The Hour That Changes Everything

How worship forms us into the people
God wants us to be

A 50 Day Journey

John van de Laar

Foreword by Rev. Dr. Ross Olivier

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into the people God wants us to be

By John van de Laar

for Debbie

Sacredise

Cape Town

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Introduction

A Roadmap for the Journey

Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are His dear children. Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. He loved us and offered Himself as a sacrifice for us, a pleasing aroma to God. (Ephesians 5:1-2)

My heart sank when I saw the expression on the face of the man walking toward me. He was one of the leaders in the independent Pentecostal church where I was assistant pastor and worship director. He was clearly unhappy, and I was clearly the cause.

"John, I think you need to spend more time in prayer and discernment when you prepare for worship," he said authoritatively, "you really missed God this morning."

As I watched him walk away, I thought to myself, "If you only knew". The truth was that this week had been no different from any other week. I took my work as worship leader to this community very seriously, and I felt the weight of my responsibility keenly. That was why every Thursday I would get to the church early and, taking my guitar, my Bible, a notebook and a pen, I would retreat into the sanctuary (usually the 'cry-room' so I would have more privacy) to pray and prepare for the two Sunday services. I would begin with an extended time of personal prayer and worship, singing, praying and listening for what God might want to say and do among us this week. Then, I would begin to prepare – reading the Bible, forming a structure that would enable the service to flow while opening us to God's Spirit, and selecting music that would give voice to this whole experience.

On this particular week I had felt an overwhelming and disturbing sense that God was calling us to a different journey from the norm. I was captivated by the idea that we needed to spend time in quiet and confession, that we needed to give God 'space' to work, and for people to open to a deep and searching move of God's Spirit in their lives. I also knew that it might be difficult for people to embrace this different 'mode' of worship easily. I had not expected the strong negative reaction that I received from this leader, though.

The following Thursday, as I entered the church to prepare for Sunday, an unformed thought that had been nagging at me became clear in my mind. I found myself questioning how I was being measured. I wondered whether there was real discernment at work, or if people simply judged my success by the level of their excitement and joy in the service. And I realised that I needed to know the answer to these questions. After a short prayer, apologising for my just-made decision not to spend the day in prayer and worship, I began to prepare for Sunday. Laying aside any spiritual considerations, I used my musical awareness to create medleys and transitions that I knew had energy and the capacity to move people emotionally. It did not take long to finish the job.

That Sunday the services were electric. People were literally standing on their chairs and shouting out words and songs of praise. The band played with skill and commitment and the music was powerful and inviting. But, through it all I felt nothing but emptiness and shame. I knew that all I was doing was manipulating people with the music – the only time I have deliberately done so – and I was getting exactly the response I had planned for. But, God seemed somehow distant and removed from me, and the emotional responses from the people felt shallow and unreal.

After the service the same leader who had confronted me a week before came up to me, his face radiant, a huge smile stretching across it.

"Whatever you did this week, John, keep doing it!" he exclaimed. "The worship this week was incredible!" With that he walked away, and I was sure I noticed a spring in his step. But, as I watched his back I thought again, "If you only knew."

The next week I handed in my resignation.

Disillusioned with Worship

Across the globe more and more Christians are asking questions about worship – what it is, what it is for, and how to be most authentic as we participate. It has been regularly noted in the last few years that the Church, pretty much across the board, is in decline. In particular, in North America and Europe there seems to be a growing disillusionment with the Church and its worship. As Sally Morgenthaler observed in her foreword to Dan Kimball's book Emerging Worship:

> When it comes to irony, worship in late twentieth century evangelicalism takes the prize. Just as the world was reenchanting the universe (think Deepak Chopra, *The X-Files*, candle-and-teddy-bear grief vigils, *Final Fantasy* video games, and *Lord of the Rings*), user-friendly Christianity was practicing religious reductionism: shrinking the divine to the size of a three-point outline and four songs in the key of perpetually happy. In denuded corporate temples across America – from strip-mall spaces bathed in eerie green fluorescent lighting to gaping grey warehouses adrift in theatre seats – turn-of-the-millennium "trendy" church is proving anything but trendy in a highly spiritualised culture.[1]

In South Africa we are seeing similar disturbing trends as young people, and older people who are bored with Church-as-usual, leave churches – whether in the suburbs or the townships.[2] One colleague and friend has even taken to referring to the normal structure of worship that most churches follow as *"religious karaoke"*.[3] A lot of this disillusionment with the Church stems from a sense that it is irrelevant, unconcerned for the needs and issues of the world, and selfishly focussed on its own growth and success. In their 2007 study of American young people both within and outside of the Church, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons chose as their title the word that best summarised responses to the Church: UnChristian.[4]

However, I suspect that for many people the primary experience of Church is the worship service in the Church building. This is reflected in the language we use – we "go to" church on Sundays. Decline in Church attendance – another Sunday-focussed measurement – must indicate two important realities about our worship, then. Firstly, we, as the Church, have failed to teach and practice worship in ways that lead people into deeper and more life-encompassing spirituality. Secondly, the spiritual encounter that people have come to expect from Christian worship services is unsatisfying and fails to challenge, transform and inspire, as spiritual practices should.

Worship and Lifestyle

In an attempt to address both the disillusionment with worship in our times, and our inadequate practice of worship, it has become common to speak of worship as "a lifestyle". The idea has been to recognise that what we do in Church is not an end in itself, but is intended to lead us into a life of honouring God in all we do. This idea has brought necessary balance to the Church's understanding of worship, leading us to recognise that what we call worship is not simply about singing a few songs and listening to a sermon. Rather, worship must impact every moment, every circumstance, and every interaction in our lives.

My concern, though, is that we may have inadvertently devalued the crucial and transforming work of the sanctuary. Many writers have rightly emphasised that the Church is not a building but the community of people who seek to love and follow Jesus, and reach out to a hurting world in Jesus' name. Many authors have correctly shown how an over-emphasis on the performance of worship services leads to a "consumer" Christianity, in which we come to Church to receive our 'blessing' or 'empowerment' for the week.

Dan Kimball has described it this way:

> Most people view the worship service as a place where we go to get service done to us by "getting our tanks filled up" at the service station. It's a place where someone will give a sermon and serve us with our weekly sustenance. In automobile terms, you could say it is our weekly fill-up. We come to our service station to have a song leader

> serve us by leading us in singing songs. All so we can feel good when we emotionally connect through mass singing and feel that we did "worship".[5]

This is probably an accurate description of how worship is practiced and perceived around the world. Unfortunately, however, in striving to combat this "worship-consumerism", we too often stray into other, equally unhelpful, views of worship. On the one hand, we devalue the act of worship when we fail to connect it with spiritual formation, with the Church's mission, or with the real work of Christ in people. When we fall into this trap, we find ourselves placing worship last in the work of the Church, and creating a false dichotomy between mission and worship. This is a common reaction to our disillusionment with the Sunday service, but actually operates from the same thinking as the problem we are trying to solve – that the worship service is simply an event that is separate from the daily work of following Christ, growing in spiritual character and participating in missions.

On the other hand, 'lifestyle' language devalues the act of worship by defining it too broadly. Ultimately, if we define something as everything, we end up defining it as nothing. When we speak of worship as a lifestyle, we begin to speak of everything we do as worship, which dilutes the meaning and significance of the communal act of the Church at worship. Certainly there is a sense in which all we do can be seen as an act of worship, in which our work, our play, our loving and our resting are all offered to God and committed to God's service. However, in practice, our daily routines only really become acts of worship when they are formed and informed by an effective, transforming spiritual discipline. And the act of worship is the fountainhead for this worship-filled way of being and living.

The answer to our disillusionment with worship is not to discredit or devalue the Sunday service. On the contrary, it is because we have failed to do the work of understanding and practicing worship well that this disillusionment has crept in. If we seek to change how the Church is viewed and experienced both by those who attend and those who don't, we need to take our Sunday services far more seriously – not merely as ministers and worship leaders who construct and facilitate the experience, but as worshippers who partake of and participate in it.

A new – or ancient – way to think of worship

If possible, then, I'd like to attempt to understand worship in a new way – or rather, return to an ancient understanding of the communal act of worship. To do so, we must begin with the biblical writers, who, it seems, struggled with exactly the same disillusionment that we do today. Isaiah challenged the people of Israel because, although they observed religious feasts, worshipping and fasting regularly, the way they lived failed to change. Because of their continuing injustice, God refused to act on their behalf, in spite of their pleas and complaints.[6] In response to this situation, Isaiah calls the people to a life of worship that overflows into a life of justice, compassion and service.

It is important to note that Isaiah's prophecy does not call for less value to be placed on Sabbath day worship, but rather that worship should be more mindfully and rightfully practiced:

> Keep the Sabbath day holy. Don't pursue your own interests on that day, but enjoy the Sabbath and speak of it with delight as the LORD's holy day. Honour the Sabbath in everything you do on that day, and don't follow your own desires or talk idly.[7]

In a similar way, the prophet Amos proclaims God's challenge to people who are religiously zealous, but spiritually dead:

> I hate all your show and pretence—the hypocrisy of your religious festivals and solemn assemblies. I will not accept your burnt offerings and grain offerings. I won't even notice all your choice peace offerings. Away with your noisy hymns of praise! I will not listen to the music of your harps. Instead, I want to see a mighty flood of justice, an endless river of righteous living.[8]

In the New Testament, this pattern continues. In writing to the troublesome Corinthian church, the apostle Paul challenges the believers because their worship practice does not lead them to live more Christ-like, compassionate lives. He draws clear connections between their liturgy (worship) and their spirituality (lives of following Christ).[9]

In none of these examples, or any others that can be drawn from the biblical teachings, is the act of worship in itself seen as the problem. Rather, the problem lies with practicing worship as a self-contained activity that somehow appeases God, or entertains the individual, and that has no connection with spiritual formation and just living. What becomes clear here is that the act of worship is understood in the Scriptures to be a spiritual discipline that is essential to the growth of God's people in faith and righteousness. This understanding addresses both the problem of seeing worship as a weekly "fill up" and the problem of blurring our understanding of worship into everything we do. As Richard Foster explains:

> One reason worship should be considered a Spiritual Discipline is because it is an ordered way of acting and living that sets us before God so he can transform us. Although we are only responding to the liberating touch of the Holy Spirit, there are divinely appointed avenues into this realm.[10]

Throughout the history of the Church worship has been seen in these terms – as a spiritual discipline that transforms us and leads us into a way of living that embodies God's values and purposes. This is especially evident in what has become known as the liturgical tradition of spirituality. Susan White, one contemporary exponent of this tradition, describes this way of viewing worship beautifully:

> The common prayer of the Church provides both the model and the content of the Christian devotional life.[11]
>
> …[I]t is within the liturgical assembly that one receives the primary spiritual insight, strength, experience of the holy, and nourishment for godly living.[12]

The idea that worship is simply a "filling station", where we come to "get something out" each week, is completely foreign to both the Scriptures and the Church's history. Equally foreign is the idea that worship can be merged into the rest of our daily lives without a regular, intentional, corporate sharing in acts of worship. Although followers of Christ have often fallen short of this ideal, the basic understanding of worship that has always been held by both the biblical writers and the fathers and mothers of the Church is that worship is an act that leads us into a transforming encounter with God from which mission, compassion, and justice flow. **The way we worship defines the way we live.**

To put it another way, we do not strive for a lifestyle of worship – rather **we strive for worship to transform us so that we live lifestyles of Christ-likeness.** It is not the practices and experiences of worship that we should seek to carry into our daily lives. It is **the transformation that worship creates in us** that we seek to bring into our everyday routines. The result of the act of worship, then, is that we find ourselves automatically living in a Cross-carrying, Christ-following, contributing and compassionate way, because we have encountered the crucified, selfless, eternally-loving Christ in our worship, and we are becoming a little more like this Jesus each day.

In this sense, the worship service is at the very heart of the Church's mission, identity and work of spiritual formation. The worship service is the fountainhead from which the life and ministry of the Church flows. Or, to put it the way Bill Hybels, of Willow Creek Community Church, once did: *"As goes the weekend, so goes the Church."*[13]

How Does This Book Fit In?

If worship is to be this transforming spiritual discipline for us, we need to grasp both the meaning and the reality of what happens when we gather for worship. We also need to learn how best to participate in the act in order to open ourselves to God's transforming work. This is the purpose of the book you now hold in your hands.

On the one hand this book is a theology of worship – but don't let that word scare you. In a Church environment in which so much of our understanding and practice of worship is shaped by a market-driven music industry, and by a rather narrow band within the wide spectrum of Christian thought, this book attempts to be a different voice. It seeks to explore the spiritual discipline of worship from a framework of thinking and practice that has been developed over thirty years of worship leading and theological work. It strives to take seriously some of the important questions that are currently being

asked of the Christian Faith through movements like the emerging church and writers like Brian McLaren, Phyllis Tickle, Peter Rollins, Matthew Fox, Rob Bell, Marcus Borg and others. In one sense, then, this book can be thought of as a theology of worship for the emerging church.

On the other hand, this book is a practical manual, designed not only to offer ideas about worship, but also to take us on a journey into a new experience of worship. For this reason, the main content of the book must be seen only as a catalyst for the journey that is guided by the resources offered in the final sections – the daily devotional guides, the small group guides and the Sunday service resources. The idea is that entire church communities will embark on this adventure together – reading the chapters, reflecting on them through personal devotional practices, engaging them together in small group worship and conversation, and then sharing in corporate worship gatherings based on the content. The whole experience takes fifty days in total, and promises to lead you into a deeper experience of worship, and a different way of living as a result.

For those who choose to walk this road alone, or with a small group of friends, though, the material can still be used as a guide, perhaps replacing the worship suggestions for small groups with an adapted version of the Sunday service, or making space once a week to practice a personal service of worship. However, since, as we shall see, worship is essentially a corporate activity, I would recommend that you try in some way to find a group to share the journey with.

A Brief Roadmap

When approaching the act of worship as a subject for reflection and discussion, it can be difficult to know where to begin. Many writers have started with the Scriptures and tried to develop definitions and theological frameworks from there. In many ways this is the most obvious course of action. The problem, I have found, however, is that the Bible does not give a simple and clear definition of worship, nor does it offer a structured theological framework. That is not it's purpose, after all.

As a result, I have decided to try a different path. A path which can, perhaps, be thought of as a dialogue between the Scriptures and the thinking of one particularly helpful scholar. A simple definition from this well-known and respected Church leader has provided the framework for the dialogue. In examining and questioning each part of his five-fold definition, the Bible has offered clarity, direction, wisdom and practical guidance. What I have enjoyed about this process is the way it has taken both the divine and the human activity in worship seriously.

Let me introduce you to the person who will be our guide on this journey. His name is William Temple, and he was ordained as priest in the Anglican Church in Britain in 1910. He went on to become Archbishop of Canterbury from 1942 until his death in 1944. William Temple was a highly respected theologian, preacher and leader throughout

his career, the author of a number of influential books, and was deeply committed to challenging the Church to be a positive and transforming influence in society. All of this is reflected in one of his better known statements: *"The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members."*[14]

It is particularly Temple's understanding of worship, and his practice as a worship leader that is particularly important for us, though. One story from his career can illustrate the sensitivity he had to God's leading in worship, and the high value he placed on the act of worship in the Church's life.

In 1931 William Temple was leading a congregation in the University church of St. Mary the Virgin at the end of what was known as the Oxford Mission. During the singing of the hymn *When I Survey The Wondrous Cross*, he stopped the music just before the last stanza, and encouraged the people to read the words to themselves silently. Then, he invited those who could sing with whole-hearted commitment, to sing the words loudly. Those who did not feel they could commit to the words, he invited to remain silent, and those who felt they could mean the words only a little, and who wanted to grow in their commitment to them, he asked to sing in a whisper. With that, the organ began to play again, and the whisper of two thousand voices was heard singing:

> Were the whole realm of nature mine
> That were an offering far too small
> Love so amazing, so divine
> Demands my soul, my life, my all.[15]

This experience was not forgotten by those who were present.[16]

Over the years I have encountered Temple's definition of worship many times and in many different forms. It has influenced the thinking and practice of many liturgists over the decades, and, after using it as the foundation for my workshops and training events, it seemed to offer the most natural and helpful framework for this dialogue. Here is how he expressed his understanding of worship:

> To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God.[17]

There are five statements in this definition, each of which corresponds with a characteristic of the Church, a facet of the Church's life in the world, and each of which is a window into both God's activity in worship and our response to it. Using these five statements as a framework allows the Scriptures to speak clearly and powerfully to our understanding and practice of worship, and leads us into encounters with God that transform us and the way we live.

Before we tackle the definition, though, there is some groundwork that needs to be laid. We need first to attempt to understand what we mean by the word 'worship' and

how our Sunday activity seeks to embody this meaning. This is the work of Chapter One. Then we need to understand the difference our worship makes to how we inhabit our world, and how we relate to the people in it. In other words, we need to recognise that when we commit to being whole-hearted worshippers, our world is changed – or at least our perceptions and experience of it. I think of this as the 'external' change that worship brings. This is the work of Chapter Two.

Then, from Chapter Three to Seven, we explore in turn the five statements of Temple's definition, recognising how worship facilitates the changes within us that he describes. This is what I think of as the 'internal' change that worship brings. In reality there is no clear way to separate the internal changes from the external. They overlap and feed into each other. It is helpful, though, to recognise that worship is neither a purely internal activity, nor a purely individual one.

A Final Invitation

You may feel that you have already begun the 'work' of this journey into worship – and you'll be right. But, this was only the necessary preparation for starting out. It was the packing, the gathering of resources and information, the planning of the trip. What lies ahead now is the adventure of the journey itself.

I can guarantee that this will be a challenging quest. There will be times of refreshment and rest, times of play and silent reflection. But, there will also be times of turbulence, times of surprising and perhaps frustrating detours, times of uncertainty and questioning. This is an inevitable part of seeking to know God – ask any prophets – but it is also where the greatest value will be found. Fortunately, you do not have to undertake this adventure alone. At times you will travel in solitude, but at other times you will be in conversation with a small band of companions who share the road with you, and at still other times you will be part of a larger community that is celebrating together.

It may be helpful to remember a parable that Jesus told for anyone who earnestly desires to enter God's Kingdom – which is, after all, what this quest is all about.

> "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure that a man discovered hidden in a field. In his excitement, he hid it again and sold everything he owned to get enough money to buy the field. Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant on the lookout for choice pearls. When he discovered a pearl of great value, he sold everything he owned and bought it!"[18]

I pray that in these pages you may find some treasure, some pearls of great value. I pray that you will feel that the work and the journey, the wrestling and the searching have been worth the effort. But, most of all, I pray that as a result of this quest, your experience and participation in worship will be deeper and more transforming, and that

you will enter the daily details of your life and relationships with a new passion, and new commitment to compassion and grace. And I pray, that as a result of the change in you, your world will be a little more whole.

It's time. Let's get started.

Chapter One

An Invitation to Intimacy

I pray that they will all be one, just as You and I are one—as You are in Me, Father, and I am in You. And may they be in Us so that the world will believe You sent Me. I have given them the glory You gave Me, so they may be one as We are one. I am in them and You are in Me. May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that You sent Me and that You love them as much as You love Me. (John 17:21-23)

The first thing that struck me as I walked into the room was how cramped it was. Within minutes I didn't care. I joined the fifty or sixty young people pouring into a space the size of a bedroom, and squeezed onto a tiny square of floor next to the friend who had invited me to this independent, non-denominational youth group. And then the music began. The songs were led by a young, bearded man in his twenties – clearly the leader of the group – playing a 12-string guitar, a tomboyish girl in her late teens on a bass guitar that looked exactly like the one Paul McCartney used to play, and a Mediterranean-looking boy playing a small pair of bongo drums. There were no words displayed or available in any way, but every person in the room was singing.

What really captured my attention, though, was the obvious passion and devotion I saw on the faces of the teenagers around me. They meant every word, using the songs to express the love and joy that was clearly in their hearts. And every ounce of emotion being poured out was being offered to God – a God who was clearly present and very real to each one.

As I allowed myself to be drawn into the act of worship, I recognised the experience as an echo of the night when I had made my first conscious commitment to Christ. I had prayed a simple prayer, kneeling alone at the communion rail in my home church, and I had known this same overwhelming awareness of the divine presence, had been overcome by the same warm wave of emotion. I had thought this was a once-off occurrence related to the significance of the decision I had made a moment ago – a gift from the God I had given myself to confirming that what I had done was real, and inspiring me to continue the journey I had just begun. But, now I realised that initial encounter with God was repeatable, that worship could open the doors of my awareness

to God's presence, that God was accessible to me any time I chose to offer my love and devotion in the simple acts of music, prayer and Scripture reading.

That night, cramped into a tiny room with a crowd of passionate teenagers, I gave myself over to the act of worship for the first time. I have never been the same.

Longings and 'Thin Places'

Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft, is reported to have said this about religion:

> Just in terms of allocation of time resources, religion is not very efficient. There's a lot more I could be doing on a Sunday morning.[19]

I must confess that I am often tempted to agree with him. I am also tempted to believe that I am not alone. In churches across the world, the way we approach Sundays reveals our commitment to efficiency and our struggle with what our worship gatherings are really meant to be. In a desperate attempt to keep people coming back each week, and in a scramble to use the one moment when we know we have the whole community's attention, we fill our services with techniques, information, gimmicks and strategies. We want Sundays to matter, and we long for measurable results, and so we fall into the efficiency trap of trying to get the 'best return' on our 'investment' of time, resources and people power.

But, for those of us who fill the pews each week, we have an uneasy sense that in all this striving, this measuring, this reaching for 'success' we have lost something important. We may not be able to voice exactly what it is, but we know that each week we leave feeling a little disappointed, a little empty and a little less hopeful. At times, when we experience a new way of 'doing worship' or a new musical style, or a new church movement, we may get excited and feel that we've touched something real, but once the novelty has worn off, we discover that all we've done is silence our longing with goose bumps, while our souls remain dry and thirsty. Over a decade ago Sally Morgenthaler, in her book *Worship Evangelism*, bravely blew the whistle on this unspoken crisis:

> We are not producing worshippers... Rather, we are producing a generation of spectators, religious onlookers lacking, in many cases, any memory of a true encounter with God, deprived of both the tangible sense of God's presence and the supernatural relationship their inmost spirits crave. A sickening emptiness pervades much of the born-again experiencing of the 90s, and the hollow rituals played out week after week in so many of our worship centres attest to it.[20]

Unfortunately, very little has changed since those words were written, and Morgenthaler herself has recognised with great disappointment that, rather than heed her warning, many churches simply used her book as the next 'efficient' strategy to 'make church work'.[21] It's as if we have developed a functional atheism, ignoring the reality of which we sing and speak, while embracing corporate strategies that we hope

will bring us worldly success. But for all our efforts, we are unable to silence the cry of our hearts for the reality that we sense is at the heart of worship – genuine, transforming, encounter with a living, loving God.

> What we seek on our journey is not a solution to a problem, not the answer to a question, but an encounter with the mystery of hope that will by very definition far exceed the best efforts of our mind, the utmost limits of our imagination.[22]

The quest for this divine confrontation has always been the centre around which the life of faith is built. Throughout the Scriptures, through every age of the Church, prophets, mystics and apostles have testified to God's availability and have encouraged spiritual seekers to settle for nothing less. The yearning of the Psalmist for God is echoed in every human heart:

> As the deer longs for streams of water, so I long for You, O God. I thirst for God, the living God. When can I go and stand before Him?[23]

It is repeated by the prophets:

> For My people have done two evil things: They have abandoned Me—the fountain of living water. And they have dug for themselves cracked cisterns that can hold no water at all![24]
>
> No, O people, the LORD has told you what is good, and this is what He requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.[25]

It is proclaimed by Jesus – as demonstrated by his prayer in John 17:21:

> "…as You are in Me, Father, and I am in You. And may they be in Us so that the world will believe You sent Me."

And by the apostles of the New Testament Church:

> That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead.[26]

This same longing to know God as a lived reality has been consistently expressed through mystics and theologians in the history of the Church. St. Augustine describes a moving encounter with Christ that resulted in his conversion.[27] The eleventh century mystic, Hildegarde of Bingen, spoke about our response to God's availability as *"yielding ourselves to the Word's brightness and wetness".*[28] The seventeenth century monk, Brother Lawrence, has become well known for his "practicing of the presence of God", and his affirmation that God's presence is available for us to encounter and enjoy at all

times.[29] In the Methodist tradition of which I am part, John Wesley's 'heart warming' experience has always been considered to be available for anyone who seeks relationship with God, and not as a unique experience available to Wesley alone. This is simply a small selection of spiritual pioneers from a long and rich tradition.[30]

The longing that we feel in the Church today is simply the most recent expression of this ancient human need, and there is no shortage of voices calling us to listen to our own hearts and set out on the journey to encounter God. It is in answer to this call that our worship becomes most powerful and most transforming. What we do on Sunday is intended for one purpose, and one purpose only – to bring human beings into deep, passionate, life-changing encounters with the God who made us and to whom we long to return.

For Marcus Borg worship *"is about creating a sense of the sacred, a thin place"*. A thin place is a term used in Celtic Christianity to refer to moments, activities and places where the visible world of our daily lives and the reality of God's presence intersect. A thin place is a place in which we become aware of the reality of God within and beyond our physical world, and in which we are opened up to encounter with this divine reality.

In expanding this idea, Borg continues:

> The diverse forms of Christian worship do this in different ways. At one end of the spectrum, the enthusiasm of Pentecostal worship can become a thin place by mediating an almost palpable sense of the presence of the Spirit. At the other end of the spectrum, Quaker silence serves the same purpose. In liturgical and sacramental forms of worship, the use of sacred words and rituals creates a sense of another world.[31]

Worship and Sex

It is this encounter with the reality of God that we know our worship should provide – even if we don't have the words to express it – and for which we constantly seek. The drive within us to find union with God is so powerful that the Scriptures are surprisingly comfortable using sexual language to describe it. The psalmist, for example, offers this directive: *"Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way."*[32] In Paul's writings the comparison between sex and spirituality becomes even clearer. He contrasts our relationship with God with sexual union with a prostitute[33], and compares it to the sexual union of husband and wife.[34]

This is just a small sample of the biblical testimony, but the message is clear. Worship is, essentially, a union with God, which can be understood by comparing it to the intimate union of human beings. As Rob Bells explains:

> You can't talk about sexuality without talking about how we're made. And that will inevitably lead you to who made us. At some point you have to talk about God.

> Sex. God. They're connected. And they can't be separated. Where the one is, you will always find the other.[35]

How does the connection between sexuality and spirituality help us to understand our worship as a quest for encounter with God? Quite simply, the sexual act is not complete in itself. Rather, the act of intercourse between human lovers is fulfilled only when it is the outward expression of the inner, intimate connection of their hearts and souls. In the same way, our singing, praying, sacraments, rituals, music, banners, Scripture reading and other worship acts are not complete in themselves. These actions are simply the outward expressions of our inner, intimate, spiritual connection with God.

The problem is that all too often we mistake the expression for the reality it is supposed to point to. We make the same mistake in worship that we make with sex. It has become common in our world to use sex as a commodity. Sex sells. Sex is recreation. We even speak about the "sex industry". Somehow the act of sex has become completely disconnected from the intimate longing for union with another person. We no longer yearn for deep, whole-person connection. Monogamy, it seems, has become a rather quaint, but outdated social construction. All we need – or think we need – is a willing partner to help us scratch the physical itch, and then we can go our separate ways with no further responsibility to each other.

But, if you live that way for long enough, you discover an emptiness in your soul, and you realise that sex doesn't work on its own. Without the connection, the intimacy, the giving of your whole self to another, and receiving their whole self in return, the act gets meaningless and unsatisfying – or even destructive – very quickly. And so, too many of us find ourselves on a treadmill, going from partner to partner seeking, unsuccessfully, to fill the hollow inside of us.

This same pattern is played out in our worship every week. We see worship as a commodity. Worship sells (as many Christian artists who have turned to recording 'worship music' have discovered). Worship is recreation (just go to any worship 'concert' to confirm the truth of this). We even have a "worship industry" (which is worth millions of dollars a year). Somehow the act of worship has become completely disconnected from a whole-person commitment to God, and to God's people. Faithfulness to a faith community has become a quaint and outdated social construct. All we need – or think we need – is a willing group to help us get the emotional high we want, and then we can go our separate ways with no further responsibility to each other.

But, if you live that way for long enough, you discover an emptiness in your soul, and you realise that worship – or the outward expression of it – doesn't work on its own. Without the connection, the intimacy, the giving of your whole self to God and God's people, and the receiving of God's Spirit, and the love of a community in return, the act gets meaningless and unsatisfying – or even destructive – very quickly. And so, too many of us find ourselves on a treadmill, going from church to church seeking, unsuccessfully, to fill the hollow inside of us.

It's like we've become focussed on the packaging and forgotten the gift inside. This is why we spend so much time arguing over musical styles and instruments, or over structure versus spontaneity. Ultimately, if we allow ourselves to become obsessed with packaging, we will be trapped by our own preferences, by the fashions of the day, or by both. This has always been the Church's temptation. When Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley were writing their great hymns of faith, there were church leaders that objected strongly to this 'new' music.[36] The great reformer, John Calvin, was so strongly opposed to the organ (known in his day as "the devil's pipes") that he would melt down the pipes in order to use them for other purposes![37] When packaging becomes the focus – whether in the liturgy of traditional worship, the spontaneity of contemporary worship or the creativity of the emerging church – we find we have traded intimacy with God for a good feeling, and we have changed from worshipers to consumers of entertainment.

This is why the Bible uses sexual language to describe our worship. Both the act of sex and the act of worship are only meaningful when they are an outward expression of an inner, intimate reality. C.S. Lewis points to that reality in a beautiful and poetic way:

> I think all Christians would agree with me if I said that though Christianity seems at first to be all about morality, all about duties and rules and guilt and virtue, yet it leads you on, out of all that, into something beyond. One has a glimpse of a country where they do not talk of those things, except perhaps as a joke. Every one there is filled with what we should call goodness as a mirror is filled with light. But they do not call it goodness. They do not call it anything. They are not thinking of it. They are too busy looking at the source from which it comes.[38]

The Experience of Intimacy – Worship Practices

Once we have identified the longing for God in our hearts, and have realised that God longs to fill our desire with God's self, we inevitably begin to ask how we can make intimacy with God a real, lived experience. It is all very well to speak about worship as intimate union with God, but we cannot help but wonder how this connection is practically experienced. This brings us face to face with the reality that these questions move us into a realm beyond words.

As Peter Rollins explains, when we seek intimacy with God, we must recognise that the God we are dealing with is beyond our ability to understand. Christianity is rooted in the belief that God can be known, that God reveals God's self to human beings, but if God is God, even this revelation leads us into 'unknowing', into recognising that God can never really be 'known'. But, at the same time, our hope is that, through God's revelation, we embark on an eternal journey into knowing, and – more importantly – being known by, God. As Rollins explains:

> Hence revelation ought not to be thought of either as that which makes God known or as that which leaves God unknown, but rather as the overpowering light that renders

> God known as unknown. This is not dissimilar to a baby being held by her mother – the baby does not understand the mother but rather experiences being known by the mother.[39]

Intimacy with God, then, is the experience of growing in our awareness of God's knowing of us. Go back and read that sentence again slowly. Worship invites us into particular actions and practices that enable us to know and express this intimacy with God. Many of these worship practices are ancient and have been used by lovers of God for thousands of years. And, not surprisingly, they tend to correspond to similar practices that human lovers have used to enjoy and express their intimacy with one another for thousands of years.

The power in these practices is in their ability to form us, to shape us in certain ways. Worship practices work in our hearts to point our longings and desires toward God and God's Kingdom the same way that acts of human intimacy work on our hearts to point our longings and desires to our lover. As James Smith puts it:

> [T]he way our love or desire gets aimed in specific directions is through practices that shape, mould, and direct our love.[40]

All intimacy – whether with God or with another human being – is really only mutual self-disclosure – the honest and vulnerable opening of our true selves to each other. The practices of love making in the human realm, and the practices of worship in the divine one, are designed to help us achieve this revealing, this disclosing of ourselves to one another, or of ourselves to God. Three 'movements' in intimacy can give us a framework to understand how different practices work to lead us to the goal of intimacy.

God's Story

The first movement in the process of becoming intimate is **attentive listening** – or what I like to call **"your story".** In order for two people to find a deep connection, their 'stories' must be told. As the details of family, schooling, friendships, achievements, failures, celebrations, losses, hopes, dreams, griefs, fears and a myriad other facets of personal experience are shared, the one seeking connection must listen carefully and attentively, openly and with active participation. The act of listening is an act of faith, believing that the 'story' is more than merely a container for information or words, but rather is the vehicle through which the other person's deepest self is being shared. We all know those moments when we've met someone and, as we have engaged in conversation, we have 'clicked'. I would suggest that this is a spiritual connection that is made, for which the conversation was merely the facilitator.

In a similar way, worship invites us into the movement of attentive listening to **God's story.** Each week as we gather, there are certain practices that are designed to draw us into God's story, not so that we can know lots of verses from the Bible, or win religious

general knowledge quizzes, but so that we can experience the 'click' of God's Spirit connecting with ours through the 'story'. As the Psalmist expresses it:

> "Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me. By day the LORD directs his love, at night his song is with me – a prayer to the God of my life."[41]

As we gather, the ancient practices of our liturgy open us to God's story. The first half of the liturgical calendar – from Advent Sunday to Trinity Sunday – is an annual retelling of the story of God's activity in our human world that draws us into a contemporary experience of God's activity in our lives. This is an extended opportunity each year to listen attentively to God's story. In addition, each week, when we offer adoration and thanksgiving, we celebrate who God is and what God has done – this is God's story. When we read the Scriptures and enact the sacraments we remember God's story among us. As we reflect on ancient symbols and rituals we find the deep truths of God's story hidden there. As Robert Webber explains:

> …[W]orship tells and acts out the life, death, resurrection, and coming again of Christ through the proclamation of the Word and the Table.[42]

And again, as we participate in these words and acts, God's Spirit reaches out to our spirits seeking union.

Our Story

The second movement in the process of becoming intimate is **vulnerable sharing** – or what I like to call **"my story".** Intimacy is a two-way process, a dialogue, and so intimacy-seekers need to share themselves through their stories, even as they have listened to the story of the other person. Again, through the words, body language and tone of voice, through actions and gestures, there is more than information being shared – it is the sharing of the self. This means that the depth of intimacy is limited by the depth and vulnerability of the sharing. The deeper and more honest the sharing, the deeper the intimacy. The more that is held back, the more shallow the intimacy becomes.

The same movement is part of our journey into intimacy with God. As we gather, we come to share **our story** with God. It is not that God doesn't know our story. It is, rather, that we need to **know** that God knows our story. Throughout the centuries, certain worship practices have been designed to enable us to do this work of sharing our story in worship.

Every year, the second half of the liturgical calendar – known as Ordinary Time or Kingdom Time – explores how we can live as authentic followers of Christ. This means that we have an extended opportunity to bring our story into the sanctuary and offer ourselves to God. When we come in confession and intercession we share our story.

When we baptise our children, join our lovers in marriage and grieve with the bereaved, we express our story. In our preaching, banners, testimonies and pulpit notices, we tell our story.

We have moments when we tell the universal story of our human condition – the story we all share – of life, growth, love, suffering, rejoicing, weakness and death. We also have moments when we tell our own unique stories. But, whether personal or communal, the telling of our story leads us into intimacy with God, because our spirits reach out to God's Spirit through the words, actions and symbols.

This is why the Scriptures and hymns of Israel, and of the church, are filled with the stories of human beings.[43] If we are to encounter God intimately, we need to bring our true selves into the sanctuary, and allow our worship to facilitate the telling of our stories, because when we do this, our stories are transformed by the God who always chooses to enter – to be incarnated – into them.

> I have come to believe that, essentially, worship cannot take place without our response to God himself, wherein our innermost selves reach out to him. For example, in worship we aren't responding to circumstances and situations in the church or in the world, or to values such as goodness and mercy. As a matter of fact, we are not even responding to life itself. Rather, our response is to God – God the Father, God the son, and God the Holy Spirit. And for me, this response is an awesome and holy aspect of worship.[44]

History

The final movement in the process of intimacy is the element of time – what I like to call **"history".** Intimacy takes time to develop, and as the sharing of stories continues over the years so intimacy grows. In the twenty-four years that my wife, Debbie, and I have been married, we have given an immense amount of time and energy to this sharing of stories, and our intimacy now is far deeper than it was when we first started dating as students at university. This is not because we have continually created amazing experiences, or even had mind-blowing sex at all times. It's because we have continued the work of sharing through both the extraordinary and the mundane.

In the same way, worship is not about creating stirring experiences each week. When we fall into the trap of competing with movies and sports events, we end up being tyrannised by the novel, the exciting, the theatrical, and we lose the heart of the intimacy we seek. Worship is not about goose bump raising experiences so much as it is about the routine – the discipline – of continually sharing with God, and growing gradually deeper in intimacy with the divine. As Craig Groeschel expresses it:

> When we are thirsty for God, God will satisfy that longing. And as we continue to seek God, we'll grow to know Him more and more intimately. When we hear God's voice, we'll recognise it instantly. We'll talk to God all the time and miss him when

> circumstances distract us from his presence. We'll be a history together, storing up story after story of shared experiences.[45]

The practice of history, of showing up week after week to participate in the act of worship, is what moves our intimacy with God ever deeper. This is why we return to worship again and again. This is why the healthiest worship is when we commit to a community and stay faithful to our companions in the journey, worshipping regularly with the same people through good times and bad.

> In a life of faithful worship, our life is not about us. It's about God.
>
> This kind of radical awakening does not occur overnight. It takes time. It is the work of our whole life and is only fully accomplished in eternity. It's the gradual unveiling of what is true, so we are not equipped to move there in just one step. We will move ahead and then back, again and again…
>
> Central to this process is communion not only with the Father, Son and Spirit, but also with the community of God's people, the Church.[46]

A Commitment to Intimacy

In the light of God's invitation to intimacy – to fill the longing in our souls with real experiences of encounter with God – we are faced with a choice. We can decide that this is all too much work, and we can continue to attend worship as an act of going through the motions – or walk away from Sunday services all together. Or we can choose to answer the call, and embrace the journey of worship as the most significant act of our lives, allowing intimacy with God to be our primary quest, and seeking for all that we do and are to be an expression of this intimacy. As Robert Webber describes it:

> Worship is central to all that we do. And for that reason our whole life is both a procession toward worship and a procession out of worship. Life is a cycle of constant return to the source of our new life and to the empowerment for life that we receive from the Christ we meet and celebrate in worship.[47]

If we have the courage to choose intimacy, we will find that Sundays become a very different day for us. In place of the longing, the desperation, the emptiness and frustration, we will be consumed by what Richard Foster calls a 'holy expectancy'. We will gather in the church grateful for these companions who challenge and support us. We will enter the sanctuary with excitement and openness, waiting to see what God has in store. And we will leave, knowing that we are different because we have intentionally basked in God's presence, and have heard God speak. In describing this expectancy, Richard Foster reflects on the way the New Testament Church approached worship:

> As those early believers gathered they were keenly aware that the veil had been ripped

> in two, and, like Moses and Aaron, they were entering the Holy of Holies. No intermediaries were needed. They were coming into the awful, glorious, gracious presence of the living God. They gathered with anticipation, knowing that Christ was present among them and would teach them and touch them with his living power.[48]

I hope that you will make the commitment to intimacy. I believe Jesus when he said that God seeks worshippers who will make this commitment.[49] And I know that the world needs people who will allow the spiritual discipline of worship to change them into Christ-like servants. This transformation is what the spiritual life is all about – it's what worship is all about. And it's what the rest of this book is all about. I hope you're ready to be changed.

Appendix A

Guides for Daily Devotions

This book is not simply about its content. It is meant to be a manual – a journey into a deeper worship life. To facilitate this, I encourage you to set aside a few minutes each day to reflect on the material in each chapter.

The idea is that you take a week to read each chapter slowly and prayerfully, and, while you're doing that, work with the content through Scripture reading, personal reflection and prayer. The following devotional guides are intended to help you do this work.

The readings, reflections and prayers offered here are not meant to be part of the 'teaching' work of the book, but are intended as spiritual exercises. For this reason I have taken a more contemplative approach, coming at the material indirectly, and inviting you to do this work from the heart, more than from the head. You will also notice that some of the prayers use plural language (us, we and our, as opposed to I, me and my). This is to help you remember your connection to the community of faith, even though you may be alone as you do these devotions.

I pray that you will enter into this journey with courage and commitment, and that you will find your heart and soul nourished and challenged as you encounter God each day.

Week One: An Invitation to Intimacy

Day One:

Read: Psalm 42

Reflect:

The cry of the psalmist is the cry of every person who has ever lived. Whether we acknowledge it or not, whether we use the name 'God' or not, we all long for intimacy with God, with Spirit, with the transcendent reality that sustains the universe. Like the psalmist we can all remember times when had a glimpse of this reality, when, in an

unexpected moment, we became gloriously aware of God's presence and love. In this psalm, the writer uses his memory of such a time to inspire and encourage him to hope for the future. Because he once knew intimacy with God, he is able to believe that God is still present even though he may not feel it, and he is able to commit to the quest for intimacy again.

How does the psalmist's longing resonate with you? When have you experienced times of close connection with God? To what extent do you feel that worship draws you into intimacy with God in your life now? How can you commit to the quest for intimacy in a more purposeful, intentional way over the next seven weeks?

Pray:

I am one who seeks after love,
I long for its touch, I yearn for the warm softness of its kiss
In this place I wait
and open my heart
I am one who remembers my Lover,
The God who seeks, the God who calls my name;
The God that I love because God loved me first;
The God who invites me into joyful intimacy;
The Lover whose offer I will not neglect.
This is my time to respond and to worship.
Alleluia.
Amen.

Day Two:

Read: Song of Solomon 1:1-4

Reflect:

The Song of Solomon is an ancient love poem, thought to have been written by King Solomon. The language is passionate and, in places, quite explicit. It is clear that the Scriptures are very comfortable with sexual language.

Throughout the centuries this song has been seen as an allegory of God's love for God's people. It resonates with the sexual language that is used in the Bible to describe our intimacy with God, and invites us to become passionate in our worship of our Divine Lover. There are some reasons why we sometimes get uncomfortable with entering worship in this way, though. For some of us we have separated the spiritual and the physical aspects of our lives so much that it seems wrong to think of worship in this way. For others, particularly men, we have become so used to masculine language – or other-worldly language – for God that we find it uncomfortable to think of God as a 'Lover' like

this. But, perhaps, if we can open ourselves to this idea, and invite God to show us what it might mean for us to experience God intimately and passionately, we can find a new joy and energy in our faith and our worship. Are you willing to try it?

Read the passage again, slowly. How does this language feel to you? In what way could you begin to explore the metaphor of 'Lover' in your relationship with God? How do you think it might change your faith and your worship to begin to embrace true intimacy with God? What might be standing in your way and keeping you from this journey?

Pray:
O Divine Lover,
How relentless You are
in drawing our attention to Your devotion to us:
You embody Yourself in planets and worlds,
in creatures and beauty
and You fill our lives with colour and with joy.

You decant Your desire for us
into the hearts of our friends and families
and touch us through their comfort and their compassion.

Yours is a subversive, uncontainable love, O Beloved.
It finds us even when we try to hide;
It reaches us, though all the world
would seek to build walls against it.
And it has invaded our hearts,
softening them and igniting love for You in us.

We praise You for this love.
And we bring the love-token of our worship in return.

Amen.

Day Three:

Read: John 17:21-23

Reflect:

This prayer is often called "The High Priestly Prayer of Jesus". Here Jesus comes to God and prays on behalf of his followers – those who were with him back then, and those of us who have chosen to follow him throughout the ages since. One word summarises

the content of this prayer – 'unity'. Jesus prays that all his followers would be one; inviting us into the unity Jesus enjoyed with God the Father and the Holy Spirit. The intimate union of the Godhead is available for us to share! And it is in knowing God – in moving into deep connection and union with God – that we find eternal life, abundant life, life to the full (John17:3). What grace and generosity we find in God. What a wonderful opportunity God gives us to live lives that are filled with God's presence.

What do the words "one with God' mean for you? In what ways do you already experience being one with God? How do you think worship can help you to connect with God even more? Why not try and spend today in a constant sense of union with God, and see what kind of difference that makes?

Pray:

You never really get tired of knocking, do you, Jesus?
Your gentle persistence as you seek a welcome
is both amazing and disturbing;

There are times when I wish you would just leave me alone,
times when I don't want to have to deal with you;
Your constant seeking of attention
for the hidden and voiceless ones,
your gentle call to live always from the best of me,
your persistent presence making itself known
in all I do and say and think.

But, most of the time, I am grateful that you seek to be welcomed;
I am glad that you give me the choice to invite you in
and that you welcome me so freely;

It seems strange that, as God, you don't just demand entrance
but wait for me to open the door;
that you don't just radiate your glory
and make your knocking unmistakeable,
instead of hiding in the faces of children and creatures,
earth and sky, broken and wounded ones.

But, for all its mystery, your coming, your knocking,
your gentle asking for access
is a gift beyond measure;
A gift that I receive, when I remember who you are,
with humble thanks and open submission.

Amen.

Day Four:

Read: Isaiah 6:1-9a

Reflect:

In a nation that was in turbulence after the death of good king Uzziah, Isaiah finds his way to the Temple. Here he is confronted with a glorious, disturbing, transforming vision of God. Notice how, although Isaiah is fearful, expecting God's judgement, God is kind, inviting and gracious. It is clear here that although God is glorious and way beyond Isaiah's – or our – attempts to understand God, the Divine Lover seeks relationship with human beings. And as Isaiah accepts God's invitation, he is able to hear God's call, and become a partner with God.

In what ways do you find encountering God frightening? Are there times when you expect nothing but judgement from God? When have you been surprised by God's grace? Think about what it means that God is God – the majestic, eternal Creator of all – and yet, that God seeks relationship with you. How do you feel about this? In what ways can you offer yourself to be God's partner today?

Pray:

We would never have expected it,
but you chose us.
We would never have believed it,
but you have called us to follow you.
We would never have known it could happen,
but you have given us a place
in your liberating work of salvation.

We are people of unclean lips,
sinful men and women,
weak and unworthy to be called by your name;
and yet, against all expectations,
not because we deserve it,
but because you are gracious and loving,
we are chosen.
Thank you.
Amen.

Day Five:

Read: Philippians 2:6-11

Reflect:

This ancient hymn of the Church tells the story of Jesus in a concise and poetic way. This demonstrates both how God's story formed the foundation for the faith of the early Christians, and also how this story was told and retold in their worship. The call of this worship is for followers of Christ to embrace this story-telling not just as mindless repetition, but as an opportunity to open to God's Spirit again, and move into intimacy with God.

In what ways does the hymn of Philippians 2 speak to you of God's story? Read it again slowly, as an act of prayer and worship. As you do, become aware of God's Spirit reaching out to you through the words. Reflect on how this experience feels for you, and ask yourself how you can develop a regular discipline, both in church and on your own, of listening to God's story.

Pray:

Lord Jesus, in You we recognise what life can be:
Recklessly loving, abundantly forgiving, and limitlessly free.
Thank You for offering this life to us again, now.

Thank You for removing the barriers
that would keep us from this life,
and for making us new again.
We praise You for the way You lived – opening doors of pain
and guilt,
and releasing captives.
We praise You for the way You died – forgiving sinners,
and denying revenge.
We praise You for the way You returned from death –
opening graves,
and re-awakening hopes and dreams.
And, we praise You for the way You come to us now –
stirring love in our hearts, and passion in our lives.

Amen.

Day Six:

Read: Hebrews 11:23-40

Reflect:

The Bible is filled with the names of people. The stories of those who lived out their faith in God are an inspiration for us, which is why they are listed in this amazing

passage in Hebrews, but they also indicate a very important truth: our stories are important to God. As we gather for worship, we are invited to bring our shared struggles, and our personal concerns, and we know that God listens and welcomes us. As we cry out or celebrate, dream or wrestle in God's presence, our spirits reach for a connection with God, and God's Spirit is there to receive us. As we bring our stories into the sanctuary, and open our lives to God's grace and love, we find the intimacy with God that we seek.

Take a moment to think about the story of your life as if you were going to tell it to a friend. Go back a few weeks or a month, and think about the high points and the low times, the joys and griefs, the things you were proud of or pleased with and the things you regret. Now, in a simple prayer, offer this story to God. As you do, invite God's Spirit to fill you, and wait for a sense of God's peace or presence to come to you. Now spend a few minutes praying over any specific concerns or longings that you hold in your heart.

Pray:
This is my story, Jesus;
It's very ordinary, very normal;
There are the usual small victories,
small celebrations and signs of new life;
And there are the common small struggles,
small failures and tears of grief.

I offer you my story, Jesus;
Not just as an interesting bunch of facts about me,
but as the pulse of my heart, the rhythm of my life,
As a way of opening myself to your grace and love,
so that we can become one,
and so that my story may reflect your story
a little more clearly.

Amen.

Day Seven:

Read: Hebrews 10:21-25

Reflect:

We may wish that life and faith were easy, that we could enjoy the best of both with minimal work and commitment, but we know this is not the case. All good things cost us in sweat and sometimes in tears. That's why the Bible often encourages us to "hold fast"

or "hold on tightly" to our faith, to our hope, to our love, to God's promises, to God's Spirit. A big part of "holding on tightly" is to find encouragement in our gathering together, and in the regular, sustained disciplines of faith. It is as we continue, day after day, week after week, to pray, read the Scriptures, sing, share in Communion and meet in gatherings of worship that we build a history with God that takes our intimacy with God ever deeper. That's why we are encouraged not to give up meeting together.

How do you feel when it's time to go to church? Are you excited and expectant, or do you find it hard to motivate yourself to go? How do you feel about the idea that faith takes work, discipline, and sustained repetition of the act of worship? Have you fallen into 'consumer Christianity' where you go to church for the 'high' and to be entertained – for what you can "get out of it"? Or have you made a commitment to show up each week not for the goose bumps, not for the people, not for the spectacle, but for the long-term nourishment of your soul? Can you make – or renew – such a commitment today, and embrace your church as the place that helps you to build a history of intimacy with God?

Pray:
Sometimes it's hard, Jesus,
to work on my soul;
When each day is filled with bills to pay,
and the demands of people,
When I feel so often like I just need a break,
a time to rest without the need for discipline.

But, I do know, although I forget sometimes,
that my soul needs regular care,
regular feeding and nurture,
just like my body.
And so I pray that you would help me
to see past the things that I don't like
in some of my fellow worshippers;
to let go of my need
to be entertained or hyped up;
to stop focusing on short-term thrills,
or easy quick-fix spirituality.

Help me to find my place among your people,
to find the glory in a community of faith,
and to find the nourishment my soul needs,

in the discipline of building a history
of constant intimacy with you.

Amen.

This sample PDF includes just the first week of daily devotional guides. The complete book includes a full fifty days of devotional guides for personal daily use.

Appendix B

Guidelines for Small Groups

A significant part of the Christian journey is sharing with, and learning from, one another. Throughout the Church's history this has often been done in small groups, with great effect. The Wesleyan revival, which employed the "class meeting" is one significant example. As a result, the journey of this book includes guidelines for small group meetings, allowing members to interact with the material on a deeper level, and learn from one another as they wrestle together. Since the journey is fifty days, there are only seven small group meetings; each one built around one of the main chapters in the book. The introduction and chapter one should be read before the first meeting, and then each chapter should be read before the meeting dealing with that chapter. The conclusion can be read after the last meeting as a final, personal commitment to take the journey into the rest of life.

Each week, the structure of the meetings is built around the classic cell group format, and includes an ice-breaker, worship suggestions, and questions for reflection around the chapter and one main Scripture reading. These suggestions are all just guidelines, and small group leaders should feel free to adapt them as necessary. If your group is not comfortable with singing, either just skip the musical suggestions, or just read the words or listen to a recording.

The small group journey will, of course, be much deeper and more effective if each person also commits to following the daily devotional guide in Appendix A, and to worship services over the eight Sundays of the journey. I pray that you find this to be a helpful resource, and that your experience of worship, and of the life that flows from it, is deepened over the next few weeks as a result.

Week One: An Invitation to Intimacy

Ice Breaker:
Can you remember the first time you fell in love, or the first time you noticed someone who was deeply in love? Describe the experience to your group.

Worship:

Begin with an open time of prayer, in which group members are invited to offer prayers of love and devotion to God, either silently or out loud.

When you feel that enough time has been allowed for prayer, read Psalm 63:1-8 (if the members of your group are comfortable to read out loud, ask them to read one verse each in turn). Then spend some time singing two or three hymns of love. Some examples could be *Love Divine, All Loves Excelling, My Jesus I Love Thee, O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go, I Love You, Lord, Breathe, Here I Am To Worship.*

When the music is finished, spend a few moments in silence inviting God to make you aware of God's love for you, and offer your love in return. Then think about people and situations you know where God's love is needed and lift them to God in prayers of intercession.

Close with a short time of sharing how you experienced God's love during this time of worship, and give thanks together.

Questions for Reflection:

Read John 17:21-23 and discuss the following questions together:

1. What do you think Jesus meant when he prayed that as God was in him, and he was in God, so we would be in God? (Vs.21)
2. When have you been aware of a longing for God within you? What made you aware of it?
3. How have you experienced being one with God?
4. In what ways does worship help you to experience your unity with God, and then live your life out of that unity?

This sample PDF includes just the first week of small group guides. The complete book includes seven weeks of guides just like this for small group or cell group use.

Appendix C

Guidelines for Sunday Worship

It should come as no surprise, after the Introduction to this book, that I believe in the power of Sunday services to open us to God's transforming Spirit. As a result of this, I have included this final Appendix, a collection of suggestions for the eight Sunday services of this fifty-day journey. Each Sunday is based on one of the Chapters of the book, starting at Chapter One. The Eighth Sunday is a final ending for the journey, and so relates loosely to the Conclusion, but is really an opportunity for you to lead your congregation into whatever direction this quest has suggested for you. The best use of these resources is if the whole church is sharing together in reading the book, practicing the daily devotions, and meeting in small groups.

All the resources and ideas listed here are offered not as directives, but as suggestions, as stimulants for your own creativity. As such, they can and should be adapted, used or discarded according to your church's specific needs. All I ask is that the content of the book be kept as the primary guideline.

The prayers can be used as is, or replaced with prayers from the daily devotions or from another source entirely. The liturgies that are suggested are for use, either without the Eucharist as an additional source of prayers, or with Holy Communion, as the basis for the service. They are all from my first book *Food for the Road – Life Lessons from the Lord's Table*, and are available as free downloads from Sacredise.com.

I need to offer an apology to those whose worship does not follow English language customs. In South Africa, in particular, where we have eleven official languages, and a number of different worship traditions, many of the hymns mentioned here will hold little relevance. Likewise, the prayers may need translation of idiom and form as much as of language. I can only offer the following defence: my work arises from my own primary context, which is English, and which employs a worship form that blends traditional and contemporary elements. Further, my work is primarily used by churches that have a similar worship 'culture'. I hope, though, that the suggestions offered here may still provide stimulus for creative practice in worship in whatever context this book is used.

Finally, I pray that your worship may be deep, celebratory and transforming as you journey together in the Hour That Changes Everything.

Week One: An Invitation to Intimacy

Readings:
Ezekiel 16:4-14
Psalm 42
Ephesians 5:21-32
John 17:1-5, 20-26

Sermon Starter:
The key to this week's worship is the availability of union with God. Each of these passages speaks in a different way about how God longs for intimacy with human beings. The Ezekiel prophecy uses the image of an infant girl found abandoned, nurtured and raised into a beautiful woman, who is then claimed by God as God's bride. The Psalm speaks of the longing God has for us, and us for God, in the language of the depths within us calling out for connection. Paul's letter to the Ephesians uses the metaphor of the marriage union to reflect the union of Christ and the Church, and in Jesus' prayer he prays for us to know God's love, revealed in Christ, and to be one with the Godhead, even as God is one within God's self. This is the invitation to intimacy that God offers.

The worship will flow into the journey of this chapter (which continues through the personal devotions and small group meetings this week) if it is allowed to connect with the longing of God's people for a real, lived experience of God, and if it reassures the worshippers that God does not play "hard-to-get". Try to start the journey off with a real sense of meeting with God, and with a message that creates a sense of expectation and welcome for God's people. Help listeners to know that the adventure of the next few weeks is not simply an academic exercise, but, while deepening understanding, will be an experiential encounter with God. The metaphors of intimacy, of getting married, or of falling in love, can all be used as possible contact points and 'hooks' for driving the message home.

Prayers:
An Invitation To Intimacy

How can it be that you, Great God,
  should long for us?
How can it be that you seek us out,
  longing for connection,
    intimacy,
  for the opportunity to give yourself again,

freely, recklessly,
to enfold us in your love?

It seems impossible that we could find such union with you,
that we could truly know you,
and experience true connection with you;
But this is what you promise,
this is your invitation,
this is what true God-seekers have always found
when they have embraced the quest.

We praise you, Great God, for your availability,
for your humility and hospitality,
and with grateful hearts,
we accept your invitation today.
Amen.

Intimacy Lost And Found

Though you long for us and we long for you, O God,
we still wander lost and alone,
bringing pain and grief
to ourselves and others;

Though you seek us out, and we want to be found, O God,
we still forget or deny your presence,
living as if you did not exist,
and becoming addicted to things that do not satisfy;

Though you invite us into intimacy, O God,
we still choose cold legalism and dry observance,
leaving our souls empty and thirsty,
and passing our lifelessness on to others;

Forgive us when, through ignorance, neglect or choice,
we miss the opportunity for union with you,
and we fail to receive and share abundant life because of it;
Teach us to live in this world as lovers of God,
to move through this world always in your presence,
and to touch the world always with your healing;

May peace and joy and love be spread
to every corner of our world,
as our worship and our lives draw all others
into your embrace.

Amen.

Liturgy:
A Liturgy for Communion

Hymn Suggestions:
Love Divine, All Loves Excelling
O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go
My Jesus I Love Thee, I Know Thou Art Mine
Great Is Thy Faithfulness
I Love You, Lord
Breathe
Here I Am To Worship
Creator King

This sample PDF includes just the first week of the Sunday service guides. The complete book includes guides and suggestions for eight Sunday's of worship, to ensure that the congregational journey is supported by the Sunday worship experience.

Notes

Introduction – A Roadmap for the Journey

1 From the Foreword to Kimball, Dan; *Emerging Worship – Creating Worship Gatherings for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), p.vi.

2 Significant research into this was done by my friend and colleague Rev. Dr. Dion Forster, and presented in the Hugh Price Hughes lecture, *Revolution or Evolution? Considering the impact of 'emerging church' conversations on the mission and ecclesiology of established churches,* that he delivered at the Hinde Street Methodist Church in London, England in March 2009. I have received a transcript of the lecture from Dion (it can also be downloaded from this url: http://www.hindestreet.org.uk/Groups/14858/Hinde_Street_Methodist/Thinking/Hugh_Price_Hughes/Hugh_Price_Hughes.aspx - scroll down for the 2009 lectures), and it makes disturbing, but challenging and hopeful, reading.

3 Kevin Light, a former Methodist minister, and the founder and director of *Labyrinth – The Movement* in Cape Town, in private communication.

4 As the authors note on p.15: *"In fact, the title of this book,* unChristian, *reflects outsiders' most common reaction to the faith: they think Christians no longer represent what Jesus had in mind, that Christianity in our society is not what it was meant to be."* Kinnaman, David & Lyons, Gabe, *UnChristian* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007).

5 Kimball, Dan; *Emerging Worship – Creating Worship Gatherings for New Generations*, p.2-3.

6 See Isaiah 58.

7 Isaiah 58:13.

8 Amos 5:21-24.

9 1 Corinthians 11:17-32.

10 Foster, Richard J., *Celebration of Discipline* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), p.207.

11 White, Susan, J.; *The Spirit of Worship – The Liturgical Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999), p.15.

12 Ibid. p.16.

13 This statement was made as part of a sermon that Bill Hybels preached at the Willow Creek Arts Conference in June 2000, at which I was a delegate.

14 Although I have encountered it before in other places, this quote is drawn from this Wikipedia article: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Temple_%28archbishop%29.

15 From the hymn, *When I Survey The Wondrous Cross*, written by Isaac Watts (1674-1748). Public Domain.

16 This story, and more detail on William Temple's life, can be found in this article by James Kiefer: http://satucket.com/lectionary/william_temple.htm.

[17] This particular version of Temple's definition is taken from Foster, Richard J., *Celebration of Discipline*, p.199.

[18] Matthew 13:44-46.

Chapter One – An Invitation to Intimacy

[19] Quoted in a Time Magazine article in Vol.149, No.2 (13 January 1997). I sourced the quote from the WikiQuote web site at this url: http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Bill_Gates.

[20] Morgenthaler, Sally, *Worship Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), p.17.

[21] This sense of frustration and disappointment was expressed in an article that Sally wrote for the May/June issue of REV! Magazine, called *Worship as Evangelism: Sally Morgenthaler rethinks her own paradigm*. The whole article can be found on the REV! Magazine site here: http://www.rev.org/article.asp?ID=2409.

[22] Kirvan, John, *Silent Hope: Living With The Mystery Of God* (Notre Dame: Sorin Books, 2001), p.20.

[23] Psalm 42:1-2.

[24] Jeremiah 2:13.

[25] Micah 6:8.

[26] Philippians 3:10 (KJV).

[27] The testimony of Augustine's conversion has been recorded in a number of works with which I have engaged over the years. I am particularly grateful, though, for the simple and concise way it is described in Susan J. White's book *The Spirit of Worship* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1999) p.13.

[28] See Nash, Wanda, *Gifts from Hildegarde* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1997), p.27.

[29] See Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God,* edited and paraphrased by Donald E. Demaray, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975).

[30] It is beyond the scope of this book to give a historical overview of writings about encounter with God in the various spiritual traditions of the Church. There are many helpful resources to pursue further study. One book that I have found particularly helpful and concise is Kenneth Leech's manual for spiritual direction *Soul Friend* (London: Sheldon Press, 1977). See especially pp.139-154.

[31] Borg, Marcus, *The Heart of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), p.157.

[32] Psalm 2:12a (NIV). Other versions use words like "submit" to express the intent of this verse, but the original word is best translated by the NIV's "kiss".

[33] 1 Corinthians 6:16,17.

[34] Ephesians 5:31,32.

[35] Bell, Rob, *Sex God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), p.15.

[36] See, for example, Wilson-Dickson, A., *The Story of Christian Music* (Oxord: Lion Publishing plc, 1992), p. 85.

[37] Blume, F., *Protestant Church Music* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1974), p.14.

[38] Lewis, C.S., *Mere Christianity* (Glasgow: Fount Paperbacks (Thirty-sixth impression) 1982), p.129.

[39] Rollins, Peter, *How (Not) To speak Of God* (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2006), p.17.

[40] Smith, James K. A., *Desiring The Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), p.80.

[41] Psalm 42:7 (NIV).

[42] Webber, Robert E., *Worship is a Verb* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992), p.45.

[43] One good example of this is Psalm 136.

[44] Webber, Robert E., *Worship is a Verb*, p.110.

[45] Groeschel, Craig, *The Christian Atheist: Believing in God but living as if he doesn't exist* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), p.34.

[46] Labberton, Mark, *The Dangerous Act Of Worship* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2007), p.168f.

[47] Webber, Robert E., *Worship is a Verb*, p.213.

[48] Foster, Richard J., *Celebration of Discipline* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), p.203f.
[49] John 4:21-24.