

*Worship Evangelism*  
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Inviting  
Unbelievers  
into the  
Presence  
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# Worship Evangelism

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## CHAPTER 4

# Worship Evangelism: The Reasons

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*Worshippers, don't just enjoy God's wonderful presence for yourselves. Call others to join you there through faith in Christ. And those of you who want to see the world come to Christ, don't just call men and women to believe, call them to worship.<sup>1</sup>*

Gerrit Gustafson

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### Worship and Evangelism: Do They Go Together?

DO WORSHIP AND EVANGELISM go together? In 1993 a twenty-member Integrity Music team toured racially tense South Africa. According to Mike Coleman, Integrity Music's president, the "Hope for the Nations" tour was originally planned "to record live praise and worship music from the indigenous body of Christ in South Africa." That goal was accomplished. But God had a much bigger plan. As a result, Integrity's team and 25,000 South Africans got a whole lot more than they bargained for.

From the outset of the trip, the team agreed that the tour would focus on bringing people into the presence of God through praise and worship, followed by an invitation to receive Jesus as their Savior or to make a deeper commitment to Him. "I wanted to see a genuine move of God," says Ron Kenoly. "I wanted God to do something—touch, save, change lives. And He did." From . . . Johannesburg [to] Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, East London and Durban, the team witnessed lives transformed by experiencing the manifest presence of God.<sup>2</sup>

Do worship and evangelism go together? Listen to Steven Witt, pastor of Abundant Life Vineyard Church in New Brunswick, Canada:

For the past two years I have worked to make our church a "seeker-sensitive" congregation where visitors would feel welcome. . . . Visitors were assured of an abbreviated yet quality time of worship followed by a culturally relevant message. . . . [However], we hadn't adequately considered how

we might also welcome the Holy Spirit. I thought we had made it "safe" to bring people to our church. But . . . the Holy Spirit [came] powerfully upon us and [shook] our unsuspecting congregation! . . . [As a result], many have come and declared that God is in our midst, and some have received him.<sup>3</sup>

Do worship and evangelism go together? Recently a seeker-driven church in a fast-growing suburban area added several worship elements to its seeker event (praise and worship songs, prayers, and occasionally Communion and baptism). So far the reaction from seekers has been extremely positive, and attendance is increasing. When I asked the church's pastor why his congregation made such a change, he responded:

The seeker event we were offering wasn't cutting it for some of the seekers who were coming. They said they were looking for something with more of a "spiritual" feel to it. So, we decided to provide a different kind of service, a celebrative time that both energizes believers and enlightens seekers. We wanted it to be kind of like the 1 Corinthians 14:22 worship where the unbeliever looks around and says, "Hey, God's here!" a time where we invite God to "invade our space" and actually engage people with Him.<sup>4</sup>

Jim Firth, former worship leader at Eastside Foursquare Church in the Seattle area, writes:

I think worship can be a great evangelistic tool. Someone sitting in a congregation of worshippers hears the Word through song, reads it on the screen, and sees others responding to God. One of our choruses says, "I believe in God the Almighty King, God Creator of all things, Holy Father my heart sings. I believe His Word will never fail, His kingdom will prevail, I believe He reigns eternally, in Him I believe." There is something very powerful and moving about being in a group of people who are making that simple, sincere declaration. There is so much about worship that attracts the unchurched unbeliever. Of all the activities of the church, worship is the least selfish and the most pure. People are simply responding to God without any other motive. It moves people to see that there are individuals who do worship God, who really do love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. Worship becomes a very powerful testimonial of hope and love to a world living on the edge of despair.<sup>5</sup>

According to worship leader, teacher, and author LaMar Boschman, we have just begun to see the witnessing power of worship.

In the arena of worship, the church is not where it was 20 or even 10 years ago. We are at a new place in God. Old road maps—old ways of thinking and acting—won't help us now. . . . Change is coming to our public worship service . . . [people are giving] their lives to Christ because of the witness of God's convicting presence in the middle of a vibrant worship

service. . . . I believe we will see an increasing number of people converted to the Lord through the witness of wholehearted Christian worship.<sup>6</sup>

Worship evangelism is already happening.

### God in a Box

A few years ago Jack Hayford wrote a classic statement on worship entitled *Worship His Majesty*, in which he challenged the separatism we promote in our sanctuaries and offered a bold, new vision for worship:

I am totally persuaded that worship is the key to evangelism as well as to the edification of the Church. Amid childlike, full-hearted worship, God's love distills like refreshing dew upon us. As worship moves beyond a merely objective exercise demanded by theological posturing, and as it becomes a simple, subjective quest for God, He responds. He answers the hunger of earnest hearts and reveals Himself in personal, transforming and fulfilling ways. The hungry and thirsty are filled as we seek Him in our worship. I contend that, as long as worship is focused on protecting God from unworthy participants, it can never serve His purpose as a resource for incomplete and broken mankind to find completion and wholeness in His Presence.<sup>7</sup>

Hayford is describing the kind of supernatural worship that makes a difference in people's lives, that not only builds up the church, but also evangelizes.

According to Hayford, worship is to be a resource "for incomplete and broken mankind to find completion in . . . His Presence." I believe that statement comes straight out of the heart of God and describes the essence of worship evangelism. God designed worship to witness, and it *will* witness, if only we will let it. There is no question about God's desire to fill the spiritual hunger of the unbeliever who walks through our worship center doors. God places no limitations on how and when to minister to "incomplete and broken" people.

However, God's children often have a hard time grasping how much God loves the lost. To God, any time is a good time for healing brokenness. "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. . . . He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds" (Pss. 34:18; 147:3). And in God's scheme of things, the expression of mercy and love does not depend on human schedules. Every day is a good day for salvation, as is every hour, every situation, and every place. "He is patient . . . not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

We, on the other hand, love to set limitations on when, where, and how God can work. For instance, God can bring people to Christ in living rooms and at prayer breakfasts, but not in offices, public housing complexes, or bars. God healed people in the first century, but God does not do that now. God only helps those who help themselves. And God cannot speak to unbelievers through worship. They don't belong there.

We as leaders particularly like to compartmentalize the process of faith. We seem to go out of our way to compress God into our favorite structures and systems. But in a healthy church situation, structures and systems always conform to what God is doing or wants to do. Healthy churches follow the lead of the Holy Spirit and remain flexible, ready and willing to change strategies if necessary.

George Barna makes the point that all of the successful churches he has studied subscribe to one common philosophy: "The ministry is not called to fit the church's structure; the structure exists to further effective ministry."<sup>8</sup> And that principle is true whether a church's structures is five centuries or five years old. When are we going to let God out of the box?

### God Is Doing a New Thing

I have talked to many church leaders and laypeople around the country who are tired of being told what God can and cannot do, especially with regard to worship. They are ready to let God out of the container, to let God be God. They agree with Ron Kenoly, Stephen Witt, Jim Firth, LaMar Boschman, and a host of others: Seekers can be profoundly touched by God during heartfelt, corporate worship. And they believe it, not because it sounds like a good idea or because it is time for a new gimmick, but because they have seen it happening in their own churches. In pockets of Christendom, God is doing a new thing. It is not the brainchild of any one pastor or congregation. It does not appear on any four-color, glossy brochures. But it is happening nonetheless.

After my article "Worship Evangelism: Bringing Down the Walls" appeared in *Worship Leader* magazine, I received an incredible number of phone calls and letters from pastors and worship leaders hungering for more information and eager to tell their stories.<sup>9</sup> Most expressed sentiments similar to what this pastor said: "I can't believe someone is finally writing about this! It's exactly what our church has been experiencing for the last few years, and we haven't known what to call it. Frankly, we've kept kind of quiet about it. We didn't know if it was OK to be reaching seekers through worship."<sup>10</sup>

God must think it's OK, however, because seekers are encountering God through worship in a way we never dreamed possible. They are observing their believer-friends in a tangible, dynamic, supernatural worship relationship with God and saying, "Wow! We want that!"

### Recovering an Old Paradigm: Open Worship

The scenario I have just described flies in the face of what many of us have been told all our lives. Even churches on the forefront of the trends seem to be recycling the old worship separatism script: "Seekers can't relate to worship. It's

offensive to them. Seekers and worship are like oil and water: They don't mix. Worship is a believers-only activity."

We had better educate God right away if we intend to hang onto these hand-me-down, elitist perspectives. Nowhere does Scripture say that seekers do not belong in worship. Nowhere does it say that seekers cannot be moved by observing God's interaction with believers. On the contrary, worship and evangelism are conspicuously linked throughout Old and New Testaments.

Isaiah 66:19 reads, "They [God's remnant] will proclaim my glory among the nations [heathen]." And the psalmist instructs, "Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples. . . . Say among the nations, 'The LORD reigns'" (Ps. 96:3, 10). In 2 Samuel 22:50 and Psalm 18:49, David exalts God for delivering him from his enemies, exclaiming, "Therefore I will praise you among the nations, O LORD; I will sing praises to your name." Later he again promises to "boast" about God to unbelievers: "I will praise you, O Lord, among the nations; I will sing of you among the peoples" (Ps. 57:9). And why does he feel like boasting? "For great is your love, reaching to the heavens; your faithfulness reaches to the skies" (v.10). David wants the "pagan" to know the love and faithfulness of God!

Several places in Scripture reveal the practice of open worship. In Numbers 15 the Lord gives Moses explicit instructions about how worship should be carried out. Yet right in the middle of these detailed directions is an admonition regarding outsiders: "For the generations to come, whenever an *alien* or anyone else living among you presents an offering made by fire as an aroma pleasing to the LORD, he must do exactly as you do" (v. 14). Here we see that God expected that there would be "strangers" present in the worshipping community.

We see the same expectation in Deuteronomy 26:10-11. In this text, Moses is instructing the Israelites about how they should worship and give thanks to God when they have taken possession of the land of Canaan. "Place the basket before the LORD your God and bow down before him. And you and the Levites and the *aliens* among you shall rejoice in all the good things the LORD your God has given to you and your household" (*italics mine*). Again we see that God desired Israel to practice open worship.

In the New Testament the presence of the stranger or seeker during corporate worship was a common occurrence, so common that the apostle Paul felt the need to help the Corinthian church understand which worship practices may be helpful and which may be a hindrance to the unbeliever's conversion (good advice for us today!):

So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand [or inquirers] or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by

all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!" (1 Cor. 14: 23–25).

Open worship is definitely the biblical standard, and in this particular passage, it is specifically portrayed as a witnessing event.

### Open Worship: Extending God's Grace

Patrick Kiefert, professor of systematic theology and cofounder of the Lutheran Leadership Institute in St. Paul, Minnesota, believes that open worship and grace are inextricably linked. He maintains that the God of Scripture continually calls us to a ministry of open, public grace, patterned after the grace we ourselves did not deserve but have received. In his book *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism*, Kiefert writes, "Since Israel was the recipient of the Lord's hospitality, so Israel's worship was to be hospitable to strangers. As God is host to Israel, so Israel is called to be host to the stranger."<sup>11</sup>

The churches of the New Testament merely adopted this magnanimous approach in obedience to the ever-gracious, inclusive heart of God. Significantly, Paul harked back to Old Testament examples of open worship in his letter to the Romans:

As it is written:

"Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles;  
I will sing hymns to your name."

Again, it says,

"Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people."

And again,

"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,  
and sing praises to him, all you peoples" (Rom. 15:9–11).

Kiefert elaborates on what worship hospitality looked like in the early church:

The New Testament presents this image of God's self-giving, self-sacrificing presence in Jesus' meal fellowship. . . . The local churches became communities gathered around the meal, and they invited their neighbors to join them. They were also the home bases for itinerant missionaries who would establish younger resident churches. Both the resident and the itinerant worshipped in public, showing hospitality to the stranger.<sup>12</sup>

Synagogue worship in the New Testament church, although eventually closed to Christians, also followed the same Hebraic tradition of hospitality and was, therefore, as public and welcoming to the stranger as residential worship. Kiefert describes the preaching and reading that formed the core of these wor-

ship events as "inherently public acts." It was only as the New Testament church came under intense attack that Christian worship became more of a closed affair. Still, hospitality to the stranger remained a key value. Kiefert writes, "Despite the temptation to make Christian worship a private act, especially with persecution and official rejection, this missionary dimension remained in the early church. The church continued to sponsor public worship, except under the most severe persecution."<sup>13</sup>

### Seekers as Potential Worshipers

God not only intends for seekers to *observe* our worship. God intends for seekers to *become* worshipers. "All the nations you have made will come and worship before you, O Lord; they will bring glory to your name" (Ps. 86:9). In Psalm 67:5–7, the psalmist prays fervently for this God-given vision to come to pass: "May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you." And in Revelation 15:4, the apostle John reiterates the Old Testament message:

Who will not fear you, O Lord,  
and bring glory to your name?  
For you alone are holy.  
All nations will come  
and worship before you,  
for your righteous acts have been revealed.

From these texts, there is no doubt that God sees every person as a potential worshiper. It is amazing, however, that the church's first designated leader did not share that perspective! Before Acts 10, Peter was totally convinced that God was only interested in the Jews. In his mind, the Gentiles were entirely superfluous to God's plan. Obviously, he had not done his biblical homework. One large sheet and a bevy of animals later and Peter had a change of mind! In Acts 10:34–35 he exclaims, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation." Peter discovered that God is not a separatist. God's grace through Jesus Christ, and therefore the opportunity to become a true worshiper, is available to everyone.

### Believer's Worship: Hoarding the Good Stuff

What are we doing with the potential worshipers in our communities? Involving them in positive, caring relationships with Christians is a great way to start. We can minister to them through small groups, parenting and marriage classes, food ministries, singles' events, divorce recovery groups, and seeker events, making sure to lift up Christ in the process.

Yet something is wrong with this picture. A huge piece of the faith mosaic has been intentionally broken out. That piece is worship, and in many churches it is functionally shut off to unbelievers simply because of the "believers only"

mentality we talked about in chapter 1. Why would we want to deny unbelievers access to something that is as potentially life-changing, healing, and beneficial as an experience of true worship? If it is because that kind of worship is not happening at our church, we had better admit it and get to work.

If, however, the corporate worship in our congregation is an authentic, dynamic, supernatural event, making worship an in-house affair is like locking up the supermarket the day before Thanksgiving! Are we going to hoard it for ourselves and let the outsiders rummage through whatever spiritual “dumpsters” they can find? Worship is the most powerful tool we have for satisfying the hunger of famished, injured souls, for breaking down spiritual strongholds of pride and unbelief, and for ushering in the gift of true joy. How can we refuse to use it?

### Worship Is for the Spiritually Hungry

In congregations where separatistic worship is the reigning paradigm, pastors and worship leaders often take pride in reserving worship for the “spiritually mature.” Some speak adamantly of nurturing only “committed believers” in their worship services. I ask them several questions if given the chance.

One, is worship meant to be a reward for spiritual maturity, or is worship meant to facilitate maturity? Two, is God revealed only to an elite group of spiritually “fit” people? If so, Moses, Jacob, and a host of other biblical figures would not have qualified. Three, how is spiritual maturity measured in their congregations, and do *all* the people coming to their worship services measure up? Four, if everyone doesn’t measure up, do they ask those who are spiritually immature, marginally committed, or seekers to excuse themselves? How many do they think they would have left if they did? And finally, where do they recommend that the less-than-mature Christian and the seeker go to have a healing, interactive, supernatural encounter with the living God?

Our whole culture, saved and unsaved, is starving for an extraordinary glimpse of God. Worship is not the only place such an encounter can happen, but it is where one would expect it to happen. Are we going to wall it off so that only those who meet our list of religious criteria can touch the face of God? *We need to get this straight: Worship is not just for the spiritually mature. It is for the spiritually hungry, and in the last decade of the twentieth century, that includes more people than we realize.* To quote Gerrit Gustafson,

The message of worship is not some hidden truth reserved only for the seasoned saints of the deeper life. It’s a street-level message that will challenge the imagination of even the most hardened among humanity: “God is looking for worshipers, and you could be one of them.” Worship is not some kind of acquired skill that can only be learned after years of religious training. It is actually the most natural response of God’s creation to His manifest presence.<sup>14</sup>

### Worship and Public Space

Hebrews 10:19–22 is clear that the blood of Jesus, not religious labels, proficiency, or maturity, is our only access to a holy God. Certainly the unbeliever has yet to acknowledge Christ’s work on his or her behalf. Yet if Christ revealed himself to an unrepentant murderer like Saul or to a thief hanging on a cross, surely the “less-than-arrived” who enter our worship centers—the spiritual infants, the backslidden, and the unbelievers—have the potential of being met by God directly.

We need to be creating an atmosphere of unparalleled welcome and acceptance in our places of worship. It should not matter what kind of religious credentials people have, what their income is, how they look, or where they spent Saturday night. God meets people where they are. And that means our churches should be public, not private, space. Handt Hanson of Prince of Peace says:

What Prince of Peace is about is public space. . . . On Sunday morning when we enter this space, when we come together, we gather as “strangers.” We may have been members of this church for twenty years, but we still gather as “strangers.” And that’s a good thing. Because it means we all come in on the same level. There is not an “in” group and an “out” group. Our assumption is that everyone is here for the first time. Everyone. And for that one first-time visitor, everything we’re doing is worth it. If it isn’t worth it for one, then we are in the wrong business. We should go and flip hamburgers.<sup>15</sup>

### Worship Is a Leveler

As for the issue of believers’ “maturity,” maybe we need to take another look at ourselves. Sixty-two percent of born-again Christians believe “there is no such thing as absolute truth.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, 42 percent either agree strongly or somewhat that “if a person is generally good or does enough good things for others during his or her life, he or she will earn a place in heaven.”<sup>17</sup>

In terms of behavior, the priorities of born-again Christians and non-Christians are identical in every area (family, health, time, friends, free time, career, living comfortably, money), the only exception being religious practice (church attendance and Bible reading).<sup>18</sup> As Barna puts it, “Both Christians and non-Christians seem driven to achieve the same basic end results and lifestyles.”<sup>19</sup> Not surprisingly, half of all born-again Christians agree that “the main purpose in life is enjoyment and personal fulfillment.”<sup>20</sup> Such statistics do not exactly support the notion of a “committed army” of saints!

Even if some of us are serving Christ and maturing steadily in our faith, that does not put us in a separate class. As Handt Hanson intimated, worship is a great leveler. We all come to the foot of the cross together, and none of us can boast of anything. Certainly some of us may know more about who God is and

what the Christian life requires. And hopefully, by the grace of God, we are trying to apply that knowledge to our Christian walk. But if there is any goodness, any righteousness in us at all, it is only because of the Cross.

We should not be reinforcing the Pharisee's attitude: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get" (Luke 18:11–12). We need to be saying, among all shapes and sizes of Christians and in the presence of nonbelievers, what the tax collector said: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (v. 13). That kind of worship is a representation of reality, and it witnesses.

If anything, mature believers need to be modeling heartfelt worship for the less mature and for the unbeliever. Bob Sorge contends, "In the Book of Revelation we read of the elders repeatedly falling down in worship before the throne of God (Rev. 5:8–9)... There should be a greater responsibility resting upon elders and the spiritually mature to worship the Lord and to be examples of worship to others."<sup>21</sup>

### Real Concerns: Worship's Purpose

Separatistic attitudes are undoubtedly at the root of many of the elitist rituals that pass for worship these days, whether traditional or trendy. Yet some cling to the believer's worship model because they have valid concerns that no one has really addressed. Significantly, many of those concerns center on the issue of worship's purpose.

Some have made evangelism the goal of worship and have turned worship into a camp-meeting. Charles Colson warns against this practice:

The worship service itself should not be primarily evangelistic. Too often Baptist churches (and others)—as a Baptist, I think I can fairly say this—treat the worship service as the church's weekly evangelistic outreach. As a result, the members never really get a sense of worship. When the whole service is geared to an altar call—when that becomes the emotional high point, and when the pressure is put on and the invitation hymn is played endlessly—the purpose of the worship service can be distorted.<sup>22</sup>

The intent of worship should be worship.

Robert Webber expresses similar concerns in his book *Signs of Wonder*:

We associate evangelism with a Billy Graham crusade. In a crusade, there are acts associated with worship such as singing, praying and preaching. Nevertheless, evangelism is not worship because the thrust of the service is directed toward the people, particularly the sinner, with the intention of bringing the sinner to a personal relationship with God through Christ... Unfortunately, many churches have brought this evangelistic model into the Sunday morning service and called it worship. It is not worship; it is

evangelism. The church must be about evangelism, but it also must be about worship—and worship is not primarily directed toward the people.<sup>23</sup>

The purpose of worship is to glorify God, not to win lost souls.

### Evangelism Comes in Different Sizes and Shapes

It is interesting that both Colson and Webber link evangelism inextricably with the crusade model, no doubt because the crusade has been evangelicalism's most glamorous and visible outreach method of the century. To a movement that very nearly worshiped its evangelists, the phenomenon of crusade success became a bandwagon not to be missed. In the typical evangelical church fifty or sixty years ago, there was a mini camp meeting every week. Tearful, heart-wrenching altar calls became the stamp of effectiveness.

Yet simply because the crusade model of evangelism has been at the forefront does not mean that it is the only way we can witness. When we lock evangelism into one particular expression, we constrict our ministries and fail to honor the infinite freshness and creativity of God. Will Metzger, in his book *Tell the Truth*, remarks: "It is... misleading to narrow our definition of evangelism to the type of meeting, literature, appeal or Bible passage used. If we did this, then we would be embarrassed to find no evangelism done in New Testament times. Can you imagine trying to find a biblical example of today's typical evangelism rally and appeal?"<sup>24</sup>

In Acts 16 we see how God used worship to evangelize unbelievers in a Philippian jail. "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them" (v. 25). Here were two innocent men, bleeding from beatings and chained to their cells. And they worshiped? No wonder the other prisoners were listening instead of jeering. There was something amazing going on in that cell! These men worshiped with their lives and their lips, and the Christ they adored was present in their praise.

There was no stadium here; there were no appeals for repentance. Paul and Silas probably did not even sing "Just As I Am"! But there was witness and there was response. We are not told if any of the other prisoners came to faith in Jesus, but the jailer certainly did. The point is, evangelism comes in many shapes and sizes. Millions of people around the world have come to Jesus Christ through traditional rallies and crusades. However, seekers also come to know Christ in other ways, and one of those ways is worship.

A distinct advantage of witnessing through a worship service is that worship services happen every week. Seekers can keep coming to experience God's presence, to hear about Jesus, and to witness Jesus in action, toting along their spiritual hunger and curiosity until they feel personally ready to respond to the Gospel. There is no pressure to "make a decision" before the end of the service.

There is more time for the process of coming to faith and more time to observe others participate in their faith.

### Intent and Dimension: A Big Difference

As Gerrit Gustafson pointed out in chapter 2, evangelism was an integral part of everything the New Testament church did. We would do well to follow that example. But making evangelism a *part* of everything we do is different from making evangelism the *only* thing we do. H. W. Genischen writes, “Everything the Church is and does must have a missionary dimension, but not everything has a missionary intention.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, every aspect of church life should be, in some way, evangelistic, even if evangelism is not the intent or the central purpose of each individual ministry.

This distinction between *intent* and *dimension* helps us to see how worship can evangelize without losing its identity as worship. The purpose or intent of worship is not evangelism. Glorifying God in spirit and truth—responding to God for who God is and what God has done for us, especially in Jesus Christ—is the purpose of Christian worship. In effective worship, worship that witnesses, the central purpose of worship remains unchanged. The focus remains on believers interacting with God, not on appeals for conversion. Yet, evangelism, like discipleship, should be one of worship’s dimensions or by-products. Evangelism is the natural and expected fruit of worship that is authentic and full of God’s presence and truth.

### Worship Evangelism: How It Happens

Just how does evangelism take place in a service that is “fully worship”? It happens in two ways: first, as unbelievers hear the truth about God (through worship songs, prayers, Communion, baptism, Scripture, testimonies, dramas, and so on); and second—and more importantly—as they observe the real relationship between worshipers and God.

This last aspect, *observation*, represents a significant departure from the crusade experience or camp meeting. In worship that witnesses, God’s truth and the uniqueness of Christ are communicated primarily through the worshipers and the acts of worship and only secondarily through the sermon or “plan of salvation.” Don’t get me wrong—the Good News is heard. But it is *experienced* even more than it is *heard*. I like the way Robert Webber puts it: “Worship is the gospel in motion.”<sup>26</sup> And worship witnesses as seekers not only hear the truth about God, but observe this “Gospel in motion,” believers interacting with God through Christ.

Songwriter and pastor Mark Altrogge of Lord of Life Church in Indiana, Pennsylvania, shares how he and the leaders of his church perceive worship and evangelism:

Good worship is just by nature evangelistic. That’s why I don’t think to myself, “I want to design worship to be evangelistic.” In other words, I don’t design worship primarily with unbelievers in mind. But I design it *with* them in mind. When we talk together in our leadership team, we say, “Everything we do at Lord of Life on Sunday morning—even Christian things—should be as sensitive and understandable to unbelievers as possible.” So, even though our worship is definitely focused on Christians worshipping, I believe wholeheartedly that there is an evangelistic aspect there. I apply what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 14: 23–25 to worship. We’re being prophetic as we speak forth the truth of God in our worship, as we’re all proclaiming who Jesus is and what He’s done. And as we’re doing that, people say, “God is in this place.” God inhabits the praises of his people, and because of the spirit of God in the worship and the doctrine in the lyrics of the songs, etc., I think people do say, “God is here.”<sup>27</sup>

### Additional Concerns: The Seeker as Worshiper

Another valid concern among those opposed to inviting seekers into worship is that somehow the seeker’s presence in the worship experience may identify him or her as a worshiper. But can a seeker actually worship? Scripture infers that an unbeliever cannot worship God until he or she has a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. In John 4:23–24, Jesus makes it clear that those who would worship God must do so in spirit and in truth. Obviously, a seeker is still being drawn to the Truth and therefore cannot yet worship in the Truth.

Nevertheless, by the Spirit of God who is drawing him or her, the things of God are being revealed. The unbeliever in whom God is working is, therefore, capable of at least some spiritual understanding and discernment. For example, before his conversion, Pharisee Nicodemus was able to discern (by the Holy Spirit) that Jesus had come from God (John 3:1–2). In theological terms this truth is called “prevenient grace.” Basically it means that before anyone can seek God, God first seeks him or her. Tozer describes it this way: “Before a sinful man can think a right thought of God, there must have been a work of enlightenment done within him . . . the secret cause of all desiring and seeking and praying which may follow. We pursue God because, and only because, he has first put an urge within us that spurs us to the pursuit.”<sup>28</sup> Jesus says, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44).

### The “Spiritually Dead” Seeker

Some have touted the believer’s worship platform from the standpoint that it is useless to include the “spiritually dead” seeker in something he or she cannot understand. Typically, 1 Corinthians 2:14 is used to justify excluding unbelievers from worship: “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things



that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned."

But who of us can look inside a seeker's soul and know with certainty that God's Spirit is not at work? It seems better to assume that the reason the seeker came to church in the first place is that God's Spirit is causing some divine "disequilibrium" in his or her heart, some healthy spiritual reevaluation. If we truly believe that all seekers have absolutely no ability to understand spiritual things, then we had better exclude them from crusades and seeker events as well as worship.

### Inviting the Seeker Into Our Midst

A seeker may not be able to actually worship, but he or she can gain much by observing. According to Hippolytus, there was a formal two-to-three-year period designated by many New Testament congregations in which the unbeliever attended worship merely as an observer, or "catachumenate."<sup>9</sup> If the early church saw the need to provide such opportunities for God to work in the unbeliever's heart through worship, surely we can put aside our modern-day paranoia and allow the seekers in our communities the same privilege.

In a fascinating shift, contemporary crusades such as the Harvest Crusade with Greg Laurie and the Franklin Graham Crusades are orienting their events more toward a worship experience. Tommy Coomes, contemporary Christian music veteran and leader of the Maranatha! Praise Band, which provides much of the music for these events, relates, "We're singing many of the same songs in these crusades that we are when we lead worship at churches."<sup>10</sup> The payoff has been great: Between 1990 and 1992, thirty thousand people committed their lives to Christ at the Harvest Crusades held in California, Washington, Arizona, and Hawaii.

Even Promise Keeper conferences are including a half hour of worship in their mass sessions. One man described the worship time he experienced as "absolutely spine-tingling." Coomes, also director of the Promise Keepers praise band, recalls his first conference experience at the University of Colorado stadium in 1993: "I had some doubt about whether I was going to be able to get 50,000 guys into a spirit of worship. . . . But I found it to be the exact opposite of what I expected. I felt like I had struck a match and thrown it into a tank of gasoline. These men absolutely exploded into worship."<sup>11</sup>

Admittedly, most attendees of Promise Keepers conferences are already believers. But in 1994 more than fifteen thousand male seekers responded to the Gospel.<sup>12</sup> Frankly, it would be hard to leave unaffected by such a remarkable outpouring of God's Spirit and hard to forget the witness of thousands of men interacting with God in such a personal, authentic way!

### No More Excuses

The well-worn axiom "seekers can't relate to worship" has more to do with our elitism and the paltry nature of our services than it has to do with any divine law concerning seekers and worship. In 1975 Willow Creek Community Church surveyed its community and found that most unchurched people viewed church services as boring, predictable, and irrelevant.<sup>13</sup> Combine those perceptions with the unchurched person's evaluation that "Christians are judgmental," and the result is not surprising. Of course the unchurched are going to say they cannot relate to worship!

But does that mean we refuse the seeker a unique glimpse of Almighty God just because we have not made worship what it could be—welcoming, exciting, fresh, and relevant? Are we going to claim that worship itself is inherently cold, dull, repetitive, and out of touch? That is absurd, but I'm afraid it is exactly the sort of muddled reasoning some of us carry around with us in our heads.

Seekers in whom God is at work have a hard time relating to worship, not because of who they are or what worship is, but because of what we have done to it! Does it make sense, then, to put all our "evangelism eggs" into nonworship events? To give up entirely on worship as a means of witness just because we have not done whatever it takes to make it better is ludicrous! Would we trash CAT-scan technology simply because some machines malfunction, ground all jets because some jets crash, or eliminate the institution of marriage because some people get divorced? Of course not! We would work to improve what went wrong. We would try to make CAT-scan technology, flying, and marriages work better.

Why can't we apply the same intentional elbow grease, the same whatever-it-takes attitude, to worship? God has given us everything we need to make it the best it can be—for God, for ourselves, and for the unchurched, whether believer or unbeliever. We have brains. We have been stamped with God's own creative nature. We have God's Son, God's Word, and God's Spirit. If we can apply such incredible ingenuity and vigor to a seeker event, we can do the same with worship. It will be different because it will be fully worship. But we can do it, and we need to do it. There has never been such acute spiritual hunger in the history of our nation. Are we going to do what it takes? The issue for many of us at the helm is not whether we can, but whether we will.

### Allowing Worship to Witness

Today when lost people have turned a deaf ear to "churchianity" but their hearts are being drawn to spiritual things, heartfelt Christian worship can meet their need for both truth and experience, for hearing the "claims of Christ" and seeing "Christ in us." Seekers can pick up a religious experience at any New Age quick-stop. But they won't get Jesus Christ in their take-out bags. Worship

such as that in the Philippian jail—exaltation of the God incarnate and present with God's people—*this* is what seekers really need to see in our churches.

We may not want worship to witness. We may not believe it can witness. We may point to the blemished lambs of worship we offer up each week as proof that it cannot witness. But effective worship, real worship—worship that is what it was meant to be and does what it was meant to do—*will* witness. As Handt Hanson says, "Worship is evangelism."<sup>34</sup>

### I Want That!

Tommy Coomes states, "There is a spiritual dynamic going on in authentic worship that can't be reasoned away."<sup>35</sup> This spiritual dynamic became very real to him one day as he and the other members of the secular rock band Love Song walked in off the psychedelic California streets into a worship service at Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa. In a recent interview, I asked Coomes what his life was like before he walked through the door at Calvary Chapel. He replied:

Lonely, somewhat depressed, scared—I had a lot of questions. I was kind of disillusioned about life. I'd been the good kid, got straight A's in school, graduated pretty close to the top of my class, went to college, but was really disillusioned, empty, and confused. I was frustrated enough to start seeking. I knew that there had to be something better in this life than what I'd seen. I had been trying to find out if there was a God for about three years at the point I experienced a worship service at Calvary Chapel.

When I asked Coomes what it was about the worship at Calvary Chapel that stood out to him, he answered:

The people had a supernatural love for each other. I saw God in their midst. Some friends and I watched the entire service evolve. They sang for about a third of the time. Chuck Smith taught out of the Bible, and then they prayed for those who were sick. It was all so full of grace and unconditional love. The spirit of what I saw there was something I had never seen before.<sup>36</sup>

At a recent music conference Coomes reflected on his initial worship experience again and summarized it this way:

My impression was that these people really knew who God was. What was going on in this little church was nothing like what was going on in the street, but I sensed God was there. In their simple little worship songs, I sensed God in their midst. I saw their worship, I saw their love for each other, and I said, "I want that."<sup>37</sup>

Coomes and three other members of Love Song gave their hearts to the Lord not long after that service. Coomes recalls:

After we'd been going to church a few weeks, we asked Chuck Smith if we could sing some of the songs we'd written. He wanted to hear them, so we went out in the parking lot and played a few for him. I remember that he cried and asked us to play that evening.<sup>38</sup>

They did play that evening, and much of the praise and worship movement in the United States can be traced to that event.

### What Is Worship Evangelism?

What is worship evangelism? Gerrit Gustafson defines it in two profound but simple phrases: "wholehearted worshipers calling the whole world to the whole hearted worship of God . . . [and] the fusion of the power of God's presence with the power of the gospel."<sup>39</sup> It is what Tommy Coomes and millions of others have experienced. And it is what millions more can experience in our churches if we will only let it happen.

Worship evangelism happens when we allow worship to be what it was meant to be—"a resource for incomplete and broken mankind to find completion and wholeness in His Presence."<sup>40</sup> It happens when we become "Davids" and testify of God's greatness, love, and faithfulness. It happens when we "let God out of the box." It is time to put these two words, "worships" and "evangelism," together without apology. In the words of a contemporary praise chorus:

Let's become a generation who will passionately praise Him,  
Boasting in the greatness of our God.<sup>41</sup>

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