

1992

# Warming Up for Worship

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## Recommended Citation

Macy, Howard R., "Warming Up for Worship" (1992). *Faculty Publications - College of Christian Studies*. Paper 191.  
<http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ccs/191>

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**W**hen you're in a Sunday worship service, lumbering through the fifth verse of a hymn or enduring the trailing ends of a sermon gone awry, it's hard to imagine doing it again next week. Let alone constantly, forever. Yet, in heaven, our chief duty and joy will be worship.

worship, learning how to prepare for it, and learning how to participate in it.

### **The Focus of Worship**

I am convinced that many people who attend Sunday services seldom truly worship, and they don't even know it. In Evelyn Underhill's words, worship is

that we'll enjoy when Christ's reign comes to full flower, a feast to end all feasts (Is. 25:6; Rev. 19:9). Worship together is the weekly potluck we keep in the interim, and it is filled with the joy and triumph that Christ's presence means even now.

At a potluck, as in worship, we don't come privately to eat

# Warming Up for Worship

by  
*Howard R. Macy*

*The quality of  
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We rightly hope that Heaven will have better choirs, angelic worship leaders, and no announcements. But we're wrong just to leave the sanctuary each week grumbling about "not being fed," for the work of worship belongs to everyone.

Each of us contributes to worship, for good or for ill. Even when leaders don't help us as they should, each of us can take practical steps to improve our own experience of worship and to help those who worship with us. These steps include understanding more clearly what it means to

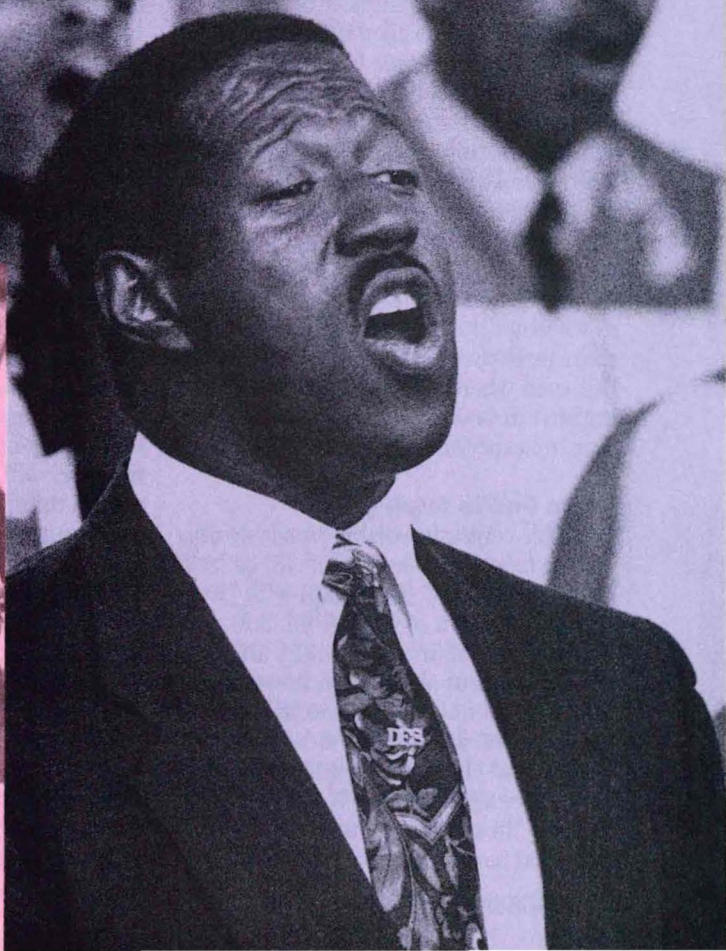
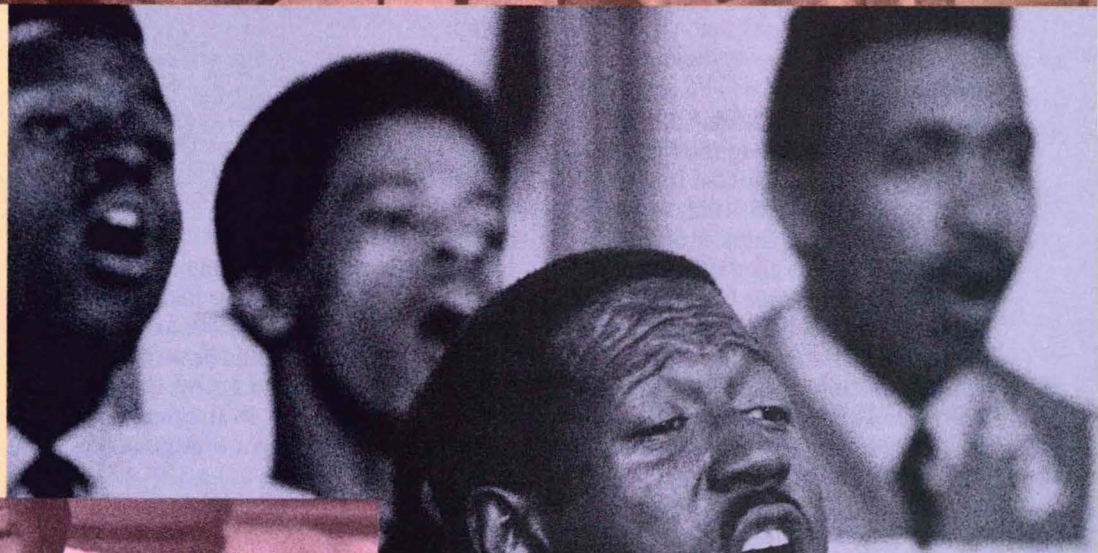
"the response of the creature to the Eternal." Simply put, we make God the center of our attention. We come before Him to offer our praise and gratitude, to confess our sin and confusion, to offer ourselves, full of love and wonder, vulnerable to God's desires for us. As we come, God responds to us, too, assuring us of forgiveness, comforting and healing us, embracing us, teaching us, and sending us out to serve.

Part of focusing on God is to tell each other and the world that God is with us, not just in church, but in all that we do. And since that is such good news, we celebrate. Worship becomes a party. The Bible tells us of a great heavenly banquet

our own sack lunches. We bring something to share, and we feast on what others have brought as well. We tell each other of God's goodness, and we laugh and shout and sing. We're dead serious, but we're not grim. In the midst of it all, God—God among us—is the life of the party.

Perhaps this doesn't sound a lot like your worship at First Fiercely Independent Christian, or perhaps it does. In any case, it is close to the heart of the matter. Certainly at First Church you have Bible reading, prayers, sermons, music, and more. But at their best, those are simply ways we use to pay attention to God. Worship, at its essence, is *responding* to God.







And that means we need to learn how to focus on Him as we prepare for and participate in worship.

The quality of our worship together on Sunday depends a great deal on what we do during the week. We can all help strengthen worship if we consistently do the following things.

### **Practice stillness.**

Noisy minds and hearts drown God's voice and hinder our worship. When our to-do lists, grievances, worries, madcap schedules, and a hundred other distractions clamor for our attention, we struggle to hear God and to give ourselves to Him. We need stillness. But we can hardly expect to quiet our noisy hearts if the only time we try to do it is on Sunday mornings. We must grow inner stillness during the week as well. That's why regular prayer, meditation, and private worship are so important to corporate worship. That's why reducing the volume and speed of our lives can help us as well. Stillness is not a commodity we can snatch chunks of once in a while. Stillness is a habit we practice.

### **Stay alert to God.**

Part of worship is to celebrate having seen God in our lives throughout the week. Another part is to hear God speaking to us. Staying alert to God is little more than "practicing the presence of God," as Brother Lawrence called it. It is not complicated, but it requires our attention. We need to steadily develop the habit of looking for God at work in our lives, of consciously noting and welcoming God's nearness. This simple habit, even when we fail to keep it as fully as we intend, not only brings us joy during the week, but also prepares us to worship with our brothers and sisters on Sunday. In some styles of worship, there is even opportunity to share publicly what we have seen of God. But even when that is not the case, staying alert to God day to day will deepen our worship experience.

### **Invite God to teach you.**

The Bible contrasts worship "made up only of rules taught by men" (Is. 29:13) or "self-imposed worship" (Col. 2:23) with "worship by the Spirit of God" (Phil. 3:3). It is very easy to fall into programs and patterns of religious observance, however sincere, that do not lead us into worship. At our best we know that it is God who enables and prompts our praise. It is God who above all others can teach us how to worship "in spirit and truth." So it's only right that part of our preparation for wor-

ship is to ask God to teach us, to lead us into paths and depths of worship that we long for but have not yet known. Having asked, we can be sure that the One who calls us to worship will also be eager to guide us in its ways.

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### **Nurture expectancy.**

We can learn to expect worship to be rich and rewarding. After all, Jesus told His disciples that where two or three are gathered in His name, He would be with them (Mt. 18:20). We can also expect that the One who is enthroned on the praises of Israel (Ps. 22:3) will delight to reign in our praises, too.

Worship is more a gift than an achievement, but it is a gift that God is eager to give us. As we reflect on God's goodness and faithfulness, we can look forward confidently to worship. In any congregation, the more people who share the anticipation of worship, the stronger their worship together will be. But even short of that, we can rightly expect that Christ will meet every eager heart in worship.

### **Look ahead.**

Some churches publish the biblical readings or preaching themes for upcoming services so that the congregation can read and ponder those passages or reflect on the theme ahead of time. This practice can enhance one's readiness to hear and participate in worship. If your church doesn't include this information in its worship folders or newsletters, per-

haps you could suggest it.

### **Support worship leaders.**

Those who lead in worship often do not get the support, encouragement, and counsel they need to be most effective. Sometimes, because they are leading, it is more difficult for them to know what helps people most in worship. One way to support them is to pray for them while they are preparing. Pray that they won't simply fall into routines but will be able to discern the needs of the people, and that they will be able to enter worship deeply, even while leading. You don't need to mention it to anybody, of course, but it can encourage leaders to know that you care enough about worship to pray for them. Thoughtful words of appreciation (beyond the polite "Nice sermon, pastor") and practical suggestions can also help, particularly if they are offered with humility and gentleness.

### **Create space for worship.**

Of course, the Sunday service is on your schedule, but do you give it elbow room? When we just squeeze it into our calendars, we cramp God's work in us, too. The Spirit can scarcely breathe into our breathlessness. In the best of Jewish tradition, the Sabbath is set like a jewel in the week, a day eagerly awaited and remembered when it is past. This rhythm of preparing for the Sabbath and enjoying its continuing fruits is one that can teach us as well.

One of the simplest ways to give space to worship is to consider how you use Saturday, especially Saturday evening. If we want to set Sunday's worship as a jewel, we should consider not working or socializing so late that we can hardly stay awake the next morning. We can also simplify preparation of food and clothing to avoid frantic Sunday mornings. This could include choosing and preparing clothes on Saturday, keeping Sunday breakfast simple, and arriving at church a bit early. It's not easy, but following a few, plan-ahead steps will create breathing space in your schedule and help open your heart.

Having prepared well through the week, you can actively contribute to worship, even if you are not one of the public leaders. Here are some ways.

### **Prepare the way.**

Quite simply, this means arrive early and begin to enter into worship yourself. The people around you may be prone to chit-chat under cover of the prelude, thinking that worship begins when someone announces it. But you can influence others in worship by focusing your attention on God through quiet prayer or medita-



tion as soon as you arrive. You could also read the text of biblical portions, hymns, or prayers that will be used during the service, so that you can thoughtfully enter into them. Invite God's presence with you and those around you. Ask His blessing on those who will lead.

You don't need to be conspicuous or appear to be exercising spiritual one-upmanship to lift the life of your church's worship. Indeed, where even a few individuals take on the task of preparing the way, it is a great help to all.

### Focus on God.

If we remember that centering our attention on God is what worship is all about, it makes it easier. But there is still plenty to distract us: the dad in the next pew lets his preschooler play with keys; the second sopranos are off-pitch just enough to make you shiver. And then there are fashion statements, musical technique, and sermon delivery to evaluate, as well as budding romances or family feuds to guess at and observe. Not to mention the inner distractions we've brought with us.

One of the best ways to overcome distractions is to gently and steadily turn our attention to God. Instead of fighting distractions, which only makes them stronger, we can offer them gently to God and then let them go. We can thank God for the young life of the kid with the keys, and we can pray wisdom for the frustrated dad. We can concentrate on the message rather than the technique of the music and, perhaps, thank God for the sincerity with which it is offered. But in all cases, we can learn to turn our attention to God, in whose honor and for whose praise we have come.

### Participate fully.

When you act like a spectator, you not only cheat yourself, but you cheat others as well. The audience mentality we so often see in worship is far distant from the trumpet-blow-

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**HOWARD R. MACY** is professor of religion and biblical studies at George Fox College in Newberg, Oregon. He is also the author of *Rhythms of the Inner Life* (Revell, 1988).

*The topic of worship is significant to him because of conversations with "many people who have told me of their disappointment in worship, a disappointment I've shared. Though I often speak with worship leaders about improving worship, I wanted to give people some ways to help make worship more satisfying."*

*If there's one thing he wishes more believers today understood and acted upon, it is that "God really loves this world and not just a world to come." Along those lines, he wishes more Christians would read the devotional classics "to open their eyes to the possibilities of life with God."*



ing, cymbal-crashing, praise-shouting, hand-clapping, new-song-singing of the Psalms. Sadly, that kind of abandon in worship seems too risky for respectable folk these days. But you don't have to be anywhere near that rowdy to participate actively in worship. Sing boldly, not bashfully. And don't worry about your singing ability. This is praise to God, not a recital for your neighbors. If there are responsive readings, read along and don't mumble. There's something about half-heartedness that short-circuits our own worship and discourages those around us.

Even when you're not being asked to join aloud in music or other activities, participate actively as you listen to others. Listen alertly to the words of Scripture read aloud. Interact in your heart and mind with the teaching you hear. Enter actively into the pictures, banners, or other visual symbols that are there to help bring you before God. In short, be present.

### Help others worship.

One way to help others is by our active par-

ticipation. Another way we can help is by our friendliness and warm acceptance of those around us. We can offer a smile or gracious greeting, even a touch or a hug, without turning the gathering into a social hour. There are a lot of ways we can say, "I'm glad to be with you here before God."

We can also help others worship by praying for them during the service. Is there someone around you who seems downcast, troubled, or distracted? You can hold him or her gently in prayer, asking God to surround that person with love, to lift the weight of the burden, to draw him with joy into the worship, to wash over her with peace. This is a quiet, even anonymous, ministry to others. You never have to speak of it. But it is a powerful help that grows out of knowing that God is present among us in worship and eager to answer such prayers.

### Be thankful.

I suppose if it were possible, we would like every occasion of worship to brim over with ecstasy, with spiritual thrills and chills. Sometimes we may even be tempted to try to make it happen, to control how God meets us week to week. But that's not the nature of our life with God, and that is not the nature of worship together. There will be times, in God's goodness, that our spirits soar and we, like Israel at Sinai, experience the lightning and thunder and trembling earth and blazing glory of God. And there will be times, as with Elijah at Sinai, when God comes in gentle stillness. God will come, of that we can be sure. We have only to yield control, to be patient, and to be thankful.

God calls us to worship and grants us that privilege. As we learn more and more how to prepare for and participate in worship, it can delight us, not burden us. It can even prepare us for the time when worship is indeed what we do constantly, forever—a prospect we can welcome with joy. ♦

## Prelude to Praise

### On Your Own

In Psalm 145: 5-6, the psalmist tells God, "I will meditate on your wonderful works" and "I will proclaim your great deeds." To help prepare your heart for worship this week, begin listing the wonderful works and great deeds that you have observed or experienced. You may want to include specific aspects of Creation, world events, answered prayers, and your own salvation and spiritual growth. Review your list before going to bed on Saturday night.

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Optional: Choose several of the other reasons to praise God from Psalm 145 and record times in which you have seen Him work in these ways. How, for example, has God been gracious and compassionate to you (v. 8), faithful to his promises (v. 13), or lifted you up when you were at a low point (v. 14)?

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