

Heavenly Worship
Achieving the Worshipping Heart
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Note: This is a work in progress! Editing is ongoing, and comments are welcome. Specifically, if you have complaints against any particular worship style dealt with in the book, I'd love to include it! (Or, alternatively, if you've heard complaints that you want answers to that haven't been dealt with.) E-mail all comments and requests to liltator@yahoo.com

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Preface

I have recently been inspired to write this book by simply thinking about a topic that is central to our lives as Christians: worship.

Honestly, as I sit down to write this book, I find it very difficult to do. I am what I call “ecumenical at heart”. Whenever I self-identify myself that way, I tend to get looks from people that say “Huh?” Often, their mouths follow suit. So, I’ll unpack this concept before I continue.

I am convinced that the Church today lacks unity. This is really a very simply point to prove. Look around you. In every community, you find multiple churches, each of totally different denominations, and often these churches are very quick to condemn the other churches for several issues. This could be everything from a moral question (Is homosexuality really wrong?) to a political question (Republican v. Democrat) to a liturgical question (How often should Communion or the Eucharist be served?) to a theological question (Are you “once saved, always saved”?). Regardless the category, we have allowed these questions to be sharply divisive to Christ’s Bride, the Church. Not only are our organizations separate (which is arguably not a problem), but our attitudes toward one another are often openly hostile. Yet, Christ tells us “By this all men shall know that ye are my disciples, that ye have love one to another”. (John 13:35 KJV) The Church has abandoned the charge that Paul gave to the early Church when he said “I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Eph. 4:1-3 KJV) As an “ecumenical at heart”, I believe that we should seek unity as the Body of Christ. This unity will arise not out of our agreement on everything, but rather on our agreement that Christ is Lord, and our unified desire to know God and love Him, to bring Him glory, and enjoy Him forever.

Yet, many will be quick to say “But, Lucas, there are limits to this unity! We can’t open the Faith so far that ‘anything goes’!” I agree. There are limits. We must draw a line between “Christian” and “non-Christian” in terms of faith and practice. But, where does that line go?

Now, some would say “the Bible must be the line”. However, there we run into difficulties immediately. Many groups (some clearly cults) claim to believe in the Bible. So, what do we mean by “the Bible must be the line”? Often, this comes down to meaning “my interpretation of the Bible must be the line”. If that is the case, then we are moving no further from divisiveness than we are today. So, what then is to be the dividing line between Christian and non-Christian? Some would say “Christ is”. But, here, we have the same problem. What view of Christ? What of those that believe Christ was a great Teacher, but not the Son of God? Are they to be included?

Now, some will wisely say “We should not judge this question, as it is not ours to decide”. However wise and enlightened this position may sound at first glance, it is simply not true. While I agree that we cannot judge any individual case, we can certainly judge certain doctrines as being outside the realm of orthodox Christianity, while others fall inside that realm. So, I propose the following as a measure of Christian orthodoxy: The Apostles’ Creed. (see below)

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
the Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord:

Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended into hell.

The third day He arose again from the dead.

He ascended into heaven
and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,
whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting.

Throughout the years, the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds have been considered basic statements of Christian doctrine. Personally, I choose the Apostles’ creed because I believe it is less restrictive than the Nicene, and more interested in providing a basic statement of faith than a more theologically complete statement of belief. However, I think it is possible to boil basic Christianity down even further: “Man sins. Christ died and rose again, proving He was the Son of God. Because of this sacrifice, God forgives man.”

Of course, none of these creeds are perfect. (As a Friend, it is my duty to point that out.) None of them provide you with a good theological understanding of God or His work. Rather, they are simple statements of facts that are proposed for belief. But, mere intellectual recognition and agreement with these facts is not enough. Rather, you must allow them to influence the decisions you make in your life. Only then can you, as an individual, be considered Christian.

This is the heart which led me to write the book you have before you. I hope that this book will help you to train your heart to worship with ecumenical unity.

Introduction

Starting out, I wasn't certain that I wanted to write the book you're reading. Certain parts of it seemed "unchristian" as I thought about them, and other parts seemed to question where the Church is today so much that I grew nervous about the possibility of writing this book.

At first, I thought to myself "Lucas, is it really right of you to condemn people's opinions regarding various worship styles? Who are you to do this? Shouldn't you judge not?" But, then I remembered a key verse that Paul wrote "All Scripture is given by the inspiration of God and is profitable for... reproof" (2 Tim 3:16 KJV). One of the purposes of Scripture is to reprove, rebut, and rebuke those actions, attitudes, and opinions which are counter to Scriptural Truth. So, taking this Scripture in hand, heart, and mind, I moved forward, confident that I was doing something for the good of the Church. Confident that I was calling the Church to a greater unity under Christ. My attitude is not one of condemnation, but one of a call to unity and redemption. My desire for you, the reader, is that you would be called out of attitudes that are keeping you from being effective in your worship, and will replace these attitudes with attitudes that prepare you for Worship Above.

I was also challenged as I looked at the state of the Church today. It seems that so few are concerned about the divided state that it is in. Each worshipping community is content in its own worship rut, and is quick to condemn all those who would dare to worship in a different manner than they do. Rather than bearing with one another in love, today's Christian sects ignore one another at best, or condemn one another at worst. This is not the fellowship that God desires his various believers to have. God wants us to build a community of love one with another, each teaching, and, moreover, learning from the other. ("Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend." (Prov. 27:17 KJV)) So, with this book, I hope that you will acquire a listening heart. A heart that is willing to experience, accept, and enjoy worship styles that are different than what you are accustomed to. It is my hope that through our common bond as worshippers of the Lord Jesus, we will learn to develop a deeper community between our different groups.

This is my hope. I can only pray that it will come true.

Chapter One – Biblical Worship

One question that must be answered before we begin is "What are the standards for good worship?" But, before we answer that question, we first have to answer one that's even more obvious. Where do we find these standards?

In this book, we will look to Scripture to answer the usual arguments given regarding worship. Now, Scripture has much to say about worship, as is really no surprise. The word “worship” appears 107 times in the King James Version of the Bible. In addition, the word “praise” appears 248 times. This alone provides a lot of material for a Scriptural study on worship. But, it’s not my goal to go verse by verse. Rather, I will focus on three categories: Scriptural statements regarding worship, examples of worship in Heaven, and examples of worship on Earth.

Scriptural statements regarding worship – The Lord has not left us to our own devices in worship. Rather, he has laid out for us certain principles of worship in Scripture. These are the clearest passages with which to refute arguments against the worship of God. However, these statements are few relative to the other two categories.

Examples of worship in Heaven – God has blessed us with several visions of Heavenly worship. Revelation, Isaiah, and Ezekiel are only three of the books that contain visions of Heavenly worship. We will take these visions as examples of what our worship may be, to be acceptable to God.

Example of worship on Earth – these are plentiful in Scripture. The longest book of the Bible is devoted to this, and the Psalms are still used in many churches for worship purposes, whether through singing metrical versions, or chanting responsively, or simply singing songs based on the Psalms. In addition to the Psalms, Scripture contains other examples of worship on Earth which can also provide us with a guide for our worship today.

These are the three categories of Scripture that will be used throughout this book. You’ll become quite familiar with them as you read. Unfortunately, it won’t necessarily be possible to have passages in each category to answer each complaint, but “a word to the wise is sufficient”, as the old adage goes. Generally, more than a word will be available, and I intend to make it so.

Before we embark to answer specific complaints, I want to lay out some basic principles that seem clear in Scripture.

1. “God is a Spirit. And they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.” (John 4:24) If we wish to offer Heavenly Worship, we have to pay attention to two aspects of our worship: its spirit, and its truth. The question of spirit is one of heart-feeling. Do we truly believe what we are saying in worship? Do we believe the words of the songs we sing in praise? Do we believe the prayers we raise? These are questions that must be answered in the affirmative for our worship to be pleasing and acceptable to God. If we come with critical spirits, then we cannot expect God to look kindly on our sacrifice. The question of truth is one that is related to the worship itself. Does the worship ring with the truths of Scripture? Or do our hymns misrepresent the God of the Bible? If so, then there is an actual problem with the worship itself. But, if the worship is true, then any problems in worship must be located in the hearts of the worshippers.

2. “What then? Notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretense, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice.” (Phil 1:18 KJV) This should be our prayer. That, for whatever the reason, Christ would be preached in our worship. If that occurs, we should rejoice as Paul did, though some were preaching Christ to try to harm Paul. But, in the end, as long as Christ is preached in worship, it is a cause for rejoicing. Therefore, we should respond in joy.

But, ultimately, the most important lesson we must learn about worship is that it is not about us, our wants, our desires, or our “preferences”. Worship must be about God. He must pervade our worship, be the object of our worship, and be presented in our worship. If this occurs, then our worship (and others’ worship!) should not be condemned by anyone. The reason for this should be obvious... God does not condemn such worship. And, if He who is the end and object of worship does not condemn it, then it is great pretense for us to! Who are we to think that we can condemn worship that God Himself does not condemn? This is the height of arrogance. And I think it is no coincidence that, traditionally, Lucifer is seen as being a director of music among the angels. Worship can easily become a source of pride. And, as soon as it does, it becomes unacceptable, as walking humbly is a requirement from God (Micah 6:8).

So, in this book, it is my hope to correct some of the errors that can often creep into our thinking about worship. It is my hope that, through this, we can build greater Christian unity amongst each other and, more importantly, that we may achieve worshipping hearts.

Chapter Two – Complaints Toward “Old Music”

We live in the age of Contemporary Christian Music. As I type now, I have playing behind me music by the Christian band Brave Saint Saturn. It’s a beautiful collection of music that praises God and calls us to ministry to the outcasts in society. It is truly “good music”, in the most important sense of “good”.

But, with Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) has come an attitude of what I call “youtholatry”. Youth is set up by many (old and young alike) as an idol by many in the church. This can be evidenced by such simple things as coloring one’s hair so that you can’t see the gray or dressing informally to Sunday morning worship. But, it expresses itself in more extreme forms. In some churches, worship for all is led by the high school youth group’s worship band. And I don’t mean simply on a particular “Youth Sunday”. Rather, year-round, week after week, the standard practice is for youth to lead their parents and grandparents in worship. This is a far cry from the divine design of the older and wiser leading the young. Some have taken Paul’s admonition to Timothy (“Let no man despise thy youth” 1 Tim. 4:12) and twisted it to a far stronger form that seems to imply that youth isn’t just something that should not be despised, but rather that youth should be envied and placed on a pedestal. It seems we have forgotten the words of Solomon: “The gray head is a crown of glory” (Prov. 16:31).

Of course, full-fledged youtholatry is rare. There are some churches where it has not yet made its appearance. And embracing some of the trappings of youtholatry does not necessarily imply that youtholatry is there. But, these facts are not enough for us to consider it not to be a problem. Youtholatry is a problem because it challenges God's design for the family, and, more importantly, His design for the family of God.

But, this is not a book about youtholatry and combating its origin and ill effects. Rather, this is a book on worship. So, let's turn then to youtholatrized worship.

In the Church of Youtholatry, no song is sung if it is more than 10 years old. Such songs are considered too out of date to speak to the Generation of Today. In the Church of Youtholatry, no song is sung unless it sounds like a song that a secular band could also sing. After all, how do we expect to bring the Youth into the Church unless we give them music that they want to listen to? In the Church of Youtholatry, all complex order of worship is discarded as a relic of years gone by. In the Church of Youtholatry, torn t-shirts and ripped jeans, wallet chains, blue hair, tattoos, and tongue-rings are considered proper Sunday attire to the exclusion of dress shirts with ties and 3-piece suits. And the Youth God forbids that the pastor be seen in anything more formal than a polo shirt.

In this chapter, it is my goal to answer some of the complaints that supporters of CCM place against what it labels "Old Music". And, don't worry, CCMians. The next chapter will turn the tables. After all, both sides have things to learn.

Complaint #1: Hymns are BORING and LONG.

Okay, I admit, these are two complaints in one. Let's first think about "boring".

My answer: "Boring" is a sign that you think worship is about you. And, worse, about music.

Worship, my friend, is not about the music. Worship music is not even about the music. Worship music is about worshipping God. How can worshipping the Ancient of Days, the Most High God, the Lover of your Soul be "boring"? In worship, we lift up our hearts and voices to Heaven in hopes of reflecting just a bit of the Light of God to the people around us. This is an inherently exciting thing! It doesn't matter if the music is fast or slow. In fact, sometimes God wants something other than fast music! He tells us so.

"Be still, and know that I am God." (Psa 46:10) Sometimes God asks that we be quiet so we can hear His voice. Because, remember, worship is about Him, it's not about you. It's about what He wants to tell you, not the other way around. Yes, we should praise Him. But, why can you only do that with modern sounding music? Do you think that a timeless God is bored with The Old Rugged Cross? He never grows weary of hearing our praises, even if they're the same ones over and over again. (Look at the beasts in Rev. 4:8! They never stop saying "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, which was and is and is to come"!)

My answer: "Long" is relative. Are you saying that you only love God enough to offer short songs?

If the length of most hymns (4 verses) wears out your love for God, then you have serious spiritual problems. Remember, in Heaven, our primary job is praising God! So, consider singing a hymn as practice for building up your endurance! And remember, He is strong in your weakness. He will carry you through the length of the song.

If you really want to see something long, look at Psalm 119. This was a song of praise written by David several thousand years ago. In most Bibles it is one of the few Psalms to take several pages. Even printing it as a computer file without any special formatting would take me about 6 or 7 pages. Most hymns can easily fit on one or two pages.

Let's be frank. God doesn't mind long songs. He put a very long one in the Scriptures. If He didn't want them to be long, He'd not have included Psalm 119, which is 176 verses long.

Complaint #2: The Bible says to Sing a New Song! So, that's what we're doing.

My answer: So what?

You're right. We should sing new songs. But, that doesn't mean we shouldn't sing old songs. If we weren't supposed to sing old songs, then why is Psalms in there any way? I'm not arguing that CCM should be banned by the Church. Rather, I'm just saying it shouldn't have the monopoly.

Complaint #3: I can't understand some of these old hymns... The vocab is just too archaic.

My answer: Your lack of education is not an excuse.

Funny, I always thought "archaic" was kind of an archaic word... But, that point aside, your lack of understanding isn't a reason to throw away a song. Rather, it's more a reason for you to sit down and expand your vocabulary! If you can't understand some of the old hymns, how do you expect to understand any of the complexities of the faith? So, find an older person to explain the hymn texts to you. Odds are you'll learn more than just a few old words. You'll probably also learn some exciting truths about God.

Complaint #4: Okay, back there a bit, I didn't actually mean "boring"... I meant more... out of date. How can the generation of today be expected to actually like these old clunky songs?

My answer: You choose what you like.

First, let's talk about "out of date". The phrase makes it sound like worship songs are like milk. If you keep them around too long, they go bad and aren't useable any more. This is clearly not the case. Once again, look at the book of Psalms. And, really, if hymns written in the 1600s or later are out of date, then isn't Jesus out of date? After all, we've been worshipping the same Savior for 2000 years. I think we should get a new one, this Savior is getting stale.

As far as your rhetorical question... Let's remember, we have a decent amount of control over what we like and don't like. They call it "acquired taste". True, there are some things that you like naturally, and there are some that you have to learn to like. So, maybe for most people today, hymns are an "acquired taste". But, that's no reason for not having them around. Let's remember, Christianity isn't really something that people naturally like! "Wait, you mean you want me to admit that I'm worthless slime that some God out there loves and died for... And then you want me to live like this guy 2000 years ago that got himself killed? Forget it!" That's the natural reaction, isn't it? But, as Christians we know that it's not the right one.

Chapter Three – Complaints Toward “New Music”

I'd like to introduce you to a Church I've encountered.

In this Church, The Hymnal that the Church has had for 50 years is the only source of music. In this Church, the pastor dressed in the same robe his predecessor wore walks in behind an acolyte as the organist and pianist play a duet. The music they're playing was written in 1742. After the Church's bell is tolled, the pastor offers the same Invocation he has for 15 years, and the Church, according to the Order printed in the Bulletin (or in the front of The Hymnal) which is the same as it was 20 years ago. The Church cycles through the same 6 hymns every two weeks. Opening Hymn, Prayer Hymn, and Closing Hymn. After a sermon that the pastor pulled out of his file, the pastor leaves to another song from the 18th century. In the back, he greets the same parishioners he has for 20 years in the same way as he always has.

I call this Church the Church of the Rut. While the Church of Youtholatry is consumed by the new, the Church of the Rut is consumed by the old. It is trapped in doing exactly the same thing it always has. It continues to print the same order of service in the Bulletin every week, just so the people will know which of the 6 hymns they already know they will be singing. And, despite the fact that the Congregation has the hymns memorized, it will continue to take out The Hymnal and turn its dog-eared pages to the same 6 pages and act like it's actually referring to The Hymnal while it sings. (Of course, for the last two lines, the Congregation is closing The Hymnal and placing it back in its rack.) New people only come into this Church by being born to current members. And, they, in their turn, will do the same thing their parents did. Because it is "how Church is done."

Of course, there is a place for tradition in the Christian life. We'd be stupid if we didn't realize that we have an old faith, and that with this old faith comes some old traditions.

However, in the Church of the Rut, Oldness is worshipped in the same way that Newness is worshipped in the Church of Youtholatry. Anything that isn't old is not merely suspect. It is outright rejected. If the hymn isn't already memorized by the congregation, then it certainly shouldn't be sung. And under no circumstances should anything less than Sunday Best be worn to worship. After all, God won't be able to recognize you if you wear different clothes.

Fortunately, the extreme case of the Church of the Rut is rare. But, there are certainly churches that are in danger of that trap, and there are certainly people who have the attitudes where the Church of the Rut is born. So, in this chapter, it is my hope to convince those who believe in "Hymnal Only" worship that we should "Sing a New Song Unto the LORD" (Psa 96:1) now and then.

Complaint #1: We don't know these new songs, so when we sing them we stumble through them.

My Answer: Learning is a part of growth.

A significant part of the Christian life is learning to worship God rightly. And, part of this process is learning new ways of worshipping him, including new music (and new styles of music). Sure, the first time or two through may be rough. However, over time, they will become easier (as is true of anything that is practiced!).

Ultimately, though, the complaint misses the entire point of praise and worship. When we sing a song, old or new, we are seeking to "make a joyful noise", as several Psalms instruct us to. Psalm 66:1 encourages "Make a joyful noise unto God, all ye lands". Psalm 81:1 similarly suggests "Sing aloud unto God our strength: Make a joyful noise unto the God of Jacob." Psalm 95:1-2 repeats the theme twice. "O come, let us sing unto the LORD: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms." Psalm 98 also demonstrates the importance of making a joyful noise. Verse 4 states "Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all the earth: make a loud noise, rejoice, and sing praise." Verse 6 restates "With trumpets and sound of cornet make a joyful noise before the LORD, the King." Finally, Psalm 100:1 echoes Psalm 66:1 when it exhorts "Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all ye lands."

The point of worship then, is not to make a beautiful noise (as of yet, I have found no verse suggesting to make a "beautiful noise" unto God). The point is that, along with the great company in Revelation 5:12, we should declare "with a loud voice, 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing.'" The word "glory" in that verse has two interesting alternative translations: "praise" and "worship". In short, we worship God because He is worthy, and through our worship we express that we understand that God is worthy.

Complaint #2: Contemporary praise and worship songs are doctrinally empty.

My answer: Songs have more purposes than just a “teaching tool”.

It is amazing to me that someone schooled in Scripture could make this objection seriously. Many of the Psalms could be considered “doctrinally empty”. For example, let’s consider Psalm 117.

“O praise the LORD, all ye nations: praise him, all ye people. For his merciful kindness is great toward us: and the truth of the LORD endureth forever. Praise ye the LORD.”

There are, roughly, two theological truths on the surface of this Psalm. God has two attributes: great merciful kindness and everlasting truth. That’s about it. Of course, this is only one Psalm. It would behoove me to provide more examples, so I will oblige. Psalm 113:

“Praise ye the LORD. Praise, O ye servants of the LORD, praise the name of the LORD. Blessed be the name of the LORD from this time forth and forevermore. From the rising of the sun to the going down of the same the LORD’s name is to be praised. The LORD is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens. Who is like unto the LORD our God who dwelleth on high, who humbleth himself to behold the things that are in heaven, and in the earth! He raiseth the poor up out of the dust, and lifteth the needy out of the dunghill; that he may set him with princes, even with the princes of his people. He maketh the barren woman to keep house, and to be a joyful mother of children. Praise ye the LORD.”

Admittedly, Psalm 113 is more doctrinally rich than Psalm 117. However, many contemporary praise and worship songs easily match Psalm 117 in doctrinal richness. And they almost certainly do no worse than Psalm 150:

“Praise ye the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary: praise him in the firmament of his power. Praise him for his mighty acts: praise him according to his excellent greatness. Praise him with the sound of the trumpet: praise him with the psaltery and harp. Praise him with the timbrel and dance: praise him with the stringed instruments and organs. Praise him upon loud cymbals: praise him upon the high sounding cymbals. Let everything that hath breath praise the LORD. Praise ye the LORD.”

From Psalm 150, it would appear that an appropriate worship song in God’s eyes (if we believe that He inspired the Bible, which I do) is to list the various instruments used in worshipping him. It would also appear that God does not object to modern worship bands, as guitars are certainly stringed instruments, tambourines are simply a modern term for “timbrel”, and drum sets certainly include cymbals. It also appears that any objections made against dancing in worship should be set aside.

Besides looking at examples, it is helpful to look at the words Paul gave to the church in Ephesus: “Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:18b-19). While there is some debate about the distinction between psalms, hymns, and spiritual

songs, some claim that “psalm” denotes Scripture set to music, “hymns” denote songs which primarily communicate doctrinal truth, and “spiritual songs” denote “love songs to God”. In either case, it is clear that the focus is to “make melody in your heart to the Lord”, not to simply write songs as teaching tools to help people memorize Scripture or doctrine.

Complaint #3: So many contemporary praise songs are “self-centered” rather than “God-centered”.

My answer: What matters is our relationship to God. We play a part in that.

As a simple exercise, let’s count the number of mentions of “God”, “Lord” and “LORD” in the book of Psalms: 440 “God”s, 793 “Lord” or “LORD”s. Total: 1233 combined. Now, let’s count the number of “I”s and “me”s: “I” appears 802 times (more than either God or Lord), “me” appears 662 times. Total? 1464 “I”s or “me”s. So, in the book of Psalms as a whole, the psalmists mention themselves over 200 times more than they mention God by name. (Admittedly “his” was left out of the count. There are 614 “his” mentions, but these are mixture of references to God and to various men, righteous and wicked. So, on the whole, the story probably would not change much as a full 422 “his” references would have to refer to God to even make the two categories equal. The word “him” appears 276 times, but, like “his”, “him” is a mixture of God and human references.)

So, why should we, as the lowly worshippers, be mentioned so often in worship music? Here, there are several good reasons, but they all have their root in a central truth of Christianity: the faith is about the relationship between us and God. It should be no surprise that our worship reflects our faith.

One way in which praise music reflects the relationship between God and man is by stating our praise for, love for, and trust in God. Psalm 7:17 states “I will praise the LORD according to his righteousness.” Psalm 116:1 reads “I love the LORD, because he hath heard my voice and my supplications.” (Note: 3 mentions of self, 2 of God in that verse). In Psalm 7:1, the author states “O LORD my God, in thee do I put my trust.” All of these are important and valid reasons to mention ourselves in praise.

Another way in which praise music reflects the relationship between God and man is by demonstrating how God relates to us. The most familiar example is probably a passage from Psalm 23: “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” Just as it is important to remind ourselves of how we ought to act toward God, it is important for us to remind ourselves of how God acts toward us. (As a side note, in Psalm 23 there are 12 references to God and 17 mentions of the psalmist.)

God is to be primary in our worship. Worship is about God, it’s not about us. That is true. But, we misunderstand what that means if we think that it’s reducible to the number of times God is mentioned versus the number of times we are mentioned. Rather, we can

honestly say that God is primary in our worship when we can say whole-heartedly with David: “Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer” (Psa. 19:14).

Complaint #4: Some contemporary praise songs are so short that worship bands repeat them over and over again.

My answer: Repetition aids learning (see complaint #1), and, moreover, emphasis.

Too often in our modern American culture, we have lost respect for the value of repetition. In many cases, we have replaced valuable repetition with the phrase “familiarity breeds contempt”. This phrase does not appear in Scripture. But, repetition does.

For example, look at Psalm 136. At the end of every single verse (that is, 26 times), the phrase “for his mercy endureth forever” appears. The Psalmist is so enamored with this concept that he repeats it over and over again. Reading the Psalm carefully reveals what appears to be the reason for this seeming obsession: everything good exists for the very reason that “His mercy endureth forever”. Creation, the Exodus, the defeat of the Canaanite kings, and even our daily bread are traced back to this cause, as is our gratitude to God. Emphasis here shows the importance of what is being repeated.

But, not only is repetition a part of earthly worship. It is a part of worship in Heaven as well. Revelation 4:8b describes: “and [the four beasts] rest not day and night, saying, ‘Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.’” Not only is the phrase repetitive in itself (“Holy, Holy, Holy”), but it is repeated over and over again day and night. Ultimately, because this statement communicates an important truth.

I have observed that often, when we complain of repetition in a song, we are actually claiming to already understand whatever truth is communicated in the song. I believe that this is impossible in worship music because, ultimately, God is beyond our capability to fully understand. On the one hand, this would seem to be a source of frustration. On the other (and more proper) hand, this means that we need not fear repetition because we can always find new layers of meaning to the text of the song.

But, too often we believe that worship music is about the music or about the words. It isn't. Rather, it is about the concepts communicated by the words set to music. So, a song which did nothing more than repeat “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come” hundreds of times should not actually be repetitive in our minds and hearts, though it may be on our lips. With each repetition, we can focus on a different word in the phrase, and, moreover, a different aspect of that word. (The word “holy” itself contains so many layers I dare not try to start uncovering them, or I would be forced to write another book.) In fact, in many ways, repetition is good because repetition makes it so that the words and music are no longer our focus. Too often, when this happens we get bored or distracted. This isn't the fault of the music or the worship style or even the worship band. It is our fault. When the band, music, and style has

given us the opportunity to free our minds from focusing on the words and music, we should then focus them on the object of that worship: God. I've found that a good way to do this is to imagine, in my mind, a scene relevant to the song being sung. If the song is about the Cross, then imagine Christ hanging on it breathing "It is finished". (My favorite time to do this is when I'm in a Catholic mass singing "Jesus, Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us" and I can simply look up to the crucifix.) If the song is about the majesty and glory of God, then imagine Him enthroned in a glorious marble temple. This is a wonderful exercise that I have found truly changes the way you worship. By bringing the object of worship into your mind, the repetition, rather than seeming like drudgery, seems insufficient to communicate the Truth that we know.

New music isn't perfect. Of course, old music isn't either. But, we should always strive to grow and to perfect our worship as best we can. And a part of that is singing a new song unto the Lord.

Chapter Four – Complaints Toward Liturgy

One of the most interesting times in my spiritual life was the summer that I spent regularly attending a Roman Catholic Church. I grew up in the Friends Church, which certainly is not known for being liturgical (more about the Friends in the next chapter). The story runs more or less like this:

I was in Auburn, Alabama for the summer working for an economic think tank near Auburn University (unassociated with it, though). So, since I was going to be working down there for three months, I decided to seek out a church. Most of the staff at the Institute I worked at were Catholic, and one afternoon in the office, I overheard one of them practicing for Sunday mass, as he sang in their worship group. I really liked what I heard so I decided to try the church. (My uncle is Catholic, as are some good friends of my family, so the Catholic Church never appeared as a "cult" to me. Rather they were simply a "high-church denomination".) The worship the first week I attended (and several thereafter) shocked me. Rather than feeling lost because I didn't know what I was doing (I learned most of the liturgy within the first week), I felt a warmth. I felt involved in the whole service rather than merely being an observer of most of it. I didn't take Communion (or the Eucharist, as they would call it). But, I felt as if I were part of a worshipping community. The liturgy bound the Church together in a way that I, being of a non-liturgical background, had never experienced before. In short, the liturgy provided a basis for unity.

Many in the Christian community today, however, are critical of liturgical worship (that is, the style typified by Catholic, Episcopal, Orthodox, and most Lutheran churches). So, I will turn now to answering their complaints.

Complaint #1: Liturgy takes the heart out of worship.

My answer: Whether the heart is in worship is up to us.

We are the ones who must decide if our heart is going to be in worship or not. Every day and every moment we must “choose this day whom ye will serve” (Josh 24:15). If we so choose, we can worship God through liturgy. In addition, many of the examples of worship in Scripture we see seem to be liturgical.

Exodus and Leviticus contain numerous regulations of worship and festivals which provide a sort of liturgy. That is, they provide a definite order and rules to worship. And, any deviation from this worship was considered to be a negative thing, whether it be the wrong person offering sacrifices or building additional altars without direct command from God so to do (the “high places”, for example, were considered an error for many of the Israelite kings even when the incense burnt there was burnt to God).

In Heavenly worship, it is common for multiple angels or saints to sing or say the same thing at the same time. This unison recitation can easily be considered a parallel to liturgical worship. And Paul himself tells the Corinthian church, “Let all things be done decently and in order” (1 Co 14:40).

Complaint #2: Liturgy is too restrictive, and doesn't allow room for the Spirit to move.

My answer: God is a God of order.

The first image we have of God in Scripture is that of the Creator of an order. He provides form where there is no form. And this form is “very good” when it is completed (Gen. 1:31). God, in fact, cares so much about order, that he instructed that the temple used to worship Him be built in a specific way to specific dimensions with specific decorations with specific materials. The Spirit can move through orderly, planned worship. In fact, the Spirit seems to bring order where there is none (as in the Creation).

Ultimately the only freedom the Spirit needs to move is for us to open our hearts to His inward leading. It is up to us to learn to do this despite the circumstances.

Chapter Five – Complaints Toward Free Form Worship

I promised more about Friends in this chapter, so I'm going to open this chapter with a description of traditional Quaker worship (which isn't always practiced by modern day Friends).

In my opinion, Quakers are the modern “reintroducers” of free form worship. In a traditional Quaker service, there is no set order of worship. There are no set items that will necessarily occur in a given Meeting for Worship. Rather, the congregation gathers and waits for the Spirit to move one of them to speak, or sing, or pray. Sometimes, silence is the only thing that is heard in an entire meeting.

Of course, this is not the only form of free form worship. It is simply the most extreme. Other forms of free form worship range from times for congregational “hymn sings”

where members of the congregation choose hymns on the spot, or Charismatic prayer times which may be interrupted by speaking in tongues or prophecies. In short, any worship which is not determined before hand can be considered “free form”.

However, some disagree with free form worship (not simply because of disbelief in “sign gifts”, but because of the lack of form itself). So, I hope here to answer their major complaints.

Complaint #1: God is a God of order. Worship without form is disorderly.

My answer: Order does not necessarily imply pre-determined order.

Some would quote the passage from Paul to the Corinthians (which I did above) that we should “Let things be done decently and in order”. However, focusing purely on this verse ignores the actual order that Paul describes in the rest of the chapter. Selecting one of the most relevant sets of verses (1 Cor. 14:29-30): “Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge. If any thing be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace.” In short, this passage implies that it is perfectly possible (and acceptable) for people to speak immediate revelations during a service without any previous planning. Not only that, but when someone receives a revelation, the person who was speaking previously is supposed to be quiet. Interruptions, it seems, have preference over our “wait your turn” cultural norm.

Order does not mean that everything is planned. Rather, it means that there is a lack of confusion about how to deal with a situation. To use a non-spiritual example, consider roadways. We don’t all sit down and plan out our trips in advance with everyone else. Yet, most of the time, we travel in an orderly way because right of way laws establish that order. But, the specific applications of those laws are not known until they need to be applied (for example, when you approach a yield sign whether you stop or continue depends on if there is any interfering traffic). Likewise, who is going to speak and when isn’t known before a Quaker meeting, but there are definite procedures for if and when that happens.

Chapter Six – Developing a Worshipping Heart

It is my hope that this small book has helped you to realize the importance and validity of unfamiliar worship forms. This final chapter I am devoting to more practical issues. Or, put differently, this chapter seeks to answer the question “How should we then worship?”

Individual Level

On an individual level, there are numerous practical implications that can be drawn from the preceding chapters. I think that these implications can be divided between “corrective” applications and “growth” applications. I will start with the corrective, as I think we actually need to do in real life.

The first corrective application of the contents of this book is very simple: don't criticize an unfamiliar (or even uncomfortable) form of worship simply because it is unfamiliar or uncomfortable. Rather, the only reason we can have to criticize a form or style of worship is if it is at odds with Scriptural truth. It is my belief that very few worship styles fit into this category. Rather, each worship style simply varies based on the tradition which forms its basis. The proper response for us, as Christians, is to act toward one another out of charitable love. Before we move to criticize or disagree, we must first move to understand and encourage. We must learn the lessons that Jesus taught his disciples when they sought to stop the ministry of others: "He who is not against us is on our part" (Mark 9:40). Add to these the words of Paul to the Corinthians: "No man can say that Jesus is Lord, but by the Holy Ghost" (1 Co 12:3). If the Spirit is there in a form of worship, then it is not our place to condemn it.

The second corrective application (which I implied in the body of the book) is more about the state of our hearts when we are in an actual worship experience. In the Catholic liturgy, there is an exchange between priest and people that goes like this:

Priest: Lift up your hearts.

People: We lift them up to the Lord.

Priest: Let us give thanks to the Lord, our God.

People: It is right to give him thanks and praise.

I think this captures the attitude we should have when we come into worship. Our hearts should be lifted up to God as an offering to Him because He is worthy of our thanks and praise. In addition, our hearts should be open to the work which God seeks to do in us during worship. Too often, we enter worship with the wrong attitude because we enter worship with our own preconceptions of what is "supposed to happen" in worship. Thus, when God offers us unanticipated blessings during worship, we misinterpret them as "problems" with worship. When we think there is a problem with worship, there usually is. And usually, that problem is our own attitude.

The most obvious example of this is when a pastor's sermon is longer than we think it should be. The natural reaction is to begin looking at your watch and thinking about how late lunch is going to be this afternoon. This is the way we react to the boredom which is setting in. In order to fight this common urge, I suggest the following. First, remember that the message is probably for someone in that church. Perhaps the repetition is necessary for someone who is doubting what the pastor is saying. Perhaps someone was distracted during the first repetition, and that person has a need that the pastor is speaking to (no, that God is speaking to through the pastor). Or perhaps this is a case where the pastor is actually saying things that no one needs to hear. But, even in this case, this is a blessing in disguise.

In modern America, we have forgotten the importance of silence. Quiet we don't mind once and a while. But, we run from silence. We put music on in the background when we do household chores (I have music playing in the background right now). If we're not busy doing something, we get bored. But, sometimes even when we are busy doing

something we get bored. Boredom is a sign that our hearts are not right. Why is this the case? Because boredom is a misinterpretation of a blessing. We interpret boredom as a sign that we aren't being mentally stimulated. This is true as well. But, lack of mental stimulation is not a problem in itself. Once external mental stimuli go away we are now free to think about what we want to think about. Boredom shouldn't be a call to busy ourselves with some other mental task or entertainment. Boredom should be a call to focus ourselves on God. This is especially the case in worship, where our entire focus is supposed to be on God in the first place.

So, use those times when you are getting bored to reflect on God or pray. Don't worry about missing God's message for you if you've gotten bored in church. If the pastor is going to say something that you need to hear, you'll hear it as long as your focus is where it should be: on God instead of on you. Most churches that I have been in provide very little time for silent meditation or prayer, if they provide any at all. Often, when they do provide it, they play piano, organ, or guitar in the background. So, rather than praying or meditating, we end up singing in our heads. While this is not a bad thing, it does defeat the actual purpose of the silence: to allow time for prayer and meditation! So, I believe that when pastors "get long-winded" or speak in a very hard to follow manner, it is actually to provide us with an opportunity to pray and meditate which we so rarely get in worship settings nowadays. Likewise, whenever you come to a point in the service where you find yourself naturally not liking it, then determine how you can turn that time over to God. The answer isn't always prayer and meditation. But, there is always a way to redeem that time. Sometimes, it is up to us to find that way.

The preceding covers the major corrective applications. But, as Christians we do not seek simply to correct bad behaviors and attitudes. Rather, we seek also to replace them with good attitudes and behaviors. That is the category "growth" applications fall into. These are practical ways that I think we can implement the basic principles behind this book.

First, I think we need to vary our own private worship experiences. I am an advocate of listen to worship music at home. This provides a wonderful opportunity for us to expand our worship experience in our own home. Go out and buy at least two CDs. Have one be a newer "praise and worship" CD. Try to find one with a few songs you've not heard of. Have the other be an "old worship music" CD. This CD could be anything from a CD of hymns (make sure it is vocal music because words are what makes the difference between a hymn and an instrumental classical piece of music) to a CD of Gregorian chant. If you're looking to buy three CDs instead of just two, then buy both.

In addition to listening to different styles of worship music, try different postures of worship. I'm going to suggest something radical to some of you. When you listen to your praise and worship CD, try dancing to it. It doesn't have to be complicated choreography. Just move around as comes naturally. Then, try kneeling. (After spending a summer attending a Roman Catholic Church, one of the things that I missed most was kneeling in a worship service.) Try kneeling when you pray. Try kneeling when you listen to any kind of worship music. Then, try something even more radical.

Try lying prostrate. Each of these positions and activities captures a different aspect of our relationship with God (or, truth be told, each captures many aspects!).

In addition to varying or private worship experiences, vary your corporate worship experiences. This suggestion, though, needs much clarification. I do not advocate “church hopping”. “Church hopping” is a terrible practice which generally serves to put our own preferences in the foreground when we think about worship. Rather, what I advocate is something a bit more difficult that requires more devotion. Be devoted to a single church as your “home church”. Worship there as regularly as you possibly can. Prioritize at least one of the services above any conflicts that are less than major emergencies. Then, visit other churches as you get the opportunity. Try, say, once a month or once every two months, to attend a service at a different church than you usually attend. If you are devoted to a Sunday morning service, then find a Saturday night to attend Catholic mass. Find a Sunday evening to attend a charismatic service. Find some time which does not conflict with your commitment to your church to attend another church so you can experience the different form. Also, make sure that it is a different form! If you are Lutheran, then attending Episcopal and Catholic services hardly widens your experiences much! If you’re Methodist, then a Presbyterian or United Church of Christ service probably won’t challenge your assumptions regarding worship. So, don’t think you’re challenging yourself just by going to a different church than usual. You’re only really challenging yourself when you go to a church of a different form or style of worship than yours.

I realize that, in some cases, this suggestion will be difficult or impossible. If that is the case, then simply take the opportunity when it comes along. For example, when you’re on vacation over a weekend, don’t pack up and hit the road on Sunday morning. Rather, go to a service at a church totally unlike the one you usually attend. You wouldn’t be going to your home church anyway, so you’re not hurting your commitment to that church. You are simply taking advantage of a rare opportunity to expand your horizons and encourage unity within the Body of Christ.

Here end my suggestions for individuals. Most people will find the last section to be relatively impractical because they are not in a position to carry out the suggestions I will make. But, if you wish to proceed, feel free to. Next, I will move the corporate level of worship and suggestions for encouraging an open heart by the order of worship used.

Corporate Level

I have seen several churches that I believe feel similarly to the way I feel in a certain way. That is, they don’t believe that worship style is particularly important in whether worship is acceptable to God. How do I know this? Not because I’ve talked to their pastors. Not because I’ve read their “Statement of Unimportance of Worship Style to its Acceptability before God”. Rather, I know this because I’ve read the signs they have in front of their churches. They generally say something like this:

Contemporary Worship: 8:30

Sunday School: 9:45

Traditional Worship: 11:00

The fact that they offer both contemporary and traditional worship shows that they believe both are valid forms of worshipping God.

But, this path, I believe is the wrong one if we want to encourage tolerance toward varying worship styles amidst the people attending our church. Why is this? For a simple reason: in most churches, two different services create, essentially, two different churches housed in one building. These two churches have the same theology (even the same pastor), but the membership is totally different. In addition, this method of solving the “worship style choice problem” encourages what I would call the “Burger King attitude”. You’re telling the people attending your church that “at this church, have it your way!” We are presupposing that people have decided that they like a particular worship style and that they will worship that way. So, if we don’t offer them what they want, they’ll go down the street and get it from another church. This may be true. But, it, too misses the point.

The purpose of the church isn’t, primarily, to serve its members whims. It is to serve God’s whims. And God desires a church built on unity. If people with divisive hearts decide that they cannot attend your church because of its chosen worship style, then they have divided themselves from your fellowship. I don’t believe that you will be held responsible for that, as long as you were seeking to do God’s will.

So, if I don’t like the two different services approach, what approach do I like? I call it the “hodge-podge” approach. In short, I suggest that, when designing an order of worship, you should take all the styles and mix them together. Sing both modern praise choruses and old hymns. Even throw in chanting a Psalm. Put time in your service for free form worship, but don’t leave out liturgical elements (like responsive readings, the Lord’s Prayer, the Doxology, or a Creed). Design your service so that people will experience a variety of forms in a single service. This will encourage an appreciation (or at the very least a tolerance) for various worship styles and forms. Also, if you’re in a position to give a sermon to your church, when you implement this plan, give a sermon about why you’re doing it! Give your congregation practical advice on how to deal with the more uncomfortable parts of the service. Perhaps even print in your bulletin (if you use one) why the service is structured the way it is (and unstructured where it isn’t!).

I realize that it won’t be easy. There will probably be resistance to this kind of move, but in the end, you will be increasing unity among the Body of Christ as a whole by encouraging understanding within your congregation of congregations from different traditions.

I also realize that it could be a logistical nightmare to figure out how to order the service. So, I will make a rough suggestion, based on my own experiences.

Prelude

Opening Hymn
Invocation and Call to Worship
Praise and Worship Songs [with open altar at some point]
Offering Hymn
Offertory & Gathering of Tithes and Offerings
Doxology
Offering Prayer
Pastoral Prayer
Lord's Prayer
Responsive Reading from the Scripture Lesson
OR
[Responsive Reading from Psalms
Scripture Lesson]
Sermon
Apostle's Creed
Introduction to Free Form Worship
Free Form Worship
Announcements
Benediction
Postlude

The style of free form worship here depends on the circumstances. Ideally, I would have it be entirely free form. That is, people are allowed to speak, pray, or request songs if the Spirit so leads them. In a smaller service, this presents little logistical problem. In a larger service, it is more difficult (though not impossible, if ushers are given wireless microphones which can be used as necessary, and the pastor "moderates" if necessary). But, much depends on time constraints (if there are any). I would actually encourage churches to limit themselves to a single worship service which is scheduled after Sunday School so that there won't be a time limit to Free Form Worship. But, that is not always practical. Where it is not, I suggest trying to get to the point where it is practical. If your church body is simply too large for everyone to meet together in the sanctuary, then begin a building fund to construct a larger sanctuary. Or, preferably, plant a daughter church and encourage your congregation to attend there, if it is nearer to their homes. But, where this proves impossible for whatever reason, time limits may be placed on Free Form Worship.

I also must point out that this order of worship is simply a starting point. It should be tailored your own needs. Perhaps you believe that free form worship is so essential that it should be placed before the sermon, so that it can, if necessary, require the sermon to be shorter or eliminated altogether on a particular week. This is certainly an acceptable alteration, as are nearly any other alterations that can be made! The purpose of this suggestion is just to get the thoughts moving and to show that, yes, it is possible to combine the different traditions into one sensible service. (Of course, I left out things like dramas which can also be added if so desired.

In the end, I hope that we may, at the very least, foster greater understanding, or at least tolerance, of the way our different Christian brothers and sisters choose to worship. And this is no small step to take.