

# Worship Odyssey

*LaMar Boschman*

The ancient tension between pioneers and settlers is finding new relevance in the arena of worship. Twenty to thirty years ago, our Lord brought His church into a new place of worship. That fresh dimension of praise and adoration focused more on the Kingdom of God and less on the squishy “feel-goodism” that had characterized so much of “Christian” music

However, the human heart will always tend to organize, and take ownership of, the organic. We seem to fall into an inevitable cycle: “a new thing” falls out of heaven on us, we rejoice in it, are humbled by it, and then grow familiar with it. We decide to settle there; we buy land, build houses, and plant gardens. Sadly, over time, the neighborhood declines into dysfunction.

Imagine...

A man is ascending a narrow mountain road. The air is getting thin. He is tired and hot and thirsty. As he stops to rest, in the silence of the moment, he faintly hears a distant roar. Could it be the sound of water? He leaves the road and moves through a mile of tall grass and trees. He climbs over or around boulders. He presses on. And, then, he pushes through some brush and catches his breath! Right there before him is a shimmering beautiful mountain river, cascading over rocks, gathering in a broad shaded basin, before continuing its sparkling tumble down the mountain. From where he stands on a bluff, the basin is so clear he can see the bottom.

Stripping to his waist, he leaps skyward and gracefully slices the surface; ah, the cool depths of the bracing waters swallow him. For hours, he frolics, drinks deeply, dives, floats, and reclines in the cool grass at the edge of this highland oasis. He’s never found such a place before. After a while, he begins to think of others. So, he makes his way back to the road and scrawls “water → ” on a rock.

Soon, other weary climbers find the place. Before long, there are RVs, motorcycles, tents, and porta-potties. A whole community develops around this pristine place. Then, someone realizes that the “sound of many waters” can be recorded. Videotaped. Oh, the possibilities! *We can add some reverb, background singers, Dolby noise reduction, and digital enhancement.* Artists begin to “interpret” the sights and sounds of the river. Camera platforms are constructed. Recording studios begin springing up like wildflowers. The bluff becomes hot real estate. The Goodyear blimp hovers overhead. Wall Street takes note. Pollution becomes a problem. Fights break out. Marriages collapse.

And, the water begins to taste funny. It no longer is what it once was.

Bible teacher Charles Simpson once said, “We will never find the joy of our salvation in the same old haunts. It always waits for us in a brand new place.” Too many of us have sentimentalized the joy of our salvation. We approach it with nostalgia. *If only we could recreate what we once tasted. If only we could depopulate the mountain river city and get back to basics. If only. If only.*

But, I – and many other worship ministries – believe the Lord is calling worshipers to journey on up the river. We don’t have to disparage the place we’ve been; we don’t have to react against the commercialization and corruption. Like Salmon, we simply move upstream.

Of course, we've not been upriver before. So, we don't know what it looks like. However, I want to give a view about life on up the mountain:

1. The future doesn't look like what we've already seen.
2. However, we will recognize it because it's mystique is familiar.
3. As we move higher, our view of God will be clearer.
4. We will worship before an "audience of One."
5. Real worship will move from "art form" to "heart form."
6. Beholding Him will give us the confidence to take off our "masks."
7. We will know "reality" and it will set us free.

## **The future does look like what we've already seen**

Because we are humans, we think of the *unknown* in the context of the *known*. So, we end up projecting the past on the future. But, God is not like that. He only parted the Red Sea once. Yet, I'm sure that every time the children of Israel got in a jam they expected something similar.

So, the first thing I would say about our journey into worship is to look *only* to God "who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20 NIV)." He is endlessly creative. We've never seen what He will do. Wisdom calls us to approach Him with a clean mental slate. We must look to Him, not to church growth experts or the planners and publishers of worship.

## **However, it will always have a certain familiarity**

Life in the spirit often has a sense of *déjà vu* about it. When we step into brand new places, we nearly always have a sense of familiarity. It is often like the line in John Denver's song "Rocky Mountain High" about "coming home to a place he'd never been before." When God brings us into new dimensions, experiences, and relationships, we recognize His thumbprint.

It is a mystery: moving on up the river will bring us to new experiences, revelations, and vistas, but I believe – just as when we finally see heaven – we will recognize the place.

## **As we move higher, we will have a clearer view of God**

As 21<sup>st</sup> century, American, evangelical Christians, we have a muddled and self-serving view of God. We see Him through the lens of our consumerist, narcissistic, egalitarianism. Consequently, our "worship" is really an exaltation of our own values and paradigms. We worship what we produce (our music), our worship and effectively ourselves.

Part of the reason we must move on up the mountain is based on a simple concept of physics: the higher our elevation, the greater our view and the greater our proximity. As one who travels widely throughout the Body of Christ, I am sensing a new understanding and appreciation of His Majesty, splendor, generosity, and authority.

The simple reality of gaining a clearer view of Him will also give us a new language of worship.

## We will worship before an audience of One

George Barna has discovered that most Americans “worship” to satisfy themselves, not to honor or please God.<sup>1</sup> *We have seen God and He is Me. Of course, we worship to satisfy ourselves.*

However, with a new appreciation of “the God Who is God,” we really are on a journey from horizontal (with its focus on the music and the performers) to vertical (which is about Jesus) worship. Kierkegaard once said, “If there is an audience in worship, it is God.” Worship is for His eyes only.

## Real Worship will move from “art form” to “heart form”

“The LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God {sees} not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” (I Sam 16:7 NAS). Man looks at the “art” but the Lord examines the “heart.”

Historically, music has been part of the rhythm of life for people in all times and civilizations. People sang when they washed their clothes in the river, brought in the harvest, cooked food, and went to war. However, when the Greeks made music an art form, it was severed from the cadence of life and came to be exalted on its own merits. Inevitably, only the “gifted ones” did it.

This is still our problem today; we do not sing as a lifestyle-worshiper to the Lord. Sadly, only when “the artists” play do we sing along. The Greek influence causes us to approach worship in an “art appreciation” mode; we go to the theatre -- excuse me, the “the church” -- to hear some fine music. That is idolatry. However, I do believe the Lord, in His mercy, is moving His church beyond that to where the worship artists become worship shepherd and lead us to the cool waters and green pastures of His presence.

## Beholding Him will give us the confidence to remove our masks

The term “hypocrite” has its roots in classical Greek theatre. It refers to the “masks” which actors wore in ancient drama. *Performance* is a slippery slope; actors sometimes lose their own identity in their roles. When we perform, we put on a mask of unreality and pretense. And, we’re all guilty of it. We slip behind our masks in our relationships, in our churches, and in our worship.

Dr. Robert Webber said, “Worship is primarily prayer. Worship is a prayer of relationship.” It is the “pray” in the “play” that causes music to become worship. Similarly, it is the “devotion” in the “motion” that makes forms of dance true worship.

Thankfully, God in His great mercy, looks past the mask and sees our heart. Furthermore, I believe that our future – on up the mountain – will bring us into waters of greater confidence toward God and one another. That will allow us to step out from behind the masks into a more vulnerable, childlike, place of beholding Him and relating to one another.

## We will know “reality” and it will set us free

In the Finnish-Russian war, a number of Red prisoners were sentenced to be shot at dawn. One of them sat quietly on a bench singing, “Safe in the arms of Jesus,” a song he had heard his mother sing. “The God my mother believed in is now my God,” he announced to another prisoner. The man sunk to the floor in despair and said, “Pray for me!”

While these two imprisoned soldiers knelt on the floor and prayed for each other, everyone sensed an unseen hallowed Presence. Soon, all the prisoners fell on their faces before God.

At daybreak, the condemned men stood before the firing squad, requested that the covering not be put on their heads, and asked if they could sing one last time. Permission was granted. Just before the command to fire, seven men lifted their hands to heaven and, with uncovered faces, sang “Safe in the arms of Jesus!”

Trust me: this worship had nothing to do with any Greek art form or contemporary technology; this was real life. Reality had set them free. Worship flowed from that new depth of vibrant truth.

I sincerely believe that God is taking us – perhaps by persecution, perhaps not – into a realm where we will know that kind of reality and it will set us free.

## Worship on the Mountain

Are you ready to go on up the mountain? Are you straining to see what is beyond the ridge? I believe the Lord is calling, “It’s time to pack up and move out!”

*2001: A Worship Odyssey* is more than a theme for this year’s INTERNATIONAL WORSHIP INSTITUTE IN DALLAS, TX. I believe that we will one day look back at this year as the time we embarked on the grand odyssey (journey) on up the mountain of the Lord.

Come and go with us!

*LaMar Boschman - author and dean of  
WorshipInstitute.com, Bedford, TX.*

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<sup>i</sup> Barna Research Group, August 1997