

TRUTH FOR TODAY SERIES

THE WONDER
OF WORSHIP

A Biblical Guide for the Worshiper

Stephen Phifer

KW
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PUBLISHING

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AUTHOR PROFILE

Dr. Stephen Phifer

I have served the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ as worship leader, worship educator, musician, and writer. Today, my ministry is one of worship renewal. I began full-time ministry in 1975, serving churches in several states and denominational and university ministries. My study of worship began in 1980 and has become the focus of my ministry. I hold bachelor's and master's degrees in music education and a doctorate in worship studies. I have guest lectured at colleges and seminaries across America and overseas. My wife, Freeda, is a marvelous musician and music educator, and she has been my flawless companion in life and ministry since June 1974.

Stephen Phifer

INTRODUCTION

Give unto the Lord, O you mighty ones, give unto the Lord glory and strength. Give unto the Lord the glory due to his name; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness (Psalm 29:1–2, KJV)

This call is universal. The stars hear it and sing. The planets move to its rhythms. Angels have their own language to line out the details of His glory, this “glory due His name” (Psalm 29:2). The hearts of men, women, boys, and girls resonate in multiplied timbres. This universal song is addressed “To Him who sits on the throne of heaven.” We, God’s covenant-people, are really a massive choir and orchestra assembled for this wonderful purpose of giving the Lord the glory due His name. Sometimes we give private recitals in the Secret Place of prayer, and at other times in large gatherings where a multitude or simply two or three are gathered together in His name (Matthew 118:20), we summon the whole family of faith to sing and play for His glory. This is the calling on our redeemed lives, and it is the pressing business of this hour.

How should this be done? Such an enterprise cannot be left to even our best ideas alone. There is a worship that pleases God! We find its dimensions, its demands, and its delights in the Holy Book of God, the Bible. Here we find both the context and the content our worship. With the Book, we load our hearts with eternal things so we can express them in contemporary terms, injecting a healing dose of truth into this stricken moment. There is no better use of words and tunes and voices and instruments. Our God-given creativity can find no higher purpose, no grander theme, and no more powerful text than these “wonderful words of life.”¹

How do we measure our success? Not in the applause of people, nor in any personal acclaim we may earn, nor in any other human measure. Our standard is the one found in the Heavenly Zion: “The glory due His name” (Psalm 29:2). To sense the Manifest Presence of the Lord is our goal, and to please the Lord Jesus is our purpose.

We have His complete attention. Do we give Him ours? Let us seize a fragment of time and step through the “torn veil” into an eternal moment of glory, the glory of the “only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and

¹ Bliss, P.P. “Wonderful Words of Life.” 1874.

truth” (John 1:14, NKJV). There are no clocks here. Time is suspended in the revelation of God as we feast on the manna of heaven and are strengthened by His nearness.

This is “The Wonder of Worship,” and this is the subject of our study.

“Wonderful”—“full of wonders”

Congregational worship should be nothing less than wonderful—full of wonders. It should never be ordinary, feeble, boring, deceitful, theatrical, plain, dull, or uninspiring. What wonders are found in congregational worship?

- » Divine Beauty from the Holy Spirit and its earthly reflection found in the worship arts,
- » Supernatural passion that strikes fire in the human heart,
- » Truth from heaven to fill the voids in the inquiring human mind,
- » Fellowship with our Maker and with brothers and sisters likewise made by Him,
- » The Peace of Christ, which passes all understanding, comforting the believer’s spirit,
- » Faith in God that transmits itself into the expectations of the worshiper,
- » Hope in the future that promises rest and worship in proper balance, and
- » Love for God and for others, thus fulfilling the two greatest commands.

Are we brave enough to inventory our worship experience in our local church? How many wonders do we find there?

If the stock is low and the variety is lacking, perhaps the worship we experience needs a new guide. On second thought, perhaps we must rescue our worship experience from contemporary culture and find more lasting, proven, and powerful truths to guide us. May I suggest the Bible? Sometimes, we approach congregational worship as if the Bible had nothing to say on the matter.

Many years ago, while serving First Assembly of God in Winston-Salem, NC, I taught a 13-week Sunday School course called “Worship that

Pleases God” twice a year. After several years of this, I had taught at least 1000 of our people a biblical vision for worship. The result? It was not difficult to lead that congregation in worship. They understood what I was doing, and, more importantly, they knew what they were doing when it was time to worship God. I assessed it this way: They approached the worship service using biblical models.

- » They were an informed Holy-Royal Priesthood (1 Peter 2:9).
- » They knew how to minister to the Lord with the Living-Sacrifice of Praise (Romans 12:1–2, Hebrews 13:15).
- » They expected their worship to bring them into His Manifest Presence before the Throne of God and of the Lamb (Psalm 22:3).
- » They knew our sanctuary had become the Lord’s Office-place because (Acts 13:1)
- » The River of Life was flowing from the throne as a healing stream (Ezekiel 47, Revelation 22).

Why all these blessings?

- » Because we had celebrated our unity before God with the arts of David’s Tabernacle and
- » Because we had come into the Holy of Holies by processing through Moses’ Tabernacle, a faithful copy of the Heavenly Zion.

I had developed this biblical vision of worship that pleases God from a 10-year intensive study of the Scriptures. In the early 1990s, I felt directed to write this class into a book. It took another 10 years to see it come to print as *Worship that Pleases God: The Passion and Reason of True Worship* (Trafford Publishing, 2004, 2014).

The Wonder of Worship: A Biblical Guide for the Congregation is a contemporary presentation of the core truths of this biblical vision designed for class use within the congregation or for personal study by the individual worshiper. My task was and is to help the worshiper see the difference between the truth of worship and the cultural expression of worship. Worship is expressed through local, generational, and personal cultural means and is, therefore, subject to wide variations of expression. Too often, these cultural expressions (songs, musical ensembles, presentation styles, service structures, and technologies) are misjudged as the substance of worship, rather than the expressions of worship. To

borrow from the words of Jesus to the Samaritan Woman-at-the-well, the human expressions of worship can be called the human spirit of worship. This “spirit” is not the Holy Spirit but is the expression of the human spirit—the God-consciousness part each of us possesses. At the same time, the Holy Spirit is at work ministering the Truth of worship found in the unchanging Word of God. This “worship in spirit and truth” is the dynamic we need (John 4:24). If we do not perceive the differences between the cultural expression of worship and the spiritual truth of worship, we may treat temporary things as if they were eternal and eternal things as if they were temporary and therefore disposable.

For these 12 sessions, we will seek the eternal, unchanging things revealed in the Word of God. Wise pastors and worship leaders can make local application through the carefully observed principles presented in this class. As a member of the Lord’s Holy Church, you can take your place among the People of God to worship the Lord in Spirit and in Truth.

The Prayer of Jesus at the Last Supper

In the coming chapters, I will present seven biblical models of worship from the Scriptures. These biblical concepts help us understand public worship. At the heart of these chapters presenting these ideas: 7 Biblical Models of worship; carefully defined biblical words, phrases, and images; and powerful concepts of worship in “spirit and in truth,” lies a powerful prayer from the heart of Jesus for His church. On His last night with the disciples, after their Last Supper was completed, Jesus prayed for us. John records it in chapter 17 of his Gospel.

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:20–23)

Can we recognize the standard of this unity? It is the most thorough and complete unity possible, that of the Divine Godhead. “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.” How do we,

a church made up of “every tribe and tongue and nation” of the earth (Revelation 13:7, MEV), achieve this level of unity? Only through the unity of faith in and obedience to the Word of God. Culture divides us while God’s truth defines us. We are called to let the Word of God define our unity while our various cultures describe our diversity.

This concept of unity with diversity must be the ruling sentiment of our public worship. Each of us must express our love for the Lord in our unique styles while respecting the culture of other worshipers in our family. This was the exact work of the disciples as they left Israel and went into all the world with the Gospel of Christ.

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. ...This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:14–18; 3:6)

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, 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 Peter 2:9–10)

The most visible, powerful, and transformational way to be ONE in Jesus is through worship in unity with diversity. The church must be a transformed body fully informed by Scripture and fully alive in our culture. This is no easy task, as it demands skillful and sensitive leadership. It also demands a unified and fully informed congregation, which is the purpose of this little book. In these pages, we will explore

the biblical truth on worship and the reasonable response we can give as the People of God.

What results from worship in unity with diversity? Worship, discipleship, fellowship, and evangelism will be the result, a church fully engaged in the call of God.

Fire and Form

The personal preference of some worshipers is for “on-fire” worship that is exciting, fun, and transformative. Let’s call that kind of worship “Fire.” At the same time, the tastes of other worshipers tend toward a predictable service full of order and transforming truth. We can call this “Form.” Which is correct?

They both are correct. Personal preference (culture) would demand that we choose between the two, while a careful examination of the Bible reveals calls for both. Worship leaders operate in the dynamic center between opposite poles. The terms “Fire” and “Form” represent these polarities. Christianity was born in fire, but the Holy Spirit also moves in form. Finding our place on the line between these and other polarities is one of the great challenges of the ministry of worship. Let’s take them in reverse order.

Form

Form is essential to Christian worship. If you say that Spirit-led worship is about freedom, you are correct. But it is a freedom within Scriptural limits and within the spiritual framework of the character of God and the ways of the Spirit. True worship is fire focused by form.

None of us wants an empty form. We long for worship services where people are healed and delivered, sinners are saved, believers are filled with the Spirit, and the Word of God is proclaimed in power. Shouldn’t we, therefore, throw off all forms and let the Spirit have His way? We should let the Spirit have His way, but the Bible reveals God as a God of order and form. Before the Spirit moved upon the earth in creative power, the earth was “without form and void” (Genesis 1:2, ESV). After the move of the Spirit, the earth came into order: day and night were organized, as were the lights in the sky, the sea, and the dry land, as well as the life in the sea, on the land, and flying through the skies.

Creation tells us of an orderly and powerful Creator-God. He fashioned Adam from the earth, creating the human form. Then He

breathed the breath of life into Adam and lit the fire known as the human spirit. Today, as we worship, that human spirit within connects with the Spirit of God and “we cry ‘Abba, Father’” (Romans 8:17)! God breathes life into us as we worship.

Fire

Wherever you may read this, the fire of the Spirit is available to you. It is not American, this fire, or Asian, or African, nor does it belong to any other race or culture of man. It is not Baptist, Pentecostal, Liturgical, or Evangelical. The fire of the Holy Spirit is the presence of the Lord.

- » As a star, this fire guided the wise men and lit the Bethlehem skies with angels.
- » It radiated from Jesus’ eyes to the eyes of fishermen, and they forsook their nets to follow Him.
- » This fire scorched the hypocrisy of the religious leaders and chased the money changers from the Temple.
- » The flame may have flickered before Pilate but was bright enough for a beaten, exhausted Jesus to declare His Kingdom greater than Pilate’s domain or even that of Caesar.
- » For a moment on the cross, the fiery eyes closed.
- » But a split-spirit-second later, Jesus strode the streets of hell with a fire in His belly hotter than perdition’s flames. He wrested the keys of death, hell, and the grave from Satan.
- » Like a holy torch, His holiness led captivity captive as he freed the prisoners of faith. Three days later, the angel rolled the stone away to reveal an empty tomb.
- » When the women met Jesus, they soon felt the old fire again—He was alive!
- » The two believers on the Emmaus road felt the fire burning in their hearts as Jesus explained the Word to them.
- » The Disciples knew His fire again when they saw Him.
- » On the Day of Pentecost, tongues of fire sat upon each of the one hundred and twenty, fires of cleansing and healing, the fires of the presence of Jesus.

New Covenant Worship

This is our New Covenant worship—the fires of Spirit within the forms of truth. And this, chapter by chapter, will be our subject.

CHAPTER 1

FINDING THE BOOK AGAIN

Biblical Reformation Leads to Revival

Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the secretary, "I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the LORD." He gave it to Shaphan, who read it.. When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his robes. (2 Kings 22:8, 11)

A Skillful Craftsman

The call for workers went out across the land from young King Josiah himself. The Temple needed repair. Skilled carpenters and stone masons answered the call, as did their young apprentices and unskilled day laborers. No one knows whether it was a master craftsman, a trainee, or just an ordinary guy, but somebody found the lost Books of the Law somewhere in the neglected and abused House of God. Imagine the excitement as news of the discovery worked its way up the chain of command:

- » From an excited worker vaguely sensing the importance of the dusty scrolls
- » to a skilled craftsman recognizing the quality of the workmanship of the manuscripts in the trembling hands of his helper,
- » to a priest, then to the high priest,
- » then to the secretary of state, and finally,
- » to the king himself.

They Found the Book, and They Read It.

The king tore his robes when the book was read in his presence. He realized more repair was needed than crumbling plaster, cracked walls, or

leaking ceilings. The worship life of the people was in dire need of repair, reform, and restoration.

This King Josiah, who tore his robes, was twenty-six years old. He had taken the throne when he was only eight before he had learned the wicked ways of his fathers. Perhaps his mother is given special mention in the Bible because she instilled in the boy a different spirit than the spirit of his age. It may be that the boy had seen glimpses of principles brighter than the darkness of the rule of raw power at her hand. Maybe he had even known the sweetness of the presence of the Lord in his mother's touch.

At sixteen, he sought the God of his father, David. At age twenty, he began his campaign to purify the nation of the heinous idolatry that gripped the people of God. When the Book of the Law was found and read to him, he commanded that it be read throughout the land, and reforms, based on demands of Scripture, marked his reign. He conducted a worship reformation unparalleled in the history of Israel and Judah.

Constant Worship Reform

I harbor no pretense of royalty—I'm no king; I'm just a worship leader, but I do, however, identify with young Josiah.

- » I came to know Jesus in my mother's Sunday school class when I was a child. I learned to sing songs like *Jesus Loves Me This I Know*.
- » I remember a picture on the wall of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, carrying a poor, injured lamb on his broad shoulders. I sensed the very presence of the Good Shepherd in that little Sunday school room as my Mother's sweet alto voice led us in song.
- » We were singing, *Oh, How I Love Jesus*, and I knew somehow that I was that little injured lamb and that Jesus had me in His strong arms.

As a doubting teen, I tested but could not dismiss what I had seen and heard, and as an adult, these simple truths have been my compass as the winds of fads and traditions have challenged my ministry.

- » I want to lead people to know the love of Jesus because the Bible is true and speaks to them.
- » I want to help them love Jesus because he first loved them.
- » I want them to realize that no matter their injury's severity, His broad shoulders are safe.

And I am a reformer.

The worship conditions handed to young King Josiah were far worse than any I have seen. The account of his reforms in 2 Kings 23 paints the lurid picture of the worship handed down to him by his fathers.

- » The Temple of Jehovah was host to the worship of Baal and Asherah, male and female deities of the Canaanites.
- » Male prostitutes were housed in the Temple area, and
- » skillful women wove garments to use in the worship of “Baal and Asherah and all the starry hosts” (2 Kings 23:4).
- » The countryside and villages had also fallen to unimaginable paganism.

High places, shrines, and altars marred the land, but Josiah destroyed them and the unholy priests who manned them.

I doubt things are that bad at your church; I know they aren't at mine! But a worship leader is a reformer wherever he or she is serving.

Semper Reformanda!—Always Reforming

One principle of the Reformation is *Semper Reformanda!*, or “always reforming.” We must be vigilant to see that the Book of God doesn't get lost in the House of God. We are the carpenters, stonemasons, apprentices, and laborers who have answered the call to restore the House of God, the New Testament Temple, the Church, and the “Habitation of God by His Spirit” (Ephesians 2:19–22).

- » Are we more skilled in our traditions than in the ways of the Book?
- » Has the Book been lost in our house?

As Reformers, we must constantly seek the face of God, the will of God, and the plan of God so that the worship we lead will be an encounter with God. God's face, His will, and His plan are found in His Book.

Should we settle for a version of Christian worship that doesn't read like the Book?

- » Where are the miracles, signs, and wonders?
- » Where is the community of the Redeemed?
- » Where is the Kingdom of God come to earth?

- » Where is the form of godliness that throbs with the Power of God?
- » Where is the conviction of the Holy Spirit that grips the souls of sinners?
- » Where is the River of Life that flows from the Throne of God to the healing of the nations?

Have we lost the Book of God in the House of God?

- » Are we still a holy counterculture, loving the lost with selfless love, while calling the nation to repentance and the church to holiness?
- » Can the Book be found on the pulpit, or have other books shunted it aside?
- » Do we sing the book or sentimental, nostalgic artifacts or transient, trivial, narcissistic anthems to ourselves?

We are workmen who have been called by the King. Let us put on our work clothes.

- » Let us find our work gloves and our tools.
- » Let us search the Temple for the Book.
- » Like the King, let us tear our robes in sorrow and repentance as the words of the Book stream over us in a healing stream. These lovely robes won't save us. They won't win us a visitation from the King.

Only the words of the Book will speak peace to us with a voice as tender as my mother's, "Oh, how I love Jesus because He first loved me."

The steps in the three-part process of worship renewal are these:

- » The biblical reformation of prayer and public worship is the first step. This goes deeper than reformation by popular trends or by copying the methods of others.
- » The personal renewal of spirituality begins with prayer and continues with righteous living.
- » The seeking of the revival of the fiery heart that powers an obedient and, therefore, victorious life. If these are your desires for your church, join me as we, in the words of the Prophet Isaiah, "tremble at His Word."

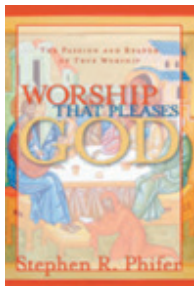
For Class Discussion

1. Discuss other sources of information about how worship should be done.
2. What does the Latin phrase, *Semper Reformanda!*, mean to you?
3. What other kinds of worship reformation besides biblical reformation have you observed?
4. How can the Word of God become lost in the House of God?
5. What does it mean for the church to be a holy counterculture?

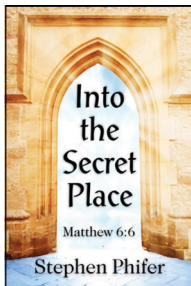
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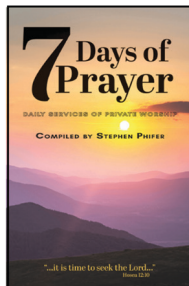
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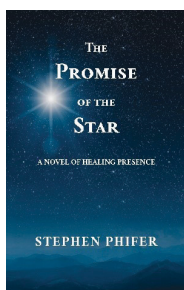
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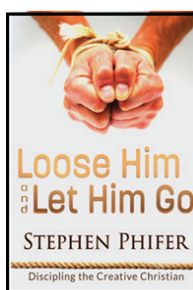
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The Nativity



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May the Lord be pleased with your Ministry to Him!

-Steve