

Deborah Moore Clark



*O Come,
Let Us
Bow Down
and Worship*

A Spiritual Guide for Leadership

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Preface

For many years now, the study of worship has been an active interest of mine, both for personal and professional reasons. I hope the following glimpse into my personal pilgrimage will tell how this is so. Although my Christian heritage is rich, I have not always been as interested in the dynamic of worship as I might have been.

The eldest daughter of a Southern Baptist pastor, I received many opportunities for involvement in church life. I literally grew up in the church. During the first decades of my youth—the 1950s and 1960s—the church played an important role in my social life and in the social lives of people like me who lived in an essentially rural area on the verge of great growth. During my impressionable years, church, school, and family activities were the mainstay of my existence. Since those childhood days, the church has remained a focal point of my life.

While I was growing up, my parents made sure I regularly attended the usual assortment of church activities—worship, Bible study, missions activities, and related recreational-social events. Like many other young people of my time, I was fortunate to be privately schooled in piano and organ lessons, encouraged to practice, and asked to use my musical talents at church.

As with other ministers' families, money was often tight, so I began working at part-time jobs during my teen years to help with the usual expenses teenage daughters incur and to save for college. When I was seventeen years old I found work as an organist and adult choir director in a small United Church of Christ where I served until leaving home for college.

Through that experience and two other similar positions following it during college, I began to feel God's specific call to music ministry.

Not long after college graduation—at some undetermined point—I began to realize my poverty when it came to understanding and leading in worship. By this time, I was serving my third church as organist and choir director, planning and leading music in worship on a regular basis. It dawned upon me that I was going through the motions where worship was concerned, not realizing the importance of my contribution as a worship leader—or worshiper. Now, please don't misunderstand. Church participation at that time was probably one of the most important aspects of my life. My faith in God was strong and my appetite for Bible study was keen. I enjoyed my work as a part-time staff member. I was saving money to go to seminary. But somehow, amid all this religious activity, I realized I was missing something. For the first time, I saw that my understanding of worship was shallow, and my contribution to worship, although meaningful, was much less than my best effort.

The epiphany was quick and illuminating. God spoke in that still small voice inaudible to human ears but discernible to human hearts. As a result of the Spirit's convicting encounter, I began to read and study, first about church music ministry, then about worship. Looking back upon the experience, mysterious and confounding as it was, I realize that in a serendipitous moment God's Spirit touched mine and a new prophet was born. Like Isaiah's encounter with God in the temple, in an instant, the Holy One seemed to call me out, challenging and leading me to reform my attitudes, my ideas, my behavior, and most of all, my leadership concerning worship. The years since this quiet but life-changing happening have been rich in the discovery of worship's wonder and magnitude. Part of what I share in the following pages are the discoveries of this pilgrimage. But the journey is not complete.

I write with the hope that you who read will reflect, question, and find the inspiration so graciously given me to look further. I share with questions still unanswered, but with a prophetic urgency to teach. I reason that others who faithfully attend worship every week—those who teach Sunday school, those who serve as diaconal ministers, those who volunteer in the many aspects of church life, and those who lead worship week after week—may also not fully realize the power and the mystery of the throne they approach in worship. While I could never say for certain whether another person truly worships or not, I reason that many others who lead and attend worship

faithfully may also be worshiping—like I did—without full knowledge of all they do or of what is expected of them.

This conviction that many worshipers are just like me underpins my effort in writing this book. I want to share what I have learned about the richness of worship. I want to stretch myself to learn more. I want to help the family of God, of which I am a part, to worship more fully. But more importantly, I want to honor God with my worship and my writing, individually through my own efforts, and also within the community of faith where I serve and worship.

Many books about worship have already been written. Many, if not most, may be more scholarly than this manuscript. This book, however, is designed to be an *interactive* text—a practical manual or study guide—for stimulating discussion and creativity in worship planning and leadership. It may be used in individual study, but it works best for group study.

Who This Book Is For

This book is for pastors, ministers of music and other church staff ministers, liturgists, worship committees, worship study or focus groups, seminary students, worship workshop participants, and any other people actively engaged in learning about, planning, and leading corporate worship within Christian churches of the free church traditions *and beyond*. Readers may also include individual worshipers as well as small groups within worshipping communities who desire to learn more about worship and to look critically at their own corporate worship practice.

Certainly, no reader who uses this book will ever agree with everything written here. But what is more important than approval or rejection is for this text to stimulate a process of critical thinking and honest questioning about this taken-for-granted, yet remarkable event called worship. I hope the use and re-use of this manual will inspire additional study and learning about worship practice and participation.

How to Use This Book

Students and teachers alike can use this manual to facilitate both worship workshop learning and teaching. The format suggests some possible uses, emphasizing the book's purpose as an interactive study guide. Questions to ponder end each chapter or major subsection. These questions are tools for interaction with the text included to stimulate critical thinking, honest discussion, and perhaps even a debate or two. I do not know the answers to all

the questions. The idea is to get the reader—the worship leader, the workshop participant, the worshiper—to think openly, honestly, and critically about his or her own attitudes about worship and worship practice. Some of the questions, without apology, are meant to be challenging and are posed to provoke conversation, struggle, and critical thinking.

An annotated bibliography appends the text (see Appendix 2.) This short recommended reading list is included for those who wish to dig deeper into the subjects discussed within the study guide. The list is small but diverse, representing my best recommendations to readers wanting more.

Biblical quotations throughout the text come from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless otherwise noted. In a deliberant attempt to be inclusive, I have chosen non-gendered language for God and human beings. Where quotations have been included that follow a more traditional, male-gendered approach to language, these have been altered for inclusiveness.

In sum, I hope the text and the format will serve as resources for opening wide the door of creativity—in thinking, in planning, and ultimately, in worship practice—as those who use it honestly and critically will become catalysts within their communities of faith for worship reform. The process, without a doubt, has challenged and nourished me.

Deborah Moore Clark
Charlotte, North Carolina



On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it?

—ANNIE DILLARD

Why Worship?



That [God] seeks worshipers is unparalleled for nowhere in the entire corpus of Holy Scripture do we read of God's seeking anything else from a child of God. God desires worship above all else.

—KENT HUGHES

Some critics of worship may ask boldly, why worship at all? Many Christians, by the irregularity of their worship, testify to their belief that worship is merely an optional activity. Others, bored by the Sunday event, find themselves wondering, why bother? In this brief introductory chapter, several reasons why we must worship are explored. If these reasons fail to convince you of worship's necessity, then I urge you to stretch your mind and imagination about worship as you read and interact with the chapters that follow. If you are already convinced of the need for worship, I encourage you also to read on. Bring with you attitudes open to expanding and enriching your thinking and practice of life's most important event—worship.

To Obey the Scriptural Command

From beginning to end, the Bible makes reference to worship and communion with God. Implicit within the story of Eden is the Creator's communal relationship with man and woman. From Abraham to Micah, the Hebrew Bible attests to the necessity of worship. Abraham provides a model for worship on Mount Moriah. Moses, instructed by God, provides guidelines for living and

worship in the wilderness and promised land. “Exodus devotes 25 chapters to the construction of the Tabernacle, the locus of divine worship. Leviticus amounts to a 27-chapter liturgical manual.”¹ Judges, kings, and the children of Israel struggled to develop and preserve monotheistic worship of the One Holy God. The Psalms—recording the songs of David and Hebrew worship—declare lyrically, *Worship the LORD in holy splendor* (Ps 29:2b) and *Extol the LORD our God; worship at [God’s] footstool. Holy is [God]!* (Ps 99:5). Pre-exilic prophets condemn ritualism lacking ethical and spiritual content. Post-exilic prophets emphasize balance between inward and outward devotion.

Jesus, steeped in synagogue worship from early childhood, teaches frequently about worship and a right relationship between ritual and lifestyle. The apostle Paul deals repeatedly with abuses in early Christian worship practice, admonishing Christlikeness in worshipers. Finally, one of the last commands recorded in the New Testament was given to John by the angel who says, *Worship God!* (Rev 22:9). We worship because God expects it. We worship because Jesus worshiped. The Bible tells us so.

To Maintain Our Proper Relationship with God

We are not so very different from the children of Israel, repeatedly promising to serve the Lord of Hosts, then forgetting our promises. Like Israel, we voice again and again, *All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do* (Ex 24:3b). *All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient* (24:7b). But scarcely after the words have fallen from our lips, we build graven images, forgetting our vows. We promise and forget, we promise and err, we promise and wander, we promise and stray, we promise and fail, and on and on the cycle goes. Over and over, we do what is evil in the sight of the Lord, forgetting the Lord and worshiping earthly idols.² But God, like a forgiving and



We keep doing these things over and over again on Sunday morning because we know that if we didn't we might lose our love. In fact, those times when we don't feel like it, when we really feel no deep attachment or desire to worship the Beloved, are the times we ought to be sure and worship . . . We come feeling our relationship with God is weak and shallow; then, in the ritual, the singing, the words of Scripture, the familiar friends and setting, we go forth strengthened, having grown in our love.

—WILLIAM H. WILLIMON

loving husband, woos us back time and time again as we forsake our vows and play the harlot.³

Because we are prone to wander, we need the regular reminder of worship to keep us committed. Troy W. Petty described this need when he wrote, “Life in covenant with God rests upon repeated incidents of worship and renewal. Worship serves to remind us of who God is, what [God] has done, and what [God] is yet doing on our behalf. Renewal of our faith is needed because of our inability or failure to live up to God’s demands.”⁴

Worship reminds us who we are, who we are not, and who we may become. Worship woos us back into a right relationship with the Holy One. If we forsake this opportunity, we fail to live responsibly in relationship with God.

Because God Is

Frank E. Gaebelien wrote, “We worship God not because we feel like it, but because [God] *is* God and worship is [God’s] due and our necessity.”⁵ Freelance writer Karen Moderow made a similar point when she wrote, “Worship is like a circle. We worship the Lord because [God] deserves to be praised for who [God] is—apart from our feelings or circumstances.”⁶ Moderow’s simile (“like a circle”) helps us visualize worship as a never-ending, ongoing process of praise. This negates the notion of worship as a once-a-week, one-hour event. Rather, worship is a process reflected in our Sunday praise and our Monday living. God, the Great I Am, deserves and



*O to grace how great a debtor
daily I'm constrained to be!
Let thy grace, Lord, like a fetter,
bind my wandering heart to
thee:
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, Lord, take and
seal it,
Seal it for thy courts above.*

—ROBERT ROBINSON, 1758



God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." [God] said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, I AM has sent me to you." God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations."

—GENESIS 3:14-15

desires our worship in the strains of our songs, in the expressions of our faces, in the tones of our voices, in our manners and motions, in our telephone conversations and prayers, in our frustration and joy, and in our sadness and glee. Ideally, all of life is worship. What offering shall we give the Alpha and Omega?

To Form the Community

We live in a culture that views worship as a private thing—private devotion, individual fulfillment, a one-hour fix to meet personal needs. This me-centered approach treats worship more like a buffet, cafeteria line, or food court where people gather to eat but more or less dine separately, eating only what they want. This modern-day emphasis focuses on individual tastes, likes and dislikes, appeal and preferences. But this is not what worship is about. Worship is more like a great banquet—a feast, festival, or family reunion—where more than a great hall or table is shared. A common meal is shared, and as through the sharing and feasting on common foods, community forms.

In worship, the Maker gathers up worshiping individuals, transforming them into a new whole—a community—existing to worship and serve God. In her classic book *Worship*, Evelyn Underhill asserts, “Christian worship is never a solitary undertaking. Both on its visible and invisible sides, it has a thoroughly social and organic character. The worshiper, however lonely in appearance, comes before God as a member of a great family; part of the Communion of Saints, living and dead.”⁷ Steeped in history and tradition and undergirded by two thousand years of spiritual culture, Christian worship has persisted and survived, and it cannot be understood apart from these influences. The community of faith, seen in this light, takes on enormous proportion. The spiritual community of God includes those saints departed, all saints living, and those yet to be born.

Christian worship is at once personal and social, yet essentially corporate. According to Underhill, each aspect of worship’s twofold character completes, reinforces, and checks the other.⁸ In worship, individuals are fused into a spiritual community with all others gathered with them—those in their particular house of worship and those gathered in all other sanctuaries in all places.



*All praise and thanks to God,
Who reigns in highest heaven,
To [Maker] and to Son And
Spirit now be given.
The one eternal god, Whom
heaven and earth adore,
The God who was, and is, And
shall be evermore.*

—MARTIN RINKART, 1636; TRANS.

CATHERINE WINKWORTH, 1858;

ADAPTED 1985

Underhill assigns deeper meaning to the church's corporate worship than ". . . merely a collection of services, offices, and sacraments. Deeply considered, it is the sacrificial life of Christ Himself; the Word indwelling His Church . . ."9 Using phrases like *Corpus Christi*, "mystical body," and "supernatural organism," Underhill describes the church transformed by corporate worship. Names such as these and the Body of Christ convey great weight and responsibility.

A group of individuals gather for worship. Through worship, the Creator God gathers up the individuals, molding them together into a spiritual community. And although the newly formed group is a diverse collection of personalities with varying interests, talents, and abilities, this new body becomes one in Christ. This supernatural gathering, knitting minds, wills, and souls into the unified body of Christ, happens only in worship. Nowhere else. This gathering of individuals into community takes place for a purpose.

Once formed through worship, the Christ community faces the challenge of great responsibility and must ask itself: What service shall we perform in God's name? What acts shall we perform as Christ's body? In what joint projects shall we, the Body of Christ, engage to express our collective faith? How are we as a community empowered through worship?

What does it mean to leave the sanctuary a changed and united people?

Both personal and corporate worship are necessary. The two are intertwined. At the heart of corporate worship is the private preparation and worship of each person in the pew. As worshipers worship side-by-side, the test of true worship—a changed heart—remains individual and personal. The Redeemer judges this condition personally with each worshiper. But the drama does not stop there. While the one-on-one encounter is going on in the hearts of individual worshipers, God is also working to collect and transform those gathered into a community who will be called upon to extend their worship by practicing corporate acts of social responsibility, generosity, and ministry in the world about them. In this sense, the changed heart of a



The Christian community is not a mere phenomenon, however distinguished. It is an event. Otherwise it is not the Christian community. . . . The fact remains that it is not itself a foundation or institution. In correspondence with the hidden being of Jesus Christ Himself, it is an earthly-historical event, and as such it is the earthly-historical form of His existence.

—KARL BARTH



. . . the corporate worship of the Church is not simply that of an assembly of individuals who believe the same things, and therefore unite in doing the same things. It is real in its own right; an action transcending and embracing all the separate souls taking part in it.

—EVELYN UNDERHILL

community of faith is also judged. What will be the community's corporate response to its encounter with God in worship? Worship begins with individual contrite hearts but ends with a newly formed mystical community of faith. We worship to form this community.

Because We Are Loved

William Willimon, in his book *What's Right with the Church*, discusses at some length the extravagance of worship. He writes, "Worship . . . has a scandalously gratuitous quality to it. People seem to do it for the sheer fun of it."¹⁰ Comparing worship to being in love, Willimon describes the unmeasured and fanciful behaviors of lovers—singing, laughing, writing poetry, crying, shouting, dancing, sending roses, hugging, kissing, and so on. Brilliantly, Willimon illuminates the analogy with this profound conclusion.

So here we are at the heart of it all. Here is the scandal of Sunday morning behavior. We love because we have been loved (1 John 4:19). Our alleged excessiveness in worship is the excess produced by love. The church's worship on Sunday is a way of being in love . . . if you have been loved, you already know something of how lovers need to return love. You are already on the way to understanding irrational, nonutilitarian, gratuitous, delightfully useless behavior like Christian worship.¹¹

Questions to Ponder

1. What reasons motivate you to worship? How did you arrive at this point?
2. Do you find yourself asking, why bother to worship? What motivates your questions?
3. How may pleasure, selfishness, greed, and misplaced priorities serve as modern idols? Can you think of others? List them.
4. What idols interfere with your worship of God?
5. Does worship woo you back into a right relationship with God? In what ways does this happen? If not, what gets in the way?
6. Does worship woo your church back into a right relationship with God? In what ways does this happen? If not, what gets in the way?
7. What connection do you make between Sunday worship and weekday living? How do you express this connection?
8. What connection does your church make between Sunday worship and weekday service? How is this connection expressed in the life of your congregation?
9. How does your own worship continue through the week?
10. How does your church's worship continue through the week?
11. How, when, and where do you fail to worship God? In an act of confession, commit these times to God.
12. Recall a time when you were in love. Describe your feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. How is your worship of the Holy One similar? How is it different? How is your church's corporate worship similar? How is it different?
13. Whom do you love? How do you express this love? Make a list of your various expressions.
14. In what ways do you express your love toward God? In what ways does your church express its love toward God?

NOTES

¹ Kent Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Man*, quoted by Davis Duggins, senior editor of *Moody* in “In Spirit and in Truth,” *Moody* 96/6 (1996): 28.

² This paraphrase loosely follows the repeating refrain within Scripture: *The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, forgetting the LORD their God, and worshiping the Baals and the Asherahs* (Judg 3:7). The cyclical scenario of the children of Israel promising to obey God, forgetting their promise, doing evil deeds, and receiving God’s merciful forgiveness is a recurring theme within Hebrew Scripture.

³ Israel’s unfaithfulness and God’s redeeming love are described metaphorically as harlot and husband in the book of Hosea.

⁴ Troy W. Petty, “Worship and Renewal,” *The Religious Herald* 155/23 (1982): 12.

⁵ Frank E. Gaebelain, “Heeding the Whole Counsel of God,” *Christianity Today* 25/17 (1981): 29.

⁶ Karen Moderow, “Breaking Through the Sunday Blues,” *Moody* 96/6 (1996): 31.

⁷ Evelyn Underhill, *Worship* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 81.

⁸ Underhill, *Worship*, 84.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁰ William H. Willimon, *What’s Right with the Church* (San Francisco: Harper, 1985), 115.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 117.