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# IN SPIRIT & IN TRUTH

THE FUNDAMENTALS OF BIBLICAL WORSHIP

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# THE NATURE OF BIBLICAL WORSHIP: COMMUNICATION

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The purpose of this book is to provide more information about public worship so that one's personal experience of worship is broadened, enhanced, and changed to the glory of God and the building up of the church.

Let's begin talking about worship by asking a question concerning the Olympics. What are the Olympics really about?

When you cut through the hype and the marketing as well as the politics, the entire exercise is about competition. The Olympic Games is motivated by, and lives off of **competition**. Countries compete for the chance to host the best, most elaborate show. Athletes sacrifice their lives to compete with one another to become the best in the world in a moment in time. The idea of fostering brotherhood, openness and friendship are all side items to the true "spirit" of the Olympics which is competition on a worldwide scale. So in a broad sense you could say that the "nature" of sport is competition – you play to win.

Now I am saying this because in each area of endeavor there is an essential nature or core idea that explains and makes

sense of the activities surrounding it. That is why great coaches never forget that sport is about competition, not fame or money or politics. They know the core issue (competition) and never let their players get away from this idea. Little kids can play for fun, the love of the game, building character, but professionals, especially successful ones, know that it is about competing and winning.

So knowing the essential nature of something is important if you are to be successful at it.

For example, the essential nature of school is **education**. When I worked at OC (Oklahoma Christian University) as Dean of Students, I witnessed so many people fail because they had not grasped this basic core idea. They joined the social service clubs, signed up for inter-mural sports, rejoiced in the fact that there were between 800 and 1200 single girls running around... They dated, played video games in the dorms until 4 am, hung out at the lounge – and oh yes – went to class.

Then the 5 week grades were sent home to parents and Junior had 2 Cs/1D/1F and an incomplete grade because his assignments were not turned in... This is when it began to dawn on students that despite all the extracurricular activities taking up their time, college was about getting a structured education. Nobody got a diploma for Ping-Pong. Those who succeeded at OC were those who understood the essential nature of that place and gave themselves over to it: **education**.

I could go on with other examples:

The essential nature of business is **profit**. No profit, no business. It is not about titles, offices, networking, advertising, bookkeeping, etc. All these things are parts of business, they support the basic or core element of business, which is profit. Sometimes I am with someone and we see some shabby

looking store or restaurant and the person will say, "Why are they still open, what a dump... etc." My answer is always the same, "They are open because they are turning a profit – period."

The only institution that stays open when it is not making a profit is the government.

Ok, then following this line of thinking, I suggest to you that the essential nature of worship is: **communication**. Communication with God.

From the first elementary examples of people worshipping God in Genesis to the exalted images given to us by John in the book of Revelation, worship has had one common thread: the effort man makes to communicate with God in some way.

This is evident from observing the actions and words used when people in the Bible are worshipping. Whether it was bowing down, offering sacrifice, expressing prayers, playing instruments in the Old Testament, or singing hymns in the New Testament, eating the Passover or sharing communion – people were not doing these things for themselves or for other believers (this was understood). The underlying reason for all of these things and more was that God was listening, watching, somehow receiving the message of faith, love, appreciation, repentance and need from those trying to communicate it to Him from here on earth.

What is interesting about this is that communication with God is the essential nature of every type of worship, not just Judeo-Christian worship.

- The Muslim pilgrims going to Mecca want to communicate with Allah.
- The Hindus who wash in the Ganges do this rite to connect with Brahma (the 1<sup>st</sup> god of the Hindu trinity and creator of the universe).

- Native Americans use sweat lodges to help them be more attuned to their “spirits.”
- Zoroastrians of ancient times lit fires to honor their god Zoroaster.

Now I am not saying that all of these methods are effective and even acceptable to the God of creation, the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ. I am simply saying that the essential nature of worship is communication. Man trying to communicate in some manner with the divine. This is the basic premise and the core idea that informs and gives meaning to the other activities surrounding worship.

Thankfully we have the revelation of God through Christ in His Word to teach us about all things including worship and how we can truly communicate with God in spirit and in truth.

<sup>9</sup> For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, <sup>10</sup> so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; <sup>11</sup> strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously <sup>12</sup> giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light.

– Colossians 1:9-13

In Christ we gain the ability, wisdom and knowledge to not only live in a way that pleases God but to worship (communicate) with Him as well. This is part of the inheritance we receive in Christ: true communication with the true God.

## Why is this so important?

I have spent a good portion of time setting up this basic premise: the essential nature of worship is communication.

Why is this important? It is important because not knowing or forgetting or not prioritizing this core idea leads us into worship that is not in spirit or truth.

Like coaches who forget about the essence of competition or business people who neglect the bottom line of profitability, churches that ignore the fact that worship is basically about communication lose the benefit of worship which is transcendence, the topic discussed in the last chapter of this book.

Churches make one of two basic mistakes when it comes to public worship:

### 1. They make the means the end

In other words, the idea of communication is lost or subverted by the "methods" of communication.

- It's like buying an expensive computer with lots of software, all kinds of gadgets but not bothering to hook it up to the internet. You have an impressive computer that cannot communicate with anyone except the owner!

Churches do this when so much attention and cost is focused on the place of worship, equipment to worship, order of worship, method of worship, etc., but no effort to examine if there is communication with God through all of it.

We think that if we get the "method" right then communication takes place, but having the right method is only part of what is required to actually communicate with God.

- It is like saying that to compete in football you have to make sure every player has his name on his jersey and knows and follows the rules of the game.

Having the equipment and knowing the rules enable you to play, but you need more than that to be competitive and win!

In the same way, knowing the methods and following the rules may produce what qualifies as worship but this does not guarantee that you actually communicate with God and receive the true blessings as a result.

I will talk about some other things necessary to actually worship in spirit and truth a little further on in this chapter.

## 2. Some make up their own methods

In his book, *“Christianity’s Dangerous Idea,”* author Alister McGrath states that Pentecostalism accounts for most of the growth in Christianity in the last 50 years. His research shows that the Pentecostal movement is larger than all other evangelical groups put together. In worldwide Christianity, there is Catholicism, then Pentecostalism, then there is everybody else.

What is really interesting in McGrath’s (Professor of Science and Religion at the University of Oxford) theory is **why** this is so. He says that unlike other groups who have a religious framework to function within, the Pentecostals have none.

Catholics, for example, have church history/law, the Cardinals’ vote, the Pope’s encyclicals as well as the Bible to guide, restrict or permit what they will or will not do.

We in the Churches of Christ use only the Bible and have a framework of rules to guide our interpretation. We also have widely accepted traditional teachings that permit or restrict our actions (e.g. teaching on use of instruments in worship).

Pentecostals have none of these. Their teachings are fluid and take into consideration the needs and circumstances of the moment, especially when it comes to worship.

I mention this because they are an excellent example of ones who make up their own methods and rules about worship – the polar opposites of those whose worship is all about rules. For Pentecostals, whatever it takes to make the worship dynamic, emotional, meaningful, entertaining and spiritual is acceptable because nothing is holding them back as far as method is concerned.

The problem of course is that they define communication with God based on their methods, not on the results authenticated by the Bible.

- It is like a hockey team judging their success by the color of their uniforms and the quality of the pre-game show, and not the final score.

Their mistake, I believe, is that they judge the effectiveness of worship by the way they feel about the worship itself rather than how the worship affects how they feel about God.

In the Churches of Christ there is a desire to go this way and justify the means for the end as well. Many congregations, sensing that they are not getting the benefits of worship and not accomplishing the core goal of worship (communication) are beginning to tinker with the “methods” and the “rules,” thinking this will make a difference. So they add instruments, drama, audio-visual aids, worship teams, or they include women in leadership roles, or experiment with charismatic ideas like clapping or tongue speaking, even mimicking the Pentecostal religious “lingo” of prophecy and special visions. And it is normal that this is what they would try since they believe that the method produces the results, so why not change the method?

Of course, others react to these changes (especially non Biblical changes) and the debate centers on the methods while nothing really changes except more division and less communication between ourselves, and God as well.

We will talk more about rules and methods in the next chapter, but for now let's review the divine requirements for communication with God.

## **Communication with God What does it really require?**

### **1. Realization that communication with God must exist personally before it can exist corporately**

Jesus trained His Apostles in private prayer for three years before they began actually worshipping corporately as a church.

If a congregation's worship is not effective it is because the individuals in the church do not know how to worship God privately. And if the leaders in the church do not have an active, effective, ongoing private communication with God, there is not much chance the church will have it either. Worship in spirit and truth does not begin with new songbooks, it begins with the patient teaching of every member to have a new and open heart to God in personal worship.

This is why Peter in Acts 6 refused to relinquish his ministry of prayer for the work of food distribution. As a true leader he was keeping his eye on the core elements of church: worship and the teaching of God's Word.

## 2. Recognition of God's presence in worship

People who are bored at worship fail to recognize God's presence. People who check their text messages, daydream, visit with their neighbor, or are otherwise distracted, fail to sing, say Amen, etc., do all of these things because their faith in His true presence is weak.

I am persuaded that God realizes that the singing may be sub-par, the preacher a little monotonous and the babies fussing, after all He sees and hears what you see and hear. But He is present in Christ because the church has gathered in His name. We should at least give the same attention He does! His presence is not based on our performance of worship but rather on His promise to be with us whenever two or three are gather in His name (Matthew 18:20).

We cannot truly communicate with God unless we first acknowledge and respect the fact that He is really there according to His promise.

## 3. A sense of ourselves

I know that worship is supposed to be focused on God, but nothing really focuses our minds on God like getting a true sense of ourselves first.

Paul the Apostle's most fervent cry, his sincerest prayer, his clearest vision and communication with God is when he declared:

Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?  
- Romans 7:24

Therefore there is now no condemnation for those  
who are in Christ Jesus.  
- Romans 8:1

Every man who comes face to face with God (the **ultimate** communication / worship) has experienced this sense of self.

For example, Isaiah who was eloquent in words and counselor to kings was only aware of his unclean and unworthy lips and words when caught up in the Spirit before God (Isaiah 6:5).

And John the faithful Apostle who had seen Jesus resurrected still fell on the ground as a dead man when he faced the Lord in His heavenly state (Revelation 1:17).

The more we see ourselves for who and what we are, the more the Lord opens our eyes to His own glory and the chasms of righteousness and glory that lie between us. This enables us to experience awe, thanksgiving, relief and joy because then we can see and value the gift that is ours in the cross of Christ.

This was the problem with the Pharisees. They were so full of their own self-righteousness that they could not see their true condition and need, and therefore, could not see (or communicate) with Jesus and what He said and did.

Nothing improves our worship (communication) with God like a sober and ruthless self-examination. This reveals our need, and our need opens the eyes of our hearts.

## 4. We need to know the language of communication

Everything has a "language" peculiar to itself:

- Sports (hat trick, touchdown)
- Business (profit and loss statement)
- Computers (software, hard drive crashed)

Worship has its own language as well, and it is not cultural (English or French), it is spiritual.

The spiritual language of worship includes the following types of communication with God (this is not an exhaustive list, but a good sampling in Nehemiah's prayer):

<sup>4</sup>When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. <sup>5</sup>I said, "I beseech You, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments, <sup>6</sup>let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I and my father's house have sinned. <sup>7</sup>We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses. <sup>8</sup>Remember the word which You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples; <sup>9</sup>but if you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them,

though those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.' <sup>10</sup> They are Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand. <sup>11</sup> O Lord, I beseech You, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight to revere Your name, and make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man."  
- Nehemiah 1:4-11

Let us just examine Nehemiah's prayer as we close out this chapter in order to see the types of prayer languages that he uses:

- **Praise** – Vs. 4-5. A short review of some of the good things of God.
- **Supplication** – Vs. 6a. Making specific requests on behalf of someone else.
- **Confession** – Vs. 6b-7. Acknowledgement, review, rejection, mourning for sins committed.
- **Confirmation** – Vs. 8-10. Reviewing and claiming for oneself God's promises and blessings. (You said you would give this and I am claiming that promise.)
- **Protection / Mercy** – Vs. 11. A request for personal help, protection and mercy in the face of difficulty or danger.

Five different types of prayer are made. Five different prayer languages used in 10 verses. This is God's language of communication. Not long or flowery words or even the quoting of Scripture.

The language of worship or communication with God is praise, mercy, supplication, request, confession, confirmation, remembrance, this is what God hears and answers! Not bands, big crowds, or little crowds, not just **men** praying but men praying and **communicating** with Him in this language!

## Summary

So, the essence of worship is communication and God has shown us in His revealed Word that there is a particular language He hears and responds to.

If our worship has not been satisfying spiritually it may be that we are not trying to communicate or we may not be using the right language to effectively communicate with Him.



# THE PRACTICE OF BIBLICAL WORSHIP: SUBMISSION

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In the previous chapter I explained that the language of communication with God is the language of praise, mercy, request, confession, supplication, confirmation, remembrance, adoration and new direction.

Remember that if you are not communicating with God using these languages, you are not really worshipping. You may be at a worship event but you are not worshipping.

So we have talked about the essence of worship (communication) and the various languages used to communicate with God, but how do we get "good" at worship?

Returning to my sports analogy, sport is about competition and winning. You get good at your sport by training, practicing and competing often, etc. Your type of training depends on your sport. I saw a program that showed how an Olympic table tennis player trained. Among other things, this world-class ping pong player used a skipping rope to improve his foot speed because there is a lot of lateral movement in this sport.

What then is the practice or training for worship? How do you improve your communication abilities with God? In a word, by practicing the virtue of **submission**.

This is an easy one to figure out because of the Hebrew and Greek words translated into the English word "worship":

- **Hebrew** – *SHACHAH*: to bow down, to prostrate.
- **Greek** – *PROSKUNEO*: to kiss forward, to do reverence, to bow down before.

These words gave an image of one who was in submission to and reverence of another one, usually God. And so the practice of worship, the spirit of worship, the way one actually approaches God for that communication is in a position of submission.

In answer to the question, "How do we improve our worship services?" one should reply, "Learn and practice greater submission to God."

Of course that is not what men do, is it? No, we try other things.

In order to improve our worship we "codify" our rituals and make these the **practice** of our worship. In other words we think the value of our worship is tied to the correctness of our rituals rather than the submission of our wills to God. Of course this is a normal "human" phenomena when it comes to worshipping God and also in religion in general.

- The Muslims do this. They have the 5 pillars of faith which guide their entire religious and worship experience.
  - Pillar 1 – The confession, "There is no god but Allah and Mohamed is his prophet."

- Pillar 2 – Alms giving, 2½% zakat
- Pillar 3 – Prayer, five times per day facing Mecca (east)
- Pillar 4 – Fasting, RAMADAN (holy month)
- Pillar 5 – Pilgrimage to Mecca
- The Sikhs have the same formulas for worship and religious life called the 5 Ks:
  - KESH, long hair and beard
  - KANGHA, comb/turban
  - KACHH, shorts
  - KARPA, steel bracelet
  - KIRPAN, sword (small knife)
- The Orthodox Jews with the YARMUKLE (skull cap), long sideburns (curls), round hats, long black coat and dress.

Every religion tries to codify their rituals or particular dress and focus exclusively on these things to create or even enhance their worship to God.

In some instances we do the same. We think that improving our a cappella singing is the way to improving worship. We spend money to expand our auditoriums, add cry rooms, create power point images, hire more ministers, fire the one we have, add worship teams, start clapping, get women to pray... thinking all of these will **improve** worship.

We focus on the rituals, the mechanics, rather than the "spirit," thinking that changes on the outside will create

changes on the inside. And yet we know, because the Bible teaches us, that change, worship and spiritual things must first take place on the inside before the outside things are affected.

Listen to the words of one who **knew** how to worship God in spirit and truth:

Restore to me the joy of Your salvation  
And sustain me with a willing spirit.

- Psalm 51:12

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted  
And saves those who are crushed in spirit.

- Psalm 34:18

Does Jesus not say:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the  
kingdom of heaven.

- Matthew 5:3

And Paul summarizes perfectly the entire issue of the practice of worship when he says,

And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him.

- Romans 12:1 (NLT)

The essence of worship is communication using the language of praise and prayer.

The spiritual exercise, the vehicle that brings our communication before God is our submissive hearts and will.

If worship were like a computer:

- The rituals, the building, the order of worship, this is the hardware.
- The language of communication (praise, request, supplication, confession, etc.), this is the software – it brings the computer to life.
- Submission of one's will to God is the internet connection.

## Practical Applications

This example may be easy to understand but not easy to apply because we are sometimes confused about how each part works. Here are some common mistakes:

### 1. We think it is all about hardware

Maintain the status quo... two songs, one prayer, communion, sermon, invitation song, closing prayer, out the door! All the energy is used to maintain the building and personnel so we can repeat this process once or more a week. We resist any change based on our belief that we have "restored" New Testament Christianity by building this hardware and no change is needed or permitted.

**Problem:** We do not understand what Biblical worship is.

**Result:** Dry, lifeless churches, dwindling in members, poor spiritual lives, small faith.

## 2. We think it is all about the software

Get rid of bulky hardware, we upgrade to an iPad or iPhone.

- Let's do house churches, experiment with other ways to **feel** about God.
- Encourage spiritual experimentation like speaking in tongues. Hey, women prophesying in tongues, why not? It is all about communication, isn't it?

This extreme forgets that communication (worship) with and before God is regulated by Him in His Word.

- **He** gives us the language.
- **He** establishes the significance of the rituals and their forms.
- **He** provides the guidelines for how and when we worship and for what purpose.

This is where submission comes in.

In Romans 12:1, Paul explains that our **personal, daily, spiritual worship** is expressed mainly in the way we submit our bodies to God in purity, service, and obedience.

And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him.

- Romans 12:1 (NLT)

I may not have the opportunity or time to articulate my worship in words to communicate my love, praise, etc. to

God. However, the actions of my body as I submit to His will in the way I think and act are a continual act of worship – true spiritual worship to Him. In this way my actions and my words form a unified communication that serve as my complete devotion to the Lord each day. When Jesus said God was looking for those who would worship Him in spirit and truth, this is what He meant.

Submission on a daily basis permits one to be in a worship mode constantly, an idea much superior to the Muslim concept of daily prayer repeated five times facing east.

In I Corinthians 11-15, Paul explains the necessity for submission in **corporate worship** as well.

We do not have time to examine each subject Paul discusses here, but obviously there were problems in the corporate or public worship assemblies of the Corinthians.

These included:

- Dress codes – veils for women to wear or not to wear.
- Proper behavior concerning fellowship meals and the Lord's Supper.
- The value / practice of spiritual gifts in the assembly.

The thread that runs through all of these chapters is that these Christians were not using the gifts or participating in the rituals according to God's will.

The answer was not, for example, to let women wear what they wanted or ban them from public worship altogether, or to do away with fellowship meals and communion because it caused so much trouble, or to restrict tongue speaking, or limit the service to one prayer and one teaching per week. Let's make **our** rules!

The answer was to be in submission to God's will for public worship just as one was in submission to His will for personal / private worship.

Paul briefly outlined what this meant for our everyday lives in Romans 12:1-2: (purity, service, devotion). This is the exercise of submission in our personal lives from Monday to Saturday. He does the same for public worship as well.

Because of submission to God's will which is the true practice of worship:

1. The women continued in that day to wear their veils in conformity to cultural norms. And they were silent in church, not leading or teaching in conformity to eternal / spiritual norms. The common denominator was submission to God's will. On one hand they did not contravene a cultural norm (veils) so as to not create a scandal. On the other, they submitted to the eternal and spiritual (not cultural) principle of male spiritual leadership in the home and now in the church.

Two different reasons, one reaction: submission – the true spirit of worship by women at that time.

2. The men also submitted to the "order" or "process" that Paul imposed in order to provide a more uniform assembly. Submission was the antidote to the chaos and competition that was tearing apart the church.

They had great "software" (tongues, prophecy, knowledge, etc.) but were unable to communicate because there was little submission to divine order.

3. Everyone had to submit to one another in Christian love so that their witness to others would be effective. Jesus said, "This is how all men will know that you are my disciples, in the way you love one another." (John 13:35). Note He did not say, "How you love the lost, the poor, the world," but how you love **one another**.

The chapter on love in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 is really the nuts and bolts of how we are to submit one to another. Mutual submission is the practice of Christian love. It is the proof that we are disciples and our best witness for Christ. Without this kind of submission there is no worship to God.

And so, in avoiding the extremes (focus on the status quo, maintain the rituals OR dump everything and try to create our own spiritual experience), we need to find the right balance to enhance our communication with God in worship.

That balance is an effort at being in submission to His will in **both** our personal everyday lives which produces an ongoing spiritual and acceptable worship to God AND our corporate assemblies because God has revealed the behavior, attitude, and practice that He accepts during these times.

In his famous devotional book entitled, "*My Utmost for His Highest*," Oswald Chambers writes that we as Christians become "*broken bread and poured out wine*." A wonderful description of the merging of our personal and public worship as those who are in submission to God.

This submission not only elevates our communication to the threshold of heaven, it also brings us to the true blessing of worship – **transcendence**.



# THE RESULT OF BIBLICAL WORSHIP: TRANSCENDENCE

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In Western culture we like to measure things in order to give them value:

- The tallest / strongest / biggest / fastest
- The first / the most / the newest
- The *Guinness Book of Records* – the man who holds record for most records

This is why we are so interested in the Olympic Games, the ultimate measurement of human achievement in sports: it reflects the spirit of our times where one's value is ultimately based on one's achievement.

Imagine – we will all remember and celebrate Michael Phelps winning a gold medal by beating another swimmer by 1/100<sup>th</sup> of a second, but for whoever came in second or third there will be no celebration, no fame or fortune. Such are the rules for a system that rewards only achievement.

Now I say all of this because in the church we are often influenced by the things in the world, and it is not a new

phenomenon. Paul urged the church not to be molded or conformed to this world in Romans 12:2, so the problem existed in the first century as well.

What happens is that we are influenced by the world to judge our worship in the same way we judge things that are strictly in the world and of the world, forgetting that worship (although done **in** this world) is not something of this world, it is otherworldly.

And so the result or goal of worship is **NOT**:

- That we finish on time
- That we do it right or very well
- That there be lots of people in attendance
- Things you can "measure" or "count".

Or, in our personal worship and devotion:

- That we be regular (every day devotion)
- We finish reading the entire Bible in one year or **less**
- We please God, our wife, be a good example.

All these things have a place and a part in worship but they are not the ultimate goal. What we are striving for as we come before the Lord in humility to commune with our God.

No, the goal of our devotion, the final result of our worship in spirit and truth is **transcendence**.

Before we explore this idea, let us first get a handle on the meaning of this word.

To transcend means to go beyond the limit, to surpass what is normal. For example in the world of sport, Muhammad Ali, the boxer, transcended boxing and became a social, religious, and political icon. Transcendence is an essential quality of God's being and character. He is beyond the material, the natural. He is, as we say, supernatural.

And so when I say that the result of worship is transcendence, I mean that our goal is to get beyond:

- The time we use to worship
- The "acts" of worship
  - Some see the various "acts" of worship (praise, prayer, preaching, Lord's Supper, giving, fellowship, etc.) as goals in themselves, meaning I worship in spirit and truth because I did these acts, or I did them often, or I did them well, sincerely, accurately, among 10,000 people.

But God has given us these things so we can communicate with Him and in so doing transcend these things to a point we can actually **experience** Him. Transcendence in worship is the experiencing of God in our spirit.

Am I describing something which is Biblical? Possible?

Well, in the Bible those who served God sought Him out in prayer, worshipped Him in spirit and in truth, had transcendent experiences of Him:

- Isaiah the prophet began his book by saying, "The visions of Isaiah (...) which he saw..." (Isaiah 1:1). This is the transcendence of the prophet. Not just a teacher of the Law, a counselor to kings, but one who transcended these things to experience God through visions. I am **not** proposing we have the same today, I

am merely showing an example of transcendence as experienced by one of God's special servants.

- David, in bringing the ark from Obed-Edom to Jerusalem, worshipped the Lord with praise, with the sacrifices of animals, but II Samuel 6:6 also says that "...David was dancing before the Lord with all his might..." Upon seeing this his wife Michal called him a fool and chastised him. David rebuked her because she could not see that he was celebrating before the Lord – he experienced a transcendent joy at that occasion that expressed itself in dance. Again, I am **not** saying let's introduce dancing to our worship so we can attain a transcendent experience. However, if we experienced transcendence in worship we might want to burst out in some form of expressed joy!

We read the Bible and not only marvel at, but are hungry for the transcendent experiences we see in the dreams of the prophets, the vision and inspiration of the New Testament writers, and the encounters with the Lord that Paul describes. We are jealous of the powerful manifestations in the early church of mighty works, dynamic growth, even the ground shaking after the saints prayed in thanksgiving for the release of Peter and John from prison (Acts 4:3).

They had transcendent experiences in their worship and service to God, and I believe this is what we are missing, and what we want for our worship to be satisfying and motivating. After all, if we meet to communicate with God Himself, should this experience not be as, or more dynamic than watching a movie or going to a concert or seeing a football game?

And yet for many (most?), it is not. Asked to use words to describe their worship experience and we often hear – boring, long, duty, pleasing to God, the right thing to do to fulfill God's will. But we rarely hear the words transcending, joyous, life-changing or bursting with happiness.

Of course I have to make disclaimers so you will not misunderstand.

- Experiencing transcendence is not the goal of every worship service or personal devotion or prayer. You do not make transcendence happen, it happens to you. Not because it **cannot** happen – with God all things are possible. It does not happen because we could not take it in our present sinful flesh.
- Transcendence comes in small doses, enough for us to get a "taste" of the heaven that awaits us, but not so much that we are rendered useless here on earth. And that "taste," that experience of God, is reserved for those who worship Him in spirit and truth.

## Transcendence Now

Okay so now comes the hard question, "What about today, what is the nature of that transcendent experience? If it is not a direct revelation through a dream or inner voice; if it is not the empowerment to do miracles or prophecy about the future, etc. What is it exactly?"

I do not know all the ways that God permits us to experience and know Him thus bringing us beyond the limits of human knowledge and into transcendence, but I do know some of the ways we experience God today:

- We have that "Here I am Lord" experience. Some refer to it as a "calling." Where somehow we **know** God is calling or directing us to a mission, a work, a task, etc. It is always hard to explain to others why we feel like this, but this is one form of a transcendent experience.
- Truly **hearing** the Word. Those who come forward are having a transcendent experience. The "words of life"

have pierced their souls and they respond with repentance, baptism, or confession of a need for prayer, etc. Sometimes we "hear" or understand the Word in a newer, deeper, more fulfilling way than ever before. This is transcendence. This experience has made me weep in its power to affect me.

- Sometimes we see a vision of God's will. Not a supernaturally created vision (like the burning bush or the valley of dry bones), but a real vision where real things and situations and people all come together like a puzzle creating an image so that you can actually see what God's Word is pointing you to in a concrete way. This is a transcendent experience.
- Then there is the transcendent joy we experience when we see God's word and will fulfilled in our own lives or the lives of others. This too is transcendence.

But beyond all of these, Paul describes the transcendent experience of realizing the power of God's love in Christ Jesus.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

- Romans 8:38-39

Note the words he uses here. God's love is greater, **transcends** death, life, spiritual beings, worries or fears or any created thing. If this is not transcendence, I do not know a better way to describe it.

When we are immersed into the full realization of God's love for us in Christ Jesus, we experience transcendence in its highest and purest form.

## The Problem with Transcendence

The main problem or obstacle to our experience of transcendence is fear. We are afraid because we have been taught that our only and true experience of God is intellectual, not emotional. In other words, we "know" God by knowing correct doctrines about God. This is like saying I know my wife by reading a report about her, or listening to what her friends tell me about her.

We can know God's will, purpose and character in this way, but we do not actually know **Him** in this way.

How would you rather know your wife: by getting a correct biological and anatomical report from her doctor OR know her with a kiss? Which is better? More intimate?

Now there is a reason why we are afraid and it has a lot to do with our history. The history I am speaking of is the history of emotion, feeling and transcendence in the church.

A. The Catholic church called it "mystery."

The changing of the bread and wine into the actual body and blood at communion is a mystery (transubstantiation). Every Sunday there is a miracle accompanied by an otherworldly experience of candles, ritual and imagery. They create a "mystic" experience through their religious service and system (saints, relics, pilgrimages, shrines) and went to a point where it did not resemble Biblical Christianity anymore.

B. The Protestant reformation was largely a reaction to these practices which were, for the most part, unbiblical. Protestantism promoted an intellectual experience, a

reasoned approach to religion to counterbalance Catholic excesses.

Many Protestant groups took over Catholic churches in Europe and removed statues, painted over frescos and replaced stain glass in order to wipe away any suggestion of mystery. The goal was a purified and almost sterile environment.

We, in the Restoration Movement, come from this background. Now the problem for Protestants who broke away from Roman Catholicism based on the idea that only the Bible will guide us (not mystery, or history, or ceremony, or papacy) was this: "Who is right when it comes to what the Bible says?" because there were different opinions on many matters.

We are the ones who answered that question by saying, "Correct doctrine through correct interpretation." The result was a movement that focused on being correct but rather lifeless.

Catholics focused on the effect (mystery) and neglected the actual cause (Bible) and ended up with a religion that did not resemble Christianity anymore.

We, in the churches of Christ, focused on the cause (Bible) and were afraid of the effect (transcendence) because we feared making a mistake and now have lifeless churches.

C. Along comes the Pentecostal movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

They put the feeling back into Christianity. Every service has "mystery" because the Holy Spirit is at work every Sunday and Wednesday and Friday giving people a "transcendent" experience (tongue speaking, prophecy, healing, etc.). They also avoid the Roman Catholic error of neglecting the Bible by

basing their claims and authority for the experience they have on the Bible.

The results: fastest growing churches in the world. Why?

### **Transcendence on demand.**

The problem? They use their own definition of what transcendence is, and not the Bible's definition! Just as they use their own definition of tongue speaking, healing, prophecy, etc. and not what the Bible describes as legitimate examples of these phenomena. A religious example of "the end justifying the means." In their case, a counterfeit end pursued by inaccurate means.

In the end they are very much like the Roman Catholics who focus on the results and pursue this with whatever methods work using their growth as justification.

The sad thing about Pentecostalism is that their system and approach denies them the very thing they seek... true transcendence. Right idea, wrong tactics.

## **Summary**

So someone might ask at this point, "What makes us so smart, or better than these others?"

The only thing I can answer to that is that at least we are asking the questions, seeking for answers, striving to find that perfect balance where we truly worship God in spirit and in truth.

- Approaching Him in humility and submission, that's Biblical.

- Communicating with Him according to His will and purpose, and not our own, this is correct and in the spirit of the Word.
- And having that transcendent experience that must come from an encounter with the living God **according to His will and not our own.**

I believe that the place to return to in order to restore our efforts to conduct Biblical worship is to not invent new forms of worship or increase the repetition of the present forms. I believe that the first step is to focus on our personal and corporate submission to God's Word, not just intellectualizing or debating it.

Submission that brings us to transcendence requires:

## 1. True obedience

Obedience to the things you know and are convinced of **now**. For example, when I first became a Christian, I was not sure about which was the true church, did the Spirit actually dwell in you, the meaning of Revelation, but I was convinced that I had to give up smoking. This was what was required **now**. Some people wait to obey God until they understand everything. Submission to obey what you know is an act of faith towards God about what you do not know yet.

## 2. True discipleship

Not just faithful attendance to services. True discipleship enables others to have the transcendent experience of seeing God living and acting in you. The purpose of discipleship is to bring others to Christ by allowing them a glimpse of Him in you. My most rewarding and dynamic experience in Christ is seeing someone give themselves over to God more fully,

based in part on something I may have said or done to serve them in the name of the Lord.

### **3. A true living sacrifice**

Like all good things, there is a cost. The submission that leads to transcendence requires that we be ready to sacrifice what is precious to us. Do not get me wrong, God rarely asks someone to sacrifice what He has already blessed us with (family, peace, ministry, etc.). What He asks is for us to lay on the altar the things that are precious to us but not from Him! ...Our secret sins; the source of our pride; the dreams and goals of our own making; the delights of this world which, in themselves may not be evil, but together get in the way of offering ourselves up as a complete sacrifice to God. These are the things that mark those who are fully engaged in obedience to God's Word.

They may not be as flashy as a charismatic, modern, hip worship service. They may not be as easy to define and explain as a three part sermon with PowerPoint, but in the end they will enable us to worship God in the way He seeks us to worship Him, and will reward us with a more perfect knowledge and experience of our Lord – something called "transcendence."



# THE GLORY OF SINGING IN WORSHIP

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For many years before we bought a new building, the church in Montreal was located right next door to a Pentecostal assembly. We could hear their band (especially the bass and drums) through the walls and it made us sing louder! Their minister, Billy English, was a nice guy and we used to visit from time to time.

Now there were many differences between our respective churches. They had no Bible classes, only a long worship period. They believed in miraculous gifts, speaking in tongues and prophecy in the modern age, etc. They used all kinds of musical instruments and performers in their public worship.

But when Billy and I got together and talked about church matters, the only thing that piqued his curiosity about us was why we only "sang" at our worship services. He understood why we had Bible classes and why we did not believe in modern miracles, but he did not get why we did not use instruments. He said that this was the most distinct feature about our group and it really separated us from the others. We were truly different in this matter.

It seems a shame that so many in our brotherhood are toying with the idea of adding instruments to worship and in doing so removing one of the most unique features of our identity.

Of course as curious as Billy was, he never really gave me a chance to clearly explain why we only use singing in our praise and adoration of God in public worship.

It seems to me that there are many people out there who are not sure why we have this practice in Churches of Christ. For this reason and with the hope that Billy will read this book one day, let me simply give you the three basic reasons why the Church of Christ does not use instruments in public worship:

## **1. There is no command in the New Testament to do so**

One of the most important elements of faith in God is worship. The very first commandment in the Old Testament is the prohibition against worshipping any other god but the Lord.

In the Old Testament God was very specific about how He wanted the Jews to worship Him.

- The building of the tabernacle in the desert as well as the Temple in Jerusalem was all done according to His detailed instructions (at least 5 chapters of instructions in Exodus).
- The manner in which the Jews worshipped, offered sacrifice, the dressing of the priests were all explained to the smallest detail.
- Even the musical instruments to be used, who and when to play them were laid out by God to Moses, David and the prophets.

## Moses

<sup>1</sup> The Lord spoke further to Moses, saying, <sup>2</sup> "Make yourself two trumpets of silver, of hammered work you shall make them; and you shall use them for summoning the congregation and for having the camps set out.

- Numbers 10:1-2

God specifies which instruments (only 2).

The priestly sons of Aaron, moreover, shall blow the trumpets; and this shall be for you a perpetual statute throughout your generations.

- Numbers 10:8

He specifies who will play them.

Also in the day of your gladness and in your appointed feasts, and on the first days of your months, you shall blow the trumpets over your burnt offerings, and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings; and they shall be as a reminder of you before your God. I am the Lord your God."

- Numbers 10:10

He explains when and why. This demonstrates that God cares about music in worship enough to give specific instructions concerning it.

## King David

<sup>25</sup> He then stationed the Levites in the house of the Lord with cymbals, with harps and with lyres, according to the command of David and of Gad the king's seer, and of Nathan the prophet; for the command was from the Lord through His prophets. <sup>26</sup> The Levites stood with the musical instruments of David, and the priests with the trumpets. <sup>27</sup> Then Hezekiah gave the order to offer the burnt offering on the altar. When the burnt offering began, the song to the Lord also began with the trumpets, accompanied by the instruments of David, king of Israel.  
- II Chronicles 29:25-27

- God through the prophets Gad and Nathan gave instructions to David as to which instruments and how they were to be used in Temple worship.
- Note that David did not do this on his own.
- The Jews never added or changed these commands.
- In this passage the writers describe Hezekiah's restoration of Temple worship after a long period of neglect, and note that when it came to music, he reinstated what had been commanded before by God, nothing more or different.

My point here is that in the Old Testament God was specific in His instructions concerning the type of music used in worship. This was probably done because the Jews were easily drawn into pagan worship if left to themselves.

This same idea carries over into the New Testament. God through the Apostles still gives us the information we need

about our worship to Him. Aside from the Lord's Supper, prayer, teaching and preaching the Word and caring for the church, the only instruction or command we have about music in public worship is to sing.

A.

What is the outcome then? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also.  
- I Corinthians 14:15

Note Paul here is giving instruction about proper conduct in the public worship of the church.

B.

... but be filled with the Spirit, <sup>19</sup> speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord;  
- Ephesians 5:18b-19

Not only does Paul repeat the idea that singing is the proper and acceptable manner of musical praise to God, the word he uses means to sing without instruments.

In English we use the term "A cappella" (Italian term meaning "chapel style") when we want to refer to singing without instruments. In the Greek language (the language of the New Testament), the word for singing without instrument is the word "*psallo*" which is exactly the word that Paul uses here.

Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all

wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God  
- Colossians 3:16

Again, to a third group of churches, Paul repeats the same inspired instruction in reference to musical praise, *psallo*, sing only.

What makes us think that the God who gave very specific commands to His people in the Old Testament about worship would let His people in the New Testament do whatever they wanted when it came to praise in music?

If we ask the question, "What command from God do we have as far as musical praise in worship is concerned?" the answer from the New Testament is very clear, "sing only."

## 2. There is no example

What is interesting about the Old Testament and the use of instruments in praise is that there are many examples of their use. The Old Testament clearly describes in detail the use of instruments, choirs, parades, etc. There is no attempt to downplay their use, it is not a "grey" area.

- They were commanded, they were used.
- We confirm their use by God's command and the many examples of people obeying God's command by using them.

This same pattern is seen in the New Testament as well. God, through the Apostles, commands the practice of singing without instruments in public worship. We see examples of this throughout the New Testament.

The point about instruments is made by the fact that there is not a single example of them being used, spoken of, referred to or debated over in all of the New Testament. We debate it today but they did not because it was a non-issue.

**Question:** Why no examples?

**Answer:** They were not used.

**Question:** Why?

**Answer:** The command was to sing.

For example, the Greek Orthodox Church: no instrument. Why? They are **Greek**, they know the meaning of *psallo*!

Just as the Jews obeyed God's command to use instruments in the Old Testament, Christians in the New Testament obeyed God's command to only sing and the fact that there is no mention of instruments in the New Testament shows that the early Christians were faithful in this.

### 3. The proof of history

One of the major arguments used by folks who use instruments in worship is that the early church did not use instruments because they worshipped underground and in hiding because of the Roman persecution, so they had to be quiet!

There are a couple of problems with this argument.

- Christian worship is largely based on the Jewish synagogue worship style which did not use instruments.
- The persecution of Christians by Rome began some 30 years after the church was established (60 AD) but the church did not use instruments during this time.

- Long after the Roman persecution and even Rome itself fell, the Christian church did not use instruments in worship.

Historians estimate that for at least the first 1000 years of church history the worship was without instruments.

Church historians, leaders and theologians as far back as Justin Martyr (150 AD) who defended Christianity in face of Roman persecution said,

*"The use of singing with instrumental music was not received in the Christian church as it was among the Jews..."* (Price, "Old Light on New Worship", p. 71)

Even Augustine (354-430 AD) saw the use of instruments in worship as "fleshly."

It is interesting to note that Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas wrote in 1260 AD,

*"The church does not use musical instruments... when praising God... for musical instruments usually move the soul more to pleasure than create inner moral goodness."* (Price, "Old Light on New Worship", p. 81)

Even early Protestant reformers were against the use of instruments in public worship.

In 1571, the French Protestant church, formed under the influence of Calvin, had 2100 congregations, some of which numbered over 10,000 members, and all used a cappella music in their public worship.

Of course, this is not Biblical proof but it is accurate historical proof. I mention it to underscore the idea that the use of instruments, drama, orchestras, choirs, bands, praise teams, are all relatively recent innovations that depart from what was practiced by the church for centuries.

We use a cappella music because we believe the Bible instructs us to do so by command and example, but we also have the bulk of church history to confirm that this is the correct way to worship.

And is this not what we are about as a New Testament church? We want to be the church that God describes in the New Testament. Of course, not just in the way we worship but in the way we preach the gospel, conduct our lives, love one another and prepare for the return of Christ.

Worship is only one element, but it is an important one if we are to truly restore the practice of Biblical Christianity in our generation.

One other thing about music I would like to share and that is how **just** singing is a glorious act in worship.

## 4. The glory of singing

We place a lot of importance on **how** we sing as opposed to the fact that we **only** sing in worship. Of course we want to do our best and offer to God songs that sound sweet and pleasant, but the fact that we only sing (without instrument) according to His command has greater significance in the spiritual context of worship.

John Price, in his book, "Old Light on New Worship," lists several ways that Christ has lifted up the practice of singing in worship as a glorious thing. Jesus has made singing in worship glorious:

### A. By His own example

Jesus anoints singing as a glorious manner to praise God because He Himself sang praises with His Apostles in the upper room on the night before He died.

In Matthew 26:30, Matthew says that they sang a hymn as was the custom of the Jews at Passover. The traditional one was the "*hallel*" which comprised of Psalms 113-118.

Before His suffering and death, Jesus sang songs of praise, trust and thanksgiving. It is only fitting that when we worship we follow the example of our Lord who exalts this practice by doing it Himself!

## **B. By making it a teaching ministry**

I return to Colossians 3:16 where Paul says,

teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

When our singing is based on the Word of God with songs taken directly from the Psalms or derived from the Scripture, we are literally teaching and encouraging one another through songs.

When we sing "*Stand up, stand up for Jesus,*" are we not encouraging one another to remain faithful and strong for Christ?

When we sing "*Up from the grave He arose,*" are we not proclaiming the gospel to one another and any unbeliever who might be present?

Aside from offering our love and praise to God, congregational singing serves as a teaching ministry for the building up of the church. No instrument, no matter how beautifully played or numerous can bless the church like the human voice declaring the truths of God in spiritual song.

As I said before, some put too much emphasis on the musicality of our singing, judging it by its tone or pleasure to the ear. But God lifts up singing as an exalted method of praise because it is the direct link to a person's heart and faith.

With the heart we believe, and with the mouth we proclaim in song that Jesus Christ is Lord – this is primal Christianity.

### **C. By making it a foretaste of heaven**

John, in his vision of heaven, in the book of Revelation says,

And they sang the song of Moses, the bond-servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying,  
 "Great and marvelous are Your works,  
 O Lord God, the Almighty;  
 Righteous and true are Your ways,  
 King of the nations!  
 – Revelation 15:3

Our singing here on earth in the church is the beginning and a hint of the "experience" of heaven. We only know vaguely what heaven will be like in negative terms (no death, no sin, no suffering, etc.).

It is hard to imagine because we have all these things here and have always had them so to experience the complete absence of these things is difficult. But singing, and singing joyfully, with faith, this is something we know, something we actually do.

God has given us this experience (among others) to help us actually feel in a very real sense, what heaven will be like. As a matter of fact, John Price says in his book that,

*"Singing is the only ordinance of the church that shall continue in heaven. When we see Him face to face, preaching, prayer, communion and baptism...shall all be done away."* (Page 185)

All of these were means to call and unite people to Christ, build their faith, and remember His sacrifice. In heaven none of these will be necessary except to celebrate our everlasting relationship in a perfect spiritual union. And God has chosen singing as the way to do this in both heaven and on earth.

## Summary

So when we gather to worship in song, remember:

1. That what we do is ordained by God and pleasing to Him because of our **obedience**, not our ability.
2. That a cappella singing is a glorious thing because Jesus has raised it above any other form of worship by His own example and the teaching of the Apostles.
3. That when we are two or more who gather in His name to worship God, Jesus is not only with us, but also sings with us as well.

In Romans 15:9 Paul quotes several verses from the Psalms showing that Christ Himself was speaking through David concerning the eventual salvation of the Gentiles.

In Psalm 18:49 Christ declares through David His prophet,

Therefore I will give thanks to You among the  
nations, O Lord,  
And I will sing praises to Your name.

So stand and sing knowing that you sing to God and with God  
when you lift your voices in song.



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