

## **Worship and Ministry - June Archives (mixed):**

### Worship in the American Church Culture

- \* Branon Dempsey
- \* Published June 22, 2008
- \* Worship Evangelism

### Questions to Consider

Worship and the Gospel is found in our everyday activities, relationships and conversations beyond the Sunday service. It's great to have services that function as a place to worship and a place to communicate the Gospel. Recently, I was approached by a few concerning issues within the church-worship culture of America. These questions challenged me to think more critically about our worship services in view of the Bible; I am interested in how (if at all) they challenge you as well.

1. Is the local church merely putting on a "show," to our congregations?
2. Are we truly showing up to worship?
3. Who is the service for?

We are surrounded by a popular individualistic world-view that has an anything-goes mentality – even in other worship movements and local churches. Biblical foundations places worship in a more Christ-centered context (1Cn 16:29; Ps. 98:5; Ex. 24:7; Lk. 4:15-21; Ac. 4:31; Lk. 22:14:20; Mt. 26:30). In America, there is no doubt that both traditional and contemporary churches face their set of challenges of maintaining biblical and cultural relevancy for today's people. The toughest point I see: how do we develop and/or preserve an accurate biblical model of church worship, while relating and reaching authentically to our neighbors as Jesus? This concern is also shared in how we as American Christians present the Gospel, worship and the Character of Christ to the rest of the world.

To often, we dress our services in many different styles in order to appeal or to "show" to the masses. There also seems to be rivalries among local churches to affirm their efforts over another. Making services relevant to our communities is needed; like anything else, we can get caught in the motions and our purpose loses vitality. Unfortunately, this has been the case for decades in battles over preference issues: music styles, our appearance, culture as well as old arguments of carpet color, bible study programs and what the pastor ate last night. These minor subjects seem to override the spiritual priorities of the Church.

It is true that a church must have a defined DNA of style of worship, but biblical worship, reading of the Word and the preaching of the Gospel, should not be compromised at the

expense of relevancy. Praise be to God, that he is not concerned over style preferences in our attempts to worship Him. He does not only hear traditional hymns, contemporary choruses or responsive readings; neither is he concerned about the caliber of our bands, video-eye-candy or catchy sermons. What He is concerned with is the condition of our hearts and the attitude of our souls in worship. Our concern does need to be in how we present ourselves to the world by our heart and biblical posture.

God is honored by a contrite spirit of worship. The worship service is for God and He alone. The Gospel belongs to the work of God in missions. The balance is found in how we rightly anchor worship services on the Bible while relating to the world via the Gospel. Through ardent praise and response from the community of worship, the unchurched and de-churched can experience the Gospel and God's unconditional love through authentic relationships.

John Piper put it clearly in "Let The Nations Be Glad," that evangelism (missions) comes out of worship – this means that worship comes first. For worship services to be ardent, authentic and of relevant substance, the Word of God needs to be the foundation for conducting services and not by our style preferences to govern our praise. Neither should the Gospel be governed by how the church presents a "style" in order to show relevancy, otherwise we appear to America (and the rest of the world) as just a show. What are your thoughts?

Bill Burt - post

Valuable thoughts Branon. You asked what are your thoughts? I find it most revealing that our Lord's last recorded words to his disciples focused not on his concern with whether or not He was worshiped but on making disciples of every people group (the text says that they worshiped him, but some doubted [Matt. 28:17]). The focus was on mission (singular). My personal take is that the majority of churches have allowed mission agencies to focus on the mission of Christ, while the local church has become a fundraising arm for the mission (now called missions), easing our lack of personal involvement in not making disciples. All of our discussion on worship styles and relevance, critical as it is (seriously), often seems a smoke screen for lack of mission ownership. I have been a participant in the worship style changes beginning in the early 1970s until now. I enjoy and value the worship band movement. The excellence of well performed music only enhances the sense of joy-filled worship. It is true that we worship an audience of One, but I differ with you when you say that worship is for He alone (your words). We do offer worship to Him alone, but we gain value from that worship. I would say that corporate worship unites the body of Christ toward a much larger sense of wellbeing. Contrite worship readies the body of Christ to do the work of Christ, to live in the strength of the risen Christ. It seems to me that the bottom line is whether or not our worship drives us to godly living and a divine urgency to participate in Christ's mission. Your words are to be heeded: Our concern does need to be in how we present ourselves to the world by our heart and biblical posture. Thanks for stirring my thoughts!

bdempsey - post

Burt thanks for sharing your stirred thoughts! My point was that worship for God is for He alone, not for ourselves. This means that as we respond and participate in His praise and worship it is ultimately for Him as He graciously shares his presence with us. Simply worship begins and ends with God.

## Spiritual Essentials of Serving

- \* Branon Dempsey

- \* Published June 20, 2008

- \* Worship Studies in the Gospels , Worship Studies In Exodus , Worship Leader Perspectives

Got Skeels?

Skills: not to be confused with "nunchuk skills, bow hunting skills, computer hacking skills..."

I'm talking about skills, ability and knowledge to use in ministry. No matter our task, we each have a set of essentials that guide our process. What about our responsibility to our tools and devices that enable us to serve in worship ministry? More importantly, what is our responsibility to God in how we serve: our purpose, intension and fruit? The call of serving thought the arts comes with much responsibility. Each of us has a calling, whether if you are a singer, musician or artist. God calls us to serve in His work for His honor and for the sake of the Gospel. The tools we use in our ministries are not a means to an end; no matter how great the technology, how cool the instrument or even how wonderful our created art looks or sounds. Times will come and go and so will our innovations; but there are four must-have primary essentials. As God provides resources to aid us in our tasks, our intension and purpose behind our tools will determine the fruit we bear.

## Exodus 31

We see two men summoned by God to work under the command of Moses in building the Tent of Meeting:

1 Then the Lord said to Moses, 2 "See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, 3 and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts-- 4 to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, 5 to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship. 6 Moreover, I have appointed Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, to help him. Also I have given skill to all the craftsmen to make everything I have commanded you: 7 the Tent of Meeting, the ark of the Testimony with the atonement cover on it, and all the other furnishings of the tent-- 8 the table and its articles, the pure gold lampstand and all its accessories, the altar of incense, 9 the altar of burnt offering and all its utensils, the basin with its stand-- 10 and also the woven garments, both the sacred garments for Aaron the priest and the garments for his sons when they serve as

priests, 11 and the anointing oil and fragrant incense for the Holy Place. They are to make them just as I commanded you." – Ex. 31:1-11

God hand picked these guys to build and furnish the Tent of Meeting for the dwelling and worship of God. The four primary essentials that God provided to these men (and still today) is His Spirit, skill, ability and knowledge.

Holy Spirit – we see God empowering man for service in the Holy Spirit: Jud. 3:10; Ex. 31:3; 1Sam. 10:6-7; 2 Sam 23:2; Isa. 61:1; Mt.12:18; Lk. 4:18 and Jn.14:17.

Skill – Scripture indicates the uses and importance of skills: 1 Ch. 5:18; 2 Ch. 2:13; 2 Ch. 34:12; Ezk. 28:5; Ps. 33:3; Ps. 144:1.

Ability – is not the same as willingness; ability defines one who is able (equipped) to complete the work set before him: Dan 1:4; Neh. 5:8, Mt. 25:15; 2Cor. 8:3; 2Cor. 8:11.

Knowledge – the fact or condition of knowing something through the gained experience and learning of His Word in order to discern and perform good works in Christ. Nu. 24:16; 1Ch. 1:11; Ne. 10:28; Jb. 42:1-6; Ps. 119:66; Pr. 2:5-6; Rm. 11:33, 1Cor. 1:5; 2Cor. 8:7; Col. 1:10; 2Pt. 2:8; 2Pt. 3:18; Js. 1:5.

We see through Scripture a harmony of how God employs His spirit, skill, ability and knowledge within a person to perform His work. Each of us in our ministries are blessed in countless forms that enable us to do the work and will of God – it is undeniable. God gave each person His guidance and tools not for our own works but for His - to “be” and “do” the works of God. So why is it, that we assume ownership over a ministry, possession or task that is rightly God’s? I guess this also explains why the same person expects something in return for themselves (not talking about merely compensation). A motivation to serve based on selfishness, will ultimately yield a worthless return and not the very true and good fruit that is fit for the King and for the Kingdom. The obedience and art of service begins when we deny ourselves and take up our cross to serve Christ alone (Mk. 8:34) for His glory alone.

Eph. 1 says that we are blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ. In 2:10, Paul tells us that we are the workmanship of Christ, created for good works in Christ Jesus. This means that God has equipped us for the very purpose to be crafted into his design for his using. Our actions in serving our ministries need to be rooted in a belief that says: all is for His will to be done - we are His workmanship – and not for ourselves. It is easy to get caught-up in the motions of “serving,” when we focus too much on our tools or the technique. When we become out-of-touch from the essence of service, even when we get in our “ruts,” our ministry can grow faint – our zeal for ministry can grow faint. However, we have help. As we have seen in the first primary essential, we are given the Holy Spirit. He comes besides us and guides us.

Scriptural Insight on The Holy Spirit

“But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.” – Jn 14:26. KJV.

In John 14, Jesus shares with his beloved that he is sending the Holy Spirit, the Great Counselor to aid, comfort and abide in them, as the disciples go about the work of God. Check this out about the term “Holy Spirit.” In the NASB and NKJV translations, the word “Helper,” is chosen to describe the Holy Spirit, which appears in Jn 14:26, Another term used to describe the Spirit is “Comforter” which is found in the KJV. “Counselor,” is found in the NIV and RSV. The word “Advocate,” is also seen in the NRSV. For this article I am making a personal choice to study the term Comforter as it resonates with my heart and mind in reading the Scriptures.

The Greek root word for Comforter is paraklētōs: par-ak'-lay-tos. The prefix of “para” is the primary meaning of “near,” it also has an action verb meaning of “from,” or “out from,” (found in John 6:19 and 46). It expresses motion or a coming besides. The suffix “kletos,” means called, invited, welcomed or appointed (the meaning of called “one who is called - to an office,” is found in Rom. 1:1 and 1 Cor. 1:1). When we align the prefix and suffix together we get: parakletos or “The Paraclete,” the One who comes besides.

As the Spirit comes besides us, we are empowered to achieve greatness in Christ. We begin to experience what Galatians 5:22 implores about the fruit of the Spirit which is “...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness...” Because our service is rooted in His Spirit we are guided as we use our skills, abilities and knowledge.

In your ministry, there’s no need to use nunchucks, bow hunting and computer hacking (you may get arrested); but rather our essentials are the Holy Spirit, skills, abilities and knowledge to do His work for his glory. Serve with gladness in His purposes as you yield fruit that is worthy of the King and the Kingdom.

Kimberly Connell - post

This sentence is awesome: As the Spirit comes beside us, we are empowered to achieve greatness in Christ. Also Because our service is rooted in His Spirit we are guided as we use our skills, abilities and knowledge sums it all up. This article really hit home with me. I really needed to read this. Thank you.

Serving Culture

- \* Branon Dempsey
- \* Published June 16, 2008
- \* Worship Evangelism

How Are We Serving Them?

In today's changing times, defining the identity of culture rapidly transforms its profile from generation to generation. The influx of nationalities, religions, ideologies, politics, social economies and cultural trends, melded together over time. In the past, describing change in the world was accomplished by observing global events outside of our local spheres. To observe change from a distance is to stand apart from reality, by residing alone and out of touch with people. Glocal, is a new term that is defined as global and local societies, which have melded together to form a unity of local diversity. The boundless sea of society is a rage of crisis, uncertainty, differences, openness, multiplicity, and change which describes our current reality. The world and culture of today is no longer separated and compartmentalized by continent, nation, language, trend or currency. In this new millennium, society revolves around the changes of the people and their culture. No longer do people adapt to society, but society has to adapt to the changes of people. In other words, the tail wags the dog in today's world-view. The concern of reaching people today exists in the way the church adapts to people.

The church is no different than society's endeavor to understand its people. However, a dichotomy exists between churches that do make an effort to meet society's people and those who do not, but exist for their own sphere of concerns. The truth is that the world is changing around us whether if the church cares or not. The need for reaching people in connecting them to Christ stands in front of our doorstep. The reality is that the world is no longer at the church's doorstep, waiting on Christians to take care of them as seen in the early 18th and 19th centuries. What happened in the 20th century? The church declared that people must come to church to find God. Today, the world no longer embraces a "come-and-get-it" evangelism. People of today are self sufficient and independent. They would like to step into the church, but are hesitant or unwilling because of past negative experiences. People are in a real need of God and the authentic care-acceptance of God's people. There is a high interest in spirituality along with the bewilderment of what to believe and who to trust. Mark Mittelberg, in his book, "Building a Contagious Church," addresses a relevant question to these current issues. He says, "...are we prepared to help them? Are we becoming the kind of people...that will be able to assist them in embarking on spiritual journeys that will eventually bring them to Christ" (Mittelberg, pg. 20).

### Leadership By The Spirit

- \* Branon Dempsey
- \* Published June 15, 2008
- \* Leadership Development

"But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things," John 14:26

Are you too busy? In your leadership, do you sometimes feel that ministry is often complicated to achieve within the sea of daily business? Though we mean well, often our priorities can slip through our focus due to the plethora of minor details. We may find ourselves depleted and spent by the time real ministry matters present themselves. In a weird way, it can seem as if we are running in circles and away from our true ministry calling of the day.

Take the Old Testament story of Jonah. He was a man who was called by God to mission to an untouchable city of people. Jonah so much despised these people that he rejected God's call and ran away from Him. However, God had another approach to get Jonah's attention. After swimming in whale gall and stomach acids, Jonah got the message. Jonah rendered himself to God for His using, despite his personal agendas. Definitely, the phrase: you can run but you can't hide, has a more appreciated ring to it! No, it does not mean that God will send a fish to swallow us when we fail to listen. The reality is that we do a pretty good job of consequenting ourselves! Such as, when we run in our haste making desperate and inconsistent decisions, we have the capacity of creating our own havoc. As a result we are not capable to fully give clear attention to the major priorities.

God does not call us to chaos but what Paul encouraged to Timothy, "a sound mind," (1Tim. 1.7) There will be troubled waters like what the disciples faced in the stormy lake with Jesus. Leadership is full of crests and rises; it does take a tough stomach to ride the boat. What enables us to ride with consistency and endurance is Jesus as our Captain with the Holy Spirit's hand on the wheel. He knows how much throttle to give in our times of need and directs our sails whenever we ask (Jas. 1:5). He does not desire for us to be tossed to and fro on the waves of doubt (v.6). Just as Jesus calmed the waters for the disciples, so has He given us the capability to restore and maintain a calm ship. But we must throw overboard all the unnecessary weight and cast off every selfish ambition (Heb. 12:1). Self is the ultimate weight of discourse. It weighs more and is the most inconspicuous stowaway. In order to lay aside this weight it involves rendering our titles, credentials, talents, pride, fear, contentions, isolations, sorrows and neglect. Once these weights are removed, spaces become available. See, we can fill ourselves with much weight of despair that it slows the momentum of what God really wants to do within us. The blocks can be built so high, that we no longer see God in front of us. All that remains is a wall of self-ambition, and downcasted is the person to topple our wall. This comes down to the epitome of pride. God sends the Spirit to break-down our walls and fill us with his peace and guidance. Jesus tells us to cast out fear: "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you." (Jn. 14.26). The Holy Spirit is the One who comes besides us who is both our Counselor and Comfort.

God has empowered us for leadership by the Holy Spirit. In our circles of responsibilities and daily life, He has given us the ability to seek his Word and presence to assist us daily. True leadership is experienced by the leading and following of God's spirit. Let's be reminded, God will take care of all of the other consequences as we follow Him first.

All of our work will still be waiting for us tomorrow – minor details and all. Let's take more time listening and responding to the Spirit's call and to move upon His impulses and not our own. As we walk in His peace, we find just the right amount of time to accomplish the needed priorities – which saves our health, souls and the ministries we lead.

God Our Provider

\* Published June 20, 2008

True, we are living in some critical times. Prices for gas beg the question if we should sell our cars in order to pay for fuel. Over production of food resources for alternative uses are driving up global farming costs as commodities decrease - it's just plain crazy!

As a nation, we try to find our resolve from government, but we walk away unsatisfied by the growing concerns and the diminishing resolutions. It's funny how the news media reports on the declining economy and the housing market, yet we are left with information and no results to circumvent our current status. I guess what concerns me the most is where we place our hope and its value. From an Old Testament standpoint, we are no different from those who put their hope in God and those who put their hope in man. As we have remaining resources and power, what are we doing as Americans (and global countries) to help provide for others in the same way how God provides for us?

Isaiah was very much concerned about the declining progress and turmoil in his country. In fact, people were running to foreign gods to seek comfort and answers from their problems. As a nation, all turned away from God and sought man to deliver peace (idols that were made by man). Enemies were pressed on every side, while Israel played in sandboxes of sin. While their land was dying around them, Israelites were praying to the created for a resolve rather than to the Creator. Many people felt that God had abandoned them and their way to God was blocked. These are among the same reasons why people continue to run from God today.

However, God speaks through Isaiah to speak peace to the people in saying:

27 Why do you say, O Jacob,  
and complain, O Israel,  
"My way is hidden from the LORD;  
my cause is disregarded by my God"?

28 Do you not know?  
Have you not heard?  
The LORD is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He will not grow tired or weary,  
and his understanding no one can fathom.

29 He gives strength to the weary  
and increases the power of the weak.

Are We There Yet?

\* Published June 15, 2008

Devotional Study in Mark 4

Remember this statement as a kid? Ah, the memories of childhood car rides. Who said these days were over? I have a confession: I am still just as impatient.

Yesterday in church, we gave a big salute to our graduating high school seniors. Our pastor gave a message that applied to each of us on the journey of life. It is so easy to get so focused on the destination that we lose perspective. It's so easy to feel that our current circumstance will never change. Time seems to suspend for an eternity. Does God see or hear us? Will He tell us how much farther we need to go? It's amazing how impatient we become for a moment that will soon pass. Once we arrive at our destination we have two responses: 1. Wow! This is incredible! 2. Wow, that's it? What I am finding more and more is the reality of our second response. We may not see the beauty we expected, but we find a grander picture in other ways unexpected.

It's only when we stop and spot check what's behind us, that a different perspective takes place. We see all the mountains and valleys we've traveled through all the windy roads. As we experience all kinds of weather and terrain as we soon develop an appreciation for our journey. I know in my life I look for the final result – the final destination. However, the process we undergo defines the making of what God is completing within us. Mark 4:35-41 takes on a whole new meaning as we fix our eyes on the here and now.

Right now you may be waiting or in the middle of pursuing what God has called you to; however, you may feel the bumps or the twisty turns in the road. Yes, these are trials, whether if we like them or not. No matter if we acknowledge them or not, trials are what they are. Here's the kicker, James 1:2 tells us to "count it all joy when we fall into various trials." What? Are you kidding me? I 'm just trying to cross over to the other side!

Here's the scene: the Messiah finishes preaching to a large crowd about the Kingdom of God. When evening came, Jesus tells his disciples to get in the boat and cross over the lake. The furious storm/squall attacks the boat. Imagine this: a canopy of darkness preys over the defenseless ship. Lightning rods plummet the surface like cannon blasts of war. Water begins to invade portions of the ship as the vile wind rips holes in the sails by its gusts of laughter. Huge waves topple the vessel like a toy in the Goliath like

surge. What does any normal person do in this situation? Panic. The apostles desperately fear for their lives in search for Jesus to rescue them. Where do we find Jesus? Asleep on a cushion? In this mess? As the story continues, Jesus gets up, rebukes the storm and questions the disciples for their lack of faith.

The interesting point I find? Jesus, being God in the flesh, foreknew that a storm was coming when he told his disciples to follow him into the boat. Jesus had no worry in the storm. He was at rest because he knew where the Father was taking them. In this picture, the disciples were beyond an are-we-there-yet perspective and now in a are-we-going-to-die perspective.

I trust that you can relate with this scenario. We have our points of worry, fear and panic. We each seek a resolution in order to locate our destination. The truth is our journey will not be completed until we cross Heaven's finish line.

What astounds me in this passage? Jesus at full rest in the storm. He was at complete peace and in the calm of the Father. The peace and trust of Christ calls us to join him. No matter the storm, no matter the outcome. God knows exactly what he is doing. It's only human to ask "are we there yet?" and even, "are we going to die?" This is our flesh speaking. It's only the peace of Christ that reminds us that he is our shelter in the storm (Isa. 25:4). He is our Light in the darkness (Jn. 8:12). He is our strength when we are weak (Ps. 46:1); he is also our guide when our roads are crooked (Pr. 3:6). God controls the heavens as he speaks over the waters (Ps. 29:3). Jesus assures us of our peace (Jn. 16:33).

Are we there yet? This question is both direct and rhetorical. In a weird way, the answer is "yes." As we trust in the Savior's peace, we are right where he wants us to be. As we rely on God's ways and commit our faith to Him, he will always lead us in paths of peace (Prv. 3). At this point, the destination doesn't matter as much. We are by his side and held in his grip.

Fields of Gold

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From the fruit of his lips a man is filled with good things as surely as the work of his hands rewards him.

- Pr. 12:14.

As God produces fruit in our lives, we give him thanks for the good things he has caused to grow. Has there been that time when God was ready to grow a purpose within you, but something else was blocking your way?

When our fields remain unattended many obstacles can prevent our growth. They can be weeds of the world, boulders of guilt, erosion of joy, the bugs of discontent or the birds of famine. Has not God called you to do something great? Has He not given you a field to produce a harvest?

About a year ago, my wife and I planted a small fig tree in the corner of our yard. We spent the whole day planting other trees and flowers. The one fig tree was special to me. I bought it because it reminded me of fun times when I was 12. I always loved the huge fig tree we had in our atrium. Large green pillowy leaves stretched over our patio to provide shade. The large brown branches shot over our enclosed area where birds would make their homes. The figs themselves made very tasty treats. On summer days, mom would make the most wonderful deserts. The figs also made great weapons of war with childhood friends. They also made a great mess of which I had to clean. Those were good times.

In a desire to rekindle some childhood treasures, I hastily dug a deep hole, planted the young sprout, added some stimulator and saturated the ground with generous amounts of water. A few weeks passed, I did not see much progress in the fig tree. I checked the soil, added a bit of fruit tree fertilizer and proceeded to water the tree. Still after a few more weeks – nothing. Then something happened, some of the leaves turned yellow. Because I did not know much about planting, I figured the tree was thirsty. I soon learned that the more I watered, more yellow leaves appeared and were falling off! I called our local nursery only to find that I was drowning the poor guy.

Yellow leaves mean that the tree is receiving too much water; brown leaves mean that it does not have enough water. I noticed another problem. There was a retention pond forming around the tree. The nursery worker informed me that sometimes certain conditions of the ground can cause this problem. South Texas is known for having large amounts of clay in the ground. Layers form together underneath the soil and form a barrier against moisture. When homeowners proceed with landscaping (like us), you have to determine where the clay is buried and replace it with good soil. What did I do? Panicked. Without reservation, I took the shovel and garden weasel and broke ground to alleviate the flood. I also added good soil to mix with the clay and aerated the ground carefully. Unfortunately, the damage was already done. The tree was already wilting with only a few leaves left. After a few more days, the little fella looked like a Charlie Brown Christmas tree. I was sad (sniff). I learned that I had ruined the tree. For the rest of the late spring and summer, the tree remained in its match stick appearance for the rest of the year.

I find that sometimes with the best intentions, we pour so much care into one thing, that we miss the bigger picture. In my case of the tree, I needed to understand the condition of my soil. Next, I needed to break up the ground more thoroughly and remove the counterparts. Finally, I needed to use less water and allow time to take it's course.

When God calls us to do something great, we need to check our fields. We need to determine if or what type of obstacles are standing in our way. The fig tree represented

something else in my life and I wanted to see results. I thought I was doing all the right things: planting, watering and waiting. But God was teaching me something greater.

The Scripture says in Ezk. 36:26, “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.” In the wrestling of my impatience, God made it clear that there were stones in the soil of my heart and they were to be removed. I needed God to clear the stones, cultivate my heart and nurture my growth in order to produce good fruit.

What do you do in the meantime? Proverb 3:5 & 6 tells us: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.” That’s it. No need to excessively add water or fertilizer to make it grow. No need to panic. God does the growing – not us. I found that my responsibility was to nurture the soil of my heart. A good friend reminded me that when we neglect our own vineyards, our growth is stunted (Song of Songs 1:6). God was purely calling me to do two things: trust and obey.

God wants your heart first. He desires to soften the soil of your heart so he can grow what he desires. Spend time in His Word that is food for your soul. Spend time worshiping and praying that places you in the intimacy of His presence. Spend time serving His Church and people that supplies and builds the Kingdom of God. Trust Him with all your heart as you obey what he’s called you to do today. Just the next step is enough; not steps 3-5. If you’re like me, jumping the whole staircase seems more fun and takes less time! However, we are a work in progress. God has called each of us to do something great and to produce something great.

We learn overtime. The joy we experience is in the progress. It’s not always fun and sometimes growth causes pain. But take heart: Paul said in Romans 8:18, our time of present suffering is not worthy to be compared with the glory that Christ will reveal. Our time is in the “here and now”. God causes all things to grow for His purposes. Our responsibility is to tend our fields. We are to be ready and able to have God complete his work within us. Check out this wonderful book, “Here and Now,” by Henri Nouwen.

What has God called you to do originally that you are not doing today? Take some time to nurture the soil of your heart, read 2Tim 1:6-12. This passage has been and will always be significant to my growth and outlook. My prayer for us is that we immerse ourselves in His Word and presence, allowing the Lord to nurture the soil of our hearts. As we seek to please him by producing good fruit, may we take the time to trust and obey by tending our vineyards.

## God’s Presence in Worship and the Exchange

- \* Branon Dempsey
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- \* Worship Leader Perspectives

## How We Lead Our Congregations

Though it's true of the Biblical references of Ps. 66:18 and Js 4:8, God will hear us with a contrite spirit as we draw near to Him; sometimes we need to be reminded that God is not removed from our daily and worship life. He is closer than we realize. We are often caught by surprise when God is standing in our midst, even in times when we may not recognize His every move. As a worship leader and/or worship team member, what do you make of this observation?

Maybe you, like me have heard the statement: "we need great worship for the Holy Spirit to show up." Ironically, there are two realities already at work. First, God is Omnipresent. As we read in Genesis (and throughout the Scriptures), God created all things, walked with man, talked with man, rendered judgment of sin, extended life to humankind and persistently called mankind into His presence. In each of these scenarios, we witness God through the Scriptures and in human life, consistently finding man and not vice-versa. Secondly, God is not looking for great worship, but rather worshipers seeking Him (Jn. 4:23). As Hebrews 13:8 declares, "Jesus is the same yesterday and today and forever," our faith reminds us that God is with us both in the garden and in our current day; His presence is inhabited in our worship. He desires our praise and acts of worship; as we surrender ourselves as living sacrifices.

Simply, worship begins and ends with God. He is first and present in worship; we are the ones who show up. Here are some thoughts that have struck me to ponder concerning His presence in worship and our response: When we do show up, what do we give Him? When He calls, how do we answer; and do we answer Him rightly? When He speaks, do we listen? I heard a great concept-question from friend and mentor, Buddy Owens who said, "When God find us, whether in the garden, in the darkness or in the light, what do we say to Him?" For me, this really hit home. God is not untouchable nor off in the distance waiting for us to find him; but He is our Heavenly Father who actively, passionately and relentlessly pursues us. In fact, God runs to us as dad ran to his prodigal son. Isn't it awesome to witness, experience and to understand the wonder and fatherly love of God who seeks, rescues and enjoys his beloved? Through grace, God invites us to be in His presence. We worship Him as he is in our midst.

There is an exchange of this invitation. God is the initiator, He calls to us and we answer. Out of obedience we invoke, seek, beckon and offer our bodies as living sacrifices (Rm. 12:1-2). We give worth to His worthiness because of who He is. God's nature and character is love; we respond to His love because He first loved us. He renders affection and restoration; by His character and goodness he heals, forgives and restores. As leaders of worship, we have many ways in which we can describe this love and presence of God. Think of some ways you can inspire and evoke a congregational response. Here are great expressions found in the Bible that show multiple authentic exchanges and responses in worship.

Ex. 19:8

"The people all responded together, "We will do everything the Lord has said." So Moses brought their answer back to the Lord."

Ps 5:3

"My voice You shall hear in the morning, O Lord; In the morning I will direct it to You, And I will look up."

Ps. 28:2

"Hear my cry for mercy as I call to you for help, as I lift up my hands toward your Most Holy Place."

Ps 51:8

"Make me hear joy and gladness, That the bones You have broken may rejoice."

Ps 85:8

"I will hear what God the Lord will speak, For He will speak peace To His people and to His saints; But let them not turn back to folly."

Ps 95:6

"Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker;"

Mt. 8:2 "A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."

Mt. 26:39 "Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

Col. 3:16 "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."

Rev. 15:4 "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."

How would these worshipful exchanges affect your worship leading and congregation? What other attributes of God can be used to describe and inspire your congregation? How do we create/facilitate a worship environment that fosters authentic exchanges? How do we use other tools and vehicles in worship such as music, technology, art and design to enhance our responses rather than distract? He invites us into His presence and we respond. May our worship and exchanges to God be full of breath, space, awe, honesty and humility. Together, let us render worth to God and marvel in His presence. I pray the best for you in your journey as a worshiper and leader; many blessings to you my friend.

## A Scripture and Prayer for You

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My friend, let us comfort one another with the hope of Christ and from the strength of the Word. From our hearts, may our worship be drawn upon fresh waters of peace that flow like streams in the desert to provide for others:

17 "The poor and needy search for water,  
but there is none;  
their tongues are parched with thirst.  
But I the LORD will answer them;  
I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them.

18 I will make rivers flow on barren heights,  
and springs within the valleys.  
I will turn the desert into pools of water,  
and the parched ground into springs.

19 I will put in the desert  
the cedar and the acacia, the myrtle and the olive.  
I will set pines in the wasteland,  
the fir and the cypress together,

20 so that people may see and know,  
may consider and understand,  
that the hand of the LORD has done this,  
that the Holy One of Israel has created it.  
- Isaiah 41:17-20.

37 "On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. 38 Whoever believes in me, as[c] the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." - John 7:37-38.

Almighty Triune God:

Thank you that you are the Sustainer and Provider for our lives. When we are in need, You supply for our thirsty souls, when we are weary you strengthen us and when we are broken, you bind us together again.

Heavenly Father of All: we are poor and needy and search for You in our dry and thirsty lands.

Jesus: You are the Source that beautifies our very existence far better than the flowers of the field and the birds of the air. Move in us to share your wealth with others. move in us to provide for those who cannot provide for themselves.

Wonderful Counselor: thank You for your peace that surpasses our understanding, while you guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Living Water: we return not just for a drink, but to be immersed in Your River of life that washes us continually.

As we die to ourselves, we ask for You to meet us here in order for You to fill us again. As we take your words of encouragement and life to a hurting world, be our strength and be our song. Like a broken fragrance, may our lives exude the pleasing aroma of Christ as an offering. Lord receive our worship; receive our praise. – in the Name of Jesus we pray – Amen.

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God Our Provider

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True, we are living in some critical times. Prices for gas beg the question if we should sell are to sell our cars in order to pay for fuel. Over production of food resources for alternative uses are driving up global farming costs as commodities decrease - it's just plain crazy!

As a nation, we try to find our resolve from government, but we walk away unsatisfied by the growing concerns and the diminishing resolutions. It's funny how the news media reports on the declining economy and the housing market, yet we are left with information and no results to circumvent our current status. I guess what concerns me the most is where we place our hope and its value. From an Old Testament standpoint, we are no different from those who put their hope in God and those who put their hope in man. As we have remaining resources and power, what are we doing as Americans (and global countries) to help provide for others in the same way how God provides for us?

Isaiah was very much concerned about the declining progress and turmoil in his country. In fact, people were running to foreign gods to seek comfort and answers from their problems. As a nation, all turned away from God and sought man to deliver peace (idols that were made by man). Enemies were pressed on every side, while Israel played in sandboxes of sin. While their land was dying around them, Israelites were praying to the created for a resolve rather than to the Creator. Many people felt that God had abandoned them and their way to God was blocked. These are among the same reasons why people continue to run from God today.

However, God speaks through Isaiah to speak peace to the people in saying:

27 Why do you say, O Jacob,  
and complain, O Israel,  
"My way is hidden from the LORD;  
my cause is disregarded by my God"?

28 Do you not know?  
Have you not heard?  
The LORD is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.  
He will not grow tired or weary,  
and his understanding no one can fathom.

29 He gives strength to the weary  
and increases the power of the weak.

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Are We There Yet?

\* Published June 15, 2008

Devotional Study in Mark 4

Remember this statement as a kid? Ah, the memories of childhood car rides. Who said these days were over? I have a confession: I am still just as impatient.

Yesterday in church, we gave a big salute to our graduating high school seniors. Our pastor gave a message that applied to each of us on the journey of life. It is so easy to get so focused on the destination that we lose perspective. It's so easy to feel that our current circumstance will never change. Time seems to suspend for an eternity. Does God see or hear us? Will He tell us how much farther we need to go? It's amazing how impatient we become for a moment that will soon pass. Once we arrive at our destination we have two responses: 1. Wow! This is incredible! 2. Wow, that's it? What I am finding more and more is the reality of our second response. We may not see the beauty we expected, but we find a grander picture in other ways unexpected.

It's only when we stop and spot check what's behind us, that a different perspective takes place. We see all the mountains and valleys we've traveled through all the windy roads. As we experience all kinds of weather and terrain as we soon develop an appreciation for our journey. I know in my life I look for the final result – the final destination. However, the process we undergo defines the making of what God is completing within us. Mark 4:35-41 takes on a whole new meaning as we fix our eyes on the here and now.

Right now you may be waiting or in the middle of pursuing what God has called you to; however, you may feel the bumps or the twisty turns in the road. Yes, these are trials, whether if we like them or not. No matter if we acknowledge them or not, trials are what they are. Here's the kicker, James 1:2 tells us to "count it all joy when we fall into various trials." What? Are you kidding me? I 'm just trying to cross over to the other side!

Here's the scene: the Messiah finishes preaching to a large crowd about the Kingdom of God. When evening came, Jesus tells his disciples to get in the boat and cross over the lake. The furious storm/squall attacks the boat. Imagine this: a canopy of darkness preys over the defenseless ship. Lightning rods plummet the surface like cannon blasts of war. Water begins to invade portions of the ship as the vile wind rips holes in the sails by its gusts of laughter. Huge waves topple the vessel like a toy in the Goliath like surge. What does any normal person do in this situation? Panic. The apostles desperately fear for their lives in search for Jesus to rescue them. Where do we find Jesus? Asleep on a cushion? In this mess? As the story continues, Jesus gets up, rebukes the storm and questions the disciples for their lack of faith.

The interesting point I find? Jesus, being God in the flesh, foreknew that a storm was coming when he told his disciples to follow him into the boat. Jesus had no worry in the storm. He was at rest because he knew where the Father was taking them. In this picture, the disciples were beyond an are-we-there-yet perspective and now in a are-we-going-to-die perspective.

I trust that you can relate with this scenario. We have our points of worry, fear and panic. We each seek a resolution in order to locate our destination. The truth is our journey will not be completed until we cross Heaven's finish line.

What astounds me in this passage? Jesus at full rest in the storm. He was at complete peace and in the calm of the Father. The peace and trust of Christ calls us to join him. No matter the storm, no matter the outcome. God knows exactly what he is doing. It's only human to ask "are we there yet?" and even, "are we going to die?" This is our flesh speaking. It's only the peace of Christ that reminds us that he is our shelter in the storm (Isa. 25:4). He is our Light in the darkness (Jn. 8:12). He is our strength when we are weak (Ps. 46:1); he is also our guide when our roads are crooked (Pr. 3:6). God controls the heavens as he speaks over the waters (Ps. 29:3). Jesus assures us of our peace (Jn. 16:33).

Are we there yet? This question is both direct and rhetorical. In a weird way, the answer is "yes." As we trust in the Savior's peace, we are right where he wants us to be. As we rely on God's ways and commit our faith to Him, he will always lead us in paths of peace (Prv. 3). At this point, the destination doesn't matter as much. We are by his side and held in his grip.

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## Fields of Gold

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From the fruit of his lips a man is filled with good things as surely as the work of his hands rewards him.

- Pr. 12:14.

As God produces fruit in our lives, we give him thanks for the good things he has caused to grow. Has there been that time when God was ready to grow a purpose within you, but something else was blocking your way?

When our fields remain unattended many obstacles can prevent our growth. They can be weeds of the world, boulders of guilt, erosion of joy, the bugs of discontent or the birds of famine. Has not God called you to do something great? Has He not given you a field to produce a harvest?

About a year ago, my wife and I planted a small fig tree in the corner of our yard. We spent the whole day planting other trees and flowers. The one fig tree was special to me. I bought it because it reminded me of fun times when I was 12. I always loved the huge fig tree we had in our atrium. Large green pillowy leaves stretched over our patio to provide shade. The large brown branches shot over our enclosed area where birds would make their homes. The figs themselves made very tasty treats. On summer days, mom would make the most wonderful deserts. The figs also made great weapons of war with childhood friends. They also made a great mess of which I had to clean. Those were good times.

In a desire to rekindle some childhood treasures, I hastily dug a deep hole, planted the young sprout, added some stimulator and saturated the ground with generous amounts of water. A few weeks passed, I did not see much progress in the fig tree. I checked the soil, added a bit of fruit tree fertilizer and proceeded to water the tree. Still after a few more weeks – nothing. Then something happened, some of the leaves turned yellow. Because I did not know much about planting, I figured the tree was thirsty. I soon learned that the more I watered, more yellow leaves appeared and were falling off! I called our local nursery only to find that I was drowning the poor guy.

Yellow leaves mean that the tree is receiving too much water; brown leaves mean that it does not have enough water. I noticed another problem. There was a retention pond forming around the tree. The nursery worker informed me that sometimes certain conditions of the ground can cause this problem. South Texas is known for having large amounts of clay in the ground. Layers form together underneath the soil and form a barrier against moisture. When homeowners proceed with landscaping (like us), you have to determine where the clay is buried and replace it with good soil. What did I do? Panicked. Without reservation, I took the shovel and garden weasel and broke ground to alleviate the flood. I also added good soil to mix with the clay and aerated the ground

carefully. Unfortunately, the damage was already done. The tree was already wilting with only a few leaves left. After a few more days, the little fella looked like a Charlie Brown Christmas tree. I was sad (sniff). I learned that I had ruined the tree. For the rest of the late spring and summer, the tree remained in its match stick appearance for the rest of the year.

I find that sometimes with the best intentions, we pour so much care into one thing, that we miss the bigger picture. In my case of the tree, I needed to understand the condition of my soil. Next, I needed to break up the ground more thoroughly and remove the counterparts. Finally, I needed to use less water and allow time to take its course.

When God calls us to do something great, we need to check our fields. We need to determine if or what type of obstacles are standing in our way. The fig tree represented something else in my life and I wanted to see results. I thought I was doing all the right things: planting, watering and waiting. But God was teaching me something greater.

The Scripture says in Ezk. 36:26, "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." In the wrestling of my impatience, God made it clear that there were stones in the soil of my heart and they were to be removed. I needed God to clear the stones, cultivate my heart and nurture my growth in order to produce good fruit.

What do you do in the meantime? Proverb 3:5 & 6 tells us: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight." That's it. No need to excessively add water or fertilizer to make it grow. No need to panic. God does the growing – not us. I found that my responsibility was to nurture the soil of my heart. A good friend reminded me that when we neglect our own vineyards, our growth is stunted (Song of Songs 1:6). God was purely calling me to do two things: trust and obey.

God wants your heart first. He desires to soften the soil of your heart so he can grow what he desires. Spend time in His Word that is food for your soul. Spend time worshiping and praying that places you in the intimacy of His presence. Spend time serving His Church and people that supplies and builds the Kingdom of God. Trust Him with all your heart as you obey what he's called you to do today. Just the next step is enough; not steps 3-5. If you're like me, jumping the whole staircase seems more fun and takes less time! However, we are a work in progress. God has called each of us to do something great and to produce something great.

We learn overtime. The joy we experience is in the progress. It's not always fun and sometimes growth causes pain. But take heart: Paul said in Romans 8:18, our time of present suffering is not worthy to be compared with the glory that Christ will reveal. Our time is in the "here and now". God causes all things to grow for His purposes. Our responsibility is to tend our fields. We are to be ready and able to have God complete his work within us. Check out this wonderful book, "Here and Now," by Henri Nouwen.

What has God called you to do originally that you are not doing today? Take some time to nurture the soil of your heart, read 2Tim 1:6-12. This passage has been and will always be significant to my growth and outlook. My prayer for us is that we immerse ourselves in His Word and presence, allowing the Lord to nurture the soil of our hearts. As we seek to please him by producing good fruit, may we take the time to trust and obey by tending our vineyards.