

Worship that Changes Lives: The Next Dimension

Alexis D. Abernethy, PhD

Overview

- This workshop highlights how our study of worship deepened our understanding of transformational worship experiences and guided our current perspectives on relationships, worship, and health. Drawing on the insights that are summarized in the book, *Worship that Changes Lives*, participants are encouraged to reflect on the relational dimension of their worship experiences.

Abernethy, A. D. (2008). *Worship that changes lives: Multicultural, multidisciplinary, and denominational perspectives on transformation in worship*, (Ed.). Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic.

Spiritual Transformation

- Spiritual transformation ... refers to “that experience which a person labels as transforming, [frames] linguistically as spiritual in nature, and [results] in significant behavioral change.” [\[1\]](#)
- The perspective here is not that all worship should lead to transformation, nor is transformation the primary focus of worship, but when worship does lead to transformation, there may be important lessons to learn (Abernethy, 2008, pp. 13-4).

Book Overview (Abernethy, 2008)

- Theology of Worship

Historical and theological perspectives on how worship may contribute to spiritual transformation

Worship and the Arts

The role of the dramatic arts, dance, film, visual arts, and music in facilitating spiritual transformation. This discussion includes insights gained from traditionally secular contexts of the arts, film, and jazz, as well as the use of these media in the church.

Worship Narratives and Transformation

Insights regarding transformation gleaned from three sources: two specific worship contexts (the emerging church and a charismatic Baptist church); transformation narratives from members of Presbyterian and Pentecostal churches that are predominantly African American, Caucasian, Latino, or Korean; and scholarly reflections on congregational narratives.

The conclusion summarizes the implications for the seminary training, spirituality and health research, and worship practice.

Worship

Witvliet describes worship

“as a soundtrack for the rest of life.”[\[2\]](#)

In reflecting on what is formed in us,
Witvliet states that

worship should help us to “decenter” ourselves.

Perspectives on Worship

- Saliers describes four key dimensions of Christian worship:
 - “the aim is the glorification of God;
 - the glory of God is related to what Jesus said and did as indicated in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures;
 - Christian worship is always “culturally embodied and embedded”; and
 - Christian worship invites wholehearted participation as we bring our “whole life to worship.”[\[3\]](#)
- He outlines three levels of participation in Christian liturgy:
 - “the participation in the action, such as singing;
 - the participation in the worship as a church;
 - and the participation in the life of God.”[\[4\]](#)
- Saliers maintains that “unless we are engaged in doxology [glory to God] and service of God and neighbor, mysticism will be an escape.”[\[5\]](#)

Overview of Study Results

- “The study included seventy-four participants who were African American, Caucasian, Korean American, or Latino from Pentecostal or Presbyterian churches.
- In descriptions of the pre-experience state, sadness was a common affective experience.
- While cognitive, affective, and relational themes were present and often interrelated, cognitive themes were predominant in describing transformation.
- Worship provided cognitive insight that was associated with affective, relational, and behavioral change.
 - People bring their troubled lives to worship, and they not only have an affectively powerful experience but this experience is also linked to deepened cognitive understanding that results in changed behavior and relationships.
- People experienced God either through direct contact, indirectly through others, and/or through an artistic element in worship.”

(Abernethy, 2008, p. 21)

Transformation Question

- “Apart from a conversion experience, reflect on a worship experience in a church service that *changed* you and made a difference in your life. Please choose an experience that deeply affected you as we will be asking a number of questions about it.”

(Abernethy, 2008, p. 217)

Relational Changes

- “A preponderance of responses were relational in nature. [Responses were divided] into categories: family and parenting, relationships with other people, relationships in the life of the church, and finally, one example of relational change—forgiveness. In general, individuals reported they are more accepting of others, more collaborative and gracious.”

Dueck, A. (2008). Worship as changed lives. In A. D. Abernethy, *Worship that changes lives: Multicultural, multidisciplinary, and denominational perspectives on transformation in worship*, (Ed.). Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, p. 244.

Categories for Transformation (Abernethy, 2008, p. 218)

Category	Unique use	Total
Word of God	26	28
Song	5	7
Both song and sermon	3	3
Spiritual presence	4	4
Nonpastor	3	5
Sense of God's presence	9	12
Witness of the life	4	4
Prayer	3	4
Charismatic	4	4
Difficulty	2	15
Other	9	10

Implications for the Practice of Ministry

Role of suffering

Achieving balance between a spontaneous and planned view of the activity of the Holy Spirit in worship

Posture of the worship leader

Corporate nature of worship

Sacraments

Bias toward the arts

Implications for Research

- Worship, Relationships, and Health
Role of Forgiveness and Unforgiveness
- Forgiveness and Health
Forgiveness and Health-Related Outcomes
Unforgiveness and Health-Related Outcomes

Worthington, E. L., Jr., Witvliet, C. V. O., Pietrini, P., & Miller, A. J. (2007). Forgiveness, health, and well-being: A review of evidence for emotional versus decisional forgiveness, dispositional forgivingness, and reduced unforgiveness. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 30(4), 291-302.

Defining Forgiveness

- “First, unforgiveness involves ruminations that may be begrudging, vengeful, hostile, bitter, resentful, angry, fearful of future harm, and depressed.
- Second, unforgiveness is hypothesized to be directly related to the amount of remaining injustice being experienced....
- Third, forgiveness involves reducing unforgiveness.
- Fourth, forgiveness is a process rather than an event...
- Fifth, the internal experience of forgiveness can be distinguished from its interpersonal context.
- Sixth, forgiveness of strangers ... is fundamentally different from forgiving a loved one.

(Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, & Miller, 2007, p. 292)

Defining Forgiveness (Cont.)

Seventh, making a decision to change one's behavior could be a sincere and permanent form of forgiving, and yet that decision must be differentiated from emotionally forgiving... Decisional forgiveness, while it might reduce hostility does not necessarily reduce stress responses. Emotional forgiveness is likely more related to health sequelae because of its strong connection to overcoming negative affect and stress reactions by cultivating positive affect.

Eighth, most would agree that (a) decisional forgiveness has the potential to lead to changes in emotion and eventually behavior whereas (b) emotional forgiveness, by definition, involves changes in emotion, motivation, cognition, and eventually behavior.

(Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, & Miller, 2007, p. 292)

Relationships and Health

"Chronic unforgiving responses could contribute to adverse health by

- **perpetuating stress beyond the duration of the original stressor,**
- **heightening cardiovascular reactivity during recall, imagery, and conversations about the hurt,**
- **and impairing cardiovascular recovery even when people try to focus on something else**

By contrast, forgiving responses may buffer health both by

- **quelling these unforgiving responses and**
- **by nurturing positive emotional responses in their place"**

(Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, & Miller, 2007, p. 297)

Implications for Worship

- Bringing whole life to worship
- Transformational process
 - Reduced unforgiveness
 - Reduced ruminations that are hostile, vengeful, etc...
 - Emotional forgiveness
 - Reduced scapegoating
 - Reduced external blame
 - Reduced desire for vengeance
 - Christ as the Model and Biblical narratives
 - Absorb the pain of the offense
 - Not seek revenge
 - Possible reconciliation

Key Elements in Worship

References

- [1] Alvin Dueck, Richard Gorsuch, and Kevin Reimer, “Spirituality, Language and Behavioral Transformation” (proposal submitted to the Templeton Foundation, funded by the Metanexus Institute, Spiritual Transformation Project, 2003).
- [2] Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 47–48.
- [3] Don E. Saliers, “The Travail of Worship in a Culture of Hype: Where Has All the Glory Gone?” *Journal for Preachers* 24 (2001): 28.
- [4] Don E. Saliers, “Christian Liturgy as Eschatological Art,” *Arts* 11, no. 1 (1999), 20.