Why "Worship Is All About God – It Is Not About Us" Is Dead Wrong

If I've said it once, I've said it a hundred times. I've heard pastors and conference speakers say it, too. You probably know the phrase, or some version of it: "Worship is all about God!" The crowd always responds with some measure of enthusiasm. After all, we are called to make God famous, to proclaim His renown, right? But then, after I've made that bold and seemingly noble statement, I've followed it up with a phrase that carries the weight of a logical afterthought. Confidently I would say, "Worship is all about God – it is *not about us*." I know what I've meant all these years. And in most ways, I've been wrong. Dead wrong. So has everyone else who has said it – especially without qualification.



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One time, when I said this as a guest speaker in front of a worship conference of about 600 folks, I pounded on the plexiglass podium for emphasis. (I'm not given to that; it just felt like the right thing to do at the time.) "Worship is all about God," I said, "…it's not (*pound*) about (*pound*) us (*big pound*)!"

That last *pound* did the trick – in more ways than one. A large glass of cold water, sitting on the inner shelf of the podium, spilled as I hit the podium on the word "us." It tipped right onto my pants. From my belt to my toes, it looked like I had wet myself! I stepped out from behind the podium, and the entire conference burst into laughter. I was a living metaphor. And yes – the water was very, very cold. God has a quirky sense of humor.

I've heard pastors, worship leaders, and very influential people communicate this same idea – that "Worship is all about God – it's not about us" – in a hundred different ways. The intention is good, and even seems Scriptural. But the problem is that these ideas strung together convey something about human beings – and God's invitation to worship – that is *dead wrong.* Especially if our Gospel begins in Genesis.

Incomplete Christian Thoughts Kill

True, God is great, and we are flawed. But that is an incomplete thought. And incomplete Christian thoughts kill.

Sure, worship is not *only* about us, our preferences, or the small spiritual paradigms we can build. But to say that worship is *not* about us, our participation (I work hard to serve it occurring every weekend), our preferences (I think God gave some of them to me), or our spiritual paradigms (you have a unique design in your life just as I do mine), is just *wrong*.

Since our Gospel begins in Genesis 1, specifically Gen. 1:26-27, let's try this: "God is great, and we are great in His image – yet now flawed to the point of death." "Fearfully and wonderfully made," the Psalmist said (Ps. 139:14), Image Bearers of God (Gen. 1:27), the Lord says.

Yet we push God up into His heavens, making Him so wonderful, and we so insignificant (Willard) that we actually *do violence to both the Story of God and the reality of worship*. While I love elements of Calvin (ever read his *Institutes*?) and pieces of reformed theology (the greatness of God is so majestically told), I sense a deep fear of human participation. We make things dirty. Messy. Imperfect. Lawyer-minds, like Calvin have given many gifts to the church, but their quest to codify faith into pristine theology has often engendered a stark resistance to any language that we have something to do with what happens in worship or in furthering God's kingdom.

If we change our clichéd language, our dehumanized language, we change our destiny. So to my pastor friends, and my worship leader friends, we need to fix this at the root.

"Worship Is Not About Us" – Is Simply Not True

Everyone knows that the hidden message in this statement is: God matters; you and I don't so much. We're not saying "we're not the focus of worship." Sure, we're self-centered and fixated on our preferences. That must be challenged. It's the silent statement of "who you are doesn't matter – you should somehow objectively understand that God is the important one here and you are… well… not."

Yes, worship is about God. When we lose sight of this, we become spiritual cheerleaders, doing religious gymnastics to get God to show up when he sees how hard we work (Peterson). We cajole and push our congregation to get them to express their worship demonstratively so we feel like all our hard prep work was not in vain. It's dark. Once again, God is removed from being the Subject of the worship sentence, who acts on us through the verb of love – to us being the subject of the sentence and God being the recipient of our frenetic, psycho-spiritual gyrations.

The worship theology *seems* good and noble, but is it?

So yes, worship is about God. But to say without conditions, "It's not about us," does not ring Scripturally, experientially, traditionally, or reasonably true (anyone notice Wesley's Quadrilateral sneaking in there?).

Worship is indeed *for* God alone, and not *for* us – but we *both* have something to do with worship happening – God and us. From Genesis 1 all the way to Revelation's "Come, Lord Jesus," we are invited to participate with God in the grand relationship that is worship. When worship spills out into the streets, strengthening the poor and defending the weak, it has truly become a great dance with the Creator.

Something rises in the heart of God when He sees we are engaged with Him in life-to-life exchange that is the activity of worship.

Worship has *everything* to do with us. God makes it so.

When we design:

- local liturgies,
- musical environments,
- visual environments,
- room environments,
- sound environments,
- service orders,
- worship sets,
- instruments, architecture, messages, class materials, programs, and parking lots…

…and more for engagement with God and His story, God must certainly be delighted! God must say "Yes! They are participating with me in this lavishly expressed, mutual love relationship that is worship! That was my original purpose in creating humankind in my image! We revel in this relationship together, and bring gifts that nurture our shared life!"

Your Preferences Matter

Wait a minute. Now we're on touchy ground. Have you ever heard someone say, "It shouldn't matter about what music is playing, or how loud or soft it is! It's about God and worship. Your opinion doesn't matter!" I've heard a few iterations of that over the years.

That, from my perspective, is also wrong. Yes, when our preferences become prejudices, that's a problem. When a 60 year-old feels called to a community where 30 year olds are leading worship, there is much grace that must be shown for the sound and music preferences that can radically differ across age groups.

But we are creational beings. Aesthetics matter. For that reason, it is good when churches work hard to create different kinds of worship environments for different seasons of life. Yes, we need to worship together. But we also have preferences that can serve our unique stage of calling and life.

When our little church in St. Stephen began an early morning Celtic liturgy service upstairs while the band rocked in the service below, it was a gift to my wife. She wanted some quiet, some reflective space, in the middle of a challenging season of life. The recited prayers came alive to her, and I was glad she had a fresh opportunity to find her voice – her preference – in worship.

Yes, we should be together in worship and show abundant grace. Yes, we can't always accommodate everyone's preferences (so we hand out ear plugs). But to say your preferences don't matter? That is "uncreational;" we are wired differently and have different experiences. The fact that I love ambient worship spaces and my wife prefers "normal" music is a good thing, a God thing, and one to be navigated with grace. The fact that we both appreciate immersive silence (Darrell Harris) brings us together.

Worship Work Is About Us

Whether it was the ancient Israelite choirs and bands of David's day (who rehearsed the musicians?), Jesus breaking bread and sharing the cup at Pentecost (who set the table?), or the disciples worshipping together in the upper room (who wrote and taught the songs?), or the Body of Christ for thousands of years creating spaces, songs, patterns, readings and more to facilitate our receptivity to the Spirit's forming us into Christ (who has designed our great body of worship work?), it *all* mattered and still matters.

Worship is all about God, yes – and yet He then makes it also about us. We then do our worship work, and make it about Him – serving those who have gathered. He is the Subject of the worship sentence, acting on us

as the Objects of His love – and then we in turn respond. That response is not only "all God" moving through us. It is our gift as His beloved creation to create beauty, rhythms, and tools of worship.

We have worship work to do, and if Christ is sitting at the center of our efforts, we will serve our communities well.

Question: Have you heard the title phrase before, or used it yourself? How has that shaped you and others as worshippers?

Start the Essentials In Worship Theology video study here. (Requires an All Access membership.)

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