

# WORSHIP, GOD'S HOLINESS, AND OUR NEED TO GROW

*Russell Herbert*



*RUSSELL HERBERT LOOKS AT WORSHIP FROM A THREE DIMENSIONAL ANGLE: IT SHOULDN'T BE LIKE THIS, IT HASN'T ALWAYS BEEN LIKE THIS, AND IT NEEDN'T BE LIKE THIS. A PAPER, COMMISSIONED BY MET IN OUR SERIES TO MARK THE 200TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE TURNAROUND PLAN OF THE 1820 LIVERPOOL CONFERENCE.*

When I was a child back in the 1980s, I had serious reservations about spending eternity in heaven. My reason was quite simple. I had picked up on several references to heaven being a place of worship, and as such I had this suspicion that it would be nothing other than one endless church service. I couldn't think of anything more dull and boring.

The church I attended was a Methodist one. The people were lovely - amazing actually. I came to Christian faith because of these people, their love and care for us as young people, and

the activities and events they arranged for us, most of which did not involve sitting in the pew for Sunday services. But on the odd occasion when it did, my experience was not one of having my heart strangely warmed, but my bum strangely numbed. It wasn't just that the pews were uncomfortable. The services could be painfully boring. I could just about endure an hour on a Sunday morning every now and then, but eternity? No thanks.

Suffice to say, my understanding of both worship and eternity have changed and developed considerably since then. But can the same be said of Methodist Sunday services?

In many ways, I think they have progressed, a lot. Many churches are now unafraid to ask critical questions about how their worship services are planned and led in such a way as to be purposefully creative, engaging and meaningful for people of all ages and stages. As a result, what might have been regarded as 'alternative' even 20 years ago has now become commonplace. The use of multimedia and the expansion in the variety of music

are just two examples of such progress. And at the risk of overgeneralising, my observation is that churches that are proactive in their quest to be interesting and relevant while refusing to dilute anything of the Christian gospel tend to be those that are growing.

But as we are all too painfully aware, the wider picture of Methodism in the UK is not one of growth. Congregations are shrinking, membership diminishing and churches closing. Should it surprise us, honestly, that this is the story right across a denomination in which many local churches seem to be unwilling to face up to the reality that what is generally served up in a Sunday service is, for the majority of the British population, frankly boring?

It shouldn't be like this, it hasn't always been like this, and it needn't be like this. But before we get on to that, there are three things that will be helpful to set out for the sake of focus and clarity. First, we must acknowledge that any discussion about worship has about it the real danger of descending into nothing more than a personal rant. Having served nearly twenty-five

years as a minister, I can confidently say that if you ever want to see how easy it is for an argument to break out in a local church, just invite people to discuss what they don't like about the worship. As human beings we're all different, with diverse tastes and preferences. If we're going to talk constructively about worship, we must get beyond that and, to risk a cliché, 'get over ourselves', so we can focus on biblically theological principles rather than personal axe-grinding.

Second, and this relates closely to the first point, let's remember that worship means more than just music. Singing is of course an important part of worshipping. The overall mood and tone of a service can be significantly shaped by the type of music it features. There may be a sense in which Methodism was indeed 'born in song', but to regard worship exclusively or even just primarily in terms of musical expression would be blinkered and misleading.

Third, let's not forget that worship is much more than what happens in a Sunday service, or indeed, any gathered context. A truly holistic discussion of the subject would take account of what it means to express worship as individuals in our daily lives. It is only because of time and space limitations that the present discussion will confine itself to the theme of congregational worship.

So having set out those three caveats, let's unpack my somewhat blunt assertion that when it comes to many typical Methodist worship services, the problem is that they're simply boring. I'll try to explain why that is my perception, and more importantly, suggest how we might do something positive about it. The discussion will be structured around my triple-pronged contention above: it shouldn't be like this, it hasn't always been like this, and it needn't be like this.

#### IT SHOULDN'T BE LIKE THIS

In the words of the Methodist Church's Our Calling statement, when it comes to worship, 'The Church exists to increase awareness of God's presence and to celebrate God's love'. Worship is not about us - it's about God. This powerful truth is disarmingly simple yet is a profound reality: when God is at the centre, we will most certainly not be bored. Nothing engages our thoughts and affections with more relevance and meaning than a sense of God's presence.

It is important to point this out because a danger inherent in any critical discussion of worship is that a focus on the concern for human relevance obscures the very theme that ought to be central - namely divine holiness. In her book, *Groundwork of Christian Worship*, Susan White highlights that for all the various understandings of worship as a human activity, we should never lose sight of the essential truth that

worship is 'the arena of transcendence' in which our encounter with the wholly-otherness of God takes place. While it is important to reflect critically on what we do in worship, we must beware the danger of making that the lens through which we look at it, and in so-doing, domesticating the holiness of God.<sup>1</sup>

I want to suggest that it is precisely when we forget about transcendence, albeit inadvertently, that worship ceases to be worship, in any authentic sense. The result is that it quickly gets very boring and irrelevant. Worship that has forgotten about connecting with God's holiness is dull and lifeless because it's got little to do with the reality of God and the importance of that reality in daily life. It is in God's wholly-otherness that God calls us into relationship with him, and when we meet with that transcendence the otherwise ordinariness of our humanity is transformed. Without it, there's no sense of encounter - just Methodist activity which, as Wesley warned, has 'the form of religion' but 'without the power'.

So just how might this sense of the transcendent be lacking in some of our services? Well, it's a bold criticism to make, and I'm mindful of my own warning that a discussion like this could too easily become a rant. I'm also wary of how abstract assertions can become

1. Susan White, *Groundwork of Christian Worship* (Epworth Press, 1997), pp. 12-15.

over-generalisations. With these risks in mind, there is one key challenge that I shall highlight, and it has to do with what I believe might be most accurately described as a fundamental disconnect between the holiness of God and the human grittiness of everyday life. Both these themes need to be made explicit in our worship, but I fear that this is not always the case.

It's a two-fold challenge. On the one hand, worship services that only emphasise theological statements through hymnody, liturgy, word and sacraments but without making reference to what these things mean in daily practical living (and in everyday language) risk circumventing what is on the hearts and minds of the congregation. Nobody comes to church empty handed. We all bring our hopes, fears, joys, sorrows, aspirations, worries and struggles. Such things constitute the ordinariness of human life and if we think we leave it at home on a Sunday then we're kidding ourselves. This is the very stuff that needs to be named, talked about, sung about and prayed into. But how often is it, really?

That said, there are all too many times when human experience actually becomes the dominant theme in a worship service. And there lies the other side of this difficult challenge. Sometimes it's more subtle than at others, but you may have noticed how such an emphasis can all too quickly squeeze

out any reference to the transforming power of God's holiness. It happens when hymnody gets swamped with the language of emotion, focusing not on God but on how we feel about God. It happens when instead of engaging in prayer that seeks to commune with the living God, we are led in poetic reflections in which attention is primarily given to the journey of life in very broad terms. And it happens when sermons cease to be messages of the saving power of Christ and become instead discourses about what it is to be human. But then, what can we expect when so many preachers now default to a way of doing theology that centres so heavily on the voice of human experience, carelessly overlooking the fact that in Wesley's quadrilateral, experience, alongside reason and tradition were only ever intended to be regarded as sub-authorities under the supremacy of Scripture?

We need to rediscover the power of the transcendent. We need to rediscover the gospel that connects the holiness of God and the human grittiness of everyday life. As Eugene Peterson wrote, 'Worship is the strategy by which we interrupt our preoccupation with ourselves and attend to the presence of God'<sup>2</sup>. For that to happen, I believe we need to rediscover the importance of spiritual growth and ongoing renewal in worship, because that is the arena

2. Eugene Peterson, *Leap Over a Wall: Earthly Spirituality for Everyday Christians* (Harper, 1997), p. 152.

within which the ordinariness of the human meets with and is transformed by the transcendence of the divine. In other words, we need to relearn the sense of expectation that whenever we worship, we will grow in some way.

#### IT HASN'T ALWAYS BEEN LIKE THIS

A highly regarded treatise among Wesley's Oxford contemporaries was Henry Scougal's *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*. The title captures something that lay at the heart of Wesley's vision. To be a Christian is to know God's presence as a living, dynamic and personal reality who is continually at work within us, refashioning our humanity in God's image. That begins with 'conversion' - the 'new birth' or 'regeneration', but this is only the start. The lifelong process of 'sanctification' is every bit as vital. Thus conversion as an event and sanctification as an ongoing process are virtually inseparable within a single vision of transformation.<sup>3</sup> Wesley said:

*Regeneration...is only the threshold of sanctification - the first entrance upon it. And as in the natural birth a man is born at once, and then grows larger and stronger by degrees, so in the spiritual birth a man is born at once, and then gradually increases*

3. For a comprehensive exposition of the holistic nature of Wesley's vision see Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Abingdon Press, 1998).



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in spiritual stature and strength. The new birth, therefore, is the first point of sanctification, which may increase more and more unto the perfect day.<sup>4</sup>

In no way does this undermine the 'once for all' nature of salvation at the point of conversion, by which the believer has the inner assurance by faith that they have been saved. Wesley was simply determined to emphasize that conversion is not regarded as the end of a process. Rather, we need to go on being transformed throughout our lives:

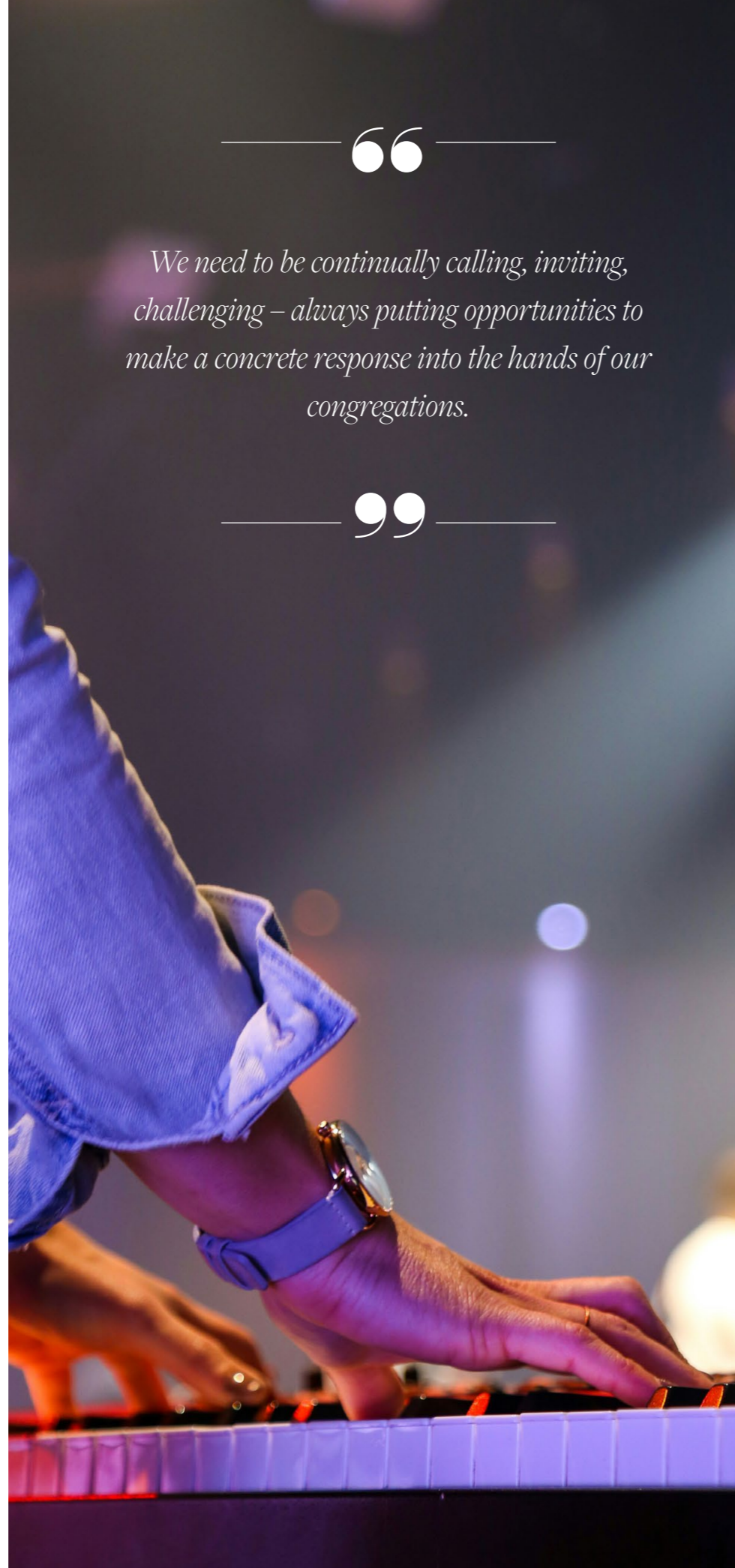
*Yea, and when ye have attained a measure of perfect love, when God has...enabled you to love him with all your heart and all your soul, think not of resting there. That is impossible. You cannot stand still; you must either rise or fall - rise higher or fall lower. Therefore the voice of God to the children of Israel, to the children of God is 'Go forward.' 'Forgetting those things that are behind, and reaching forward unto those that are before, press on to the mark, for the prize of your high calling of God in Christ Jesus!'<sup>5</sup>*

There is no 'standing still'. That was unthinkable for Wesley. We should expect to grow. Faith is not a static entity. If it were fixed, that would be to reduce it to a belief system, a set of doctrines or a moral code. Such things may denote some of the various aspects of faith, but as a living, organic reality, it can only be properly and fully understood in more dynamic terms. Christian faith is about knowing God in a relationship, where God's transcendence meets with our humanity. It's about vibrance, movement and development, ever seeking to 'grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ'.<sup>6</sup>

The historic Methodist 'movement' (literally) is founded on this conviction. As such, if we are to take seriously the Our Calling declaration that in worship we seek to 'increase awareness of God's presence', then we need to renew

*We need to be continually calling, inviting, challenging – always putting opportunities to make a concrete response into the hands of our congregations.*

4. Wesley's sermon, 'On God's Vineyard', cited in Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation*, p. 82.  
5. Wesley's sermon, 'On Faith', cited in Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation*, p. 84.  
6. 2 Peter 3:18.



our expectation that growth can and will happen. There are some practical things we can do about this.

#### IT NEEDN'T BE LIKE THIS

We have noted that authentic Christian worship focuses on God, not us. Such a focus will bring growth in us as God's holiness is at work in our humanity. It's God, not our human effort, that makes such growth happen. But there are practical things we can do in order to open up opportunity for this in worship. The wider church needs to be aware of these things, but let's start by focussing on the role of those who are specifically responsible for leading gathered worship.

#### Ministers, local preachers and worship leaders

When we're preparing to lead worship, we need to pay very close attention to the question of how we might enable others to make some sort of response. This is essentially how we can translate our commitment to growth as a theological conviction into a practical opportunity for those we lead.

Now, to my brothers and sisters who share in this ministry, as well as to myself, I put the following questions, and I make no apology for their bluntness:

- When we come to lead worship, just how strong is our conviction that growth is likely to take place?
- Do we really expect lives to be genuinely changed?
- Do we actually anticipate that there will be a difference in the hearts and minds of the people in our congregations as a direct consequence of their experience of the worship in which we have led?

I put these questions not in an accusatory way, but from my own familiarity with leading worship week-in, week-out. Under the pressure to produce material and get things like readings, songs and orders of service into the hands of music groups, organists, stewards and whoever else needs them, the danger is that everything starts to get all too routinised. That may not mean that the integrity of what is prepared becomes compromised. The gospel may well

still be proclaimed. But in the urgency to get everything ready, there is a genuine risk that we lose sight of the question, 'how might every member of the congregation be afforded the opportunity to make some kind of personal response?'

We need to ask this question not simply as an extension of our planning once we've settled on the message that is going to be preached in the service, but right at the outset. We need to be continually calling, inviting, challenging – always putting opportunities to make a concrete response into the hands of our congregations. Only when worship and preaching keeps us all on our toes with the fact that God continually calls us to make decisions for him, will such ministry be serious about the provision of occasions to respond so that growth may occur.<sup>7</sup> And that begins with a genuine expectation in the hearts and minds of leaders that God can and will indeed 'enter every trembling heart'.

#### The wider church

Let us not assume that the responsibility to nurture a culture of growth-expectation is the exclusive domain of those who lead worship. That won't do. And yet the abdication of such responsibility is all too prevalent within our churches. Just how often do we hear someone bemoan that they choose to stay away from a Sunday service for a whole host of different reasons such as their dislike of the person who is planned to preach, or the fact that it's all-age worship, or a service with prayers for healing and wholeness, or something else that doesn't accord with their own personal tastes and preferences? Such individualist and consumerist spirituality is endemic, and indicative of the tragic way in which worship has been reduced to some kind of commodity. In some ways it can be seen as a natural consequence of the way in which church services have become a passive experience for those who are not leading. While

7. For more about the link between growth and responding in worship, see Russell Herbert, *Growing Through the Church* (Kevin Mayhew, 2012), particularly Chapter 8, 'Calling everyone: services with responsibility'. See also David Flavell, *Vote for Jesus* (Kevin Mayhew, 2002).

this reinforces the need for those who do lead to wake up to the importance of being more engaging by providing opportunities to respond, the challenge to approach worship with a deeper expectation and greater readiness to grow is something of which we must all take ownership. We need to do more than pay lip service when we sing of that desire to be 'changed from glory into glory'.

I'm pleased to say that my childhood reservations about spending eternity in worship have long since been dispelled. I don't attribute that to any human maturation of my own making. I'm pretty sure that left to my own devices I'd still be stuck in my personal hang-ups and probably would have given up on church a long time ago. But that's not what happened. I encountered God. I haven't time to share that story now. All I will say is that it's a story in which I discovered that worship that's focused on God and not something else is not boring, because God is most certainly not boring.

*The Revd Dr Russell Herbert is Superintendent of the Gordano Valley Circuit and minister at Christchurch Ecumenical Partnership and Kenn Road Methodist Church in Clevedon, North Somerset. He is author of several books, including 'Growing through the Church' (Kevin Mayhew, 2012), 'Living Hope' (Kevin Mayhew, 2014) and 'Halfway Home? Finding faith in mid-life' (Kevin Mayhew, 2019).*

