

# THE TRAJECTORY OF WORSHIP

### What's really happening when we praise God in song?

**I**t has often been said that Sunday morning is the most racially segregated time of the entire week. Sometimes that is true, at other times not. But it *is* safe to say that our worship hour might well be the most divisive time as we fight over different music styles. We have even coined an oxymoronic term for these seemingly intractable tensions: “worship wars.” How did something that God intended for good get so far off track? And, more to the point, how do we get it right?

John Koessler’s article “The Trajectory of Worship” gives us some principles that provide a biblical perspective on worship that we all need—on Sunday and every day.

**Scripture:** Psalm 150:1–6; Isaiah 6:1–8; John 4:7–26; Acts 4:23–31; Revelation 5:1–14

**Based on:** The article “The Trajectory of Worship,” by John Koessler, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, March 2011



# HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE FOR A GROUP STUDY

**This Bible study can be used for an individual or a group. If you intend to lead a group study, follow these simple suggestions.**



- 1** Make enough copies of the article for everyone in the group. If you would like your group to have more information, feel free to copy the leader's guide for them as well.
- 2** Don't feel that you have to use all the material in the study. Almost all of our studies have more information than you can get through in one session, so feel free to pick and choose the teaching information and questions that will meet the needs of your group. Use the teaching content of the study in any of these ways: for your own background and information; to read aloud (or summarize) to the group; for the group to read silently.
- 3** Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting people to open up.
- 4** When working through the questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for your group to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.
- 5** Begin and end the session in prayer.

**Part 1 IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE**

*Note to leader: Provide each person with the CHRISTIANITY TODAY article "The Trajectory of Worship," included at the end of this study.*

John Koessler has a confession to make:

I find that I have reached a stage in life where most of the music I hear in church is "their" music, whoever "they" are. That is to say, I have reached a stage in life where most of the music I hear in church annoys me. I do not mean to be a musical snob. Indeed, I think of myself as an eclectic. I was raised on Bix and Beethoven. I came of age in the era of the Beatles. The buttons on my car radio are set to classical, country, oldies, rock, and even Christian music. I think of myself as someone who has been baptized by immersion in the waters of musical diversity. Yet somehow when Sunday comes, all my musical sophistication dissolves, and I am reduced to that most primitive test of aesthetic values: "I may not know what art is, but I know what I like." Or, rather, "I may not know what worship is, but I know what it isn't."

We've all been there—or perhaps we're there right now. Musical worship, instead of drawing us into the Lord's presence, merely annoys us. Instead of joining voices and hearts with fellow believers, secretly we harbor a grudge. We want to worship God our own way, "the way we've always done it," and so on. Yet the dichotomy between what our lips and our hearts say leaves us uneasy, perhaps feeling a little guilty. How do we address this dissonance?

**Discussion Starters:**

- [Q]** What kind of worship music did you grow up on (if applicable)? Do you still enjoy it?
- [Q]** Today are you more a fan of traditional or of contemporary worship music?
- [Q]** In what ways can we worship God besides music?
- [Q]** Does the prospect of worshipping God forever in heaven seem boring or exciting? Why?
- [Q]** What do you do if you don't like a particular hymn or worship song that your church is singing?

**Part 2 DISCOVER THE ETERNAL PRINCIPLES****Teaching Point One: Worship begins with God—but it doesn't stay there.**

Koessler makes the point that often our approach to worship is self-centered. "Like most churchgoers, I tend to view worship as something that moves from earth to heaven," he writes. "We think of worship as something that originates with us, our gift to God. Perhaps this is why so many of us are conflicted about it." The prophet Isaiah, during a time of national upheaval, didn't have that problem. That's because he had a vision of God, and an accurate understanding of himself. These two things made him set aside his own agenda and pursue the Lord's.

Read Isaiah 6:1–8.

**[Q]** Uzziah has died (v. 1), and the kingdom is in upheaval. What lifts Isaiah's eyes and heart heavenward? Describe what he saw in the first two verses. How do you think his perspective was changed?

**[Q]** In what two ways do the seraphs describe God (v. 3)? How do they induce our worship?

**[Q]** Verse 4 indicates the powerful presence of God, something that produces shock and awe in Isaiah. Do you have a similar sense of fear when you come to worship? Why or why not?

**[Q]** Isaiah is filled with fear and remorse for his sins and those of his people (v. 5). How does repentance factor into true worship?

- How should repentant people approach the "worship wars"?

**[Q]** How does God respond to repentance (vv. 6–7)? How does his mercy encourage even more worship?

**[Q]** Isaiah's worship turns to service (v. 8). Describe a time when your worship prompted you to similarly drop your agenda to pursue God's.

**Optional Activity:** *Read Revelation 4:6–9 and compare it with Isaiah's vision.*

**Teaching Point Two: Worship God any and every way you can.**

Koessler looks at Psalm 150 and notes, “The psalmist’s portrait of worship is noteworthy because it is so specific. One thing is clear from his description in Psalm 150:3–5: It is appropriate to worship God with music.” But he also adds, “First, we don’t have to please everyone when it comes to worship. Given the variety of styles and tastes, it is not possible to please all people all the time. I am certain that the psalmist’s style of music would sound alien to my ears. If that’s true, I don’t need to be ashamed of the fact that I really do hate some of the music I hear in church, nor be upset that not everyone agrees with my judgment.” Psalm 150 points to great variety in worship music, but at its core it calls us to worship in every way possible.

Read Psalm 150:1–6.

**[Q]** Count how many times the psalm urges us to praise the Lord—the Hebrew word is *hallelujah*. Why is God-praise so important?

**[Q]** Where does God tell us to praise him?

**[Q]** List what reasons we have to worship him. What other of his attributes can you worship him for?

**[Q]** Note the instruments of music mentioned in this psalm. What other instruments do you like to hear in worship? Why?

**[Q]** Verse 6 makes it clear that no one is exempted from worshiping God. How does this apply, if at all, to the “worship wars”?

**Teaching Point Three: The Lamb is the focus of our worship.**

Koessler emphasizes repeatedly that worship starts with God—but not just *any* God. “We find the same trajectory of worship in Revelation 5,” Koessler says. “John, who has been caught up to heaven and sees an innumerable multitude of angels and saints surrounding the throne of God, hears the angels declaring the worthiness of the Lamb ‘to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!’” The Lamb, of course, is Jesus Christ, who died as a sacrifice for our sins. Worship of this Lamb is not only nice; it’s necessary.

Read Revelation 5:1–14.

**[Q]** John sees no one worthy to open the scroll of God (vv. 1–4). This is unbearably sad news for John. This unworthiness of mankind extends to all who would worship God. What might a sense of our unworthiness have to do with our musical worship?

**Optional Activity:** *One of the elders tells John that Someone is worthy to open the scroll (v. 5). List his names mentioned in this verse, and use a study Bible to discover what they mean. How does this identification help you to worship him?*

**[Q]** Describe the scene of the Lamb taking the scroll and the worship that breaks out as a result (vv. 6–14). What reasons are we given for worshipping him?

## Teaching Point Four: Worship strengthens us in evangelism.

Koessler writes, “Worship is by nature answering speech. Like a musical instrument in which one plucked string causes all the other strings to resonate, earthly worship resonates with the worship of heaven.” Indeed it does, as this passage shows, and the resonance can shake us up to turn our world upside down.

Read Acts 4:23–31.

**[Q]** The Jerusalem church has just experienced persecution, with Peter and John jailed for preaching the gospel. Upon their release, they return to the church (v. 23). How does the church respond (v. 24)?

**[Q]** How do they describe what God has done (vv. 24–28)?

**[Q]** What do they ask him to do (vv. 29–30)?

- Note that they *don't* ask him to remove the persecution. What does this tell us about their focus in worship?

**[Q]** What is God's response (v. 31)? Have you ever experienced a similar answer to prayer? If so, tell us about it.

## Teaching Point Five: We must worship God in spirit and in truth.

Sometimes we think that we need certain elements in order to worship God properly. In music, we turn to time-tested hymns, “praise songs,” pianos, and the like. Or we think incense or other accoutrements make worship *worship*. “[T]he quality of music is not always the most important factor in our worship experience,” Koessler notes. “Clearly some music is better than other music. A Beethoven piano concerto is qualitatively better than ‘Chopsticks.’ Part of me wants to believe we should offer God only the best. Yet the worship music that moves me most and is the most effective vehicle for helping me to enter God's presence is not always the best music.”

# THE TRAJECTORY OF WORSHIP

## Leader's Guide

Though always giving God our best is important, Jesus wasn't too specific about how to worship. He said only two things in worship are really necessary. Read John 4:7–26.

Samaria was a thorn in the side of any serious Jew in Bible times (Matt. 10:5; Luke 9:52–53). Its inhabitants engaged in a syncretistic, false form of worship and had done so for centuries. Yet Jesus engaged a Samaritan—and not just *any* Samaritan, but a Samaritan *woman* (v. 7), and not just *any* Samaritan woman, but one with a *loose reputation* (vv. 16–18).

**[Q]** The woman, face to face with a prophet (v. 19), changes the subject to the “worship wars” (v. 20) Jesus answers plainly, yet charitably (vv. 21–24). How does his answer serve as a model for us in such things?

**[Q]** What two elements does God require of those who worship him (v. 24)? What do they mean?

**Leader's Note:** *They are rooted in God's nature as Spirit and Truth.*

## Part 3 APPLY YOUR FINDINGS

The “worship wars” are real, Koessler allows, but they are temporary. “Worship is not a private practice,” he points out. “It is the chief work of heaven and the duty of every creature. A day will come when our conflict and mutual discomfort over the church's worship will end.” How do we attain this heavenly perspective here on earth, when the hurts, slights, and frustrations are so real?

First, we remember that worship begins with God, not us. Second, we are to worship God any way we can. Third, we focus on Jesus, the Lamb of God who is worthy of our worship. Fourth, we realize that worship, if it is about God, will strengthen us to serve him in things like evangelism. Fifth, when we worship, the key thing to remember is that we must worship in spirit and in truth. While remembering these things won't guarantee that we will not struggle over music and worship, it will help us to keep things in perspective and keep God paramount.

**Action Point:** *Poll the members of your group and discover who has musical talents (vocal or instrumental). Schedule one of your group meetings with musical worship as the primary focus.*

— *Stan Guthrie is author of All That Jesus Asks: How His Questions Can Teach and Transform Us (Baker Books). A CT editor at large, he writes monthly for [BreakPoint.org](http://BreakPoint.org) and [Crosswalk.com](http://Crosswalk.com). Stan blogs at [stanguthrie.com](http://stanguthrie.com).*








## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES


### **ChristianBibleStudies.com**

We offer both **multi-session** and **single-session** studies on worship

 **True Discipleship: The Art of Following Jesus**, by John Koessler (Moody, 2003). If we truly believe Jesus Christ is not only the Son of God, but also our Savior and Lord, it is reasonable for others to expect to see proof of our commitment to him in the way we live. That evidence is what biblically-minded Christians call discipleship. “Discipleship is faith expressed in real life, every day, in every way,” says noted author and lifelong disciple John Koessler. But there is more to it than merely watching your language on the loading dock or dropping a few coins in a charity donation box. Discipleship implies a living relationship with the Christ we love, serve, and seek to imitate. For most of us there is room in this relationship for considerable improvement. If improvement is your goal, Koessler will take you on an incredible journey. This contemplative and practical book, along with its separate companion guide, will help you find the tools you need to deepen your commitment to Christ.

 **Resonant Witness: Conversations between Music and Theology**, edited by Jeremy S. Begbie and Steven R. Guthrie (Eerdmans, 2010). A new volume that takes us deeper into the theological significance of music.

 **Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music**, by Jeremy S. Begbie (IVP, 2007). Even fallen humans can compose soul-stirring symphonies. Theologian and musician Begbie helps Christians uncover the gospel message in the melodies that surround us; discover God’s diversity shining through sound; see the Master of Song; and experience the harmony of heavenly hope. Features practical examples from a wide variety of genres, lucid explanations, and an accessible bibliography.

 **The Cyber Hymnal**. This site has over 8,300 Christian hymns & Gospel songs from many denominations. It has lyrics, sheet music, audio, pictures, biographies, history, and more. To use the site effectively, you’ll need speakers or head phones, a sound card, JavaScript enabled, and a browser or plugin that can play MIDI files. [hymntime.com/tch/](http://hymntime.com/tch/).



A photograph of a hand reaching upwards towards a glowing cross in a church setting. The hand is in the foreground, and the cross is in the background, both illuminated by a warm, golden light. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people in the church.

# The



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By John Koessler

# Worship of Trajectory

**T**HE FIRST TIME I can remember singing from a hymnal was in 1972. It was the year between high-school graduation and college, the year I got my first full-time job. That year my mother's health began to fail, and my world shifted on its axis as I started to follow Jesus. That was the year I began to attend Glad Tidings, a plain concrete bunker of a church, whose colored windows reminded me more of ashtray glass than cathedrals.

Glad Tidings was a Pentecostal church, but of the reserved variety. Their Azusa Street brethren might whoop and dance. Let other congregations swoon in ecstasy, ravished by the Spirit, or speak in the mysterious languages of men and angels. Not the folks at Glad Tidings. It's not that they didn't believe in such things. They were convinced that God had the power to interrupt the service at any moment. He might send them all into a fit of shouting that lasted for days. Indeed, they prayed for such things to occur. But they never acted as if they actually expected he would.

Most of the time, or so it seemed, God respected their suburban sensibilities and kept a polite distance. But every so often the Spirit would stir the congregation the way the angel stirred the waters of Bethesda, and one or two voices would cry "Glory" or "Amen." They were always the same voices, of course. They never made this declaration at any volume that would disturb our decorum. But it

was loud enough for all of us to hear. Just loud enough to let the rest of us know there was glory afoot.

## RED HYMNALS AND CAMPFIRE ROUNDS

Glad Tidings was less self-conscious about singing. Three or four times during the service, the entire congregation reached for the old red hymnals in the pew racks and gave voice to their faith. The dog-eared hymnal pages were illuminated by the penciled scrawls and stick figures of bored children. The stanzas below those hieroglyphics depicted the pilgrim life of Jesus' followers as one of wandering and weariness, tears and tarrying.

*We were passing through the valley.  
We were camped on the banks of the river.  
We were sinking deep in sin.*

The hymn writers helped us get our bearings by pointing to the milestones along the way.

*We were at Bethel with Jacob.  
We were drinking water from the rock with Moses.  
We were in the Garden with Jesus.*

I wouldn't describe the melodies of those old hymns as pretty.

They seemed strange to me, as archaic as the shape-note harmonies of the Sacred Harp, from which many of them were hewn. They exuded a kind of musty charm for me, the way my grandmother's house did with its ancient wood and iron stove. Something about them reminded me of the songs my father and uncles sang after they had drunk too much beer. Songs with titles like "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" and "On the Road to Mandalay." Those hymns rolled along with a rhythm that was so predictable, you didn't need to know the words or the melody to sing them. If you knew one hymn, it seemed, you knew them all. And if you didn't know it, you had only to wait a stanza or two to sing it like you knew it.

The songs we had sung the night before at the Lost Coin Coffee House were different from the hymns we sang in church. The Lost Coin was located in the Sunday school building just across the parking lot from Glad Tidings. At the Lost Coin, we worshiped God with campfire rounds led by a gangly guitar player named Mike who prayed daily for the salvation of Bob Dylan and George Harrison. The songs we sang at the Lost Coin were simpler, based on a handful of chords

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and a seemingly endless repetition of the chorus. We didn't mind. If anything, their simplicity made them even easier to sing than the old gospel songs. We sang them with enthusiasm. We clapped. We stomped. We sang in antiphonal rounds. We mirrored the meaning of the words with hand gestures. If someone had taken the words of Psalm 119 and fit them to the tune of "Bingo" ("There was a farmer had a dog and Bingo was his name-o"), we would have sung it. All 176 verses.

The songs we sang at the Lost Coin were fun. But *fun* is not the word I would use to describe the hymns of the church. If the campfire rounds we enjoyed at the coffeehouse taught us that we could lift our voices in worship, those old hymns taught us how to lift our gaze. The

God spoken of in those songs was not fun but immortal and invisible. He was so holy we had to say it three times. "Man of Sorrows, what a name," we cried, "Hallelujah! What a Savior!" Those were the kinds of songs that caught in your throat and moved you to tears. The kind that made you stand a little straighter and sing a little louder.

Now, 38 years later, I find that I have reached a stage in life where most of the music I hear in church is "their" music, whoever "they" are. That is to say, I have reached a stage in life where most of the music I hear in church annoys me. I do not mean to be a musical snob. Indeed, I think of myself as an eclectic. I was raised on Bix and Beethoven. I came of age in the era of the Beatles. The buttons on my car radio are set to classical, country, oldies, rock, and even Christian music. I think of myself as someone who has been baptized by immersion in the waters of musical diversity.

Yet somehow when Sunday comes, all my musical sophistication dissolves, and I am reduced to that most primitive test of aesthetic values: "I may not know what art is, but I know what I like." Or, rather, "I may not know what worship is, but I know what it isn't." When

the worship leader reminds me that worship "isn't about me," I try to take it to heart. I really do. Nevertheless, more often than not, I walk into church hoping to be a worshiper and leave a curmudgeon. A chastened curmudgeon. A repentant curmudgeon. But a curmudgeon nonetheless.

#### REVERSING FIELD

I have concluded that the root of my problem is one of vertigo, not aesthetics. What I need is not a change of tune so much as a reorientation along worship's true trajectory. Like most churchgoers, I tend to view worship as something that moves from earth to heaven. We think of worship as something that originates with us, our gift to God. Perhaps this is why so many of us are conflicted about it. We consider worship to be an expression of our personal devotion. So when the musical style or some expression gets in the way, we don't feel like it is our worship at all. It is someone else's idea of worship. Perhaps the worship leader's or that of the majority. But not our own.

The biblical portrait of worship moves in the opposite direction. The trajectory of heavenly worship begins with God and descends to earth. This trajectory is reflected in Psalm 150, where praise begins in the heavenly sanctuary and resounds throughout the domain of God. From there it is taken up by those

on earth, who praise God with a variety of instruments and dancing, until "everything that has breath" praises the Lord (Ps. 150:6).

We find the same trajectory of worship in Revelation 5. John, who has been caught up to heaven and sees an innumerable multitude of angels and saints surrounding the throne of God, hears the angels declaring the worthiness of the Lamb "to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" Revelation 5:13 continues: "Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying: 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!'"



In his book *Working the Angles*, Eugene Peterson makes an observation about prayer that applies to worship in general. “Prayer is *answering* speech,” Peterson writes. “The first word is God’s word. Prayer is a human word and is . . . never the initiating and shaping word simply because *we* are never first, never primary.” Worship is by nature answering speech. Like a musical instrument in which one plucked string causes all the other strings to resonate, earthly worship resonates with the worship of heaven. Worship is not our attempt to project our voices so that they will be heard in heaven. Neither is it a performance executed on the earthly stage for the benefit of a spectator God. It is certainly not something we do primarily for ourselves, as if it were a kind of self-amusement or spiritual entertainment.

In a sermon entitled “Praise, One of the Chief Employments of Heaven,” Jonathan Edwards explained, “Let it be considered that the church on earth is the same society with those saints who are praising God in heaven. There is not one church of Christ in heaven and another here upon earth.” This means that when the church gathers for worship, it engages in a heavenly activity. The worshiping church does not merely imitate what goes on in heaven. It participates in heaven’s worship. Like one who walks into the church sanctuary after the service has started, those who worship on earth move into something that is already in progress. We take up a theme that was begun by others before the throne of God, adding our voices to theirs.

Consequently, the worshiping church is part of a much larger congregation. It is one that includes patriarchs and prophets, saints and angels. No wonder Edwards called worship “the work of heaven” and observed, “If we begin now to exercise ourselves in the work of heaven, it will be the way to have foretastes of the enjoyments of heaven.”

## A HEAVENLY CONGREGATION

The psalmist’s portrait of worship is noteworthy because it is so specific. One thing is clear from his description in Psalm 150:3–5: It is appropriate to worship God with music. Most believers agree with this. What we often don’t agree on is the kind of music and which instruments to employ in this worship. The reasons for our differences are varied and far more complex than we realize. Some of our differences are a function of culture and taste. We grow accustomed to certain instruments and prefer particular styles. I like the music I grew up with. I hate the music my kids listen to. But personal tastes change. My father was a huge fan of jazz, not the “cool jazz” of today but old school jazz: Bix Beiderbecke, Louis Armstrong, and Fats Waller. As a kid, I hated his music. When I became an adult, especially after my father died, I found that I liked it because it reminded me of him. This is not unusual. Personal experiences shape our musical preference. So do society and culture.

But even deeper reasons remain for our reaction to the music we hear in church. In his book *Resounding Truth*, Duke theologian Jeremy Begbie writes that music not only reflects a social and cultural order, it is also embedded in what he calls a “sonic order.” Music “. . . involves the integrity of the materials that produce sound and of sound waves, the integrities of the human body, and the integrity of time.” “When we hear music,” Begbie writes, “a whole range of elements are pulled together—in particular, our state of mind and body, memories and associations, social and cultural conventions, and other perceptions that come along with the musical sounds. Together, these greatly affect the meaning the music will have for us.”

What does this mean for us as far as worship is concerned? For

one thing, it means that we cannot help being profoundly affected by the music we hear. Music affects us on every level: neurological, physiological, aesthetic, and emotional. When someone says to me, “I just can’t worship to that music,” I believe them. But the psalmist’s description of the worship of heaven suggests that the variety

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of musical styles, the instruments used, and the methods the church employs in its worship should exceed the scope of taste.

## SIMMERING DIFFERENCES

In light of this, three suggestions arise almost spontaneously. They are not new thoughts by any means, but they bear repeating, given that tensions surrounding worship are always simmering below the surface of congregational life.

First, we don’t have to please everyone when it comes to worship. Given the variety of styles and tastes, it is not possible to please all people all the time. I am certain that the psalmist’s style of music would sound alien to my ears. If that’s true, I don’t need to be ashamed of the fact that I really do hate some of the music I hear in church, nor be upset that not everyone agrees with my judgment.

Second, the quality of music is not always the most important factor in our worship experience. Clearly some music is better than other music. A Beethoven piano concerto is qualitatively better than “Chopsticks.” Part of me wants to believe we should offer God only the best. Yet the worship that moves me most and is the most effective vehicle for helping me to enter God’s presence is not always the best music.

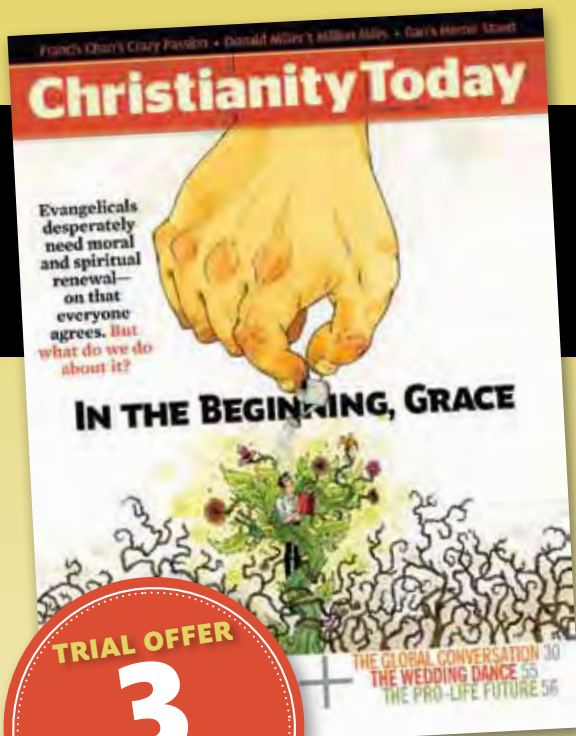
Third, it is not our differences in taste but rather our mutual contempt and lack of respect that have caused the most damage in the church. What has hurt us most has been our unwillingness to acknowledge that all of us have sacrificed in some measure when it comes to the church’s experience of worship.

Worship is not a private practice. It is the chief work of heaven and the duty of every creature. A day will come when our conflict and mutual discomfort over the church’s worship will end. Until then we must muddle through the best we can by reminding ourselves that we are part of a much larger congregation—one populated by patriarchs and prophets, saints and angels, where we are invited to join a chorus that began on the first day of creation. The first notes were sounded by those who surround the throne in heaven. Their theme echoes through the rest of God’s domain. All that remains is for us to add our voices to their song. ✚

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**John Koessler** is professor of pastoral studies at Moody Bible Institute and author of the forthcoming *Folly, Grace, and Power: The Mysterious Act of Preaching* (Zondervan). Part of this article appeared in a *PreachingToday.com* sermon, “The Hallelujah Chorus.”

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