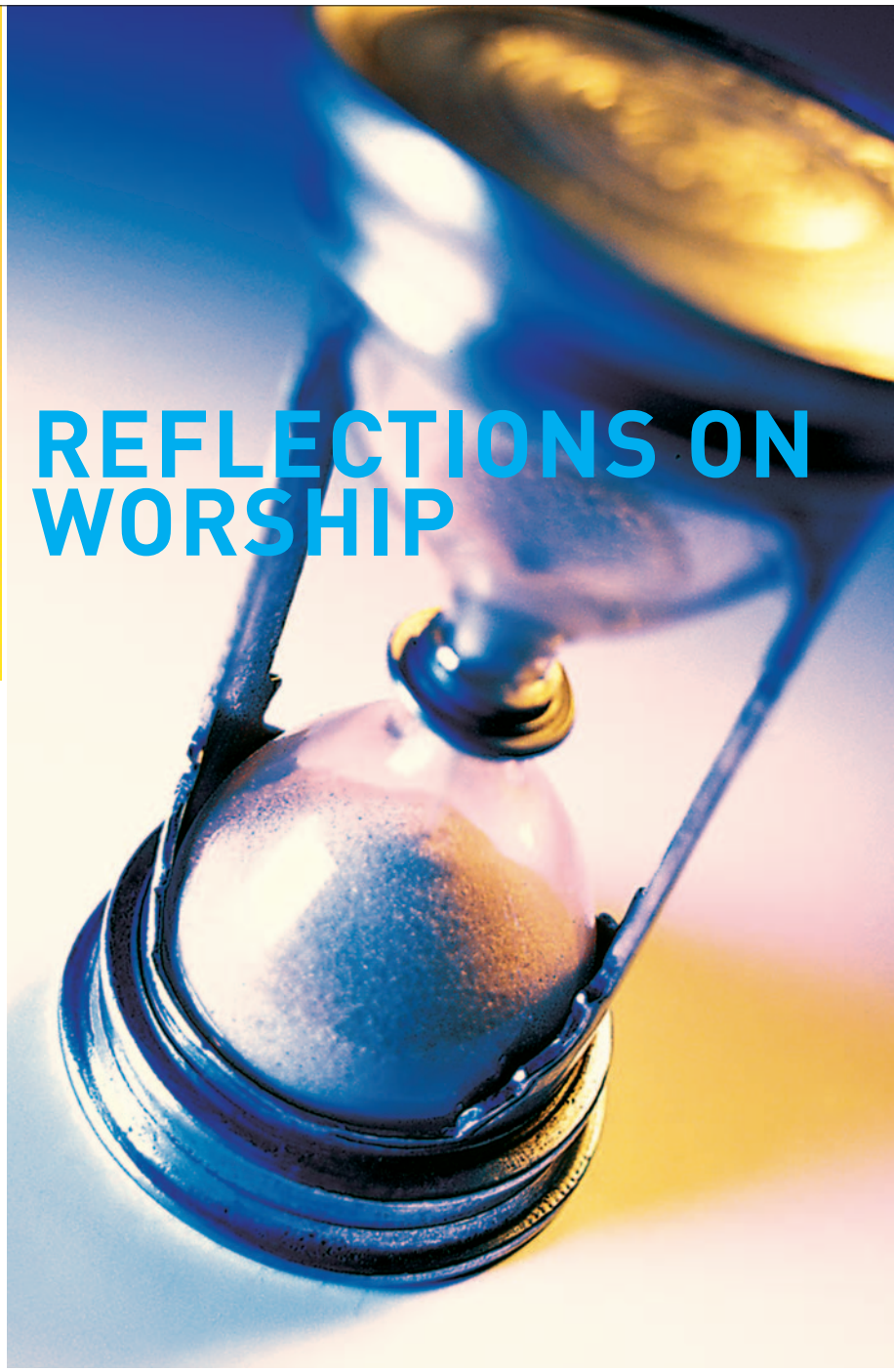
EDDIE GIBBS

TIME IN A BOTTLE: REFLECTIONS ON WORSHIP



I have long held the conviction that worship is the primary function of the church. If we make a distinction between the church militant here on earth and the church triumphant in heaven, it is immediately obvious that there is more of them there than of us here! Furthermore, much that takes high priority for the church as it engages in the mission that the Lord has entrusted to his body, will one day be concluded with the return of Christ to consummate his kingly rule. In recognition that the church is called to live God's future now in anticipation of that Great Day, every member is called up to "present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom 12:1 NRSV).

MISUNDERSTANDING WORSHIP

Paul's appeal to the believers in Rome also corrects a common misunderstanding among those who prioritize worship to the marginalization or exclusion of all else. It emphasizes that our worship is not conducted in splendid isolation from the pressures of the world. It is not a retreat into denial or a search for a safe-haven. Worship that becomes privatized and compartmentalized is in danger of degenerating into a form of spiritual self-indulgence. For Paul, worship is not an adrenaline shot, eventually leading to an adrenaline addiction among those who are constantly seeking a new "high." For him there is no place for exhibitionism, for true worship entails a dying to self. It is not a temporary and periodic ecstatic experience, but the consecration of our entire being. It is not an interlude in the week but to be integrated into the whole of life.

The emergence of the Charismatic Movement in the 1960s certainly had a liberating and creative impact on the worship scene, especially among God's "frozen chosen" either immobilized in a liturgical straight-jacket, or turned into the jerky movements of robotic performers that I am told is referred to as "popping" and "locking." In other words, it challenged us to "present our bodies" in worship and to learn to move spontaneously and appropriately. It was a healthy move to lay aside our Anglo-Saxon inhibitions, offering our bodies as well as our minds in worship.

WORSHIP IS GOD CENTERED

The presenting of our bodies as living sacrifices expresses in a dramatic form that worship is God centered and must not be used as a means to other ends, no matter how worthy. Specifically, worship is not a means to evangelization. Neither is it simply a source of inspiration, making us feel good about ourselves. Above all worship is about God and our self-surrender to the Almighty.



COVER THE SCOPE OF SALVATION

It is well and good to sing songs directly to God expressing the intimacy of our relationship with our Heavenly Father through Christ, but this must not degenerate into sentimentality or spiritual complacency. When our worship songs focus mainly on the individual and how he or she feels in relation to Jesus, then worship becomes self-centered to an unhealthy degree. There are only so many ways to say how much we love Jesus.

Please don't misunderstand me. I value worship songs addressed directly to God to supplement the great hymns of the church (both ancient and recent) that remind us of the grandeur of Almighty God, the story of redemption as it unfolds dramatically throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, and the universal scope of salvation. But neither can substitute for the other; we need songs of adoration as well as songs of declaration.

WORSHIP AND TRINITY

This leads me to a related consideration, namely that our worship must be thoroughly Trinitarian in focus. God the Father planned our salvation, for He so loved the world that He sent His one and only Son as Savior to the world. Jesus came to implement the will of his Heavenly Father. He lived in total obedience to and dependence on the Father. And it is the Holy Spirit who is the *Go-Between God* to quote the memorable phrase of John V. Taylor who wrote a book with that title. It is a salutary exercise for pastors and worship leaders to check through the song selection, sermons, and prayers to ensure that there is a Trinitarian balance.

A Trinitarian focus is important for another reason. It provides a powerful and theologically grounded challenge to the hyper-individualism that typifies our culture and which has infiltrated into our churches. At times it is appropriate to worship the Lord, with our heads raised, eyes closed, and hands aloft. But this is neither the exclusive or highest expression of worship. Our gathering is essentially a corporate and communal activity. The other worshipers around us are not incidental. They must not be excluded during our time of communion with the Lord, but are essential to it. If worship is to lead to wholeness, it must be expressed corporately.

TIME IN A BOTTLE

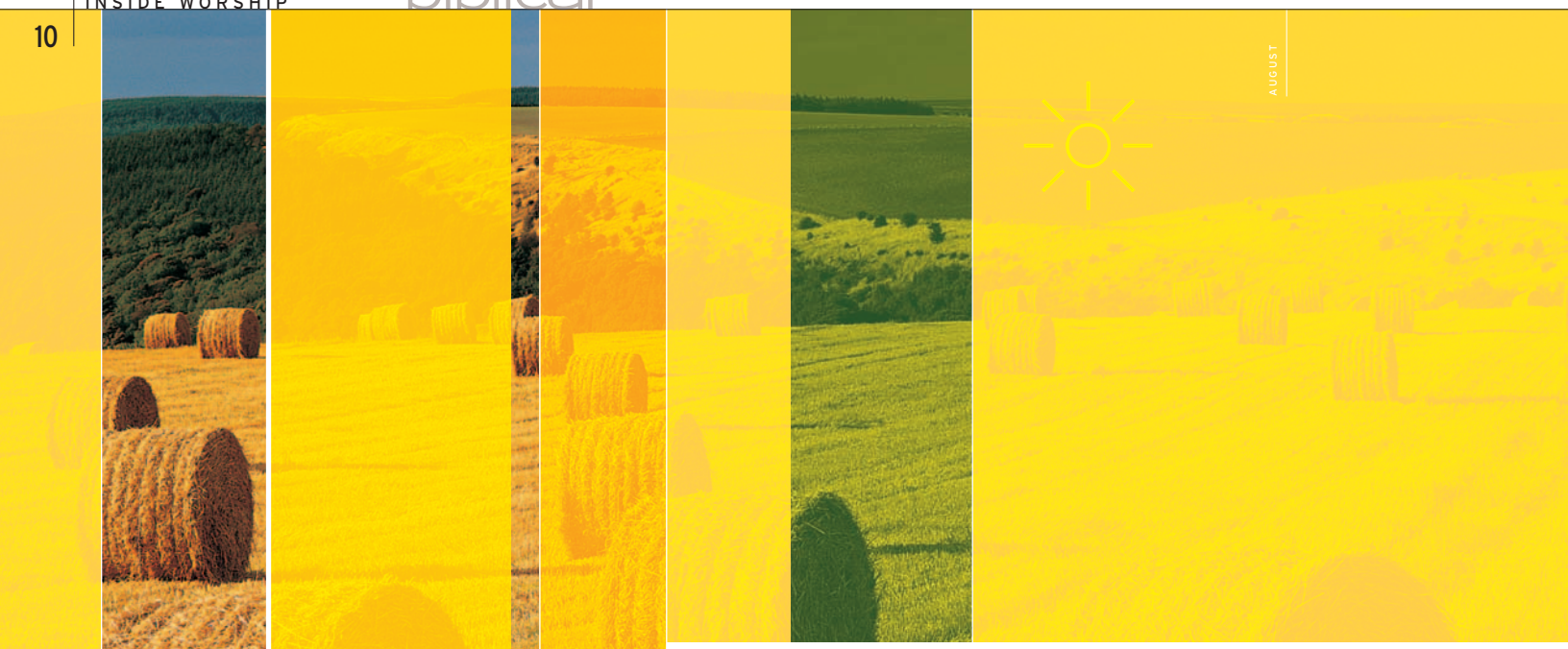
By this time the reader might be wondering about the title at the head of this article – *Time In A Bottle!* The significance is that each occasion of worship is like opening a bottle of wine. It is related to the "now" of our experience, and is always changing. I am told that to the wine connoisseur no two bottles of wine taste the same. While speaking at a pastors' conference in South Africa, one of the pastors who was from the wine growing area of Stellenbosch and who had himself worked in a winery, was blindfolded in order to test his skills. He was then given a glass of wine to taste, after which he was invited to give us as much information about the wine as he was able. To our amazement he identified not only the type of wine, but where it was grown and the year of vintage! Our worship offered each week should be as distinctive as wine from a bottle, not as generic as Coke from a can!

This is where the seasons of the year come into play. In the liturgical year we cover the scope of salvation.

- In *Advent* we prepare for the coming of Christ. When such preparation is ignored then Christmas becomes commercialized and sentimentalized. Shopping and spending days are more in people's minds than preparing ourselves for the consummation of Christ's Kingdom that was inaugurated with his first coming.

- *Christmas* is a time of joyful, family celebration of Jesus, the Savior of the World, coming as a helpless babe, announced by socially suspect shepherds.

- *Epiphany* points to God's surprising revelation to astrologers from the East (Syria or Babylonia?). This reminds worshipers that God gets there



LIVE GOD'S FUTURE NOW

before we do! Those who appear to be furthest away may be closest to the truth.

– *Lent* is a time of solemn self-examination, reminding us of the self-denial and sufferings of Christ. In how many worship services is there no opportunity given for confession and absolution? We may emerge from our worship experience exhilarated or inspired, but do we come our clean? Alongside songs of worship songs we need appropriate songs of lament. The Psalmists got the balance right! Authentic worship leads us reverential fear of a Holy God to challenge our presumptive intimacy.

– Next comes *Holy Week* beginning with the Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, challenging the misplaced, culturally-conditioned expectations of the his disciples among the crowd, who expected him to assume the role of a triumphant Messiah-king leading the nation to victory over their oppressors. But they missed the symbolism of the humble, donkey on which he rode.

– Next we come to *Jesus' Ascension* into heaven when we are challenged afresh with the church's ongoing global mission to make disciples (Christ-followers) among all nations. The Great Commission has become the great omission in so many churches. The main reason for this sad state of affairs is our failure to turn decisions for Christ into disciples of Christ. It takes a fellowship of disciples to venture forth to make other disciples. We reproduce after our own kind. This is the meaning of spiritual fruitfulness.

– Furthermore, this mission cannot be undertaken apart from the presence and power of the Holy Spirit poured out at *Pentecost*. Not until Jesus had ascended into Heaven could his mission be translated into our mission. The remainder of the church's liturgical year explores the implications for this mission to the world for the life of the Church if it is to be an authentic and credible witness.

THE IMPACT MUST NEVER DIMINISH

I remember my first visit to Disneyland and to the Country Bears Jamboree. It was a great show. In subsequent years I paid an occasional return visit in order to take visitors for their Disney experience. But of course the show was exactly the same, and its impact quickly diminished. Our worship can similarly suffer from routinization if we choose Coke rather than wine!



Eddie Gibbs is the Donald McGavran professor of church growth at Fuller Seminary in California. In 2005 he wrote Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community In Postmodern Cultures with Ryan K. Bolger (Baker Academic). He has been a great friend of the Vineyard movement for many years.