

# Why Did God Create Worship?



**A free e-book by**

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***You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God.***

Exodus 20:3-5, NIV

## I. God Created Worship for Himself

God created worship for himself! We don't need to look any further than the first of the Ten Commandments to realize this truth. Here is almighty God telling us in no uncertain terms that he expects worship to be his and only his. You've heard it said, and may have said it yourself, "I didn't get anything out of that worship service today." But worship is not primarily for us to "get something." Instead, true worship happens when we present ourselves to God. It is all about what we bring to him.

Experiencing true worship does not result from the church building, the band, the choir, the organ, the musical style, the performers or the ministers, or any other packaging or personalities. True worship is not dependent on whether our worship is expressed in a liturgical service, an evangelical service or any other particular form or format. Worship is all about God and for God. This truth must saturate our minds and hearts to flush out any self-centeredness God finds in our worship. In *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren wrote, "True worship—bringing God pleasure—

happens when you give yourself completely to God. Offering yourself to God is what worship is all about." (Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 78.)

What is the core of Christian worship that is non-negotiable? What is the essence of true worship that transcends all our styles, cultures, and traditions? Is there a common worship theology that holds true regardless of denomination or local church affiliation? If we expect to embrace true worship that will power our Church ever closer to God, we must answer these questions. We must discover God's definition of worship that will effectively empower us as worshiping disciples on mission.

***For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise;  
he is to be feared above all gods.***

1 Chronicles 16:25, NIV

Here is the main thing we need to understand if we are going to truly worship God. God does not need us. We need God. God is complete, in and of himself. His glory is not dependent on us glorifying him. He was almighty and all-glorious before creation. He was Alpha and Omega before he created us to have relationship with him. And our worship can't add one ounce to his completeness. My greatest performance does not bring value to my supremely worthy God.

The psalmist looked to the heavens and marveled at the miracle of life on this blue planet in the midst of a barren universe.

*When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" - Psalm 8: 3-4, NIV.*

God, the master artist, chose one single planet. Earth became the canvas for his greatest work of artistic creation—the human race. But his creative power did not stop there. God craved relationship with the people he created. When we became separated from him by our rebellious nature, he sent his son Jesus to die for our sin. Through Jesus we are eternally restored to relationship with our master creator. What a wonder!

Thomas Carlyle said, "Wonder is the basis of worship." (<http://www.brainyquote.com>) When we begin to grasp just how big God is, and how big his act of love for us, we will begin to grasp the wonder of worship. He cannot be measured, nor can he be

contained. Donald Miller, in *Blue Like Jazz* wrote, "I don't think there is any better worship than wonder." (Miller, *Blue Like Jazz*, 206.)

When we conclude that God needs us, we lose our wonder for God and replace it with familiarity. Our sinful pride causes us to act like we are the parent and God is a helpless child. What would he ever do without us?

There was a time in my life when I imagined God looking down on my constant effort on his behalf and proclaiming, "I sure am glad Mark Powers is on my team because he is my MVP! I don't know what I would ever do without him." What a pitiful joke I was. How misguided and ignorant of God could I have been to think such a thing? God had to break me of my ego and replace my self-worship with constant wonder for him and his awesome power.

On the other hand, God is not some self-centered, egotistical deity demanding that we constantly tell him how great he is. God does not call us to worship because he craves our adoration. He is the one true God as defined in Scripture and revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It's you and I who have the need to adore him. Our worship is the expression of our relationship with him. C.S. Lewis said, "It is in the process of being worshiped that God communicates His presence to men." (Lewis, <http://www.williamthelesser.org/quotesonworship.html>.) A living, growing relationship is what he wants most of all from us. Only in the context of relationship with God can we grasp the meaning of worship.

The essence of the gospel is that our father God, who does not need us, truly does want us. He desires us not because there is any good in us, but because he is supremely good. While we were slaves of sin, God stepped up and paid the price to buy us for himself. God sent his son, Jesus, to live perfectly, die for my sin, and conquer death in his resurrection. He constantly pursues the relationship of father and child with us. This is the main teaching of Christianity that sets it apart from every other world religion: instead of humankind trying desperately to reach God, God is reaching out to us in love through Christ! How can we not respond with worship?

***Love the Lord your God with all your heart  
and with all your soul and with all your mind.***

Matthew 22:37, NIV

Our English word “worship” is derived from the Anglo-Saxon term meaning “worth-ship.” Worship is the actions and attitudes that show how much we value someone or something. The simplest definition of worship is to ascribe ultimate worth. Bruce H. Leafblad reminds us, “In true worship, love is the supreme affection, and God is the exclusive object of our greatest love. At its center, this divine-human encounter we call worship is a love affair of the highest and holiest order.” (Leafblad, *Worship 101: Recovering the Priority of God*, <http://www.ozcorners.net/worship/19-worshiparticles/30-worship-101-recovering-the-priority-of-god>.)

How do you show your spouse or loved ones that you value them highly, that they are worth everything to you? Do you listen intently when they talk, engage them in conversation, lavish them with gifts, serve them, love them unconditionally, and build your relationship daily? Those are the same elements of worship which we shower upon our Lord. A.W. Tozer said: “The whole personality has to worship God. Faith, love, obedience, loyalty, high conduct and life all must be taken as burnt offerings and offered to God.” (Snyder, *Tozer on Worship and Entertainment*, 4.)

In *My Utmost for His Highest*, Oswald Chambers stated: “Worship is giving God the best that He has given you. Be careful what you do with the best you have. Whenever you get a blessing from God, give it back to Him as a love gift. Take time to meditate before God and offer the blessing back to Him in a deliberate act of worship. If you hoard a thing of blessing for yourself, it will turn into spiritual dry rot, as the manna did when it was hoarded [Exodus 16]. God will never let you hold a spiritual thing for yourself, it has to be given back to Him that he may make it a blessing to others.” (Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, January 6: “Worship.”)

Because worship means “worth-ship,” worship is a continual lifestyle of showing God’s ultimate worth 24/7, all day every day. Worship begins every morning when we present the day before us to God for his use. In my first waking moments, before I even get out of bed, I say to God, “Father, this day is yours. Take it and use it however you choose. Transform me in your image. Walk with me through every moment today and use me for your mission and your glory.” This prescription for daybreak worship will ignite you to discipleship and mission as you walk in his presence throughout your day. And it will overflow into your corporate worship in church each week, too.

If we do not redefine worship as a minute-by-minute hunger for God's presence, we may think worship is all about us. How often have you heard someone say they left a church because they "just weren't being fed"? A true worshiper feeds on the presence of God 24/7 in trust and obedience. Then when we gather for corporate worship with the body of Christ, our worship together is powered by our personal lifestyles of daily worship. How can I do any less if I truly accept the sacrifice of Christ on the cross for me?

So the derivation of the word "worship" helps us start to understand it. But there is more to true worship than our English word signifies. The biblical words for worship are far more descriptive and hold more meaning. Let's look at them.

***Come, let us bow down in worship,  
let us kneel before the Lord our Maker.***

Psalm 95:6, NIV

The Old Testament word for worship is the Hebrew word *shachach* (pronounced "shaw-kawh"). This word means to bow down, to fall prostrate in subjection before the one you worship (Strong, *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*.) When I *shachach*, I expose my neck in unguarded vulnerability. In Old Testament times the weapon of choice was the sword. If I was walking down the road and encountered a soldier in the conquering army that ruled my land, I might bow down before him. This act of submission puts my life in the hands of the approaching soldier. As I expose the nape of my neck, he can use his sword to cut off my head or stab me in the back. But on the other hand, he can turn the sword blade sideways and lay it on my shoulder to bless me, saying, "Your subjection to me has earned my favor. Rise and walk along with me. I will protect you and guide you."

In the New Testament, the word used for worship is the Greek word *proskuneo*, which means to "prostrate one's self in subjection." When we understand worship as falling before God in complete subjection, we draw closer to the heart of worship. Subjection presupposes the attitude of sacrifice, of giving up my right to myself. In the Old Testament, sacrifice and worship were inseparable terms. King David himself once approached the altar with no sacrifice because he was at war. A bystander offered to give David his own sacrificial offering since the king did not have one himself. But David replied, "No, I insist on paying you for it. I will not sacrifice to the Lord my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing" (2 Samuel 24:24, NIV).

This attitude of personal sacrifice is too often missing in our worship. Can our acts even be called worship if they cost us little or nothing? The foundation of worship is always sacrifice—God sacrificing his Son for us, us sacrificing our lives for God, and the church sacrificing personal agendas for the good of the kingdom of God. A.W. Tozer wrote, “It is certainly true that hardly anything is missing from our churches these days—except the most important thing. We are missing the genuine and sacred offering of ourselves and our worship to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Snyder, *Tozer on Worship and Entertainment*, 15.)

Harold Best, dean of Wheaton College Conservatory of Music, wrote: “Worship this, worship that, conferences here, symposia there; source books, methodologies, cue sheets and, sadly enough, worship styles as litmus tests for spirituality. It just may be that, instead of worshipping, we have come to the dangerous condition of worshipping about worship or even worshipping worship.” (Best, “When Is Worship Worship?” [www.leaderu.com](http://www.leaderu.com), accessed October 8, 2008.)

*Shachach* and *proskuneo* paint a poignant picture of surrender and subjection to God. The primary goal of worship is not passion but surrender. In their article “We Were Made to Worship Him,” Regi and Kimberlee Stone wrote: “God is simply looking for the kind of obedience that says, ‘Take my finances, my abilities, my children, my home, my prayers. Use them to bless others.’”

***So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do,  
do it all for the glory of God.***

1 Corinthians 10:31, NIV

Worship is not bound by time or place. The failure to realize this concept leads to blank stares whenever I say, “Worship ignites us to discipleship and mission!” Why this reaction? Because it is so hard to think that the anemic hour of worship going on in many of our churches could ever ignite anything. We must enlarge our concept of worship! (Stone and Stone, “We Were Made to Worship Him,” *Perspectives on Worship: Vol 1*, 203.)

Robert Webber, in *Worship Is a Verb*, wrote: “Worship challenges secularism because it establishes a relationship with God and sets the world in order. In worship, the good news is happening again. It reaffirms the reality of God, the significance of life, and the worth of the human person. It creates, sustains, and enhances a relationship with God, and it heals broken human relationships. Worship refreshes the soul, rekindles the spirit, and renews life.” (Webber, *Worship Is a Verb*, 27.)

The bottom line, the main thing, the essential ingredient of true worship is this: that I hunger and thirst every moment of life for God's presence. Are you thirsting every day all day to experience God at every turn? Are you hungry to find God's work revealed in daily situations and conversations? Do you possess a craving to see his glory in the smallest circumstances? This hunger for God's presence is the root of the worshiping relationship with him.

***(After the resurrection), the eleven disciples traveled to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had directed them. When they saw Him, they worshiped, but some doubted. Then Jesus came near and said to them, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."***

Matthew 28:16–20, HCSB

Worship is first a constant lifestyle of living in the love relationship with God through Christ. Then when we gather as the body of Christ in the church, our personal worship will overflow into our corporate worship service. But a worship service is not a service to us, it is our service to God. Paul proclaimed this in Romans 12:1, translated into classic King James language, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service." In the corporate worship service, the children of God gather to connect with and adore their loving heavenly Father. In a worship seminar that I attended, Robert Webber shared how worship in the family of God is like a family reunion: we greet each other on the front porch and re-establish family connection, we adore our father and celebrate our family heritage, we share stories of great moments in the life of our family, we talk of our future, we may even share a meal before we affirm our plans to stay connected with each other and our father, then we depart to represent our family name in the world.

After his resurrection, Jesus gathered his new family of believers. Before Jesus commissioned them to go make disciples and win the world for him, they fell down

and worshiped him. A heart of worship will always be the ignition key for missional discipleship in the family of God. Jesus' disciples had followed him for three amazing years of ministry and then experienced the agony of his crucifixion and the joy of his resurrection. It must have been an emotional roller-coaster ride for them. There were so many things they didn't know. Now they had been summoned by Jesus to this mountain to meet with him face to face. Just as with everyone else who encountered the risen Christ, they fell down and worshiped him.

This is the first example in the New Testament of the disciples demonstrating an act of worship toward Jesus. Yes, others had worshiped Jesus during his ministry. The blind, the lame, even the lepers, had demonstrated their adoration of Jesus after he healed them. But until this moment, the New Testament has no account of his own disciples bowing in worship. Peter had made the confession of Jesus' lordship verbally, but even this confession did not lead to an act of worship on their part. Isn't it strange that the very ones who were closest to Jesus had trouble believing on a level that led to acts of personal worship? Even as they fell down and worshiped on that mountain, some of them doubted.

Disciples and worship leaders can be like that. We are so busy as a steward of the church that we sometimes forget to worship him ourselves. We desperately need to hear a fresh call to authentic corporate worship that ignites discipleship and mission.

***These people honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.***

Matthew 15:8-10, NIV

The worship renewal movement began several decades ago to rediscover the place of authentic corporate worship in our evangelical church life. For centuries, evangelicals had been so focused on evangelism that we had ignored communing and connecting with the Father in our worship services. Worship in our churches had become primarily evangelistic services focused on attracting non-believers into church to hear the gospel. In that setting, only the music portion of the service was referred to as worship, like an appetizer for the main course—the sermon.

Worship in the church should not be defined by our music. The power of church is not the power of music. The power to change the world does not come from a particular musical style. In fact, in a typical worship service, only 15 to 30 minutes

are given to music. If you do the math, that means that around two tenths of one percent of the 10,080 minutes of a church-goers' whole week is spent engaged in worship music.

How strange that, in many churches, 100 percent of our identity is determined by two-tenths of a percent of our weekly activity. "The major challenge," according to George Barna, "is not about how to use music to facilitate worship as much as it is to help people understand worship and have an intense passion to connect with God. ("Focus on 'Worship Wars' Hides the Real Issues Regarding Connection to God," [www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org), (accessed November 19, 2002). Bryan Spinks has said: "To put it bluntly, worship is about worshipping God and the Lamb, and not about entertaining the sheep!" (Spinks, "Worshipping the Lamb or Entertaining the Sheep," [www.modernreformation.org](http://www.modernreformation.org), accessed July 31, 2012)

The focus of biblical worship has always been God initiating relationship with a chosen people at the cost of his Son on the cross. This revelation demands a corporate response of self-denial and sacrifice. But attractional worship mistakenly turns the spotlight of worship on individuals and meeting their "felt needs" in a worship service. The danger here is that worship with the family of God becomes our individual narcissistic relationship with God, like the child at the family reunion who seizes all the attention as if they were the only one present. In that self-focused context, corporate worship becomes simply a party or show the church offers me. Then, few demands, if any, are placed on seekers since it becomes the church's responsibility to sell them on the benefits of following God. Shallow worship produces shallow Christians who are no more than consumers of worship as entertainment. And worse, worship narcissism can fuel ruthless church leaders who tear apart the church with their own agenda on committees or governing boards in the institutional church. Paul warned Timothy of people "having a form of godliness but denying its power" (2 Timothy 3:1-5, NIV). Acceptance of Christ is always a personal decision of surrender at the heart level. And discipleship focuses on continued surrender in daily life. Sending church members on mission may be the best antidote to our self-centeredness. In the meantime, God's kingdom is seriously hindered by self-centered worshipers who are allowed to think worship is "all about me."

Bob Kauflin, in his book, *Worship Matters: Leading Others to Encounter the Greatness of God*, stated the biblical concept of worship beautifully: "Worship is God's gift of grace to us before it is our offering to God. Apart from this perspective, leading worship can become self-motivated and self-exalting. We subtly take pride in our worship, our singing, our playing, our planning, our performance, our leadership.

Unfortunately we separate ourselves from the God who drew us to worship him in the first place. Gathering to praise God cannot be a means to some “greater” end, such as church growth, evangelism, or personal ministry. God is not a genie we summon by rubbing the bottle called ‘worship.’ He doesn’t exist to help us get where we really want to go. He is where we want to go. God’s glory is the end of our worship, and not simply a means to something else. In the midst of a culture that glorifies our pitiful accomplishments in countless ways, we gather each week to proclaim God’s wondrous deeds and to glory in His supreme value.” (Kauflin, *Worship Matters: Leading Others to Encounter the Greatness of God*, 176–77.)

The worship renewal movement was long overdue. But, as often the case in renewal, we focus solely on the area which is crying out for attention and are blinded to other issues. “Let’s fix this problem,” we say, and we pour all our attention and resources into solving that issue. By focusing exclusively on worship, we have given it disproportionate attention. It seems that we think we will fix the church if we can just fix our worship. If we are not careful, the focal issue of worship becomes our newest idol. The goal of this book is certainly to renew our worship. But it goes beyond that to show you how worship is just the start of the church’s calling. My passion is that you will see that worship—both personal worship and corporate worship—is the ignition key to discipleship and that you will learn how the power of true worship propels us out to share Christ with the world around us.

When all is said and done, we have nothing to offer our world but God himself and his Son, our Savior. Jesus, our only source of power to impact the world, mandates that we “Go” and share his power with the world. Yet we keep on missing it. At a recent conference, Charles Billingsley, worship leader at Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg Va., said, “God doesn’t need our production to show his presence. True worship is not just what we do; true worship is what we are.” (Author’s personal conversation with Charles Billingsley.)

We think if we can just offer the right mix of music presented by outstanding performers enhanced with modern technology that true worship will result. We are very flashy, but often very empty. **If our worship is not focused totally on God, it will be essentially powerless in eternal impact. After all, he created it for himself!**

## **A Worship Meditation:**

***And can it be that I should gain  
An interest in the Savior's blood?  
Died He for me, who caused His pain?  
For me, who Him to death pursued?  
Amazing love! How can it be  
that thou, my God, should die for me?***

Life hurts. Dad develops a malicious lung condition which steadily drains life. Mother-in-law is silently overcome by Alzheimer's, a slow goodbye to awareness. Betrayal invades a marriage, and loved ones divorce. Where are you God? Are you real? Or are you just an idea cooked up by desperate humans afraid of insignificance in a lonely universe? Question marks abound in life.

***He left his Father's throne above,  
So free, so infinite His grace;  
Emptied Himself of all but love,  
And bled for Adam's helpless race;  
'Tis mercy all, immense and free;  
O praise my God, it reaches me.***

Reach me, Lord. Can you reach me? I am desperate to feel the wonder of your presence. Doubt threatens, but faith yearns to rise and lift me to you. Be merciful and free me from captivity to self.

***Long my imprisoned spirit lay  
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;  
Thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray,  
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;***

***My chains fell off, my heart was free;***

***I rose, went forth, and followed thee.***

Your light invades; darkness runs to the shadows. Strength overtakes weakness; healing overcomes pain. Lord, I worship you!

***No condemnation now I dread;***

***Jesus and all in Him is mine!***

***Alive in Him, my living Head,***

***And clothed in righteousness divine,***

***Bold I approach the eternal throne,***

***And claim the crown, thro' Christ, my own.***

***Amazing love!***

***How can it be that thou, my God, should die for me?***

(Wesley, "And Can It Be," Public Domain.)

## **II. When Methodology Becomes Idolatry**

***Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.***

***But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!***

Amos 5:23-24, NIV

I have friends who travel the country as consultants for church growth with churches of every denomination, size, and style. I ask them: "What do you see across America in worship?" Many have replied: "Worship idolatry is rampant in the church today. Most worship leaders in our churches are little more than performers putting on a good show."

Does God need us to put on a really great show to sell him to the masses? Is he just waiting in the wings for some help from my worship team? Is God nervously hoping that his people will somehow “get something” out of our worship service? Has God postponed winning the world until all our church members are happy with the music and preaching? We have taken the King of the universe, the creator of all things, and cast him as a pleading old man who begs us to come to him.

In our first section, we defined the essence of authentic worship that transcends style and denominationalism. Now it is time to take a hard look at our worship to identify sources of idolatry.

Recently, I had a heart scan. The heart scan shows everything in my heart without threatening my health. My family history is genetically marked with heart disease. But our human family is marked with heart disease called sin. We need a daily heart scan to measure our worship lifestyle by God’s standard. May this chapter be our heart scan.

***Who makes a god or casts a metal image for no profit?***

***Look, all its worshipers will be put to shame, and the craftsmen are humans.***

Isaiah 44:10–11, HCSB

Bob Kauflin said on his Worship Matters blog: “When someone mentions idolatry, we can picture some tribesman in New Guinea bowing down to statues of wood or metal, and think, ‘Thank God I don’t struggle with THAT.’ Idols, however, are far more pervasive, insidious, and deceptive. Idolatry is attributing ultimate value, authority, or supremacy to any object other than God. Whenever I think I can’t worship God unless “X” is present, I’m making a profound statement. If “X” is anything other than Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, I’ve moved into idolatrous territory. Idolatry is always evil, but the idols we pursue aren’t necessarily evil things. They are evil for us because we value them over God.” (Kauflin, “Idolatry on Sunday Mornings, Pt. 1.”)

Let’s be honest. Whether as worshiper in the audience or worship leader on the platform, the temptation of idolatry grips us all. We project our personalities above God’s glory. We present performances in place of broken and contrite hearts. We replace proclamation of God’s Word with positive-thinking techniques. It’s easy to

depend on personal charm and skill to draw a crowd. But God always calls us to be reflections of his glory, not enamored with our own glory.

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 2:1–5: “When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom . . . For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified . . . My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power.” (NIV) God will not overlook anything we put in his place of glory, especially if that thing is me.

According to the Great Commission, engaging in worship services is not the essential work of the church. When we make weekly worship an end in itself, we are easily tempted to worship the very acts of worship. We are tempted to worship our favorite style of worship. We are tempted to worship our most meaningful experience of worship. And when we worship the acts of worship, we are missing the only worthy object of worship—God incarnate in Christ manifested in the Holy Spirit. If we worship the ways we “do” worship, our methodology has become idolatry.

When Jesus gathered his followers on the mountain he did not say, “Go ye, therefore, and worship.” Worship is not an end in itself! Worship is a means to an end. What is that end, that ultimate goal? Jesus’ commission to the church is to make disciples and win the world, pure and simple. Jesus’ followers fell down and worshiped him, but then they arose and moved out into the world to make disciples. Our commission from Christ is to win the world by making disciples for him. Worship idolatry has become a huge distraction from the process of making disciples who make disciples.

***Then Jesus said to His disciples,  
“If anyone wants to come with Me,  
he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me.”***

Matthew 16:24, HCSB

In a world separated from God, daily life becomes a web of cravings for personal happiness. Western culture has elevated our selfish cravings to be socially acceptable and even admired. Morality has become “what makes me happy right now” rather than a behavioral standard set by God. This culture of self-satisfaction

is a trap to Christian worshipers. And the Evil One has set that trap just for you and me. Oh, how many times I have fallen into it myself. We want to be the standard by which things around us are measured. We want attention and praise and glory. Even in subtle ways we crave to have the focus on ourselves. As we humble ourselves to pray we wonder who noticed us kneeling.

In many of our churches, the absence of an intentional discipleship process leaves church members with no other frame of reference than themselves. They think they are doing the right thing because their only reference is their personal preference. But preference is only an extension of self. To enthrone my preference as the only way it should be done is to put myself on the throne of worship.

A young worship leader who I have mentored for many years was called to appear before his church's personnel committee. On the table around which they were gathered lay his job description. One of his many responsibilities read: "Provide worship that will edify the church members and connect young families in our community with God." In that sentence only the first seven words had been highlighted by the chairwoman of the committee. "We have called you here to tell you that you are not meeting the worship needs of the people on this committee," she stated. The young worship leader reminded them that he was presenting traditional hymns as well as songs in modern styles. Then he had the audacity to ask why the second half of the phrase was not highlighted. The chairwoman spoke up, "We are not here to talk about those other people. We are the financial supporters and workers in this church, and your job is to give us what we want."

Of course, it's easy for worship leaders to point an accusing finger at church members. We blame our members for holding us back from true worship. But we worship leaders are not immune to idolatry. We become the self-appointed local authority on worship. We develop a worship plan and style that keeps our members happy; then we deify that order of worship. Or we may be worshiping our own personal preference for classical works or contemporary choruses or Southern gospel songs or hymns. Who are we to stand before God and tell him what he needs?

Judson Cornwall, in his book *Worship as Jesus Taught It*, wrote: "Whenever the method of worship becomes more important than the Person of worship, we have already prostituted our worship. There are entire congregations who worship praise and praise worship but who have not yet learned to worship God in Jesus Christ". (Cornwall, *Worship as Jesus Taught It*, 70.)

***But I, when I am lifted up from the earth,  
will draw all men to myself.***

John 12:32, NIV

Look at Jesus' words from John 12:32. This statement is rich with meaning on many levels. First, Jesus was reminding his Hebrew listeners how Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness as a sign of healing. In this reference, Jesus built a bridge both to his Jewish heritage and to his crucifixion to come. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent, Jesus would soon be lifted up on a Roman cross as the ultimate healer of sin for all time and all eternity. But there is more in this simple statement that we dare not miss. Jesus was also giving us the simplest formula for true worship. When we lift him up above all, he will draw hearts and lives to himself. Worship style is simply packaging for the truth of the gospel.

I have used the same brand of body lotion for many years. Across those years, the identifying marks of the lotion bottle—color, shape, print style, etc.—seldom change. And why would it, since the manufacturers want me to be able to identify it easily in any store? On the other hand, the words “new and improved” seem to appear on my lotion regularly. They are always seeking to change the product to better fit the ever-changing needs of the users.

The good news that Christ died on the cross for the sin of the world is just the opposite from my favorite lotion. The product of the gospel is never new and improved. When Christ gave his life for us, it was fully active for all time and all people in all places. Truth, by definition, is completely true and never gets stronger, more effective, or “more true.” Christ's death and resurrection cannot be improved upon. It always will be the only way that God redeems us to himself. God's plan is perfect.

But our tendency, like the manufacturer of my lotion, is to make an icon of the packaging. Any way you cut it, our music and preaching styles, architecture, dress, seating arrangement, format, etc. are simply packaging for the product. We want to take our favorite shape, color, and style and make them the standard in every market. When we fall into that trap, worship methodology becomes idolatry. Worship of God misses the mark when we make it all about our favorite package. The formula for real worship is all about the product—the gospel—not the packaging.

Rick Warren wrote in *The Purpose Driven Church*: “Every church likes to believe its worship style is the most biblical. The truth is there isn’t a biblical style of worship. Each Sunday true believers around the world give glory to Jesus Christ using a thousand equally valid expressions and styles.” (Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 241)

Colossians 3:16 (NIV) shows us that God affirms variety in our worship: “Let the Word of God dwell in you richly with all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, giving thanks in your hearts to God.” In modern terms, psalms are Scripture songs, hymns are great songs of the faith that present the gospel, and spiritual songs are songs sung to God personally.

If the gospel never changes, why should the packaging of the gospel change? The language and style of our cultural context at any given time demand different wrappers. The means of communicating the truth of the gospel must be contextualized to best convey the message. The means of salvation, however, will always be Jesus Christ, Son of God.

***When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.***

Luke 7:37–39, NIV

God originated excellence as he made this marvelous universe. Then God showed omnipotent creativity as he lovingly formed us and placed us in this awesome world. What an excellent creation of his we are!

God wants us to reflect his creative excellence as *imago dei*, the image of God. In his image all humans are made to create. A Christian artist has a distinctive calling and gifting from God to create. Excellence is how we both honor the gift God

has given us and fulfill his call to glorify him with it. Yes, we should hone our craft to the highest level as we offer it to God. When we use our gifts to create with excellence, we reflect God's excellence. God uses our creative excellence to glorify himself in three ways:

1. Providing us the abundant life Jesus promised when we live in Him,
2. Serving and equipping the body of Christ, his church, and
3. Calling the world to redemption in Christ through excellent creative arts...  
pouring out our worship creations on him like expensive perfume.

#### **A. Excellence is our worthy gift to God.**

Can artistic excellence become an idol? Yes. Excellence can easily become an end-in-itself. Excellence must never be a means of placing our artistic ability on the throne of worship. When the woman poured oil on Jesus' feet, her expression of love was extravagant. Our gift of worship excellence is our extravagant gift. We pour it out on Jesus because we owe him everything, never to earn praise for our own ability.

Let's put excellence in its proper place. Are we extravagant, pouring out our artistic gifts in excellence to him? Redefine excellence as extravagant worship for our Father who loves us extravagantly.

***For the desire to do what is good is with me,  
but there is no ability to do it. For I do not do  
the good that I want to do,  
but I practice the evil that I do not want to do.***

Romans 7:18-19, HCSB

In spite of our desire to do good, we continue falling into idolatry in our worship. The two most prominent symptoms of worship idolatry that I encounter in my own life, and in the lives of worship leaders and worshipers around me, are indulging in **performance pride** and becoming the **self-appointed keeper of standards**. Let's look at these two temptations that so easily entrap us.

## **B. Performance Pride**

The tools of artistic expression have immense power. Like all tools, the artistic tools of music, art, drama, and movement can be used for powerful good or for malicious evil. God gives us these tools both to accomplish his work and for our personal enrichment. Performance is simply the medium through which these tools become active and are expressed.

Our society adores the American Idol mentality. Rock-star status is cultivated throughout our society. Flashy athletes get the headlines. Celebrities reign supreme in the media and are marketed to a star-hungry population. A distinctive performance style delivered with passion can be a ticket to stardom, if you have the celebrity connections. In the world, performance is everything.

But, American “me-ology” is in direct conflict with Christian theology. In biblical worship, performance fulfills only two God-given purposes. First, performance in church is the medium through which we express worship to our sovereign Lord. Second, performance is the medium through which we communicate the gospel. That’s all—no more, no less. Performance in church should not be a ticket to stardom or celebrity status. It is not meant to impress or entertain anyone. There is only one “star” in worship, and he is our eternal God.

Self-centered pride always undermines our God-given purpose in life. Pride is at the root of our sin nature. If we are honest, we acknowledge that pride plagues us even in worship. We secretly hope we are being noticed for our platform style. We wonder if anyone appreciated how eloquent and heart-felt our prayer was. We crave compliments for our musical offerings. We love recognition.

While it may not seem so, the performance mentality is giving in to salvation by works. We think our performance will gain more grace, more favor, more acclaim. But God already loves us to the fullest extent possible. Absolutely nothing we do can earn more of God’s love. He loves us totally and completely. He sent his very own Son to die for us on a cross of love. Absolutely nothing we do can earn that gift, not even a great performance.

A corollary to this for a worship leader is personal pride in my performers. Using people as fuel for my personal performance is just as idolatrous as personal performance pride. We stoke the performance engine with them until they are burned up. Too often we allow ourselves to think of our worship team members only in terms of what they can do for us. My reputation is at stake in the quality of

their abilities and performance. But when I elevate my own reputation above the well-being of fellow worship team members, I have once again dethroned God to replace him with me.

***Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy,  
to offer your bodies as living sacrifices,  
holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.  
Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world,  
but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.  
Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—  
his good, pleasing and perfect will.***

Romans 12:1-2, NIV

### **C. Keeper of Standards**

The keeper of standards appoints himself Supreme Court justice of all things worship. The keeper of standards is one who has forgotten that they are a sinner too. I confess that I have been guilty of this practice. And so have you. We attempt to play God. But there is only one God, and I am not him. Neither are you.

No worship leader is exempt from the temptation to lift up false standards. We are all vulnerable. I see contemporary worship leaders who despise traditional musicians for their purist conceit; yet they do the same with modern style and song. I see traditional musicians who elevate subjective standards to the level of divine. I see Southern gospel fans who are as snobbish as those who think only hymns are appropriate in worship. What standard have you placed on the worship throne? What have you elevated to the level of idol? I know mine. Do you know yours?

God despises idolatry of any kind. A worship leader is not allowed to absorb even a ray of God's glory for his or her own pride. Somehow we have convinced ourselves that our experience and training give us the inside track. We are sure that

we know more than anyone in our church— and more than most of our fellow worship leaders for that matter. We are convinced that the church owes us big-time thanks. We have convinced ourselves that we are doing God a great favor by exalting a stylistic standard. But stylistic standards are based on externals, whereas God is looking deep within.

Where can we find God's standard for authentic worship? We find his standard only in his Word. And the Word of God is surprisingly inclusive of worship style. Instead of worship externals, God's focus is the activity of the heart throughout every moment of worship. God is running a continuous heart scan on each of us.

It is so easy for us to squelch the power of authentic worship by becoming keepers of the standard. Jesus harshest words were aimed at Pharisees who held the truth at arm's length so they could hold tight to religious power. Am I a Pharisee? Jesus shines a searchlight into our hearts that reveals our deepest intentions. He tests our inner core to seek out selfish pride. There is false security for us in playing God. It sets us above others and gives us a false sense of control. After all, life is very insecure. Death lurks daily. Health can come and go in a moment. Nothing is assured. Judging others by our own standards can certainly make us feel secure. But, it is pernicious pride at its worst.

These are hard words. I know as you read this you may feel under attack. You may feel defensive and possibly angry. You may feel that this is an affront to your integrity as a Christian. If that is how you feel, I beg you to look deep inside your own heart. Let these words sink into your soul and be used by God. We must submit to the laser beam of God's judgment. We must develop a standard that goes beyond our own preferences. When all is said and done, whether we have lifted up our crucified Christ above everything else is the standard that matters most.

***. . the glorious wealth of this mystery,  
which is Christ in you,  
the hope of glory.***

Colossians 1:27, HCSB

We must look carefully to see if we are caught up in performance pride or have appointed ourselves as keeper of standards. Our selfish nature and our heart for God are always at war within us. If we are ever going to experience victory in that inner war, we have to aggressively call our own hand at self-centeredness. We must

develop inner referees that will “throw the flag” when we are off-sides. Every worship leader on your team must be practicing the spiritual disciplines of prayer and Bible study every day. You as leader must model those disciplines and hold your team accountable to eliminate self-centeredness. In every moment and in every action we must ask ourselves: “Am I lifting anything above Jesus? Are there any idols in my life or in our worship that would block attention from him?” Then periodically we need to engage in more intense searching and self-examination in a retreat setting. A day away from the office alone with God can revolutionize your relationship with our Lord. Calendar a personal retreat monthly, quarterly, or at the very least annually.

Once again, allow me to remind us that the ultimate antidote for idolatry is a craving to experience the presence of God in each and every moment of life. When I deeply desire to know God’s presence, life tends to order itself according to his purpose in surrender and obedience. Are we more hungry and thirsty to see God’s amazing presence every day than we are to get our own way?

While touring a Colonial reenactment site, I saw the silversmith melting silver over a small flame. He explained that he was heating the molten silver until he could see his reflection in it. At that point, he would know that he had melted away the impurities and could use it to make fine jewelry. We must allow God to melt away our impurities in the heat of his flame. Self-assessment, tested by the heat of God’s Word, helps us maintain purity—not of musical preference—but of our passion for God. When our passion for God is pure, our worship will reflect his image and not ours.

**This is why God created worship!**

### **A Worship Meditation**

***I hear the Savior say, “Thy strength indeed is small,  
Child of weakness, watch and pray,  
Find in me thine all in all.”  
Jesus paid it all,  
All to Him I owe;  
Sin had left a crimson stain,  
He washed it white as snow.***

When I stand at the foot of the cross and I look up at Jesus—his body torn and his heart broken for my sin—a thought overwhelms me. The power of the cross goes far beyond imitation. I cannot live the Christ life by copying what Jesus might do. I must die. When self is dead, then and only then is there room for Christ in my life.

***For nothing good have I  
Whereby Thy grace to claim;  
I'll wash my garments white  
In the blood of Calv'ry's Lamb.***

In Christ's death he shows me how to die for him. In his resurrection I am reborn. Once, we were worlds away from each other—I in my sin and he in his heaven. Then God came to us. The truth of his undeniable love is this: God has given Jesus for my sin, he now lives in me.

***Jesus paid it all,  
All to Him I owe;  
Sin had left a crimson stain,  
He washed it white as snow.***

Lord, put to death my idolatrous ego and use me for your glory. You bought me; I am yours; take full possession. Plant yourself in the center of my heart and grow from the inside out. I surrender to you my worship preferences that have become idolatrous. Take them off the throne and take your rightful place as King. **You alone are the object of my worship.**

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