

worship: the transforming priority

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Scripture Passage Psalm 95:1-2

Like most evangelical churches, VCBC is a busy place. Lots of activity. Lots going on. There are many things we are committed to in our mosaic of ministries: evangelism, children and family, missions, and practical ministry. But we may need to acknowledge that when it comes to worship, most churches and most of us are little more than pygmies. A.W.Tozer, a Christian leader from a previous generation, called worship the missing jewel in the evangelical church.

In any organization and churches, when things get complex or muddled, When we lose sight of why we do what we do, it is often time to go back to the basics. Ask many churches what their priority is, they say **EVANGELISM**. Others might say it is discipleship. Recent EFC conference, hard to disagree with either response. But I would suggest both miss the mark. The real priority of the church is worship. More than anything else, we are called to be worshippers. But our view, our understanding of worship is often too narrow, We think of it only as singing. Something we do before the sermon. Or we confine worship to an hour on Sundays. Or we think of it as a certain kind of service. We need to rediscover His missing jewel.

Our Vision statement and Core values—**Intimacy with God**

We value intimacy with God that is nourished in prayer, worship, and attention to the spiritual life.

In the Old Testament, the nation of Israel was made up of 12 tribes. An entire tribe called the Levites had the responsibility for worship. They did not have a worship pastor. They had a worship tribe. That's how important worship was.

One day in a discussion with a woman at a well, Jesus said that real/true worship was worship that was in spirit and in truth. It was not about a place, or a style, or a liturgy. It was about meeting God the Father in worship and in truth.

When a church fails to understand and to value worship, every other area of its life will be diminished.

Archbishop Temple's great quote:

To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God; to feed the mind with the truth of God; to purge the imagination with the beauty of God; to open the heart to

the love of God; to devote the will to the purpose of God.

It has nothing to do with the songs we sing, whether we use guitars and piano. Nothing about technique. Sometimes in our poverty we ask, what can we do to start worship—to get it going?

That is the wrong question and it badly misses the point. We do not start worship at all. Worship is our human response to the divine initiative. This triune God is always the one who makes the first move. This triune God has always acted first. This triune God leads and we follow.

Worship is our response to the character of God—to whom God is.

The question is asked: who is like the Lord? And the only answer is, no one is like the Lord. He is unique. So the centre of worship is always the Lord Himself.

Psalm 95 – a Psalm about worship

**Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.
2 Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song.**

But not all worship is praise and clapping our hands.

Isaiah 6: in a moment Isaiah sees the glory and the holiness of God. And he falls down on the ground feeling the awfulness of his sin. Worship drives him to his knees.

Even a glimpse of God for who he is brings us to our knees in confession.

At the beginning of the Book of Revelation, John has a glimpse of the glory of the risen and ascended Jesus, Revelation 1.

His head and hair were white like wool as white as snow. And his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.

Many so-called worship songs today talk about our feeling. And the space we are in. And how we feel. This is not where biblical worship starts. It always starts with who God is. Worship and praise is not a cheer-leading time to make us feel good about ourselves. Worship is always about who God is.

2 WORSHIP: THE TRANSFORMING PRIORITY

One thing we do need to discover in Biblical worship is a lack of focus on oneself. All of the focus is always on who God is.

When we realize this, this is intended to draw us away from how we are feeling, and move us towards how we should think and feel. In our worship, we define and create the mood and disposition we should be in, rather than just reflect the one we are in. We worship to state truth, rather than express our feelings.

Many Christian songs today are introspective. They are about how **we** feel. We need in worship to lift our eyes towards all that God is.

Worship is the human response to all that God has done.

#1 We respond to God for His work in creation.

This is the worship song of the psalms.

Psalms 19: the heavens declare the glory of God.

Psalms 95: in His hands are the depths of the earth. The mountain peaks are his. The sea is His and His hands formed the dry land.

We are to look at the mountains and say **WOW!** Look at what God did. We see the sunrise every day and we say God does that every morning.

#2 We respond to God for his mercy in redemption.

We are people who have stood at the foot of the cross. Often more than once. And from the very core of our being there needs to flow a constant stream of gratitude to God for his work on the cross.

And it can be.

I stand amazed at the presence of Jesus the Nazarene.

When I survey the wondrous cross on which the prince of glory died.

But the scripture calls us to more than words and songs. It calls us to a whole-life response.

Romans 12:1
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.

3 WORSHIP: THE TRANSFORMING PRIORITY

This whole life worship is a transforming reality because it brings together. It integrates. It re-connects some aspects of our lives that have become disconnected and separated.

We will take a short detour and see several examples of this whole-life worship.

#1 Whole-life Worship reconnects the spiritual to the physical.

For many of us, worship has become cerebral, intellectual. It takes place in our minds. And we are often quite happy to leave it there. But whole life worship involves our whole being: spiritual, intellectual, emotional, physical. The psalms invite us to clap, to raise our hands, to bow our knees, to bring our whole being to God.

Psalm 95
Come, let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before the LORD our Maker;

Romans 12: to offer our **bodies** [Paul chose to say bodies, not just hearts, or spirits] as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.

I was taught as pastor that I needed to stay aloof from the people I pastored. Pastors needed to stay emotionally detached. That did not work for me. One of the ways in which God has touched my life and brought a greater wholeness in me in the past number of years is that he has re-connected my spirit to my body and given me the freedom to express out of my whole life. And as God connected my feelings to the rest of me, He has gently moved me towards a greater wholeness. I have learned to cry.

I recall when I held Jennifer in my arms, I cried with joy. I have also carried white little caskets and laid them in a tiny grave and I have cried tears of grief. I cried when my best friend died of a heart attack one evening.

#2 Whole life worship re-connects the Sunday to the rest of the week.

We cannot be worshipful on Sunday and then live like non-believers the rest of the week. Whole life-worship re-connects the act of worship to the rest of life. Our whole-life worship comes in how we live.

#3 Whole-life worship re-connects our lives as individuals to the life of the community – the people of God.

We have to worship both individually and corporately. Sometimes we may think, I don't need the rest of the church. I will just worship by myself. There is an obvious place and necessity for personal worship. We need to be in the congregation of the people of God to worship together.

These are how whole-life worship re-connects the broken pieces of our lives, and the fragmented way in which we live. And so worship becomes a transforming experience.

Now we return to the theme of responding to God.

#3 We celebrate God's work in our lives.

There is a thread woven through the Scriptures that I think evangelical Christians do not know or do very well. And if they try it, they feel guilty. It is the theme of celebration. It means learning how to throw a party.

Here's what we find in the Bible.

A wayward/prodigal child makes it home, and they have a party.

A woman breaks an alabaster jar over the feet of Jesus and his disciples are upset about the money that was wasted.

Think about us.

A baby is born. We should celebrate and throw a party!

Someone comes to faith. Their small group or Alpha people should have a party. After all the angels rejoice. Perhaps we should also!

When someone is baptized, there should be a worship party.

When a prodigal son or daughter comes home, or comes back to Christ, for heaven's sake – have a party!

Richard Foster writes: Celebration comes when the common ventures of life are redeemed. Worship is when we see God in the ordinary common ventures of life. Over and over again we are told celebrate the goodness of God.

Not all of life is easy. There are dark threads woven into each of our lives. There are times when we do not feel like singing, worshipping. This happened to Israel.

4 WORSHIP: THE TRANSFORMING PRIORITY

Psalm 137: a psalm written in the days of exile in Babylon.

1 By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.

**2 There on the poplars we hung our harps,
3 for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"**

4 How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?

Some of you have walked through dark days of grief and struggle, and we cannot always sing songs of joy.

When we cannot sing songs of joy, we need to turn to the Psalms and read the songs of people who were in the pit of depression. Who felt that God had abandoned them. Who did not know where God was. Who felt like quitting and throwing in the towel.

There are songs of lament and struggle. Songs to be sung in a minor key when life is hard. And perhaps as we sing their songs, we will discover the same light that they found in their darkness.

Somewhere even in the midst of tragedy, even in the long dark night of the soul, we can start to find a shred of thanksgiving and start to worship. We can start to climb out of the pit of despair and depression, and we will see again the face of God.

Not all our whole-life worship comes with raised hands and with a shout to the lord. Some of our deepest worship may come on our knees with tears running down our faces. That is all right. Because God is there too. There may be a depth of response of God in those times which will be deeper and richer than at any other time.

We will never forget what we learn about God in the darkest moments of life.

Tears may come in the night, but joy comes in the morning.

Worship is also about anticipation.

Worship is a holy expectancy—a looking forward.

The final act of history is that the Lord will reign forever and forever. All the nations of the earth will come and worship Him. The songs of the Bible look forward to this event and they anticipate it with joy.

It is reminding us that in all the struggles of life. In all the twists and turns that life takes. In all the ups and down that we experience. In all the injustices and wrongs that happen in our world, through all the wars and famines. After all the suffering and evil, there is a final act still to come. There is a last word still to be spoken. And the last word belongs to Almighty God!

Every time God gets to win someone's life. Every time God gets a victory in history, another note in being written on the final version of the Hallelujah chorus which is still to be sung. Every triumph, no matter how large or small, is a rehearsal for the final song to be sung in heaven. And we will sing who is like the Lord. And all of heaven will reply there I no one like the Lord.

The apostle John was given a glimpse of that day and a peek into the triumphant finale of history.

[stand]

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders.

In a loud voice they sang:

"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise!"

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing:

"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power,
for ever and ever!"

The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshiped.