

Psalm 95:1-6. The Heart of Worship.

Psalm 95:1-6. *O come, let us sing unto the LORD: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation. ²Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms. ³For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods. ⁴In his hand are the deep places of the earth: the strength of the hills is his also. ⁵The sea is his, and he made it: and his hands formed the dry land. ⁶O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the LORD our maker.*

I was first introduced to corporate worship at the age of four years when I was adopted by a family that attended a protestant church whose doctrine is based upon the Reformed traditions. The order of service was simple, reverent, and repetitive. We would start with a hymn, a prayer, two more hymns, a responsive reading, an offering, the singing of the doxology, the little choir would sing a song, the pastor would present a sermon, and the service would end with the recitation of the same closing prayer each week. During those formative years, my mother would keep me busy by giving me drawing paper and a pencil, which I would put to good use as I drew pictures of anything that came to mind, and through that medium I was able to listen to every word the Pastor would preach. For a youngster, the service could be summed up in one word: boring. Week after week, month after month, year after year, I witnessed the same order of service that included the same songs, the same responsive readings, the same prayers all repeated by the same group of people who seemed to never smile during that longest of boring hours. Only a handful of those who were there actually participated in the singing and in the prayers.

Not long after high school I, with my wife, became active in Baptist churches where the greater depth of Bible study and use of more upbeat and contemporary music in the worship services were attractive to me. We were introduced to traditional Baptist worship services: We would start with a hymn, a prayer, two more hymns, an offering, the choir would sing a song, the preacher would preach, and the service would end with the recitation of a prayer. All that had changed from my protestant upbringing was the removal of the somewhat liturgical doxology and responsive reading, providing more service time for the sermon that received far more emphasis and time in this latter denomination. Week after week the same experience was shared by the same group of people who never seemed to smile during the worship services. Only a handful of those

who were there actually participated in the congregational singing and in the prayers.

I later started serving as a minister of music and was given the opportunity to change this pattern of nearly lifeless worship. After years of service in several churches in different areas of the United States, inspired by a continuing desire to see more joy and spontaneity in worship, I found that I was able to lead only a somewhat familiar order of worship: We would start with a hymn, a prayer, two more hymns, an offering, the choir would sing a song, the pastor would present a sermon, and the service would end with the recitation of a prayer. People would rarely smile, and participation in the singing was usually half-hearted at best. Many participants would not sing at all, and most of these would not pick up a hymnal.

Is this what our worship of the LORD should be, or should there be something more? What does God expect from us when we engage in true worship?

We find many examples of worship in scripture. When we look at the worship and praise lifted up to the LORD, YAHWEH, by the ancients and by the early church, we do not find an outline for an order of service that God has written down for us to follow. We do find a pattern, however, that can shape the nature of our worship and possibly bring us much closer to the experience that God intends.

Psalm 95:1a. *O come, let us sing unto the LORD:*

The Psalms contain a tremendous amount of teaching on the subject of worship. The author of the 95th Psalm, traditionally King David, knew how to worship God. When David worshipped, it was as if there were none but God and David in the room as he would express sincere and exuberant joy, reverence, and wonder in worship. Psalm 95 starts with an invitation to come to God in worship. Note the vertical nature of worship that David describes. When we come to God in worship with singing, to whom do we sing? We sing unto the LORD.

1. The heart of worship is vertical.

It is not God's intent that we would come together simply to sing praises to one another. Unfortunately, the model we have adopted for corporate worship services makes it very easy for us to fall into a mode where we come to church to be entertained. With the media full of high-quality amateur entertainment such as that viewed on television's "*American Idol*," "*America's Got Talent*," "*The Voice*," and similar shows, we have come to demand a very high level of quality from those who entertain us. This consumerist model becomes adopted by the

church when we provide rousing applause for a well-performed solo or choral presentation, while remaining unresponsive for a presentation that does not move us. As consumers we will leave the service edified if we liked the music or if we liked the pastor's message. As consumers we will be somewhat critical of a less-than-professional presentation of both the music and the message. This model is far from the model of true worship, and represents one of the reasons why we may not experience the form of worship that we see in scripture: Our focus is often more on ourselves (inward), and on each other (horizontal) rather than on God (vertical).

Certainly, a balance is in order. The writer of Hebrews speaks of gathering to worship:

Hebrews 10:25. *Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.*

The scripture clearly points to many horizontal aspects of worship, as it calls us to come together as a family of believers, exhorting¹ one another as we respond to the tremendous gift of grace that God has given us. We need one another, and to turn our concerns entirely off one another in order to focus solely on God would also be a great error.

What is the nature of that balance that actually applies in worship? As a musician, David encourages us to worship God in singing. The way we come to God in singing states much about our true participation in worship, and it is easy to demonstrate both horizontal and vertical worship in our songs. Consider the following two examples:

Horizontal worship: "Jesus loves me, this I know." "I was lost but now I'm found, I was blind, but now I see." "I was sinking deep in sin... Love lifted me." Such testimonies are edifying, and certainly bring glory to God. Yet their focus is upon ourselves, they can be sung one-to-another, and can leave God out of the line of communication. If we are not entering the worship experience with a vertical intent, we can still go through the motions of worship without missing a beat (pun intended), but missing the mark when we sing half-heartedly to each other rather than to the LORD.

Vertical worship: Consider the lyrics of songs like "I love You, LORD," "How Great Thou Art," "You are my All in All." It is amazing that the Creator, the Almighty God, would grant to every one of us first-person access to His throne of

¹ Encouraging and uplifting.

grace. It is in this access that a context for worship truly takes place. These are examples of song lyrics that are sung to God, not to each other. Since they are sung directly to God, we often refer to these as worship songs, prayer songs, or praise songs. The Psalms are a source of prayer songs, and their words are often included in this genre of music.

We can worship the LORD with testimonials and with prayers. We can help in creating a more vertical worship experience when we consciously focus on God, and often it is easier to do so with prayerful lyrics.

Psalm 95:1b. *Let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.*

2. The heart of worship is joyful.

How should we come to God? David describes worship as JOYFUL. David was a musician and loved to sing and play musical instruments. This gift he brought to the LORD, and he did so with over-the-top, exuberant joy. Why is there often so little joy in our services? Actually, part of the answer to that question lies in the history of the modern Christian church. The Vatican, the Church of England, the early reformers, and the reformed churches (particularly the Puritans,) all adopted a formal, legislated, and austere form of corporate worship that was short on joy and long on reverence for God. Fearing that any expression of joy might appear disrespectful, their orders of service were designed to focus on reverence for God. The presence of laughter and smiling faces would have been considered irreverent, and even demonic during the middle and dark ages. Certainly, reverence, as we will shortly find, is also a very important part of worship. However, when we look at the biblical model for scripture we find that the first response to God in worship is joy.

Traditions die hard. Even now, 500 years after the foundation of reformed theology was established,² we still may balk at the expression of joy in worship. We seem to have an unspoken fear that spontaneous joy might break out, so we will put controls in place to avoid such a controversial experience. Shouts of "Amen," "Praise the LORD," "Hallelujah," are rare in most of our modern corporate worship. Expressions of praise such as the raising of hands in worship are culturally suppressed. However, to constrain the joy of worship is to purposely place a limit on the quality of worship that God deserves, our willingness to participate in it, and on the depth of meaning that worship can have for us. By stifling joy, we are also willfully disobedient to God's command to be joyful in our worship of Him.

² c. October 31, 1517-1648 A.D.

It may be interesting to note what true joy sounds like in worship: David describes a *joyful noise*. The apostle John, in his Revelation describes the same sound as he describes the worship of the great throng of the New Jerusalem: the fellowship of saved souls of the age of man,

Revelation 19:6. *And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the LORD God omnipotent reigneth.*

The Hebrew verb used here is literally, "shout aloud," the identical instruction that was given to Israel when they were to blow the trumpets and shout in front of the walls of Jericho prior to the destruction of the city.³ We see another example in 1 Samuel 4:5 when the Arc of the Covenant was returned. All Israel shouted so loud that the ground shook. This is a joyful noise to the LORD.

I have had the opportunity to sing in some relatively large choirs. One such experience was in the mid 1970s with a group of about 2000 Christian musicians who met in a conference in Falls Creek, Oklahoma. Other similar opportunities included crusade choirs with Billy Graham. While experiencing the joy of worship in this setting I would often ask myself if this is what heaven will be like. As a musician I enjoy the balance and harmony of skillfully presented choral music, and I am obsessive when it comes to correct pitch. When a thousand voices come together to sing praises to God, the sound is almost indescribable. Still, however, scripture reveals that the voices raised in worship will be as the voice of mighty thunderings: far more powerful than anything I have ever experienced or imagined.

Unlike we who desire to be entertained by *American Idols*, God is not interested in our rhythm, balance, harmony, or pitch. He is not interested at all in the musical quality of our singing. **God is only interested in the joy that we feel in our hearts as we express our love for Him.** In our drive for horizontal worship, we have sometimes come to place an expectation of musical professionalism on those who "perform for us." **The worship experience is not for us: it is intended to honor God, alone.**

A contemporary musical composer, theologian, and singer, Michael Card, wrote on the back of one of his early albums the prayer, "**LORD, compared to your glory and majesty, my music is nothing but squeaks and squawks. LORD, please bless my squeaks and squawks.**"⁴ When we recognize God for who He is, we are humbled, and we can only offer the best of what we have for Him,

³ Joshua 6:20.

⁴ Paraphrased from memory.

and it is only this that God expects. Our best is not characterized by silence when our joy is stifled by our failure to completely love God in worship.

I am reminded of the exuberant worship expressed by King David, the author of this Psalm. Would we be critical of, or even offended by his worship because of its over-the-top exuberance? David is described as dancing and shouting before the LORD, and worshipping with his musical instruments. He was even comfortable enough in his worship to do so without wearing his ceremonial robes that were required for temple ceremonies, choosing to worship God in the modern equivalent of a t-shirt and blue jeans. His wife, Michal, despised him for his exuberance, and for his state of undress that is considered nakedness in ancient near-eastern culture. David simply stated, "I must celebrate before the LORD."⁵ Worship is a joyful celebration of who God is, and what He has done for us.

I was once impressed by a woman in an upstate New York Pentecostal church fellowship who stepped out into the aisle and started dancing during an extended singing portion of a Sunday morning worship service. Unsure of my own response to her expression, whether I was at ease with it or not, I was aware that if this was a true and sincere expression of her worship, using the gift of dance that God had obviously given her, it was appropriate. As she danced, young children began to encircle her and join in. Before long, I was sharing in their worship of the LORD as I watched their joyful exuberance. Tradition is so hard to break.

How do we fully shed those attitudes and thoughts that encumber our worship? How do we put away our selfish desire to have it "our way" and be freed up to simply worship God?

David shows that this is done by focusing his worship on God, rather than on man or his icons and idols. God is the Rock of our Salvation. He is the very basis and foundation for every blessing we have received, and it is in His grace alone that we are saved. When we come before God in worship, we are coming to the same God that we will someday worship together in heaven. We will be part of that "mighty thunders," and when we stand before God in heaven we will be amazed and humbled. There is no reason for us to experience any less amazement, or any less humility as we approach God now.

Furthermore, we can see that God requests our exuberant praise. This Psalm is part of God's Holy word, and it is only one of many places where God is expressing His desire for our vibrant worship. For us to sit quietly during the

⁵ 2 Samuel 6.

singing, by our failure to participate, we are simply disobeying God. God's Holy Spirit is not going to lead us to disobey Him. It is only the unholy one who wins when our worship is stifled. Our true worship of God is an expression of our obedience to Him, and obedience is simply the fruit of humility. It is our own selfish pride and our own selfish desires that stand between us and our exuberant worship of the Rock of our Salvation.

How many times have we seen church members leave the service angry over something that did not take place the way they thought it should? Their testimony is something like, "I did not like ___!" We can fill in the blank. Worship is not about what we like. It is about what God requires: a humble heart that expresses sincere, joyful, worship of Him. It makes no difference what style of worship we employ, whether it is liturgical or free. It makes no difference if we are wearing a blue suit or blue jeans. The only thing that makes true worship is what is taking place in the heart of the worshipper.

3. The heart of worship is thankful.

Psalm 95:2a. *Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving.*

When we truly understand who God is, and when we truly recognize what He has done for us, we have no other rational response than thankfulness. What do we have to be thankful for? Certainly the list is endless, because God, the Creator, is our Sovereign LORD, and all that exists because of Him. We owe God our very life that He has given us. Every life is created and sustained by Him. Of course, we come to Him in thankfulness for what He has done through His Son that we have been forgiven for our trespasses, and are granted the privilege of worship, not just for today, but for eternity.

4. The heart of worship is participatory.

Three times, David has introduced the verb in each phrase with "Let us." Worship is not something to be watched, for to watch only edifies ourselves, and **opens up our natural bent for critical observation.** We cannot worship God simply by watching someone else any more than we can hit a consistently accurate 350-yard drive by watching Bubba Watson or Phil Mickelson. True worship of God is personal, and from the heart. True worship is an expression of that heart, an expression that God deserves as well as commands.

When we do not participate, we tend to evaluate. We will be more concerned with what people are wearing, the room temperature, the comfort of the pews, the crying babies, the squealing hearing aids, or any other number of

distractions. When we do not participate we become bored, waiting for the service to be over so that we can return home to our pot roast or to watch our favorite televised sports events. When we do not participate, we do not worship at all.

However, when we take our eyes off of our own desire for entertainment, when we begin to see the opportunity for worship for what God desires it to be, we will be able to set aside our deadly pride and focus on God, who is the only One worthy of worship. God has instructed us to worship Him, so participation is not an option if true worship is to be experienced, and if we are to truly praise God.

How do we participate? We do so by volition: by choice. We choose to participate because God has called us to do so. We choose to participate because God loves us and we sincerely love God in return, and we show it by worshipping Him. Once that choice is made, and we begin participating, we have jumped that hurdle and began to find the heart of worship.

Psalm 95:2b. *And make a joyful noise unto him with psalms.*

We might observe some repetition of the expression in verse 1 with that in verse 2. This Psalm, like much of Old Testament writing is written in Hebrew poetic form. Hebrew poetry is a little different from that employed in modern western languages. Where we tend to rhyme word sounds and rhythms with less regard for the message, Hebrew poetry rhymes the message with little regard for the word sounds or rhythm. Taken together we get from these rhyming phrases a better understanding of the writer's message than we can from one phrase alone.

We see the first rhyme involves coming before the LORD. We come before His presence in singing and in thanksgiving.

We see in the second rhyme that we are to come with joyful and exuberant shouting, with Psalms, to the Rock of our Salvation. To King David, a Psalm was simply a spiritual song. Because of the sin of personal pride that so dramatically influences our hearts, it may be difficult for many of us to voice our testimony aloud, and to express to others what we truly believe. For many of us, our witness to those outside of the church walls is almost verbally silent, and though we are sincere in our hearts towards our love for God, we find putting our thoughts and our suppressed emotions into words to be quite difficult. It is an easier thing for us to turn to Hymn number 33, and join with everyone as we sing "To God be the glory, great things we have done." We sincerely believe what we are saying and singing as we are praising God with a Psalm that was written by another. This is why David encourages us to praise God with Psalms.

Again, how should our Psalms be sung? The same word is used in verse 2 as in verse 1: with a joyful shout. I am reminded of when, serving as a camp director for our associational children's camp on the southern shore of Lake Ontario, I assigned to myself the task of leading the children in singing around the campfire. One of the songs they enjoyed, "*Jesus is coming back some day*" called upon them to shout "AMEN!" in the middle of the chorus. They became excited when I stopped them suddenly after the shout and pointed out the echo that rolled over the water. This inspired them to shout all the louder, and there is little doubt that every fisherman within several miles heard that shout of "AMEN!" (and probably complained that we were chasing his fish away!) This is exactly what David is referring to. The children possessed no inhibitions to their worship. They were excited to be together singing praises to God. And, it was certainly a joyful noise. With every child picking his/her own musical key it was a pure musicians nightmare, but surely God's delight.

I also once had the opportunity to serve as the music director in a summer camp for the deaf and hard of hearing. When they sang around the campfire, it was literally a collection of screams. The music was a disaster. Their joy was over-the-top.

As a minister of music I have always longed to see that same exuberance in adult worship. I have always recruited membership for the choir from the full range of church members, with no regard at all for musical ability. The prerequisite for singing in any choir I direct is simply a heartbeat. God is not looking for perfect harmony, He is looking for perfect love. God is not interested in your musical ability, He is looking for your praise. I have been very inspired to see the change in worship that has taken place in churches that have traded in hymnals for screen projection. Instead of looking at the tops of peoples heads as they look down and sing into their hymnals and mumble the words to the songs, I see faces looking up, and hands freed to praise God. Traditions die hard.

Psalm 95:3. *For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods.*

5. The heart of worship is humble.

It is man's nature to puff himself up, extolling his own virtues in order to satiate his own prideful need for significance. When that nature comes into worship we tend to lift up one another in the same way. Our expression of worship becomes a "worship service" that is done the way "we" want it to be as Jesus' lordship over the congregation is replaced by our own. We get upset when we don't get our own way. We demand that worship be what we want it to be, with very little thought or concern about what blesses others, or what God really wants from us.

This is the consumer model of worship that gives little priority to the LORD and great priority on our personal desires.

Such worship is empowered by our personal pride, replacing God's model for worship with our own. We have usurped His lordship over the congregation and replaced it with our own agenda. When we truly recognize who the LORD is and what we have done to worship, we should be repentant and seeking His forgiveness.

As David introduces this Psalm, he quickly states the clear truth that the LORD is God.

Psalm 95:4-5. *In his hand are the deep places of the earth: the strength of the hills is his also. ⁵The sea is his, and he made it: and his hands formed the dry land.*

6. The heart of worship is reverent.

It was a cool and clear Spring afternoon when I was being carried up the side of one of the larger mountains in the German/Austrian Alps on a sparsely populated ski lift. This first encounter with such a lift came with quite a surprise at the top, for as we crested the hill the trees opened, and suddenly from the top of that slope I found myself looking over a vast panorama of snow-covered mountains that stretched on for hundreds miles in three directions with their roots in several European countries including Germany, Austria, France, Switzerland, and Italy. Amongst the beauty and majesty of this immense sight, I felt infinitesimally small. Yet, I knew that this view was but a tiny piece of this little planet we live on, and this earth is but a tiny part of this universe that God created for His own pleasure. Yet, this God who has the power to create (and destroy) this entire universe by simply speaking a word, chooses to be concerned about my personal welfare on this earth, and my eternal security with Him.

The next thing I knew, I found myself talking, though I was utterly alone. I was talking to God as if He were standing with me, for I certainly felt as though He was as He opened my eyes to see Him in a new way. I was thanking Him for the blessing of the life he breathed into me, praising Him for His awesome and unfathomable grace and considering His intention for this tiny little person in light of His great purpose. I remember forcing back tears, fully recognizing that tears and freezing-cold mountaintops do not make a good combination. I left that mountaintop changed. Before leaving the slopes that day I spoke with my wife, and we made the decision to leave the career in which I was currently employed, a very successful military career that had already planned my future, and trade it

to go back to college and head in any direction that we felt that God would lead us.

I came off of that mountain with a new reverence for God. I descended those slopes with a new closeness to Him as my prayers changed from that sporadic and scheduled discipline that I had been taught to a simple and continual conversation. When I came down from that mountain the context of my worship changed from a practice to a lifestyle. Life is worship. We are to revere God in a manner that is consistent with our knowledge of His greatness. Because of our own frailties and innate sinful spirit, we cannot do this appropriately on our own. Still we can express reverence for God in all that we do.

Some would teach that reverence and joy are mutually exclusive. This was the position of the early Puritans and reformers who instituted a creed that stifled joy so that reverence would not be compromised. We can be fully joyful and fully reverent at the same time. Those who disagree may be confusing joy with happiness. Happiness is a short-lived emotional response to a positive stimulus. Joy is a deep and enduring heart-felt response to God's love and grace.

Psalm 95:6. *O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the LORD our maker.*

The heart of worship is Jesus.

When we come to a worship service, we are to come to worship. Worship is bowing down before the LORD our maker. True worship is fully submitted to Him. Worship is not about us: it is all about God. It is impossible for us to worship God if God is not truly our LORD. To kneel in the manner that David describes is to place one's self under the authority of the one knelt to. To place one's self under God's authority is to live in obedience to His plan. God has made us to have fellowship with Him, and that fellowship is possible only if we turn to Him in faith. We must be saved from the penalty of eternal separation from God that comes from our own selfish nature. God becomes our LORD only when we are saved.

Our salvation comes only by His grace through what He has done for us through Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Savior. Without God we were lost, facing an eternity without Him. Through Jesus we have been given an opportunity to turn to Him in faith, receiving promised and eternal salvation. If we have not received that salvation, we cannot truly worship. As we examine the heart of our worship, let us examine our own heart and determine if we have actually turned our life over to Jesus Christ as LORD. If we have not, we can simply do so now.

Matt Redmon wrote a song a few years ago, one that is probably best recognized by an arrangement published by the contemporary Christian men's trio of Phillips, Craig, and Dean. The group experienced a collective theophany when they came to realize that their fame was beginning to overtake their faith. Together, they made a promise that they would take care to sing only for God's glory, rather than their own. Their music took a radical shift from Christian entertainment to that which would serve to lead others in praise and worship. They adopted Matt Redmon's song as the title track of their first worship album.

The Heart of Worship
Matt Redmon

***When the music fades, all is stripped away, and I simply come
Longing just to bring something that's of worth, that will bless Your heart
I'll bring You more than a song, for a song in itself is not what you have
required
You search much deeper within, through the way things appear
You're looking into my heart.***

***I'm coming back to the heart of worship
And it's all about You, It's all about you, Jesus
I'm sorry, LORD, for the thing I've made it
When it's all about You, It's all about you, Jesus***

***King of endless worth, No one could express how much You deserve
Though I'm weak and poor all I have is Yours: every single breath***

***I'm coming back to the heart of worship
And it's all about You, It's all about you, Jesus
I'm sorry, LORD, for the thing I've made it
When it's all about You, It's all about you, Jesus***

Where is the heart of true worship to be found?

- **The heart of true worship is vertical:** we come to focus on God, not on our own desires, wants, or for our own entertainment.
- **The heart of true worship is joyful.** Our joy becomes spontaneous and exuberant when we truly turn our focus to God, celebrating what He has done for us. God also requests that we express our Joy.

- **The heart of true worship is thankful.** There is no end to what God has done for us, and He deserves every bit of thankfulness that we can possibly express.
- **The heart of true worship is participatory.** God calls us to worship Him, not to watch someone else worship Him. It is not until we truly participate will we experience the true worship that God deserves.
- **The heart of true worship is humble.** Pride kills worship.
- **The heart of true worship is reverent.** God is still God, the Rock of our Salvation. We should not suppress our joy in our expression of reverence. Neither should we compromise our reverence in our expression of joy.
- **The heart of true worship is Jesus.** If our worship is not ALL about Jesus, it is not about Jesus at all. Worship is impossible if Jesus is not our Savior and LORD.

It is not the worship style or the order of worship that defines true worship. When we seek the true heart of worship, it can be found whether we choose liturgy or free worship, whether we emphasize the music or the message. True worship can be found in a crowd, and it can be found when we are isolated and alone. When we truly worship God, we lose our concern for the worship style that is shared by others around us as we focus on God instead. When we do so we find we can worship God without regard to the worship style, or even the place where worship takes place.

Let us each search our hearts, and seek forgiveness from God for what we have been doing with our worship. We have made worship what we want it to be. We have approached worship for our own entertainment and failed to truly focus on God. We have failed to really participate in worship as we have been distracted by so many of the issues of this pagan world, listening to prayers rather than praying, listening to the praise instead of praising. We thank God that He is a forgiving God, and ask that the Holy Spirit kindle in our hearts a sincere and renewed desire to worship Him in the manner He requires, and He deserves. Then, let us express that desire in true worship that is part of every experience of our lives.

Life is worship. Let us not reserve worship for a few moments on a Sunday morning. Let us worship God with every part of our lives, every minute of every day. The LORD deserves no less.