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FOREWORD BY RORY NOLAND

H O N E S T
W O R S H I P

FROM FALSE SELF TO TRUE PRAISE

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One

HOLY SMOKE

Then he was told, “Go, stand on the mountain
at attention before GOD. GOD will pass by.”

A hurricane wind ripped through the mountains
and shattered the rocks before GOD, but GOD
wasn’t to be found in the wind; after the wind an
earthquake, but GOD wasn’t in the earthquake; and
after the earthquake fire, but GOD wasn’t in the fire;
and after the fire a gentle and quiet whisper.

When Elijah heard the quiet voice, he muffled
his face with his great cloak, went to the
mouth of the cave, and stood there.

1 KINGS 19:11-13 *THE MESSAGE*

MY TEENAGE SON, JUSTIN, had been invited to an area church
by a friend. Since he had grown up as a PK (pastor’s kid) and had
never been to a megachurch like this before, I wondered what
impression it might give him.

Sure enough, soon after his experience, Justin asked me a
question: “Why do they need smoke machines in church?”

There was much I could have said in that moment. I could have contrasted different philosophies of ministry, especially in relation to the seeker movement in our postmodern culture, and explained how some view the Sunday service as having components of both worship and evangelism. I could have articulated the differences between entertainment and engagement and how the two, while they may look similar, are very different in intent and outcome. And I could have passionately shared my deeply held convictions on worship theology, what it means to come before the throne of God as the people of God, the bride and the Bridegroom, the community of believers with the community of the Godhead. But I didn't.

Instead I simply replied, "Well, technically, you need the smoke machines to be able to see the lasers."

THE STATE OF THE ART

Generalizing broadly, worship in a number of churches today is a far cry from that of previous generations. Computer-controlled concert lighting, digital automated sound systems, high decibels, and high-definition screens create a dynamic, multisensory experience. On the expansive platform, talented musicians command center stage, performing the current worship songs with note-for-note perfection, underscored by click tracks and drum loops. Ushers greet people warmly, offering ear plugs along with the bulletins. There's an emphasis on branding, social media, and corporate organization. There may even be a hipster self-awareness that permeates the room, an anti-fashion fashionableness.

These churches, which some refer to as "attractational model," carefully and purposefully design high-impact experiences to

attract people to their weekend services. With roots that trace through the seeker movement of the eighties and nineties, they understand that high production values and marquee personalities both attract nonbelievers and retain believers. High-tech media and pop style are the vernacular of modern culture and can be used to effectively speak into that culture. And to these churches' credit, many people come and worship God, mature as Christians, and share their faith.

Smaller churches, which often sit in the shadows of their neighboring megachurches, are also swept into the slipstream of this cutting edge. Small and medium-sized churches are often caught in the whirlwind of trying to modernize technology, media, facilities, web presence—and talent. Even volunteer worship leaders feel the pressure to “sound like the record” when they lead worship.

Due to the explosion of the worship industry in the last decade (from CDs to radio airplay to major concert tours), musical selection in worship services has become more important than ever. People want to hear their latest favorite worship songs. And while the worship wars of the previous generation are generally a distant memory, we are still jounced by their wake. Hymn books, pipe organs, and choirs have become anachronisms. Some churches have settled on separate services, providing traditional and blended alternatives. While this pragmatism has proved workable for many churches, the issue remains that worship has too often devolved into stylistic preferences.

In the midst of these sweeping trends, some attenders succumb to the temptation to church-hop, sampling church services like so many downtown restaurants. Many older attenders are unsettled, even exasperated by the changes, and make it their

business to rally for some semblance of familiarity, for hymns and “praise choruses.” Some young and old, unimpressed by the high production values of today’s churches, are instead turning to liturgy, to quieter, ancient-future expressions of the faith, in order to meet an unhurried God.¹ Others, seeking more organic community, are attending intimate, high-touch house churches. But the disturbing trend is that some people—from boomers to millennials—are choosing to leave the institution of the church entirely. Perhaps they have been jaded by the experience of church or the attitudes of the attenders, like Dorothy discovering the wizard behind the curtain. Or perhaps the world’s distractions are simply too big and too loud to ignore.

Certainly the church is in flux. And the implications for worship—and the worshiper—are many.

Now, I’m not doubting the sincerity or integrity of any of these churches or of their leaders. I firmly believe that these churches are filled with good-hearted, God-focused people who are trying to do their best to further the kingdom. I also don’t have anything against high-tech production or hip music or excellence in the arts. Cutting-edge worship music is a staple at the church I pastor, and for many years I’ve been an outspoken advocate for the arts in the church and for artists of faith. This is an exciting time to be an artist of faith, and I’m grateful to be a part of it all. Further, I have many friends and associates who minister in both small churches and megachurches, and I know them to be God-honoring Christ-followers. But there are pitfalls and tripwires all around these issues of which we must be acutely aware. As A. W. Tozer warned, “Worship is no longer worship when it reflects the culture around us more than the Christ within us.”²

At the crux of all these trends is the desire to help worshipers worship, to meet God in a transcendent and transformative way, and to give God glory. And that's a good thing. The holes in our hearts can be filled only by God, and it is the calling of the church to help people become heart-filled and soul-alive.

SPECTACLE AND TRANSCENDENCE

As humans, we long for transcendence.³ We long for experiences that take us beyond the mere material, corporeal world. We thirst for things beyond this earthly plane, things that lift us up and give us a sense of wholeness and acceptance and assurance. We were made this way. This universal longing is a good thing because it serves as a divining rod of sorts, pointing us to the one true God.

But we are self-focused beings by nature, living in an increasingly narcissistic culture. And we take that cultural self-centeredness into our worship services in deep and subversive ways that we may not realize. We bring our angst, our neediness, our consumer-driven worldview, our pop-culture appetites, and our narcissistic tendencies into Sunday morning. Instead of seeking communion with God, we often seek experiences of God. Instead of encounter, we settle for escapism. When we do, we're in danger of revering the experience more than the Person. And that puts us in a precarious place.

Transcendent moments with God can't be manufactured. No matter how we try, we can't program them, design them, or will them to happen. Transcendence is a Holy Spirit thing.

So we turn to the arts, which are transcendent in nature. They can express the unexplainable and convey emotion, beauty, and

truth beyond mere words. Using the arts, we create spectacle, because that's what we know how to do. We compose amazing songs and assemble talented bands with accomplished vocalists to sing them. We employ mind-blowing sound, lighting, and multimedia systems. We incorporate theatrical and visual arts into our productions. Whether it be a mass choir and orchestra, a rock band with pulsing lasers, or a gospel fusion ensemble with a horn section, we create emotive and sensational experiences. Because we're human beings and because the arts are a natural part of how we express ourselves, we create great spectacles. And honestly, we're really good at it. We've become quite sophisticated at stirring our emotions and impressing ourselves. But spectacle can turn people into spectators. And the act of worship is neither passive nor inert.

Now, I'm not saying that God-breathed transcendence doesn't happen in these experiences. It most certainly does. What I am saying is that we're sometimes too quick to create spectacle, too quick to want to be wowed and have our emotions stirred in the name of God. If we are brutally honest with ourselves, we will admit this to be too often true. We can't manufacture holy transcendence, but we can manufacture spectacle, so we create spectacular services that titillate and tease, inspire and impress. And then we trust that God will show up.

I know this to be true—because I am one of those leaders who created spectacle, who led large teams of musicians, artists, and technicians to create grand and glorious shows brimming with the gospel, full of great energy and creativity and technology. It was my job. We did it really well. And truth be told, we were all a little intoxicated by the thrill of it.

HOLY SMOKE

Of course, the author of true transcendence is the Holy Spirit. And in worship, both personal and corporate, the Spirit is where we should begin and end. In his conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus patiently offered her this correction as it related to worship: “A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth” (John 4:23-24).

During this interchange, Jesus repeated the phrase “in the Spirit and in truth.” He emphasized the Spirit, because the Spirit authenticates true worship. Worship happens in the communing of our spirits with the Holy Spirit. He also emphasized truth, in part because he was contrasting Jewish worship, which pointed to the one true God, to Samaritan worship, which pointed to “what you do not know” (John 4:22).

Worship is dialogical, a continuing interaction of revelation and response. Constance Cherry writes, “God’s action invites a response. God’s initiatives always result in an invitation to trust God and respond to and receive the action offered. This engagement of revelation/response forms the core of Christian worship.”⁴ God reveals himself to us when we gather, and then we respond to that revelation with external actions, such as singing and exaltation, and with internal actions, such as repentance and reverence. This continuing revelation and response is done in the presence of—and I would say is *driven by*—the Spirit of God. The Spirit moves in us to reveal, revive, convict, assure,

comfort, admonish, and inspire. God-centered worship is permeated by the Spirit. This is what it is to worship in the Spirit.

The Spirit helps us to see beyond the material world—into the holy transcendence—and helps to bring us before the throne. James B. Torrance offers this more complete view of worship: “As in worship, so also in our personal relationships with one another, we are given the gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son’s communion with the Father, in the Trinitarian life of God.”⁵ This is the wondrous relational essence of worship: the community of the Trinity calling and communing with the community of his people.

Here is my fear for the church: in the midst of all the smoke machines, high-def video loops, and latest worship hits, we may be settling for something less than true transcendence, something less than Spirit-breathed worship, something less than God on God’s terms. Are we inadvertently teaching ourselves to settle for spectacle, to be satisfied by titillation—and maybe even to become dependent on it—in our worship? Have we unintentionally allowed worship services to devolve into mere religious experiences? Have we mistaken the sizzle for the steak?

But imagine a different scenario. Imagine worship that has less to do with what we experience and more to do with God’s experience of us. Imagine embracing a fuller definition of worship, one that begins in prayer closets and extends to soup kitchens. Imagine the power of the arts carried on the breath of the Holy Spirit. Imagine worship that is founded on a gospel that invites us to selflessness and humility and ultimately joy.

Transcendence in our worship is an encounter with the holy God in which we open the eyes of our hearts to his presence.

Spectacle can aid us in experiences of transcendence, but we must always be aware that in an increasingly self-absorbed culture, spectacle must always serve the still, small voice, and not the other way around.

MADE TO WORSHIP

There's a fascinating account in the book of Exodus, chapter 32. It speaks not only of the nature of celebrity but also of the very nature of humanity. It's the story of the quintessential idol: the golden calf.

We know the story. The nation Israel tires of waiting for Moses to come down from the mountain. They know their circumstances are the result of a series of miracles gifted to them by a gracious God. Yet they can't wait. They burn with the need to worship, so they create with their own hands a false idol, molded from the spoils of their oppressors, which they proceed to worship and glorify. Seeking transcendence, they settle for mere spectacle. On many levels, their actions are irrational, immoral, absurd. And yet there are parallels to worship today.

Moses, who carried the tablets containing the Ten Commandments, was so distraught at the sight of this false worship that he cast down the tablets at the foot of the mountain, breaking them. He burned the golden calf to a powder and made them drink it, internalizing their sin. And after some creative blame-shifting by Aaron ("Really, Moses, I just cast this gold in the fire, and this calf popped out!"), Moses had the perpetrators killed.

There is an obvious lesson here. We humans were made to worship something. It is hardwired into our souls. Lacking a clear understanding of God and having a natural predisposition

toward ourselves, we make our own gods to venerate and worship. Psychologist Dr. Gerald May contends,

From a psychoanalytic perspective, one could say we displace our longing for God upon other things; we cathect them instead of God. Behaviorally, we are conditioned to seek objects by the positive and negative reinforcements of our own private experience. . . . We look for ultimate satisfaction in God's palpable and definable creations instead of looking through them to the hidden, loving face of their Creator.⁶

We live in an increasingly spectacle-driven culture that inadvertently feeds our inborn need for transcendence and worship. This is why we uphold and revere our celebrities and athletes and pop stars and political leaders to such a high degree. Worship is foundational to who we are. Just go to an NFL game or rock concert or political rally—worship is happening, in fundamentally primal ways.

God knows this about us, of course, and he fashioned the first commandment to address it: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2-3). It's the first commandment, and it sets the tone for the rest of the commandments: that we are to put God and his will and ways first and foremost in our lives and hearts.

REFLECTIONS OF OUR CULTURE

Certainly, there are powerful and invisible forces tugging at the hearts of worshipers today. That being said, modern worship—in

all its various flavors and forms—is simply a reflection of the culture around it. It reflects our culture’s aesthetic and style, but more ominously, its values and motivations. Cultural values—like trendiness and superficiality and relativism—are deeply imbedded in these modern forms, whether we like it or not. And we must be aware of the attendant dangers. Culture is neither static nor amoral.

One of the deeply held misconceptions in churches is that the “product” (to use the term crassly) of church ministry is what happens on stage—the music and the programming and all the many elements of the service. But decades of full-time vocational ministry have taught me that great music, great art, and great programming are not the product—they are the byproduct. The true product of church ministry is the hearts of the people. Everything that comes from the stage—from the lighting design to the songs sung to the prayers prayed to the sermon preached—should be seen as a byproduct of submissive hearts that are growing in Christ.

We are indeed living in an exciting time in the life of the church. In the tempest of this high-tech information age, we have a tremendous opportunity to reach different generations in many different ways. And we must—with the best of our abilities, with the best of what we have, and with the best of who we are. Through it all, however, we must remain diligent against the darker, subterranean motivations that can seep into us—to be entertained, to seek emotional escape, to settle for experiences of God instead of God himself.

We must not mistake the smoke for the Spirit.

WORSHIP PRACTICE

Surprisingly, many people have very limited experiences in terms of worship style. We certainly like our comfort zones, even to the point of sitting in the same pew every week. But there is a wide variety of valid worship expressions—liturgical, charismatic, meditative, contemporary, traditional, modern. And we can get a bigger picture of our very big God when we learn to worship in the variety and scope of God’s expressive people.

As a suggested practice, attend a church that is far different from the one you attend. If you have a large home church, attend a small one. If your church is loud and musical, attend a quiet, liturgical one. If your church is traditional with a choir and organ, attend one with a rock band. If you live in the suburbs, attend an inner-city church. The point is to get out of your comfort zone and your personal preferences. As you worship in this place, intend to fully seek God. See if he meets you there, and see if he has something to tell you.

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