

Issue #36  
September 6, 2004

But simplistic, repetitive music meant only to force us into a prefabricated swoon is not that substantial vehicle. It is plastic. It is insincere. It is immodest.

After more than a month of Sundays visiting churches, I am fast approaching the conclusion that contemporary worship tries too hard. It tries too hard to be casual and cozy at a time when it should, instead, be reverent and humble. It tries too hard to lever the Spirit into still-slumbering hearts and brains. It tries too hard to force everyone to worship according to the same acceptable template.

In my possession is a sizable stack of popular "Praise & Worship" tapes. The group that publishes these uses a standard template on virtually every one: The first side of the tape contains loud, upbeat songs intended to get the listener (as well as those in attendance at the actual recording) energized and motivated. Then the second side is usually given over to more thoughtful, reverent, even contrite songs. Physically, the first half is all grins and clapping, while the



O come, let us sing for  
joy to the Lord,  
Let us shout joyfully to the  
rock of our salvation.  
Let us come before His presence  
with thanksgiving,  
Let us shout joyfully to  
Him with psalms.  
For the Lord is a great God  
And a great King above all gods,  
In whose hand are the  
depths of the earth,  
The peaks of the mountains  
are His also.

The sea is His, for it was  
He who made it,  
And His hands formed  
the dry land.  
Come, let us worship  
and bow down,  
Let us kneel before the  
Lord our Maker.  
For He is our God,  
And we are the people of His  
pasture  
and the sheep of His hand.  
(Psalm 95:1-7a)

second half is prayerful and bowed down. And this is the standard template commonly used in churches today. Pry the congregants away from the coffee pot and their chit-chat with the loud, upbeat songs of praise, then, once everyone has settled down and is participating, follow up with the more reverent songs of worship.

As Psalm 95 implies, this pattern is not inauthentic, but in this self-centered society in which we now live it is possible for such an order to lead to an immodest—even man-centered—form of worship. It can inadvertently express an attitude of barging into God's throne room based on *our* merit, rather than His: "I am here to worship You! Aren't You glad?" Too often the joy expressed in this moment is an inauthentic, physical joy leveraged by the worship leader(s) from the platform.

## Spirit-generated

The Master said:

"These people make a big show  
of saying the right thing,  
but their hearts aren't in it.  
Because they act like they're  
worshipping me  
but don't mean it,  
I'm going to step in and  
shock them awake,  
astonish them,  
stand them on their ears.

The wise ones who had it all figured  
out will be exposed as fools.

The smart people who thought  
they knew everything  
will turn out to know nothing."

(Isaiah 29:13-14 *The Message*)

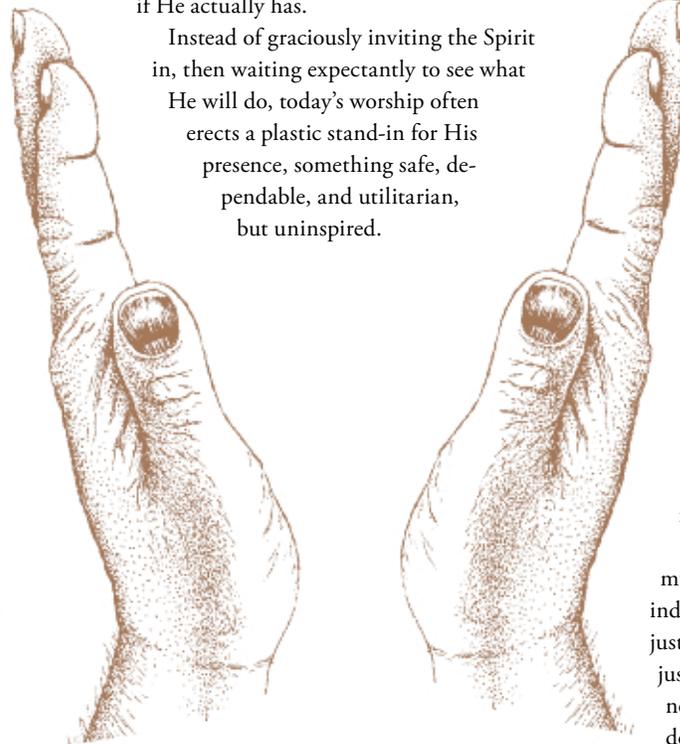
By contrast, when we begin our worship focusing on God, rather than on our contribution to His praise, we are driven, appropriately, to our knees in humble, reverent awe. When we begin by acknowledging our position in Him—worthy, but only because of the sacrificial blood of Christ—we can approach the throne only with empty hands and a full heart. And the joy expressed in *this* moment is sincere, Spirit-generated, and a true "sacrifice of praise." It is a joy expressed from the inside out, rather than in mimic of an outside influence.

Then the energetic praise that follows—our grinning and clapping—will

be the authentic outward expression of the gratitude and adoration we have experienced on our knees before the throne. It will be God-, rather than man-centered.

The modern paradigm for worship can badly manhandle the Holy Spirit. It is presumptuous, even arrogant. It says, "We will be in the Spirit." It pre-empts supernatural prerogative: Rather than carefully preparing fertile soil from which He might reveal Himself by *His* timing and manner, worship leaders today often haul out the Spirit by the scruff of the neck. And if He chooses not to sanction the moment, they simply behave as if He actually has.

Instead of graciously inviting the Spirit in, then waiting expectantly to see what He will do, today's worship often erects a plastic stand-in for His presence, something safe, dependable, and utilitarian, but uninspired.



## Spirit-filled

The modern form of worship (based, for the most part, on attracting those unaccustomed to worship of any kind, and especially of a holy God) makes much of the Holy Spirit. He is talked about and sometimes spoken to, artistically imagined in banners, and, on occasion, invoked. He is addressed with the familiarity of a close, personal friend. Yet rarely is He patiently "waited upon."

But as for me, I will watch  
expectantly for the Lord;  
I will wait for the God of my salvation.

My God will hear me.  
Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy.  
Though I fall I will rise;  
Though I dwell in darkness, the  
Lord is a light for me.  
I will bear the indignation of the Lord  
Because I have sinned against Him,  
Until He pleads my case and  
executes justice for me.  
He will bring me out to the light,  
And I will see His righteousness.  
(Micah 7:7-9)

Jesus' counsel to the woman at the well was both succinct and profound:

"But an hour is coming,  
and now is, when the true  
worshippers will worship the  
Father in spirit and truth; for  
such people the Father seeks  
to be His worshippers. God is  
spirit, and those who worship  
Him must worship in spirit and  
truth."

(John 4:23-24)

The "truth" to which Jesus refers is the *one* truth. It is not subjective, malleable, negotiable or fleeting. It is God's eternal revelation: the Bible. The believer's worship—for it to be authentic, and accepted by its intended Audience—must be based on the truth found in God's holy word.

Then our truth-grounded worship must be informed by, energized by, indwelt by the Holy Spirit. It cannot be just a quick reference to His name; not just an acknowledgement that He exists; not just a recitation of His familiar wisdom, but it must include His singular *presence*. It must be a worship *infused* by the Spirit. Not a pale, insipid substitute, but the real thing.

Only then will our worship, praise, and thanksgiving be a fragrant aroma in the nostrils of our God.

...for we are the true circumcision, who  
worship in the Spirit of God and glory  
in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in  
the flesh...

(Philippians 3:3)