

ENCOUNTER

GOD



Welcome.

Thanks for downloading the Speakers' Notes for the Worship Central Course.

For this second session, we've outlined the structure and key points for the talk, and left space for you to add your own examples. Feel free to personalise the examples and make it your own, but we'd please ask that you keep the core material the same, as we want people to be able to get the same course wherever they are.

We pray this course will be a great blessing to you and your worship team, and we stand with you as you seek to encounter God, equip the worshipper and empower your local church.

Tim Hughes & Al Gordon

Introduction

We all long for our worship to connect people to God. We all long to see worship change lives. But how does this happen?

In this session 'Encounter God', we're going to look at three key values that are vital if we are to keep the worship of God central.

On the evening of 10 January 1610, a little-known scientist was staring into the Italian night sky. It was a glorious night; the heavens were sprinkled with a thousand burning stars and planets danced in the clear winter air. He had just built an ingenious device using polished glass that allowed him to see the planets close up.

In those days, the universe was a simple place; people believed that the sun, the moon, the stars and planets all revolved around Earth. We were the centre, the focus, the constant and everything else spun submissively around us. Jupiter's moons, however, were in rebellion. They seemed to be happily spinning around Jupiter, not the Earth, not us. Galileo's discovery rocked the scientific world like a cosmic earthquake. The truth hurt; theories would need to be reworked, libraries pulped, schoolbooks updated, calendars recalculated. People really didn't like the idea that we weren't the centre of it all.

It's a bit like that with worship. It's easy to fall into the trap of saying, 'I really didn't get much out of that time of worship' or 'those songs didn't do much for me'. We've probably all done it. But the truth is that we are not the centre of the worshipping universe. The point of worship is not to make us feel better or happier or fulfilled: worship is not about us. David Peterson says, 'Worship of the true and living God is essentially an engagement with him on the terms that he proposes and in the way that he alone makes possible.'

So how do we ensure that we don't make the mistake of thinking that we are at the centre of our worship? There are three key values that are at the heart of every expression of worship.

The first is:

1. Christ-centred

We get a glimpse of what this looks like at the end of the Bible, in the book of Revelation. The writer describes a breathtaking scene: every living creature in heaven and on Earth gathered worshipping, countless millions of angels, kings and rulers, amazing looking creatures, all focusing on one throne. Day and night they are crying out in worship. And there, at the centre of it all, standing in the middle of this panorama of praise, is Jesus: 'Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the centre of the throne ...' (Revelation 5:6).

i. Jesus is the goal of our worship

True worship is centred on Jesus – he is the goal of our worship: it is in Jesus, through Jesus, to Jesus, for Jesus. He is the name that is above every name, our great adventure, the One our worshipping universe revolves around. The apostle Paul puts it like this:

'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.' (Colossians 3:16–17)

When we really begin to understand this we discover that we are free to worship at all times and in all places because we worship 'in Christ'. When we turn away from the things we know are wrong and choose to make Jesus the centre of our universe, we are freed from sin, freed from our selfish nature – and become the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. Everything we do should be an act of worship. That means taking our everything: our waking, sleeping, working, thinking, laughing, weeping – to take all of it and bring it before God as an offering. That's what

being truly Christ-centred looks like, and it's the key to the most dynamic, exciting, fulfilling way of life you could ever hope to pursue.

ii. Jesus perfects our worship

There was once a little girl sitting playing a piano in the lobby of a very smart hotel. Her playing was terrible, so poor that it irritated the guests around her, causing a number of them to complain. All of a sudden, a man sat down beside her and began to play along with her. He began to fill in all the chords around her notes, correcting her errors by playing the right notes, and suddenly a breathtaking sound filled the hotel. Everyone was speechless, and stood listening to the wonderful music. It emerged that the man was the girl's father, the famous nineteenth-century Russian composer, Alexander Borodin.

In the same way that the man in this story took the discordant and limited playing of his little girl, transforming it into something beautiful and glorious, so Christ receives all that we offer up to God and turns it into something wonderful and pleasing. Jesus is our great high priest, our once-for-all sacrifice, the only one capable of offering perfect worship. He is, as Calvin wrote, '...the great choirmaster who tunes our hearts to sing God's praise.' It is through him that our worship becomes holy and acceptable to God. Because of this, we must take care that our worship is directed to Jesus.

iii. Jesus is the model for our worship

Paul writes in Romans 12:1, 'Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is true and proper worship.' (Romans 12:1)

In this passage, the Greek word Paul uses for worship is *latreia*, the same word that is used to mean 'service'. As worship leaders and musicians we are called to serve God and to serve

people. The privilege of leading worship is not that you are in the spotlight; on the contrary the privilege is that the living God has called you into a 'divine service'.

Jesus' life on Earth is a demonstration of worship through service. Philippians 2 includes a section from one of the hymns of the early church, and in this we see a picture of Jesus the worshipping servant: Here we read:

'In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!' (Philippians 2:5–8)

Jesus did not use his superior status as a means for gaining an advantage over others. His life was lived in reverse. He made himself nothing. This was his means of worshipping the Father and it must be ours as well.

How do we serve God? Jesus' example is clear. He has come to bring good news to the poor, to bring freedom to the prisoners, sight to the blind, to release the oppressed and tell the world that God looks at them and loves them. If we are to be like Jesus, then this is our mandate too. We are called to preach the good news, but also *be* good news.

So that's the first key value, our worship must be Christ-centred. The second key value is that:

2. Holy Spirit led

Paul uses the phrase in Philippians 3:3 '... we who worship by the Spirit of God ...'

Worship is only made possible by the Holy Spirit. When things aren't going well we can all find it tempting to play louder, faster or speak more forcefully in order to create a response in worship

amongst a congregation. But this rarely seems to work. Why? Because the only way to truly lead people in worship is to allow the Holy Spirit to take the lead.

Christ-centred worship only happens through the power of the Spirit – the same Spirit that brings revelation, opens our eyes to the wonder of his new life, love, mercy, kindness and infinite power. He alone leads us to the place where we glorify Christ and acknowledge, ‘Jesus is Lord.’ (1 Corinthians 12:3)

It is easy to get caught up with the things that we can control, like which songs we sing, the sound quality, the lighting, how the band look, and the general atmosphere. But they are nothing without God’s Spirit and when we rely too heavily on them things go wrong. Sometimes there can be a danger that we have an over-fascination with production and an under-fascination with the presence of God.

It can be so tempting – in worship as in all aspects of life – to base our choices and actions on what we’ve seen work well in the past. God, however, isn’t looking for formulas or rules and regulations. A. W. Tozer warned: ‘If God took his Holy Spirit out of this world, what the church is doing would go right on and nobody would know the difference.’

Without the Spirit we are left with lifeless religion, something dead and mechanical, something fruitless, something worse than useless. Bono once said, ‘I often wonder if religion is the enemy of God. It’s almost like religion is what happens when the Spirit has left the building.’

Insert Story

Insert your own humorous story here about trying to ‘make worship happen’ in your own strength. In the example below, Tim Hughes tells a story of being at a church youth group meeting and the whole group being reprimanded for not singing with enough passion. After that they carried on, but the sound and the soul was hollow. Share a story from your own experience of a time when worship was a case of ‘going through the motions’.

Use the following example to help you prepare, or, if you do not have an example of your own, you may tell the following story about Tim.

Example story

Tim: 'When I was growing up I attended a fantastic youth group. One Friday night meeting there were about sixty of us gathered together as the worship began. I was fourteen years old and if I'm honest my first thought that evening wasn't the transcendence and immanence of our Divine Creator. I was thinking about the girl I fancied, and the football game I was due to play the following day. Judging by the somewhat apathetic singing going on around me, I don't think I was alone in my lack of concentration. Suddenly, one of the youth leaders' frustrations boiled over. She started screaming at us, 'Don't you know what you're singing about? Don't you care that Jesus died on the cross? How dare you not worship passionately? If Jesus was in the room here standing next to you, would you look so bored?' At this, she stormed out the room slamming the door behind her.

My friend who was leading worship had to pick up the pieces and began playing and leading us in worship again. This time everyone's hands were in the air and everyone was singing. But it wasn't real. It wasn't genuine. It was human initiation. We were far more concerned about keeping in our youth leaders' good books than we were about engaging in a genuine response of worship.'

Spirit-led worship is not a new thing. In fact, it is the heritage of the church throughout the ages. Spirit-led worship can be found where incense is wafted, candles are lit and traditional robes are worn, just as much as where the latest songs are sung and people dance and jump up and down. Allowing God's Spirit to lead our corporate times of worship isn't an issue of style or preference. It is a foundational truth that is essential in our worship today, as it was for the early church.

Paul, writing to the church in Ephesus, said, ‘Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the [Holy] Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.’ (Ephesians 5:18–20)

As we are filled with the Spirit, our hearts overflow with worship. We respond with a life of gratitude and songs of devotion. If we allow the Holy Spirit to be our chief worship leader, placing our trust ultimately in him, we will see explosions of life, freedom, joy, creativity, healing and blessing. We will have the privilege of joining in on the most exciting and exhilarating of journeys. ‘... where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.’ (2 Corinthians 3:17).

The third key value of true worship is:

3. Response to the Father

As we worship Christ in the power of the Spirit, our hearts are drawn to respond to the Father. The very same Father who responds to us like the father who responded with such grace and love to the prodigal son in Luke’s Gospel. We read:

‘But while he was [still] a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.’ (Luke 15:20)

i. Identity from the Father

No matter how we feel about ourselves, God has chosen us as sons and daughters, inheritors of his kingdom, called by name and unconditionally loved. The Bible tells us: ‘For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption. And by him we cry “Abba, Father.”’ (Romans 8:15)

The great Chinese Christian leader, Watchman Nee, tells of a young man who came to see him in deep distress. He said: 'No matter how much I pray, no matter how hard I try, I simply cannot seem to be faithful to my Lord. I think I'm losing my salvation.' Nee responded, 'Do you see this dog here? He is my dog. He is house-trained; he never makes a mess; he is obedient; he is a pure delight to me. Out in the kitchen I have a son, a baby son. He makes a mess, he throws his food around, he fouls his clothes, and he is a total mess. But who is going to inherit my kingdom? Not my dog; my son is my heir.'

ii. Intimacy with the Father

William Barclay, the great biblical commentator writes that, 'True worship is when a person, through their spirit, attains intimacy and friendship with God.'

Michael Edward Reagan was the adopted son of Ronald Reagan, the 40th President of the United States. At the funeral service of his father in June 2004, Michael opened his address with these words, 'Good evening. I'm Mike Reagan. You knew my father as Governor, as President. But I knew him as Dad.'

Likewise, the most holy and awesome God is known as King of kings, Lord of Lords, Creator and Sustainer of the Universe, but, to us, now, he is known as simply Father.

It's the great scandal of the universe, that the God for whom atoms dance and galaxies spin symphonies, the God who rules and reigns, transcendent above and beyond understanding invites us to call him Father. Through Jesus, who is 'the image of the invisible God' (Colossians 1:15), God is revealed to us as a loving, tender parent. The kind who forgives, heals the broken-hearted, sings over us and loves us unconditionally. We find ourselves drawing close to a God who reveals himself not as a harsh judge, waiting to catch us out, but a Father who delights in us.

Intimacy involves both close affection and reverent awe. Throughout history, the church has tended to swing between over-emphasising either the 'immanence' – or closeness – of God or the 'transcendence' – or otherness – of God, but the Bible teaches us to embrace both in our worship. This tension is well captured in the word most commonly used in the New Testament to describe worship, *proskuneo*. The word literally means 'to come towards and to kiss in reverence', a term of intimacy and tenderness, but at the same time of great respect.

In Hosea 11, there is a verse that on first reading seems very strange: 'They will follow the Lord; he will roar like a lion. When he roars, his children will come trembling from the west ...' (Hosea 11:10)

No one in their right mind approaches a roaring lion. Yet in this picture we see God described as a lion – ferocious, powerful and kingly – whose children come running to him. God is to be feared and revered and yet at the same time he draws his people close. Here in Hosea we see a stunning picture: the weak, frail, vulnerable and broken-hearted running towards the very thing that should most strike terror and fear. However instead of being destroyed they find protection and safety. The Bible tells us, 'The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him' (Psalm 25:14, NRSV). He both terrifies and welcomes in.

Here we find the great paradox of intimacy: to truly understand the majesty of God, we have to draw near by faith to experience the closeness of God in Christ. In Jesus, God has revealed himself as a God who invites us to approach him in intimacy.

Brennan Manning writes that, 'God entered into our world not with the crushing impact of unbearable glory, but in the way of weakness, vulnerability and need. On a wintry night in an obscure cave, the infant Jesus was a humble, naked, helpless God who allowed us to get close to him.'

Not only is intimacy central to our worship, but we must lead worship in such a way that encourages others to come into a place of intimacy with God. Our attitude, as worship leaders, is to be like that of a good usher at a wedding. We see this so clearly in the life of John the Baptist,

who knew his goal was to help the people of God, the bride, encounter Jesus, their bridegroom.

John the Baptist said this:

'The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less.' (John 3:29–30)

Illustration

Insert your own wedding illustration. For instance, have you been to a wedding and helped out? Maybe you were an usher or bridesmaid, or perhaps it was your own wedding. Use your experience to tell a story that illustrates how the friends of the bridegroom (the ushers or groomsmen) will do everything they can to make the service run smoothly (eg, remove screaming children, sort out the seating arrangements) so that at the moment of the marriage, the Bride and Bridegroom are able to focus entirely on each other and enjoy their moment of public intimacy.

You may use the example illustration that Al gives below to help you prepare.

Example illustration

Al: I love a good wedding. The excitement, the dressing up, the joy of a man and a woman who love each other coming together in the sight of God. At a British wedding, the bridegroom will ask his closest male friends to be his ushers – responsible for helping ensure the service goes smoothly. The first time I was asked to be an usher was such fun – there were photos, we had to hand out a few orders of service, but we got great seats in the church, it was a wonderful, relaxing day.

Then a few years later I got married to my wife, Olivia. I had no idea how much there is to organise at a wedding. Now, when I am asked to be an usher, I am the world's best-prepared usher! I turn up at the church at the crack of dawn, I scan the building, familiarise myself with fire exits, I organise the seating plan for relatives, and once the service has started I am ruthless ... If a small child starts crying, I move in like an under cover agent, I extract them from the building!

Why? Because I know just how important that moment is, when the bride comes face to face

with her bridegroom. A good usher does everything to ensure there is no distraction or disruption, to enable that public moment of intimacy, exchange, devotion and dedication.

In the same way, our role as worship leaders is not to draw attention to ourselves. It is to decrease – to draw attention away from ourselves and towards God, so that we don't get in the way of encouraging intimacy with God. We have a great privilege – to lead the church, the bride of Christ, into the presence of the bridegroom and then to allow that moment of public intimacy to happen.

Conclusion

Our worship must be Christ-centred, Holy Spirit-led, and a response to the Father. We worship a God who is Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – and so this is where our worship must begin. We find ourselves standing in the Son, filled with the Spirit and embraced by the Father. Here we don't find a sombre silence, but an exuberant dance of joy. Like the child who runs to be swept up into the air by its parent, we find ourselves lifted off our feet as we worship, caught up in the very heart of God. It is here, in this place of intimate encounter that we are led to service and we see transformation.

Right now, today, you may feel hungry for a new encounter with God. You may feel your universe is out of sync and needs to realign. You may feel distant and long for intimacy. The good news is that, right now, we can ask God to come by his Spirit and to reveal Jesus to us in a new and powerful way.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you don't leave us like orphans, but you sent Jesus to come and rescue us. We thank you that you're here today by your Holy Spirit. Now, come we pray and



fill us with your power. Amen.

Next

Leave lots of time for prayer ministry, then break into small groups for coffee and discussion. The questions for the Groups are on the Notes, which can be downloaded from WorshipCentral.org

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