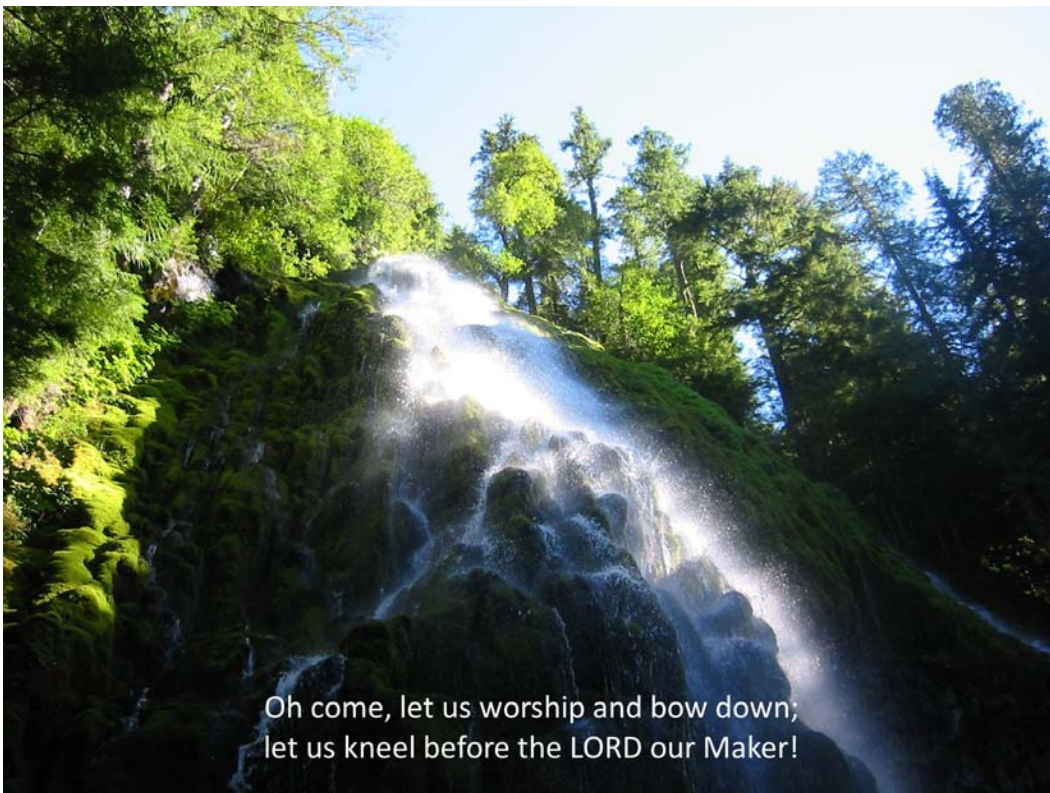


## A Collection of Thoughts on Worship

~by Keith Purvis~

### ***The big picture***

Worship comprises so much more than singing songs on Sunday morning! In the New Testament, the two main words for **worship** are *proskuneō*, “to kiss towards,” and *latreuō*, “to serve.” Thus, to worship God is to adore Him as our greatest, all-satisfying treasure and to willingly serve Him as our Lord and King. Within this broad definition, there are many expressions of worship, such as prayer, singing, art, obedience, and suffering; however, all true worship is a response to God. As Matt Redman puts it, worship is “revelation and response.” God initiates with us, and we respond by His grace. These personal encounters with our Creator are what worship is all about! God *initiates* with us by revealing Who He is through the Bible, creation (Ps. 19:1, Rom. 1:20), people (Gen. 1:26-27, Acts 17:28-29), Jesus (John 1:18, Hebrews 1:1-2, John 14:8-9), and the Holy Spirit (John 14:16,17,26, 16:13-15, 1 Cor. 2:9-16), and we *respond* in faith, humility, and adoration. God initiates by doing great works in and among us (conviction, salvation, guidance, encouragement, building His kingdom), and we respond in confession, repentance, commitment, thanksgiving, and celebration. God initiates through His great love for us, shown most expressly in His sacrifice on the cross (John 15:13, Rom. 5:8, 1 John 4:7-10,19), and we respond in trust, surrender, obedience, and love! Worship is a lifestyle of response to God by seeking to love Him with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength.



Oh come, let us worship and bow down;  
let us kneel before the LORD our Maker!

## ***Stories of worship***

Although it doesn't contain a dictionary definition, the Bible describes true worship through the lives of men and women who encountered God. In Isaiah 6:1-8, we read of the prophet Isaiah's vision in which he was taken into the very presence of the Lord sitting on His throne. Seraphim stood above Him, calling out, "Holy, Holy, Holy," while the ground shook, and the temple was filled with smoke. Overwhelmed by God's awesome holiness on display, Isaiah – surely with his face to the ground – cried out his utter unworthiness and ruin in seeing "the LORD of hosts." Instead of judgment, he was offered forgiveness as an angel flew to him and touched his mouth with a burning coal from the altar. With both God's holiness and grace flooding his being and gratitude welling up in his soul, there was no time for questions or hesitation when he heard God's call and responded, "Here I am. Send me!" In Job 1, we read of Job, an upright man who feared God and was richly blessed with ten precious children, enormous wealth, and a great reputation. When God allowed Satan to test him by destroying all he had, Job tore his clothes and fell to the ground, stricken with grief. And yet he *worshiped* God, saying, "The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." What an example for us all! Job accepted God's will for his life and worshiped God for Who He was, not the gifts He had given Job. Other noteworthy examples of worship in the Old Testament include Abraham's devotion in obediently sacrificing his son Isaac (Gen. 22:1-14), Moses' life-changing encounter with God at the burning bush (Ex. 3-4), David's dance of celebration to the Lord as the ark of the covenant was brought into Jerusalem (II Sam. 6:12-22), and his worship of repentance after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba and faced the consequences (II Sam. 12:1-20).

The New Testament records a number of people who encountered Jesus and responded in worship, boldly acknowledging His deity (e.g., Matt. 2:11, 8:2, 9:18, 14:22-33, 28:1-17, John 9:35-38). Matthew 2:1-11 tells the story of three wise men who saw a star in the east signifying that the "King of the Jews" had been born. Guided by the heavenly sign, they traveled a great distance to fall down and adore its Source of light. Little did they know that the Child they worshiped was sent from heaven to change the world and rescue them from hopelessness! Moving forward about 30 years, in Matthew 14:22-33, the disciples were in a boat on the stormy sea in the darkest hours of the night when Jesus came walking toward them on the water. Heart-stopping terror turned to awe as they saw Jesus enable Peter to come to Him on the water and then Jesus get into the boat and instantly calm the storm. Amazed at their Master's absolute command over the forces of wind and water, the disciples worshiped Him, proclaiming, "Truly you are the Son of God." Another beautiful picture of worship is found in John 12:1-8 (cf. Matt. 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, Luke 7:36-50), where Mary came to Jesus with an alabaster jar of perfume worth a year's wages and poured it on His head and feet, wiping His feet with her hair and kissing them. What a heartfelt act of devoted, sacrificial worship! I wonder what would happen if we wasted

ourselves, poured ourselves out on our Savior in such unmeasured and reckless abandon! Finally, Revelation gives many examples of heavenly worship, where hymns of adoration are sung praising God's being (eternity, honor, wisdom, holiness, power, etc.) and global works (creation, 4:8-11; rule, 15:3, 16:5-7, 19:1-5; redemption, 5:8-10, 7:10; consummation, 11:15-18, 12:10, 19:6-7).

### ***The ultimate example***

The ultimate example of worship is Jesus Christ Himself. Although Christ did not worship in inferiority as we do, and though as God He is to be worshiped, as Man His life on earth was one of both public and private worship to His Father in heaven. When Satan uttered his third and most detestable temptation, seeking to steal worship for himself, Jesus responded by quoting the law, "You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve," which He applied to Himself. The claim that Jesus worshiped is further supported by His response to the Samaritan woman, "You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews [emphasis added]" (John 4:22). Christ demonstrated worship not only by choosing to honor God over powerful temptations, but also by praying (Mark 1:35), fasting (Matt. 4:2-4), singing (Matt. 26:30), and praising the Father (Matt. 11:25, John 12:28); by faithfully completing the work the Father gave Him to do (John 17:4, 19:30); and by living in complete submission and obedience to His Father's will, even to the point of death on a cross (Mark 14:34-36, cf. Luke 22:41-44, Phil. 2:8). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught about many of the characteristics of genuine worship, including true love, right motives, and a heart of forgiveness. He also taught us to pray by giving us the Lord's Prayer. Indeed, Jesus showed us how to live a life of worship!

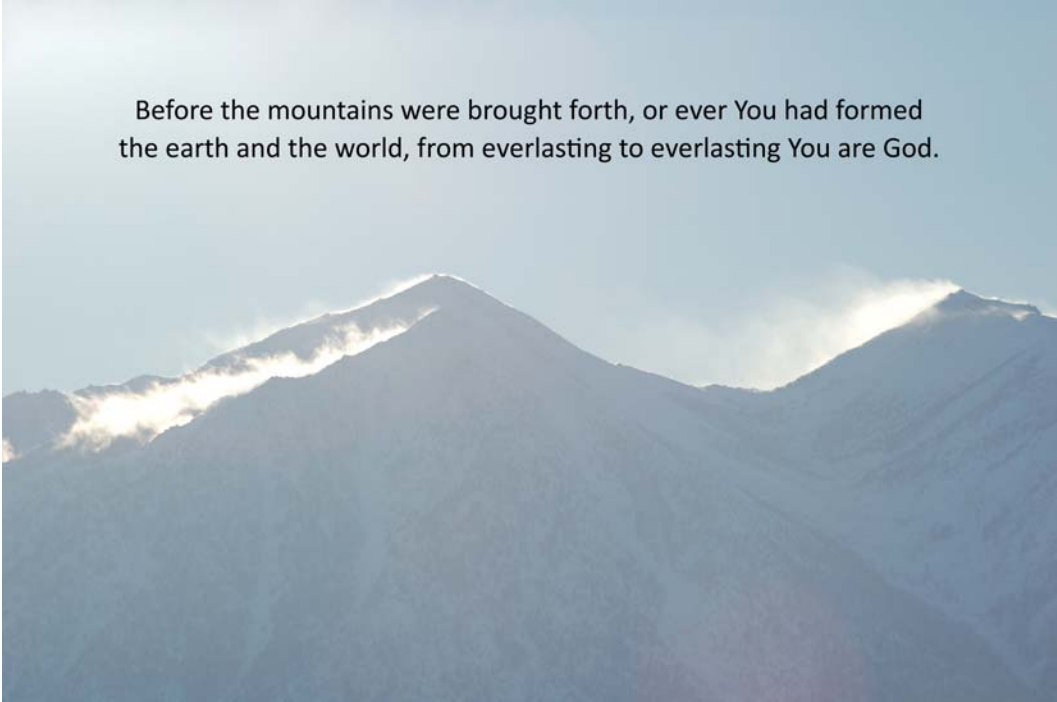
### ***Worship prompters***

Since worship is about responding to God, a great question to ask is, "What about God can we respond to?" Even though the answer has been discussed somewhat above, it's helpful to write these worship prompters out more fully so that we who so easily forget can *remember* God and what He has done! Some biblical reasons for Christians to worship God are:

1. God is holy (Ps. 99:9).
2. His glory, holiness, endless power, perfect nature, and beauty are magnificently displayed by creation (Ps. 19:1, Isa. 6:3, Rom. 1:20).
3. No matter what the circumstances are, God is God; He is on His throne, and He is in control (Job 1).
4. God commands that He alone be worshiped (Matt. 4:10, Heb. 1:6).

5. Christ, the holy King of glory, humbled Himself by coming to a corrupt earth as a helpless baby and dying on a cross for *our* sins (Matt. 2:2,11, Phil. 2:5-11).
6. He loved us with the ultimate love by laying down His life for us, and He asks for our love in return (John 3:16, 15:13, Rom. 5:8, Mark 12:30-31, I John 4:7-21).
7. He has absolute power and authority over everything, including the elements of nature as well as life and death, and He cares for us (Matt. 8:2, 9:18, 14:32-33).
8. Jesus rose from the dead and conquered sin and death (Matt. 28:8-9,17-18, I Cor. 15:54-57)!
9. God's Spirit reveals His truth to us, enabling us to understand it and reminding us of it (John 14:16,17,26, 16:13-15, I Cor. 2:9-16, I Peter 1:10-12, Luke 10:21).
10. The Father convicts us of sin by His Spirit and lovingly disciplines us as His children (II Sam. 12:1-20, I Cor. 14:24-25, Heb. 12:6,9).
11. God is faithfully continuing His work in us to make us more like Jesus, changing our hearts and minds as we surrender to Him and providing mercy and grace when we stumble and fall (Phil. 1:6, II Cor. 3:18, Rom. 12:1-2, Lam. 3:22-23).
12. He created everything; we live and move and have our being by His will (Rev. 4:10-11, Acts 17:28-29).
13. Christ was slain for our sins, and He purchased us for God with His blood and made us to be a "kingdom and priests to our God" (Rev. 5:9-14).
14. Salvation belongs to Him and comes from Him alone (Rev. 7:9-12).
15. One day, He will make everything right by His power, and He will reign (Rev. 11:16-18)!

Indeed, God's character has so many facets, which we can celebrate and revere Him for, and He has done so much for us, which we can thank Him for! Furthermore, God is continually accomplishing new works in and through the Church to further His kingdom, and throughout the world as He accomplishes His sovereign plan. As the Lord says in Isaiah 43:19, "Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" Let us not miss those moments when we realize what He is doing, to worship Him in response!



Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever You had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting You are God.

### ***The greatest commandment***

One of my favorite verses on worship is Mark 12:30-31 (cf. Matt. 22:37-39, Luke 10:27). When one of the scribes, seeking to trap Jesus, asked Him which commandment was most important, Jesus responded brilliantly by quoting two passages from the Torah. The first is “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:5), and the second is “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18). To love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength is to love Him with everything that we are, and that’s worship! This concept introduces a whole new perspective: Instead of following rules and rituals, Jesus says that we are to worship God from every fiber of our being! Looking closer at the four main words that describe our makeup – *heart*, *soul*, *mind*, and *strength* – can help us to worship God more fully, the way we were meant to. Based on Strong’s Concordance, Vine’s Dictionary and The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, the word for **heart** (OT: *lēb*, NT: *kardia*) generally represents the seat of our thoughts, emotions, and will; it is the inner man, for “from it flow the springs of life” (Prov. 4:23). The word for **soul** (OT: *nepesh*, NT: *psuchē*), literally means “breath of life,” and in some cases it is simply used for “life” or “self”; however, overall it can again be interpreted as where our thoughts, emotions, and will reside. *Heart* and *soul* are sometimes compounded in Scripture to describe the same thing, so it’s not surprising that their meanings overlap. In his book, “Experiential Worship,” Bob Rognlien explains that *heart* is most strongly connected to our will, while *soul* refers mainly to our emotions; this categorization is useful and fits a good number of the relevant Biblical references, hence it will be adopted. The word for **mind** (NT: *dianoia*) is used to

denote our thoughts, understanding, and judgment. More than a computer that processes information, the mind is our God-given faculty by which we come to know and discern spiritual truth through reason, reflection, and the direction of the Holy Spirit. Finally, the word for **strength** (OT: *m<sup>e</sup>'ōd*, NT: *ischus*) is most transparent since it literally means our strength, which involves our physical body and the actions we take. In summary, we are called to worship God: 1) in the choices we make, 2) in our feelings, 3) in the thinking we cultivate, and 4) in our actions; and don't forget that little descriptor, *all*! Although I first developed this idea about four years ago for teaching our worship team, I would like to acknowledge Rognlien's book for significantly influencing my philosophy in this section.

So how can these definitions help us worship God more fully? By understanding the different aspects of our human existence, we can begin to purposefully worship God in new ways and to express and offer parts of our self in worship that were dormant before. As we make worship a lifestyle and give ourselves more completely to our Creator, Savior, and King, He will draw near and deepen our relationship with Him, which will further draw us to respond to Him in passionate, sacrificial worship!

## **Heart**

Consider the choices we make every day, such as how we spend our money, what we eat, and how we use our "free time." Each decision represents an opportunity to worship either God or something else, and God is pleased when we honor Him even in the small things. Hard times will also come, and, like Job, we will face the choice of still blessing God's name. As the psalmist says, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him, my salvation and my God." (Ps. 42:5). The idea of worshiping God with the will has challenged me and caused me to fall to my knees in sadness as I have sensed the tug of war deep within my heart between serving myself and serving God. At times like this, it's good to pray, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me" (Ps. 51:10). One application of the will in public worship is that of making commitments to follow the Lord in a specific way. Notice that Isaiah's worship experience resulted in his heartfelt offering, "Here am I! Send me." (Isa. 6:8). Genuine worship yields life change, and one of the ways this happens is when we sense God's leading through worship encounters and willingly respond to Him in obedience. Altar calls are a good, traditional example of engaging the will specifically in committing or recommitting one's life to Christ. The will can also be involved by participating in symbolic activities designed to convey spiritual truths. For example, at our church we created a special communion time one month where people wrote their name on a red card, walked down the aisle, and nailed it to a wooden cross (see left picture below); afterwards, they went to one of two tables to partake in communion.



Through the willful, physical acts of writing their name, going forward, and hammering the nail, each person was invited to worship, and many were deeply blessed as they were penetrated by what Christ did for them on the cross. Recently, for Palm Sunday, we opened by handing out palm branches and reading of Jesus' triumphal entry from a children's Bible. After explaining the meaning of this event, we sang "Hosanna" and invited the kids and then everyone to bring their palm branches up front and lay them at the foot of the cross as an act of worship (see right picture above), in essence saying, "Yes, Lord, You're welcome in my life; please come and work in my heart today." Another way we can worship with our will in a congregational setting is by determining to have a good attitude and give God the glory He deserves regardless of the style or quality of music or any other apparent distractions. Finally, we need to remember that it is God Who has given us a will with the potential to make choices that glorify Him, and He enables us to follow through with those choices that honor Him (Phil. 2:12-13).

## **Soul**

My two little girls, Kayley and Abby, are full of emotion. One second they can have the biggest grins and the next they can be weeping large tears of sorrow; it's almost comical! Check out these pictures, taken only three minutes apart:

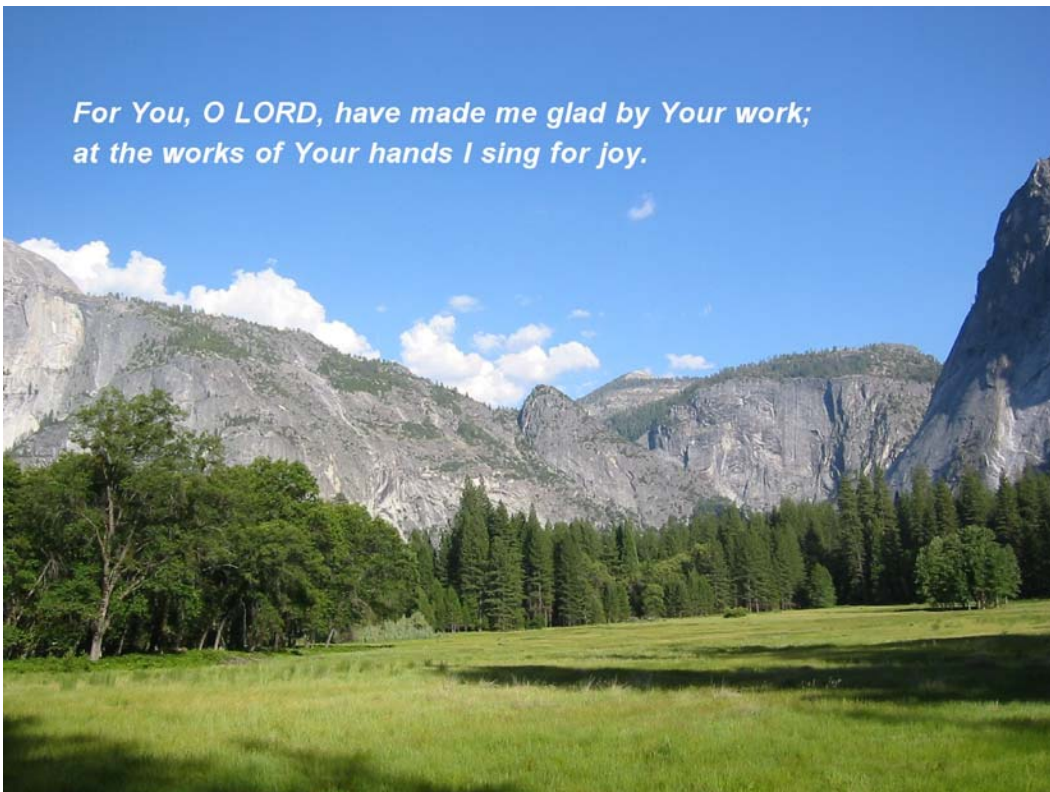


By the time we become “adults,” most of us have learned to suppress our emotions (except when our favorite team or band is playing or when we get behind a slowpoke on the road). Why? Maybe we’re afraid of looking silly or not being in control. Maybe, in growing up, we were repeatedly criticized by those close to us when we expressed our emotions. Besides, certain expressions such as crying out in sorrow or acting in anger aren’t considered “normal” in our culture. However, Jesus wept deeply for those who were touched by the death of Lazarus (John 11:33-36), He overturned the moneychangers’ tables in righteous anger (Mark 11:15-17), He prayed in such anguish and fear that “His sweat became like great drops of blood falling to the ground (Luke 22:44), and He rejoiced in the Holy Spirit (Luke 10:21). Further, Psalms is filled with passages where the writer expresses different emotions (as you read, take the opportunity to express yourself to God through the verses that echo your soul):

1. “Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!” (32:11) “I will be glad and exult in You; I will sing praise to Your name, O Most High.” (9:2)
2. “How long, O LORD? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? (13:1-2) “Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eye is wasted from grief; my soul and my body also.” (31:9)
3. “Do I not hate those who hate You, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against You? I hate them with complete hatred; I count them my enemies” (139:21-22)
4. “My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me.” (55:4-5) “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea.” (46:1-2) “I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin.” (38:18) “But I, through the abundance of Your steadfast love, will enter Your house. I will bow down toward Your holy temple in the fear of You.” (5:7)



Notice the gamut of emotions, from 1) gladness to 2) sorrow to 3) anger to 4) fear and reverence! In public worship, we tend to focus mainly on gladness, but we really need to come to God and worship Him in whatever state our soul is in. If we're sad and feel like crying, we should cry to God and take comfort in Him. If we're fearful or anxious, we should confess these feelings to our Father and remember His faithfulness. When we're awed by His holiness and love, we should respond in a posture of reverence. When we're full of joy, we should certainly let it out and not hold back, whether in clapping, dancing, shouting (Ps. 47:1, 149:3), or simply smiling! There is even a place for right anger in worship. The point is not to manufacture or fake emotions as in emotionalism, but to genuinely express our true feelings to God and not ignore them. Humbling ourselves before the Lord and not caring what others think will protect us from either emotional extreme in worship: faking or ignoring. Our God-given emotions connect the mind with the will and the body, moving us to turn thoughts into decisions and actions; they also indicate what's going on inside us and help us open up to the Holy Spirit's transforming work. Without them, life becomes boring, lacking that "breath of life." I find that emotional dryness is cured by things like getting out in creation, listening to music, or spending time with little kids. Art and children (it's true!) capture our emotions, and they need to be encouraged in the church to help people experience and worship God from their soul. In closing, it's important to recognize that our emotions can also lead us astray at times. Thankfully, our faith and salvation are based not on emotion but on the inerrant, immutable Word of God. On Christ the solid Rock I stand!



## Mind

Laziness can be a formidable opponent to worshipping God with the mind, and so we ought to discipline ourselves to think rigorously! A most excellent way to employ our minds is reading, memorizing, studying, teaching, and meditating on God's Word. By immersing ourselves in the Scripture, we recognize its Author as the One Who possesses true truth and wisdom, and we are rewarded with a deeper understanding of Him that we can worship Him for! Doing an inductive Bible study has helped me worship God in this way. First, by reading a passage over and over, I come to memorize and meditate on it, and this helps me delight in the Lord and not sin. Second, in studying it, I am rewarded by the Holy Spirit with insight into the mind of God and His thoughts concerning me. Finally, as I apply it, I offer myself to God for life-changing work. For a worship service to engage the mind, each element of the service should somehow reflect God's truth, and the elements should be arranged purposefully to communicate and build upon the main spiritual theme. As an example of thematic planning, while our church was focused on involving more people in ministering to the neighborhood children, we planned one Sunday around the worship model from Isaiah 6 (see excerpt below). The focus moved from God's awesome holiness and a posture of reverence to our response of surrender and answering God's call to missions, which culminated in a concrete opportunity for people to follow the Lord in. The elements integrated into this segment were scripture, singing, themed imagery, instrumental music, meaningful physical movement, testimony, and an opportunity for commitment.

Annette:	Scripture reading on God's holiness  <a href="#">Holy, Holy, Holy (C-D)</a>  <a href="#">Here I Am to Worship (E)</a> (instrumental at end for people to connect with God)  <a href="#">I Surrender All (C)...</a> stand, and a capella on last verse (encourage raising hands – universal sign of surrender)
Keith:	God-story <a href="#">Mission's Flame (C)</a>
Robert:	Opportunity for helping reach the neighborhood

It's quite helpful to use a spreadsheet that arranges element categories (e.g., song ideas, special/new music, scripture, drama, dance, stories/testimonies, poetry, symbols/metaphors, film/pictures, painting, décor, communion ideas, physical movement, interaction, and commitment opportunities) in rows and the messages/themes of the next several services in columns, with lots of space to brainstorm and plan ahead. We have found symbols and metaphors, presented through words, film, pictures, paintings, or physical objects, to be very effective stimulants of the mind (e.g., cross, hammer/nail, bread/cup, burning candle, ocean waves, rainbow, flower, nativity, Christmas tree, soaring eagle, Rock of

Ages, Bread of Life, Light of the world). Recently, through watching The Chronicles of Narnia, I experienced how dramatically symbols and metaphors can stir the imagination and comparative faculties, causing the mind to come alive and provoking thoughts and analogies on a spiritual level. Indeed, symbols and metaphors take us into whole other worlds of meaning through our minds and also help us remember significant events and stories that took place in our own lives. Take a moment to reflect on the examples pictured below and see where they take you.



Stories are another powerful element that can engage the mind. There's just something about a good story, which appeals to people of all ages, and many stories can be used to communicate spiritual truths. In summary, we need to be creative but also intentional in the elements we choose and how we combine them, so that the worship time provides for people to come away with fresh spiritual meaning and a fuller understanding of God. Lastly, a word of caution: our limited mind, like our emotions, can sometimes point the wrong way. Even if something seems logical, it may not be according to God's ways and thoughts, which are higher than ours (Isa. 55:9).



## Strength

Because the Bible often uses *strength* to refer to our physical strength (Ps. 31:10, Prov. 20:29, Luke 16:3), and because the physical part of us is not covered by *heart*, *soul*, and *mind*, the strength spoken of in Mark 12:30-31 is interpreted as involving our physical body – our senses, movements, and actions. Recalling the Biblical meaning for *worship*, which is both to adore and to serve, it's easy to see how we can worship God in the many physical tasks we do, such as building something, cooking a meal, changing a diaper, playing sports, or even sleeping! Colossians 3:23 exhorts us, "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men." In balance, it's good to remember that Jesus' yoke is easy, and His burden is light (Matt. 11:28-30); in fact, our strength to serve comes from God as we wait upon Him! In planning a time of worship, one way to involve the physical body is to include elements that engage each of the five senses; for example:

Sight	Hearing
<p>Projection – videos, backgrounds</p> <p>Light – contrast, windows</p> <p>Color</p> <p>Art</p> <p>Props, décor</p> <p>Haze, fog, smoke</p> <p>Dance (interpretative)</p> <p>Drama</p> <p>Architecture (history – stained glass, cathedrals)</p> <p>People</p> <p>Attire, costumes</p> <p>Photography, pictures</p> <p>Greenery, water</p>	<p>Silence (constant) – different than dead time</p> <p>Music, singing</p> <p>Space, changing sound and where it’s coming from, surround sound</p> <p>“Audio Bible,” or have a child or oldest man read Scripture</p> <p>Poetry</p> <p>Good sound system</p> <p>Clapping, applause for Jesus</p> <p>Responsive reading (Biblical – Isaiah), antiphonal singing (e.g., Psalm 136)</p> <p>Interactive – talking, videos</p> <p>Spontaneous prayer</p> <p>Hammer ring, laughter, water trickling</p> <p>Baby crying (pray for them!)</p>
Smell/Taste	Touch
<p>Communion (plan differently sometimes)</p> <p>Bread of Life – smell of bread baking, give loaves of bread away to 1<sup>st</sup>-time guests</p> <p>Saltwater – bitter, maybe not too good!</p> <p>Positive and negative smells</p> <p>Have someone with a “new” nose walk through the church and see what it smells like (coffee, bread, bathrooms, etc.)</p> <p>Lemons → lemonade</p> <p>Give out Hershey kisses</p> <p>Cookies with different ingredients missing</p>	<p>Meet and greet – important!</p> <p>Be careful – some people don’t like hugs</p> <p>Christ’s touches – healed blind man and leper, picked up children, washed disciples’ feet</p> <p>Other Biblical examples – laying on of hands, anointing with oil</p> <p>Prostrating oneself – bowing down</p> <p>Write sins on a paper and nail it to a cross or burn it in a fire</p> <p>Rocks, nails, coins, rope</p>

Although hearing has been the predominant sense engaged in church, the sense of sight is starting to receive more focus, as it well should given our media-saturated culture. Smell is arguably our most powerful sense because of how certain scents transport us back in time. Regarding the sense of touch, it's important to realize that there are people who haven't come in contact with another human in the last week or even month, so this is very important. Like a meal with good friends, a quality time of worship should invite each of the senses to participate.

Worship should also allow for movement and action to take place. Have you ever noticed how we can become lethargic after being in a single position for a while? After working at my desk for a few hours, my bones and joints become stiff, my brain turns to mush, and my body cries out, "You need to move!" Children almost always seem to be moving, so full of life. Moving is a natural thing that God made us to do; it's why He gave us faces and arms and fingers and legs and feet, with hundreds of muscles and millions of nerves to move them. So when it comes to worship, people need to be free to do more than sit still and carry a tune in response to our awesome God. We need to be free to stand, clap (Ps. 47:1), shout for joy (Ps. 32:11, 33:1-3, 35:27, 47:1, 66:1-2, 71:23), lift our hands (I Kings 8:22-23, Neh. 8:6, Ps. 28:2, 63:4, 119:48, 141:2, Luke 24:50, I Tim. 2:8), dance (II Sam. 6:12-22, Ps. 149:3, 150:4), and bow low (Gen. 24:48, Ex. 4:31, II Chr. 20:18, Neh. 8:6, Ps. 95:6, Phil. 2:9-11), all before our Maker! If this is not the norm, then it should be gently encouraged and modeled to help people worship and experience God more completely. Personally, I have found these expressions to be more desirable and meaningful as I have progressed in my own worship pilgrimage and come to know God more intimately. Granted, neither outward movements nor their absence makes us more spiritual – God looks at the heart (I Sam. 16:7); however, they are a Biblical way for us to *express* genuine worship to God. We don't have to be happy to move; we can also bow before God in reverential fear or lift our hands and cry out to Him in grief. What's important is that we respond to *God* in public worship and not, "What will others think?" Finally, planned actions in worship, such as nailing a symbolic piece of paper to a cross as mentioned earlier, taking communion together, altar calls, and interpretative "journeys" to different interactive stations throughout the sanctuary (as space allows) can be very meaningful.

### **The big application**

This section would not be complete without considering the second part of the greatest commandment, which is to love others as we do ourselves. It makes sense, doesn't it, that to love God is to love the people He created in His own image? This is the big application of true worship, and also the most challenging. After all, humans aren't perfect like God; we have bad habits, bad breath, bad attitudes, and are generally prideful and selfish in many ways, making getting along a bit difficult. But loving God and others goes hand in hand: "Beloved, let

us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.” “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar.” (1 John 4:7-8,20). Moreover, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing” (1 Cor. 13:1-3). Wow. Loving others is very important because love is the essence of God. Authentic worship should lead to this life change, which is God making us into more loving people, like His Son, Jesus. True worship is always accompanied by love. If we’re not moved to love, then there’s something missing. It’s great to have those incredible times of worship when we feel so connected with God – I love to worship in those moments of exhilaration and awe – but we need to continue our response of worship to God in the big application of loving others. When we view loving people as an act of worship to our Creator, we have significantly expanded our worship vocabulary.



## ***Obstacles of worship***

Finally, this is the section you've been waiting for! Just moments away is the magic answer for how to deal with the singer who's way off key, the fussy baby who keeps letting loose during quiet times of prayer, and outrageous music styles! But are these distractions the real obstacles of worship, or are they just illuminators of the obstructions inside us? While distractions should be avoided when possible, no external force can keep us from truly worshiping God if we have the right heart. No one can snatch us out of the Father's hand (John 10:28-29), nothing can separate us from His love (Rom. 8:35-39), and we have His Spirit living within us to empower us (Rom. 8:9-11, Eph. 5:18-19), so we can worship in any situation as we yield to Him. Considering the following obstacles of worship can help us enter into true worship as we allow the Holy Spirit to perform surgery on any obstructions in our hearts.

In "The Worship Answer Book," Rick Muchow lays out a four-part foundation for worship:

1. Biblical worship must be done in love. No love – no worship (I Cor. 13).
2. Biblical worship is always accompanied by humility and reverent fear (Isa. 66:2).
3. Biblical worship is commanded by God (Luke 10:27).
4. Biblical worship involves surrendering your entire life as an offering to God (Rom. 12:1).

By essentially taking the opposite of each principle, we get the obstacles. Starting with number one, it follows that a lack of love in our heart is a serious obstacle of worship. If there is hatred in our heart toward someone, we need to confess our thoughts to God and ask Him to heal us. If we have wronged someone, we need to make a plan and then follow through to make things right. If we simply don't care about our fellow man, we need to ask God to waken our hearts and give us compassion for people, who are created in His image. Number two speaks of humility, whose opposite is pride. Pride can come in several different behaviors, in many words or few, through puffing up or putting down, but it always puts the focus on me, me, me. The antidote for pride is to turn our eyes upon Jesus and humble ourselves before the awesome Creator of the universe, before Whom we are all wretches but for His incredible love and saving grace on the cross. Number three calls us to obedience. Jesus said, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments" (John 14:15). If we are in a state of disobedience, we need to confess our sin to God, thank Him for His forgiveness, and yield to the direction and power of His Spirit once again. Confessing our sins to a brother or sister for prayer and support can also be a huge help (James 5:16). Number four calls us to surrender. If we are unwilling to give up that thing in our life that God is asking for, it will be impossible to worship Him in truth (John 4:24). You can't fake God out! He will keep pressing on that issue until we



relent. But oh how worthwhile and wonderful it is when we yield to Him and enjoy the richness of His fellowship once again! In summary, by looking at the foundation of worship in reverse, we see that four potential obstacles of worship are a lack of love, pride, disobedience, and an unwillingness to surrender.

In his Bible study series, “True Worship,” John MacArthur talks specifically about three obstacles of worship:

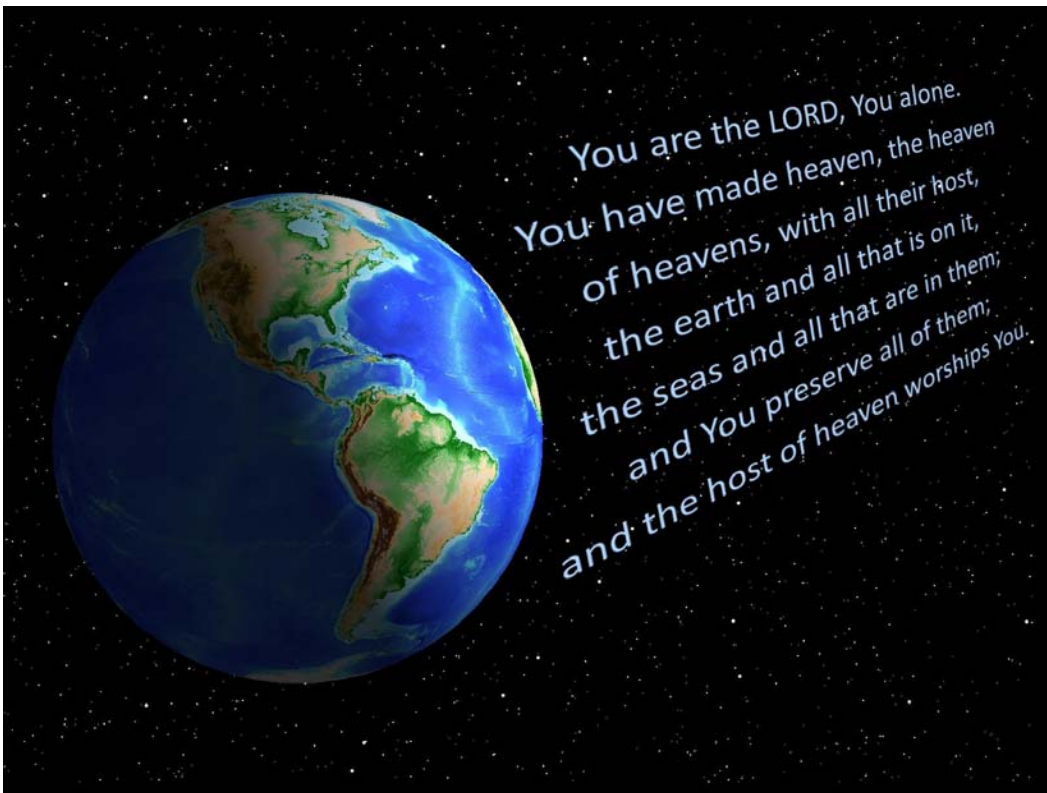
5. (lack of) Repentance – dealing with our sin and pouring out our heart in repentance to God, as David did (II Sam. 12:1-20).
6. (lack of) Acceptance – accepting the circumstances God allows in our life, no matter how hard, and choosing as Job did to still worship God (Job 1).
7. (lack of) Devotion – willingly giving whatever God asks of us to devotedly follow Him, as Abraham did with Isaac (Gen. 22:1-14).

I like the way that each of these obstacles is connected to a personal life story in the Bible, making it easier to understand. Note that number five, an unrepentant heart, is related to the obstacle of disobedience given by number three above, and number seven, lack of devotion, is similar to an unwillingness to surrender from number four. Number six, refusing to accept our circumstances, still needs discussion. Whether we have lost someone dear, have trouble at work, are in financial trouble, or are experiencing pain, we need to trust God and accept the circumstances He has us in. When we turn from trusting Him to focusing on how to “get out of the desert” and feel happy again, we short circuit what He is trying to do in our life. God wants us to know Him more intimately, and His Spirit is continually nudging us closer to Christ, that we might be fully satisfied in the delights of Him. This end often involves difficult circumstances where Christ is the only One we can turn to. When we do turn to Him and trust His heart toward us – that He works all things for our good (Rom. 8:28) – we will be able to worship Him like never before.

I would like to add another obstacle of worship: forgetfulness. When we fail to remember Who God is and what He’s done, it becomes difficult to respond in worship! And when we forget God, we go after other gods and worship them (Deut. 8:19) – everyone worships something. Forgetting isn’t always passive either; sinful choices require us to willfully forget God. As pointed out in “The Silence of Adam,” the definition for *male* in Genesis 1:27 is “the remembering one.” Thus, we – men especially – were created to remember God’s faithfulness, goodness, and greatness and to tell stories of how He has moved in our lives and communities in powerful ways. By passing on these memories, we help others to remember Him, and when we remember God, we are drawn to worship Him. The act of remembering and worshiping God is seen many times in Scripture (e.g., Deut. 4:9-10, Neh. 4:14, 9:1-31, Ps. 44:1-3, 63:5-7, 78, 105, 106, 135, 136). God knows that we forget easily; one of the reasons He established the Passover (Ex. 13:3-16, cf. Deut. 16:1-8), the Sabbath (Deut. 5:12-15), and the twelve

stones from the Jordan (Jos. 4:1-7) was so that the Israelites would remember how He delivered them from Egypt and led them through the wilderness to the promised land. Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper that we might remember Him and proclaim His death until He comes again (Luke 22:19-20, cf. I Cor. 11:23-26). Like Samuel who set up an "Ebenezer stone" in memory of how God rescued His people from the Philistines (I Sam. 7:12), we too should use meaningful symbols journaling, or recording to help us remember God and His mighty works in and among us. Telling stories and creating memorials can help us confront the obstacle of forgetfulness, but the bottom line is that we must choose to remember God! By keeping God in mind, we will also be more aware of what He is doing in the now, which will further stir us to worship Him.

Like salvation, worship is really directed by God. He sets the stage, providing many diverse opportunities for worship, and the one thing we choose is whether or not to give our heartfelt response to Him in genuine worship. If there are obstacles present in our own hearts, whether lack of love, pride, disobedience, unwillingness to surrender, refusal to accept our circumstances, or forgetfulness, we need to take action by praying and asking God to help us, and then yielding to the work of His precious Holy Spirit in us. It can be tempting to remain in our sin, but consider this: Are we going to rob the God of the universe of the worship He so rightfully deserves for our own selfish, petty reasons? Until we deal with these obstacles, we will not be free to truly worship God.



## ***Personal lessons in worship***

Following are several short but important lessons that I have learned or am learning about worship.

Worship centers on God; it's all about Him, not about us! So why do we sometimes get nervous or not feel the freedom to worship God with others around? Who are we really serving in worship? Ephesians 6:6-8 encourages us to serve *God* from our hearts and promises reward for what we do *for Him*. Colossians 3:17,23-24 reminds us to do all things in Jesus' name, as working for the Lord, not men, giving thanks to the Father. When we serve our self, it leads to selfish and prideful acts; we become performance oriented, which leads to nervousness (How will I do? How will I look?); we become empty and exhausted; and we look very similar to the religious leaders in the New Testament who were out for themselves. When we serve others, it leads to people-pleasing, which results in anxiety; dishonesty and bondage often follow; and even with "good" motives, we become discouraged and feel underappreciated, leading to burnout. When we serve God, it leads to freedom and forgiveness; thankfulness that God is using and equipping us; contentment since it's rewarding both here and in heaven; and rest, as Jesus' yoke is easy, and His burden is light (Matt. 11:28-30). In worship, we only need to focus on serving God. As my pastor has said, we are "playing to an audience of One."

God looks at the heart, not the outward appearance. When God chose David as the next king, it was based not on his physical stature but on his inner person – that he was a man after God's own heart (I Sam. 13:14, 16:7). "For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward Him" (II Chr. 16:9). It's so important to have a tender heart toward God in worship, open to His touch and sensitive to His voice. Only with an upright heart can we worship God in spirit, from our Spirit-awakened spirit to His, and in truth, from an authentic life (John 4:24). A God-centered heart also deflates "distractions" and uses them as opportunities for worship. When we worship God from our heart, emotions and actions will follow, but these by themselves do not make us more or less spiritual; God looks past all that to what's going on inside us, what's motivating our outward expressions. Thus, we should be concerned first with our heart and last with how we appear outwardly! Because it's so crucial, we need to bring our heart before God often for maintenance so that it doesn't become hard or bitter. "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life" (Prov. 4:23).

A personal reflection: I remember when I went to some more charismatic churches...some of the things I saw people do during worship just didn't seem genuine; in fact, they seemed prideful, like they cared more about what others thought and saw. I thought to myself, "I'm not like that, and so I'm worshiping in a better way," the "better way" being not showy at all but reserved – you know, humble. But over the years, there have been times in public worship where I was

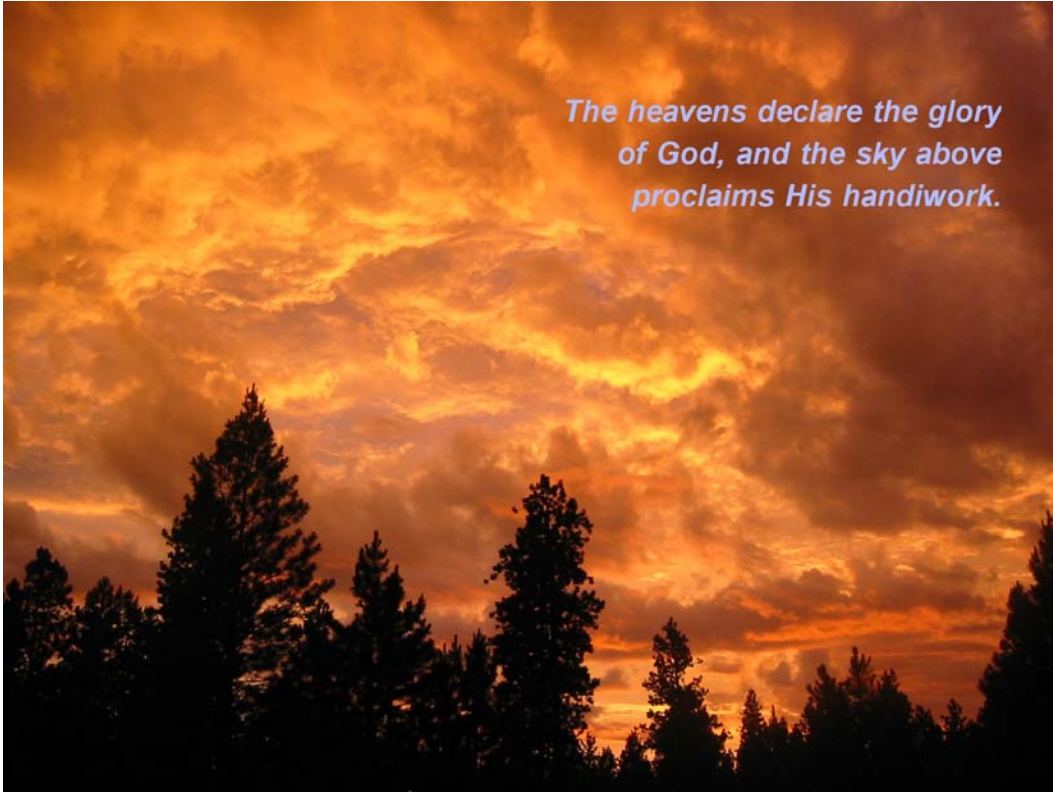
overwhelmed by God's presence and holiness or what He was doing in my life, and I felt the urge to respond to God by standing/lifting my hands/bowing to Him. Sadly, many times I resisted. Why? The answer is the same as what I said earlier: pride. I cared more about what others thought! So pride is not equivalent to charisma, and being reserved in worship doesn't necessarily indicate humility. Rather, it all comes back to that worship is our response *to God*, for Who He is, what He has done, and what He is doing in our lives personally. The question, then, is: Are we responding to *Him*?

True worship leads to life change. In general, whatever we worship defines the trajectory of our lives. When we experience God in worship – His majesty and love and holiness – we are moved, out of awe and thankfulness and a longing for Him, to obey Him. We honor God by choosing to obey Him, but the power to follow through comes as we yield to His Holy Spirit. Three areas of change that I should be growing in as a true worshiper are:

- Surrendering to God – giving Him my desires and dreams; my time, talents, and treasures; the things I take pleasure in; and the dark corners of my heart.
- Committing to follow Him in faith – trusting Him in the valley of opposition; getting out of the boat to walk toward Him on the water, one small step of faith at a time.
- Loving others – loving my family first, then the body of believers (including its difficult members!) and those outside the faith.

If these things are absent, then I need to reassess what I am worshiping because worshiping God is always going to lead to the fruit of His Spirit.

This may seem obvious, but the single most important ingredient for wonderful worship is a genuine, dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ – not creativity, excellence, or lots of people. We need *Him* desperately, every day. We need to spend quiet time alone with Him, away from the noise. We need to read and meditate on His Word. We need to pray often, more often. We need to commune with Him continually. As we draw near to God for nothing else than Himself, He will draw near to us (James 4:8), which will compel us to worship Him; not only does our relationship with God stir worship, but worship also builds our relationship with Him! Let us press hard into God, believing that “He rewards those who seek Him” (Heb. 11:6). One day, when we get to heaven, we will be united with the Bridegroom. With our Savior and King face to face, we will directly experience His awesome holiness and intimate love and enter into the most incredible worship imaginable; this is our destiny as believers.



*The heavens declare the glory  
of God, and the sky above  
proclaims His handiwork.*

### ***A vision for worship ministry in the church***

Worship is absolutely vital to the life of a healthy church. After all, it centers on the Great Commandment and is the ultimate purpose for which we were made! Of the church's main purposes (one division is missions/evangelism, fellowship, discipleship, worship), worship is the one that focuses most directly on helping people connect with God in a more holistic and intimate way. People who experience God through worship are greatly encouraged and uplifted, drawn together in unity, and moved to walk in faith as they trust Him for great things. Simply put, worship nurtures our love relationship with Jesus Christ in a unique and powerful way. Genuine worship also draws unbelievers toward God. Without worship, our heart grows cold, and our Christian walk becomes wearisome, a formula of rituals to be followed in a mundane existence.

So what should a healthy worship ministry look like? First, the worship ministry should encompass a lot more than Sunday morning services; it should be integrated with the life and other ministries of the church, always seeking to help more hearts connect with and worship God more completely. I see the worship pastor mentoring and training up other worship leaders so that they can serve in home groups, youth groups, and wherever the church needs. As these leaders learn what worship is all about and become advanced in their musical and artistic gifts, they can collectively teach, model, and encourage passionate worship for far more people than one person ever could. I see communities of artists being formed, for example, visual arts, writing, songwriting, filmmaking,

dance, and photography, where people can exercise their gifts and creatively reflect God in the languages of today's society. I see the worship pastor stirring up these communities and then unleashing them to worship and inspire others to worship the Grand Creator. I see a worship team that's like family, where people genuinely care for each other and get together just to hang out and have fun. I see the worship team taking time not just to practice, but to actually worship and pray together. I also see the worship pastor facilitating times of worship for other staff/ministry teams, that they might abide in Christ to produce the fruit of His Spirit. Further, I see the worship pastor networking with worship pastors from other churches, and every so often helping to coordinate really neat, big times of worship with multiple churches; wouldn't that be cool!? I see an intentional focus on worship – not just fun and games – in children's ministry, where kids are encouraged and enabled to enthusiastically worship Jesus! I see high-school students being mentored and rising up, against the coolness factor, to lead their peers in loving Jesus with all that they are. When more and more people are coming to an understanding of true worship, lots of people are passionately participating and using their gifts, and diverse members of the body are connecting with God, then the worship ministry is well.

In general, worship is more effective and reaches a more diverse population when many people are involved in using their talents to minister to the body. However, the logistics of preparing for and leading such times of worship require a lot of coordination. First, multiple support teams are needed: a technical team responsible for sound, lighting, and recording, a visual media team responsible for displaying lyrics, imagery, and film, and a décor team responsible for making the physical environment inviting and thematic. For a smaller church, these teams might only comprise one or two people each. Each team should have a leader, and the leaders should communicate and meet with the worship pastor. Since the support teams are really part of the extended worship team, they also need to pray and hang out together with the worship team. The worship team (whoever is serving in an upcoming time of worship) needs to meet weekly for worship, prayer, and practice, which will also involve members of the support teams. Since the role of the worship pastor is to support the vision and philosophy of ministry of the senior pastor, these two should meet to discuss the message/series and where the senior pastor believes God wants to lead people. In planning for worship, the worship pastor should get together a bunch of creative, artistic people from the communities mentioned above to brainstorm a list of ideas for worship, given the upcoming series outlined by the senior pastor. Then, the worship pastor can meet with the leaders from the support teams, and possibly the senior pastor, to decide what ideas would be feasible, appropriate, and effective. The worship pastor can then start making specific plans, possibly for several weeks ahead, and coordinating with the support teams and communities of artists involved. For smaller churches with more limited resources, it's important to focus on worship in community at the expense of

dropping some of the elements of a bigger worship production. However, whether the church is big or small or we're talking about a home group, the idea is to get a sense from the leadership of where God wants to take people and then encourage and direct members of the body to use their gifts and help draw others to life-changing worship.



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