

The Complete Offering:
An Exposé of Disingenuous Corporate Worship
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Abstract

This paper explores the facets of individuality and self-centered characteristics that have sprung up in the modern corporate worship setting. It describes the pitfalls of such a direction, preventive measures, and models and suggestions of worship practices that may help to combat these negative possibilities. The basis for these arguments are primarily biblical with supporting data from neurological research, theological inquiry, and social observation.

Keywords: Worship, CCM, idolatry, music, composition, honesty, genuineness

The Complete Offering

Worship is an activity that occurs corporately at least once a week for a typical congregation, and yet we worship as individuals on a constant basis. To quote Harold Best, “We are, every one of us, unceasing worshipers and will remain so forever.”¹ Worship is in our nature as humans. If misdirected, it can be detrimental. Many would argue that the object of human worship is what makes it right or wrong, but is there more to it? What about the manner in which we worship? What about the transparency and genuineness of the ones who are worshipping? Corporate worship — that is, the public gathering of a congregation for the sake of worshipping together — is meant to be a righteous act of spending time honoring God, and yet, somehow that purpose seems to have been overshadowed by a subtle and devious design that has remained largely unchallenged for many years. So what is the problem if we get together as brothers and sisters to celebrate God in a corporate setting? The problem deceptively lies within a context that is right and good, which is how it has resided for so long without notice. This corporate regimen that is encouraged in biblical scripture is in fact a good and beneficial thing, but Satan delights in taking that which is righteous and godly and twisting it ever so slightly. The simple act of singing songs about God is not enough for God’s children. Christians are responsible to create and lay down genuine acts of worship to God, despite what society, stylistic preference, or popular demand has to say about it. The guarded, dishonest means of current corporate worship will pull the church down from a unified body into a state of selfish individuality if it is not corrected. Before any issue can be addressed, the components that are being dealt with must be laid out and the terms defined so that everything may be understood.

¹Harold M. Best. *Unceasing Worship: Biblical Perspectives on Worship and the Arts*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003.) 17.

This paper will explore what worship is, what is included in it, and what God asks of His people through it. At the same time, it will illuminate the precise problem that has arisen, and the ramifications of how it has threaded into modern day worship. This paper will explore what can be done from a creative standpoint to fight against this intrusion into God's house. Finally, it will provide practical implementation of these in the culture and in the church in a way that is honoring to God.

The Specific Problems that have Arisen in Worship

Oxford dictionary defines worship as “The feeling or expression of reverence and adoration for a deity.” This is a good definition, but worship is a highly discussed concept in Christian circles, meaning that there will be a great deal of variance among accepted definitions of the term. A quick internet search of worship and definitions of worship brings up countless results, one of which comes from Christianity Today: “The heart expressed through a lifestyle of holiness.”² Another definition is found by The Gospel Coalition: “Worship is the entire Christian life, seen as a priestly offering to God.”³ This definition postulates that the object of worship must be God. Because of the vastness of the term, many who try to define it are purposefully vague, using broad definitions. Biblestudytools.com gives this condition for true worship: “Worship pleasing to God must be unfeigned and transparent, offered with a humble and pure heart.”⁴ With this definition in mind, it cannot be assumed that everyone who shows up to corporate worship is in the same emotional place — a place that is ready and willing to sing

²Kathleen Norris, John D. Witvliet, Enuma Okoro. *Three Views: Why Confess Sins in Worship When It Seems So Rote?* Vol. 57, No. 10. (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 2013.) 30.

³“What is Worship?” *The Gospel Coalition*. 2013.
<https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/tgcworship/2013/10/11/what-is-worship/>

⁴Andrew E. Hill, *Worship*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996.)

God's praises. It would be wise to recognize that many people in a given gathering cannot genuinely come to the place of telling God how good he is over and over. This lack of constant positivity is part of the human condition, and it is something that God understands.

One mistake that is commonly made is equating worship to praise. In an online thesaurus, each of the words "worship" and "praise" can be found on the list of synonyms for the other. This misconception is one source of the problems that have arisen. For the purposes of this paper, I have defined worship in the following way for the sake of having a unified foundation for the concept: *The service to and recognition of God's character through the outpouring of an individual life in spirit, in the flesh, and in truth.* This, too, is not an exhaustive definition, and worship as we will be discussing takes place in reference to the context of music. Most definitions of worship stand on shaky footing and are not complete. The Xenos Christian Fellowship states that "The connotative meaning of 'worship' in the Christian community is substantially different from the biblical teaching on the topic."⁵ Where the bible is the number one source of Christian understanding, we would do well to ensure that it is our first and chief source for defining worship.

While there is no clear definition of worship in the Bible, there are some passages that help to direct us to the answer. One of the qualities of worship was identified by Jesus when he spoke to the woman at the well. He told her that "God's worshippers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."⁶ Jesus had prefaced this by stating that God is spirit. If worship was all about the flesh, it would be a shallow affair, and not something edifying to either God or the ones worshipping. Perhaps it seems like God wants His children to come into His house and be

⁵Lee Campbell, "What is Worship?" *Xenos Christian Fellowship*. (Columbus, OH.) <https://www.xenos.org/essays/what-worship>

⁶*New American Standard Bible*. (Anaheim, CA: Foundation Publications, 1997) 754.

honoring by singing praises even when we do not feel like it. Perhaps it seems like a sign of good spiritual health to attempt to force worshipful praise to God, even when life may be tumultuously present on the mind, even superseding the desire to be close to God. As C. S. Lewis famously said: “[Satan’s] cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do [God’s] will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.”⁷ While that is a monumental concept and one that is vastly applicable to our lives, it is misunderstood in this case. This quote from *The Screwtape Letters* refers to general obedience and submission to God without always understanding current circumstances. When it comes to matters of the heart and relationship with God, however, obedience is not simply the completion of a task for the sake of saying it is done.

Sometimes this will be the case, like being obedient in forgiving a grievous offense. However, obedience in worship is not only about the act, but also about the heart. God expresses it this way through the prophet Isaiah: “People draw near with their words and honor Me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts far from Me, and their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote.”⁸ The gravity of this verse is imperative to understand, but easy to miss. God consistently talks about the importance of the heart, and how He doesn’t care about the outward appearance of a person. Over time, simply performing the tasks and rituals of what is considered to be worship turns into a tradition that is adhered to in a ritualistic, rule-based way. Jesus cites this verse in Isaiah when talking to the people he had the most enmity with, the Pharisees. He said, “You invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You

⁷C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters: With, Screwtape Proposes a Toast*. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001.) 40.

⁸*New American Standard Bible*. (Anaheim, CA: Foundation Publications, 1997) 506.

hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you.”⁹ Tradition sometimes has a way of skewing the genuineness of God’s ideals. It can take something beautiful and turn it into rules and rituals that lose the very aspect that made it beautiful in the first place. The Pharisees did this with the Sabbath, and were rebuked for taking something that was meant for rest and using it for just another way to follow and enforce rules. Jesus told them that “The Sabbath was made to meet the needs of people, and not people to meet the requirements of the Sabbath.”¹⁰ He went so far as to even say that they were *invalidating* the word of God. What they were doing was taking the truth of God and exchanging it for a lie, as explained in Romans 1:25. This is the second portion of Jesus’ guidance regarding worship.

Worshipping in truth has many implications. Perhaps the most apparent implication is that the things we say about God should be true. This is very basic and requires no explanation. However fundamental, it is important to keep on the alert for falsehoods in worship, and in the church in general. John Collins states in the article *In Spirit and Truth*:

The principle ‘in spirit and truth’ bears directly upon the content of worship. If worship must be consonant with the nature of God (thus he interprets the ‘in truth’ part), it must be in accord with what God has revealed himself to be and regulated as to content and mode by the revelation God has given in Holy Scripture.¹¹

Anything that is assumed about God beyond scripture is in danger of being false or skewed.

Despite it being an elementary lesson, consider the importance of what it means to speak truly about God. We can talk about the names of God, and sing proudly about how good He is

⁹*New American Standard Bible*. (Anaheim, CA: Foundation Publications, 1997) 692.

¹⁰*Ibid.* 708.

¹¹John Collins. "John 4:23-24, 'in Spirit and Truth': an idiomatic proposal." *Presbyterian* 21, no. 2: 118-121. (ATLA Religion Database, 1995.) 118-19.

and how He is merciful, but “truth” takes on a subtly different form and meaning in the context of art. Art is one of the most versatile, engaging and important ways that Christians can illuminate and outwardly admire Christ’s character for others to witness. In any given worship service there are undoubtedly people who are struggling in their faith, and there may well be people who have no faith at all. Is it going to be illuminating to these people to say that God is good over and over? Those who are lost may no sooner be affected by this sort of inculcation than they would by a billboard stating the same thing.

At this point it is important to acknowledge and stress the fact that the Holy Spirit is the one who does work in people’s hearts, as clearly stated in John 14:26: “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.”¹² This passage says that the Holy Spirit will teach us ‘all things’ in regard to God and our salvation. Also, Matthew 10:19-20 explains how our testimony to others, even in the face of crisis and accusation, is the work of the Holy Spirit: “But when they hand you over, do not worry about how or what you are to say; for it will be given you in that hour what you are to say. For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.”¹³ With this in mind, an artist should not be held solely accountable for the reaction their listeners have to being led in worship. However, it is good to give the lost something substantial to contemplate, as Paul did throughout his ministry.

Any good work of art will have substance — something that pulls the reader/listener/viewer in for a closer look — something of intrigue. Consider the Old Testament, the way it tells about God in depth through stories and accounts, rather than simply names and characteristics. The Old Testament comprises over half of the Bible, and it takes a great deal of

¹²*New American Standard Bible*. (Anaheim, CA: Foundation Publications, 1997) 765.

¹³*Ibid.* 688.

time identifying the character of God without outright descriptions. For example, in Isaiah 40 when God speaks through his prophet to his terribly rebellious people: “‘Comfort, O comfort My people,’ says your God. ‘Speak kindly to Jerusalem; and call out to her, that her warfare has ended, that her iniquity has been removed.’”¹⁴ The compassion and tenderness of God is displayed clearly and more profoundly than if the prophet were to have just talked about how merciful God is. The Bible doesn’t turn around after this and say “Isn’t God great? Look at how gentle and kind and forgiving He is in light of the way His incredibly sinful people have acted.” The character of God is revealed marvelously through stories countless times in the Old Testament. To believe that worship of God must be about blatant, obvious facts is to misunderstand God’s character. He is an artist Himself.

God’s artistic nature is expressed in the first verse of the nineteenth Psalm, “The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.”¹⁵ This is worship, but entirely without words. And yet, almost anyone who observes a vast mountain range, a starry night, the intricacies of a hummingbird, or the profundity of the human physiology should be awestruck. As Paul says in Romans 1:20 “For since the creation of the world, His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that [humanity is] without excuse.”¹⁶ The words “clearly seen” and “understood” show the power of wordless arts to express God’s characteristics.

Creation is a beautiful work of art with detail and subtlety, and with enormous diversity. Speaking from a compositional standpoint, there is little in most modern worship songs that have

¹⁴*New American Standard Bible*. (Anaheim, CA: Foundation Publications, 1997) 513.

¹⁵*Ibid.* 399.

¹⁶*Ibid.* 799.

detail, subtlety, or diversity. The I, IV, V, and vi chords are predominant in use, and the melodies lack much variation. Melodies tend to repeat a simple line through the chord progressions, relying on the harmonization of the chordal structure for variety. With the vast, almost innumerable amount of ways there are to build songs with the elements of music, it can come across as lazy to maintain production of these simple compositions. This is not to say that simple chord progressions are necessarily bad — the aspects that make music high or low quality are products of the use of the seven elements of music, or rather the lack of substantial use of the elements. Such analyses have been performed at length in many other publications, and will not be plumbed in this essay for brevity's sake. But one such example is *Music, Arts, and the Bible* by Dr. Allen Schantz.

These low quality songs have replaced the canon of worship from years gone by, which were hymns. Hymns have largely been discarded in favor of the simplicity and feel-good characteristics of contemporary worship songs. They were both approachable and artistically excellent, using thoughtful four part harmonies and an often rich variety of chords. They were not repetitive lyrically, but full of creative thoughts and imagery.

Modern worship choruses tend to use an inordinate amount of repetition of simple ideas. Typing “worship songs” into a Google search and selecting the first song that comes up provides a good example of this repetitive nature. *How Great is Our God* by Chris Tomlin is a good example of modern music and lyrics. The verses and the chorus both progress: I — V — vi — IV, and the bridge V — vi — I — IV. The lyrics of the chorus is as follows: “How great is our God. Sing with me, how great is our God. And all will see how great, how great is our God.”¹⁷ With no disrespect to Mr. Tomlin, it is not as simple as singing these words for all to see God's

¹⁷*Metrolyrics.com*. <http://www.metrolyrics.com/how-great-is-our-god-lyrics-chris-tomlin.html>

greatness. We need more than minimalistic, repetitive phrases of music or of lyrics driven incessantly into our minds to know and understand God, nor to worship Him completely.

Of course, musical compositions should not be driven by need, but by artistry and joy, essentially whatever will relay the message that we as composers are trying to send in the best possible way. That being said, what if people desire to have music that is simple? Why should a concerned Christian body stifle the desires of the people by insisting that music be complex? For this question, it is helpful to look at the physiology of the human brain.

Dr. Daniel J. Levitin, an avid musician who became a scientist, goes into the details of what exactly happens in the human brain when listening to music. Astonishingly, he found that “musical activity involves nearly every region of the brain that we know about, and nearly every neural subsystem.”¹⁸ Music can be so all-encompassing that it takes all of the brain to understand and enjoy. However, he goes on to say that “at a deeper level, the emotions we experience in response to music involve structures deep in the primitive, reptilian regions of the cerebellar vermis, and the amygdala -- the heart of emotional processing in the cortex.”¹⁹ Therefore, we can listen to music sheerly for the baser emotional pleasure it grants to the primitive mental areas. Furthermore, a series of studies performed by Elizabeth Hellmuth Margulis from the University of Arkansas showed that repetition increased pleasure for the listener. The study showed that “there is an element of pleasure that comes from recognizing repetition, making novel or complex melodies easier to grasp and thus easier to enjoy.”²⁰

¹⁸Daniel J. Levitin, *This is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2006), 85-86

¹⁹Ibid. 87.

²⁰Paul Atkinson and Lyndsey Thompson, “The Case of Repetition in Music.,” *Music, Mind & Brain*, 2012 <https://musicmindandbrain.wordpress.com/2012/05/07/the-case-of-repetition-in-music-2/>

As these findings about the way the human brain operates are listed, it may seem like a perfectly good thing wherewith no objection should be raised. However, concern should mount when considering the purpose of musical worship. If simple statements mixed with unremarkable conclusions set to an enjoyable beat and tune is what we do for corporate worship, then it would seem that our primary goal is not God, but pleasure. Referring to the definitions of worship stated above, the object of worship is generally recognized as an issue of absolute importance. In the case of singing to God to gain pleasure from the act, the focus is redirected from God to the one singing. Pleasure is not something that God denies His people, but when it is misplaced or misdirected, it is certainly a sin, as Saint Augustine argues in his manuscript, *City of God*:

Now he is a man of just and holy life who forms an unprejudiced estimate of things, and keeps his affections also under strict control, so that he neither loves what he ought not to love, nor fails to love what he ought to love, nor loves that more which ought to be loved less, nor loves that equally which ought to be loved either less or more, nor loves that less or more which ought to be loved equally.²¹

In no uncertain terms, St. Augustine explains why placing too high of regard on anything — even on things that are good — is not the model of a just and holy life. Too much emphasis on pleasure is unholy when it exceeds our desire to actually and honestly worship God. The pursuit of pleasure instead of the pursuit of God in the time for worship is also unholy. In his book *Music, the Arts, and the Bible*, Dr. Allen Schantz brings to light his own concerns regarding the state of musicians and their offerings to God:

The people of Ancient Israel worshipped their aesthetic creations rather than their Creator who made these possible, but it is often difficult for us to realize how easy it is for many of us today (even in Christian schools of the arts) to exalt our aesthetic works and performances over loving other people and over loving the Lord *through* our aesthetic works and performances.²²

²¹Augustine, and D. W. Robertson. *On Christian Doctrine*. Vol. 2., 45. (New York: Liberal Arts, 1958) 45.

²²Allen Schantz, *Music, the Arts, and the Bible*. (Aesthetic Arts Press, 2015), 57

The love of aesthetics and the pleasure derived therein is a potential stumbling block for Christians both in participation of corporate worship and in the creation and performance of art as it is involved in worship. A love of the work or performance over the love of God and others is a disorder of priorities, and is therefore wrong. For example, a soloist in an Easter service can play beautifully and add greatly to the service, delighting the congregation and making the day all the more special. But if his joy is wrapped up in the applause and in how well he played, he has placed the sacrifice higher up than He who was supposed to receive the sacrifice.

Another aspect of truth is that of heart truth. Heart truth has to do with the condition someone is in when they go to worship. Notice that Jesus does not say to worship “in the spirit and in happiness”. In fact, there is nothing in the verse that dictates any proper emotional state for those worshipping. An appropriate paraphrase would be to say that God desires honesty in worship. Herein lies the problem with so much worship music having a consistently positive message. In analyzing the top twenty of the top fifty chart of Contemporary Christian Music hits, the overwhelming majority of content was desiring God (“I want to be close to you, I need to feel your presence, etc.), praising God (You’re wonderful, beautiful, Your name brings gladness, we love you, etc.), and stating facts about God (Your name is Jesus, You are the Prince of Peace, etc.).²³ The difficulty lies in being honest with God within an atmosphere that appeals so heavily to happiness, contentment, and peace. Approaching God while dealing with anger, fear, death, loss, or other personal issues does not blend well with a time of worship saturated by happiness. Telling God only how much He is loved when dealing with trouble and heartache else is a lie of omission. If there were two friends who got together for coffee, one of them dealing with enormous loss and the other well aware of it, their interaction would be a very disappointing one

²³“Top 50 Worship Songs Released In 2015 (So Far).” (*Praisecharts*. 2015.)
<http://www.praisecharts.com/blog/top-50-worship-songs-released-in-2015-so-far/>

if the loss went unaddressed. It would be telling about the shallowness of their relationship if the one who was suffering only told his friend how much he loved him, and never mentioned his struggles. Anyone looking into that situation could see that there is no closeness between them. God desires intimate communion with all of His children, not brushing aside real issues just because they are not fun or happy.

Being honest with God in worship will invariably include times of hardship when a person will have to admit honestly, “God, I don’t feel close to you;” maybe even “God, I’m not sure I want to be close to you right now.” An unrealistic ideology is believing that this would never happen to anyone. It is very likely that these sentiments will be at the center of people’s emotional state from time to time. Better to be open with the creator, than to try and placate the matter by brushing it off and dutifully singing words that cannot be sung genuinely. It is not a necessity of worship to only come to God when everything is great. A wonderful example of going to God “as you are” is found in Job, right after he had learned of the loss of his sons, not to mention the loss of everything he owned. “Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped.”²⁴ He was in the midst of pain and grief, and yet the first thing he did in the face of heartache and destruction was to worship God. To pretend to have no troubles before God is a dangerous and fraudulent road to walk. It is dangerous because any element of pretense with God means there is something hidden or kept in secret, which is the way the devil leads people astray. John 3:20 says, “For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.”²⁵ Satan plants fear in the hearts of God’s children to keep them from coming out of secrecy. Proverbs 28:13 explains, “He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will

²⁴*New American Standard Bible*. (Anaheim, CA: Foundation Publications, 1997) 370.

²⁵*Ibid*. 753.

find compassion.”²⁶ Concealment of sin is what keeps people from God, and Satan knows this, which is why he encourages secrecy.

In his book, *Dynamic Diversity*, Bruce Milne talks about the vast differences between people in a congregation and how nobody should be lesser than anyone else. “There are no subclasses of people, no subclasses of Christians, and, emphatically, no subclasses of Christian worshipers. Hence each worshiper has an equal claim to a worship experience with which they will be able to meaningfully identify, and which will be an authentic vehicle of their worship.”²⁷ With this in mind, considering the truth that people in any given congregation come from vastly different circumstances that can change weekly for anyone, how is it that the vehicle of modern worship has become archetypal in emotional integrity? In a similar vein of thought, Harold Best broaches the subject of diversity within worship as well. He says that “we should cherish diversity because God does.”²⁸ Characterizing music and stances of worship as trees, he goes on to sketch the following metaphor:

Just as there are numberless species and subspecies of tree, so there are of music; just as certain trees thrive in a given environment, so with music; just as certain environments may welcome many species at once, so with music; just as one person may consider one species of tree more aesthetically pleasing or functionally useful than another, so with music. In the meantime, the intrinsic worth of every type, along with its contextual ability to be useful, is common to all musics as it is to all trees.²⁹

Although his is specifically referring to different styles of music, the same metaphor is relevant to people and characteristics. Best is making the point that it is not up to one person or set of opinions or stylistic ideals to say what is best for an entire congregation of unique people.

²⁶*New American Standard Bible*. (Anaheim, CA: Foundation Publications, 1997) 474.

²⁷Milne, Bruce. *Dynamic Diversity: Bridging Class, Age, Race and Gender in the Church*. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007.) 107.

²⁸Best, Harold M. *Music through the Eyes of Faith*. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993.) 65.

²⁹*Ibid.* 66.

Being aware of heartache is a vital aspect of being a leader in the church, no matter whether it is in the capacity of worship, pastoring, or discipleship.

Jesus said in John 16:23 that His people will experience tribulation. In Acts 14:22, Paul encourages us to stand firm because “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”³⁰ Simply put, if things are pleasant throughout life, then the cross of Christ is not a present factor. Pain and sorrow are certain experiences in this life. Asaph confessed and recorded his own struggles in Psalm 73: “But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling, my steps had almost slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant as I saw the prosperity of the wicked.”³¹ He openly admits to being envious of the unrighteous. He explains in verse five, “They are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like mankind.”³² Again, at first approach, this appears desirable. Humans do not long for trouble and hardship, but it is essential. He goes on to explain why this is not something to be envious of. Because they are not troubled or plagued, “therefore pride is their necklace; the garment of violence covers them. Their eye bulges from fatness; the imaginations of their heart run riot. They mock and wickedly speak of oppression; they speak from on high. They have set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue parades through the earth.”³³ In a sense, suffering is something to be desired — it sets us apart and is an indicator that we are on the right path. Paul says in Romans 8:17, “We suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.”³⁴ Glorification with God comes from suffering in the world.

It may not yet be clear how this is applicable in a setting of corporate worship. Why should personal grief, problems, and sin be a matter of public exposure? Corporate worship is a

³⁰*New American Standard Bible*. (Anaheim, CA: Foundation Publications, 1997) 783.

³¹*Ibid.* 423.

³²*Ibid.* 423.

³³*Ibid.* 423.

³⁴*Ibid.* 803.

large gathering, after all. But Galatians 6:2 says to bear one another's burdens. How would that be possible with everyone pretending not to have any burdens? To defeat the surreptitious nature of sin, honesty with each other and with God is imperative. There was an instance in the book of Nehemiah of such a public event:

Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth and with dirt upon them. The descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. While they stood in their place, they read from the book of the law of the LORD their God for a fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God.³⁵

This event took place amidst a time of rejoicing and worshiping God. In fact it was the eighth day of a feast wherein there was a great amount of celebration. This passage is very clear and telling of a time when worship was comprised of confession and admitting grief before God. The confessions were done in public, as a united people in a worship setting, going to great lengths later in that chapter to confess openly their sin and the sin of their fathers. Corporately acknowledging sin is beneficial for the sake of seeing God's goodness (as well as the fact that it is commanded of us). White looks all the more white when contrasted with black.

In one of the most well-known biblical accounts of remorse and regret over sin, David pours out his soul to God in Psalm 51. Verses sixteen and seventeen say: "For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise."³⁶ David is worshiping God in a quite different way than the Christian community is used to experiencing. In a commentary on these verses, Stanley D. Walters explains through the perspective of David: "God wants us to have hearts full of devotion and service more than hands full of sacrificial

³⁵*New American Standard Bible*. (Anaheim, CA: Foundation Publications, 1997) 358.

³⁶*Ibid.* 414.

offerings calibrated in conformity to the Law. The prophets assert that God is more concerned with honesty in everyday life than in thousands of rams and lambs.”³⁷ Walters asserts that honesty is the sacrifice that David speaks about, that honesty is having a broken spirit and a contrite heart. Paul links these two in Romans which brings about a new identity to examine.

Sacrifice as Worship

Paul talks in Romans about a very different aspect of worship, which is sacrifice. The first verse of the twelfth chapter says, “Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.” Clearly sacrifice is another form of worship. So how is sacrifice identified? And is it possible to have such a thing in a time of corporate worship? Sacrifice is defined in the Oxford Dictionary first by the slaughtering of an animal. The next definition is, “An act of giving up something valued for the sake of something else regarded as more important or worthy.” A person’s body is valuable, but a relationship to God is even more valuable. The key in this is that it goes beyond giving up the believer’s soul to God (which is already assumed). John MacArthur explains in his commentary of Romans:

Our bodies, however, are more than physical shells that house our souls. They are also where our old, unredeemed humanness resides. In fact, our humanness is a *part* of our bodies, whereas our souls are not. Our bodies incorporate our humanness, our humanness incorporates our flesh, and our flesh incorporates our sin, as Romans 6 and 7 so clearly explain.³⁸

³⁷Walters, Stanley D. “I Talk of my sin (to God) (and to you).” (*Calvin Theological Journal*, 50 no 1. ATLA Religion Database. 2015.) 105-6.

³⁸John Macarthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary Romans 9-16* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 1994), 142.

Paul, MacArthur specifies, is stating that God desires the submission of the sinful self as well as the purified self in an offering of worship. Submitting the spirit only would be a deception, a diminishment of God's work for us. God encourages His children by including all of the human self into salvation — promising redemption for the soul and a new body. The body is therefore not to be discarded between God and man, but must be submitted with all of its flaws before God's holiness. This representation of the flesh nature is characteristic of all that humans wished they did not possess; of all that is unworthy of God's presence. The flesh is confusing and horrible in many ways. Paul rails against it in Romans 7:15 "For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate."³⁹ Paul is describing the flesh the way many would prefer to cover up. The flesh makes people do things that are clearly and undoubtedly wrong. Certainly any sane person who approaches the God who created all things perfectly would be embarrassed to show God what has happened to this creation entrusted to humankind that was at one point, "very good."⁴⁰

Exposé of the Heart Issues

I was recently standing among a large gathering of young Christians, watching a performance of *Sinking Deep* by Hillsong United. There were hundreds in attendance, the crowd swaying and hands lifted at the swell of the bridge — the climax of the song. "Your love so deep is washing over me, Your face is all I seek, you are my everything. Jesus Christ, You are my one desire, Lord, hear my only cry, to know you all my life."⁴¹ As I stood and watched the closed eyes, heads tilted backward, I concluded that this event was infected with insincere worship. A

³⁹*New American Standard Bible*. (Anaheim, CA: Foundation Publications, 1997) 803.

⁴⁰*Ibid.* 1.

⁴¹*Metrolyrics.com*. <http://www.metrolyrics.com/sinking-deep-lyrics-hillsong.html>

conclusion of such gravity should not be lightly stated, but it is biblically based and founded without prejudice against anyone who was there. The evidence is within the lyrics.

In Romans 3, Paul talks about everyone who is under sin, all of humanity: “There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one.”⁴² God is the one who seeks after mankind. Human beings are sinful and fallen, chasing after desires and interests that are sinful. If it were not this way, there would be no need for grace, but at the core of all humanity, evil lurks and dominates. As it says in Jeremiah 17:9 “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.”⁴³ Believing that people seek after God constantly and claiming this to be true is deception. Recapitulating the lyrics of *Sinking Deep*, “Your face is all I seek... you are my one desire... my only cry [is] to know you all my life.”⁴⁴ These are claims that no one can honestly make. People seek after evil things, false idols, and unholy desires. There is no one in the body of believers or otherwise that can make this claim. The question is implicit — why would someone say this?

Isaiah 53:6 says “All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.”⁴⁵ The simile here speaks of the natural state of mankind to wander away from God, and yet a lot of contemporary worship speaks much like the aforementioned Hillsong bridge — talking about how devoted the singer is to God. This can be explained in one of many ways.

Thinking of worship music as an art — which it is — it could be postulated that artistic freedom through exaggeration is the reason for these claims. Jesus used such tactics in his artistic parables, so why not use them in worship choruses? Jesus says in Matthew 5:30 “If your right

⁴²*New American Standard Bible*. (Anaheim, CA: Foundation Publications, 1997) 800.

⁴³*Ibid.* 550.

⁴⁴*Metrolyrics.com*. <http://www.metrolyrics.com/sinking-deep-lyrics-hillsong.html>

⁴⁵*Ibid.* 524.

hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you.”⁴⁶ Hyperbole, such as in this case, is common in the ancient Hebrew culture, and Jesus used it Himself frequently. However, there was always truth in those instances, not a claim that was false and blown out of proportion. Whenever Jesus made an actual claim, such as being the son of God, it was one-hundred percent serious, true, and not exaggerated. A claim that is blown up so much that it is no longer valid is referred to as the “slippery slope” of logical fallacy.

Another reason why these lyrics would be sung with no inhibition is because of the nature of the culture. In her book *A Royal “Waste” of Time*, Marva J. Dawn examines, “Our culture is one of immediacy — and especially immediacy of intimacy, even though the result is a false one.”⁴⁷ Therefore, the template for worship music is all too often something that causes the congregation to feel good. A prime example of this is the song *The More I Seek You* by Kari Jobe. Following is the complete lyrics: “The more I seek you, the more I find you. The more I find you, the more I love you. I want to sit at your feet, drink from the cup in your hand, lay back against you and breathe, feel your heartbeat. This love is so deep, it’s more than I can stand. I melt in your peace, it’s overwhelming.”⁴⁸ This seems to be entirely feel-good oriented music, not true worship. Dawn expounds upon the issue of immediate intimacy later on in the same chapter.

Many churches respond to this genuine yearning by dumping everything from worship that seems more remote and joining the rush to instantly available feelings of coziness. I believe that this is, in the long run, harmful to worshipers, for it doesn’t deal with the needs for deep consciousness of God’s presence, deep relationship with God, and deep intimacy with others — needs all aggravated by the profound loss of true intimacy.⁴⁹

⁴⁶*New American Standard Bible*. (Anaheim, CA: Foundation Publications, 1997) 684.

⁴⁷Marva J. Dawn. *A Royal Waste of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World*. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1999.) 229-230.

⁴⁸*Metrolyrics.com*. <http://www.metrolyrics.com/the-more-i-seek-you-lyrics-kari-jobe.html>

⁴⁹*Ibid.* 230.

This kind of response to people's desires is an example of a lack of faith, as is any circumstance where church leaders seek to satisfy their congregations' desires apart from God. The use of feel-good music is in danger of doing just that, although some leaders may be (hopefully) unaware.

Feeling good about the concept of only ever seeking God and never turning to anything else is a beautiful lie that would be wonderful if true. However, this deception is keeping the church from worshiping in truth. James 1:26 confidently and bluntly explains "If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless."⁵⁰ This is a harsh verse that is difficult to take, but it is spoken out of love to encourage the Christian community to be honest with themselves.

It is a very easy thing to tear down someone else's work, to point out problems, to identify weaknesses without ever addressing solutions, options, and good examples. That being said, there are many wonderful, worshipful songs that have been published, and there are likely many more that have not been published because of what this essay has striven to drive home — that it is the most personal and truly vulnerable works that are the most worshipful. Personal vulnerability takes courage, and a lyric that is more general will typically meet the cultural standard for worship.

One such example of a true and spirit-filled worship song is *Secret Ambition* by Michael W. Smith. The chorus lyrics are as follows: "Nobody knew His secret ambition, nobody knew His claim to fame. He broke the old rules steeped in tradition, he tore the holy veil away. Questioning those in powerful positions, running to those who called His name. But nobody

⁵⁰*New American Standard Bible*. (Anaheim, CA: Foundation Publications, 1997) 858.

knew His secret ambition was to give His life away.”⁵¹ These lyrics draw attention to Jesus in a thoughtful and admiring way — pointing out key concepts of His character in a cohesive summary of parts of His life. Worship music writers should understand the fact that God cannot be summed up with ease. He is mysterious and far beyond simple descriptions. To point to Him and imply deep questions and considerations or otherwise stoke the fires of curiosity in listeners is often the best that a composer can do, trusting the Holy Spirit to guide them through the questions and contemplations. One song that does this well is *If I Stand* by Rich Mullins:

There's more that rises in the morning than the sun. And more that shines in the night than just the moon. It's more than just this fire here that keeps me warm, in a shelter that is larger than this room. And there's a loyalty that's deeper than mere sentiments, and a music higher than the songs that I can sing. The stuff of earth competes for the allegiance I owe only to the giver of all good things. So if I stand let me stand on the promise that you will pull me through. And if I can't, let me fall on the grace that first brought me to You. And if I sing let me sing for the joy that has born in me these songs. And if I weep let it be as a man who is longing for his home. There's more that dances on the prairies than the wind. More that pulses in the ocean than the tide. There's a love that is fiercer than the love between friends, more gentle than a mother's when her baby's at her side.⁵²

Although this piece is not a worship chorus that is practiced in corporate settings, it is very worshipful and the artistic composition of it should be learned from. The solo piano line dances and paints like a light-handed brush stroke. The lyrics speak of God as more — more than the best that we know, warmer than the warmest thing we can conceive of, more loving than the most loving picture we can conjure. All of these unspecific descriptions help understand God in a poetic and beautiful way.

Even artists that have not accepted God’s grace can be greatly influential — sometimes even more so because of their unique perspectives. There is a phrase that has been promulgated

⁵¹*Metrolyrics.com*, <http://www.metrolyrics.com/secret-ambition-lyrics-michael-w-smith.html>

⁵²*Christianlyricsonline.com*, <http://www.christianlyricsonline.com/artists/rich-mullins/if-i-stand.html>

throughout the Christian culture that says “All truth is God’s truth.” This was possibly first described by Saint Augustine in his books *On Christian Doctrine*. “Let every good and true Christian understand that wherever truth may be found, it belongs to his Master.”⁵³ With this in mind, listening to those referred to as “secular” musicians in Christian circles can be worthwhile. Five years ago, I listened to a song that radically changed my life for the better. It is called *Terrible Lie* by the band Nine Inch Nails. The sole member of the band is the outspoken agnostic, Trent Reznor. In the quest for genuine, passionate, and vulnerable statements of truth from the heart, *Terrible Lie* is a rare gem. It concludes in the last verses:

Hey God, there's nothing left for me to hide. I lost my ignorance, security and pride. I'm all alone in a world you must despise. Hey God, I believed the promises, your promises and lies. Terrible lie. You made me throw it all away, my morals left to decay. How many you betray, you've taken everything. My head is filled with disease, my skin is begging you please. I'm on my hands and knees, I want so much to believe.⁵⁴

The torment of his struggle of faith was more poignant than anything I had previously encountered. It led me to realize a lot of the doubts in my own life that had been repressed and shrugged off. Finally being able to express and realize the truth that I felt abandoned by God (a truth that festered and persisted, despite me ignoring it) led me to a vulnerable and brutally honest place before God where I could only say “You’ve taken everything, but I want so much to believe in You.” Only after this acknowledgement could I be healed from the doubts and bitterness that had grown in my heart, but how long might that realization have taken if I had only ever sung lyrics about how much I loved God and how great He is? It is possible I never would have addressed the very real issue that I was going through. Yes, all truth is God’s truth, and introspective truth is paramount to an honest and open relationship with God.

⁵³Augustine, and D. W. Robertson. *On Christian Doctrine*. Vol. 2. (New York: Liberal Arts, 1958.) 45.

⁵⁴*Metrolyrics.com*, <http://www.metrolyrics.com/terrible-lie-lyrics-nine-inch-nails.html>

Conclusion

The mandate as laid down by Jesus is to worship in spirit and in truth, therefore having one without the other is not true worship. This essay has identified examples of both: music that is worshipful in spirit but lacking truth, and music that is not worshipful in spirit but is full of truth. A writer of music for the sake of worshiping God and calling the congregation to worship in spirit and in truth should be mindful of these issues that have been identified in this paper: First, worship should not automatically be associated with praise. Second, the text of a song should be true in general. Third, it is beneficial to the church body as a whole to create music that is contextually honest for varying emotional states. This will likely take a diversification musically that may be distasteful to members of the congregation. As was specified earlier, it is important to keep everyone's best interests in mind, so it may take some gradual adjustment to accomplish this. Harold Best describes one method of easing into this, a method he calls "adjacent pluralism."⁵⁵ This is to gradually shift styles and content from one similar artist or artistic concept to another. For instance, it would be an acceptable move to go from Chris Tomlin, to Michael W. Smith, to D.C. Talk, to Five Iron Frenzy over the course of a few weeks. This is a substantial change, but the adjacent nature of the shift makes it more palatable. In appendix A, there is an example outline of how a worship service could go as in a way that is supported by this paper. The example is not exhaustive, and it is only one of many ways to implement the suggested adjustments.

Whenever and however possible, individuals within a congregation should not feel left out of a time of worship, and people should be encouraged to come into the house of God as they

⁵⁵Harold M. Best. *Music through the Eyes of Faith*. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993.) 70.

are, because if anyone feels that they cannot, sin and secrecy will undoubtedly be visited on them. The keys to worshiping in spirit and in truth is to be honest with God and with each other. It is not enough simply to sing songs about God. Christians are responsible to create and lay down genuine acts of worship to God, despite what seems logically correct or culturally relevant. God is above these things. If the mystery, beauty, and majesty of God is expressed as well as humanly possible, then we can rest and rely on the Holy Spirit, that He will perform the work in people's hearts.

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Appendix A

- Worship service start. Upbeat, fun song to break the ice: “Sunday go to Meeting” by Bryan Duncan.
- Welcome and introduction
- Song for congregation participation speaking of the qualities of God, not demanding anyone to make claims they cannot honestly make: “Awesome God” by Rich Mullins.
- Admission of need for grace
- Song facilitating those who are struggling to feel close to God, accenting the need for grace: “Every New Day” by Five Iron Frenzy. (Possible offering time)
- Invitation to join as next song begins
- Song of praise: “You are My All in All” by Natalie Grant.