The God We Know:
Developing And Maintain

BY COSTA MITCHELL



Intimacy is the most perfect knowledge one person can have of another

My encounter began at a halfway point on a long journey. Driving the 1000 miles between Cape Town and Johannesburg, two friends and I broke up our trip by stopping at the home of a friend and colleague. Our friend is primarily a worship leader and songwriter, and also pastors a church (as opposed to me, primarily a pastor who wishes he was a worship leader!). We had a great barbeque in his garden, and afterward he picked up his guitar and we worshiped together. I had been used to worship experiences of the "proclamation" variety. In other words, I was familiar with hymns and "choruses" that were rich with content, and spoke about God, rather than to Him. There was nothing wrong with that understanding in my mind, and I was hardly aware that anything was missing from my worship life.

And then it happened. He began a song that blew my paradigm apart. "I exalt You," the song said over and over again. I began to weep, for no reason other than a deep awareness that I was connecting with God directly in worship. This was different. It was "I – You" language between a fallible human being and the transcendent God. I felt vulnerable. I felt exposed. I felt known. I felt like I was home.

Knowing And Being Known When Jesus encountered the woman at the well of Sychar, He used an expression that encapsulates authentic worship. He said *"...we worship what we know"* (John 4:22). We worship, by implication, a God who is knowable. A God with whom we may have intimacy. The verb that means "to know" here is the Greek word "oida," which means "to have seen or perceived; to have full or perfect knowledge of." It is the knowledge that springs from relationship, and is dependent on self-disclosure.

Karl Barth, the most famous theologian of the 20th century, spoke of the need for the church to be constantly hearing the "now" Word of God – to wait for God to initiate worship by revealing Himself among us each time we meet, so that our worship is responsive rather than ritualistic. Barth went so far as to dismiss blind ritualism in worship as atheism! If we worship without knowing Who we worship, we become guilty of the vain repetition and emptiness of idolatry, which makes a god of its own preference, and speaks to its god without hearing it speak or act in return.

Simply singing modern worship songs in a "Spirit-led" environment does not guarantee freedom from ritualism. It happens far more quickly than we suppose. That is why worship leaders fill such a critical role in the modern church. A worship leader actively listening for what the Lord wants to disclose of Himself in a particular service, and hearing both His Word for the day as well as His choice of songs, is facilitating the growth of intimacy and the genuine knowledge of God in the congregation.

I have a friend who disapproves of modern worship songs. He feels they are sentimental and too focused on "me," "my pain," "my feelings," etc. For him, the old hymns are where worship begins and ends. When we discussed the subject recently, I showed him that the Psalms of Israel have much in common with some of those "sentimental" modern worship songs (read, for example, Psalm 42). David, the man after God's own heart, wrote psalms that are full of passionate self-disclosure, to the point of making every emotion in his life, including even his displeasure with God, public.

So, how do we maintain intimacy with God? The keys are mutual self-disclosure, corporate transparency and freedom from shame.

Mutual Self-Disclosure Intimacy is the most perfect knowledge one person can have of another. Notwithstanding our belief in the omniscience of God, it is staggering to realize that there is a sense in which His "knowledge" of us depends on our making ourselves known! In the oft-quoted text from Matthew 7:23, Jesus indicates that the basis of judgment is a lack of self-disclosure from our side toward Him: *"I never knew you. Go away, you evildoers!"* In other words, I never knew you, because you did not come

ing Intimacy With Jesus

close enough. You did not allow me to know you. You avoided the intimacy I desired with you. That is cause for my greatest disappointment in you. The basis of oida is simply self-revelation – God's to us and ours to Him.

God has "self-revealed" Himself to us. When God promised the covenant of which we are the beneficiaries (Jeremiah 31:31-34), He said it would involve complete knowledge of Him. *"...No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,' declares the LORD."* We approach the God who is there, the God who speaks. He tells us what He is like, what He loves and hates, what His purposes encompass, and most importantly, how He loves us individually – passionately and sacrificially. As we take time to listen to His Word, He highlights what we need to hear each time we meet Him, and confirms it through other means, like prophecy and other charismatic gifts, "impressions" of the Spirit, and dreams and visions. This happens both individually and corporately.

We must self-reveal ourselves to God. Our responses, in the form of the appropriate emotions and words expressing worship, surrender, agreement, repentance and faith, have the effect of releasing God's power among us. You can choose to be unresponsive, or distracted, or even critical, and miss what God is doing. You can, like Michal, bring barrenness on yourself (II Samuel 6:14-23). You can invite the rebuke of God on your church, like the Pharisees did on Jerusalem (Luke 19:37-44). Or, you can invoke God's own song and works of deliverance by your extravagant response (Zephaniah 3:14-17).

Corporate Transparency My experience on that road trip was not only one of personal intimacy, but intimacy with God in community with others. To say to the Lord "I exalt You," "I love You," "I adore You," in the company of other macho, undemonstrative, western males, caused a measure of vulnerability and discomfort that might not have been there if I had been alone. In fact, I had probably known times of such transparency in my shower, without noting the moment as being unique (vulnerability and showering are synonymous!). But here, another dimension occurred as I let down any "image" of strong, secure, theologically correct masculinity and abandoned myself to being real – weeping as I enjoyed God without caring what others thought. They, as far as I know, did the same. So we grew together as Christians, friends and fellow worshipers. It is a moment that can scarcely be described to others, but that left the four of us who shared it changed, and hungering for more.

Freedom From Shame "*The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame*" is the description of the dynamics of the first marriage (Genesis 2:25). The new covenant we referred to earlier bases the possibility of intimate knowledge of another on forgiveness:

God has "self-revealed" Himself to us

"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." The barrier between human beings and God is our sinfulness. It not only offends Him, but it also blinds and deafens us. It is because of sin that "we see through a glass, darkly." Sin distracts us and causes our spiritual senses to be dull and insensitive. But it also brings shame into the relationship between Him and us. When the first couple sinned, they covered up and hid themselves. Shame alienates us from God emotionally as much as spiritually. Therefore, forgiveness is a necessary prerequisite for fellowship with Him. In I John 1:7, cleansing, righteousness and relationship are linked in a mutually causative connection. We will not have any of them without the others being present.

A Pursuit That Never Ends The principle revealed in the encounter I described has become so important to me in my life story. As we approach Jesus, what a great thing it is to know that He desires intimacy with us. We are made to know God, to love Him and to enjoy Him forever. We are made for intimacy with Him. This is the goal of all worship. It must be the goal of every worship leader to lead God's people to that place. I constantly remind worship leaders of this with various phrases: "Take me there," "Take the people there," "Don't quit until you get us there."

Every worship experience shares this goal of achieving intimacy with God. In one sense there is no "arriving" at this goal, rather only a glimpse of how much more there could be. There is no formula for achieving it. In fact, intimacy with God is never an achievement, but always a gift. Let's be clear about the personal and corporate goal of worship – intimacy with the God we know, and who knows us. If we are passionate for anything, let it be for maintaining that vital intimacy with Jesus.



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