

## **Building A Culture Of Worship**

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### **Introduction**

For my entire adult life I have been involved in the Christian music business. Combining the time spent with my band, Big Tent Revival, touring as a solo artist, and in recent years, as a music staffer at three prominent churches, I have performed over 1000 concerts. Those concerts were in churches of various denominations, spread across every state of the U.S. From that unique vantage, God has given me a privileged survey of the church-at-large in America.

Every church leader I have met is trying to answer the same question: How can we lead our people to become more engaged in our worship services? Basically, what they are asking is whether I have experienced some cutting edge music style or production element that motivates people to engage in worship.

Much has been debated within the church walls pertaining to styles of music and whether it is more important for music to sound culturally relevant or reverently worshipful. To such arguments, I pay little heed. The reason I accepted the invitation to write this article is because I believe many church leaders ask the wrong questions, with respect to worship and music. With wrong questions come intelligent answers that never quite hit the mark because they provide adequate solutions to wrong questions. It reminds me of the man who could not reach his destination in St Louis, even though he was following the map, perfectly. It was not until his wife pointed out that he was consulting a map of Kansas City that he became aware he would never reach his intended destination by perfectly following the wrong map!

I believe the style of music in the corporate worship setting is somewhat arbitrary if the worshipper is independently pursuing the Lord outside of the corporate worship setting. The question church leaders should be asking is: What are we doing to prepare the worshippers before they enter our corporate services, so that, regardless the style of music performed, so long as it resonates with God's Word and lifts His Name up, the people will respond in praise?

### **Worship Is Not Exclusively Music**

I have observed that many church leaders define worship as music. Their service orders read, "Worship, Offering, Preaching, ...", when what they really mean is "We will Worship the Lord through Music, Offering, Preaching, etc." The fact that I (a musician) have been asked to submit an article to a theological publication focusing on worship is an indicator that some people are aware that music is defined as worship by many church leaders. It is a definition I can understand, culturally; yet, I do not agree with biblically.

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength." (Deuteronomy 6:5)<sup>1</sup> The Shema clearly describes a whole-self approach to worshipping God. The expression of that worship can take many forms. While music is definitely a legitimate form of worship, worshipping is by no means limited to music. Worship occurs whenever we surrender our will in order to align with God's revealed Word. By God's definition, there is no specific time of worship for God's followers; He desires us

to worship Him all of the time. We may have set times during which we enter into a particular venue or mode of worship, but the worship itself should never cease as the believer transitions from mode and venue.

### **The Lifestyle of Worship**

“Worship is a posture of life that takes as its primary purpose the understanding of what it really means to love and revere God.” – Ravi Zacharias <sup>2</sup>

I believe Ravi Zacharias’ statement, that worship is a “posture of life,” is true because it aligns with God’s articulated time for men to worship Him: continually.

“These words that I am giving you today are to be in your heart. Repeat them to your children. Talk about them when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.” (Deuteronomy 6:6-7)

If we are reflecting continually on the Word of God as our “life’s posture,” God’s Word will be the central focus of every event in which we participate, from the mundane assembly to the sacred. In essence, every activity in which we are involved becomes sacred, although it may not be a corporate worship assembly. Whatever the venue, we should be governed by that “life’s posture” as we consider what it really means to love and revere God as He has articulated for mankind to love and revere Him in His Word.

### **The Source of Worship**

If we are to pursue a life posture with its primary purpose to *understand* what it means to love and revere God, our only source of that understanding is God’s Word as revealed by His Spirit. In addition to the gracious gift of salvation from God’s judgment, believers in Jesus receive the great benefit of the gift of His Spirit, also known as “the Counselor/Teacher.”

“But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit—the Father will send Him in My name—will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have told you.” (John 14:26)

Following God’s directive in the Shema, that His Word is to be in our hearts throughout the day, and that it deserves a prominent place (not only in the training of our children, but in our every conversation), our response to God’s Grace - our “worship-as-lifestyle” - is directly proportional to our pursuit of God’s Word as revealed by the Spirit. (1 Corinthians 14:1)

We must remember that the average Pharisee and Sadducee had access to God’s Word, although not necessarily illuminated by His Spirit. Hence, they were more influenced by religious traditions of men than by religion as prescribed by the Word of God. That negative influence (of men’s opinions versus the Spirit’s revelation of God’s Word) had risen to the point where the religious leaders could not recognize the Messiah, Who came according to the Scriptures, even as He was standing before them.

Consider the spiritual condition of Israel’s worship when young Samuel entered the scene: “The boy Samuel served the Lord in Eli’s presence. In those days the Word of the Lord was rare and prophetic visions were not widespread.” (1 Samuel 3:1)

Also, consider Israel's spiritual condition after the Joshua generation: "Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of 110. They buried him in the territory of his inheritance, in Timnath-heres, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash. That whole generation was also gathered to their ancestors. After them another generation rose up who did not know the Lord or the works He had done for Israel." (Judges 2:8-10)

In both instances, the foundation for God's impending rebuke of His people was not found in the absence of religious assembly or in the style of songs they sang while in attendance. Judgment lay firmly on Israel's departure from God's Word (by both priest and pedestrian) and the Spirit-led prophetic revelation thereof. The various pagan behaviors of Israel were merely symptomatic of Israel's ignorance of (or refusal to pursue and align with) God's articulated ways for men to walk rightly before Him.

We must understand the utmost importance of Spirit-filled believers reading the Bible everyday and incorporating its truth into every aspect of their lives. Only then can men truly live a lifestyle of worship, as God has designed for us. Only then will the laity rise up and assume the roles of priesthood we have all inherited through faith in Jesus. (1 Peter 2:5)

### **The Solution of Worship**

**Question:** Church leader, do you have a plan to comprehensively teach God's Word? (i.e., Genesis-The Revelation). How does your operational theology communicate to your congregants the value of pursuing God's Word daily with the intent of obtaining a comprehensive knowledge of it? If so, what resources have you allocated to facilitate that pursuit?

I have observed very few pastors (among the 1000 + congregations I have visited) who have implemented a strategy to teach the whole counsel of God. Perhaps, they exhort congregants to read the Bible, or suggest a "read the Bible in a year" plan every January, but they do not actively facilitate that pursuit as an ongoing effort, nor is daily Bible pursuit continually articulated as a value and reinforced in their pulpits. Yet, it is so essential to worship! Often, churches that pride themselves on going deepest with their exposition (spending months on a particular chapter) fail miserably in this area of teaching the whole counsel of God.

Calvary Chapel churches, for the most part, distinguish themselves as teaching linearly through the Bible, chapter-by-chapter, book-by-book. In my observation, they are the most disciplined collection of churches with respect to Biblical literacy. However, at a chapter/week, it takes roughly 24 years to teach a congregation the entire Bible. So, a more aggressive strategy of Biblical pursuit is necessary if we want to fast-track revival in our generation.

Again, let's consider God's directive from the Shema, to seek His Word everyday, all day. At a chapter per day you can read the gospels in 89 days, the New Testament in 9.5 months and the entire Bible in a little over three years. Yet, how can a pastor teach daily, when most of his congregants only attend church for a couple of hours, once a week? You reach your congregants, electronically – email, text, Facebook, Twitter and other emerging electronic platforms.

At Bellevue Baptist Church, we are presently employing this approach to biblical literacy with great results. (See [www.bellevue.org/challenge](http://www.bellevue.org/challenge)) Beginning this past January, we challenged our congregants to read the Bible a chapter per day. Every day, Bellevue sends an email devotional to correspond with an aspect of each day's chapter we are reading

corporately. By the time this article is published, we will have led around 5000 daily participants (and growing) through the entire New Testament. Then, we will begin the Old Testament.

In roughly 3.5 years, Bellevue Baptist Church will have given its entire congregation the opportunity to read the entire Bible, chapter-by-chapter. When we are finished, we will start the whole process again. More than just a challenge to our congregants, we are daily holding their hands, as it were, every step of the way.

You may ask, "How can you go deep with a simple devotional?" While there is pastoral oversight of the content, the devotionals are just that: simple devotional thoughts. They are not intended to be comprehensive concordances of all that could be fathomed from any particular chapter. The daily devotionals are encouragement for the congregant to read the entire chapter themselves. Basically, the devotional serves as a reminder for a daily appointment between the congregant and the Holy Spirit, Who will take the learning from where the devotional leaves off. The level of depth may interest you as a scholar, but most of your congregants have never read the Bible. You lose them with the first Greek parse! I trust the Counselor/Teacher (Holy Spirit) to instruct the individual at their level, as they personally seek God in His Word. I trust the Spirit because God does.

### **The Effects of Worship**

The program of daily Bible pursuit that we have incorporated at Bellevue (i.e., The 90 Day Challenge, The Bible Challenge) began development over a decade ago, while I was working for Greg Laurie at Harvest Christian Fellowship in Riverside CA. I arrived in 2005, during a season of expansion for Harvest. Harvest wanted to explore satellite church campuses, and I had experience with satellite music team logistics, having just left the team that pioneered the multi site strategy, Willow Creek. So, I hit the ground in California aggressively pursuing young musicians who would be willing to travel all over Southern California, playing in worship band rotations.

At Harvest over 2000 people attended their Sunday night High School outreach event, but fewer than 100 attended their college group. Obviously, there was a silent exodus post-high school. (I say "silent" exodus because the church was growing in overall attendance, so the decline of post high school attendees went unnoticed.) I gathered about ten young musicians who were not attending the college group, invited them to my home, and asked them various questions about their overall church experience. I discovered that while most of them grew up in church, none of them had read the New Testament and none could name all Ten Commandments. Oh, yes, and most of them were considering leaving the church, either to find another church that suited their felt needs, or they were just done with church, in general.

My solution to the situation was to teach them the Ten Commandments (which we recited as sort of a pledge when we gathered each week) and to lead them through the Bible, daily. My leadership philosophy is "speed of the leader, speed of the team," so I knew it was not enough to simply tell these young people to read the Bible. I had to read it too. When they got my email devotional each day, it communicated 1) Christians read the Bible everyday, 2) God reveals Himself to us when we read His Word, 3) I value you (the participant) in that I take the time to write a devotional to share God's revelation with you every day.

Operationally, I was getting back to the Shema: “teach these things diligently to your children.” Basically, I picked up where both their biological and church fathers had fallen short. I taught them how to walk with the Lord, daily - by walking with them, daily.

To date, over 2000 people in Southern California (and beyond) are reading the Bible with me daily and receiving a daily email devotional from me. (That is in addition to the roughly 5000 people reading the Bible at Bellevue.) The program participants also gather once a week in small groups (usually coffeehouses) to discuss what they have been reading. So, there is accountability and a venue that allows people the opportunity to learn to articulate Biblical ideas and doctrine.

The endeavor has acted for the vast majority of the “almost done” as a run-off reservoir. Not only did they not leave their church, but once they began taking ownership of their faith by reading the Bible, they eventually returned to church, not as CONSUMERS, but as CONTRIBUTORS.

Daily Bible pursuit sets into motion a series of transformations.

- 1) When we elevated biblical pursuit, we elevated faith. (Romans 10:17)
- 2) When we elevated faith, we elevated volunteerism (the faithful response to a perceived need)
- 3) When we elevated volunteering, we elevated resources/tithing because they now had a greater understanding of the value of the ministry they were involved in. They invested resources where they were personally invested.

### **The Expectations of Worship**

When people are led to experience God through the daily pursuit of His Word, we can expect an elevation of faith, volunteerism and resources within our churches. However, we (the leaders) must lead them. Remember: they are sheep in need of shepherding.

“Then sang Deborah and Barak the son of Abinoam on that day: That the leaders took the lead in Israel, that the people offered themselves willingly, bless the Lord!...” (Judges 5:1-2)

My experience over the past decade (developing tools and implementing biblical pursuit) has led me to expect that if we can amass enough believers reading God’s Word everyday, we can expect revival in our nation to the level of Josiah’s generation. Yet, we must humbly respond to Biblical illiteracy as Josiah responded, in order to see revival.

“When the king heard the words of the law, he tore his clothes. Then he commanded Hilkiah, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Abdon son of Micah, Shaphan the court secretary, and the king’s servant Asaiah, “Go. Ask Yahweh for me and for those remaining in Israel and Judah, concerning the words of the book that was found. For great is the Lord’s wrath that is poured out on us because our fathers have not kept the word of the Lord in order to do everything written in this book.” (2 Chronicles 34: 19-21)

If we do not find a way to restore whole-self worship in our day, we will shepherd the church to the decline we observed in Jehoiakim’s generation:

“The king sent Jehudi to get the scroll, and he took it from the chamber of Elishama the scribe. Jehudi then read it in the hearing of the king and all the officials who were standing

by the king. Since it was the ninth month, the king was sitting in his winter quarters with a fire burning in front of him. As soon as Jehudi would read three or four columns, Jehoiakim would cut the scroll with a scribe's knife and throw the columns into the blazing fire until the entire scroll was consumed by the fire in the brazier. As they heard all these words, the king and all of his servants did not become terrified or tear their garments. Even though Elnathan, Delaiah, and Gemariah had urged the king not to burn the scroll, he would not listen to them." (Jeremiah 36:21-25)

**Question:** Will pastors lead like Josiah or like Johoiakim? Will they lead the people to seek the Word of God or will they disregard the people's wellbeing in favor of their personal ministry agendas, continuing to embrace the ministry paradigms & practices that have led the church-at-large to its present day decline?

"If you love Me, you will keep My commands" (John 14:15.)

How will the people live rightly if they have never read the Word? How will they live a whole-self lifestyle of worship, unless the shepherds guide them through the Bible, facilitating that daily pursuit that God prescribes for His people?

### **The Music of Worship**

The world is pursuing us everyday, all day. We cannot expect Christians to live victoriously by spending a few hours each week in corporate services and small groups. When people pursue the Lord in His Word, daily, the Holy Spirit reveals the truth to them and their values change. When they ponder that truth throughout the day and incorporate it into every aspect of their lives, the enemy finds no room in their inn, so to speak.

When we have a collection of biblically knowledgeable believers who share a right understanding of Scripture, they are properly motivated to serve. When that happens, we have a church that is unstoppable! Laymen lead revival. If we have a collection of those churches, filled with that type of believer, we will see revival in our land in our generation.

At that point, it really won't matter what the soundtrack is. Sing hymns with an organ? OK! Have a full choir and orchestra? Totally! Strike up the modern worship band? Sure! Have a guy leading songs at a coffeehouse Bible study on his acoustic guitar? Why not? As long as the music lifts up the Name of Jesus, crucified and resurrected; and as long as it resonates with the Spirit of God in the hearts of believers, it's all fair game.

Martin Luther said, "Music is the handmaiden of theology."<sup>3</sup> Music serves the worshipper, but only to the extent that it carries and supports the Word of the Lord. That is why music typically precedes preaching, so as to prepare the heart, and follows preaching, so as to punctuate and facilitate response. To that end, music can only facilitate and elevate a person to the extent that they are willing & able to agree with and receive its message. Therefore, music resonates deepest when the worshipper is engaged in an ongoing pursuit of the Bible. The worshippers' response to music (their "Amen!") is in proportion to their discipleship, how the Spirit of God reveals the Word sung to be consistent with the Word sought.

**A Word of Caution:** When we lead our people to pursue the counsel of God (the Bible) as He prescribes (daily, continually), they live lives of worship; but if we don't, they will seek other sources of counsel. That approach sets-up a dangerous and predictably downward

trajectory in which worldly counsel and practices mingle with the Lord's worship. (Sadducees & Pharisees 2.0) Perhaps, that is why it was warning #1 in song #1 of Israel's hymnal:

“How happy is the man who does not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path of sinners or join a group of mockers! Instead, his delight is in the Lord's instruction, and he meditates on it day and night. He is like a tree planted beside streams of water that bears its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.” (Psalm 1:1-2)

**In Conclusion:** If we lead our people to worship in the Word, they will always have something to sing about. If not, Lamentations will be our sad refrain.

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<sup>2</sup> Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus Among Other Gods: The Absolute Claims of the Christian Message* - W Publishing Group (February 8, 2002)

<sup>3</sup> Marshall Shelley, ed., *Changing Lives Through Preaching and Worship* (Nashville: Moorings, Random House, Inc., 1995), 193.