

# The Essence of Pentecostal Worship



There are seven axioms that every Pentecostal church must embrace to help reach its maximum potential in worship.

By H. Robert Rhoden

Harvey Cox, in *Fire From Heaven*, identifies an indispensable ingredient in Pentecostal worship. "One Sunday morning in September 1993, I attended a lively Latino Pentecostal church housed in a former synagogue in what had once been the German-Jewish section of Chicago. While the mostly Puerto Rican worshipers were swaying and singing '**Dios Está Aquí**' (God Is Here), I spotted a small sticker. It was attached to the gleaming red and white mother-of-pearl trap drums a young devotee was beating with an astonishing series of slams, rolls, and **paradiddles**. From my location about a third of the way back, I could see that the first word on the placard was 'Music' and the last

word was 'Jesus.' But the intervening words were in smaller print, and no matter how hard I squinted, I could not quite make them out. My curiosity had been piqued, so after the service I slipped up to the band area to take a closer look. Now I could see the whole message. It said 'Music Brought Me to Jesus.'"<sup>1</sup>

On the Day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter preached a sermon in response to the question, "What does this mean?" It is significant that the word translated "addressed" in Acts 2:14 is the same as "enabled" in Acts 2:4. Peter's sermon, no less than the speaking in tongues, was the Spirit's work.

Peter quoted Joel to indicate that the outpouring of the Spirit was a sign the last days had begun. The remaining 75 percent of his sermon focused on the life, ministry, crucifixion, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus to the right hand of God. This sermon evoked a question from the hearers, "What shall we do?"

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38\*). The result? "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day" (Acts 2:41).

Harvey Cox's story and the apostle Peter's sermon identify two salient components of Pentecostal worship—music and preaching. If we define Pentecostal worship as an authentic heart-level expression of love to our Heavenly Father quickened by the Holy Spirit, then worship is a verb rather than a noun. The vocabulary of worship in the Bible is extensive, but the primary Old Testament Hebrew word used for **worship** means "a bowing down." The same idea is behind the New Testament Greek word for worship, which means "to serve."

How does the Pentecostal church extrapolate this so the Sunday morning service incarnates the essence of Pentecostal worship? Before we respond to this question, let us

look at the theological and biblical underpinnings of the concept of worship.

## Toward A Theology Of Worship

An abridged theology of worship is essential to provide a framework for our journey. I am borrowing from a teaching session by Jack Hayford<sup>2</sup> to provide a *Reader's Digest* version of a theology of worship.

1. As God above all, the Lord Almighty is our Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer, and as the Sovereign of the universe, is worthy of our worship and deserving of our praise.
2. The objective in our worship is not merely to fulfill a prerequisite, acknowledging our place in the created order, but is a God-ordained means for advancing our restoration and reinstatement in that order.
3. Worship is God's gift to us for our blessing more than His. His objective is not the securing of our adulation, but our discovery and realization of advancement in His intended purpose for our fulfillment.
4. Worship is not only a means of reaffirming man's relational dependence upon, submission to, and obedience before God; it is the means (through grace) to reinstating man's partnership with God in ruling the earth—one that begins in a present practical, yet partial, realization—and will succeed after Christ's coming unto a complete and full realization.
5. For the redeemed, worship is the essential key to welcoming the rule of the kingdom of God into human experience: i.e., into our daily affairs, our homes, our congregations, our business affairs, and our cities and nations.
6. Worship is the primary means for establishing an atmosphere (a) for the transforming entry of God's presence; (b) for the clear entry of God's Word; (c) for the loving entry of God's Spirit; and (d) for the dynamic entry of God's works of power.
7. Accordingly, leadership needs to approach worship with the conviction that we are not providing an optional moment but determining a pivotal one.
8. With this understanding, we must confront the fact biblical worship (a) will always require the humbling of human pride **through** worship; (b) must appropriately be conducted according to divine patterns **for** worship; and (c) will regularly manifest in the transforming joy and humility distilling **from** worship.

## Biblical Periods Of Worship

In patriarchal times, there was both the privacy of prayer (Genesis 18:16–33) and the public act of setting up the altar (Genesis 12:7). From the patriarchs onward, the Bible is divided into four periods. First, under Moses, the tabernacle was the focal point of public worship. The second period became highly organized, and priests, assisted by the Levites, led the temple ritual. It included a complex system of sacrifices. The third stage centered on the synagogue, which was developed by those who remained in exile. In the synagogue, the emphasis was more on instruction than worship. The fourth stage was the early Christian church.

## What Is Worship?

Worship is conversations between God and man, a dialogue that should go on constantly in the life of a Christian.

1. Worship is giving to God and involves a lifetime of giving to Him the sacrifice He asks for: our total selves.
2. Worship is our affirmative response to the self-revelation of the Triune God. For the Christian, each act of life is an act of worship when it is done with love that responds to the Father's love. Living should be constant worshiping, since worship may be said to provide the metabolism for spiritual life.
3. Worship was the outcome of the fellowship of love between the Creator and man and is the highest point man can reach in response to the love of God. It is the first and principal purpose of man's eternal calling.
4. Worship is one's heart expression of love, adoration, and praise to God with an attitude and acknowledgement of His supremacy and lordship.
5. Worship is an act by a redeemed man, the creature, toward God, his Creator, whereby his will, intellect, and emotions gratefully respond in reverence, honor, and devotion to the revelation of Jesus Christ.
6. Worship means "to feel in the heart." Worship also means to express in some appropriate manner what we feel.
7. True worship and praise are awesome wonder and overpowering love in the presence of our God.
8. Worship is the ability to magnify God with our whole being—body, soul, and spirit.
9. The heart of true worship is the unashamed pouring out of our inner self upon the Lord Jesus Christ in affectionate devotion.
10. Worship is fundamentally God's Spirit within us contacting the Spirit of the Godhead.
11. Worship is the response of God's Spirit in us to that Spirit in Him whereby we answer, "Abba, Father," deep calling unto deep.
12. Worship is the ideally normal attitude of a rational creature properly related to the Creator.
13. Worship is extravagant love and extreme obedience.

—Excerpted from *Exploring Worship: A Practical Guide to Praise & Worship* by Bob Sorge, Oasis House Publishers, with permission.

As far as the New Testament is concerned, our information on Christian worship is vague. Clearly the day of worship was the Lord's Day (Acts 20:7), although there were daily services at the beginning (Acts 2:46). Worship was conducted in believers' homes. Simplicity marked the house-church worship services. They consisted, for the most part,

of praise (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16), prayer, reading from the Scriptures, exposition, prophesying and tongues, and other spiritual gifts. The love feast followed by the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23–28) was also a common feature of Christian worship. But the emphasis throughout would be on the Spirit and the inner love and devotion of the heart.

## Seven Axioms Of Pentecostal Worship

There are seven axioms that every Pentecostal church must embrace to help reach its maximum potential in worship.

### **Make spiritual preparation.**

At the primary level, every worship service must be networked with prayer. Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost was preceded by 10 days in the Upper Room. When I pastored at West End Assembly of God in Richmond, Virginia, we gathered for prayer every Saturday night. We prepared our hearts for the Sunday morning service and interceded for every person who would attend, especially non-Christians. I rarely accepted an invitation to attend a function on Saturday night. Yes, it was a sacrifice, but we believed prayer was endemic to the success of the worship service. One evidence was the long list of people who were saved during our 22 years there.

### **Appoint a worship leader who is a worshiper.**

Finding a song leader is not difficult, but finding someone who can lead people as they sing is essential. This person must himself be a worshiper if he is to lead others in worship. Judson Cornwall<sup>3</sup> has three questions every worship leader should ask.

First, where do we start? Leading people requires beginning where the people are. Most people arrive at the service with a minimum God-consciousness and a lot of self-consciousness. Starting with songs of personal experience or testimony meets people where they are and gives them something with which to identify early in the service.

Second, where are we going? Let the congregation enjoy singing songs of testimony until they are sufficiently united to begin moving closer to God. Songs of testimony often give way to songs of thanksgiving. The worship leader must carefully weigh his or her words in transition. On more than one occasion, an overzealous song leader has talked a worship service to death. Songs of thanksgiving can often lead into majestic hymns that give expression to higher concepts of God than do some of the simple choruses.

Third, how do we know when we have arrived? If the leader has been successful, there will be responses from the human spirit that have depth and devotion in them. Worship takes time, so it is important not to rush the congregation. Repeat the verse or chorus of the hymn that seems to give honest expression to what people are feeling at the moment. Just worship. Cleverness is inappropriate. Talk is unnecessary. Singing should not be considered an end in itself. It should be a release of the Holy Spirit in a worship expression. People need to be led from the natural to the spiritual and from expression of self-need to Spirit-worship. This is the goal of the worship leader—being a leader of worshipers more than a leader of songs.

### **Embrace all generations.**

If you want to send a message to young people that they are not important, eliminate

their music. If you want to marginalize the older saints, get rid of their music. In his book *Built To Last*, Jim Collins says companies that last adopt a both/and rather than an either/or attitude. The church must embrace this concept in preparing for a preferred future in worship. If sons and daughters are prophesying, young men are seeing visions and old men are dreaming dreams under the same Spirit, surely we can find a worship service that connects rather than divides the bookend generations.

### **Change, not eliminate, the past.**

God has always raised up individuals to influence the church in worship at various seasons. The decade of the 60s produced Chuck Smith and the Jesus Movement. The 2nd Chapter of Acts and Bill and Gloria Gaither influenced the decade of the 70s. Carol Cymbala and The Brooklyn Tabernacle gave a new sound to the 80s. At the same time, Hosanna and Integrity music were household names. Lindell Cooley emerged in the mid 90s. Today Darlene Zschech and Hillsong are making a world impact. None of these gifted people would suggest their music is intended to compete with or eliminate other music of the past. As a matter of fact, it is always a delicate tension to hold the diachronic (through time) music such as the classic hymns that express sound theology with the synchronic (with or in time) music that emerges and then fades. May we incorporate change and the new while at the same time embracing and maintaining what is important from the past.

Worship: Noun or Verb?

When worship is perceived more as a noun than a verb, we tend to seek a worship experience. The congregation becomes the audience rather than the performers. However, the reality in true worship is that God is the audience. The question on the way to church Sunday morning is not, "What is in this for me?" but rather, "What do I have to give?" Scripture is clear about our role in worship.

**1. Participation.** "When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church" (1 Corinthians 14:26\*).

**2. Physical expression.** We are instructed to clap our hands, shout to God with cries of joy (Psalm 47:1), and to lift up holy hands in prayer (1 Timothy 2:8).

**3. Praise.** "Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name" (Psalm 100:4). "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord" (Psalm 150:6).

**4. Prayer.** "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed" (James 5:16).

This illustrative list, although not exhaustive, makes it obvious that worship is a verb.

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\*Scripture references are from the New International Version.

## **Choose substance over style.**

I have no idea what style of worship they were experiencing in Acts 13:2,3 when the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." What I do know is substance is more important than style. It was an atmosphere in which the Holy Spirit could call out the called. This gathering was not about what the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard called the aesthetic or "feel good" level of worship or even the ethical level of "a code of rules." It was worship at a spiritual level that creates a readiness to trust oneself wholly to God. Every worship service must have the potential and expectation to experience the substantive acts of God in our lives.

## **Be open to the miraculous.**

Mark Batterson, a pastor friend in Washington, D.C., preached a sermon entitled "The Miracle of Music." I love his description of the Paul and Silas jail experience:

Worship is where spiritual breakthroughs happen. It was midnight in a Middle Eastern prison cell when Paul and Silas started praising God. Their bodies were chained, but their spirits soared. As they sang, there was a violent earthquake. Acts 16:26 says that prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. That's what happens when we worship. Worship sets the stage for the miraculous.<sup>4</sup>

While we do not focus on miracles, it is important to see the worship service as a place that uniquely opens us to the miraculous. Once the prison doors were opened, the jailer and his household were saved. God exercises His power with a purpose—reaching the lost. Testimonies in a worship service of God's miracle-working power will often be the catalyst to bring lost people to Jesus.

## **Promote freedom in worship.**

The most common expression I heard from new people coming to West End about the worship service was "such freedom, yet safe." Paul declared, "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Corinthians 3:17).

Freedom finds its greatest expression where boundaries are clearly established. Sensitivity and respect for others is a clear biblical teaching (1 Corinthians 12). It is not an oxymoron to plan a Pentecostal worship service, to expect excellence from the musicians, and to have teaching moments, especially when tongues and interpretation are a part of the service. As a general rule, I explained from Scripture what we were experiencing after a message in tongues and interpretation. We also printed and verbalized the scriptural basis for clapping and raising our hands in worship. Good teaching and active pastoral leadership will foster an atmosphere of freedom in a Pentecostal worship service that will encourage greater participation. Not everybody will be comfortable with the expressions of a Pentecostal worship service. We accept that. But we must make sure their uneasiness is not our misuse of freedom.

## **Conclusion**

Last year an article in the *Washington Times* said, "The most common reason people leave church is that it's too similar to their everyday lives."<sup>5</sup> They are searching for a spiritual community radically different from their working environment. May every Pentecostal church purpose to be a place where the worship service is a transforming experience as we "worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24).

\* Scripture references are from the New International Version.

**Endnotes**

1. Harvey Cox, *Fire From Heaven* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1995), 139.
2. Jack Hayford, *A Theology of Worship*, Van Nuys, Calif., 1996.
3. Sermon "Leading People Into Worship" by Judson Cornwall.
4. Sermon by Mark Batterson, pastor of National Community Church, Washington, D.C.
5. Mark A. Kellner, "Flock Strays From U.S. Churches," *Washington Times*, 18 October 2002.