

WORSHIP



**COMING BACK TO THE HEART OF
WORSHIP**

Published by the Unboring Book Company

Northampton, England

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INTRODUCTION

According to the '100 Best Love Songs of All Time' website, the theme of love is the one most commonly explored by popular song writers. I am not certain whether that is true or not, but I have no reason to doubt it. My first distinct memory of a Beatles' song was standing outside a bowling alley down on the Kent coast and hearing 'She Loves You' belting out, unrestrained on a windy Saturday afternoon.

As an uninitiated teenager, my soul was stirred with a vague sense of longing – though for quite what I had no idea. Singing about, or listening to songs about love is a need that is shared by the larger part of the human race. It has given rise to some songs of outstanding beauty, to others of sexual provocation and to others, that most of us would quite frankly class as rubbish.

As much as they are an integral part of human life, and as much as, at their best, they can be a positive part of that life, I do not think any of us would confuse love songs with love itself. We not only recognise that a song about love is different from love, but that there is an inexpressible difference between the two. Whether between husband and wife, lover and lover, mother and child or lifelong friend and lifelong friend, a rich human encounter expressing committed, unconditional care through mutual giving and receiving between two people, is quite another sort of thing than a song about it.

The world would become a far more frustrating place if actual love were removed, and all we did was pursue the dream of it in songs and deep unfulfilled longings.

Yet, incredible as it may seem, a shift approaching something of this magnitude appears to have taken place in some of our churches in respect of worship.

It seems that songs about worship are being confused with the actual act of worship.

We would probably be unable to contemplate the concept of a lover singing about love, and mistaking that for an actual encounter with the beloved, yet many of us seem to have substituted a real God encountering act of worship, with songs which at best, express a longing or desire for such an encounter. Many of us have a vague unease that something is not altogether right with our worship, but we have not quite been able to put our finger on it in order to identify what the problem is.

There are three main areas of confusion:

The first, is that many churches use the word 'worship' as an inclusive term for praise, aspiration, preaching, childrens' activities and a variety of other things, and often we have replaced real worship with these.

The second, is that we have increasingly failed to distinguish things which originate in the soul from those which originate in the spirit.

The third, is that over the past sixty years or so we have introduced a new ministry – that of worship leader – and the main qualification for this ministry is usually that of being a musician, rather than being either a leader or someone who understands and practices worship.

We recognise that we are going right against the flow in raising these things, and if you are uncomfortable with that, you may want to stop reading now. However, if you want to get back to the heart of worship – read on.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT WORSHIP?

Let's get the hard bit over with first:

In the bible, worship is rarely linked directly to either music or singing.

Whilst praise is coupled again and again with both music and singing, worship is not. We will revisit and explore praise later but it needs to be emphasised that it is different from worship, and if this difference is not recognised, there will inevitably be areas of confusion.

So how does the bible refer to worship?

In most translations of the bible, the word worship occurs around three hundred times. About two hundred and twenty of these relate to physical action:

To bow down
To bow the self down
To kiss the hand toward

Within these meanings there is also the thought of prostration or kneeling, but whatever the physical manifestation, there is always the underlying concept of a lesser person giving deference to a greater. In the remaining seventy or so occasions, the word relates to serving or service – either as the act of a servant or else as someone fulfilling a public office, which may be, but is not usually, a religious office.

The primary idea behind worship, is that of an inferior person acknowledging the superiority of another person (even of a false thing, such as an idol). That acknowledgement incorporates the realisation that submission and obedience are right, proper and the only appropriate action. The action was originally expressed first and foremost in a physical way. The bowing of the knee, the kissing of the hand or utter prostration upon the ground.

Of course these can be, and often were, mere outward forms which may have been done reluctantly and with no inner conviction. The proof of sincerity of what was expressed outwardly, came by an accompanying inner attitude that resulted in appropriate action afterwards. Where the act of bowing down was both heartfelt and genuine it would be followed by faithful service. With this understanding, it makes full sense of the meanings of the words in the bible and of the incidents when acts of worship are recorded.

The focus is on the excellence of the one being worshipped, not on the condition or the experience of the worshipper.

The initial use of any word in the bible often set the tone for its meaning. The first occasion when the word worship appears, is when Abraham is taking his son Isaac to be sacrificed. Every hope, prayer, and aspiration; every dream and promise for the present life, the life of his descendants and for all the nations of the world for all ages to come, was centred in Isaac. As terrible as it would have been for any parent to hand over a son to death, for Abraham this was so much more.

Everything he had or could hope for – even his relationship with God – was to be relinquished with one blow of the knife in his hand. Abraham called that worship. It was the acknowledgment of the sovereignty of God, of His absolute right to ask anything of Abraham without coercion and without an explanation or promise of something better.

In fact there were no better promises than those which God had already made and which Abraham, in human terms, was having to lay down. Abraham was so confident of the trustworthiness of God, that the book of Hebrews records he believed that, even if he killed his son, God would bring him back from the dead.

The book of Job records another situation from around the same time that Abraham lived. Job was a man of great wealth, possessions, and a secure family. When he lost everything at one time, his response to God was to worship Him and to say:

“Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord.”

These early accounts of worship set a pattern of the abandonment of all rights and expectations before a sovereign and loving God.

In the New Testament, we find that when Jesus visited the area of the Gadarenes He met someone in an extreme, pitiful state. The man was so full of demons that he lived naked in a graveyard and continually harmed himself. The response of the local people had been to restrain him with shackles and chains, but he had broken free and he roamed among the tombs and in the mountains, crying out both day and night. When he saw Jesus, he ran toward Him and worshipped him.

Rather than his condition being a hindrance to him worshipping, it was the incentive for him to do so. Recognising his own obvious inferiority, he bowed down and abandoned himself to the superiority of Jesus. Either he or the demons within him acknowledged that Jesus was the Son of God. Far from rejecting him because of his terrible condition, Jesus received him, dealt with his problems, and restored him to his right mind.

When we recognise that the ‘worth’ in worship relates to God alone, and is unaffected by our outward circumstances or our inner condition, we will refuse to hold back because of any problems we have or any failings we see in ourselves. We will not set out any conditions for God nor insist that He behave in a way of our choosing. We will press forward on the basis of the grace, mercy, wisdom, sovereignty and sufficiency that we acknowledge in God, regardless of any lack of positive feelings in ourselves. We may have positive feelings, and sometimes we may experience the presence of God, but our worship can never be dependent on such things.

At its most basic level, we express our worship of God by coming to him in spiritual nakedness with nothing to give or to receive. It is the bowing of ourselves to Him as we are, with no attempt at self-improvement, no conditions, and a full acknowledgement of who He is and His freedom to act as He chooses.

The Lord’s prayer sets out the basis for coming to God. We acknowledge who God is and we align ourselves with His will, whatever that might mean for us.

Choosing God’s will for our lives is foundational for our acts of worship. To pray ‘make me willing to be willing’ is not worship but aspiration. The desire to accept God’s will without making the choice to actually receive it for our lives, is really the same as saying ‘no’, and by definition, worship is not worship if preceded by refusal to acknowledge the sovereignty of God.

WHERE HAVE WE GONE WRONG?

As we said in the introduction, the first of our problems is that we have come to use worship as an all-inclusive term. Throughout the bible, when the people of God relate to God, there are various and distinct ways in which they do this. The three main ways are worship, prayer and praise. They are all valid, but they are not all the same, and should not be confused. An error in the church today, is that we fail to distinguish the various approaches and, in doing so, we sometimes omit worship, which is primary, and bring to the fore the other aspects that are obviously important, but which are not as important as worship.

The way we often use the term 'worship' is as a general word to cover several different things relating to our approach to God. That need not be a problem, provided we set out beforehand what we mean in a particular context or conversation.

One of the most common ways we use worship, is as a catch all for what happens with a particular group of people at a particular time and place; usually Christians, at around 11.00am on a Sunday morning in a church building. Notice boards outside such buildings often state boldly and clearly, 'Sunday Worship here at 11.00am. All Welcome'. We may also use worship to specifically refer to the part of the time on such Sunday mornings when the minister or leader reads a particular form of service. Alternatively, according to the type of church we are in, someone may stand up by his or her keyboard or guitar and say something along the lines 'Let us move into a time of worship'.

These two ways we use and understand the word are so common that they are often considered the normal usage. It would be nigh on impossible to try to change them. However, it is important that

we realise, that however normal and familiar they are in our use of them in church - they have moved away from the way in which the bible uses the word worship.

If we do not consider the bible to have any defining influence on what we do, we may not see this as a problem, and we may simply choose to go with current practice. However, if we do consider the bible to be the source and authority for what we do, then our task will be to rediscover and re-emphasise the original biblical concept of worship, and to find ways of bringing that back to the central place in both our individual and our communal church lives.

Most English dictionaries connect the root of the word worship to early medieval usage, where honour, adoration, reverence and the appropriate actions that follow those things, were bestowed on someone or something that was worthy of such attributes. The heart of the word is the concept of worth and was originally more nearly 'worthship'.

This early English use aligns closely to how the writers of the bible would have understood it, and also how the translators, who gave us the versions which undergird our modern bibles, would also have intended it to be understood.

Understanding how the bible uses it will help us to appreciate better the place that true worship can, and indeed should play in our lives. That is always provided we can let go of the more common non-biblical ways that we have come to understand worship in our churches today. This usage is rooted in:

A confusion between prayer, praise and worship

My wife recently consulted the doctor because she was experiencing severe pain in her left shoulder, arm and hand. After examining her, he told her that the problem was 'golfer's elbow'.

Apparently this was probably caused by some tiny lesions in the muscle where it connects to the elbow, inflicted in my wife's case by over-energetically mowing the lawn. In daily use and practice, my wife makes no distinction between the various parts of her arm. While all parts exist and function correctly, there is generally no need to distinguish muscle from bone, and elbow from forearm. However, once there is a malfunction, clinical discernment becomes an essential priority if the problem is to be successfully treated and normality resumed.

When the Church is moving in spiritual normality as God intends, there is no need to nit-pick over details of what is prayer or praise or worship. The three will move, flow and function together. But the nagging unease that many Christians experience in what is called 'a time of worship' is an indication that something may not be quite right, and if that is the case, then accurate discernment and analysis becomes necessary. Bearing in mind that a clinical examination distinguishes between things which may not bear such a functional examination in practice (such as my wife's arm), when we analyse them, the component parts of an approach to God may be expressed as follows:

The acknowledgement and declaration of who God is.
The offering of sacrifice (including ourselves) to God.

The hope and request that God will act for us.
The praise and thanksgiving for who He is and what He has done.

The first two may be included within a definition of worship, but the last two should not. They may follow hard on the heels of worship and arise out of it, and in practice they may be inter-woven with it, but they are different. Expressing requests and praise and thanksgiving, are entirely appropriate ways of coming before God, but they are not worship and should not be confused with it.

If we consider what is involved in these various approaches in turn it will show why it is not helpful to confuse them:

The acknowledgement and declaration of who God is

Moses asked God to identify himself, the response was, 'I Am who I Am'. God is God and that must be our starting point. Over the years, many Christian thinkers have sought to express an understanding of God in ways the human mind can grasp. Ultimately they have always fallen short (how can the finite grasp the infinite?) but nonetheless, the various attempts have often been helpful. One of the ways, has been to consider the attributes of God. An attribute is a facet without which something cannot be what it is. If we were to describe a dog, we could say that it was a small, brown, fierce animal. Small, brown and fierce are not attributes but descriptions of a particular dog – another dog could be large, white and friendly. But 'animal' is an attribute. All dogs, regardless of size, colour and disposition are animals and if they were not they could not be a dog.

God's attributes include the fact of His self-existence. God is uncreated, complete and entire in and of Himself with no dependence at any point outside of Himself. He is also self-sufficient, all powerful, all knowing, all wise and all present, and hence sovereign over all. He is without boundaries, without beginning or end and not limited to our comprehension. He is also loving, good, just, merciful, gracious, faithful and holy.*

In and of ourselves we are none of these things. That is why our first response to God is always based on the lesser acknowledging the greater. And then, as we acknowledge who He is and realise who we are in relation to Him, we can only offer ourselves unreservedly to Him for His work, His pleasure and His purposes.

*'The Knowledge of the Holy' is a book by A. W. Tozer deals with the attributes of God in depth and is well worth reading.

Worship is not dependent upon circumstances, place, time, or feelings. It is entirely dependent upon God himself. Even if God should have chosen to reject us and cast us away from Himself as unfit to be in His presence, worship would still be the only appropriate response to make to Him. What is such good news, is He does not reject us, but He receives us with love and grace. He accepts us because of what he has done for us in Christ.

Building on the understanding of who God is and who we are in relation to Him, we then respond with active faith in His character and on the basis of what He has said to us in the bible. Without the truth of who God is and some appreciation of His character, there can be no worship. This understanding can come instantly when He opens our eyes by His Spirit, or it may come gradually through seeking and study. We may catch glimpses as we look at creation, but however it comes, it is always God who gives us understanding of Himself.

Because God is ultimately incomprehensible, our grasp of the truth will always be partial. Our understanding may be inadequate, but it must never be considered unimportant, or our approach to it casual. We should always be striving for the very best grasp of truth that is possible and for the best ways of expressing it that our language can achieve.

The Holy Spirit does not work in a vacuum. One of His main roles is to testify of Jesus, affirm who Jesus is and reveal Him to open hearts and minds. Whilst He can and sometimes does do this in a non-verbal way, Jesus who is the Word, is most usually made known through words, and especially through the words of the bible. God's principle of witness and affirmation is always through two mouths. As far as worship goes, it is our responsibility to speak forth the truth of who God is and what he has done, and it is the Spirit's responsibility to apply that truth to our hearts, confirming that the word is true.

Unless our minds are soaked with truth, and unless we continually seek to find the very best ways to verbally express that truth, the likelihood is that we will end up with empty (and sometimes meaningless) repetitions of second rate thoughts and ideas which bear little resemblance to truth and which the Spirit will not own.

This fusion of acknowledging who God is and then declaring that truth to each other and to all of creation, is the foundational act of worship. If we neglect this, we will move into mere self-expression, where we are saying what we think and feel (often about ourselves and what we would like) rather than confessing what God has revealed about Himself.

These twin acts of acknowledgement and declaration of who God is, are the first and the essential expressions of worship that we can make.

The offering of sacrifice (including ourselves) to God

Human beings are not natural atheists. Some people, especially in more financially wealthy cultures, achieve a state where they deny the existence of God, but it has usually required constant, dripping propaganda in order to extinguish the spark within that cries out for a relationship with the One who made us.

In every corner of the world through all known ages, men and women have offered sacrifices to God – whoever and however they have understood Him. The inner light of conscience, which faintly sees the evidence around it testifying to a creator, is never fully eradicated however much sin and unbelief take root in our souls. That voice of conscience constantly brings people to the conclusion, that whoever and whatever God is, they have wronged Him, and the connection they deeply long for requires restitution through sacrifice.

When the God and Father of Jesus Christ reveals Himself to us, we respond firstly with worship that acknowledges He is the greater and we are the lesser. Next we offer ourselves to Him.

The problem we then find however, is that not only are we less than God but we are entirely other than Him. To compound the matter, we also realise that we are deeply flawed. Any sacrifice or offering we can make, of ourselves or of what we possess, whilst being an entirely appropriate act, is none the less unacceptable to God, because of the sin and unrighteousness bound up in our nature. God has of course dealt with this problem through the person and work of Jesus Christ. He is the one and only fully acceptable sacrifice, and God has incorporated us in Him in both His death and resurrection. Therefore, as we come to God, and as we acknowledge who He is, though we are aware of our own inadequacy, we are also aware of what He has done for us through Christ. This means that we come boldly to offer ourselves, assured that we are fully acceptable through our union with Jesus.

The bible speaks of the people of God as priests. The principle function of the priest throughout the Old Testament was to offer appropriate sacrifices. With the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the old order has been abolished. A new priesthood with new sacrifices has been inaugurated. Jesus Himself is both the new high priest and the sacrifice offered. Baptised into Christ in that same death, resurrection and ascension, we are incorporated into the one new man who now serves God forever. As such, we can continually present Jesus to the Father, and ourselves in Him.

This means that we come to God in worship, understanding who He is in His eternal being and acknowledging and declaring it. We continue our worship by presenting Christ, and then ourselves fully and unconditionally surrendered in Him. That is the essence of worship, the act in which we discover the very reason we have been created.

However, worship, whilst being primary, is not the only approach we make to God. Having been reconciled to God, we will want to walk in as full a relationship with Him as we can. The biggest problem that most of us find is that of sin. Whilst in Christ, the guilt and power of sin have been dealt with, that does not mean that we automatically experience all the benefits all of the time.

John said in his first letter, that he was writing it so that his readers might not sin, but that if they did, the remedy was in the advocacy of Jesus. We know that in eternity, sin will be eradicated, but the issue we have now, is to what extent God will deal with it whilst we are on earth. That we are likely to sin is acknowledged through the words that Jesus gave us in the Lord's prayer where we are told to ask for forgiveness on what seems to be an ongoing basis. In experience, many of us find that the depths of sin within us are far greater than we could have imagined, but we also find that God's provision in Christ is greater still.

As we come before God, we will therefore also want to ask both for forgiveness and for increasing faith in order to walk in the strength that Christ gives us. In some churches, this is built into the liturgy, whilst in others people may be encouraged to deal with issues before they meet together. In some there may be an emphasis on keeping short accounts with God and encouragement to ask for forgiveness the very moment that sin is acknowledged.

Whatever way it is dealt with, and it does need to be dealt with, the issue of forgiveness is not itself worship. It is part of what I have termed:

The hope and request that God will act for us.

This includes one of the key elements that is often, even usually, assumed to be part of worship but is not, and that is aspiration.

The dictionary defines aspiration as ‘eager desire or high hopes and aims’. Surely something good? Absolutely. It is entirely appropriate that we have such things, but it can quite seriously hinder our achieving them if we do not recognise that they are distinct from worship and, more seriously, can become a substitute for it. For example:

If I believe that God is speaking to me about having control of my finances and I consciously and deliberately hand them over to him without any reserve, then that is an act of worship - an offering which is responding to God who is provider. This involves faith and action. However, and the difference here is crucial, if I respond by saying ‘Lord I want to give you everything’, but don’t actually do it, then that is aspiration which involves neither faith nor action.

A very high proportion of songs in our repertoire (whether new or old ones) are aspirational songs.

‘Lord I really want to worship you’ may not be worship. If I said to my wife that I really wanted to love her, she would probably be most offended that I am acknowledging the fact that I do not actually love her but just wish I did. There is only a subtle difference on the surface but it is a real one in practice, as it will leave us in an unfulfilled state with faith remaining dormant.

‘Jesus be the centre’ hovers on the edge of aspiration and worship. If the song is sung believing that He actually is the centre (which of course He is), then it is an expression of worship. (why not simply sing ‘Jesus you are the centre’?) However, if it is sung with the hope that Jesus might become the centre, but there is no conviction and faith that He actually is, then it is not worship but aspiration.

What do we mean when we sing, ‘Lord reign in me, reign in my heart’ or when we say ‘We welcome you’? If we take them at face

value, they could be understood in a similar way to us visiting Buckingham Palace and telling the Queen that we welcome her, and asking her to reign over us. I suspect she would be offended and reply something along the lines that ‘One does rule over you already, and as this is my house, it is my place to welcome you not the other way round’.

If we are baptised into union with Christ; His death, resurrection and ascension then we are in covenant relationship with Him. This cannot be increased or decreased. The *experience* of what that means may be less than we would wish for, but it will not increase simply by asking again and again for what we already possess.

It is not possible to be both married and unmarried. It is possible to be married and not to experience all the reality of what that means, but such experience is not improved by trying somehow to get more married. Rather it is by acknowledging the fact and then exploring the reality of the relationship that fact attests to.

Prayer, hope and aspiration operate correctly when they are based on who God has declared Himself to be, rather than on what we might like to happen.

We ask for our daily bread because God has revealed Himself as provider.

We ask for healing on the basis that God has said ‘I am the Lord who heals you’.

We ask for God to put His will into practice on earth because He has already established it in the heavens.

We ask for fullness of the Spirit, because the risen Christ has received the promise of the Father and has poured out the promised Spirit to His people.

What is not appropriate, is to treat things that are already fact as if they were not, and then to ask for them to become so. To ask God to be present with us is a strange and inappropriate request. If God is omnipresent (present everywhere at all times) then He cannot be more present than He already is. If, as I suspect is often the case, we are wanting to experience His presence with us in a greater way, then our starting point should be to acknowledge and declare his actual presence as an act of worship and faith, and then to ask that we might experience that in greater measure as a follow on prayer. However, even if God does not give us a greater experience of His presence, we still continue to worship because worship is the right thing to do and we do it by faith.

Faith relies on truth as its anchor, and whilst God is incredibly gracious at putting up with our misunderstanding and confusion, ultimately if we will not be corrected, we will suffer the consequences. If we persist in sloppy thinking, speaking and singing we will open ourselves to believing and pursuing that which is not true.

Where does this leave us?

It would not be such a problem if our worship was correct, but then we went astray a bit on the aspirational element. However, what is undoubtedly a problem (whether we are aware of it or not) is that in many churches and cross-church gatherings, we have all but eliminated the foundations of pure worship and are almost exclusively emphasising the aspirational aspect instead.

Aspiration can be extremely enjoyable. Anyone who has observed small children in the run up to Christmas or a birthday, will know that the desire and anticipation for the presents may be a far more intense experience than the actual reception and enjoyment of them on the special day and the days after.

Worship, however may be far from enjoyable. All true worship is costly as it involves the offering of our best to God. It is likely there will be times when we do not want to do God's will, and it is OK to tell God that. Even Jesus prayed and asked the Father for an alternative path to the cross if it were possible. But when He knew there was no other way, Jesus agreed to the cross, and told the Father that He would accept His will instead of His own. It will not come as a surprise therefore, that when the Father reveals the way of the cross for us, that we will shrink back from it. But there is no other way and in the end we can only accept it and offer ourselves as Jesus did.

There will always be a temptation to stay in the realm of enjoyable aspirations – it costs nothing to say we want to do God's will and not do it – than to move into worship where we both agree to and actually do His will – which may cost a great deal.

Zeal and desire for God can get very close to sustaining us without ever actually being fulfilled. Paul wrote to the Roman church concerning the Jewish Nation, that zeal without knowledge can leave God-fearing people in a state of being very religious, but still missing out on the reality of God's purposes. Aspirations, zeal and desire are all good things provided they are the springboard from which we dive into the will of God. However if we continually stay on the edge, endeavouring to get satisfaction through the experience of anticipation, ultimately (and sometimes it takes years) we will become disillusioned.

It will be helpful to check what is happening in our church services. Is the emphasis on Jesus, who He is and what He has done? Is there a heartfelt agreement to be united with Him in the cross in order that we might do the will of the Father, or, is the emphasis on us, our needs, our desires and ambitions (perhaps especially the ambitions for *our* church rather than concerns for His Church in all its breadth and fullness)?

The next important element of approaching God is:

Praise and thanksgiving for who God is and what He has done

This is quite different from both worship and aspiration. If worship is acknowledging who God is and declaring that, then praise should be understood as being grateful, sometimes exuberantly so, for God being who He is. Thanksgiving then moves on from gratefulness for who God is, to gratefulness for what He has done, especially in response to the prayers and aspirations of his people.

As important and central as it is, praise is not worship, and in practice may be expressed quite differently from it.

One of the differences that is overlooked by many, is that throughout the bible – especially in the Psalms – praise is coupled again and again with music and singing, whereas worship is not. Of the three hundred or so times when the word worship occurs in the bible there only appears to be one instance where there is a specific connection with instruments, music or singing and that is in the book of Revelation. On the other hand, praise is often linked with them in an extravagant and uninhibited way.

Whilst in the bible, music is not an essential element of worship, that should not lead us to conclude that it should be prohibited. We recognise that God has made us with poetic and rhythmic elements and it is neither surprising nor wrong that we should want those elements to play a part as we come to God and offer ourselves to Him. However, what is essential, is that if we introduce music into worship, it is subservient to the purposes of acknowledging and declaring who God is and the offering of ourselves to Him. In all of these acts, the elements of understanding and comprehension are crucial, and the introduction of any music should always serve to enhance those elements and not detract from them.

Praise is one of the principle activities that can, and at times should, be done with musical instruments, even when there are no accompanying words. There may be words on most occasions, but the final Psalm concludes with the exhortation to apparently let rip on trumpet, lute, harp, timbrel, stringed instruments, flutes, loud cymbals and – as if that was not enough – clashing cymbals. We are also exhorted to praise him in dance. Even the animals are not left out, for everything that has breath should praise the Lord.

Now just as aspirational songs have often pushed out the focus on worship, so also at times they have pushed out the focus on praise.

Instead of times together when there is a clear, serious, understanding based worship of God that is rooted in truth and affirmed by the Spirit, which then moves on into beautiful, even explosive, praise and thanksgiving, we often get stuck in the aspirational doldrums.

Aspirations, requests and prayers, whether said or sung, are good. They are an essential part of our coming before God, but they are only a part, and a part which should never replace worship and praise, and they should still be God centred, not me or us centred.

Too often, we have veered to a burger and fries diet in our times together. Aspirational songs require the least effort of any type of Christian music because their purpose is often simply to stir longings in us which may be vague and undefined. They may only require a minimum of thought and preparation, be vaguely pleasing to everyone and slightly addictive if you sing them too often. They can resemble ready meals off the production line, made to order from a limited number of set recipes which tend to appeal to untrained taste buds.

FAILURE TO DISCERN BETWEEN SOUL AND SPIRIT

Some years after the Welsh Revival, two of its leaders – Evan Roberts and Jessie Penn Lewis – took time to reflect on the positives and negatives of their experiences. One of their conclusions, expounded in their jointly authored book ‘War on the Saints’ was that whilst the Spirit of God was mightily and effectively active, there was an intermingling of the merely human or soulish (and also some which was demonic).

The only book which Watchman Nee actually wrote (all his others were from his or his follower’s notes of his sermons) was the ‘Spiritual Man’. Many of his conclusions were similar to those of Evan Roberts and Jessie Penn Lewis regarding the contamination of God’s work by human or demonic elements.

Many others have written on this matter and it is far too large a subject (especially the demonic aspect) to cover in this brief overview of worship. However it is needful to say some things.

I recently bought an old CD of Simon and Garfunkel’s greatest hits. It cost me the princely sum of 99p. Along with many folk who are getting on a bit, I have a soft spot for some of the music of the 60’s and 70’s. I was not disappointed when I sat down to listen to the very young sounding Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel. The thing that I particularly like about their songs is the amazing way in which they match words and music to give a fusion of poetic sound that is only achieved by a few of the most talented composers. As I listened, I confess to a few goose bumps, especially when I heard ‘Bridge Over Troubled Water’.

The interesting thing is that my response, which included a very high level of enjoyment, was to a verbal/musical fusion which incorporated a large number of statements which were pretty meaningless and sometimes pure nonsense. ‘Sail on silver girl’ has very little in the way of precise communication, whatever way you look or listen to it.

The important thing to realise, is that the fact that Paul Simon’s words had no coherent meaning, did not detract from the enjoyable and moving experience that I had when listening to them. For a listener who wants an experience, the crucial factor is not meaning, but effect and feeling.

Such experiences are often neutral – neither right nor wrong – but they are experiences that originate in the human soul and not the spirit. They may be intense and pleasurable, and for some they are addictively desirable, but they are human not divine in origin.

Now just as I can have such an experience from listening to Simon and Garfunkel, so too it is possible to have a similar experience by listening to music which has some sort of Christian content. That too need not make sense, that too may rely largely on a musical and verbal fusion, or it may rely almost entirely on the musical content. The thing to be aware of though, is that if that is the case, the experience induced by it will almost certainly be soulish and not spiritual.

Generally speaking, it is not wrong to have soul pleasure in songs we sing and listen to, even some of the silly and meaningless ones. (Most small children enjoy ‘Old Macdonald had a farm’ without harm.) When the songs actually have positive and meaningful words, especially words that relate to God, God’s creation, His people or his people’s hopes and desires, there would seem no reason not to appreciate and enjoy them. However, a pleasurable experience derived from singing about or to God and done in the

presence of God does not automatically move it into the category of worship, nor does it make it automatically spiritual. It may be pleasurable, but it may be a pleasure we experience through the faculties of our soul. That is not necessarily wrong or a problem provided we do not attribute spirituality to it.

That is most likely to happen when we have a soulish experience alongside something that is genuinely spiritual. Bodies, souls and spirits do not operate in neat boxes. Eating actual bread and wine with our bodies can fuse into a genuine spiritual experience with God, but it is not automatic and in particular, faith needs to be active. It is quite possible that, if by faith, our spirits are engaging with God at a point when we are together in a meeting, and if, at the same point, our souls are responding to something that is humanly originated, we may end up attributing spirituality to what is in fact soulish. This is especially likely to happen when there is something musically based where the singers or musicians imply it is spiritual, by their comments, actions or bodily expressions.

In such a situation, we may simply imitate them and embrace the whole experience as a spiritual one instead of one that is actually quite mixed. Often, on reflection we judge that, as there was at least some spiritual element, and as others appeared spiritually connected, and as, in the main it was reasonably pleasurable, it would be crass to judge that it was not all spiritual. This is where error and confusion tend to gain a foothold. If we allow, and continually accept the deception that something human was actually from God, we will find we become less and less able to discern what is genuinely spiritual. When this happens, we may end up moving in the flesh rather than the spirit much of the time.

It is actually quite easy to differentiate between what is spiritual and what is soulish provided we are prepared to be real, ruthless, and detached from self-interest.

The first test is ‘where does it place Jesus?’ If our self-awareness is greater than our awareness of Jesus, who is God’s Messiah, seated at the right hand of God in heaven, then we will not be on the right track.

Secondly, when Jesus spoke to the woman at the well in Samaria he said that, ‘God seeks those who worship in Spirit and in truth.’ If understandable verbal truth is absent from our experience, and if the Holy Spirit has not impressed that truth on our hearts then we might be missing something.

Jesus also told the woman that if she asked him for a drink then her thirst would be quenched. True worship in Spirit should leave us contentedly satisfied, whereas a soulish experience, however real or pleasurable in the moment, will leave us wondering when we wake up the next morning, quite what happened the night before, and where the experience we had then has gone to.

The main test relates to where we are a week or a month or a year later. We can have an ecstatic experience, be transported with the songs we sing, or even feel we are surrounded by gold dust and angels, but if there is no measurable growth in our Christian life, then it is all very questionable. If we come back the next week simply looking for a repeat experience, we must ask what the last one accomplished. This does not mean that all issues in our lives are immediately and permanently dealt with (some things in our lives may take a long time to resolve), but there should be tangible evidence of moving in the right direction.

THE NEW ROLE OF WORSHIP LEADERS

It is likely that many, if not most people who serve as worship leaders are men and women of God, who are seeking to serve His people and to further his kingdom.

However, we need to acknowledge the fact, that the role of worship leader does not appear anywhere in the bible. Also, the prominence given to the position in many churches is a recent innovation of no more than about 60 years. Of course, neither of those facts are necessarily issues to concern us. The roles of youth leader, Sunday school superintendent, church secretary, treasurer, church cleaner or many others do not appear in the bible either, and some of them are also of comparatively recent origin

We are free to use names and descriptions for people who serve the church and not all of those will necessarily be biblical or of long standing.

The possible problem however, is not merely that we describe a role in a way that is not in the bible - in itself not a problem - but the fact that we then allow that role to redefine biblical truth.

As we saw earlier, worship involves an acknowledgment of who God is, declaring who He is and then offering ourselves to Him. It is possible that someone may be gifted in their understanding of God and fully surrendered to Him in all areas of their life, and subsequently be recognised as someone who can also lead others into that as well. If that is the case, then it may be appropriate to describe that person as a worship leader.

However, in many churches today where there is someone who is designated as a worship leader, the main qualification appears to be that they are a musician. They sometimes appear to be young, without a deep knowledge of God or any proven leadership skills. Their standing before God in respect of a surrendered life is often an unknown factor. This then gives the impression, or in many instances the conviction, that music is a key, if not the only key, component of the act of worship. In this respect, the role can redefine worship in a way that has little connection to the bible, for as we have seen, in the bible there is no necessary connection between music and worship at all.

This is where things can often begin to go wrong. There are four main areas where this happens:

The first is simply that a gifted musician may not also have the spiritual, biblical, theological or leadership gifting needed to bring God's people to worship.

The second is that most musicians like music and are good at it, but do not necessarily have the same affinity for words. The result can be that they are happy with songs where the words have been chosen to fit the music instead of the other way round. I have heard musicians, who would be meticulous in ensuring the correct musical notes are played, argue that sloppy language is perfectly acceptable, and that is permissible to have words misspelt, lines wrongly punctuated and sentences that do not make sense.

This could imply that Christ, who is described as the Word, is not concerned about His followers taking care with using words themselves. As worship is primarily based on who God is, surely it should incorporate our very best attempts to communicate that in clear, unequivocal, understandable language?

The third is that some very good musicians write tunes in such a way that only other musicians, or at least those with some musical gifting, can follow them. In the main, songs that are written by poets or wordsmiths will follow a basic and regular metre, and be easy to fit to a tune that anyone can follow, so that almost any person can join in the singing. A tune that is irregular and unpredictable may be very good musically, but be beyond the capability of a person without musical ability to follow it. (Surely, one of the functions of a leader is actually to enable others to follow them.) Such songs may be excellent for performance but not for enabling the community of God's people to sing together.

The fourth area relates to the feel good factor that music can create. A Christian song may create a good feeling (in the same way that many non-Christian songs do), but as we saw earlier, that may be merely soulful and it will not qualify as worship, simply on the basis of the feeling it gives. It does seem that by giving musicians the responsibility to lead worship and hence often, through their songs, to write in a way that is aimed at producing a feel good factor, rather than something that is first and foremost, verbal truth, the whole ball game has shifted.

STEPS TOWARD THE RECOVERY OF TRUE WORSHIP

When God told Moses to build a tent where He could live amongst His people, He was very specific as to its design and construction. It was to be the place where He could meet with them, and allow them access to His presence. Until Jesus came and brought in the New Covenant, the access was limited to the outer court and to the Holy place. The Holy of Holies, where God dwelt, was only open to the high priest and he was allowed to enter just once a year.

In times past, especially perhaps during the period from the mid nineteenth to the mid twentieth centuries, a consideration of the meaning of the tent (usually called the Tabernacle) and, after the time of Solomon, the more solidly constructed stone Temple, was the subject of serious study by Christians. This should not surprise us for it is estimated that up to a fifth of the whole bible deals directly or indirectly with this theme.

Many books have been written around the subject, suggesting lessons God might wish to teach us from what was perhaps the greatest visual aid in history. A number of them, particularly those written by members of the Brethren, are well worth reading.

In the New Testament, Jesus and Christians (both individually and corporately) are referred to as the temple of God. In the book of Revelation, the final unveiling of God's plan sees Him living in the midst of His people as a fulfilment of all the tabernacle/temple types in the bible.

Anything that permeates a fifth of scripture will have something to teach us, but we will concentrate on those aspects that give us insights into what God wants when we approach Him.

In worship our concern must be to approach God correctly and offer Him what He wants.

The first thing is fearful, and possibly should make our hearts sink, for it is sacrifice – stark, total, costly and bloody. It is also inescapable. Anyone who wants a relationship with God cannot avoid this. It is significant that the first reference to worship in the bible was when Abraham was told to go and sacrifice Isaac.

Day in, day out, morning and evening, the first step toward God's presence in the tabernacle, was a large bronze altar upon which the sacrificed lambs were offered. God had set this as His requirement for his people.

When the New Covenant took effect in and through the person and work of Jesus, all the old sacrifices required under the law were done away with. However, access to God still required sacrifice; it was just that it was no longer the sacrifice of animals. The book of Hebrews emphasises both the priestly and the sacrificial ministry of Jesus, who through His own death and shed blood, opened a way to the Father for all who will believe and trust in Him.

At the instant when Jesus died, the dividing curtain that separated the Holy of Holies from the Holy place in the Temple was ripped apart. This miraculous act did not signify that blood was no longer required, but that Jesus' blood had been poured out and was now eternally available to open the way into God's presence.

When we come to God in worship, it is always, and will always be, through the sacrifice of Jesus.

Even the insight we are given into worship in heaven in the book of Revelation shows the elders falling down before Jesus and singing:

“You are worthy to take the book and to open its seals, For you were killed, and by your blood you bought back people for God, from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom of priests to serve our God, and they will reign upon the earth.

What is remarkable, but not unique, in this passage, is that all God's people are called to be priests.. As we come before God, the first thing we present as an act of worship, is what he Himself has given and ordained – the offering of Christ – once and for all.

But when Jesus died, though he died for us, this was not all. For God incorporated us into the death, burial, resurrection, ascension and glorification of his Son. This means that in our role as priests of the New Covenant, not only do we offer God the sacrifice of Jesus, but we present ourselves also, even though there is nothing in or about us that can add one jot to the work of Jesus.

We understand that the privilege of the ministry in resurrection life we share with Jesus, only comes because God has placed us in Jesus' death. It is therefore appropriate and necessary that we offer ourselves as sacrifices as He did. Paul wrote to the Christians at Rome:

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer yourselves as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, which is your reasonable worship.”

Different translations offer some variation - reasonable service, spiritual worship or simply an offering. However, whatever way we read it, the heart of the meaning is the same. It is the right and

sensible thing to do to give ourselves totally to God as the first step of worship. (It is of course impossible to offer half of ourselves to God and keep half back – the altar of sacrifice is unequivocal it requires the death of the whole being.)

The focus of a worship-filled life will be the acknowledging of the sovereignty and holiness of God and, in response to that, the daily offering of ourselves to God because Jesus has first offered Himself and we have been united with Him.

This is the paradox. We offer ourselves as living sacrifices and we remain alive, but at the same time, through the refining fires of God we are continually delivered unto death so that we can say with Paul that we die daily. This is worship in Spirit and truth.

When John the Baptist declared that Jesus would baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire, he foretold that the daily circumstances of our lives would be a continual refining that would accomplish death to the flesh and produce the nature of Christ in us.

This is in tune with the opening lines of the Lord's prayer where we come before the holy God in heaven and align ourselves with his sovereign will on earth.


As typified by the tabernacle, when we move past the first point of sacrifice we will find the place of washing and then, and only then, do we find ourselves standing in the place of feeding, enlightenment and communion symbolised by the tabernacle's shew bread, candlestick and altar of incense.

In the letter to the Hebrews, the writer encourages us to come boldly into the presence of God. If we do it on the basis which God has set out, we will have nothing to fear, but we will enter into His presence with confidence and with thanksgiving.

Anyone, whatever their condition, can come to God, worship him and come before His presence, accepted purely on the basis of Jesus sacrifice. However it is not possible to continually live in His presence without the sacrificial surrender of the will to His.

If the sacrificial fires have been extinguished in our lives, whatever else we may be doing, it will not be true living, and it will not be true worship.

We can only help one another to live in and experience a life of worship by confronting and challenging any practices that may cause us to fall short of it. We are all called to examine ourselves to see whether we are in the faith or not. Both as individuals and as churches we can set ourselves on the pathway of coming back to the heart of worship that is the natural response to God of a fully surrendered life.



*O Thou who camest from above, the pure celestial fire to impart.
Kindle a flame of sacred love on the mean altar of my heart:
There let it for thy glory burn with inextinguishable blaze,
And trembling to its source return, in humble prayer and fervent praise.*

SOME OBJECTIONS AND SOME SECONDARY ISSUES

From conversations that I have had, I am aware that much of what I have said may not be received in some churches. However, the main arguments against my position do not appear to be that I have misunderstood or misrepresented the bible, but that I harbour certain prejudices against particular types of music and ways of doing things.

The first suggestion, is that it is all a matter of style and that my style preferences are simply different to other people's.

The second, is that I am old fashioned and that, if we want to attract new people to church we have to have modern music.

The third, is that I have a (possibly secret) hankering after liturgy and that I need to be prepared to accept the current moving of the Spirit.

The fourth, is that because I happen to be a writer, of course I am over preoccupied with things like punctuation and spelling which do not matter to anyone else.

I will readily admit that I have preferences of style. Very few people do not. However, any individual's style preferences should not be the basis of what we choose for corporate singing. I am actually fairly broad in my taste in music, and am equally pleased by some heavy rock as I am by some of the classics. For a decade

from the late 90's I was involved in promoting Christian music concerts, including a number considered cutting edge at the time. Whatever prejudices I do have, I do not think prejudice against particular styles or types of music may be included among them.

I may well be a bit a bit old fashioned, but I accept that unless it is good wine or cheese, there can rarely be an automatic assumption that the old is better than the new. However, it is also true that what is new is not automatically better than that which is old. C.S. Lewis emphasised the need to assess everything on its own merits, and that age in and of itself was rarely a significant factor in helping us to do so.

Although most of my Christian experience has been in the charismatic new church/pentecostal streams I do indeed appreciate some aspects of liturgy. Rich, God centred liturgy, honed by the use of centuries, fused with the freshness of God's immediate and living word impressed on our hearts by the Holy Spirit, can be a wonderful thing. When spoken thoughtlessly or in a rush it can be pretty dire. Some churches, having identified weaknesses in the use of liturgy, have gone to the other extreme and rejected anything prepared beforehand as somehow unspiritual.

Whether we use liturgy or seek spontaneity, the outcome of both should be judged primarily on the basis of quality, truth and spirituality, not form or lack of it.

As a writer, I do particularly notice when words are mistreated and misused. My wife has just retired after twenty years as a Teaching Assistant in a Primary School. I have it on her authority, that if many of the songs of recent years were handed in by a seven-year old for marking, they would be handed back as below standard on several points: spelling, punctuation, capitalisation and grammar. I confess, I do struggle with offering something to God that would be rejected by the teacher of a seven-year old in primary school.

I suspect however, that the problem of incorrect language which has entered our churches in the past couple of decades, is little more than a reflection of the way the world is moving. That does not mean that it is either excusable or unimportant, simply that it is understandable. The teachers in my wife's school are becoming stricter because they are reaping the slackness of a previous generation. Unfortunately, the church has not caught up with the recognition that things have gone wrong. Part of the reason for that, is that many of the people in the church who now have responsibility for presenting the words of songs to us, are chosen on the basis of their technical or musical ability, rather than any ability in the use of English.

Whilst I have no objection to joining in with Simon and Garfunkel's nonsense words for a bit of fun and relaxation, I draw the line at being asked to sing nonsense words to God as a supposed act of worship. Such things are false fire and need to be recognised as such.

However, I have not written this booklet because of these things. They may form the basis for some further discussion, but they are secondary issues rather than primary biblical ones. My overriding passion is to see the Church of God honouring, respecting, fearing and worshipping God in Spirit and truth. That can only come from a return in practice to what God has said about worship in the bible.