

SEEKING THE FACE OF GOD

Evangelical Worship Reconceived



J. Daniel Day

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Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references are taken from the New
Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

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“Cathedral Service” from Peter Kocan, *The Fable of All Our Lives*.
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As the Apostle Paul prayed, the church of our time must rediscover ‘the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth’ of the love of God in its worship. Dan Day gives us a “guidebook” for that journey. At the same time a deep exploration of the historical and biblical roots and intensely practical help to those who seek to connect depth and seriousness to the context they serve. Readable, thoughtful, helpful—this is a book the church needs.

Dr. Gary Furr, Pastor, Vestavia Hills Baptist Church
Co-Author, *The Dialogue of Worship*

As I read Day’s manuscript, one image kept coming to mind. It was the image of a Wednesday night business meeting in a small Baptist church. Fifty minutes into an hour-long contentious debate among folks who really do love each other, the church, and God, one quiet person finally stands up and speaks calm wisdom into the room. His words summarize the argument and put it into a biblical and historical perspective that gently nudges the noise toward solution and progress. Dan Day is the person. This book may well be the speech.

Terry W. York, D.M.A., is Professor of Christian Ministry and Church Music at Baylor University’s George W. Truett Theological Seminary in Waco, Texas.

Seeking the Face of God is an important book and one that deserves careful attention by leaders in worship in all churches. Rooted in a deep knowledge of church history and engagingly written, it offers rich insights not only in the understanding of worship but also in its practice.

Glenn Hinson is Senior Professor of Church History and Spirituality at the Baptist Theological Seminary of Kentucky in Georgetown, Kentucky

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Seek the Lord, and his strength: seek his face evermore.
Psalm 105:4 (KJV)



When thou saidst, Seek ye my face;
my heart said unto thee,
Thy face, Lord, will I seek.
Hide not thy face far from me . . .
Psalm 27:8-9a (KJV)



But we all, with open face beholding
as in a glass the glory
of the Lord, are changed into the same
image from glory
to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.
2 Corinthians 3:18 (KJV)



. . . the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it
[the holy city, new Jerusalem];
and his servants shall serve him:
And they shall see his face . . .
Revelation 22:3-4a (KJV)

FOREWORD



This book is written for church-going people, written to have a conversation about worship. It's written to remind us of just one thing: Worship is about God. It isn't about selling God. It isn't about being inspired by God-referencing programs. It's not even about "experiencing" God. Worship is about God. Period.

It takes only four words to state this. For many readers this assertion will be easy to affirm—it seems so obvious. But, as is frequently the case, the obvious isn't always clear. Specifically, just what does this statement of the obvious mean? If we say that worship is "about" God, in what way or ways is it "about" God? For that matter, what does the word "about" actually mean? And how might one tell if a worship service is really "about" God or "about" something else? If it is "about" God, does this mean that the worshipers themselves are irrelevant? That their needs, their culture, their longings don't matter? Indeed, what would a worship service that's truly "about" God look like? In the course of the book I hope to offer clarifying, credible, and hope-creating answers to questions like these. Arising from within that discussion will actually be a conception of worship that is different from many typical evangelical understandings. However, I'm not so foolish or vain as to imagine that mine is the final word on this subject—my desires are much more modest. What I hope is that these words will be persuasive enough that you'll understand why our evangelical worship must be reconceived and made less about us and more about God.

The metaphor of “seeking the face of God” is used here to characterize this kind of worship. It is, of course, a biblical phrase that’s seen often in older translations of the Bible. Newer translations, attempting to convey the theological meaning of the facial reference, helpfully and accurately render it as seeking God’s “presence.” Nonetheless, there is a graphic and personal quality to the older, literal rendering. So for this and other reasons explained more fully within the book, “seeking God’s face” is used here as an image of worship that is about God.

Fortunately, a glimpse into its meaning has been artistically provided in Michelangelo’s famous Sistine Chapel painting of the Creation. The best-known portion of that painting is the cameo of the almost-touching fingers of the Creator and the newly-created Adam. The strength and power of God is so agonizingly close to the lifeless, drooping finger of Adam—an unforgettable depiction of the need of the human and of the life-giving power of God. But Michelangelo gave a parallel rendering of this same truth in his presentation of the eyes of these two. Each figure’s eyes are locked upon the eyes of the other, especially Adam who seems to be seeking the face of God as though through a dreamlike state of innocence and confusion. It is particularly in this second cameo that the heart of worship is shown, for “Christian worship . . . represents the mutual gaze of the human and the divine eye.”¹ In this open-hearted seeking of God’s face (whose eye and face is clearly turned toward and seeking us), worship is given a vibrant, lustrous image. And that is what this book seeks to explore and encourage.

Much of what is said here comes from pondering what I find in the Bible—as well as in a score of thoughtful and scholarly books about worship and culture written by folks who also have meditated upon what they found in the Bible and in the Church and its history, and in their own spiritual history. Many of their books are mentioned or footnoted in this one. Certainly, the details and patterns of historical understandings of worship found in those books are one of the clarifying gifts this book tries to transmit.

But a larger bit of this book doesn't come from books; it comes from four decades of planning and leading worship in seven churches in five different states. Occasionally within these pages there are even digressions into reminiscences and "preacher stories"—although I hope not so many as to be off-putting. No apology is offered for this; it grounds these reflections in the real, practiced life of the local church and its clergy, not in the think-tanks of the academy. Though I hope academic readers will find these pages credible, they haven't been written for their attention.² Rather, think of these words as a pastoral conversation with worshipers and with those charged to lead next Sunday's worship. Think of this as one pastor/professor's attempt to meld the ideal and the actual into a form that is possible.

Another important source for what you'll find here is conversations with divinity school students. Following my years as a pastor, a professorial role was given to me—a role that thrust me into worship conversations with persons of all ages and evangelical orientations. Most of them bore evidence of some tint of Baptist coloration but, thankfully, they were complemented by many from other streams: United Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal, Lutheran, Church of God in Christ, Episcopal, Pentecostal Holiness, Disciples of Christ, a wandering Presbyterian now and then, and some who preferred no label other than Christian. They made for some lively class periods! If they happen to read these pages, I hope they will see that, on more than a few issues, their wisdom has been heard—sometimes agreed with and other times still being pondered or still being resisted. To all of these—the authors of the library books (and of the Book), the members and ministerial colleagues in the several churches I've been privileged to serve, and the patient students of "DIVI 4000: Christian Worship"—to all of them I express my sincere gratitude.

My thank-you list can't end there, though. It must include some faculty colleagues at Campbell University Divinity School: founding Dean Mike Cogdill, who originally trusted me with the assignment to teach worship, and to Derek Hogan, Barry Jones, and Cameron Jorgenson who

read and responded to various portions of the developing manuscript; and to two pastor-friends (Don Gordon and Ed Beddingfield), three teacher-friends (Adam English, Bill Leonard, and especially Paul Richardson) who lent their critical eye at various times during its development—and two former students, Jonathan Altman and Louisa Monroe, who gave most useful feedback. A cluster of friends were also kind enough to read and respond: John Killinger, Jim Rinker, Bob and Marilyn Russell, and the “Band of Brothers” at First Baptist Church in Raleigh, NC, being foremost among them. Most of all, I thank my patient and encouraging wife, Mary Carol, who listened to most of the book’s content far too many times, and managed to sustain steadfast interest in and support of the project (and me) throughout the writing—of such is the Kingdom of God! Each of these has proved to be an invaluable conversation partner, though I can’t imagine that any one of them is eager to add an Amen to everything I’ve finally written. My hope is that there is enough truth and common sense loafing around within these pages that some discriminating readers will spy them and give them a Sunday job.

Notes

¹Bernhard Lang, *Sacred Games: A History of Christian Worship* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), ix. Lang is to be credited also for the suggestion of the Sistine Chapel painting as illustrative of “seeking the face of God.”

²Academics will quickly note my omission of many subjects typically discussed in worship textbooks: baptism, weddings, funerals, ordinations, art, architecture, symbolism, aesthetics, etc. This work, however, focuses only on the typical evangelical Sunday service, its purpose and activities, believing that this is foundational to all the rest. For those interested in the wider issues of worship studies, recent textbooks that address them well are Frank C. Senn, *Introduction to Christian Liturgy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), Gail Ramshaw, *Christian Worship: 100,000 Sundays of Symbols and Rituals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), and Ruth Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2013).