

Worship: Intimacy with God

by John Wimber

Worship, the act of freely giving love to God, forms and informs every activity of the Christian's life.

Many people who visit Vineyard Christian Fellowships remark on the depth and richness of our worship. This has not come about by chance: we have a well-thought-out philosophy that guides why and how we worship God. In this article I will communicate that philosophy.

To understand how we worship God, it is helpful to learn about our fellowship's history, which goes back to 1977. At that time my wife, Carol, was leading a small group of people in a home meeting that evolved into the Anaheim Vineyard. I'll let her describe what happened during that time.

'We began worship with nothing but a sense of calling from the Lord to a deeper relationship with Him. Before we started meeting in a small home church setting in 1977, the Holy Spirit had been working in my heart, creating a tremendous hunger for God. One day as I was praying, the word "worship" appeared in my mind like a newspaper headline. I had never thought much about that word before. As an evangelical Christian I had always assumed the entire Sunday morning gathering was "worship" - and, in a sense, I was correct. But in a different sense there were particular elements of the service that were especially devoted to worship and not to teaching, announcements, musical presentations, and all the other activities that are part of a typical Sunday morning gathering. I had to admit that I wasn't sure which part of the service was supposed to be worship.

'After we started to meet in our home gathering, I noticed times during the meeting - usually when we sang - in which I experienced God deeply. We sang many songs, but mostly songs about worship or testimonies from one Christian to another. But occasionally we sang a song personally and intimately to Jesus, with lyrics like "Jesus I love you". Those types of songs both stirred and fed the hunger for God within me.

'About this time I began asking our music leader why some songs seemed to spark something in us and others didn't. As we talked about worship, we realized that often we would sing about worship yet we never actually worshipped - except when we accidentally stumbled onto intimate songs like "I Love You Lord", and "I Lift My Voice". Thus we began to see a difference between songs about Jesus and songs to Jesus.

'Now, during this time when we were stumbling around corporately in worship, many of us were also worshipping at home alone. During these solitary times we were not necessarily singing, but we were bowing down, kneeling, lifting hands, and praying spontaneously in the Spirit - sometimes with spoken prayers, sometimes with non-verbalized prayers, and even prayers without words at all. We noticed that as our individual worship life deepened, when we came together there was a greater hunger toward God. So we learned that what happens when we are alone with the Lord determines how intimate and deep the worship will be when we come together.

'About that time we realized our worship blessed God, that it was for God alone and not just a vehicle of preparation for the pastor's sermon. This was an exciting revelation. After leaning about the central place of worship in our meetings, there were many instances in which all we did was worship God for an hour or two.

'At this time we also discovered that singing was not the only way to worship God. Because the word "worship" means literally to bow down, it is important that our bodies are involved in what

our spirits are saying. In Scripture this is accomplished through bowing heads, lifting hands, kneeling, and even lying prostrate before God.

'A result of our worshipping and blessing God is being blessed by Him. We don't worship God in order to get blessed, but we are blessed as we worship Him. He visits His people with manifestations of the Holy Spirit.

'Thus worship has a two-fold aspect: communication with God through the basic means of singing and praying, and communication from God through teaching and preaching the Word, prophecy, exhortation, etc. We lift him up and exalt Him, and as a result are drawn into His presence where He speaks to us.'

DEFINITION OF WORSHIP

Probably the most significant lesson that Carol and the early Vineyard Fellowship learned was that worship is the act of freely giving love to God. Indeed, in Psalm 18:1 we read, 'I love you, O Lord, my strength.' Worship is also an expression of awe, submission, and respect toward God (see Ps. 95:1-2; 96:1-3).

Our heart's desire should be to worship God; we have been designed by God for this purpose. If we don't worship God, we'll worship something or someone else.

But how should we worship God? There are various ways described in the Old and New Testaments:

Confession: the acknowledgment of sin and guilt to a holy and righteous God.

Thanksgiving: giving thanks to God for what He has done, specially for His works of creation and salvation.

Adoration: praising God simply for who He is - Lord of the universe.

As Carol pointed out, worship involves not only our thought and intellect, but also our body. Seen through the Bible are such forms of prayer and praise as singing, playing musical instruments, dancing, kneeling, bowing down, lifting hands, and so on.

PHASES OF THE HEART

Not only is it helpful to understand why and how we worship God, it is also helpful to understand what happens when we worship God. In the Vineyard we see five basic phases of worship, phases through which leaders attempt to lead the congregation. Understanding these phases is helpful in our experience of God. Keep in mind that as we pass through these phases we are headed toward one goal: intimacy with God. I define intimacy as belonging to or revealing one's deepest nature to another (in this case to God), and it is marked by close association, presence, and contact. I will describe these phases as they apply to corporate worship, but they may just as easily be applied to our private practice of worship.

1. Call to Worship. The first phase is the "call to worship", which is a message directed toward the people. It is an invitation to worship. This might be accomplished through a song like, 'Come Let us Worship and Bow Down'. Or it may be jubilant, such as through the song, 'Don't You Know it's Time to Praise the Lord?'

The underlying thought of the call to worship is 'Let's do it; let's worship now.' Song selection for the call to worship is quite important, for this sets the tone for the gathering and directs people to God. Is it the first night of a conference when many people may be unfamiliar with the songs and

with others in attendance? Or is it the last night, after momentum has been building all week? If this is a Sunday morning worship time, has the church been doing the works of God all week? Or has the church been in the doldrums? If the church has been doing well, Sunday worship rides on the crest of a wave. All these thoughts are reflected in the call to worship. The ideal is that each member of the congregation be conscious of these concerns, and pray that the appropriate tone be set in the call to worship.

2. Engagement. The second phase is the "engagement", which is the electrifying dynamic of connection to God and to each other. Expressions of love, adoration, praise, jubilation, intercession, petition - all the dynamics of prayer are interlocked with worship - come forth from one's heart. In the engagement phase we praise God for who He is through music as well as prayer. An individual may have moments like these in his or her private worship at home, but when the church comes together the manifest presence of God is magnified and multiplied.

EXPRESSING GOD'S LOVE

3. Expression. As we move further in the engagement phase, we move more and more into loving and intimate language. Being in God's presence excites our heart and minds and we want to praise Him for the deeds He has done, for how He has moved in history, for His character and attributes. Jubilation is that heart swell within us in which we want to exalt Him. The heart of worship is to be united with our Creator and with the church universal and historic. Remember, worship is going on all the time in heaven, and when we worship we are joining that which is already happening, what has been called the communion of saints. Thus there is a powerful corporate dynamic.

Often this intimacy causes us to meditate, even as we are singing, on our relationship with the Lord. Sometimes we recall vows we have made before our God. God might call to our mind disharmony or failure in our life, thus confession of sin is involved. Tears may flow as we see our disharmony but His harmony; our limitations but His unlimited possibilities. This phase in which we have been awakened to His presence is called "expression".

Physical and emotional expression in worship can result in dance and body movement. This is an appropriate response to God if the church is on that crest. It is inappropriate if it is whipped up or if the focal point is on the dance rather than on true jubilation in the Lord.

4. Visitation. Expression then moves to a zenith, a climatic point, not unlike physical lovemaking (doesn't Solomon use the same analogy in the Song of Songs?). We have expressed what is in our hearts and minds and bodies, and now it is time to wait for God to respond. Stop talking and wait for Him to speak, to move. I call this, the fourth phase, "visitation": The Almighty God visits His people.

This visitation is a by-product of worship. We don't worship in order to gain His presence. He is worthy to be worshipped whether or not He visits us. But God 'dwells in the praises of His people'. So we should always come to worship prepared for an audience with the King. And we should expect the Spirit of God to work among us. He moves in different ways - sometimes for salvation, sometimes for deliverances, sometimes for sanctification or healings. God also visits us through the prophetic gifts.

GENEROSITY

5. Giving of Substance. The fifth phase of worship is the "giving of substance". The church knows so little about giving, yet the Bible exhorts us to give to God. It is pathetic to see people preparing for ministry who don't know how to give. That is like an athlete entering a race, yet he doesn't know how to run. If we haven't learned to give money, we haven't learned anything. Ministry is a life of giving. We give our whole life; God should have ownership of everything.

Remember, whatever we give God control of He can multiply and bless, not so we can amass goods, but so we can be more involved in His enterprise.

Whatever I need to give, God inevitably first calls me to give it when I don't have any of it - whether it is money, love, hospitality, or information. Whatever God wants to give through us He first has to do to us. We are the first partakers of the fruit. But we are not to eat the seed, we are to sow it, to give it away. The underlying premise is that whatever we are is multiplied, for good or for bad. Whatever we have on our tree is what we are going to get in our orchard.

As we experience these phases of worship we experience intimacy with God, the highest and most fulfilling calling men and women may know.

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