am a twisted man. I am full of blight and disease and things not to be brought to light. I am oppressed and tired, and hardly strong enough to listen, much less act. I, like God, so unlike God, am that I am. Am what I am. Nothing more, and no mere Sunday words can change the “I am” in me.

... AS WE STAND AND SING.”

Rustle, rustle, et the pitch, start the song. Oh no, is it time to respond to the Lord again? So soon? Must I speak back to you, Lord? Must I reply to this word of yours?

“JUST AS I AM, WITHOUT ONE PLEA...”

How does a song leader “come forward”? how does an arm-waver throw himself at the feet of God in confession, brokenness and hunger? I don’t know, but I constantly want to, and do. What else can I do as I sing these undeniable words? Just as I am isn’t much.

“LAMB OF GOD, I COME ...”

Mere words bring no comfort, no change. Songs bring no healing. Prayers hold no power in and of themselves, and the prayers today, for the man and woman in the eleventh row on the right, have been empty and cold.

“BREATHE ON ME< BREATH OF GOD...”

Please. Something. Anything. Please, God.

What happens on a Sunday morning?

God comes, that’s what.

The Maker descends. He comes. He listens. He watches. He revels, weeps, turns away, enfolds, comforts, reveals, encounters. He himself, his Person, his Action, changes the “I am” in me from tragedy ... to glory. To glory!

And what do we do on these Sundays? Why do we come? To respond. We fall on our knees, on our faces. We sing songs too small, give praises too tiny when held up against his immensity, his fathomlessness. We come to be loved.

We come – in all our ugliness, in soiled lives, in sin-filled moments – to find God finding us.

“AND ALL GOD’S PEOPLE SAID – ‘AMEN.’”

Another great job, someone says, and how much we all enjoyed the singing today.

Turning down South Eleventh, God turning with me, I know – and I smile for joy – that mine is a Father who transforms quiet, shouting struggles into Sunday morning songs, songs fraught with sin and pain and longing and joy, even filled with humanity.

What happens on a Sunday morning?

My God comes to me – running, laughing, warring, weeping – loving me, lifting me, holding me, knowing me, carrying me another step toward final reality, final hope, final victory.

Holy Mysteries

by C. Leonard Allen

September, 1994

The modest audience in the small Bethany church building on that Sunday morning in 1848 waited eagerly as Dr. Robert Richardson rose from his seat, walked slowly to the communion table, then turned to face the congregation. Alexander Campbell had just delivered the morning sermon, as usual. But now the audience awaited a special treat – a communion meditation from Richardson. These meditations, delivered from time to time over the years, were memorable events, and the Bethany Church of Christ – made up mostly of students and faculty – eagerly anticipated them.

The doctor stood facing the congregation for several moments. There was utter silence. He was a thin, dignified man standing somewhat taller than Campbell.

“How truly incomprehensible and beyond comparison is the love of God for man!” he began in his high-pitched, reticent voice.

“Inscrutable are his ways, unsearchable as his judgments, deep as the exhaustless mines of his wisdom and knowledge, his love but partakes of the infinitude of his nature.” He paused slightly. “How, then, can we hope to fathom its depths, to estimate its value, or to realize its power!”

Richardson spoke further of the magnitude of that love and of how weak and small seem our noblest efforts in comparison. “But, alas! how shall man return a love of which he cannot even adequately conceive?” he asked. “It is as high as heaven; it is vast as the universe! How can he attain to it? How can he compass it?”

These exclamations and questions point to the heart of the spiritual life as Richardson conceived it. “True religion” meant entering into spiritual union with God. It meant contemplating the divine glory and the “ever-opening mysteries of redeeming love.” It meant allowing oneself to be renovated into a living temple for the Holy Spirit.

Throughout his life Richardson addressed these themes with a quiet passion and eloquence. In a time when doctrinal, polemical, and organizational matters preoccupied the movement, he remained a persistent – at times almost solitary – advocate of a deeper, richer spirituality. It was here, he felt, that the movement was most lacking. In 1842 he noted, for example, “a dull insensibility in respect to spiritual things, which seems to arise from an ignorance of there being any such thing as a true and spiritual union with God and Christ.”

A few other voices had raised such concerns before him. John Rogers of Carlisle, Kentucky, for example, had written to Campbell in 1834, noting that “many of us, in running away from the extreme of enthusiasm, have, on the other hand, passed the temperate zone, and gone far into the frozen regions.” “There is, in too many churches,” he added, “a cold-hearted, lifeless formality, that freezes the energies.”

And Campbell himself, on a few occasions, could raise such concerns. Religion certainly was an intellectual matter, he wrote in 1837, “but religion dwelling in the heart, rooted in the feelings and affections, is living, active, and real existence.” This is what fills the soul with divine life. “This is religion,” he concluded; “all the rest is machinery.”

Richardson picked up such concern and made it a life-long focus. His writings resound with the call to the spiritual life. But nowhere is his vision of that life more powerful and eloquent than in his many communion meditations delivered to the Bethany church.

J.W. McGarvey was a student at Bethany College in 1847-48 and heard many of them. “The richest service of all,” he later wrote, was when they had a sermon by Mr. Campbell followed by Dr. Richardson in a five- or ten-minute talk at the Lord’s table.” These talks were gems of beauty, he said.

Between 1847 and 1850, Richardson published a series of the talks in the *Millennial Harbinger* under the title “Communings in the Sanctuary.” Later, at the urging of McGarvey and others, he collected 24 of them into a small book of the same title. That book remains the first and greatest of the devotional books written in the Restoration Movement.

At the heart of the book lies a constant sense of the awesome mystery of things human and things divine. Three themes predominate.

1. *The mystery of the holy.* In Richardson’s view, recognition of the divine mystery is fundamental to Christian faith. Far from hindering one’s vision or obstructing one’s spiritual progress, the recognition of mystery brings “truer and nobler” views of God. “In proportion as the mysteries presented to us deepen, they approach nearer to God,” Richardson said. “He is the great mystery of mysteries, and we draw nearer to him as we approach the veil that conceals his inner temple.”

In one of the talks, Richardson contrasted the “religion of the imagination” and the “religion of the intellect.” The first, he said, focuses on nature and its beauties. To its devotees, the world becomes “an emanation from the Beautiful, which is their deity and idol.” Their great error, he said, lies in thinking that true religion consists in reverence for God’s beautiful creation.

But, Richardson said, a “thousand charms” mark such religion when one compares it with the “barren and undecorated religion of the intellect.” For these devotees are obsessed with analyzing the organisms of the spiritual system and dissecting its outward forms – squeezing out their life and beauty in the process. In this view, Richardson says, “to think right is to do right, and to worship reason is to worship God.”

But in the sanctuary of God, with the “Lamb that was slain” lifted up and the emblems of divine love spread, both errors find their corrective. There one can neither “bow in the chambers of imagery nor yield to the idolatry of reason.” Indeed, how poor and feeble do those things seem “when the heart feels the love of God, and the soul rejoices in the Beloved!”

“Before the cross of Jesus,” Richardson continued, “the magnificence of earth is vanity, and the power of intellect but pride.” Before the cross one must exchange the “religion of the imagination” for the great promises of Christian hope and subject human reason to the “mysteries of Revelation.” And it is a great and happy exchange. For Christian hope opens more glorious scenes that anyone can imagine and the “mysteries of Faith are more sublime than those of Reason.”

In pointing to the mysteries of faith, Richardson did not cast out reason. The Christian faith contains intellectual depths, to be sure, and the mind seeks to plumb them. Reason especially plays an important role in the “preliminary examination of the facts and evidences of the gospel.” But reason’s power is sharply limited. It simply cannot purify the heart and bring human passions under control. Only the gospel can do that. In purifying and transforming the heart, the gospel reveals its greatest power and profoundest mysteries – here one finds that “a ‘deeper deep’ speedily exhausts the plumb line of reason and philosophy.”

2. *The mystery of Christ’s atoning death.* Because Richardson prepared these talks for the communion service, they invariably centered in Christ’s death. Though the coming of Christ into the world was a great mystery, he said, “how much greater the mystery of his death! What new and wonderful developments it gives of the divine character! What startling thoughts it suggests of things invisible!”

So inscrutable was the mystery of the atonement, many preachers in the movement thought, that dwelling on it or trying to explore it yielded little profit. One did better to affirm the simple historical facts, then turn to more practical and understandable matters – like what people must do to be saved.

Richardson thought otherwise. To him the events of Jesus’ death were “transcendent facts” full of meaning and mystery. By fixing one’s eyes there, troubled consciences and rough desires were stilled by the “potent charm of Jesus’ love.” By entering its dark places and exploring its deeps time and again, one grew ever more captivated by holy things and higher loves. Indeed, in contemplating such mysteries, one came to “see more of God than angels knew before!”

3. *The mystery of union with God and Christ.* In Richardson’s view the Christian faith was not “a mere system of salvation from sin,” with the cross being one part of that system. Neither was Jesus’ death simply a removal of sin’s penalties. Its purpose rather was “to effect a renovation – a regeneration of the soul.”

many believers, he thought, view redemption as a kind of commodity “which they may obtain upon certain terms, of which the ministers of the Gospel are supposed to be the negotiators.” But redemption is no negotiable commodity. Rather, it involves nothing less than a transforming union with God and Christ through the Holy Spirit.

This union is one of faith’s great mysteries. Through it the believer develops entirely new spiritual sensibilities. As those senses are cultivated, the believer grows “as fully alive to the things of the spiritual world, as is the natural man to the things of the natural world.” he develops

“a fellowship with spiritual existencies and objects of whose very existence he was formerly wholly unconscious.” In a word, the believer becomes fit for life in heaven with God.

Standing behind the communion table on that Sunday morning in 1848, Richardson brought his talk to a close. “How shall man return a love of which he cannot even adequately conceive?” he had asked.

“Oh! how joyful the reflection,” he now answered, “that however weak our powers, however imperfect our efforts, the Divine Comforter can shed abroad the love of God in our hearts, enlarge our capacities, transform all our feeble nature, and render us partakers of the divine fullness.”

In front of him the table was spread and ready. He looked down at it for a moment, then back to the audience.

“Inscrutable and sublime mystery,” he exclaimed, his voice trembling slightly, that “the glorious Being, of whom our unequal powers can form no adequate conception, and whose glory fills both earth and heaven, can yet find a dwelling place in the human heart!”

Richardson turned and walked quickly back to his seat. Servers came forward and the congregation communed together, sharing the sacred emblems of divine suffering and glory.

Adapted from *Distant Voices: Discovering a Forgotten Past for a Changing Church*, forthcoming from Abilene Christian University Press.

Further Reading

Goodnight, Cloyd and Dwight E. Stevenson, *Home to Bethphage: A Biography of Robert Richardson*. St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1949.

Richardson, Robert. *Communings in the Sanctuary Cincinnati*, date unknown.

_____. “Pure and Undeiled Religion – No. 1” *Millenial Harbinger* 5th series, 2 (November 1859), 622-26.

Resources for Contemporary Worship

by Kregg Hood
September, 1992

Terry Wardle tells this great story in his book *Exalt Him!*

A small boy sat beside his mother at church. Like most children, his attention was neither easily captured nor readily held. So much of what was happening in the service seemed uninteresting, unrelated, unimportant. Quite frankly, he was bored stiff! Suddenly his ever-wandering eyes noticed a bronze plaque prominently placed upon the side wall. There he saw stars, letters, and the outline of an American flag. Nudging his mother and pointing to the plaque, he asked, “What’s that?” Graciously and patiently the young mother replied, “Oh, those are the names of people from our church who died in the service.” There was a long pause. The little fellow was somewhat bothered by her answer. Suddenly he demanded his mother’s attention again. With a sense of concern – almost panic – he asked, “Mom, was that the first or second service?”

That story’s almost too true to be funny. Worship to Almighty God should be to create a wondrous mix of celebration, awe, reflection, and encouragement. Whether worship is in public or in private we need to experience the presence of our Heavenly Father.

But the big question is how do we open pathways to more powerful worship? This review suggests resources which will help both your private and congregational worship. But there is something more important you need to realize first. Think back on the life of David and his Psalms. Worship was never better! Why? Because David had a keen sense of who God is and what he has done. If you want to energize your worship, focus on understanding and growing in your appreciation of those two thoughts. If God is not at the center of your worship, you’ll be imprisoned by your preferences, comfort zones, and worship format “fads” that come and go.

Three caveats are in order before my review. First, this list is not exhaustive. I’m sure many of you know of other excellent resources. If so, great! Let’s share them! Anything which helps us better comprehend who God is and appreciate what he has done will lead us to more powerful worship.

Second, this list focuses primarily on contemporary worship resources which are compatible with more traditional formats. If you’re more “high church,” please remember that resources are already plentiful for this approach. The same can also be said for the “low church” folks.

Third, my positive recommendation of a resource simply means it is helpful to me. It does not mean I necessarily agree with every single doctrinal point or application suggested by each resource. Study God’s Word, search your heart and examine the opportunities God gives you for influencing worship.

RESOURCES FOR DEVELOPING MORE POWERFUL WORSHIP

Books:

A Celebration of Praise by Dick Eastman. This book expands on the two most fundamental truths necessary for powerful worship: who God is and what he has done. Eastman opens the book by addressing the first of these two truths. He surveys several key facets of God's unlimited existence, weaving in his own insights with others like A.W. Tozer and J.I. Packer (Baker, 1984).

Mastering Worship by Jack Hayford, John Killinger, and Howard Stevenson. This very practical book comes from the pens and hearts of three gifted leaders of meaningful congregational worship. The authors provide explanations, guidelines, and tips to improve any congregational worship experience (Multnomah, 1990).

Beyond Church Growth by Robert Logan. This entire book is about helping a church develop a comprehensive approach to ministry. Logan, a proven church planter, describes 10 principles needed to minister effectively in a contemporary society. Of special interest is Chapter Four, "Celebrative and Reflective Worship" (Revell, 1989).

The Ultimate Priority by John MacArthur, Jr. This book studies worship from a theological standpoint. But, MacArthur's writing style is not tedious at all. His Scripture study helps to develop the heart of an adoring, obedient disciple. Even though the book is oriented toward a more traditional understanding of the topic, it's one of my personal favorites. (Moody, 1983).

Up With Worship by Anne Ortlund. The sub-title of *Up With Worship* says it all: *How to Quit Playing Church*. This book presents 70 brief essays on a wide variety of issues and concerns which are relevant to congregational worship. (Regal, 1982).

The Attributes of God by Arthur W. Pink. Here's a classic book that's helped me enlarge my awareness of God's greatness. Pink discusses 17 of the many incredible qualities of God's nature. This information will give you a greater respect for the Lord. You can't help but worship when you realize how great he is! (Baker, 1975).

The Hallelujah Factor by Jack Taylor. This book includes an extensive analysis of both Greek and Hebrew words as they were used in various biblical worship settings. The author's love for the Lord and his passion for leading others into worship enhances the impact of this book, too. (Broadman, 1983).

Worship is a Verb by Robert Webber. Another top leader of the study and practice of Christian worship brings his theological, academic, and practical experiences to bear on this topic. (Word, 1985 and Abbott-Martyn, 1992, 2nd edition).

Exalt Him! by Terry Wardle. Wardle shows the interrelatedness of Christ-centered worship. His thesis is that dynamic, Christian worship must glorify God, edify believers, and appeal to the lost. (Christian Publications, 1988).

Resource Tapes/Recordings:

Galestorm Music (P.O. Box 121474, Nashville, TN 37212-1474) by John Elliot. Elliot's skills as a worship leader are superb but unpretentious. And his insights as a teacher are penetrating. He has the following materials available through Galestorm Music: Teaching tapes on "The Magnificence of God," "Worship Leading," "Hindrances to Worship 1 and 2," and "Spiritual Warfare." Like most contemporary praise music, this music is not arranged for the *a cappella* experience.

Hallal Music (P.O. Box 153394, Irving, TX 75015-3394). Fortunately, however, there is a new source of contemporary praise music serving non-instrumental churches. Ken Young, Minister of Music and Family at South MacArthur Church of Christ in Irving, Texas created Hallal Music to

meet this growing need. The word “hallal” is from a Hebrew word which means “to praise God with a loud voice.” Hallal Music has just released “The Singer’s Workshop Series.” These materials include a collection of some of the most popular contemporary praise songs, all arranged for four-part harmony. Ken has also set several great portions of Scripture to music. This material has been “field tested” extensively and is very “singable” by churches of all sizes.

Contemporary Hymnbooks:

Several other contemporary songbooks, oriented toward a *cappella* singing, are available. Two of these are *Praise for the Lord* (Praise Press, 1992, telephone 80-331-5991). This new hymnbook brings as wide a variety of songs as any hymnbook available to churches of Christ. The editors have included both the words and music to some of the newer, well-known and popular worship songs in the 900 selections this book contains.

Songs of the Church, 21st Century Edition (Howard Publishers, 1990, telephone 318-396-3122). This book is a complete update from a popular previous hymnal produced by Howard Publishers.

Periodicals:

Worship Leader (CCM Publications, 1913 21st Avenue South, Nashville, TN 37212, 615-386-3011). This bimonthly magazine is directed at the congregational leader who wants to bring contemporary worship to the local church. It features articles, ideas, resources, and reviews (as well as advertisements) which can enhance congregational worship.

Discipleship Journal (Navpress, telephone 800-877-1811). Issue 70, 1992 highlights the theme of worship. This one issue is full of excellent teaching articles and information about the state of congregational worship in evangelical America.

Obviously, I have not listed all available resources, but I hope these will be helpful. Perhaps this list will at least “whet your appetite” for the most important task of more meaningfully worshipping our God!

Tasting Worship: Feast or Famine?

by Jeff Nelson
September, 1994

The Senses of Worship, Part V

How long has it been since you've had a big bite of worship? I had one the night before I was to leave for a week's commitment of leading worship for the Great Northwest Evangelism Workshop. I had spent hours in preparation but many tasks were yet to be done. I knew of a worship seminar that I have attended in the past. I wanted very badly to go but I knew I needed to continue preparing. I thought maybe I could go for just one hour and I wouldn't be too far behind.

The air was crisp with the expectation of powerful worship. The beginning praise songs were high-spirited and celebrative.

As the music became slower and more meditative, our hearts became more sensitive. I don't remember the name of the song we were singing, but the words referred to bowing with the angels in worship and falling on our faces with the elders, lifted from passages in the Revelation. We sang these words several times before moving to the chorus which contained many repetitions of the beautiful worship words "holy" and "glory." I had my eyes closed wanting to sense being in the throneroom with these heavenly beings.

Making no effort, the throneroom appeared in my mind in more splendor than I had ever imagined and what I saw in my mind for the next few moments was so real I could taste the experience. The room was suspended in space. There was no ceiling or floor, only millions of bright, twinkling stars in a rich midnight blue sky. The focal point of the room was the throne and the shining golden stairs leading up to it. A rainbow of vibrant penetrating colors made an enormous arch over the throne. From the bottom of the stairs out to a point in infinity, heavenly warriors line the room displaying the brilliant gold shields Solomon had made for his guards. Blinding light bounced around the room reflecting from the shields. The light from the throne was blinding also. I realized I was a spectator "viewing" a scene unseen by human eyes.

Wrapped in a semi-circle facing the throne were thousands of saved worshippers dressed in white robes. Between the worshippers and the stairs to the throne was a beautiful pool of water. The song changed to one with the lyrics "blessing and glory and honor and power forever." As these words were sung the worshippers raised their hands high on the word "blessing," lifted their faces when they sang "glory," bowed low when they sang "honor," and stood with firm fists on the word "power." Smiles beamed from their faces as they worshipped.

I stood completely still so that no movement would remind me this experience was only in my mind. I dared not open my eyes for fear this beautiful throneroom might disappear. It didn't disappear; rather the angels appeared. They were as white as snow and with feathered wings spread wide; they flew gracefully throughout the throneroom calling out, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory."

The singing stopped momentarily as the worship leader began to speak. He had not mentioned the throneroom up to this point but now he said, “We are in the throneroom of the Almighty.” He spoke beautiful words of worship and I hoped that these moments would linger uninterrupted for a while longer. As he spoke I stood back in my mind and observed the whole arena of this awesome sight with feelings of honor and humility. The place I was observing is a scene that has always been and always will be.

The worship leader then focused his words on Jesus, beautiful words describing him and how worthy he is of the place he occupies in the throneroom. As he spoke of Jesus I saw that the pool of water between the worshippers and the stairs to the throne was crystal red. The waters began to stir and all eyes in the room turned to see Jesus rising from the pool on a pedestal that ascended above our heads. The crystal red water was dripping from him as he rose, which to me symbolized the shedding of his blood. The moment was one in which chill bumps appear instantly all over. There was not a word spoken but every heart knew the Lamb from the altar had entered to take his rightful place.

A radiant glow accompanied this welcomed Savior as he ascended the stairs to take his place at the right hand of the throne.

I have never sensed such an energetic spiritual moment. Thinking this scene must be the finale, I stood and took in the entire spectrum, hoping to remember the hue of every color and the texture of every thread in this tapestry of worship.

But it wasn't over yet. The worship leader began leading softly,

*There is a place of quiet rest,
near to the heart of God.
A place where sin cannot molest,
near to the heart of God.
O Jesus, blest Redeemer,
sent from the heart of God,
Hold us, who wait before thee,
near to the heart of God.*

As these words were sung, the intense light of the throne took the shape of a heart. A warmth penetrated the room like a fire built on the first cold day of winter. The feeling of eternal security welled up in every soul.

Needless to say, these words of an old familiar hymn found a new and endeared place in my heart. Until I join this army of worshippers, every time I sing these words, I will savor the taste of a place far removed from my physical setting.

I had an appetizer prior to the feast of eternal worship. For me, this conceptualized being changed from one degree of glory to another. It was minute in the total spectrum, of divinity but it was a taste of what is to come. Perhaps the Holy Spirit led me to this place as did the ghosts of

the Christmases in Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," intending for me to see this for a specific reason.

I believe it was a profitable decision to go to worship that busy evening, and even though I stayed longer than an hour, I had no regrets, and even proceeded with my preparation with a refreshed perspective. Since I had been before his throne it wasn't difficult to lead a week of transforming worship. I had glimpsed glory and simply asked the worshippers to join me before the throne. As the deer pants for the taste of water, so my soul longs for the taste of worship.

I have no profound theological analogies to equate with this unprecedented experience, but I would like to offer some observations as a little "Food for Thought":

1. What would our faces look like if we expressed ourselves during a feast of worship as we do during a gourmet meal?
2. What spices could be added to make our worship more "flavorful"?
3. Is there any comparison to the repugnant taste of the worship of the Laodicians to ours?
4. Sometime during the Lord's Supper think about what you are tasting – "the bread of forgiveness, the wine of release." These symbols of Christ pass over the most vile part of our being – first, the tongue, cleansing its sins and flowing through the entire body bringing the sweet taste of renewal.
5. Is it possible that we are in a sense starving ourselves by not encouraging each other to use our God-given gifts in the would-be "feast of worship"? Many have left our fellowship because gifts, such as music and drama, that would contribute to our worship are not welcomed; thus these "misfits" find acceptance elsewhere and we miss out on some wonderful "home-grown" ministries. Why would we turn anyone away who has been gifted to prepare and serve the feast?
6. Could Peter be teaching us a lesson when he was given permission from God to taste something he had previously refused to eat? God may have been saying, "If you don't taste it, you'll never know what you're missing."
7. Do our tastes for worship change as we mature in Christ? Can we discover new tastes that we once rejected? When I was young I belligerently refused brussels sprouts, broccoli, and squash. Now, I salivate for them.
8. I receive letters frequently concerning thoughts about worship; what it is and what it's not. Read these comments and see how the church is "tasting and seeing the goodness of God." Can you relate to any of these "feast" or "famine" comments?

FAMINE:

"Our worship services are like a trip to the morgue!" ~ Arkansas

“I am at a crossroads in my ministry. I am a bit tired of having to spend so much energy gently dismantling the walls of tradition so that some new wine can be tasted.” ~ Colorado

“It’s about time for many Churches of Christ to be able to sing and worship with songs and approaches that are connectable with the culture we live in today.” ~ Ohio

“It takes many elements to create a ‘worship-led’ service: willing elders, accepting members, and openness to the reality of the functioning Holy Spirit in our lives. I don’t feel hopeless, but I think I will have to be patient. I just know there are untold numbers of thirsty souls who need to come to the well – and that most certainly includes me!” ~ California

FEAST:

“I serve with a small but growing group of Christians. Unlike most smaller churches, we have a fairly progressive attitude toward many aspects of church life and work. We have discussed ways of making our assemblies more praise-oriented and uplifting. We’re not afraid to do things in a ‘non-traditional’ way.” ~ Texas.

“The worship I experienced last week was wonderful. I’m ready for an eternity like that!” ~ Texas.

“We are presently participating in the planning of an early praise service on Sunday mornings. There are only a few of us, but we are hungry for a more spiritual experience.” ~ California

“It was so refreshing to have a worship service like we had last Sunday night. There were over 1,200 youth in attendance for this wonderful experience.” ~ Oklahoma.

New cookbooks are being written daily by “worship chefs” who are sincerely listening for new recipes that will nourish the body of Christ. There are new chapters being added to the books constantly. If you have an edition marked “complete,” it is now obsolete. Anticipate new volumes. Don’t let a tattered old men keep you from enjoying the eternal feast prepared for you; preparation that began the moment you took your first sip of spiritual milk. Don’t crave milk any longer

“All things are ready. Come to the Feast!”

AfterGlow: Externals and Extolling

*by Phillip Morrison
September, 1992*

A well-meaning brother recently purchased a communion set and had a friend take it to a new church in Russia. He had heard that these new Christians were drinking grape juice (surely not wine!) out of a single chalice, and he didn't want any "one-cuppers" to get started in Russia. He didn't realize that his new brothers and sisters were simply reflecting their culture, not making a doctrinal statement.

A preacher friend insisted that women in the congregation make the communion bread from scratch. The church could not use kosher unleavened bread because "the hands that crucified my Lord should not touch the bread served at the Lord's table!" I assume he verified that no Jews were employed at the Welch's grape juice processing plant.

I have a childhood memory of a lady rising from the waters of baptism shouting, "Hallelujah! Praise Jesus!" And of the people who quickly branded her a "holy roller," never quite fully accepting her as a sister in Christ. What should have been a time of rejoicing became a time for suspicion and quenched Spirit.

These are extreme examples of a more common problem: giving more attention to the externals of worship than to what happens in the worshippers' hearts. The Samaritan woman (John 4) was clearly trying to avoid any divine probing into her heart when she asked Jesus which mountain was more appropriate for worship. Jesus was just as determined that she should not evade the real issue: God is a Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.

Worshipping God in spirit and truth is to become one with him. It is to allow God to fill and direct our lives. After all, if we do not possess the Spirit of God, we don't belong to him (Romans 8:9). And Christ in us is our hope – our only hope – of glory (Colossians 1:27).

George Buttrick observed, "Protestant worship has sometimes become cheap – prefaced and ended in casual conversation, interrupted by a casual 'announcement period,' and disfigured by hymns that are poor jingles and preachments that are a 'noisy going.' Jesus lived the prayer he offered: 'Father, glorify thy name.' In thought and speech, in deed and worship, he revered the nature of God who is all and in all."

It is not that we do too little in worship; we may be trying to do too much. I have been in many worship situations (and, God forgive me, I have led too many of them) where we tried to convert the lost, instruct the young, inspire the faithful, strengthen the weak, motivate the indifferent, commune with God, take care of the money, announce all the trivia – and still get out in time to beat the Baptists to the cafeteria. I wonder if the church leaders who used a stop watch to determine the most efficient way to serve communion really understood the nature of worship. Shouldn't the people of God congregate for the singular purpose of glorifying him?

I recently calculated that I have gone to church more than 10,000 times in my life, gone to worship many of those times, and really worshipped a few of those times. Worship is not just a place to go or things to do; it is an encounter with God. True worship is so compelling, so life-filling that we are changed forever each time we worship. Robert Webber is right: Worship is a verb.