BY DR. PETER FITCH

The Supreme Value Of Worship

After an exciting time as a young Christian in the early '70s, I somehow landed in traditions that had expressions of worship that didn't quite fit my personality or values. For about the next 15 years, I longed for a quality of spiritual life, a depth of community and an experience of worship that continued to elude me. I cried out for reformation in the church at large, but it was years before I knew that God had raised up people like John Wimber and others as instruments of change around the world. When I finally found out that such a depth of worship experience existed, it made my hunger all the more intense. I felt as though I was pastoring in chains, caught in a system that didn't feel like a home to me. Finally, during an Easter service in 1992, my heart was broken by a reading that had been based on Psalm 27:13-14 that read, "Wait for the Lord, O my soul, for I shall again praise Him in the land of the living." God would answer my cry for a living worship experience with Him.

God likes to give the kind of parties where the guests get treats.

Out of this and other fresh encounters with God, my wife and I, along with a group of friends, planted a local church – the St. Croix Vineyard in New Brunswick. We spent considerable time in loving and expressive worship. Developing intimacy with God became one of our greatest priorities. We weren't necessarily very "good" at this at first, but we devoted ourselves to seeking after God, primarily using contemporary worship music and intercession as our starting place. It didn't matter if the times didn't always seem to be rich; we knew that worship was for God and not for us. We were aided by a statement made by John Wimber, that when people say "I didn't get anything out of that worship time," it is like going to someone else's birthday party and complaining that you didn't get any gifts! In time, and with an additional focus on serving the community around us with practical acts of love, things began to improve – we learned that God likes to give the kind of parties where the guests get treats.

The Supreme Value Of Worship

The following thoughts on the supreme value of worship are based in a local church's ongoing encounter with God. While the way we choose to worship is unique to us, the principles that flow from authentically "living worship" experiences apply to us all. Actually, encountering God in worship is a little like changing guitar strings – there's no way to know how dull your old ones sounded until you hear the new ones ringing. It's often the same with our hearts.

1) Worship Sets A Time To Focus On God

It doesn't seem to matter if our worship is quiet or exuberant, sonically current or traditional; people often respond by being drawn into a place that is special to them and to God. We see it in the tears of newcomers, the quietness that comes over young people and the look on faces simply lost in concentration on Jesus. We also see it in the loving gestures and the meeting of eyes that flow from normally reserved people to those around them. Simple songs sung from sincere hearts make a resting place for Jesus to visit, and His presence brings a warm breath of spring to hearts captured by various forms of winter.

Living worship draws us into God.

2) Worship Creates A Space For Communion With God

To me, this is the supreme value of worship: it creates a space in life for true communion and relationship with God. We open our hearts to God in vulnerability and transparency, and He comes among us in different ways, some of which are very tangible. He continues the work of setting things right in our hearts, and as we set our eyes on Him we are changed. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), in his sermons on the Song of Songs, spoke of the touch of the Holy Spirit as the kiss of God.[1] He wanted people to understand that God's presence is an expression of His affection for us. He also suggested that we come to God with our own kisses: first, the kiss of the feet, then the kiss of the hand, and finally, the kiss of the mouth. Here is his explanation:

"This is the way; this is the order. First we cast ourselves at His feet and deplore, before God who made us, the evil we have done. Secondly, we reach out for the hand which will lift us up, which will strengthen our trembling knees. Last, when we have obtained that, with many prayers and tears, then perhaps we shall dare to lift our faces to the mouth which is so divinely beautiful, fearing and trembling, not only to gaze on it, but even to kiss it . . . . When we are joined with Him in a holy kiss we are made one with Him in spirit through His kindness.[2]"

These themes resonate in many simple worship songs such as "All I Need," "Hungry" or "You Are My King." While I don't consciously go through these steps every Sunday morning, something like this often happens to me. After my head empties from the busyness of the week, I suddenly notice the music (after I laugh at the new hat the bass player has found) and I am swept into joy: remembering God, loving God, remembering my need, receiving His answers, singing from the heart, singing in the spirit, awakening, awakening to Him – alive again to communion with God.

Living worship awakens us to God.

3) Worship Prepares Us For Commitment To God

Another value that flows from a living worship time is its ability to draw forth

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deeper commitments from our soul. Athanasius (c.293-373) taught that worship music had the marvelous ability to focus all the parts of the soul in one direction, to sort out our contradictory desires. He said, "As in music the pluck is used to strike the string, so the human soul may in music become like a stringed instrument completely devoted to the Spirit, so that in all one's members and emotions one is thoroughly responsive to the will of God."[3]

Living worship prepares us to make a deeper commitment of our lives to God.

4) Worship Opens Us To An Opportunity For Healing From God

Worship also helps to heal us. Martin Luther (1483-1546) wrote, "I firmly believe, nor am I ashamed to assert, that next to theology no art is equal to music; for it is the only one, except theology, which is able to give a quiet and happy mind. This is manifestly proved by the fact that the devil, the author of depressing care and distressing disturbances, almost flees from the sound of music as he does from the word of theology."[4] In another place he said that music was a gift from God that drove away the devil and made people cheerful.[5]

Living worship heals us, from the inside out.

5) Worship Provides A Place Where We Can Be Transformed By God

William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1942 until his death in 1944, captured many of these benefits in the beautiful description of worship that he gave in his book, *Hope Of A New World*. He also affirmed the importance of the worship experience in transforming us into the image of Jesus:

"To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God.[6]"

Living worship increasingly transforms us into the image of Christ.

Within Your Reach

In light of this wisdom from older voices, and in light of my own continuing experience for most of the past decade, I think it is almost impossible to overestimate the importance of living worship for the human soul. We need it to survive spiritually; we need it in order to become what God wants us to be. Each community of Christian believers must work with heart and mind to find the living way that works for them. It is a tragedy of the first order that many churches have fallen into a "worship slumber," with members thinking they have worshiped when they have barely scratched the surface. Lack of a living worship experience, and its consequent disappointment, can shield us from searching for the true communion that is nearer than we can imagine. Living worship is within reach for all of us.

Living worship is within reach for all of us.

I thank God that He heard my desperate cry and allowed our local congregation to develop a worship structure that enables us to meet with Him in a real way. Discovering a style that works in your local church is worth more than any tradition, and certainly worth more than the small amount of time that is often allotted to it. There is a place called "the land of the living." It's a place of living worship for every person, and for every local church. I counsel you not to rest until you have experienced the supreme value of worship.



PETER FITCH, D. MIN. (FULLER)

Dr. Peter Fitch shares the senior leadership of St. Stephen's University in St. Stephen, New Brunswick, Canada, where he is Dean of Ministry Studies. He is also the senior pastor of the St. Croix Vineyard and the author of Learning to Suffer Well, a devotional workbook for individuals and small groups.

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1 Bernard of Clairvaux from Sermon 8 on The Song of Songs, Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works, trans. By G. R. Evans, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1987) 237.

2 Clairvaux., from Sermon 3, 223.

3 Athanasius, A Letter to Marcellinus, quoted in Thomas C. Oden, Classical Pastoral Care, Volume Two: Ministry Through Word and Sacrament (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1987) 103.

4 Martin Luther, quoted in Oden, 106.

5 Luther, quoted in Oden, 106.

6 William Temple, Hope of a New World (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1940).