

Growing Edges

October 1997

Recently our adult son, Nathan, and I climbed Mt. Elbert—the highest mountain in the Colorado Rockies. This, you understand, was a challenge for both father and son. For me the challenge was just to make it to the top; for Nathan it was a challenge in patience as he often waited for me to catch my breath! Below is a short record of that climb.

Alpine Journal

“Early on we meander through lush stands of aspen right on the verge of exploding into their fall display of color and mountain streams tumbling over an infinite array of rock formations. Once above timberline the climbing becomes harder, more steep. (Frankly, I thought it was steep at the beginning of the trail!) Granite dominates the landscape now, but the hiker who walks slowly (as I, of necessity, am doing) is rewarded by glimpses of Alpine Sunflower and Snow Buttercup and Moss Campion and Yellow Stonecrop and Fairy Primrose. The last five hundred feet of elevation are by far the most arduous. (I am glad to see Nathan stopping to catch his breath too!) Above 14,000 feet now the very air seems squeezed out of our lungs—and so it is.



“But the first step onto the peak makes it worth all the strain and struggle. What a sight! We can, it seems, see forever. Here we stand at what feels like the top of the world looking ‘down’ on Mt. Massive and Mt. Harvard and all the other ‘fourteeners.’ We stare in stunned wonder at Longs Peak to the north and Pikes Peak to the south. Snowmass to the west is decked out with a new dusting of snow. And the Maroon Bells simply take our breath away—in both senses of the word! Since on this particular day we are blessed with near perfect weather, we stay on the peak for an hour or more, gazing in perfect silence at the inexhaustible panorama. The psalmist was surely right in seeing that ‘The mountains skipped like rams’ ” (Ps. 114:4, NRSV).

The Many Landscapes of Worship

I want to use this day of mountain climbing as a bridge to the theme of this *Perspective* issue: **Renewal Through Worship**. You see, sometimes worship is a little akin to strolling through a verdant forest; it bursts with beauty and multi-colored variety, like the silver and gold vessels and bright white linen of an altar at Epiphany. At other times worship resembles a steep climb above timberline; it is hard, stark, stripped down to the essential, like the austerity of plain chant or the simplicity of Quaker silence. And, if we are persistent and steady in our worship, once in a great while God allows us to break free onto the mountaintop of worship where everything is vast and panoramic and awe-ful, like the majesty of Handel’s Messiah or the immensity of Bach’s Mass in B Minor.

We all need this full range of worship experiences, and complete immersion in any one experience would be too much for us. We need the variety and beauty of the forest, but to be always in the kaleidoscopic diversity of the woodlands would unduly distract us. The climb above timberline challenges our sloth and selfishness, but to be always on the steep ascent would wear us out. We need the clarity, the vision, the wonder that is given us on the peak, but to be always on the mountaintop would do us in. Therefore we enter the many landscapes of worship—forest diversity and timberline ascent and mountaintop ecstasy—seeking, always seeking to “Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness” (1 Chron. 16:29, KJV).

Peace and joy,

Richard J. Foster

Growing Together

Worship is critical to exercising ourselves unto Godliness. Below are a few simple exercises that are designed to help you explore this important Discipline of the Spiritual Life.

- **Learn to practice the presence of God daily.**

With Brother Lawrence, let us sense the presence of God with as great a reality when “washing pots and pans” as when receiving the holy Eucharist. We can follow Paul’s words, “Pray without ceasing,” by punctuating every moment with inward whisperings of adoration, praise, and thanksgiving. We can schedule personal times of inner worship and confession and attentiveness to Christ, our present Teacher. Doing this heightens our expectancy in public worship, because the gathered experience becomes a continuation and intensification of what we have been trying to do all week long.

- **Have many different experiences of worship.**

Personally, individually we can learn to worship God. Little home groups can meet not just for Bible study, but for the very experience of worship itself. Gather little groups of two and three and learn to wait upon God, learn the experience of prayer. Many things can happen in smaller gatherings that cannot happen in a larger group because of sheer size. If possible, visit church traditions other than your own and experience the different approaches to worship: their strengths and weaknesses. All of these experiences of worship will empower and enkindle the Sunday gatherings in your home church.

- **Find ways to prepare for the gathered experience of worship.**

You may want to prepare for Sunday worship: by going to bed early on Saturday night; by having an experience of examination and confession; by going over hymns and Scriptures that will be used on Sunday; by gathering before the worship service begins to pray that God’s presence will fill the room; by letting go of inward distractions so that you can be genuinely present.

- **Be willing to be gathered in the power of the Lord.**

Learn to let go of your personal agenda, of individual concerns, of a special need to be blessed, of hearing the word of God. The language of the gathered fellowship is not “I” but “we.” There is submission to the ways of God. There is submission to one another in the Christian

fellowship. There is submission for the good of everybody. There is a desire for God’s life to rise up in the group, not just the individual. If I pray for spiritual gifts, they are made manifest not just to me but to any person in the group or upon the group as a whole if that would please God. We become of one mind, of one accord. We are gathered.

- **Cultivate a holy dependency, a holy expectancy, and a holy obedience.**

In worship, *a holy dependency* says that we are utterly and completely dependent upon God’s touch for anything significant to happen. There is inward travail and inward struggle that we might be truly dependent, that the evil will weaken, that the good will rise up. Within the group, *a holy expectancy* looks forward to God moving and acting and teaching and wooing and winning. For everyone, *a holy obedience* is a determination to do whatever Christ tells us to do. If he urges us to speak or to teach or to give a witness or a prophetic message, we are obedient. If we are to make confession, if we are to respond to what is happening, we do exactly what he says with a holy obedience that has been cultivated by years of experience.

- **Absorb distractions with gratitude.**

If there is noise or distraction, take it in and conquer it rather than fussing or fuming. If little children are running about, bless them. Thank God that they are alive and that they have energy. Maybe they’re a message from the Lord. When I’m preaching, I love to have little babies and children in the congregation because sometimes they are the only ones that appear alive! Become willing to relax with distractions. Learn to receive whatever happens in gathered worship as an experience from God instead of feeling that the service has to follow your agenda or that distractions somehow deter you from worshipping God.

- **Learn to offer a sacrifice of worship.**

Many times we don’t “feel” like worshipping. Maybe we have had so many disappointing experiences in the past where the sense of God’s power is so low that we think it is hardly worth the time. People are not adequately prepared, and it is very, very discouraging. But we need to go anyway. We need to offer a sacrifice of worship. We need to be with the people of God and say, “These are my people. As stiffnecked and hardhearted and sinful as they may be, I stand with them and together we come to God.” The Bible tells us not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together, and it does that because we are the Body of Christ together.

Richard J. Foster

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Finding the Heart of Worship

By George R. Skramstad

At the age of twelve, I remember the first time I heard the golden tones and glorious shape of the melodic lines produced by the renowned violinist, Isaac Stern. The mystery of how such precision and artistry could be combined to spellbind an audience was indeed a phenomenon. To a neophyte violin student, such beauty and bravura seemed more of a dream than a possible reality. But down deep in my spirit, something began to churn that said, "If I were the best violin player on earth, I'd like to play like him!" I desired to own his recordings, to attend his concerts, and to become familiar with how he interpreted the great violin literature. I began recognizing his playing, his sound.

During those years I began to develop my own style, my own tone, and my own abilities. I heard stories of musicians who rehearsed eight to ten hours a day. For me, practice proceeded through phases of deep commitment as well as periods of sloth and dislike. Underlying all of this was the measuring stick of my own progress: the success and brilliance of Isaac Stern. It was what I remembered and experienced that shaped my idea and expectation of my musical journey. Isaac Stern and his marvelous virtuosity became a tool by which I could identify where I was in my musical progress. He served as a marker that brought the reality and quality of my own playing to light. I recognized my own glaring inadequacies when I witnessed who Mr. Stern was.

The Focus of Worship

Worship, when it is authentic and Christocentric, allows us to see who God is. Worship is ultimately a window through which we see the face of God, experience the heart of our Lord Jesus Christ, and sense the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We are another step closer in our own relationship with God when we have truly been in worship where he is revealed. When I see who I am in relationship to the white-hot heat of God's pure love and grace, I am made painfully aware of my own inadequacies, my need.

We can liken our experience of worship to that of the prophet Isaiah, who exclaims, " 'Woe to me! . . . I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.' "

"Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, 'See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.' "

"Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?'

"And I said, 'Here am I. Send me!' " (Isa. 6:5-8, NIV).

Identity for the Christian is found in the very roots of worship. Both sin and grace are experienced in the process. Once we see the glory and majesty of God, we recognize our inadequate little minds and selfish hearts. The worthless and rationalizing words that spill from our mouths now become caught as lumps in our throats. We agonize over the vileness of our desires and ache to be like the Father. And in the middle of the battle comes the extension of God's grace that sets us free to play, to worship, to serve, to live, and to be living ambassadors of Christ to a hurting world.

Whether worship takes place in our private devotional time, in a small group, or in a large corporate setting, the results are the same. Our identity is established by the One we worship and the practice of doing it. Why should we not worship when this is the only discipline of the earthly Christian life that will continue into and throughout eternity?

A Convergence of Worship

In our world today we see a great convergence of emphasis upon worship. The importance of the right way to worship concerns many. Some proclaim that we must return to the ancient worship liturgies of the second century. Others urge us to incorporate more contemporary expressions of the arts and technical mediums of our day. We witness less congruency of worship practice between congregations within the same denomination than ever before. What is right? What is valuable? What brings honor to the God *we* worship? These are the questions that we must grapple with mightily.

From *The Report of the Theological Commission on Worship, Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order* come these statements: "We do not find in the Bible . . . an attempt to systematize . . . variety or to evaluate various types of worship over against each other . . . There is no preference for corporate worship as against a private worship, or *vice versa*. There is no competition between a sacramental worship and a type of worship centered around the preaching of the word and prayers. There is no sign that difference between spontaneous prayer and the use of 'fixed formularies' caused any controversy, although both types of prayer are evidently there. The tendency to standardize a specific type of worship . . . is alien to the Bible. There is in the New Testament a greater variety of forms and expression of worship than in the majority of divided churches and traditions today."

If I were to relate our current worship practices to my own early years of learning to play the violin, I would first need to recognize the model that my heart and mind are trying to emulate. No other but our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ could be that center, that ultimate psalmist, that personality who mirrored the heart of the Creator, his

Father. He became, as one writer has expressed, the “Lord of the Dance.” Christ’s worship, which was to do the will of the Father, leads us to the elements he lived out for us.

Our Model and Our Task

Christ’s exaltation of God as the Maker and Giver of salvation; his thanksgiving for life and all of its blessings; his confession of who he was in light of his relationship to his Father; his transparency of not wanting to go through the Passion and death on the cross; his affirmation of God the Father; his joy of serving; his respect for the personhood of all people; his prayers and worship both privately and corporately to the Father; and his continual abiding in the function as well as the attitude of worship give us worship practice examples.

From what should we take our cue as we reach the second millennium? Could it be something as simple as allowing the Christ we celebrate by the revelation of his Holy Spirit to lead us into meaningful worship? Could it be that we continue to invest the event of Christ with interpretation and meaning? Could it be that we transmit the continuing life of the Word through forms which declare its authenticity and power? Could it be that we continue to use the worship traditions of the past as well as inculcate new ones? I resonate with what Paul Waitman Hoon says in his book, *The Integrity of Worship*: “The Spirit is as much the source of continuity, of order, and of heritage as it is of newness and freedom; and it is this truth which those who reject tradition conveniently ignore. Present-tense or future-tense theologies cannot be permitted to stake out a monopoly on the doctrine of the Spirit. The Spirit’s reality is to be marked as much by what it has done as by what it is doing or shall do; and out of its richness the wise man brings forth treasures both new and old.”

Worship must be given primacy within the Christian community. Without it, the visage of Christ is blurred and oftentimes lost. It is through worship and its icons that Christ is revealed to us. A Christocentric focus must always be present. Texts, actions, hymns, movements, liturgies, and silences must all point to the life and example of Christ. In worship we tell the story of God’s creating and redemptive work through Christ. And we must wisely decide to tell that story through the rudiments born out of the past while consciously choosing to incorporate new ones.

Doing so authenticates our identity in Christ. It becomes as sacramental as the bread we eat and the wine we drink. Our life is changed. At one time, we had no identity. But now we are the people of God. “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Pet. 2:9-10, NIV). Through worship we become a people, a people with identity.

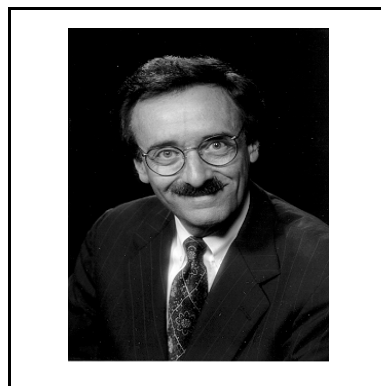
What is Worship?

In the RENOVARÉ approach to worship, we attempt to blend the past, the present, and the future. This blending best expresses the various streams of our faith—Contemplative, Holiness, Charismatic, Social Justice, Holiness, Incarnational. We cannot afford to throw away the prayers of St. Francis. Nor can we refuse without loss the singing of Bill and Gloria Gaither’s hymn, “Because He Lives.” How fulfilling it is for me personally to lead worship in a manner that embraces all of creation, all of the arts, and all of the elements extended to us through God’s abundant grace.

Let me share with you my defining process of worship: Worship is that moment in Christian celebration when we see God’s children touch the hem of Christ’s garment as did the woman in need. We seek, we come, and we reach to the God who waits to meet us where we are. At that moment, we see who God is, realize who we are, and accept who he desires us to become. This is transformation from the old into the new spirit born through faith in Jesus Christ.

Worship is the process whereby we thank, we praise, we honor, we confess, we celebrate, and we purpose to the God of all life through his Son, Jesus Christ, that we are his daughters and sons. Therefore, worship is filled with ingredients which allow us to focus and to express our love and appreciation: singing, giving, praying, reading, teaching, preaching, enacting, responding, baptizing, dedicating, communing, partaking, and sharing.

Ultimate worship takes place when we, like children, find ourselves climbing into the lap of our heavenly Father with the desire just to be with him. At that moment there is no agenda other than to sit in his presence, to love him, to whisper in his ear our gratitude, to feel his face, to hear his heart, to rest in his embrace, to enjoy the moment, and to understand more fully the God who yearns to enjoy us.



George Skramstad has served the church-at-large for over twenty-five years as a worship leader, practitioner, composer, and clinician. He has built worship ministries within congregations in Phoenix, Arizona, and Wichita, Kansas, where he also was an adjunct professor in the Graduate School at Friends University. George now is Pastor of Worship Ministries at Belle Isle Community Church in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Growing Together

With a theme like **Renewal Through Worship**, there are books galore. But I want to narrow the field down for you and at the same time give you a solid foundation upon which to think about worship, and to enter into a deeper, richer, fuller worship experience. Here are six resources:

- *A Brief History of Christian Worship* by James F. White. White is the undisputed authority in Christian liturgical history with fifteen books in the field. This book is a jewel in its brevity and sweep of history from the early Christian centuries through the Middle Ages and the Reformation up to the present. It even has a brief statement on "Worship in the Churches of the Future."
- *Prayer and Worship* by Douglas V. Steere. This tender little book is a wonderful antidote for what Steere calls "the pressure and temporarily satisfying narcotic of intense busyness." Indeed, the book is worth those startling sentences that seem to jump out of the text, e.g. "In the school of adoration the soul learns why the approach to every other goal had left it restless." ***And, if you order the other five books, we will give you this one free.**
- *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down* by Marva J. Dawn. This is the most substantive of the new books which is

trying to guide us through our "worship war" over "traditional" versus "contemporary" expressions of worship. Dawn takes both theology and culture seriously which is what makes this book so helpful. I especially like her stress on the role of worship in character formation—e.g. consider her chapter title on preaching, "Worship Ought to Kill Us: The Word."

- *Songs for Renewal* by Janet Lindeblad Janzen. This is our own RENOVARÉ contribution to the worship renewal movement. In the Christian life devotion and music—praying and singing—are inseparable twins, for both center on the heart. Prayer is the language of the heart, and music is the medium of the heart. The special contribution of this book is the unique way it holds these two together.

- *The New Worship* by Barry Liesch. Liesch is a professor of music and this is reflected in the music emphasis of his book. It is exceedingly practical and will give you many solid handles for framing your practice of worship. The book has a supplemental computer disk dealing with keyboard modulation and improvisation.

- *Worship* by Evelyn Underhill. For a theology of worship this book really sets the standard among Protestants, and everyone measures their understanding of worship off of it. Her discussion of "ritual and symbol, sacrament and sacrifice" is worth the price of the book.

Richard J. Foster

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