Chapter 1
A New Life

Christianity is the "good news" that beauty, truth, and goodness are found in a person.
—Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola

I didn't have many close friends in high school, so I suppose you could say that by the time I entered university in 1975 I was ready for a friend who would accept me no matter what. And that's what I got. But this friend of mine was unlike any friend I'd ever had. He was the most beautiful, attractive, captivating personality I had ever met, and I didn't have to wait until the weekend or the next Wednesday night to see him.

It was about this time that I visited a Vineyard church for the first time. I was instantly mesmerized by the transcendence of the worship experience. It wasn't just singing; I saw people engaged in a dance of adoration of God, swimming in a sea of God's love. I was captivated by the realness of it and left with my appetite fully alive to the prospect of pressing in to knowing God for myself.

The windows of heaven opened up to me that year. Until then I didn't know that God spoke to people, and I certainly had no idea that he would make himself real to me. Yet from this point on everything was different. I had encountered the loving God and nothing would ever be the same again.

The official start of my journey with God was 1975. It was the time when—to borrow a phrase from *The Chronicles of Narnia*—I entered "through the wardrobe" into another world. It was the beginning of a wonderful adventure, an adventure made up of countless smaller ones, a journey made up of many voyages.

I found "goodness in a person" when I met the Lord. I found someone I could talk to, who would listen to me. I found someone who loved me no matter what. As a freshman Christian I could be found sitting in my room of the fraternity at UCLA. This was a fraternity led by Christians who are now pastors. Reading the Bible felt more like listening to someone who was right there in the room talking to me, and day-by-day, I could feel my life's story being re-written. Up until then, my "story" consisted of sports, guitars and studies, with an aim of getting a good job in the not-too-distant future. Then I became part of God's story, growing to know Him day-by-day. The most exciting adventure of all was just beginning.

Playing the guitar used to be just another form of recreation, but from this point on it became truly re-*creational*. The Holy Spirit was renewing me through the creative act of making music. It was like going from black and white TV to a hi-def color screen with surround-sound; a fourth dimension opened up. Finally I had something to sing about,

someone to sing to. Through the gift of music, the Holy Spirit opened the eyes of my heart to see Jesus.

As this book starts out it's essential that we do a little tuning up, to ensure that we are going to move on from here without too much disharmony. And so this is our bottom-E string; the worship life is all about *knowing a Person.*

> The characteristic of Christianity lies in the fact that its source, depth, and riches are involved with the knowledge of God's Son. It matters not how much we know of methods or doctrines or power. What really matters is the knowledge of the Son of God.[1]

Christianity is more than a philosophy or an ideology. It is more than a form of morality, social ethic or worldview. We don't follow a doctrine of Christ; we follow Christ Himself. We don't worship a book; we worship a Person. Knowing doctrine is secondary, knowing Jesus is primary. The gospel reminds us of this continually with the Son of God walking among people, talking, healing, helping, and making Himself knowable in the clearest possible form. "We can never let our life with Jesus turn into a depersonalized set of principles. Being yoked with Jesus is a new way of living a new story—the story of God."[2]

The idea that we are on a journey with God is nothing new, and I am sure that other writers have used similar words to describe their own experience of worship. Yet I am not interested in coming up with a brand new way to present an ancient truth. For me, as I have already pointed out, this is about faith; this is personal. This story is as old as it gets.

I want to tell you what I know about worship. I want to share what I've begun to understand about it over the years. Across the following pages you might end up surprised, challenged or intrigued. Some of it you will agree with, some you might not. But at the end, what matters most is not whether I have convinced you to see the world exactly as I see it. No, what matters most is the journey: your journey, my journey, and our journeys. What matters most is that you close this book for the last time determined, inspired and a little better equipped to travel the coming stages of your own journey of worship of God.

A New Creation, A New Identity

So, yes, worship of God is not worship of a static object, concept or thing. When we talk about worship we are talking about our relationship with our heavenly Father. And just as real worship flows out of "aha" moments of encountering Jesus, it also flows out of our new identity as children of God who are born of the Spirit. Now, I've led musical worship in many countries, including Hong Kong. I don't speak Chinese, but I've led worship in Chinese by mimicking the sounds of the words. People tell me I'm pretty good at it, but I get busted whenever someone comes up after the worship set and tries to

actually have a conversation with me. While I know the gist of each line I've sung in Chinese, the basic truth is that I'm faking it.

Unless we have been reborn and transformed by the Holy Spirit, singing worship songs is a foreign activity. It's gibberish. It doesn't mean anything. It is only at the point of our conversion that God gives us a *new heart*—an enlightened *worshiping heart.* It is from that heart that our new native language flows.

When we are born of God and become citizens of heaven we receive his implanted Holy Spirit and it causes our hearts to be in tune with Jesus. He writes his laws on our hearts. As citizens of heaven, and members of a spiritual family, we understand and speak a common language of worship. We become sensitive to the ways of the indwelling Holy Spirit and we learn to quickly respond to his urgings "for his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God's children" (Rom 8:16 NLT).

My wife Linda describes her conversion like this:

> Meeting Jesus was like coming to life; I was dead then I was alive; I was totally blind and not *aware* of being blind and suddenly I could see. Like a baby being born, moving from one world into another. I love singing about this transformation.

Each of us, when we are born anew in Christ, find the essence of our hearts changed. The old man dies and we are raised to life, leaving us spiritually joined to Jesus. "But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit" (1 Cor 6:17). We actually become new people: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Cor 5:17). Amazingly, in our new state of being "alive in Christ," we have the capacity to discern or understand things that were previously hidden from us: "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor 2:14).

This changes the whole ballgame. The fact that we can communicate with God is foundational in the life and language of a worshipper. It was a reality that hit me hard as a young Christian; suddenly, my mind was illumined by the light of Christ as I had a new language of prayer that sprang from an enlivened spirit. I experienced a new access to God that I had never known was possible. As a member of God's household I could hear his voice ringing throughout the house. All that I had to do was respond, as "Worship is our responding to the overtures of love from the heart of the Father."[3]

Like I said, this changes everything.

Even after almost three decades of marriage, spending time with Linda never gets old. Why? Because we're on an adventure together and we're in love. So it is with God, when we understand that his offer to us is to spend time with him in relationship, rather than just as consumers of sterile information. Get this right and we can experience an amazing

sense of fulfillment and completeness as we worship, we can become " … *complete through [our] union with Christ*, who is the head over every ruler and authority" (Col 2:10 NLT, emphasis added). Words can't describe this sense of being *complete* in Christ. It can only be experienced. Even if we don't "feel" anything, it remains a fixed reality.

In Jesus Manifesto, Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola talk about the "Great Dance," a term the Cappadocian Fathers used to define the communion among the members of the Trinity. The word is *perichoresis*, which means to "move about" or "dance around." Just as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit share their lives in a divine "dance," we are invited into a "dance" with the Trinity, which leads to entering into our true God-given identity.

"Christians have a *perichoretic* relationship with Christ. That relationship makes you more fully yourself than you could ever be apart from him. The gospel is not the eradication of you; it is not self-negation. Rather, the gospel is the radical reconfiguration of the "self" within a relational context. The old self has been put to death, and the new self in Christ has taken its place. Your new self is the real "you."[4]

In this age of diminishing oil reserves and increasing global demands for petroleum, it's fascinating to read about new types of fuels and engines being developed. One of the world's leading hydrogen cell companies is located where I reside in Vancouver. They are developing an engine unlike the old internal combustion type that runs most of the cars on the road today. The new engine requires a different kind of fuel—it runs on oxygen instead of petroleum.

When I was born again it was like God put a new type of engine in me. The new "me" was thirsty for the fuel that God gives, not the old stuff my previous engine craved. When his disciples were worrying about what fuel they were going to take on board, Jesus said, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about" (John 4:32). We need the fuel of God's living words, supplied by his indwelling Spirit.

In the Royal Family

I wasn't looking for Jesus when he found me. Before I woke up to God, I was a wandering teenager. I had no plans to make Jesus the center of my life, but he chose me. He showed me who I was created to be. To quote Annie Dillard: "I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck."[5]

When the Lord caught my attention I gained a radically new self-image, all tied up in being his child. His revealed love prompted me to call out to Him, just as it did for Paul: "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" (Rom 8:15-16).

Worship is a means of understanding our own identity. Tim Keller says:

> A sign of real worship is that you feel like a priest and a king. Worship of the true God makes you feel as glorious as he is … you feel as royal and as powerful as a king and as pure and acceptable as a priest.[6]

I don't always get these feelings when I pray or sing, but it happens consistently. These moments serve as markers of eternal reality, or " … as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come" (2 Cor 5:5).

No matter what your station in life—banker, landscaper or shopkeeper—you see the *real you* when you draw near to God: "We are, all of us, never-ceasing spiritual beings with a unique eternal calling to count for good in God's great universe."[7] You have an earthly occupation, but that's just a piece of you. In worship you take a journey back to your true identity, your true home. You become aware once again at the deepest level of your being, you are a child of God. You've sensed him making his home in your heart, and you know that is only a foretaste of heaven.

I remember playing the song *I Have Found*[8] while leading worship in Hong Kong several years ago:

> I have found such joy in my salvation since I gave my heart to you.
>
> I have found *the reason I'm living*, so in love, so near to You … (emphasis added)

Though I had discovered my "reason for living" many years before then, I needed to see it again. As I sang these words fresh revelation came to me about just how God felt about me. The lines of communication between Creator and Created opened up little wider and I could see my eternal destiny with a little more clarity.

Paul The Worshipper

If there's one man in the Bible who saw his eternal destiny clearly—a man who embodies a life of worship—it is Paul. Paul knew Jesus firsthand despite never meeting him. Freed from a law-based religion, he was consumed with knowing a glorious person. Knowing and serving Jesus was his life's sole purpose. His life was all about embracing Christ and being embraced by Him. His words to the church in Philippi are clear: "Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant—dog dung. I've dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him" (Phil 3:8 The Message).

There seems to be no duplicity in Paul's life—he walks out his worship in every facet of life. He's one of the great heroes of the Bible yet we see his human weakness and everyday struggles as well. We see him viciously attacked for spreading the gospel, yet he finds a way to rejoice through it all. As he follows Jesus, giving himself as a "living sacrifice," we see his sacrificial love for the people he pastors. We see him working

harder than all the rest of the apostles by the grace of God, both in tent-making and in pastoral ministry. In all he does, he endeavors to please the Lord. In looking at Paul's life, we see a model of all-pervasive worship.

A High Class Jewish Boy

I'll be referring to the Apostle Paul many times throughout this book, picturing childhood neighbor Kenny in my mind as I do so. I think of Kenny when I think of Paul because Kenny came from a good, middle class Jewish family that lived out in the suburbs, and that's kind of what I think Paul was like. But instead of Los Angeles Paul was born in Tarsus, an ancient city on par with today's New York City or London, England. It had all the reputation, all the education and all the culture you could wish for, and there's no surprise that when the Roman soldiers were about to put Paul in chains in Jerusalem, he said to them: " … I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city" (Acts 21:39).

Paul's family ran their own tent-making business and had the means to send their boy to the homeland Jerusalem to study. Anyone who had the means to pay for their son to be educated in another country would have been wealthy. We know from Acts 22:27 that Paul was *born* a citizen of Rome, so his father must have been a Roman citizen. For a Jewish man in Tarsus to be a Roman citizen was an exceptional distinction; the few Roman citizens who were inhabitants of Tarsus would have been considered a social elite.[9]

We know that Paul's family was very devout in the Jewish faith. Though he was born in Tarsus, his parents made sure that he received an orthodox education in Jerusalem, studying at the feet of Gamaliel, the leading Pharisee of his day. In his appeal to King Agrippa in Jerusalem, Paul says, "according to the strictest sect of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee" (Acts 26.5). The term "Pharisee" makes us think of legalism and hypocrisy because of Jesus' sharp confrontation of this group. But we should remember that before Jesus introduced a new covenant, this was the best option available for a Jewish family who truly wanted to serve God. Beneath the layers of legalism that had accumulated through the generations, there was likely a genuine desire to love and honor God.

In his religious zeal as a Pharisee, Paul " … intensely … persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it" (Gal 1:13). Paul helped round up Christians to be brought to trial, " … breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples … " (Acts 9:1). He even went beyond the borders of Judea to find Christians and bring them to trial and punishment. "When the chief priests and their associates launched their attack on the disciples, Paul came forward as their eager lieutenant."[10]

Years later, after his conversion, Paul sorely regretted his vicious attacks against Christians: "For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an

apostle, because I persecuted the church of God" (1 Cor 15:9). But that big mistake set up an incredible opportunity for a much bigger experience of the grace of God.

Jesus is The Center

When I got a glimpse of God's unfathomable beauty, wisdom and riches of glory, I became a worshiper. It is an eternal truth that seeing leads to worshiping. Day by day we all need to think about His incomparable worth. How true it is that:

> … both the center and the circumference of the Christian life is none other than the person of Christ. All other things, including those related to Him, are eclipsed by the sight of His peerless worth.[11]

Paul understood this and his writings continually point the way to Christ-centered living, the sort where Jesus is the beginning, middle and end of a worshipful life. He understands that preoccupation with Jesus is the starting place—and the only way to sustain—a worship-life.

It is one of the greatest lessons to learn that meditating on the profound truth about Jesus will move us towards profound worship: "Worship isn't merely sentiment or emotion, worship keys off the exposition of truth. It ignites out of truth; it launches out of truth; it explodes off of truth. Worship is logic on fire."[12]

Paul's whole life was a pursuit of Jesus—to know Jesus and reflect Jesus' life to the world. "Paul was consumed with his crucified, risen and reigning Lord."[13] Even the number of times Paul refers to Christ in his letters is astounding (Col 1, Eph 1, Phil 1), and yet he remains aware of the fact that the love and unfathomable riches of Christ can be known and yet are "unsearchable."

"Jesus Christ is like a vast ocean. He is too immense to fully explore, and too rich to fathom. You are like a bottle. *The wonder of the gospel is that the bottle is in the ocean, and the ocean is in the bottle"* (emphasis added).[14] The Lord of glory is in me, and I am surrounded by His omnipresence. I could spend weeks thinking about that concept and still be amazed, particularly when adding in the fact that He fills the universe yet he has chosen to live in me!

We see in Paul's life that "knowing" Jesus is not just head-knowledge or sound doctrine. It is intimate knowledge of the mystery of Christ. " … God has chosen to *make known* among the Gentiles the *glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you*, the hope of glory" (Col 1:27, emphasis added). The mystery of the ages is living inside us, his Spirit co-mingling with ours.

In *The Jesus Manifesto,* Sweet and Viola point to Paul's letter to the Colossians in which we see:

> … a stunningly elegant vision of Christ—exalted, glorious, high and lifted up … Paul's goal was to strip away every distraction that was

> being held before their eyes and leave them with nothing but Christ. He dared to displace all rules, regulations, laws, and everything else that religion offers, with a person—the Lord Jesus Himself … He presented a panoramic vision of Jesus that exhausts the minds of mortal men."[15]

Sweet and Viola go on to say, "The need today is for the scales to fall from our eyes so that we may see the infinite greatness of our Lord."[16] I say "Amen" to that.

Behold the Lamb of God

> The Hebrew word for "behold" is used over one thousand times in the Old Testament. Why? It's simple—we have a hard time listening! The Hebrew word translated "behold" is "an interjection demanding attention, "look!" … The term emphasizes the immediacy, the here-and-now-ness, of the situation.[17]

Jesus is the here-and-now God. He said to his disciples "the kingdom is near" (Matt 4:17). We need to stop and take note.

One day John the Baptist saw his cousin Jesus walking toward him and said "*Behold*! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29 NKJV, emphasis added). He didn't see his cousin, though John was the son of his aunt Elizabeth, as He wasn't seeing with *natural eyes*, but with spiritual sight. He saw the sacrificial Lamb. John *saw* with enlightened eyes.

The next day, John was with Andrew and another of his disciples. "And looking at Jesus as He walked, he said, 'Behold the Lamb of God!'" (John 1:36 NKJV). Jesus invited the disciples to come to the place he was staying. *After spending the day with Jesus*, "The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, 'We have found the Messiah'" (John 1:41, emphasis added).

After *spending the day with Jesus,* Andrew knew he had found the Messiah.

The story of their visit with Jesus takes me back to my university room in 1975. I was over the moon at meeting God. But finding Jesus once isn't enough. I have to keep finding Jesus over and over again. Unless I look for him and spend time with him I don't continue to marvel at the Son of God. And unless I marvel, my eyes will grow dim.

As blood-bought, Spirit-filled Christians, we have a new identity, new eyes, a new heart and a new spiritual "engine." When we kick-start our engine with worship, God gives us the fuel to really get moving. Whether we are in the habit of spending entire days in prayer or not (and I have to admit that I'm not) we can be sure that when we put time aside to pursue God, "the kingdom is near us." We discover that this promise is true: "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."

This chapter started with a reminder of the fact that this good news at the heart of Christianity is entirely personal. Not only does that mean we find Jesus, but the spirit of the glorious Lord has been implanted in us, enabling us to see "the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints … the glorious riches of this mystery, *which is Christ in you*, the hope of glory" (Col 1:26-27, emphasis added).

The very presence of Christ in us energizes and inspires, firing us up as we set out on a journey unlike any other. We've got some ground to cover in the coming chapters. First we will start with the other essential—grace. We will look at what our worship really is before thinking about the notion of being a child again. Friendship and partnership with God will both get looked at, and then we jump into the idea of prayer—after all, isn't that the way it works? We start as children, become friends with God, and then move into partnership, and because of all three, prayer is far less intimidating.

After that, we look at the character of the worshipper. Gratitude, our reaction to suffering, contentment and humility all get explored. And after that we move onto lifestyle. What should our relationship with God do to our attitude to work and rest? What about our approach to risk? Should we be more sensitive to issues of justice as a result of our devotion to God? And what about these resources we find at our disposal—how should the worshipper use them? Finally, endings; how do we end well?

It's a long journey ahead. We'd better get going. Are you coming?

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15. Ibid., 26.
16. Ibid., 20.
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