

PRAISE FOR WALLPAPER WORSHIP

“Danny Byram helps us to understand the necessity of being spiritually alive and thoroughly committed to worship, which begins with God and His glory rather than with ourselves and our preferences. *Wallpaper Worship* is biblical, practical, and a vital resource for congregations and for those who lead them.”

—Alistair Begg
Senior Minister, Parkside Church, Chagrin Falls, OH

“Whenever I am speaking at a conference, I am always delighted when Danny is leading the worship. Not only is he a gifted musician, but he understands worship. And, he understands how to help other people worship. This book gleans from his extensive international ministry and years of teaching. It will make you think. It will also make you want to worship like you never have before.”

—Richard Blackaby
Author of *Living Out of the Overflow* and *The Seasons of God*
President, Blackaby Ministries International

“In *Wallpaper Worship*, Danny Byram defuses all the pointless dichotomies that so many books on worship get lost on. He gets to the core issues as only someone who has been involved for decades in shaping worship services, both great and small, could do. This book is not about changing our methods, but how our hearts can be changed by shifting priorities and focus, and by learning to truly care for those who find themselves simply showing up and lining the walls during worship.”

—Michael Card
Writer, teacher, songwriter

“We have all heard about ‘worship wars,’ in which people squabble over musical forms. This book digs much deeper. It focuses not on form, but on the *what* and *why* of worship. Most Christians have opinions about worship styles. What is more important is making sure that we are truly worshipping. This is a book worth reading.”

—Gary Chapman, PhD

New York Times best-selling author of *The 5 Love Languages*

“In my lifetime, worship has changed from something we do before an audience of God to something a few semiprofessionals do for an audience of us. In this thoughtful book, Danny Byram draws from his vast experience in many countries to explore the impact of this change. What have we lost and what do we need to regain? Danny was my worship leader for years, and he has earned the right to be heard.”

—Philip Yancey

Author of *What's So Amazing About Grace?*

WALLPAPER WORSHIP

WALLPAPER WORSHIP

WHY CHURCH MUSIC SOUNDS BETTER, FEWER
ARE SINGING, AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

DANNY BYRAM



Fort Washington, PA 19034

Wallpaper Worship

Published by CLC Publications

U.S.A.

P.O. Box 1449, Fort Washington, PA 19034

UNITED KINGDOM

CLC International (UK)

Unit 5, Glendale Avenue, Sandycroft, Flintshire, CH5 2QP

© 2018 Danny Byram

All rights reserved. Published 2018

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN (paperback): 978-1-61958-290-3

ISBN (e-book): 978-1-61958-291-0

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are taken from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from the New American Standard Bible® (NASB), Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. www.Lockman.org

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Scripture quotations marked NKJV are taken from the New King James Version®, Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Italics in Scripture quotations are the emphasis of the author.

Cover design by Mitch Bolton.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I was first asked to teach on the subject of worship, I was a bit stumped. At the time, it seemed easier to just lead worship than to articulate the whys and hows of worship. That was 1999, and since then there have been over two decades of workshops and conferences around the world.

As a young boy in love with music, and under the observation of my parents' ministry, I pursued a degree in sacred music. Yet it has been the last thirty plus years of my itinerant music/teaching ministry and event production that has given me the experience and knowledge base from which to write this book. The acknowledgments that follow reflect those who have invested in me and who share the message in these pages.

My wife, Angela, deserves the first acknowledgment for being the one who has emboldened me to be a man of integrity and selflessness, which is a challenge for someone who has lived his life on the platform to the accolades of many. Angela, you are truly the "wind beneath my wings." I enjoy the privilege of having a marriage, a family, and a ministry because of your patience, love, and sheer commitment to our partnership, and to the work God has called us to do together.

It is appropriate for me to acknowledge the shoulders this book stands on: My dad, Air Force Chaplain David Paul Byram, whom I watched and heard

from his pulpits and desks in air force chapels. He taught me the importance of critical thinking. My mom, Nancy Byram, was my earliest musical influence. She was the one who modeled how to use music to lead congregants, choirs, and individuals into meaningful worship experiences, whether contemporary or traditional. A stickler for professional presentation, her heart was foremost for the participation of the worshippers she led.

More recently, I want to thank Lisa and Larry Cardenas for their encouragement to finish this project, even before we had a publisher. Lisa especially deserves a big thanks for proofing my premanuscript, which eventually became a real manuscript for CLC Publications. Thanks to my nephew Adrian Viccellio, for critiquing and editing my book proposal; and to Dave Almack, former publisher at CLC, who accepted the proposal because he shared a vision for what this book had to say. Janelle Harris, who edited and encouraged my revisions, deserves a big thanks for making my message clear, credible, and actually printable. Thanks also to Erika Cobb, managing editor for CLC, who talked with me like a summer camp counselor throughout the process.

I want to thank the prayer partners and financial friends of Danny Byram Ministries who have faithfully walked this journey alongside Angela and me for thirty years.

Finally, a heartfelt thanks to our children, who are all adults now, and who all follow and worship the triune Christian God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Their confidence, encouragement, and advice lodges deeply into my soul. This book is an investment in their generation and the one to follow—the next historic cycle of worshippers who will worship in spirit and truth.

CONTENTS

	Preface	11
	<i>What Is Wallpaper Worship?</i>	
	Introduction	17
	<i>This Is a Football</i>	
1	Worship: A Major Award	23
2	The Worship Conversation	37
	PART ONE: WHAT WORSHIP IS	
3	Worship Is Our Heritage	51
4	Worship Is Our Privilege	75
5	Worship Is Our Duty	89
	PART TWO: WHAT WORSHIP ISN'T	
6	Worship Isn't Casual	101
7	Worship Isn't Deeds	121
8	Worship Isn't Music	135
	PART THREE: WHAT WORSHIP CAN BE	
9	Three Things Missed in Traditional Worship	149
10	Three Things Missed in Contemporary Worship	167
11	Three Principles of Planning: Participation, (un)Predictability, Power . . .	183
12	Three Essentials of Evaluation: Declare, Respond, Devotion	205
13	Our Legacy of Worship: What Will We Pass On?	227
	APPENDIXES	
	Appendix A:	243
	<i>A Historical Survey of Christian Song</i>	
	Appendix B:	253
	<i>Church Calendar for Dummies</i>	
	Appendix C:	257
	<i>The Creeds</i>	
	Appendix D:	261
	<i>US Air Force Hymn</i>	
	Appendix E:	263
	<i>The Larry Norman Story</i>	
	Appendix F:	267
	<i>Devotional Songs</i>	
	Notes	271

PREFACE

WHAT IS WALLPAPER WORSHIP?

My earliest experiences in church music and Protestant worship were in US Air Force chapels. My father was a trained Southern Baptist minister who became an active-duty air force chaplain when I was in first grade. Every three years, we were moved to a new duty station. We started out at Loring Air Force Base (AFB) in Maine. From there we moved to Spangdahlem AFB in Germany, then to Altus AFB in Oklahoma, Mountain Home AFB in Idaho, and the US Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs.

There was usually a Catholic priest and five or six chaplains from various Protestant denominations at each base, and Dad served as one of those many chaplains while my mother assumed the role of the choir director at the base chapel. This was where my earliest musical training was cultivated. I started piano lessons in second grade at Loring AFB. I taught myself to play guitar and ukulele in fourth grade at Spangdahlem AFB. I was entered into piano competitions in junior high

and sang pop songs with my guitar in school assemblies and musical theater productions at Altus AFB. In my senior year, I sang the bass solos in Handel's *Messiah* and took piano lessons at Mountain Home AFB from a teacher who had been a concert pianist at a music conservatory in Athens, Greece. I also landed my first professional singing job there. I was the music entertainment at a local restaurant for three hours every Friday and Saturday night, which helped me save money for college. When I started, my dad asked if I had enough songs to last a weekend, so I made a list of all the songs I knew. I stopped at 375. I could've sung every weekend for months without one repeat. By that time, it was obvious to me, my family, and my friends that I was going to be a music major. So I left Mountain Home AFB for Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma and started my undergrad studies.

While I was earning my bachelor of music degree in sacred music, I performed in pizza restaurants, hotel lounges, churches, the Elks lodge—anywhere someone invited me to provide entertainment. Sacred music and hymnology seemed like a weird specialty to me since most of my time was spent doing music that wasn't sacred and my performances weren't inside church buildings. As much as I appreciated my classical-based training by day, I really wanted to grab my guitar and head to Nashville, Music City USA, to write songs and become a recording artist.

In the last semester of my senior year, a Nashville-based recording artist named Gene Cotton performed on campus. He wasn't a huge star, but I'd heard a couple of his songs on the radio and I was curious enough to attend his concert. Since I knew the students in charge of the event, I was able to get

backstage to chat with him. I explained that while I was earning my music degree, I was singing in churches, clubs, and restaurants around town trying to build a fan base. Some of my admirers were encouraging me to go to Las Vegas and perform in the casinos. Cotton looked at me and said, “That’s great advice if your dream is to be singing your heart out while people walk by and stare at you as they count their gambling chips. If you want to make wallpaper music, go to Las Vegas.” I didn’t want my music to be passively heard or completely ignored. So I took his advice. I never went to Las Vegas.

Wallpaper music isn’t designed for serious listening or engagement. Like the wallpaper that hangs in a living room, it exists to enhance the design of the surroundings. No matter the skill or sincerity of the musicians who perform it, wallpaper music serves a passive purpose and requires little participation from its listeners. When we are shopping at the supermarket, we are accompanied by background music produced to make us feel good as we spend money. When I am dining at my favorite Mexican restaurant, I am audibly transported to that country by the mariachi music playing through the sound system. When we walk into a dentist’s office, we are as nervous as an ant on a freeway until we are intentionally calmed by the soothing sounds of smooth jazz. Wallpaper music is pleasant to the ear but it does little for the spirit.

WALLPAPER MUSIC YIELDS WALLPAPER WORSHIP

My wife, Angela, and I were invited by friends to attend a worship service at one of the largest churches in the Denver area, where we live. After hearing about how different the

experience of this church's worship style was for other people, we were curious: What new experience would we observe? We entered the main auditorium, a ten-thousand-seat arena with two-story-high video walls surrounding the stage and four stationary television cameras on floor platforms throughout the seats. The atmosphere was electric with anticipation. Suddenly, the house lights went down, the stage lights blinked, and the screens showed masterful camerawork by the video team. After taking their place on stage, the band began to play with precision and style. The musicians seemed to be very much engaged in what they were doing. I looked right, left, behind, and up to the balcony. About 80 percent of the people were visibly disengaged from what was happening on the stage. Some were chatting in small groups; some were nestled into the theater-style seats sipping coffee. Most of those present were merely standing on their feet watching the band play and sing. As sincere as the musicians seemed and as great as the music sounded, the people in the congregation were not connecting to the songs. It was painful to watch the musicians playing their hearts out, mouthing meaningful lyrics to a crowd that was, for the most part, paying them no attention. I thought to myself: *This looks just like Las Vegas.*

Was this church different? From what I have witnessed as I travel the nation and the world visiting churches, Christian conference centers, and military chapel services, churchgoers are experiencing this wallpaper worship in congregations as large as ten thousand or as small as one hundred. Many across the landscape of present-day church leadership say that this kind of nonparticipatory experience is what the current culture demands. As well meaning as that explanation is, it ignores

the bigger picture. The issue is rooted in a fundamental point that what we have been calling worship may not be worship at all. The church has redefined worship to fit a cultural model instead of a biblical one, much to the ignorance of many newly churching believers and the dismay of mature worshippers who have been around long enough to know the difference. This redefinition has evolved from a well-intentioned desire to connect with the surrounding culture in a relevant, contemporary way. The challenge is to understand which components of worship we are compelled by the Scriptures to never change in a social culture that is constantly changing.

I do not believe that what we had in the church seventy years ago should be considered the “golden age of worship.” As you will see in the pages ahead, wallpaper worship is not new. Early in its history, the church had eras of glorious worship followed by stumbles into passivity. Some of these periods lasted for hundreds of years until a groundswell movement helped the church find its voice again and begin to worship God in new ways that were alive in spirit and truth. If we fail to consider the historical context in which we inherited the practice of worship, we find ourselves vulnerable to repeating mistakes of the past, no matter how well we gift wrap those mistakes. I hope this book awakens our identity as corporate and individual worshippers and enlightens us about who we are: a privileged, powerful people who will not settle for passivity and passionately participate in all of our God-ordained activities, the first of which is worship.

—Danny Byram

INTRODUCTION

THIS IS A FOOTBALL

In 1959, Vince Lombardi became the new head coach of the Green Bay Packers. When he took the job, the team's record said it all—they were losers. Assuming they had a desire to win, even though they had won only two of twelve seasons, the new coach concluded what they had been doing wasn't leading them in a winning direction. It was up to him to earn their trust and lead them in a new direction. As he stood before them surveying their woe-begone faces, he told his players that under his leadership, they were going to return to the fundamentals of the game. He picked up a football and gave what was to become the most famous quote in NFL history: "Gentlemen, . . . this is a football."¹

Lombardi's simple point that day was likely met with reluctance and cynicism. But he knew something that his players had long forgotten. Leadership is about guiding followers to a desired goal. That season, the Packers followed their new

coach on a journey that led them out of the loser's column to become NFL champions. It was a journey into the fundamentals of the game. It was a journey back to the basics.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Confronting the “Ghosts of Worship Past” helps to uncover how we arrived at this current state of corporate worship. As we understand our history of worship, we more clearly see our present worship. Inevitably, this kind of reflection forces the question: “Why are we doing what we are doing the way we are doing it?”

I believe we experience worship in cycles. Before the Reformation of the sixteenth century, those cycles turned slowly over several hundred years. In my lifetime alone, there have been movements and cycles that have changed how the church approaches its worship practices. From 1962–1965, the Catholic Church changed many of its centuries-old practices of worship through the ecumenical council referred to as Vatican II. One of those changes no longer required the Mass to be recited in Latin. Instead, it was spoken in vernacular language. Folk music styles were also incorporated into worship and used as liturgical music. The result was the folk mass, which became a precursor to the contemporized music in the Protestant traditions. By 1969, four years after Vatican II, the Jesus movement started in Southern California. It changed not only the style of Protestant worship, but created churches that are still leading the contemporary worship movement into the twenty-first century. There have been other movements before and since: the Great Awakenings, the D.L. Moody Crusades, the

Billy Graham Crusades, Promise Keepers. Even with a simple cursory observation over my own lifetime, one can reach the conclusion that we tend to experience worship cycles not every few hundred years as in ancient times, but every fifty to seventy years and now as quickly as twenty-five to thirty years.

Since societal change is faster now, the cycles are shorter, starting and restarting before one generation has moved on. As we examine these cycles, it may be surprising to see where we are now in the early portion of the twenty-first century. A new normal has been established in the Western church. It has very little relation to whether rock music or traditional hymns are used in worship services. It does not matter whether your church uses a rhythm section or a pipe organ. It has nothing to do with liturgical elements or if a church meets in a remodeled bowling alley or a five hundred-year-old cathedral. The new normal is this: Many of our worship gatherings have become passive activities that often are akin to attending a motivational seminar, a ticketed concert, or watching a TV reality show. Those provide a vicarious experience for the viewer. The downbeat is hit, the program begins, the adrenaline starts, and suddenly we become observers transported into someone else's world. Many churchgoers in today's church market are experiencing worship in a similar way. Are we designing and executing our services to encourage passive observation? Do we think this is what congregants want? More importantly, is this what they need?

WHY THIS BOOK?

As someone who has led, performed, preached, and produced in NFL stadiums and NBA arenas, makeshift chapels

and US combat zones, I can attest—as many others can—that real worship is participatory. It has little to do with the location of the service, size of the crowd, comfort of culture, style of music, availability of gear, or whether the latest songs are used.

This book is the core curriculum of what I have taught in my worship workshops around the world since 1999. Getting back to the fundamentals of biblical Christian worship will help us to achieve corporate worship experiences that are fully participatory and spiritually powerful. In my touring and teaching over the past thirty years as a musician and minister, I have observed believers genuinely excited about worship as they understand it. What birthed the curriculum of my worship workshops was the lack of understanding of a biblical perspective on worship in contemporary, traditional, and even liturgical contexts.

There is an old phrase that parodies the Seven Last Words of Christ. It is called the Seven Last Words of the Church and they are: We've never done it this way before. Whether you are a leader, elder, deacon, pastor, musician, or lay volunteer, you may get excited about designing a new game plan and what it could mean for the people you lead and serve. You may get a vision of what is possible at a deeper level in your own life as a worshipper. I have learned in my own work as a leader, both in my ministry and in my marriage and family, that a good leader is wise. I have also learned to never act in isolation or reaction. As you read this book, share it with others in your community and see if they resonate with what is being put forward here. Remember, change is difficult.

For Coach Lombardi, the destination was simple: Get the team to carry the ball over the goal line. They had the uniforms,

the equipment, the facilities, and the talent, but they were not reaching the goal. What they lacked was a leader who understood how to create a new game plan that would harness their assets to lead the team to where they ultimately wanted to be. This book is about harnessing assets that belong exclusively to the church for the purpose of leading people into a powerful worship experience that is fully participatory, transforming, and powerful, regardless of the style, size, culture, or location. If your game plan isn't working, it's time to scrap it and get back to the basics of what worship is—and is not—and what it can be. So, ladies and gentlemen, "This is a football."

1

WORSHIP: A MAJOR AWARD

The perfect church service would be the one we were almost unaware of; our attention would have been on God. But every novelty prevents this.

—C.S. Lewis

Our family has a list of movies that have become “the Byram classics.” No matter how many times we watch them, they guarantee laughs for us and our guests. One of those movies is *A Christmas Story*,¹ which follows the school and home misadventures of a ten-year-old boy named Ralphie during the holiday season in 1948 Indiana. Narrated by his adult self, the film marks Ralphie’s dreams of getting a BB gun for Christmas and the hints he drops to his distracted parents.

One scene that is central to the story’s comedy is when Ralphie’s dad (the “old man”) arrives home from work announcing he has won “a major award” from a crossword puzzle contest and that it will arrive sometime that evening.

Later, as the family is having dinner, there is a knock at the door. They rush from the table and watch with anticipation as a large wooden crate is delivered. The old man manically pries open the wooden cover. And as he dives into the crate, sending packing materials flying, he lifts out his “major award”: a lamp that is a replica of a woman’s leg, complete with a shade on top that looks like it came from an 1890s saloon.

Young Ralphie’s eyes bug out. His younger brother Randy’s mouth drops open. Their mother is horrified as she covers Randy’s eyes. But the old man’s face glows with pride and excitement. It doesn’t matter to him what it looks like; it’s his major award! He quickly moves furniture, carefully positions the leg lamp in the front room window, plugs it in, and runs outside to admire the glow of his prize from the sidewalk. Just then a neighbor walks up slowly, staring in confusion. The neighbor asks the old man what that thing is in the window. The old man proudly announces that it is a major award. The neighbor squints his eyes and responds sheepishly, as if to say, *Really? It looks like a lamp to me.*

Since the word *worship* evokes images and meanings that were not linked to it as recently as a few decades ago, it’s easy to find ourselves staring at something in a church service that looks and sounds familiar, but is not completely recognizable. The people on stage are closing their eyes and are engaged in some kind of worshipful expression. If perchance the live sound is mixed favoring the vocalists, you might understand a few scriptural phrases. But why are so many congregation members leaving these religious gatherings feeling as if they missed something? They sound good. They sound right. We are told they are worship experiences. They are billed as

worship experiences. Yet I often hear reactions similar to the neighbor squinting and viewing the leg lamp in the window. “What is that?” a congregant asks. The reply: “It’s worship.” The response: “Really?”

WORSHIP REDEFINED

The American version of English has a reputation of being non-English English. That’s no more evident—and frustrating—than when you travel to London and need to find a restroom. To the English, you are looking for *the loo*. As Professor Henry Higgins sings in the musical theater classic, *My Fair Lady*: “There even are places where English completely disappears. In America, they haven’t used it for years!”² He’s quite right. Even words in our common language can have very different meanings. Over time, vernacular language becomes tired and submits to colloquialism.

Another reason words or phrases receive new and adjusted meanings are because the new meaning can serve a larger purpose when the populace catches on. Here are some examples:

WORD	OLD MEANING	NEW MEANING
Green	A color	Environmentally safe or friendly
Embezzlement	A crime of stealing	Misappropriation of funds
Gay	A jovial mood	Homosexual
Stream	A flow of water	A flow of electronic information
Thread	Used to sew on a button	A flow of electronic conversation
It	The old man’s major award	A gaudy leg lamp

Webster's American English Dictionary offers a concise definition of the word *worship*: "devotion to a deity." It's pretty simple and easy to understand. Yet worship has been redefined by our current Christian culture. I first heard the word used in the songwriting context in the late 1980s when a company called Hosanna! Integrity (now Integrity Inc.) began to publish and release cassette recordings of the musical portions of worship services. Because of their simple choruses, those short, repetitive songs had been previously known in the 1970s as "praise choruses" and eventually became familiar to listeners and musicians as "worship songs" because they were easy to follow, perform, and use in participative group singing. The song form itself has roots much further back than the 1980s.³ Over time, the usage of the music came with a new usage of the word *worship*. When I was recording in Nashville in the early 1990s, the song style had become accepted and known as simply "praise and worship." At one of my recording sessions, some of the studio musicians I hired to assist me asked, "Is your music P&W?"

There are unspoken rules behind the current usage and meaning of the word *worship*. Inherent to those rules is the assumption that anyone without that knowledge is out of touch.

Worship is a gathering of Christian people.

Worship is the programmed flow of a service.

Worship is the music portion of the service.

Worship is a style of music.

Worship is a song form within a style of music.

Worship is a lifestyle.

Worship is an emotion.

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING EXAMPLES OF CURRENT WORSHIP PHRASEOLOGY.

- “Are you doing worship?” This question is generally directed to (a) a person planning to attend a worship service or (b) a musician invited to play music in a church service.
- “When will we sing worship songs?” This makes the distinction between hymns, instrumentals, and other styles.
- “You’ll do the worship portion of the service.” A musician is being given instruction that their music will be played during segments in the service designated for music only, particularly group singing.
- “Make sure you do some praise and worship.” The phrase “praise and worship” denotes a specific song form or repertoire, anything but a hymn or a solo piece.
- “We loved your worship.” A compliment I have personally received over the years. It means “we liked your song selections, the way you performed them, or the way we felt when you performed them.”
- “Did you like that worship?” This is asked to determine if a person liked or disliked a set of songs (or a solo) used in a service. It is also a litmus test for judging a congregation’s musical taste.
- “Girl, you worship!” A compliment directed to a friend who demonstratively participated in a worship service.

Some may quip, “I see. Sometimes, it’s simply about using the word *worship* in place of the word *music*. What’s the big deal?” Oh, if it were that simple. There are at least a dozen possible ways *worship* can be used in the above examples. All of them create nuances that may or may not be consistent with each other. In other words, you may choose to scramble, fry,

poach, or throw an egg, but it is always an egg. Not so with worship. This diversity of use and nuance is risky because:

1. It fails to ensure what is being transmitted or what is being received.
2. The interpretation is completely subjective to the moment, the context, or the culture.
3. The new meaning of the word may not line up with the biblical meaning of the word.

A pastor I worked with for a number of years had a flashy and dramatic style of communication. Congregants were thrilled as he used movie clips and dramatic soliloquies to illustrate his points and entertain his audience. But if you asked congregants as they were leaving the service, you would find that few understood what he was actually talking about. When asked, “What was the point he was making?” I heard the response: “I have no idea, but it sounded great!” In other words, it’s plugged in and it’s glowing in the window. But what is it?

WHAT’S SO AMAZING ABOUT WORSHIP?

What is truly amazing about our Christian worship heritage is the vast array of styles, colors, music, art, liturgies, and improvisations in the spirit. As a people group, Christians have inherited an incredibly colorful history of worship expressions. There are places today where many of these tools are being used in creative ways to capture the hearts and minds of those in attendance and connect them with the truth of the gospel. For instance, Angela and I recently attended a “night

of worship” at a nearby church where music was performed; liturgical readings, poetry, and Scripture passages were shared; and testimonies were given. Meanwhile, visual artists were at work around the room, creating paintings and interpreting in art what was being communicated from the platform. Though this kind of experience in a worship service setting may not happen every week, going to a worship service should be something we find incredibly rich to our minds and hearts.

Regardless of style, any worship service that is boring and predictable is like going to an art museum with paintings that are all blue. After moving through two or three galleries, one may ask, “Is this it? Why aren’t there any paintings in other colors?” After seeing every exhibit in one color, we may get so used to it that we begin to think, “Well, I guess this is art.” The same mistake can be made in our worship habits. When few congregants are participating—standing around drinking coffee, chatting, or passively observing the goings on from the platform—we can get so used to it that we may walk away thinking, “Well, I guess this is worship.” Perhaps we should ask a tougher question: Is what we are calling worship boring and predictable?

Our son, Jeremy, and his wife, Carly, have volunteered at their church to help with music and sound. One Sunday, he was stationed in the rear of the sanctuary helping with lyric projection when one of the pastors decided to stand in the back with him during that particular service. Normally, the pastors dutifully sit on the front row. The service opens with church announcements followed by the opening set of music. When the band took its place on the platform and started to play, one third of the congregants made their way to the aisles,

through the doors, and into the lobby for coffee and visiting. The pastor turned to Jeremy and asked, “What’s happening? Why is everyone leaving?” He was completely unaware that what he was observing had been happening every Sunday behind his back. Oddly, no one who was leading from the platform and facing the congregation ever brought it up in a planning meeting. Hmm.

So why are they leaving? Why are so few singing and so many standing around observing, as if they’re waiting for something else to happen? The answer is obvious to those willing to consider it: There’s not much there demanding people’s participation. How can that be, we ask? We have rehearsed our heads off. We have all the right gear and talent to create the sound of world-class praise and worship.

The same phenomenon is true for nonmusical portions of a worship service. A speaker may think, I have worked so hard on this sermon and no one seems to get it. What’s wrong with these people? But is it really the congregation’s fault? More and more churchgoers are starting to realize that their worship experience may be something other than a worship experience. It may contain elements of music, a teaching, some movie clips, a dramatic characterization, and definitely a bunch of announcements. But what is it?

The *Washington Post* published an editorial by a millennial reflecting on her church experience. In it, she said, “The trick isn’t to make church cool, it’s to keep worship weird. You can get a cup of coffee with your friends anywhere, but church is the only place you can get ashes smudged on your forehead as a reminder of your mortality. You can be dazzled by a light show at a concert on any given weekend, but church is the

only place that fills a sanctuary with candlelight and hymns on Christmas Eve.”⁴

AN OBSERVER’S SPORT

Wallpaper worship is an observer’s sport and since watching reality TV, clicking YouTube links, and streaming video on our phones and laptops is the cultural norm, doing worship as an anonymous nonparticipant feels somewhat normal. However, when there is little, if any, participation, it doesn’t take long for congregants to realize they are actually just passive observers, providing a weekly audience for a group of performers.

Are we bound to this kind of experience simply because we happen to live in an era of passivity and vicarious media experiences? Is there more to this worship thing than what we are getting? Is a nonparticipatory observance of a performance what the Father intended for His worshippers? When we gather to sing, pray, recite, take sacraments, listen to a Bible teaching, sing again, and depart, do we do so with a sense that something extraordinary has happened in our midst? Or have we settled for a rational, linear, television program-like experience because that is what we are used to?

OK, SO WHAT IS WORSHIP?

Getting back to the fundamentals requires us to agree on what worship is and what worship isn’t. To get clarity, why don’t we find out what the Bible has to say on worship? Let’s look at one of the shortest yet most revealing passages that

gives us the purpose, characteristics, and results of worship—the five verses of Psalm 100.

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth!

Serve the LORD with gladness!

Come into his presence with singing!

Know that the LORD, he is God!

It is he who made us, and we are his;

we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving,

and his courts with praise!

Give thanks to him; bless his name!

For the LORD is good;

his steadfast love endures forever,

and his faithfulness to all generations.

THE PURPOSE OF WORSHIP

Worship causes humility. When we “come into his presence with singing” (100:2), something profound becomes obvious: He is God and we are not. It is humbling to realize “we are his people, the sheep of his pasture” (100:3). Think about it. This Lord, who is God Himself, has created His own people. That’s us! This is a humbling thought in our world of self-made, rugged individualism.

Worship honors His power, His praise, and His plan. Our humility in worship causes us to declare God’s power, not our own. It also verbalizes His praise. Verse 4 says that

thanksgiving and praise is the posture with which we enter the place of worship: “Give thanks to him; bless his name!” Worship also declares that His love is everlasting for all people of the past, present, and future: “For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations” (Ps. 100:5). Worship makes us humble so we can declare His power, praise, and plan to “all the earth” (100:1).

The more we worship, the more humble we become. The more humble we become, the easier it is to declare His power, His praise, and His plan. This is the purpose of worship.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF WORSHIP

Worship is corporate. Verses 1, 2, and the opening line of verse 3 all use the imperative commands of make, serve, come, know. The implied subject of the commands is “*you* make, *you* serve, *you* come, *you* know.” That this is a plural *you* becomes clearer as we move into verse 3 and beyond: “It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people.” It doesn’t say “it is he who made me” or “I am his person.” This psalm talks of worship as being a corporate activity with the participation of many.

Worship is private. It is clear from other passages besides Psalm 100 that worship can also be a private activity—involving prayer (see Matt. 6:6), fasting (see 6:16), offerings (see 6:4), and praise through song or prose (Hannah’s prayer of praise in First Samuel 2:1–10 or Mary’s Magnificat in Luke 1:46–55).

The Bible is clear that the characteristics of worship are not corporate *or* private. Rather, worship is both corporate *and* private.

THE RESULTS OF WORSHIP

Worship results in grief over our sin. This kind of godly grief or sorrow (as seen in Second Corinthians 7:9) is a fruit of the humility it takes in knowing “that the LORD, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his” (Ps. 100:3). Every worship experience does not necessarily lead to grieving over sin, but it is worth recognizing this as one result of worshipping a holy God.

When the nation of Israel returned to Jerusalem after being held captive in Babylon for seventy long years, their governor, Nehemiah, and the priest, Ezra, called for an assembly. There was a celebration wherein Ezra read the Law of God for seven days. In describing the event, Nehemiah 8:9 says, “For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law.” In Nehemiah 9:1–3, they wept in humility, realizing how they and their ancestors had been disobedient. Then “they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day; for another quarter of it they made confession [of their sin] and worshiped the LORD their God” (9:3). The rest of chapter 9 is their declaration of not only their sin but also God’s power, praises, and plans for them.

Worship results in joy over God’s forgiveness and loving-kindness. Psalm 100:4 tells us to “bless his name!” Why should we bless His name? Verse 5 elaborates: “his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.”

Again, Nehemiah said something very similar to the people of Israel when they wept over their sin: “‘This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.’ For all the

people wept as they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them, ‘Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength’ ” (Neh. 8:9–10). Sounds like a great worship service, which ended in joy.

Worship results in unity of direction. When we declare God’s plans, there is always action to be taken for us to fulfill them. God’s people come together in one heart and mind to do His will. Psalm 100 is five verses of commands, not only for corporate and personal worship, but also for living life itself: make, serve, come, know, enter, give, bless. These are the ways we not only worship in a gathering, but also worship with our lives—in the doing of life—as a community of believers and followers of God, reaching out to our neighbors and the world around us in the name of Jesus Christ.

As we move forward, drilling further down into the details inside of worship, let’s start with the Son of God Himself and His report of what His Father in heaven’s view is on worship.