

# **Wineskins Magazine**

## **Worship: Encountering God**

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## In With the Old – In With the New

by Rubel Shelly

September – October, 1997

Please bear with me for a few paragraphs. If the subject matter for the opening of this editorial seems remote to the worship issue, I promise to bring the two together. So give me the benefit of the doubt. Read on. . . .

One of the most interesting of the hundreds of pieces written when Princess Diana died tragically on August 31, 1997, was by Barbara Amiel. A columnist for London's *Daily Telegraph*, she argued that one of the many paradoxes of Diana's sad life is that her lingering image may save Britain's monarchy.

The House of Windsor has fallen on hard times of late. The stuffy irrelevance that many associate with a monarchy in these democratic times has had many Britons speaking of its end with the reign of Queen Elizabeth. For all his civility and erudition, Prince Charles has never inspired the nation. There is no clamor for him to rule. Ms. Amiel correctly pointed out that anyone who could keep the public's attention on the royal family had to be viewed as an asset.

If she did nothing else, Lady Di certainly captured the public's attention for the royal family. From a fairy-tale wedding to a seamy affair to a painful divorce, everything she did kept her, her husband, and speculation about the future (if any!) of the British crown an issue of daily discussion.

Upon her death, it became clear that England's commoners felt far closer to their rejected princess than to the family that gave her that status. Though it must have galled her to do so, the Queen consented to a funeral that was a little short of what a head of state receives. Likely more people lined her funeral route than will line that of Queen Elizabeth when she goes the way of humankind.

Here was the English columnist's conclusion to all this: "Ultimately, the Queen, by maintaining the legend of Diana, Princess of Wales, will only help the institution of the monarchy. The public may now feel that they cannot deny Diana's fervent wish: to see Prince William become King of England" ("The Princess of the Common Touch," *New York Times*, September 2, 1997, p. A15).

Here is a precedent for modernity and tradition coming together. Neither destroyed the other, but both were changed significantly by their union. I wonder if we might not say the same thing about what we are witnessing with worship in our fellowship?

We have some traditions in worship. They vary by region of the country and from rural to urban settings. They are even more varied if one takes into account practices by people associated with us in countries outside the United States of America.

There is nothing inherently wrong with the development of traditions. In fact, it cannot be helped. The problem comes when those traditions become so fixed that they are seen by many to inhibit true worship and to make the church appear irrelevant to a watching world.

In Churches of Christ, “modernizing” usually has nothing to do with our fundamental commitment to honor God with Scripture-based worship. It has nothing to do with challenging our heritage of a cappella music. Instead, it most often means using contemporary music, a presentation piece by a soloist or chorus, teaching through drama, or otherwise doing something non-traditional in our limited worship experience.

I happen to think the generations *need* each other. I further believe they can *bless* each other. And Ms. Amiel’s editorial about Queen Elizabeth and Princess Diana makes my point very effectively. The latter was a woman of her time, and she was hard pressed to conform to a mold of protocol that did not fit her or her peers; the former was a woman of *her* time who could not understand that the pulse of her country – for better or worse – was beating in rhythm with that of her daughter-in-law and not her own.

If the two women had not been so distant from each other and so threatened by each other, many, many things might have been different. A marriage might have been better. The temptation to go seeking other companions might not have come to the Prince and Princess. There might have been no estrangement, no divorce, no crash in a Paris tunnel. But all that is musing to no point. Or is it?

If those of us who want to preserve the traditions in which we were raised can be a bit more understanding and incorporating toward the Baby Boomers and Generation X-ers who want some things more in sync with their pulses and those of their searching contemporaries, there need be no divorces (i.e., splits) in our churches. If the younger people who want some things to be more relevant to their tastes and time can affirm the value of their parents’ and grandparents’ traditions, maybe both generations can profit from the exchange.

Our history speaks of “the acts of worship,” usually limiting them to five. This is the result of a penchant for systematizing rather than good theology. The very language misleads – leads away from significant biblical truth. *It is more precise to say that worship is always an attitude of reverence before God that is exhibited by appropriate actions.* Fundamentally, there are three types of actions that are appropriate to the corporate worship of the church: praise, prayer, and preaching.

More correctly still, these three are probably best described as categories or types of worship that appropriately accompany and exhibit worship, but they are not necessarily worship in and of themselves. All of us know the biblical truth that even right actions are not acceptable when the heart is wrong (i.e., not worshipful). Such texts as [Isaiah 1:11-17](#) and [1 Corinthians 13:1-3](#) are only two of many texts that underscore this important truth.

Actions are worshipful if and only they are part of a genuine encounter with God, part of a larger experience of life-surrender to God. This means that corporate worship must flow out of personal, private worship. Whether from Generation X or from the generation that lived through

the Great Depression, whether from Baby Boomers or from their World War II parents – no one can be an occasional (i.e., Sunday-to-Sunday) worshiper who is not also a regular (i.e., daily) worshiper who meets him in private places – and truly encounter God.

When the people of God – whether young or old, rural or urban, black or white, American or European – are worshipful in spirit, we will stop fighting one another over the externals of worship. We will stop rejecting and judging each others' preferences. We will stop thinking ourselves spiritual and and those who disagree unspiritual. We will even stop thinking principally in terms of what is new and what is old.

When we are truly worshipful before our God, we will have such respect for and give such deference to one another that we will begin to pull out of our treasure chest things both old and new and offer them together to his glory. As we do so, we will smile at one another and sometimes hold hands. And each of us will have contributed something to the saving of what all of us value – a healthy church that is able to communicate the Word of God to its time and place.

## How to be a Christian Despite Attending a Christian College

*by Mike Cope*

*September – October, 1997*

It usually takes me longer to offend people than my title; this may, however, be the exception. I'm going to jump out on a limb and say that, though I am somewhat skeptical, I think it IS possible to be a Christian despite attending a Christian college.

I think you can be a Christian there. It just isn't particularly easy.

Often when I've spoken at youth rallies across the country I've heard Christian college recruiters plugging their schools with the "faithfulness factor." They quote some statistics proving that you basically CAN'T be a committed Christian if you go to a state university. Evil profs will steal your faith every time, they warn.

Problem is, that doesn't match my experience. I've also spoken at lots of campus retreats for ministries from state universities and seen campus groups that are doing just fine, thank you: alive, evangelist, and faithful. Not everyone thrives at a state university, of course. Some do lose their faith. But what wilts some galvanizes others.

Several of your parents hoped that if they could just get you through that pagan, public high school and ship you off to a Christian college, everything would be fine. But I have news for them: it isn't always. Some who graduate from a Christian university peek in the rearview mirror and realize that they were more alive spiritually during their high school years.

Why? Because the life of following Jesus is uphill ... against the current ... into the wind ... against all odds. "God bless you," Jesus said, "when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me ... You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:11-14).

Resistance builds strength, though we don't usually like it. I don't really enjoy running hills when I train for a marathon. I prefer running in Abilene, where by "hill work" we mean stepping over a speed bump. (By the way, can anyone explain to me why so many churches in town are named for elevation? Highland, Hillcrest, Baker Heights, Southern Hills ... just wishful thinking, I guess.) When you're lifting weights, you'd rather quit than do five more reps, but you know that it's those last few that are really strengthening your muscles.

The same principle is true spiritually. Resistance can wipe us out; but it can also make us stronger. Christians are meant to be the counter-culture to the world around them. In high school, you could see clearly what it meant to follow Christ. At a state university you can fairly well spot light and darkness. But sometimes on a Christian college campus, everything becomes fuzzy. It's almost as if when everyone is a Christian, no one is a Christian. Instead of light and dark, we have many nuances of gray.

This is my fourteenth year to preach in a church with hundreds of students from a Christian university and I've seen it many times: great young men and women who slowly let their faith slip into a coma.

Sometimes it involves immorality: after all, you can sleep with your date on Friday night and then come back to a dorm devotional! But more often, it's just a faith that slowly gets lazy. Lots of religious language. Lots of religious activity. Just not a lot of gospel-shaped faith. And as spiritual rigor mortis starts to slip in, here's what happens:

**First, flu shot faith develops.** When you get a flue shot, you're actually being given a weak strain of the flu virus so your body can build up immunity to it. Christian education can be the force that energizes and focuses your life. But it can also serve as a flu shot: filling you with a weak strain of the Faith Virus, so that you're immune to the real thing. Faith can be defined by the Least Common Denominators of Bible knowledge and church attendance. So much for taking up the cross and following Christ!

**Second, minivan fever develops.** We just returned from a 2500 mile trip in our extended minivan. At first we drove the van. Eventually we drove one another – to insanity. That extended minivan seemed the size of a Miata by the time we got back in Abilene. We were together breathing the same air for too long. We'd fought over where to eat. (My five-year-old goes for Happy Meals with Hercules action figures; my 15-year-old goes for bulk; my wife goes for ambience; I go for cheap.) We'd battle over music. (Diane goes for Susan Ashton; I'll take Eric Clapton; the teenager prefers George Strait and Shania Twain; Christopher wants Barney sing-alongs – the audiotape from – well, you know.) What we needed was to get OUT of the van.

Sometimes in and around Christian colleges, people become like minivan riders. Since they're not out in "the world," they spend way too much energy criticizing one another. Just listen: you'll hear people this year become bent out of shape over the most unbelievably small stuff. Get a life.

**Third, holiness weakens.** It weakens because people feel like they can't confess their struggles around all their hyperspiritual friends. In another environment, you might feel free to confess your sin and ask for help. But how can you admit – to all these people who seem like Chapel Poster Children – that you're addicted to Internet pornography? How do you tell someone that you cheated on a test, pushed by fear of how your parents might respond to midterm grades?

**And fourth, the disease of worldly values takes over.** Of course, we don't let them in the front door. No, we baptize them, put church clothes on them, and smuggle them in the back door. We put on our best Christian smile while holding to the world's materialism, lust for success, and fascination with externals over internals.

Bottom line: The state university is a great place for some to lose their faith; the Christian university is a great place for some to trivialize their faith.

Well, hopefully you've realized that I'm speaking partly with my tongue buried in my cheek. For I'm glad you're here. I'm well aware of wonderful reasons for you to seek a Christian education

(just as I did). But don't take spiritual growth for granted. Being on a Christian campus doesn't make a person a Christian!

So what can you do to keep your faith from slipping into a coma? No great insights here. They're actually no-brainers. But many overlook them.

**First**, I encourage you to be a real live member of a real live church. Abilene churches are notorious for floaters: people who don't call any one church their home. You need a place where you can know some of the leaders, a place where you can meet some families, a place where you can participate in a ministry. I'd love to have every student at Highland this year while I lead us through Mark in a series called "Shadowing the Savior." But honestly, I'd rather you be plugged in as a member of another church than a floater at Highland.

**Second**, I encourage you to be part of a small group. Find a few others who will meet regularly to share struggles, sins, encouragement, and prayer. Every week Diane and I meet with three other families. Our group has covenanted together to help one another follow Jesus.

**Third**, I encourage you to practice the spiritual disciplines. All the chapel services in a year don't take the place of your private meeting with God – a meeting with prayer, meditation, confession, and scripture.

I'll close with the great slogan I've seen on a tee-shirt. It says, *Si Hoc Legere Scis Nimum Eruditionis Habes*. That's Latin for, "If you can read this, you're overeducated." Let me tell you: God isn't impressed with overeducation! He is, however, impressed with hearts devoted to him and to other people. I think you can experience that – despite being at a Christian university.

This article is a condensed version of Mike Cope's sermon on August 24, 1997 at the Highland Church of Christ in Abilene, Texas as students were beginning a new year at Abilene Christian University.

## **I Just Want to Testify**

*by Dan Dozier*

*September – October, 1997*

In the congregation where I grew up I never heard anyone give a testimony during the worship assembly about what Christ had done in their life. That, we felt, would have been as out-of-place as the proverbial pearl in a swine's snout. We simply did not do that, nor a lot of other strange (yet biblical) practices some of our religious neighbors did, like kneeling to pray, voicing a hearty "hallelujah," or lifting our hands in praise to God. I could not have explained why we did not do those things – we just did not. Perhaps you grew up with similar impressions.

I have changed my mind about testimonies in worship. In the congregation of which I am now a member, we do that sort of thing from time to time. As a matter of fact, the entire time normally allotted for the sermon recently was given to a series of testimonies. More than 60 teenagers and their adult supervisors had returned from mission trips to poverty stricken areas of Mexico and Nassau. What they experienced during those weeks of ministry was so life-changing that they were bubbling over with enthusiasm to share the news.

Six teenagers and two adults spoke briefly, as the rest of the group surrounded them on the platform. One of the adults showered the young people with compliments and declared to the congregation, "Contrary to popular belief about youth today, these kids are not going down the drain. Because they let Christ work through them, our kids were world-changers last week." Several of the teens, many of whom had never seen abject poverty before, said things like, "Those people have nothing, and we have so much. I felt so ashamed that I've got so much and feel bored when they have so little and have learned to be happy."

The whole assembly was touched to hear about kids who were so moved by compassion for hungry, ill-clad children that they spontaneously gave their own spending money to buy clothing and food for them. We listened with excitement as the kids told of teaching the children about Jesus. We thrilled as they told us of helping to build a house for the poorest of the poor in the shanty town. We wept as one of the adults told us about one of our teenage girls who voluntarily took a bucket of water and gave a bath to a young crippled child whose mother was so uncaring for her child that she regularly left him sitting naked in the street.

The message of God's love and transforming power he gives to those who will serve him was more powerful coming from those kids that Lord's day than if the preacher had tried to tell the stories which he himself had not experienced. The service concluded with a father baptizing his son into Christ. God was glorified. Christ was lifted up. People were moved deeply in their hearts, and all were edified by the wonder of all that occurred that day.

### **Testimonies in the New Testament**

Testimony comes from a word that refers to one who remembers and can tell something to another person. In both the Old and New testaments, the word is often translated "witness." Its

earliest application is a legal term, referring to someone who comes forward as a witness to something he has seen or experienced. This usage is seen, for instance, in John the Baptizer, who bore witness that Jesus was the lamb of God ([John 1:7](#)). Another example is the Apostle John, whose purpose in his account of the gospel was to testify about the teachings and events in Jesus' life that would lead people to believe that he was the divine Son of God.

Two other events demonstrate the power of testimony. After the Lord healed a demon-possessed man, he told him, "Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you" ([Luke 8:39](#)). Everyone was amazed! Again, after Jesus' revealing conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, [John 4:39-42](#) informs us that many townspeople believed on Jesus because of her testimony concerning him. "Testimony" is a rich word. By the second century, many Christians were being persecuted and killed for bearing witness to Jesus. Since the Greek root word for testify is *martus*, it is easy to see from where the word *martyr* comes.

### **But What About Testimonies in the Assembly?**

The biblical illustrations above all had an evangelistic purpose, and not one was given in a worship assembly. Actually, all the recorded sermons in the New Testament are delivered in evangelistic settings, and none of them appear to be in the Sunday morning worship assembly of Christians. What was the nature of those messages? The Apostles' sermons about Jesus recorded in the book of Acts are based not only on the fact that Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament Scripture, but also on the personal encounters and experiences of his disciples who lived with him three years. Even Paul told King Agrippa of his blinding encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus ([Acts 26:12-22](#)).

No one objects to witnessing outside the worship assembly – that is the basis of personal evangelism. But the question still stands: Is it right to have testimonies in worship? How can we know? We know that sermons were delivered in Christian assemblies, but Scripture supplies the contents of none. The New Testament does not even record the order of worship for a single service. That fact alone ought to give us pause in being too dogmatic about whether or not testimonies occurred in the assembly.

### **What Is It We Fear?**

If you were taught as I was, you probably learned to be skeptical of personal spiritual testimonies, especially in the assembly. But why? Our greatest fear, probably, is that people will elevate personal experience over biblical authority, that emotion will overrun reason. We are afraid that they highly emotional people in the body will stand up and talk about what they happen to be feeling at the moment, and we are terrified that what they say may not be appropriate. We fear that things will get out of control, that unspiritual individuals will start a competitive game of "I can do you a better story than that!"

Will Campbell illustrates some of our anxieties. In his book, *The Glad River*, Campbell describes a fictional worship service in a congregation called the "Church of the Almighty in Jesus' Name Amen." The preacher screams:

“We don’t have a printed bulletin that’s sent to the printer on Tuesday for next Sunday’s service. You know what I’m talking about! ... They’ll have all this fancy stuff. Processional, Call to Worship, Invocation. Or whatever they call it when the preacher gets up and reads something out of a book. Congregational Hymn. Offertory. First Lesson. Second Lesson. Responsive Reading. All that. Sermon. Recessional. Prayers of Intercession ... Now brother, we don’t write it down in advance because we don’t know what the Spirit has in mind for us to do until He leads us to do it. We don’t have printed on a piece of paper Processional, Call to Worship, Hymn, Sermon, Lift Up Serpents! We lift up serpents when the Spirit of the living God tells us to lift up serpents! Not when some elder or bishop or pope tells us to. You know what I’m a-talking about out there!”

Testimonies do not have to fall prey to such subjectivism. Just because a testimony is personal does not mean it has to be wildly irrational or uncontrollably emotional. My daughter, Amy, recently returned from a six-week mission trip to the land of the rising sun where she established a good friendship with a young Japanese girl. Yasuyo does not yet believe in God, even though Amy, and others, have taught her. Yasuyo was interested in the teaching about God, but what touched her heart most were the personal testimonies my daughter and others shared with her. Amy told Yasuyo of her conversion to Christ and how her life has been remarkably changed since that day, that she has a purpose in this life, and a confident assurance of eternal life hereafter.

That’s only one of several testimonials Amy shared with Yasuyo concerning her walk with the Savior. My daughter’s initial testimonies to her oriental friend were about Jesus. But along with that foundational witness about the Lord, Amy shared practically and personally how Christ is at work in her life. The message of Christ is of primary importance, but it very well may be Amy’s personal testimony that someday helps lead Yasuyo to Jesus Christ. While such testimonies are often shared in private, they could just as well be shared in the public assembly where many others could benefit.

Most Churches of Christ have not practiced personal testimonies. One reason has to do with the view held by many that the New Testament is a blueprint for every practice in worship. This view holds that there is a clear pattern of worship in the New Testament, and it is to be replicated exactly in every age. It doesn’t seem to matter that the New Testament does not give a standard order of what worship was to be for any church. The reasoning goes like this: If a worship practice was present in the primitive church, that act of worship merits repetition today. If the New Testament is silent on certain activities, they had best be left out of our worship today. If you follow the reasoning, the conclusion is that we should not do “testimonies” because we have no specific, unquestionable illustrations of such being done in an assembly of worship in the New Testament.

At least this view takes Scripture very seriously, and that should be applauded. However, to use the New Testament as a detailed description of worship that outlines every form and sequence of the service is a mistake. At best, the New Testament gives us sketches of what worship looked like in a few congregations. To get the fuller picture, we literally have to gather specific elements and practices of worship from all over the book of Acts and the Epistles. How one congregation orders its worship, making use of those various elements, is up to each congregation. That is why

Christian worship services look different in different cultures, and yet each one may be thoroughly acceptable and honoring to God.

The New Testament provides elements, concepts and principles of worship, but no fixed pattern or style of worship. There was variety of worship styles in New Testament churches. The earliest Christians were Jewish converts who assembled at the temple precincts to worship. Their Hebrew background must have made their worship style quite different from the worship among the predominantly Gentile converts in Corinth or Rome. There is good reason to suspect that as Christians gathered for worship, regardless of the congregation or city, personal testimonies played an important role in all of them.

### **Proceed, But Be Careful!**

There are obvious possible dangers with testimonies. There are good reasons to listen carefully to those would caution us. I offer the following suggestions with some reserve and a lot of humility. I claim no expertise in, what is for me, a relatively new-found areas of expression. Since they are merely my opinions, feel free to share your own suggestions with me.

**First**, examine every potential act of worship. Just because someone thinks something would be nice to do in worship does not necessarily mean it would be right or edifying to the body. A good theology of worship requires us to ask, “What does this act lead people to believe about God?” Individual preferences and idiosyncrasies have to be subjected to the needs of the entire body. Whatever is done must be done for the strengthening of the body ([1 Corinthians 14:26](#)).

**Second**, do not allow testimonies to become a badge of super-spirituality in the body. Those who do not have a marvelous testimony may feel spiritually inferior to those who do. No one should feel any pressure to give his or her testimony to find acceptance among fellow Christians.

**Third**, focus on the witness of Scripture first and foremost. Only as you are well-grounded in the revelation of Scripture and are growing in its knowledge will you be able to test your own experiences. Look for *outside-of-me* realities before you look for *inside-of-me* phenomena. If you are quick to talk about what God is doing in your life, but you are slow to study the Word, you are wading in very uncertain water.

**Fourth**, give your testimony only when you think it can benefit others. Never use a testimony to fulfill selfish desires for personal attention. That kind of unhealthy craving can easily lead to one-upsmanship and sin.

**Fifth**, be just as willing to make public confession of weakness and sin as you are to give a glowing testimony of the victories Christ has given you. No Christian is perfect, and to tell only the positive things is to live a life of pretense. Confessing sin is the hardest work of worship because it requires us to face the dark side of our natures with absolute honesty.

**Sixth**, practice moderation in the use of personal testimonies in worship. Too many too often would tend to make them trite, even banal. Let a testimony be unique, powerful, encouraging, memorable.

Testimonies can benefit the assembly if shared by those who are guided by the Spirit of God. Let us not forget, however, that the primary function played by testimonies in the New Testament was to share the good news of Jesus Christ and the saving grace of God to the lost. Any unwillingness to testify privately to the sinner about what God is doing in our lives tarnishes our most powerful testimony in the public assembly of worship.

## He Put a New Song in my Mouth

*Jeff Hood*

*September – October, 1997*

*“I waited patiently for the LORD; he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. 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 40:13).*

I'm completely convinced that you can worship God without singing, but you can't worship God without singing. Have I confused you yet? Keep reading. Let me explain.

During the winter of 1995 Nashville experienced one of the worst ice storms I have ever driven in. I had been working late in my counseling office, starting my drive home at about 8:45. I could see that the weather conditions had been deteriorating outside, but I didn't know how bad things were until I started to travel the short seven miles to the house. The ditches and shoulders of the roads were littered with cars that had spun off the roadway. The ice made navigation so difficult that I was quite fortunate to make it home safely that night at all. My wife sat tied up in traffic in another part of town on Interstate 40 because huge trucks had jackknifed in the roadway. She finally made it home at two in the morning! Drivers who were doing their best to make it up the hills and around the curves of Nashville streets found they could not coerce their cars into doing what they would have easily been able to do under normal circumstances. I was a wrecker driver's dream come true!

Sometimes life feels like that from a spiritual perspective. You feel at a complete loss to get yourself safely through. When things aren't going right, when you're in trouble or you've lost your way, God is the only one who can manage things. He can put you back on solid footing.

As you can see from the life of David, sometimes those slippery messes you are in are the result of your own mistakes. At other times they are the result of the actions of others. Still other problems are caused by circumstances or catastrophes. Regardless of the origin of the problem, when we pray and are patient, God is faithful to deliver.

When you have been delivered, when you have experienced the “slippery slope” of trouble and disappointment and have been released, then you can realize more fully the safety and confidence of having a firm place to stand. The result is the urge to sing.

Worship follows deliverance. If you had been near drowning and a lifeguard rescued you, the natural response would be to express thanks. Likewise, when you are covered up with problems and are finally delivered by God's gracious hand, a song of thank you is in order. If you are anything like me, to affirm that you always wait patiently would be a lie. But I have waited and waited for God to respond to my need. There have been times when I wanted desperately for God to act on my behalf when my perception was that he was not. Like David, I've had times when it seemed my life was on “PAUSE” while God made his mind up about what he was going

to do and when he was going to do it. But even when I think he takes too long, I know that God does act on my behalf. He hears my cry. I may think that he took his sweet time doing so, but the truth is that he acts according to his timing, not mine and he does exactly what is needed at the time.

Let me use a personal example. Three years ago God called me back to fulltime ministry. As I was studying the story of Moses, one of God's many initially reluctant servants, I was impressed with the fact that I was underemployed while working as a therapist. I would only be able to use all my skills if I were in a ministry setting. My wife and I, in our attempt to be obedient, began the process of applying for openings that we knew about.

Over the course of the next two and a half years we saw doors close, not open, in response to our applications. We interviewed at a number of places and sent resumes to many more, but a match for us wasn't found. During that time I felt like a football player who had been "pumped up" by an inspiring halftime speech, only to find that the locker room doors had been locked and I couldn't get out to play the second half! What frustration! But we kept searching and over time made contact with a church in Irving, Texas that was a god fit for us and we were hired.

You may be wrestling with challenges that for you are much more intense than mine. You may be battling cancer or struggling to keep the doors of your business open or watching the life of someone you love fall apart or going through a difficult divorce. Regardless of your situation, know that God is working in your life. He hasn't forgotten. he will set your feet on solid ground!

Our natural response to this call to ministry and connection with the appropriate church has been to sing a song of praise. We were affirmed that we heard correctly when God called us to ministry. We were placed where he wanted us. We felt compelled to worship God in song.

Now, there are any number of ways to worship. To stand in awe at the beauty of the setting sun is to worship. To watch the trees come to life or to see a child be born and to be struck with the power behind nature is to worship. To sit in a quiet mountain retreat or to watch the power of the surf rolling in at the beach and to consider the majesty of the one who made them both is to worship. You can worship in all these ways without singing, but I'm fully convinced that you won't worship this way long before you start to sing. Sooner or later song is a part of our expression of homage to our maker and king. That's what I mean when I say you *can* worship without singing, but you *can't* worship without singing.

If you don't have a "new song," if you don't have a current hymn of praise to God, let me suggest that it's because you haven't fully recognized the work that he is doing in your life on a current and ongoing basis. When you don't see God at work delivering you from trouble and setting you on solid ground, your attempts at praise will be anemic at best, nonexistent at worst. The more you realize how dependent you are on God for every good thing in your life, the more you'll be filled with energy for song.

If all your favorite songs are songs you've been singing for 20 or 40 years, you may have grown less aware of what God is doing in your life today. There is no problem in singing old songs. I'm sure this "new" song of David would be one he could recall even years later. But there is a place

for new songs in your life. That is what happens when you've been delivered. That is what occurs when you're back safely on solid ground.

I've experienced the slip and slide of life and have felt the deliverance of God that has put me back on firm ground. Now there's a new song in my mouth. Praise to our God!

## The Write Side: Story and Truth (Part 1)

(part 1 of a 2-part essay on story and the transmission of faith)

by Thom Lemmons

September – October, 1997

*You have yet to understand, my dears, that the shortest distance between a human being and Truth is a story .... Do not despise the story. A lost coin is found by means of a penny candle; the deepest truth is found by means of a simple story. – Anthony de Mello*

What happens to you when you hear the phrase, “Once upon a time ...” May I venture a guess? Whether you are six or sixty, my hunch is that you can’t help leaning forward a little, either literally or figuratively, because you know you are about to be taken on a timeless excursion. You may wrestle with giants and slay dragons, or you may match wits with evil stepmothers and sorcerers. You may discover buried treasure or dive to the bottom of the sea. In fact, “once upon a time” is a sort of incantation, an invitation to enter into the world of the story, to be carried along by the skill of the story teller to whatever destination he or she might have the courage and craft to attempt.

Storytelling is a high and holy calling, an art with deeply spiritual implications. I believe stories are as essential to society as language itself. In every age and culture, humans have been storytellers. Story is the tool, perhaps more basic than fire, by which human civilization has been shaped and altered. Calvin Miller, in his book on preaching titled *Spirit, Word and story*, says that our stories define us, both as individuals and as nations. If you would know the heart of a nation, a tribe, a culture, learn its stories. If you would understand the fondest dreams and deepest aspirations of a people, find out who are the heroes of their stories, their legends. And if you want them to be better people, they need to hear better stories. This last assumption must underlie any attempt to use story as a vehicle of eternal truth.

J.R.R. Tolkien, author of the epic trilogy *Lord of the Rings*, often spoke of the “tree of tales,” of which he claimed to be a devotee and caretaker. In Tolkien’s usage, the tree of tales represented that vast body of story, myth and legend through which mankind has, throughout history and in all cultures, striven to make sense of the sometimes hostile and always confusing universe in which he finds himself. Tolkien chose the arboreal metaphor because, in his view, all tales, legends, stories and myths, however ancient or modern, are manifestations and effluences from a central trunk, a unified Source which is the beginning point of all story, all legend, all myth and all truth.

In his essay, “On Fairy-Stories,” we find a partial explanation of Tolkien’s identification of what trunk from which all others stories are sprung. He writes,

“The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. [It] has entered History and the primary world ... There is no tale ever told that men

would rather find was true, and none which so many skeptical men have accepted as true on its own merits ...

*But this story is supreme; and it is true.* Art has been verified. God is Lord, of angels and of men – and of elves. Legend and History have met and fused [emphasis added].”

Similarly, C.S. Lewis makes this observation in *Miracles*:

The story of Christ demands from us, and repays, not only religious and historical but also an imaginative response. It is directed to the child, the poet, and the savage in us as well as to the conscience and to the intellect. One of its functions is to break down dividing walls.

Many, however, would much prefer to maintain the walls between story and faith. One reason is that the essence of story is mystery, and our time is not too tolerant of mysteries. We think that unless we can track it down, document it, observe it, quantify it and replicate it under controlled laboratory conditions, it isn't true. We assume that our destiny is to capture and domesticate the entire physical universe; to codify and quarantine it with laws, axioms, theories and hypotheses. We assume that the only good mystery is a dead mystery. This attitude is often evident even in the church. I can't prove it, but I suspect this discomfort with mystery lies at the root of many of the schisms suffered by the body of Christ over the last two millennia.

The interesting irony is that the more we find out, the more elusive complete knowledge becomes. Even sub-atomic physicists will tell you that we cannot really discover anything about quarks and mesons and neutrinos without changing them in the process to something unfamiliar, something undocumented. Every discovery creates a new question mark. With Pascal, I find it interesting that on both the infinite and the infinitesimal scales, creation is stubbornly resistant to yielding up her secrets. Of course, that's all right with me. I love a good mystery.

Another reason many are uncomfortable with a discussion of story's place in communicating the gospel is that some cannot abide the juxtaposition of something fictional with the abiding truth of the gospel. In this view, "fiction" becomes a synonym for "lie," as in "a fictitious address." And we all know that truth can't co-exist with lies. I once had a Christian book store owner tell me that he didn't stock fiction titles in his store because "people don't need that stuff. They need to know how to live here and now."

But consider ... When the prophet Nathan was charged by God to confront King David about Bathsheba, did he march into the palace, point an accusing finger at David, and flail him with citations from the Decalogue? No. Instead, he told him a story about a poor man, a beloved lamb, and a greedy neighbor, and David was held fast by his own imagination. Indeed, by the time Nathan finishes his narrative, David is red-faced with indignation at the gross injustice done to the poor man by the selfish neighbor. "As the Lord lives," he roars, "the man who has done this deserves to die!" Nathan then delivers the *coup-de-grace*: "You are the man." And God's white-hot blade plunged cleanly through the armor of David's self-importance to the core of his guilty heart. Nathan already knew what Shakespeare's Hamlet would verbalize two-and-a-half millennia later. To paraphrase: "The story's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king."

And when Jesus was asked the question, “Who is my neighbor?”, how did he respond? Did he launch into a rabbinical *midrash* on the ninth commandment or the Levitical ordinances governing treatment of foreigners? No. He told them a story. “Once upon a time,” Jesus said, “a man was going from Jerusalem down to Jericho, when he was set upon by robbers ...” At the end of the tale, Jesus allowed his listeners to define the truth for themselves. “Who was a neighbor to the victim?” he asked, and the correct answer was obvious, even to the hostile exegete who had started the whole thing. “I suppose the one who showed him mercy,” the legal expert muttered, probably out of the side of his mouth, not quite able to bring himself to say the word, “Samaritan.” But of course by then it didn’t matter.

Remember that the Good Samaritan, as we have come to know him, is a “fictional” character. But I doubt seriously that anyone would suggest this story isn’t “true,” in every sense that matters. Each time a human being reaches across barriers of hatred and mistrust to offer a cup of cold water in Jesus’ name, the eternal truth of this story is validated again. And what about the prodigal son, his steadfast, loving father, and self-righteous, self-consumed older brother: are these fictitious characters? The Good Shepherd, the Determined Widow, the Foolish Virgins, the Rich Man and Lazarus ... the list is long, and comprises some of the most pervasive archetypes in human culture. Perhaps it is for this reason that novelist Madeleine L’Engle identifies Jesus as “God telling stories.”

Our hymns remember how important stories are to our faith, even if we’ve forgotten. How many of us could stomach a song that said, “Tell me the old, old *doctrine*, of unseen things above ...” Or “Tell me the *facts* about Jesus, write on my heart every word ...” Then there’s this one: “I heard an old, old *sermon* –” And would anybody have bought Fulton Oursler’s book, would Hollywood have made it into an epic movie, had it been titled, *The Greatest Theology Ever Told?*

Perhaps part of the reason for the power of story is that when we listen, our capacity to hear is changed. We are pulled outside ourselves and our petty concerns and our carefully constructed defenses and compelled to interact directly with the heart-changing truth of the tale and its characters. We suspend judgment except as it applies to the justness of the story. We are instructed without realizing it. And at the end of the story, what happens? A guilty king sobs his repentance for adultery and base treachery to a loyal servant; a conniving scribe with ulterior motives has no choice but to concede an argument that is over before it has begun. Paltry things such as thrones and legal arguments can never hope to prevail against the potent authority of a story that is well and truly told. If the method was good enough for God’s prophets and his Messiah, it ought to be good enough for us.

The importance of story to the transmission of faith is no accident of culture. Indeed, the universal presence of story within all religious traditions would suggest that all human beings everywhere have an inherent need for stories as tools to grapple with the immense questions of life, death, injustice, mercy, and the destiny of the universe. If some cultures have dealt with these questions in terms of primordial turtles with the world on their backs – as in some native American creation stories – or jealous gods and goddesses who devour their offspring and mate with humans – as did Greek mythology – it is less an indictment of the propriety of story as a vehicle for truth than of the ability of fallible humans to hear properly. Indeed, these pagan

myths, benighted as they are, do contain grains of truth. As C.S. Lewis and others point out, even such legends accurately explain that the universe is not self-sustaining; that it must rest on something outside itself. They hint that immortality might sometime choose to clothe itself with mortality.

No, the fact that humans have made bad or inaccurate uses of story is no more proscriptive of story than the fact of glutton is proscriptive of food. We are fallen beings who live in a fallen world, and our only hope is that our bodies, our appetites, our wills and our stories can be redeemed and made fit for the uses for which they were intended by their Maker.

Robert Coles, a doctor of psychiatry who teaches courses in medical ethics at Harvard, is also fascinated by the therapeutic and ethical function of stories. In his book *The Call of Stories*, he relates how one of his students describes the impact made upon her by a William Carlos Williams story:

“Williams’ words have become my images and sounds, part of me. You don’t do that with theories. You don’t do that with a system of ideas. You do it with a story, because in a story – oh, like it says in the Bible, *the word becomes flesh* [emphasis added].”

Indeed, the storyteller is engaged in an act of incarnation. Madeleine L’Engle says that a writer’s task is to serve the story, to give it freedom to become what it wants to be. As a storyteller who is a Christian, I feel an intense responsibility that what is born in the mind of my readers should bring them closer to the God who Himself became flesh, and dwelled among us.

## Let the Redeemed of the Lord Say So

by John Willis

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Jack Melton and Fred Hodges were rough, well-trained, experienced sailors and fishermen. They loved to fish several miles out into the Pacific off the northern island of New Zealand. Today was no different. They had left early in the morning, and were enjoying a good catch. About mid-afternoon, dark clouds gathered quickly, and Jack and Fred found themselves in the midst of the powerful typhoon. In spite of all their efforts, their boat tossed frighteningly up and down in the ruthless storm. They realized that the situation was far beyond their abilities to cope, and they cried out in prayer for God to deliver them.

When Jack and Fred had not returned home several hours past their expected arrival time, their wives contacted the coast guard and expressed their deep concerns about the safety of the two men. Several search teams went out in boats and helicopters, but without success. A week passed, and the families and friends of the two fishermen imagined the worst. But on the ninth day of their ordeal, a ship from South Africa spotted them over 200 miles away from the area where the searchers thought they should be, and its captain sent a message to the New Zealand authorities that Jack and Fred were safe. When the authorities relayed this good news to the distressed wives, they immediately called the other members of the family and their friends and neighbors. It was impossible to keep this joyous news to themselves; they had to tell everyone they saw that Jack and Fred had been rescued and were headed home. One of the neighbors observed: “This is such a wonderful occasion! I wonder if anything like this has ever happened before! It is incredible to think how these two men somehow survived that terrible storm!”

As a matter of fact, **SOMETHING LIKE THIS HAD HAPPENED BEFORE!** The author of [Psalm 107](#) describes it this way:

*Some went out on the sea in ships;  
they were merchants on the mighty waters.  
They saw the works of the LORD,  
his wonderful deeds in the deep.  
For he spoke and stirred up a tempest  
that lifted high the waves.  
They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths;  
in their peril their courage melted away.  
They reeled and staggered like drunkards;  
they were at their wits' end.  
Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble,  
and he brought them out of their distress.  
He stilled the storm to a whisper;  
the waves of the sea were hushed.  
They were glad when it grew calm,  
and he guided them to their desired haven.*

*Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love  
and his wonderful deeds for humankind.  
Let them exalt him in the assembly of the people  
and praise him in the council of the elders.*

These sailors are the last of four groups whom the author of Psalm 107 uses as examples of people who found themselves in dangerous circumstances far beyond their human capabilities to cope, and cried to the Lord for deliverance. The Lord delivered them, and psalmist admonishes them to thank him for his steadfast love manifested in his intervention and deliverance, and to “extol” and “praise” him for what he has done when God’s people assemble for worship and fellowship. The other three groups are hungry and thirsty lost travelers (vss. 4-9), guilty, chained, depressed prisoners (vss. 10-16), and sick people who almost died (vss. 17-22).

Psalm 107 teaches the importance of God’s people “witnessing” or “testifying” to God’s mighty acts in their lives. Four significant particulars concerning “witnessing” stand out in this text. **First**, one can witness or testify only to that which has actually happened. Witnessing assumes that God is constantly working in his world: in nature, in nations and other groups of people, and in individuals. According to the Bible, the basic characteristic which distinguishes the one true God from all other alleged gods is that he is alive and acts unceasingly to carry out his purposes in his world ([Psalms 115:2-7](#); [135:13-17](#); [Jeremiah 10:1-16](#)). Asking God for something or thanking him is mockery if the one praying does not believe firmly that God can do things which human beings cannot do ([James 1:5-8](#)).

**Second**, when God does something for us, it is natural to share what God has done with others. In fact, it is unnatural to keep to oneself a wonderful thing that has happened in one’s life. Therefore, it is not surprising that there are many examples in the Bible of individuals and groups witnessing to God’s mighty acts in their lives when God’s people gathered for worship. The author who composed [Psalm 66](#) says to his hearers:

*Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell you what he has done for me. (v. 16).*

[Psalm 68:24-27](#) describes a common scene in an Israelite worship experience:

*Your solemn processions are seen, O God,  
the processions of my God, my King,  
into the sanctuary –  
the singers in front, the musicians last,  
between them girls playing tambourines:  
“Bless God in the great congregation,  
the Lord, O you who are of Israel’s fountain!”  
There is Benjamin, the least of them, in the lead,  
the princes of Judah in a body, the princes of Zebulun, the princes of Naphtali.*

Here, those who had experienced firsthand God’s victory of Israel’s enemies (see vss. 11-14, 17-18, 21-23) go in procession before the entire congregation of God’s people, celebrating the victory and calling on their fellow worshipers to join them in praising God for what he has done.

Similarly, the early Christians witnessed to God's working in their lives when the local church gathered for worship. For example, when Jesus healed the lame man at the Beautiful Gate of the Jerusalem temple through Peter, and Peter and John preached Jesus to the crowds that gathered, the Jewish authorities put them in prison. After strictly admonishing them to quit preaching in the name of Jesus, the authorities released them ([Acts 3:1-4:22](#)). Peter and John went to "their friends" ([Acts 4:23](#)) who had "gathered together" at a designated "place" ([Acts 4:31](#)) to worship God, and "reported" what the Jewish authorities had said to them ([Acts 4:23](#)). These sisters and brothers praised God, because he had announced that enemies would attempt to overthrow God's work, and Herod and Pontius Pilate gathered together "to do whatever *your (God's) hand and your (God's) plan had predestined to take place.*" Now, these Christians pray that God will look at the threats of the Jewish authorities against Peter and John and grant his servants the boldness to speak his word with boldness ([Acts 4:24-30](#)).

**Third**, there are at least three ways that a person or group may "witness" to a mighty act of God in their lives.

a) They may *tell* their fellow-worshippers what God did. The author of Psalm 107 begins his poem with this admonition: "Let the redeemed of the Lord *say so*" (v. 2), i.e., let them "say" or tell how God "redeemed" them or delivered them from their troubles (see [Psalm 73:28](#); [118:17](#); [145:6, 10-12, 21](#))

b) They may *sing* to the assembled worshippers about God's deliverance. The author of Psalm 107 admonishes those whom God had healed from severe illness:  
*Let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices,  
and tell of his deeds with songs of joy* (v.22).

God's people have always composed and sung songs to celebrate and commemorate God's mighty deeds. Moses and the Israelites sang a song praising Yahweh for defeating the Egyptians and delivering his people at the Sea of Reeds ([Exodus 15:1-18](#)). "The ballad singers" sang about Israel's victory over Sihon of Hesh-bon and over Moab ([Numbers 21:27-30](#)). The "musicians at the watering places" ... "repeated the triumphs of the Lord" over Israel's enemies ([Judges 5:11](#)). [Philippians 2:6-11](#), [1 Timothy 3:16](#), [Revelation 4:11](#), and many other New Testament passages are songs which the first century church composed and sang. Those who are talented musicians and poets among God's people in each generation should write songs celebrating and commemorating God's mighty acts in their lives and in the lives of the people of God whose experiences they know.

c) They may write and perform dramatic productions to communicate God's great message. The Passover with the Feast of Unleavened Bread ([Exodus 12:1-28](#); [12:43-13:10](#); [2 Chronicles 30](#); [35:1-19](#)), the Feast of Tabernacles ([Leviticus 23:33-43](#); [Numbers 29:12-40](#); [Deuteronomy 16:13-17](#); [Nehemiah 8:13-18](#)) and the Day of Atonement ([Leviticus 16](#)) are examples of festivals involving dramatic activity to "relive" God's mighty deeds for the present generation. The obvious dramatic nature of the Gospel narratives calls for dramatic performances, as modern Passion Plays show.

**Fourth** and finally, the purpose of “witnessing” is to encourage God’s people to pray to, trust in, and be thankful to “the living God” for his unceasing faithfulness and care for those who love him and seek to serve him. In Psalm 107, after the four groups witness to God’s mighty deeds in their lives (vss. [4-32](#)), the author sums up the great truths these mighty deeds communicate to the present audience (vss. [34-43](#)). He concludes by saying:

*The upright see it and are glad,*

*and all the wickedness stops its mouth.*

*Let those who are wise give heed to these things,*

*and consider the steadfast love of the Lord (vss. [42-43](#)).*

Worship assemblies of the church should include testimonies or witnessing to God’s mighty acts by men and women as they experience clear evidence of his working in nature, in their individual lives, in the life of the corporate group of believers, and in the world. There is ample precedent for this in Scripture, and it is a major means of building up and encouraging God’s people.

## Stopped by the Altar

by Victor Knowles

September – October, 1997

When we fail to forgive, we destroy the bridge over which we ourselves must inevitably pass.

Many years ago a man went to church but was stopped at the altar. He was not stopped by the police, a priest, or a pastor. Nor was he stopped by an earthquake that shook the church or a bolt from the blue that blasted the altar to smithereens. The man was stopped by his memory. It wasn't that his memory wasn't working. It was working, all right. Working only too well. The man remembered a shadow from the past – a shadow that hindered his worship of God.

The sacred record reads: *“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift”* ([Mathew 5:23-24](#)).

**Unreconciled differences** between believers are a great hindrance to worship. Perhaps no greater hindrance exists today than this one. But, oh, what a joy it is when differences are resolved and our gift of worship is offered – together – on top of the altar! In my biography of Archie Word (*Voice of Thunder, Heart of Tears*, College Press, 1992) I tell the story of a church in Ceres, California, a congregation which had been “split down the middle” for 12 long years. After four weeks of preaching in a gospel meeting, with no results of repentance, all seemed lost. But as Word testified, “Then one night it happened. When the invitation was given, people began crossing the aisle and taking each other by the hand. Others hugged and kissed in reconciliation. This went on for quite some time. Then people began coming down the aisle to get right with God, as well as getting right with their estranged brothers and sisters. It was one of the most loving services I have ever been in.” The reconciled congregation took out a full-page newspaper advertisement signed by every member in the church, asking the community to forgive them for their past behavior. After that, they experienced “the highest spiritual level” they had enjoyed in years.

Jesus said, “And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins” ([Mark 11:25](#)). when we fail to forgive, we destroy the bridge over which we ourselves must inevitably cross. The 18th-century English hymnist William Cowper lamented, “Alas! If my best Friend, who laid down his life for me, were to remember all the instances in which I have neglected him, and to plead them against me in judgment, where should I hide my guilty head in the day of recompense? I will pray, therefore, for blessings on my friends, even though they cease to be so, and upon my enemies, though they continue such.”

**Unconfessed sin** is another barrier to worship. “If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; but God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer” ([Psalm 66:18-19](#)). If you cherish a relationship with God, you will not cherish sin in your heart! God sees the

heart. He is greater than our heart. He sees what is in the secret chambers. He is fully aware of every secret of our soul. Only pride or stupidity will keep us from confessing our sins to God. Jesus told a story about two men who went to a church to pray. One man, filled with unbelievable vanity and pride, boasted to God how good he had been that week. “I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.” He also “thanked” God that he was not a sinner like others: “robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector.” The poor publican, however, beat his breast and cried seven words that brought salvation to his house: “God, have mercy on me, a sinner” ([Luke 18:13](#)). Worship that does not include confession of all sin precludes all carriers of sin. Those who dare to brazenly invade the presence of God with sin in their heart or on their hands will be stopped cold at the altar.

Who then can worship God? Are we not all sinners? Indeed we are. But there is a world of difference between a contrite sinner and a contriving sinner. God will not despise a broken and contrite sinner. “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” ([Psalm 51: 17](#)). But God will withstand, mightily, successfully, and eternally, those who approach the altar ramrod stiff with pride and arrogance. Christ received penitent prostitutes but rejected proud Pharisees ([Matthew 21:31](#)). There are seven things that God hates and the number one sin that offends him is pride ([Proverbs 6:17-18](#)). I am impressed with the way believers in Eastern Europe enter a church building. They seat themselves, quickly and quietly. They bow their heads and their lips move in silent prayer. What are they praying? I don’t know, but their humble spirit speaks volumes to me.

**Unopened eyes** are yet another barrier to worship that enriches and energizes. Have you been going to church more but enjoying it less? If so, perhaps it’s because you need spiritual surgery on your eyes. If our vision is blurred, or worse yet, if we are stone blind to that which is divine, then it is little wonder that we have such little wonder in our worship. One of my greatest thrills was to visit England and sing Charles Wesley’s hymn “Love Divine.” Truly, I was “lost in wonder, love and praise” that unforgettable afternoon.

Thomas Carlyle said, “Worship is transcendent wonder.” A.W. Tozer has observed, “More spiritual progress can be made in one short moment of speechless silence in the awesome presence of God than in years of mere study.” How long has it been since you were staggered by the majesty of God? Have you had an Isaiah experience?

The year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah saw the Lord, “*seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple*” ([Isaiah 6:1](#)). The prophet was absolutely transfixed by what he saw. The Lord was surrounded by seraphs who sang as they flew through the air, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory” ([Isaiah 6:3](#)). When the seraphs sang, “the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke” ([Isaiah 6:4](#)). Talk about “Holy Smoke!”

In contrast with how Isaiah saw God (high and lifted up), he saw *himself* as ruined and unclean. Our worship of God, whether private or corporate, is a waste until we see God as He is, and we see ourselves as we really are. God is three-times holy; we are three thousand-times unholy. Yet, in spite of this great disparity, God actually *seeks* men to worship him ([John 4:23](#)). The unknown Italian hymnist had it right: “Come, Thou Almighty King, *Help us* Thy name to sing, *Help us* to

praise. . . .” We are helpless before him. Hapless. Hopeless. But even at that his majestic deity causes our mere humanity to cry out, “My soul yearns, even faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God” (Psalm 84:2).

One Summer Sunday morning, when I was about seven years old, a sparrow flew into our sanctuary. Every eye was on the sparrow as he flitted here and there. Finally he found lodging on a cornice, high in the vaulted ceiling. Years later I came across this passage of Scripture that reminded me of that incident: “Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young – place near your altar, O LORD Almighty, my King and my God. Blessed are those who dwell in your house, they are ever praising you” ([Psalm 84:3-4](#)).

May our worship of Almighty God never be stopped at the altar – stopped by unreconciled differences, unconfessed sin, or unopened eyes. May we, like the lowly sparrow (and we are of greater value than sparrows), find a home – a place near the altar of our Almighty King and God!

## The Write Side: Busy Preacher's Sermon Outline Guide

by Dennis Crawford

September – October, 1997

Here's the preacher's nightmare. It's 10 o'clock Saturday night. Due to an unusually busy week, an unexpected weekend visit from friends, 36 holes of golf and a bad headache, he hasn't had a thought about tomorrow morning's sermon. It looks like one of those Saturday nights. He'll be up until 3:00 a.m. plagiarizing like a bandit from one of Chuck Swindoll's books, all the while praying for an attack of appendicitis, or some other acute – yet non-life-threatening – illness that calls for a run to the emergency room.

But the illness doesn't come. After five hours of cramming, he has something that could be called a sermon, another headache, a bad case of the coffee jitters, and new resolve – next week, no Saturday night special.

After having several Saturday nights in a row like the one described above, I began thinking about writing a busy preacher's sermon outline book. I imagined a book that would outline a surefire method to quickly produce deep, powerful, enriching, inspiring, engaging and interesting sermons. Well, I think you'll see that I've been doing some heavyduty thinking. One Saturday night between 10:00 and 11:00 I came up with this baby (sermon) below. The next Monday morning, looking over my Saturday night's labor, I had a flash of insight. That sermon could be a model, a paradigm, for hundreds of sermons. The sermon preparation method that grew from that insight is so easy, I think almost anyone – even preachers with post-graduate degrees – can get the hang of it in a couple weeks.

I am confident that after using my method, preachers everywhere will soon be throwing rocks at Buttrick, Long, Fant and Craddock *et al.*

As you note the outline please remember, I came up with this sermon in less than an hour!

**Title:** “Sin: Its Existential Reality in a World of Pluralistic Values and Philosophical Hedonism.”

**Introduction:** Talk about the weather, your pets, your children or grandchildren, saving the wetlands in North America, gardening, Monday Night Football, or whatever else is on your mind at the time. Try to use the word “sin” somewhere toward the end of the introduction.

**Main points:**

I am against sin.

I am really against sin.

I am very much against sin.

No kidding.

I AM REALLY, VERY MUCH AGAINST SIN!! (optional point if you feel the congregation needs it.)

**Conclusion:** Actually say, “In conclusion.” (This may be said right after point #1 if people begin to nod off, and may be said every three or four minutes after that, as needed.)

Quickly review points 1-3 or 1-4. Then say the word: “Letusstandandsing.”

That’s it. It’s that easy. It’s that simple.

The wonderful thing about this sermon is that it can become an entire series of sermons. Simply change one or two words in the outline and it’s brand new. The possibilities for sermon freshness are endless. A preacher will have no excuse for a poor sermon just because he didn’t start preparation until 10 o’clock Saturday night.

For instance, here’s another outline I came up with in just six minutes:

**Title** “The Intertwined Existential Relationship Sustained Between Good and Goodness.”

- 1) I’m for goodness.
- 2) I’m really for goodness.
- 3) etc. etc.

Scary, isn’t it? I know that’s what you’re thinking. It’s really easy. But here’s the best part. I got so excited about this idea that I called the Fang and Claw Publishing Co. to see if they would like to publish a book with the details of my new method. They promptly referred me to a more conservative, and a tiny bit more defensive publisher, The Slashing Bloody Sword with Guts and Stuff Dripping Off Of It Publishing Co., Inc. They also publish a monthly paper, but that’s another story. At any rate, the upshot is this – The Slashing Bloody Sword people are interested in publishing a how to guide and a compilation of my outlines. The working title is: *I’m Against (Fill in The Blank) Quickie Sermon Outline Book For Busy – Or Lazy – Preachers*. If things go as planned, the book should be out next spring.

Preachers, I’m sure you can see I’m onto something. But I don’t want to be selfish, or commercial. Even though many preachers will soon be shelling out \$29.95 for my book, I’ve shared this prepublication article with you so that you can use my method next Saturday night. I know you’ll get plenty of comments on your sermon.

## Worship as a Way of Life

by Jim Martin

September – October, 1997

Several years ago a student was renting a small apartment from an older Christian man. He had lived there for about six months when two friends from out of state came to visit him. One friend was white, the other was African-American. After these friends left to return home, the student found a note placed on his front door. “You will need to find another apartment,” the note read, “you are just not working out here.” After reading the note, the student knocked on the landlord’s door and asked to speak with him about the note. The student began the conversation by asking why he had been asked to leave the apartment. “To be honest,” the gentleman answered, “you brought that black (my word, not his) man into my apartment. I won’t stand for that.” The student was stunned. “But I don’t understand! You are a Christian. How can you do this? My friend has been a student at two Christian colleges and has even preached on occasion. He is your brother in Christ.” The landlord replied, “Church is church and business is business. This is business!”

What do we do with such a situation? Both men were in assemblies each Sunday. Both claimed Jesus as Lord. Both believed that worshiping and glorifying God was a necessary response for a believer. They were probably sincere in their faith. Perhaps the problem was that for one man a gap existed between Sunday morning and the other six days. For some reason, what was proclaimed on the first day of the week did not affect this landlord’s attitude and behavior. Perhaps the reason for this gap is that people do not understand the place of worship.

God is prior to worship. His grace is prior to our response. We worship in response to God in gratitude for all that he has done for us. In worship, we declare God’s worth and respond to his love. On the first day of the week Christians come together in “assembly.” The other six days of the week are to be an extension of that worship experience. Worship is to be a way of life because God interacts with us in our everyday lives. Yet, unfortunately, many of us make such a distinction between the sacred and the secular that our faith makes no significant difference in our lives during the remainder of the week. James Davidson Hunter has observed that American religion thrives in some respects (*Partisan Review*, Spring 1997, pp. 187-19). After all, people are going to church, praying, and going to Bible studies. This is deceptive, however, because American religion has fallen to “privatization, fragmentation, and subjectivization.” As a result, “it (religion) persists but is hollowed out.” We affirm Jesus as Lord on Sunday, but that confession may have an empty ring to it on Monday. Consequently, we become disconnected from our faith and our lives are blown here and there by every cultural wind that comes along.

The assembly is a time each week when we come together and our life in God is nurtured. The nature of the body of Christ is to meet together. The expression “come together” is used in both 1 Corinthians 11:18 and 14:23 to refer to the assemblies of the church. The expression is used in Acts 12:12 to refer to a prayer meeting. There are numerous words used in the New Testament to refer to worship. Most of the time these words in some way also refer to the Christian life and especially one’s moral conduct and good deeds. Everett Ferguson has observed that one would

have to press hard to make a major distinction between worship as assembly and one's service to the world. Ferguson has stated:

Modern usage applies the word, "worship" to the assembly of believers gathered for corporate acts of devotion ... The New Testament usage for the words for worship is much broader, including the Christian moral life and acts of service on behalf of good people. The common meaning of worship today represents a narrowing down of the New Testament meaning of worship. It selects one aspect of worship and applies the word exclusively (or almost so) to that aspect. Worship properly understood, however, covers the Christian life as well as the Christian assembly, all acts of service and devotion to God (Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, p. 226).

While the gathering on Sunday ("the assembly") is a time of worship and edification, the other six days are to be an extension of that worship. Due to the formal nature of our assemblies (suits, ties, dresses), one might be led to believe that on Sunday morning, God is looking intently at each worshiper with spiritual binoculars not used at any other time. All of life, however, is an expression of worship to God. The assemblies in the New Testament were not isolated from the daily gatherings of believers. The assembly on the first day of the week was seen in continuity with all of life, both past and future.

The presentation of our lives before God on a daily basis is an act of worship ([Romans 12:1](#)). We are called to behave in such a way that our actions are shaped by the Lord Jesus rather than the powerful expectations of this culture. If we are not worshiping God during the remainder of the week, it may be because we have been seduced by the idols. In other words, the issue may not be *whether* we worship but *what* we worship. Sex? Pleasure? My money? My happiness? All of these can become seductive gods tempting us to pay attention to their claim to make us feel good. As Augustine said, "We imitate whom we adore." Flirting with these idols will result in a life hollowed out by idolatry.

Two unmarried college students sit next to one another on a Sunday morning partaking of the Lord's Supper as it is passed. Less than 12 hours ago they were having sex, bowing before the god of sexuality. In the same assembly, a 30-year-old mother of two who has been married for nine years, plans to leave her husband and children. No, there is no one else. She says that she needs more space and time for herself. She has bowed to the god of pleasure. Meanwhile, a business person sitting three pews in front of her is preoccupied with a business deal that should close this week. Unfortunately, he chose to lie a bit to make it work. He bowed before the god of money. The problem on this particular Sunday morning is that these people have bowed to idols during the week and are now gathered to worship the creator God on Sunday. Meanwhile, God calls for us to abandon all idols and worship him exclusively throughout the week.

The question at this point is, "How is God to be worshiped the other six days?" After all, our bodies are referred to as a temple of the Holy Spirit ([1 Corinthians 6:19](#)). The Spirit of God lives within us and so we are called to glorify him at all times. What does it mean to live a life of worship?

**First**, a life of worship has to be rooted in a life of prayer ([1 Thessalonians 5:17](#)). When Paul says “pray without ceasing” he is not advocating constant vocal prayer. To pray without ceasing is to recognize the need for a God-driven day. Such a day stands in stark contrast to a task-driven day, an employer-driven day, or a pleasure-driven day.

**Second**, a life of worship will result in treating our brothers and sisters in a way that brings honor to God. A life of worship means that we offer our bodies as living sacrifices, “holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship” ([Romans 12:1](#)). Later, in a discussion of the weak and strong, Paul says that we are not to insist upon our rights and hurt a brother who is weak in the faith ([14:13ff](#)). We refuse to insist upon our own way, and Paul says that “anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men” ([14:18](#)). When we treat people in a selfless manner, we are presenting ourselves as a sacrifice to God. This is not becoming a martyr but a joyful presentation of ourselves to God. Without such daily worship, our deadly ego-sin will destroy the people around us as we put self-interest above all else.

**Third**, a life of worship will be reflected in showing love toward believers who are in need. Paul refers to the gift of money given to help his ministry as an “acceptable sacrifice” ([Philippians 4:18](#)). Not long ago, I visited with a Christian woman in her late 80s who lives in a retirement home. A former school teacher, she now has a hearing aid and suffers from dizzy spells. She lives in a complex where some persons are in a traditional nursing home setting, while others who are able to care for themselves live in apartments. On this particular day, as she rocked in her chair, she spoke of washing the clothes of one of the residents and mending the dress for another. In her view, one way that she served the Lord was by helping some of these people when she could. She concluded that it was her “duty” to the Lord to do what she could for others after all that God had done for her. Daily worship will result in serving people in ways that may seem insignificant and unimportant but are God-honoring.

**Finally**, a life of worship will result in ethical behavior. In telling the Corinthians that they were the temple of the Holy Spirit, Paul gives them (and Christians today) an enduring reason for avoiding fornication. Since Christians are a temple of God, we are to glorify God in our bodies ([1 Corinthians 6:18-20](#)). In other words, when a Christian says “no” to an occasion for sexual immorality, he brings honor to God. The ethical concern is addressed repeatedly in the prophets. The prophets declared that God would not accept the worship of a people whose lives reflected that they did not care about the concerns of God during the week.

I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. 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 ([Amos 5:21-22](#)).

Why? Amos said that these people who were enjoying luxury were mistreating the poor ([5:11-12](#)). The prophet Micah addressed the same kind of situation as he told the people that the problem was not in their offering, but in their lives. Micah asks,

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgressions, 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](#)).

Jesus continued the same theme when he said that if things are not right with a brother or sister and one is offering a gift at the altar, the relationship needs to be dealt with first ([Matthew 5:23-24](#)). Our praise on Sunday can be rejected by God if we ignore his concerns the other six days. We cannot mistreat people during the week and then expect God to honor our expression of worship on Sunday.

We must put behind us the sacred/secular distinctions which too often result in the compartmentalization of our faith. The cross is to shape our lives. Does the cross make any practical difference in the way we live during the week? Does our faith affect our behavior with a person of the opposite sex? Does our relationship with God make a difference in how we spend money? Is our conduct in business different because Jesus is our Lord and Savior? We are called to be a people who are totally his. What is life about? It is about worship. Worship is to pay attention to our loving Father and to respond in gratitude every day of the week.

## **Putting the Meaning in Meaningful Worship**

*by Larry Bridgesmith*

*September – October, 1997*

### **Where Do We Find God?**

He had spent a lifetime of Sundays in his customary pew. He was a good, God-fearing young man. But since his brother committed suicide, there was little solace to be found in familiar routines. Church was no different. The worship assemblies he attended since his brother's death were not inspiring. They failed to meet him in his loss. His pain was not soothed. A church shepherd and friend could not help but notice.

One day the elder asked the younger about his spiritual and emotional health. The answer was obvious before it was articulated. Nothing seemed to make sense anymore. God was nowhere near in the young man's confusion. Certainly, the church assembly offered no connection with eternity and the answers offered there. Confusion gave way to anger as the young man explained how meaningless worship had become. He looked for God in the church assemblies, but could not find him.

The elder asked his young friend where he felt closest to God. "In my duck blind," was the immediate reply. "Then go there," said the shepherd. "Talk to God about your loss, your anger, your confusion. And then listen for his response."

Early Sunday morning, Matt got in his truck and headed to his favorite hunting spot. It was not duck season, so neither dog nor gun accompanied him. In the quiet of that special place, Matt poured out his heart hurts. Over the course of the entire day he questioned, he accused and he honestly confronted his God with the inexplicable dilemma which faced him. He shouted, he argued and he cried out. He heard no voice; he saw no vision. But for the first time since his brother's death he sought an encounter with God with all his heart, head and spirit. His plea was simply, "If you are there God, if you care about me, show me."

At day's end, exhausted and emotionally spent, he headed home. As he crested a hill, the glory of a spectacular sunset caught his eye in the rear view mirror. He stopped his truck on the side of the road and got out to see it more clearly. Matt had not noticed it before, but when he stepped out, a huge stag deer stood motionless in the road between him and God's glorious sunset. The deer looked at him momentarily and bounded away. Stunned, Matt fell to his knees and worshiped. The God he thought was not listening came near in ways his heart was prepared to encounter. At that moment, Matt's emotional and spiritual healing began. His questions were not answered; his accusations were not responded to. But God came near and his presence was unmistakable.

### **What Puts the Meaning in Worship?**

Perhaps the most meaningless question being asked around Sunday dinner tables is, “Did you get anything out of worship today?” In our well-intended quest for meaning in worship experiences, what we “get out” of worship is immaterial. Worship was never intended to be about us. Worship is about God, the only being in the entire universe worthy of worship. The externals of a worship experience may be either conducive or an obstacle to true worship, but they are never worship in themselves.

Some would make the mistake of concluding that Matt’s experience teaches that worship can only be meaningful in the context of the outdoors, sunsets and God’s animal creation. Few of us would stretch analogy that far. However, many are willing to reach similar conclusions about other externals of the worship experience. Are praise teams your sunset? Is a particular style of music your stag? Do our preferences dictate how God should reveal himself to us? Is it necessary for us to sense that God has chosen to come near for our worship to be “meaningful”?

What led Matt to worship was an attitude of heart and spirit that was open, honest and anticipatory. Matt was blessed when God chose to respond to the desires of his heart for connection with the eternal. Whether God did so or not, Matt was poised for worship and he encountered God for the first in a long time. The worship experience is not a place, it is not a style, it is not an expectation to be satisfied. Worship is an encounter with God that leaves us changed and our posture in contrast with the eternal clarified. Worship places our condition in perspective as God proclaims his sovereignty. We’d better know who we are because we see who he is.

### **Worship Is Not Always Fun, But It Is Always Worship**

Many worshipers, like Matt, meet God in times of loss without finding easy answers or instant joy. Abraham took his son Isaac to worship on the mountain altar prepared to lose his most prized possession. Abraham could not understand God’s strange command, but he was prepared to obey. He was willing to trust absolutely because God had proven himself absolutely trustworthy. It was not the “why” or “how” that drove him to an intersection of faith; it was the “Who.” Abraham had to be confused, distraught, even angry, but he was prepared to respond to the voice of God calling him to worship. That call was not about Abraham’s comfort, it was about God’s holiness and his need to be first in Abraham’s faith. Isaac could not be Abraham’s focus of worship. Only God deserves such a place (Genesis 22:5).

We are given Abraham choices constantly. Will we seek comfort, satisfaction and gratification, or will we seek God? Do we possess the prerogative to define “meaningful worship” or is that the sole domain of the Almighty? Can we worship when music styles, format and content are not to our liking? If not, we probably need to be more concerned about the idolatry in our theology than finding a worship style we like. Is God calling us to take our “first born” worship expectations to the altar of sacrifice in order to be faithful children of the King? If we approach our worship responsibility with the submission of Abraham, our worship experiences will be satisfactory to the only audience that matters. We are not the audience, we are the performers.

Worship is not concerned with our getting, it is only about our giving. King David paid total devotion to the healing of his son by Bathsheba. He prayed, he fasted and he threw himself on

the mercy of *Jehovah Raphe*, the Healer. Days passed and David dedicated himself completely to God's will. He prayed for the elimination of this illness in an innocent victim of David's own sin. To no avail. The child died. Immediately, David got up, washed his face and worshipped ([2 Samuel 12:15ff](#)). How can we worship God when he does not give us what we want? How can we do otherwise? Do we really think we deserve any better? Is God any less worthy of worship when we are disappointed? Is he any less God?

Job revealed the same worshipful response to loss. On learning of the loss of his possessions and his children, Job worshiped ([Job 1:13ff](#)). His submission to God was not dependent on having his desires met. No less should we seek to adore and glorify our God only when events in our lives are suitable to our tastes. May God grant us the patience and the wisdom to seek his satisfaction over our own. May our worship theology transcend our human tendency to gratify our desires rather than his.

### **Worship Is A Response to God In Our Midst**

Angels were heard on high the night Jesus came in the form of a human baby. He was known then and now as *Emmanuel*, God with us. The Revelation shows in vivid imagery the celebration, the unrestrained joy which will accompany the reunion of the church with the Bridegroom. Our public and private worship merely foreshadows the inevitability of this divine unveiling which God planned before Adam's fall. Knowing what he has done for us drives us to worship.

Human traditions can serve to obscure the purpose and focus of worship. Isaiah warned that man's rules can serve as an illicit substitute for true worship ([Isaiah 29:13](#)). Christ agreed ([Matthew 15:1-11](#)). All our efforts to "do worship" the right way may actually serve to distance us from the God we seek to honor. When more struggles are expended on the form and content of a "worship service" than on the name of the Lord of lords and King of kings, we may be worshipping worship rather than God.

### **Form Is Secondary, But Not Irrelevant**

Jesus spoke eternal truths to the Samaritan woman by the well when he informed her that place is not important, but truth and spirit are essential in worship ([John 4](#)). Jesus amplified the priority of worshipping God when he proclaimed that the first order of human obedience is to love God with all our heart, mind, body and spirit ([Matthew 22:37-38](#)). Worship is clearly more than a mental exercise. It is far more than a spectator sport. When we learn to be participants in holy abandonment, rather than sophisticated critics of various forms of worship, we will be truly prepared to worship.

This does not imply that worship forms are irrelevant. Instead, they are merely secondary to our pursuit of the appropriate response to the Almighty. Worship can be dishonest, hypocritical and detestable in God's sight ([Isaiah 29](#)). Worship can also be self-congratulatory and inward-focused to the exclusion of the outsider ([1 Corinthians 14](#)). Worship that does not speak in culturally relevant fashion to those who do not yet know God misses the mark entirely. Unwittingly, we can grow persuaded like the Corinthians that worship which "meets my needs"

ends the inquiry into meaningful worship. To the contrary, we must remain vigilant to use worship forms consistent with biblical freedoms which connect with God seekers who are not familiar with “the way we have always done it.” Those traditions may feel good to us but lack any capacity to bring unbelieving outsiders to their knees and exclaim, “God is really among you!” ([1 Corinthians 14:24-25](#)).

### **Worshippers Must Develop a ‘Holy Expectancy’**

The greatest obstacle to meaningful worship is our personal lack of attention to worship preparation. No one can do that for us. It is our individual responsibility to prepare for the encounter with God. Failure to do so almost ensures there will be no encounter. In his book, *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster develops the promise of consistently wonderful worship through developing a worshiper’s “holy expectancy.” Worshipers throughout Scripture revealed a distinctly immediate expectation that God’s presence will be revealed in worship. In the Old Testament only the chief priests entered the Holy of Holies. They did so and reflected the *Shekinah*: the radiance of God. After the veil of the temple was torn from top to bottom, all believers were ushered into the very presence of God. Our only intermediary is Christ and he has promised eternal presence in our midst. Unless we expect to see, hear and experience the Holy Mystery of God among us, we will not know it when he comes. If we bring a critical spirit, a callous and unfeeling heart or an unwillingness to be touched by the God of Hosts into private or public worship, our expectations will be realized. Instead, seek to find God in praise, song, prayer and Scripture. Hold up the leaders of worship and pray for the *Shekinah* of God upon them. Listen for the message of God and submit your heart to his voice and you will find worship meaningful and life-changing.

### **Practice Worship When It Seems Unattainable**

Worshippers do not wait until it feels like worship before they worship. They practice worship even in circumstances that seem antithetical to worship. David revealed the true worshiper’s heart in [Psalm 22](#). Over the first 20 verses, David rails at the Almighty for ignoring his plea, for leaving him twisting in the wind before his enemies and for abandoning him to the “wild dogs.” In desperation he cries, “Don’t let them cut my throat; don’t let those mongrels devour me. If you don’t show up soon, I’m done for – gored by the bulls, meat for the lions” (*The Message*).

With nothing to rejoice about, David then recounts the story he will tell his friends when they come to worship. Sound like a setting for a “pity party”? Only to those who have not prepared for worship. To David, the man after God’s own heart, the occasion called for only one response: “Shout Hallelujah, you God worshippers; Give glory, you sons of Jacob; adore Him, you daughters of Israel.” To anyone who doubts God’s presence in times of loss, confusion and attack, David proclaims, “He has never let you down.” The king adores the King “in this great gathering of worship” where a “praise-life” was discovered. Does this sound oxymoronic? When everything is wrong, how can anything be right? Wouldn’t it be prudent in such times of distress to wait until circumstances are better, when the form is more to my liking? Not to a “truth and spirit” worshiper. God is sovereign regardless of our perspective, our desires and our

preferences. David found his “duck blind experience” where the congregation gathered and where God came close.

### **Worship Is Sacrifice with a Smile**

Like Abraham taking Isaac to “worship,” like David and Job rising from the depths of despair to worship, like all God seekers in all ages, worship is about giving, not getting. As a people of God created for “the praise of his glory” may we rise above the babble of self interest, territorial certainty and simply worship. Let us stop talking about worship and just worship. Let us stop merely teaching about worship. Let us not critique the efforts of those seeking to worship. Let us worship.

With expectant hearts anticipating a holy encounter with the Creator of the universe, let us enter into worship with the clear understanding that meaningful worship is defined only by the Holy One who is the sole focus of our worship. In turn we will derive meaning out of our response to the Lion of Judah. Like Isaiah, we will respond with a life dedicated to the difficult, but infinitely rewarding task of seeking God and being filled with his presence. Is that meaningful? More than anything on earth!

## Hope Network Newsletter: Worship in Blue and White

by Kevin Wooten

September – October, 1997

**Introduction by Lynn Anderson:** *This month I have asked permission from Kevin Wooten to publish the following article. Kevin is doing an incredible job as the Campus Minister at the University of Kentucky in Lexington. The article is adapted from the opening keynote address he delivered in early August at the annual National Campus Ministers Seminar at SMU and the Preston Road Church of Christ in Dallas. Read and be blessed.*

You picked the right guy to talk about worship. We know worship at the University of Kentucky. Let me tell you about it. On Sundays and sometimes even for mid-week service, 24,000 worshipers flock to the “temple,” and that’s just the number that get in. We have thousands of people who travel miles just to hang out in the court of Gentiles or the court of women, people who never actually set foot in the temple itself. You see, you have to be born into certain honored tribes or contribute money in biblical proportions if you are to ever enter the court where worship occurs. But once you’re in, you have an experience that’s nearly heavenly. Everyone in attendance is a die-hard worshiper. Everyone knows the songs and chants. They have hidden these words in their hearts since birth. No need for books or screens. Expectant parents sing these songs to their children while they are still in the womb. Around the top of the temple hang the names of saints who’ve pioneered the way in earlier days. The worshipers still talk about them, reminiscing about days gone by whenever a lull happens to come along.

From any seat in the house the reality of warfare is obvious. From these seats, every worshiper sees everything in black and white (or rather blue and white). The enemy is easily identified and fiercely attacked at any opportunity, while the anointed ones are blindly cheered and encouraged to show no mercy toward the enemy. We know all about worship in Lexington.

The greatest moment of our worship assembly during the past eight years has been a moment to die for. After all the announcements are made, following the call to worship, after the clear identification of the enemy ... worship flows into a frenzy. Everyone becomes lost in praise. They all begin lifting holy hands and bowing as the king himself makes his triumphal procession through the temple gates. The worshipers talk about the king’s attire; from his tie to his shoes, every detail is praised. They even know how much hair he’s lost since the last assembly. Rumor has it some are even willing to offer their firstborn, if only he’d let them on his team. We all know the real king is none other than Rick Pitino. Oh, yes, we know how to worship in Lexington. Now if we could just learn to worship the right God.

For quite a few years now, I’ve been learning about worship, yet it’s one thing I feel very inadequate doing or leading. Maybe it’s because I’m too left brained, too analytical. Maybe it’s because of some unexposed or denied sin in my life. Maybe it’s because Satan has a stronghold on me. Or maybe it’s due to so many years of three songs and a prayer on Sunday. I don’t know for sure. But I do know I’m developing a genuine thirst to be in the presence of God. Best I can

tell, what people and angels tend to do when they are aware of God's presence is worship. Worship has been going on long before we got here.

In fact, worship is one of the central themes in Scripture. I think I knew this, but my reading Warren's book, listening to Hybels and McDonald, and reading a few other books here and there affirmed it. If you check out [Nehemiah 9](#) or [Isaiah 6](#) you see that even before creation, angels worshiped God. Right from the start of creation, Adam and Eve were created in perfect fellowship with God, honoring him, worshiping him. But Satan came onto the scene saying, "Don't worship God; instead be like him." The result of that conversation has plagued all of us.

What was the context of the first recorded murder in history? Why did Cain kill Abel? Because in their worship and sacrifices to God, Cain brought an unacceptable sacrifice and Abel brought an acceptable sacrifice. Due to the jealousy surrounding worship, Cain killed Abel. I don't suppose this should surprise us with the way we see people react when someone changes worship. We just about had a murder at our church when we quit using the books and started printing song sheets each week.

When God gave Moses the top ten, what was number one? Everything begins with this: You shall have no other gods before me. You worship me and honor me – no one else. Number two: Don't make a graven image of me to worship Number three: Don't take my name in vain. Hybels comments on this verse, "Watch out how you even talk about me. Don't use my name loosely. Don't sing praises to me thoughtlessly."

Think about the significance of the sacrificial system in the Old Testament. A predicative element is certainly present. Someday Jesus would offer Himself for us. Also, God laid out the whole system of sacrifices so that when people performed those rituals, they'd have an opportunity to express inwardly what those altars signified outwardly. As the altars were built, the fires started, animals sacrificed ... up went the smoke. As the smoke went up and people sacrificed out of a worshipful, obedient heart for God, the smoke was a sort of a symbol of their worship rising up to God. In the New Testament we read of Jesus' sacrifice being a fragrant offering to God (as if the smoke is rising up to heaven).

What was the determining factor in the success of Israel's kings? A king would come in, clean out the idols, rebuild the altars and temples, then reestablish a spirit of worship. God would normally follow up with blessings for the nation when the nation worshiped him. We see this over and over.

Worship is the theme in the last book in the Old Testament. In Malachi God asks, "Where is my honor? Where is my respect? A son honors his father and a servant his master, but you don't worship Me. I tell you to find an unblemished lamb and put it on the altar, but you find one that's sick and just about ready to die, one that won't bring any profit for you in the marketplace. You say, "Here's a lamb I can spare. I'll take it to the altar." God says, "I don't want that kind of worship. You're stinkin' up the skies." Then the prophet tells the people, "Straighten out your worship. It's a priority."

So from eternity past and all through the Old Testament, we see worship as a central theme. This theme doesn't stop in the New Testament. As you turn one page from Malachi to Matthew and meet a few wise men heading across the desert to find this newborn king, they state their mission, "We've come to worship Him." In [Luke 2](#), after the shepherds visit Jesus, they leave glorifying God and worshipping him. [Luke 4](#) paints the scene of Jesus being tempted by Satan. Satan tries his best with these words, "Just fall down on your knees and worship me." Jesus simply responds, "It is written, we worship only God."

[Luke 19](#) gives us a picture of what happened on Jesus' way to Jerusalem. Check out verses [37 and 38](#) to see all kinds of worship going on. The whole crowd joyfully praises God: "Blessed is the King! Peace in heaven!" Then some of the Pharisees demand that Jesus get this nonsense stopped. After all, Jesus isn't God and he shouldn't be worshiped. But Jesus' response is tremendous. "I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." I wish everyone had stopped praising so we could read about what would've happened next. Jesus lets them know this moment demands worship and he'll receive it one way or another.

What about worship in the future? Revelation is John's peek into the party that goes on in heaven. We see in several different places in John's revelation that heaven is all about worship. So before creation, at creation, through the Old Testament and through the New Testament, all the way into eternity ... the theme is worship.

I know I could have much more to say about a number of other topics like relationships, marriage, parenting, exercising. I'd rather listen to King David talk to me about worship. he's the guru when it comes to this issue in my opinion. He wrote all those psalms sitting out in the fields and hanging out in caves, on the throne and on the run. He had plenty of time to worship. but, worship is not a luxury I can afford. I have too many people to train and teach and get to know. I have two kids and a wife to take care of. I haven't enough hours in the day to do the Lord's work. Hybels asks this question: "Wouldn't God be happier if at the end of my life I came to Him with my arms full of people and battle scars than if I came with less scars and fewer people, but with a heart full of worship and praise?" My question sometimes is what does all this worship accomplish anyway? My question to you is, how easy is it for you to find something else to do other than worship the God who made you ... and justify your decision in the name of ministry?

Worship is at the heart of our Christian community. Warren writes, "We grow broader through ministry, warmer through fellowship, larger through evangelism, deeper through discipleship, and we grow stronger through worship." Because of what is clearly emphasized throughout the Bible I believe, I believe all of what and who we are as a community of God's people begins and continues for eternity with worship. I also believe for us with a Church of Christ heritage, worship as God intended is difficult to experience. In fact, I know of several people who felt like they had to join up with a different fellowship if they were to ever experience worship as God intended.

We have basically two kinds of worship: corporate and private. For church people, private worship drives our corporate worship. For unchurched people, dynamic corporate worship may motivate private worship times.

Some complain that our corporate worship times together lack life and exuberance, bordering rather on dull and dry. These complaints come in many different flavors: song choice, projection screens, song books, worship leader talks too much or not enough, dramas are from Satan, dramas make all the difference in nailing the point, responsive readings are too high church, and let's not forget the beloved clapping issue. Question: are we putting too much pressure on what happens on Sunday morning? Are our expectations too great on our worship assembly? Bigger question: do we expect something to happen corporately on Sunday morning that we don't experience privately the rest of the week? I am convinced that too many people come on Sunday looking for the leaders to show them the way to God ... and they better do it fast because we only have 60 minutes ... but we haven't spent 60 minutes total for the week worshipping God in private.

Let me illustrate. In junior high I joined the band. The band director went to our church and he made it sound like so much fun. So I chose the French horn and began my band career. I remember enjoying my band experience, for about six months. I recall three major turnoffs: practicing, concerts, and Kim Porter. If not for these three things, I could've stuck it out. Kim Porter was the big problem, though. She also played the French horn but she wasn't like me; she was good, and she knew it. She had good posture; she never, ever missed a note, and her horn was so perfect. She even had the thumb key. (I didn't have the thumb key, but I certainly had some opinions on what she could do with her thumb key.) I never was very good, and I only got worse when I quit practicing on my own. I learned an important lesson: you never get any better if the only time you play is during a concert ... and soon you dread those times, too. I believe it's the same with worship. If worship isn't a way of life through the week for us, then Sunday will forever be disconnected and disappointing. Lynn Anderson painted a graphic picture for me one time to illustrate this same point. He said our boredom with corporate worship is like the dry heaves, trying to bring up something that's just not there.

Do you think the community of believers described in [Acts 2:42-47](#) ever got bored with their worship times? Can't you just hear their conversations? "I'm so tired of singing these same old songs David wrote about a million years ago. We need some new songs. And you know, I love Peter, but that brother preaches way too long! Don't you wish he'd talk about something other than Jesus and the cross? You'd think that's all he knows anything about, Jesus and the cross, Jesus and the cross, Jesus and the cross." Every day that passed, the people in this community were worshipping. They didn't live with the pressure or expectation of having to adore God, study his word, hear what he has to say, realize their sins, confess and change, be resolved, receive peace, participate in the Lord's supper, evangelize and equip, communicate all the announcements ... all in the same time it takes for Lenscrafters to make you a pair of glasses – in just about an hour. Their whole lives were worshipful ones. Their worship wasn't a pressure-packed hour! I honestly believe our expectations of a worshipful hour will never be met until we spread those expectations for worship throughout our entire week, indeed our entire lifetime.

Consider worship as a performance – not necessarily a performance for us, but a performance for God. All week long we've been practicing, learning, growing. That way, when we come together, we don't lose our place or get left behind. We know the part we play as we perform our heart-filled worship to the Heavenly Father. We can't hold back; our hearts yearn for our Father.

Worship is not just a time for performance, but also a time of celebration. We come together and remember we are saved through Jesus Christ. We are rich, gifted, forgiven, made new, made heirs, redeemed, all through Jesus. I believe we really need to hear others' testimonies about these things. When I listen to you tell what Jesus has done for you, our community bond will be strengthened and Jesus will be made more real. I'd love to be a part of what John writes of in [1 John 1:1](#). He says his mission is to proclaim what he has seen and touched, what he's looking at so others will get to hear about the difference Jesus is making. I'd love for us to celebrate what Jesus is doing in our lives. A worshiping community celebrates Jesus.

I work primarily with our postmodern Generation X culture on a university campus. Leading them into the presence of God to worship is a great privilege, but also poses a few unique challenges. This generation of people is intensely relational. Example after example comes to my mind which illustrates just how relationally focused they are. The people God has put in my life to tell about Jesus boils down to my relationship with them. The presentation of propositional truth is way down their priority list. "Can I trust you? Do you live out what you're teaching? Will you be a friend to me?" These searchers ask questions like these. My answers determine my effectiveness in bringing them to Jesus.

The students I work with are watching me closely. They are watching me in my marriage. If I don't treat my wife with respect, I will never effectively lead these students into any environment of worship. In the same way a strange dog can tell if you're afraid of his presence, Gen Xers can immediately sense if you're being genuine and honest with them. If you're trying to dupe them, you'll get turned off right away, regardless of how much you know, what degrees you've earned, how much money you make. Getting into their heart and mind is all about relationship.

They are also going to watch me as I relate to my children. College students have initiated numerous conversations regarding my parenting. They especially need to see us dads spending time with our kids. Be careful about brushing off your child so you can "talk about the Lord" with someone. If that someone sees me ignoring my children, he will be turned off. You see, so many young people have been grossly ignored by their parents, especially their dads. Listen to this letter written by a university student to see how much of an impact my parenting will make in my relationship with him.

*Dear Dad,*

I really wish we could have shared some of the things you and your father shared. You hunted, you fished, you probably adventured together. Why didn't you do those things with me? Was I not good enough or man enough or strong enough to do it? Did you look at how bad I was in sports and think, "He can't do this well, so he probably can't do anything else." I felt rejected. I asked you to take me fishing and the answer was always "sometime." You didn't even say "no," so I kept hoping it would happen sometime. I remember when we'd take the fishing poles on vacation and I'd hope that we'd go somewhere, just you and me, and fish ... but we didn't.

The only time we did go fishing was with my cousin and uncle and I felt like I didn't know how to do it. I did it anyway though. I remember resenting my cousin because his dad took him fishing and you didn't. He knew how to do it and I didn't. I was jealous of him for that. I

probably would have given up all my toys for times like he had with his dad. And I remember when I was there with the fish on my hook. I was crying because I didn't know what to do. My uncle was the one who helped me and told me what to do. ... not you. Why wouldn't you help me? And you two laughed about it ... about me crying ... and it was your fault that it happened anyway because you never taught me how to fish and you left me there all by myself.

You never went out and adventured with me in the woods, and I always wanted you to. I remember one time that you and mom went to that old house in our neighborhood with me. I had so much fun. You were there with me doing what I enjoyed doing. But you never went back there again, except once when I ran away and you angrily came to get me. Didn't you see what I enjoyed? I didn't understand how you could do all those fun things with your friends and not with me. Aren't I your friend, too?

Dad, I still need you. I still love you. I want to get to know you better. I want to learn about what kind of man you are, where you come from, who you were when you were young. I want to build things with you. I want to hike, fish, and camp with you. And I want us to do all those things together with my son.

Nobody can make up for what I didn't get from you. You are my only earthly father and I know there are no substitutions. I want to learn how to be a man and I'm asking God to give me what you haven't. He is the father of us all and I love him.

How can I develop a relationship with this person if he sees me treating my son the same way he's been treated? This brother is watching me. My interaction with my wife and my children becomes worship, because I'm honoring the gifts God has entrusted to me.

We can powerfully lead this generation of souls into God's presence by modeling confession. Let's be honest in our relationships about what we can do and what we can't do, what we should do and what we shouldn't have done. I need to ask for forgiveness when I'm wrong. My experience is that when I lead the way in confession and prayer, what follows is amazing. People are seeking an outlet to be honest, to be forgiven, to be cleansed. That's worship!

The challenge in my life to lead students into God's presence and into purposeful worship is acute. People are looking for a place to belong, a place where they can be accepted. Belonging and acceptance are relationship words. We are going to impact this generation of souls not by insightful exegesis, but through a commitment to a relationship with them. These relationships won't happen if our number is unlisted or if we hide away at night or if we're tracking our time to get in a 40-hour week. Forget the time card and make your ministry a lifestyle of worship. It's what we do; it's who we are. Leading young people with questioning minds, open hearts, and growing dreams into God's presence has to be the greatest job in the world. May God gift each one of us with commitment, patience, grace, and a dream as we love people into his kingdom to worship him.

## AfterGlow: Transforming Worship

by Phillip Morrison

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A preacher who influenced me in boyhood years would not allow us to talk about “going to church.” Arguing correctly that the church is not a place but a people, he preferred that we talk about “going to the meetin’ house.” It took me some years to realize that was a distinction without a difference. He was still talking about a place; he was just hung up on calling it church!

Going to worship is neither going to occupy some place nor observe some performance; it is going to do something, to offer something, to feel something, to become something. As Robert Webber put it so well, worship really is a verb.

I have preached sermons chastising people for the presumed inadequacy of their giving (“Give of your best to the Master”) when my own life was certainly not without spot or blemish. I wanted the sacrifice offered by the people to be more acceptable than my own.

Many churches are giving more thought to worship planning. Gone are the days when song leaders dog-eared their favorites five minutes before service time and the main qualification for prayer leading was being present and willing.

Worship in our tradition has been too preacher-centered. A proper emphasis on evangelism has led to an improper combining of evangelism and worship. Singing, praying, even remembering our Lord at his Supper have often been hasty preliminaries or hurried afterthoughts. Our emphasis on pattern theology has somehow failed to note that the early church assembled to worship and went out to do its evangelism.

The sermon, if carefully prepared and delivered, can be a vital part of worship. But it must be, in the words of John Killinger, “a real Word, and not something compounded in fever on Saturday night to be delivered in spasms on Sunday morning.”

“This is the sum of the matter,” said Martin Luther, “that everything shall be done so the Word prevails.” And Karl Barth held the preacher responsible for creating “an expectancy that something great, crucial, and even momentous is to happen.”

C.S. Lewis, in *Mere Christianity*, has Christ saying to us, “Give me all. I don’t want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want YOU. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good ... Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked – the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you myself; my own will shall become yours.”

Then we will be able to truly worship.