

# Worship as Transformation

**Key Premise: We are not what we should be. We are not who we ought to be. God is holy and perfect; we are not. Something must take place within us to change us and transform us into what we should be and who we ought to be.**

A few questions to explore: How does God transform us? What methods and means does God use to bring significant inward change to our heart? What part do I play in that transformation? How do I work with God in order to be transformed from a naturally sinful, selfish, proud and ungodly person, into someone reflecting the image and likeness of Christ through my affections, character and personality?

The simple and yet vastly complex answer is that *we become like that which we worship*. That which we give our deepest affections, love and adoration to will ultimately determine the type of person we become. Moreover, just as we must breathe for physical life, and don't really have a choice about this, so we are by nature creatures who worship. We have a spiritual dimension and a consciousness which is wholly different to all the other creatures on earth. We are made to worship, and what, or whom, we worship determines the nature of our character, behaviour, affections and personality: our soul. Our deepest and truest identity is formed and fashioned through worship.

## Part 1: Two Problems to Overcome

### 1. The stubbornness and waywardness of the Human Heart.

The biblical view of humanity is one of glorious privilege and honour bestowed upon us as God's crowning achievement in creation. Everything else was "good", but we were "very good". We were made "just a little lower" than God (Ps 8). We could walk and talk with God like a friend with no shame, fear or guilt. Just pure innocence, happiness and joy. But that was then and this is now. Things took a serious turn for the worse when our first parents decided that God was not enough. And so we fell into a world of pain, shame, violence, and evil.

There are people who find talk of original sin and fallenness to be a bit outdated and old-fashioned. But try as we might with a plethora of various fig leaves we attempt to cover our shame with, the truth is something is broken in the human person. We need fixing. And as much as there are many things that may help us be happier, healthier, smarter and more comfortable in life, there is absolutely nothing we can do to fix the brokenness inside each one of us, nor to heal and remove our shame. Only God can transform us and heal us. The good news is he can and he wants to.

When God had brought out the people of Israel from Egypt so that they might worship Him, they failed at the first test and instead made gods of gold and bowed down and worshipped them. Moses asks his brother Aaron:

*"What did these people do to you, that you led them into such great sin?"*

*"Do not be angry, my lord," Aaron answered. "You know how prone these people are to evil. They said to me, 'Make us gods who will go before us...' (Ex 32:21–24)*

Throughout the life of Israel's kings there is a constant war in the hearts of the people between worshipping their God, the LORD, or idols. And the kings set the tone for the nation. David, a "man after God's own heart" (1 Sam 14:14) set the right pattern and basis for worship in Israel. But it was pretty much downhill from there. It started with David's son, Solomon:

*The LORD became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice. Although he had forbidden Solomon to follow other gods, Solomon did not keep the LORD's command. (1 Ki 11:9–10)*

One of Solomon's officials named Jeroboam rebelled and made himself king of the 10 Northern tribes, leaving the 2 Southern tribes, or Judah, to be ruled by Solomon's son Rehoboam. They both turned away from God and led the people to do the same.

Jeroboam set up golden calves (can you believe it!) for the people to worship, he built pagan shrines in the high places, held festivals to foreign gods and appointed anyone to be priests, though they should have only come from the tribe of Levi. God spoke to Jeroboam through the prophet Ahijah saying,

*"You have done more evil than all who lived before you. You have made for yourself other gods, idols made of metal; you have aroused my anger and turned your back on me... 'Because of this, I am going to bring disaster on the house of Jeroboam.'" (1 Ki 14:6–11)*

Rehoboam was no better. This is his epitaph as king:

*<sup>22</sup> Judah did evil in the eyes of the LORD. By the sins they committed they stirred up his jealous anger more than those who were before them had done. They also set up for themselves high places, sacred stones and Asherah poles on every high hill and under every spreading tree. There were even male shrine prostitutes in the land; the people engaged in all the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites. (1 Ki 14:22–24)*

And so the dye was set and apart from a few exceptions, Israel and Judah's kings followed this pattern, beginning with Rehoboam's son:

*Rehoboam's son, Abijah, succeeded him as king and we are told that: He committed all the sins his father had done before him; his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his forefather had been. (1 Ki 15:3.)*

We need to take a moment here and see the utter depravity of worshipping idols or images. It's as if the human heart has eyes and needs to fixate upon something in a devoted and adoring manner. Again, we can't *not* worship. But to worship images, idols, things, people, and experiences is to be fashioned into the likeness and nature of the things we worship. God is not diminished or lessened in any way when we don't worship Him. God suffers no loss to His Glory, Holiness and infinite majesty and beauty when we give our hearts to lesser gods. Let's be clear: we are not doing God any favours when we worship Him, and nor are we giving him anything He does not already possess. Mind you, that is not to ignore that God delights in us and enjoys relating to us through worship. God's anger at false worship is twofold: 1. it is blasphemy and an affront to God; 2. it hurts us and deforms the image of God in us. Worshipping anything other than God is a treasonous rebellion against our God and creator, and it dehumanises us by ultimately transforming us into ugly, disfigured and marred people. But when we praise His beauty, when we gaze adoringly into His majesty and glory, when we pour out our devotion and love toward our Creator, it is then, and only then that we begin to reflect and become who we truly are.

And Jesus was scathing about the state of worship among the people of God in his day, noting that the problem was a hard and stubborn heart:

<sup>6</sup> He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

" 'These people honor me with their lips,  
but their hearts are far from me.

<sup>7</sup> They worship me in vain;

their teachings are merely human rules.’ (Mk 7:6–7)

But God did something about the entrenched stubbornness of the human heart and foretold it in the prophets:

31 “The days are coming,” declares the LORD,  
“when I will make a new covenant  
with the people of Israel  
and with the people of Judah.

33 “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel  
after that time,” declares the LORD.

“I will put my law in their minds  
and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God,  
and they will be my people. Jeremiah 31:31–33 (NIV)

“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. 26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.” Ezekiel 36:25–27

So the good news for those in Christ is shared by Paul

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

## **2. The Wounds and Hurts of the Human Person**

### **The issues:**

“The person who brings a wounded spirit into the setting of worship often finds it difficult to enter into the experience of worship. Paradoxically, it is the very act of worship that offers healing for those wounds, even though the pain may hinder the hurting Christian’s full participation in it.

Worship comes alive when it becomes relational, when through it we encounter both the God with whom we are acquainted and our fellow believers with whom we are united as a body. The corporate encounters with God enrich our personal experiences with him, while our private ones invest the corporate with new life. This level of worship is not an unreachable ideal, but a vital reality to many believers. Unfortunately, there are many others for whom worship is an intellectual and behavioural routine which never rises to the level of relationship.

It is possible for sincere Christians to be limited in their worship experiences because they have, over a period of time, built emotional barriers around themselves to protect wounds they have sustained in the course of personal relationships. A person who has been hurt by a relationship will find ways to protect himself or herself from further hurt. Sometimes these protections are consciously chosen and are appropriate to the situation. But much self-protection is unconscious and serves to restrict and defeat rather than to free.”

### **Steps to healing and change:**

**Self-discovery.** Healing of old wounds begins by discovering that there is a link between the experiences and relationships of the past and those of the present.

**Safe Relationships.** Self-examination at this level is rewarding, but difficult and painful as well. The decision to begin this journey is deeply personal and occurs in that private place of relationship to oneself. But walking the journey through must take place within safe, committed relationships.

**Forgiveness and Restoration.** When a person moves toward acceptance and resolution of the past, it becomes necessary to sort out the issue of responsibility. Hurt children often assume the blame and guilt that belong to others and then grow up either blind to or confused about the implications of their own attitudes and actions. Christians committed to healing know that they are supposed to forgive those who have wronged them and seek forgiveness for their own wrongs. But they cannot do that in a meaningful way until they are clear about who bears responsibility for what.

**Behaviour Change.** Working with the relationships of the past is important, but it is meaningful only as a foundation for change in the relationships of the present. Healing the past frees a person to engage more effectively in the process of change, including some hard work in the here and now.

**Understand the old behaviour.** Familiarity with the old ways of relating is an unpleasant but necessary first step toward change. Some research may be required. "What exactly happened in that messy interaction with the choir director? What role did I play that caused or contributed to the problem? Is this a pattern in me that has led to problems before?"

**Discover the new behaviour.** Healthy behaviour patterns are a mystery to people who did not see them modelled as a child. They may know in general what healthy is, but they usually do not know how to make it happen. It takes time to discover and experiment with alternatives in real life situations.

**Trial and Error.** Learning to change relationship patterns is not very different from learning any new skill. Anyone who has ever learned to ski knows the feeling of being overwhelmed with stimuli. Information and instructions are flying in every direction, but somehow nothing works right. If you could not see people all around you successfully skiing, you would be certain it is impossible to whiz gracefully down a mountain with two sticks strapped to your feet.

Margaret M. Webb

### **The tension to manage:**

Worship is not ultimately about us, but about God.

"Genuine Christian worship is not worshiper-centred but God-centred. Worship that is based on the biblical perspective must by definition be directed away from the worshiper and towards the proper object of worship, the God who has involved himself in the history of a people and who comes to them as Creator, Saviour, and Lord."

"The primal experience of worship is the sense of awe in the presence of the holy, the one who is infinitely greater than ourselves and beyond all comprehension."

**"Worship that focuses on meeting human needs will never break the destructive cycle of self-centeredness. Only worship that lifts up a transcendent God, calling people to commit themselves in his service and to abandon themselves in fascination with his glory, will break this cycle and bring healing."**

Richard C. Leonard

## Part 2: The Grounds for Transformation through Worship

As we see God clearly and come into His presence we become aware of our sin. It happened to Isaiah, it happened to Peter and it will happen to us.

### 1. Worship and our minds

True worship must begin with the revelation of God's nature, character and deeds. We must know clearly, intimately and rightly the God whom we worship. It may not be a big conference puller like a well-known celebrity worship leader, but the revelation of God's nature, character and deeds is to be found only in one place: the Bible. Well, it's the primary place, but of course God has also revealed attributes of his character and glory in the heavens and the earth (Ps 19; Rom 1).

What does this say about the content of the songs that we are singing? They need to be authentic and heartfelt expressions of the truth of God as revealed in Scripture, as well as genuine prayerful expressions of our hearts.

We need to be able to pray and sing our theology so that it is not dry and arid intellectualism. On the other hand, we need biblical theology as the basis for our worship otherwise we ignore the truth of God's revelation in Scripture and may be worshiping an idol god fashioned by our own hands.

### 2. Worship and our emotions and affections

Worship must reach and include our emotions; but worship is not emotionalism. In this sense, artistic expression is a gift of God in our worship. Take Israel's song and prayer book, the Psalms. As one writer states, "the Psalms are poetry. Poetry is the language of emotion and imagination which, in the context of worship, will seek to explore the mystery of human life as it is touched by God."<sup>1</sup>

As important as engaging our emotions are in worshipping God, "To worship the Lord as an act of obedience, regardless of personal "feelings" of the moment, is a therapeutic, restorative act because it is an act of sacrifice—what Scripture calls the "sacrifice of praise"" (Heb. 13:15). Richard C. Leonard

Music in particular can connect to and open up the human heart to be more responsive to God and more aware of his truth and love. Music, and art in general, can reach us below our conscious mind and awareness to deeper places of our imagination, emotions and affections. In this sense, music has a God-ordained power as a means of ministry to God's people. Music that is inspired, directed and anointed by God's Holy Spirit is a powerful gift in our worship of God.

This is where those leading worship in song and pastors need to carefully understand these moments of people opening up and serve them in ministry. We don't want to manipulate people in this receptive state; and sadly, this does happen in some Christian circles. But we have the opportunity to minister in several ways.

Firstly, we can pray. When we have joined together in praise of our God through song, and we come to a moment of shared silence, the LAST thing we should hear is "please take a seat." I feel violated! I feel ripped off! I need to be careful with this imagery, but let me have a stab at it. If worship is about God's people opening their hearts in love and adoration to God and God responding by lavishing his gracious love afresh upon us, I don't want to be told to sit down at this point. The imagery I want to use is that of a husband and a wife opening themselves up to each other in love and then as things are progressing in a more satisfying

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Edinburgh: W.B. Eerdmans; Handsel Press, 1998), 5.

and passionate manner one of them jumps up and says “Well, I’m off. Catch you later!” Talk about ripped off!

The leaders of the worship time have an opportunity to pray into that space with prayers that gather up all of our longings and thankfulness to God. Prayers that affirm God’s love for us and set our hearts more deeply into his presence and love. Prayers that acknowledge the reality of persistent sin and how sorry we are for it, coupled with the beautiful gospel affirmation that we are accepted in Christ.

Secondly, at these moments in gathered worship we can proclaim the truth of Scripture to people. How powerful and potentially transformative to proclaim in faith over the people of God the truths and promises of the Bible. Proclaim who God is through his own revelation of himself. Proclaim assurance to God’s people by way of his promises.

Thirdly, we can wait a little in those times. We can invite the Spirit to speak and move among us as he wills.

### **3. Worship and our bodies**

The ultimate test of transformative worship happens in the way we live. Changed lifestyles, reformed behaviour and increasing integration of biblical theology with daily life are the fruit we must cultivate in transformative worship. Listen to Romans 12:

*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 your true and proper worship. Do not conform 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.*

This is so important. Worship that does not empower godly living and faithful witness to Christ in our lives is a sham. Or worship together needs to be concurrently focused on the eternal glory and beauty of God, but also with an eye to a broken world of pain, sin and sorrow. Isaiah saw this and he worshipped God while being commissioned and sent out as God’s messenger (Isaiah 6). The church at Antioch saw this as they worshipped the Lord the Holy Spirit spoke to send out Paul and Barnabus to the work God was calling them to (Acts 13).

Let Paul have the last word about us being transformed as we gaze on God:

<sup>16</sup> But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. <sup>17</sup> Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. <sup>18</sup> And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. 2 Corinthians 3:16–18 (NIV)

Nicholas Tuohy, Kew Baptist Church, May 2015.