

WORSHIP AS RESPONSE TO A REVELATION OF THE CHRIST-EVENT STORY

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Summary:

This paper defends the principle that Christian worship must include the revelation of the Divine as well as human response. Included is a practical component around four Advent lessons to prepare hearts for Christmas.

Length: 17 pages

Outline

I. Introduction and Thesis

- A. Current Worship Crisis or Challenge
- B. Definition of Worship – Responding to a Revealed Story
- C. Thesis: Worship as Revelation and Response

I will argue that joy-filled, God-glorifying worship must involve both the “revelation of truth” from God in the re-telling of the Christ-event story and active participation as a “response of the spirit” to the Christ-event story.

II. Biblical Worship as Revelation and Response

- A. Old Testament worship is responding to God’s redemption action.
- B. New Testament worship is responding to the Christ-event story

III. Ways to Specifically Reveal and Respond to the Christ Event Story

- A. Creating a Sense of Mystery
- B. Observing the Seasons of the Calendar
- D. Paying Attention to Sacred Space
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IV. Worship is a Matter of the Heart that Responds to God’s Revelation

V. Conclusion

PART I OF MAJOR PROJECT – A RESEARCH PAPER

Worship as Response to a Revelation of the Christ-Event Story

The issue of corporate worship is often a controversial subject within the church today because “the way we worship is often as much a part of our Christian identity as *whom* we worship.”¹ The reality is that we are “more conditioned by custom and personal preference” than we care to admit.² As North American Christians we have mistakenly equated worship style with cultural relevance and in the process lost some of the substance of our worship. The evangelical worship package (the image, the sound, the delivery) has focused on presentation and the essence of worship participation has been largely ignored.³ The result of this entertainment model is that many people are “confused about what worship is, whom it is for, and why they do it.”⁴ Today there is a growing restlessness emerging in our evangelical churches for people longing to express their worship to God⁵ but who are told to passively sit in their seats and experience worship as something done to them and for them, but not by them.⁶

Any attempt of the church to address this increasing spiritual hunger and interest in worship renewal must be founded on a biblical definition of worship, but defining worship is often difficult. Definitions that understand worship to be a “dialogue between God and his people”, or simply “an adoring contemplation of God” are correct, but prove inadequate in expressing the full experience of worship. It would seem any comprehensive definition must

¹ Sally Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism: Inviting Unbelievers into the Presence of God*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 17.

² David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 15.

³ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Dan Kimball, *Emerging Worship: Creating Worship Gathering for New Generations*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2004), xiii.

⁶ Robert E. Webber, *Worship is a Verb: Eight Principles for Transforming Worship*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishing, 1992), 2.

include the fact that God is the initiator of worship and we as human beings are the respondents of his revelation.⁷ Repeatedly, theologians and authors who engage in discussions concerning worship agree—worship needs to involve both the “revelation of God” and the “response of his people”. The revelation we are to respond to is the “Christ-event” story lived out in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and thus our worship is to be a celebratory response to that Christocentric message.⁸

For this reason, I will argue that joy-filled, God-glorifying worship must involve both the “revelation of truth” from God in the re-telling of the Christ-event story and active participation as a “response of the spirit” to the Christ-event story. This is best facilitated by creating an atmosphere where the mysterious and personal presence of God is celebrated: through the observance of special days, by giving attention to establishing sacred space, by using meaningful and artistic signs and symbols, amid heartfelt music, song and dance, by means of listening to the spoken proclamation of the word verbalized in various forms of speech and most importantly, through the leading of the Holy Spirit.

To begin with, Christ-centered worship finds its roots in the Old Testament because the new covenant we enjoy in Christ today is the fulfillment of the old covenant (Matt 5:17). Therefore, any study of worship should include some understanding of how God initiated worship in the Old Testament, how he revealed himself and how people responded to that revelation. It is interesting to note that whenever God made himself known either to individuals or groups, the immediate response was one of worship. For example, John M. Frame writes, “When God met with Moses at the burning bush, Moses had to remove his shoes, for he stood on

⁷ Andrew Hill, *Enter His Courts with Praise: Old Testament Worship for the New Testament Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), xix.

⁸ Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 31.

holy ground (Exod 3:5). He hid his face for fear of God. He heard God's word and went forth to carry out his divinely given responsibility (3:7-4:31)."⁹ When God revealed himself to Isaiah, he was overwhelmed with his sin as a response to the majesty and holiness of God (Isa 6:7).

Similarly, when God met Israel at Mount Sinai, they saw an awesome display of his power and responded in fear by requesting that only Moses speak to them on God's behalf (Exod 20:19).

Whenever God appeared in the Old Testament to reveal his majesty as Lord, worshippers seldom remained the same; they always left the worship experience to serve God in a new way.¹⁰

Peterson reminds us that God defines the way in which worship is to happen. An engagement with him is always on the terms he proposes and in the way he alone makes possible.¹¹ The worship proposals God put in place in the Old Testament are identified in the forms of the "sacrificial liturgy, the covenant renewal liturgy and the temple liturgy."¹² Through these forms people responded to God by expressing their worship using music and song, bodily gestures, drama, feasting, gift giving, and meditation on God's law.¹³ In all their worship activity, God's people were remembering and responding to the redeeming actions of God.

In the New Testament God is principally known through the saving action of the Christ-event story revealed to us in the gospels. The birth of the church is the response to that event, and each worship experience today continues to be a joy-filled response to the life, teachings, ministry, death, resurrection and promised return of Jesus Christ. The difference though is that in the New Testament "worship is no longer something connected with set feasts, such as Passover; or a set place, such as the temple; or set priests, such as the Levitical system

⁹John M. Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth: A Refreshing Study of the Principles and Practice of Biblical Worship*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1996), 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹¹ Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 20.

¹² Hill, *Enter His Courts with Praise*, 50.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 176.

prescribed. It is for all the people of God at all times and places, and it is bound up with how they live.”¹⁴ From this we gather both a broad and narrow understanding of worship. Broadly speaking, worship in the New Testament is no longer cultic, but simply requires a response through a “life of obedience to God’s word, a sacrifice of ourselves to his purposes.”¹⁵ Narrowly speaking, the forming of the church is a response to the work of Christ and it has become the context in which the Christ-event continues to be proclaimed, celebrated and responded to.¹⁶

The experience of the early Christians in the New Testament book of Acts highlights their response to the Christ-story as one of “awe and wonder” (Acts 2:43). Don Saliers writes that this “sense of awe and wonderment at the mystery of God’s becoming flesh” is a requisite for response and participation in Christian worship,¹⁷ not the response of a pep rally enthusiast, but a response to the revealed presence of God that goes deep inside of people’s hearts and emotions.¹⁸ Reaction to the awesomeness of God as he reveals himself is first of all motivated by the Holy Spirit, and he needs to continue to be our motivation today. But as Webber writes,

We have to create an atmosphere in which it can happen. We need to let go of our intellectual idea of worship and realize there is more to worship than a sermon; we have to let go of our evangelistic notion of worship and reckon with the fact that worship is not primarily directed to sinners who need to be converted; we must let go of our entertainment expectations and remind ourselves that we are not in church to watch a Christian variety show. We have gathered together in worship to be met by God the Almighty. God, the creator of the universe, the One who sustains our lives, our Redeemer and King, is present through the proclamation and remembrance. He wants to communicate to us, to penetrate our inner self, to take up residence within us. And, as we go through the experience of meeting with him in this mystical moment of public worship, we are to respond.¹⁹

¹⁴ D.A. Carson, ed. *Worship by the Book*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 24.

¹⁵ Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 30.

¹⁶ Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 112.

¹⁷ Don Saliers, *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 191.

¹⁸ Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 113.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 114.

But how are we to create an atmosphere of worship that will facilitate a heartfelt, holy, God-honouring response to his revealed nature? The first thing to remember is that people come to church for all kinds of reasons, but their primary need is one of worship in the very presence of God. Therefore, response from the beginning to the end of any worship occurrence must be a powerful inner experience of being in the presence of a holy God.²⁰ This means our worship services must be characterized by a *sense of God's mystery, awe and wonder*. As Thomas Long writes, “vital congregations make room, somewhere in worship, for the experience of mystery” and that as ministry leaders we must take care not to sabotage the mystery of God's presence by a feeling of over familiarity or secularism.²¹

Secondly, if all that goes “into an actual service of worship must pertain to the event of God revealing himself to us,”²² it makes sense to include the observance of *special days* with a focus on the Christian calendar.²³ This forgotten aspect of observing the church calendar begins with Advent as it looks forward with anticipation to Jesus' coming. At Christmas it celebrates the birth of Christ and declares with awe, “Emmanuel, God with us.” At Epiphany it celebrates, remembers and declares the good news of Christ coming for all nations. During Lent and on through Good Friday, it remembers and commemorates the death of Jesus Christ and then on Easter, a climax is reached in a victorious, resurrection celebration.²⁴ These and other special days can restore a sense of sacred time to our worship experiences, as we participate with joy in remembering the Christ-story.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Thomas Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship*, (The Alban Institute, 2001), 20.

²² Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 118.

²³ Kimball, *Emerging Worship*, 93.

²⁴ John Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding: Windows into Christian Practice*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 298.

A third thing to bear in mind is that the aesthetics of our worship space is important. Attention needs to be given to create a *sacred space* to enhance our ability to respond to God appropriately. Scripture in both testaments have graphic descriptions of space and color being used to create a spiritual environment for worship, and we would do well to pay attention to the design of our worship spaces.²⁵ How we arrange our space for worship determines a great deal about the level of response and participation anticipated. As Webber writes:

I believe it is the function of space to foster rather than hinder congregational participation. Unfortunately, the typical Protestant church employs a very closed use of space. The aisles are too narrow and the pews are situated in a style similar to that of a lecture hall. This arrangement, combined with a dominant pulpit, doesn't inherently free the congregation for involvement in worship. There is very little space for musical processions, for artistic expression, for drama, or dance. When I am in this kind of space, I always feel that my natural inhibitions are being supported and a leader-dominated worship is being affirmed.²⁶

As much as possible the arrangement of worship space should vibrate with the potential of an encounter with God, an encounter that will spontaneously and naturally break out in song, movement, praise and ultimately, surrender and service.²⁷

Tied closely to the idea of sacred space is a fourth dimension of worship that helps create an atmosphere to facilitate God's revelation and our response—the use of visual *signs and symbols*. Kimball reminds us that today's emerging generations are eager for visual symbolism to be used in gatherings for they crave a spiritual environment for worship. He suggests using artwork, prayer stations, candles, decorative symbols and props, scripture displayed creatively in artistic forms, visual images on screens, and symbolic uses of color.²⁸ The beauty of signs and symbols are that they compress biblical and spiritual truth into a form easily understood and

²⁵ Kimball, *Emerging Worship*, 78.

²⁶ Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 197.

²⁷ Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars*, 76.

²⁸ Kimball, *Emerging Worship*, 78-80.

assimilated by the worshipper. One only has to think about the revelatory symbolism of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper to realize their compelling imagery. They prepare us to meet with God by drawing our attention away from ourselves to a fuller consideration of Christ and his message. As a means to convey God's nature and revelation, symbolism has always been an important part of biblical religion, and needs to continue to be so.²⁹

Today in most evangelical churches the use of visual symbols is rare, for our worship gatherings are characterized primarily by verbal exchange. To a multi-sensory world that relates to life through the highly visual world of television and other high-tech media, our churches need to be places where multi-sensory worship can be experienced, and where the use of religious signs and symbols are utilized as legitimate forms of communication.³⁰ Employing signs and symbols will allow us to step outside our "worship box" to a whole new level of participation in worship through the use of all our senses.³¹

Fifthly, setting an atmosphere for worship through the use of *sound*, especially music and song, strikes at the very core of our being. For that reason music is often referred to as the language of the heart. Witvliet agrees, for as he states:

Music unconsciously sculpts the emotional contours of our religious experience. Aside from the text, music is a significant language in its own right. It is more than a shell for the text. The music we sing shapes the affections of our souls. It gives emotional content to the text. It interprets the text. Each of music's building blocks—melody, rhythm, harmony—has power and force. . . . Take the three-word text "Eat this bread." Music can make that single text mysterious, sentimental, celebratory, funereal, or meditative.³²

Many people feel that music only has validity as it prepares and serves "the message", so that whatever is sung or listened to needs to flow from the biblical text being expounded on that

²⁹ Hill, *Enter His Courts with Praise*, 56-59.

³⁰ Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism*, 134.

³¹ Kimball, *Emerging Worship*, 82.

³² Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*. 237.

day.³³ Although it is true that musical selections must serve the text, the role of music to reveal the Christ-story and provide an avenue for people to respond is much larger than just complimenting the morning's spoken message. More broadly speaking, Webber states that, "Music serves the fourfold order of Preparation, hearing the Word, communing at the Table, and being sent forth. Through its lyrics, melody, and rhythm, music brings us into the presence of God, assists us in the hearing and responding to the Word, helps us experience healing at the Communion Table, and provides us with the sense of being sent forth."³⁴

The best music in worship is not a repeat of the top ten worship songs but a reflection of each particular worshipping community. In a thriving congregation there is a lot of music—hymns, praise choruses, and laments with varied styles utilized from all eras of the churches history. The music is selected out of alertness to the moment in worship—and is sensitive to the fact that a particular musical selection is more an offering of response to the love story of Christ than a presentation of entertainment value.³⁵

Another means of determining the atmosphere that facilitates revelation and response is utilized through the means of *speech*. Spoken communication is used to proclaim the good news of Christ through liturgies, drama, prayer, testimonies, scripture reading and homilies. Our heritage is grounded in scripture, and the use of all these verbal means to communicate scripture will greatly enhance our ability to more actively participate in the re-telling and re-enacting of the Christian story.

Regardless of how scripture is incorporated into our worship gatherings, it is the record of God's covenant with his people, for it not only records his activities, it also makes mention of

³³ R. Kent Hughes, "Free Church Worship," in *Worship by the Book* (ed. D.A. Carson; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 167.

³⁴ Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 186.

³⁵ Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars*, 64.

the responses of faith by the biblical characters. When believers today hear how saints of old listened, praised, bowed down, raised their hands or even wept in response to God they are encouraged to likewise respond as scriptures actual meaning becomes fresh and new to them.³⁶ Scripture reading, along with the preaching and teaching of God's word has always been important and should continue to be so, but scripture never says that it must be done by monologue, for God often reveals himself through the use of parable, stories and other dramatic elements.³⁷ This leaves room for much variety in the way *speech* is used to reveal God's word and how verbal language is used to respond.

Patrick Keifert, a strong voice for the resurgence of meaningful ritual speaks of liturgy as God's gift of speech to his people. He feels that God's promise to be present in Israel's worship necessitates public ritual. He sees liturgy not as a "human devise to hold God on reserve but a gift from God of God's self,"³⁸ and that our challenge in worship is not to focus exclusively on the gift wrap (the liturgy) so that worship becomes mechanistic, but not to throw away the gift wrap either, realizing that the advantage of ritual behaviour is how it draws our attention away from ourselves and onto God.³⁹ Marva Dawn agrees with the analogy of liturgy being God's gift to us. To her, we worship by God's invitation and using his words in liturgical response will help us to remember that worship is God's gift to us and not the other way around.⁴⁰

Even though God invites us to worship as "his gift to us", too many believers receive the gift with little emotional attachment to the Giver. Their worship is an affair of the mind, rather than an affair of the heart. The result is that the external expressions of worship in any form,

³⁶ Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 73.

³⁷ Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 93.

³⁸ Patrick Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 60.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁴⁰ Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 243-246.

such as praying, singing, preaching, rituals, symbolic gestures, dancing, et cetera are empty and pointless.⁴¹ We do well to listen to the rebuke of Jesus to the Pharisees, “These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. In vain do they worship me, their teachings are but rules taught by men” (Matt 15:8-9).

Thus, without the motivation of the Holy Spirit working in our lives to evoke a heartfelt response to a revelation of God’s truth, lived out in the incarnate life of Jesus Christ, our worship remains external, artificial and pointless. It is the Holy Spirit that quickens hearts to their need for God, it is the Holy Spirit that draws people to the life giving water offered by Jesus Christ; it is the Holy Spirit that reveals to people the truth of God’s word (John 16:8-15), and it is the Holy Spirit who enables believers to truly worship in “spirit and truth” (4:23-24).

All the vehicles of worship mentioned are simply expressions or responses of worship—they are not worship in and of themselves. They are as Piper suggests “the resulting heat of our affections for God.”⁴² Worship, as joy-filled love for God is always involving both the “revelation of truth” from God in the re-telling of the Christ-event story, and active participation as a “response of the Holy Spirit in ones life” to the Christ-event story.

In worship “God is present, loving me, caring for me, bringing me to himself, and offering me the benefits of his work on my behalf. How can I not respond to his work? How can I remain silent, or passive, or indifferent? I can’t. So I respond with an appropriate ‘Amen’ or ‘Alleluia’ and more”⁴³

⁴¹ John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 2003), 83.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 82.

⁴³ Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 9.

PART II OF MAJOR PROJECT – A PRACTICAL COMPONENT

Four Advent Lessons to Prepare Hearts for Christmas

I have been intrigued by the ancient practice of *lectio divina*, a technique practiced and kept alive in the Christian monastic tradition. It is described as a “slow, contemplative praying of the Scriptures which enables the Bible, the Word of God, to become a means of union with God.”⁴⁴ Deliberation, meditation, silence and reflection are all aspects of this process of *lectio divina*, and are used as Father Luke Dysinger states, “to listen for the still, small voice of God; the ‘faint, murmuring sound’ which is God’s word for us, God’s voice touching our hearts.”⁴⁵

Thus, for the practical component of this project I have designed four lessons that can be used in a small group setting, which combine the process of *lectio divina* along with other aspects of worship mentioned in Part I. The lessons are for the season of Advent leading up to Christmas in order to help people prepare their hearts for this very significant Christian celebration. Many evangelical believers are unprepared emotionally and spiritually for Christmas and thus miss out on experiencing the deep significance of the birth of Christ. I will be incorporating scripture, narrative, meditation, music and silence, along with a display of symbolic items to create a sacred space where group attendees will be encouraged to respond to the re-telling of the wonder of the Christmas story and reflect on the miraculous event of the coming of Jesus to earth as a humble child. Through listening and responding to the scripture readings and the profoundly moving vignettes by Richard Exley,⁴⁶ group members will draw on their imagination to capture some of the sights, sounds and feelings surrounding the events of Jesus’ birth.

⁴⁴ Father Luke Dysinger, “Accepting the Embrace of God: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina”, *Valyermo Benedictine*, Spring 1990 (vol.1, no.1), 99-110. Online: <http://www.valyermo.com/ld-art.html>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Richard Exley, *The Indescribable Gift*, (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Honor Books, 1997). Photocopies of the narratives to be read are included separately.

The four lessons are built around the following themes: 1) Waiting for the Lord, 2) Preparing for the Lord, 3) Responding to the Lord, and 4) Celebrating the Love of the Lord. Each week after explaining the process and history of *lectio divina*, the format of the lesson will be generally the same. After a time of “getting acquainted”, we will open with prayer and spend the majority of our time together reflecting on various scripture passages and a narrative reading. After each reading, time will be spent in silence and then brief reflective responses will be encouraged about how God has revealed himself to individual group members.

Ideally this group would meet in a home where the setting is casual and comfortable. On exhibit would be a collection of crèches from around the world, an Advent wreath with a new candle burning each week, and an area where pens, paper and art supplies are available for those who wish to express themselves on paper during the times of silence. Soft instrumental Christmas music will be played in the background as people arrive. On a special table symbolic items that correspond to the weekly scriptures can be displayed. For week one the table could be covered with a deep purple cloth to symbolize the royalty of the coming Christ. On it could be a beautifully wrapped gift “waiting” to be opened, as well as a large open Bible. On week two, a few Shepherds and Wise Men from the nativity scenes could be added to symbolize how both the “great and the humble” were being “prepared” to meet Christ. On the third week, I might add a few images of people “responding” to Jesus, and on week four the addition of a bouquet of roses, a baby blanket and a crown to symbolize the “greatest gift of love” being born a baby and yet a King, might complete the display.

The scripture readings, the times of silent reflection, the symbolic décor and the narratives are all an attempt to make this “bible study” a multi-sensory worship experience that feeds the heart and spirit, as well as the mind.

Advent Week One – “Waiting for the Lord”⁴⁷

1. Ice Breaker Question: What is the most difficult thing you’ve ever had to wait for?
2. Open with Prayer
3. Ask people to read the following scripture portions that talk about the importance of “waiting”. Follow each passage up with one minute of silence and an invitation for group members to reflect on the scripture reading with simply a one or two word response. (Members are welcome to write or draw out responses as well on the paper provided.) Have others reread the passages, pausing again after each reading for two minutes of silence. After the two passages have been read, ask group members to respond with a brief description on how they see, feel or hear God speaking to them.
 - a. Waiting for the Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34)
 - b. Waiting for the News (Malachi 3:1)
4. Read Luke 1: 5-25 concerning the “Birth of John the Baptist foretold”.
5. Follow this reading with the narrative of “Zechariah” by Richard Exley in *The Indescribable Gift*.
6. Have group share some reflection on how God touched and challenged them through the scripture reading and/or the narrative.
7. Invite prayer requests that deal with the difficulty of “waiting” for the Lord’s right timing. Close with time for communal and private prayer.

⁴⁷ The Advent themes and readings are gleaned from an Advent Devotional by James L. Evans, *Family Devotions for the Advent Season*, (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 1991).

Advent Week Two – “Preparing for the Lord”

1. Ice Breaker Question: What are the ways in which you prepare for Christmas?
2. Open with Prayer
3. Read Matthew 1:18-25 about how God was “preparing” Joseph.
4. Follow with reading the story of “Joseph” by Richard Exley in *The Indescribable Gift*.
5. Ask group members for a few brief, reflective responses to the story.
6. Ask different people to read the following scripture portions that talk about the importance of “preparation”. Follow each passage up with one minute of silence and an invitation for group members to reflect on the scripture reading with simply a one or two word response. (Members are welcome to write or draw out responses as well on the paper provided.) Have others reread the passages, pausing again after each one for two minutes of silence. After the three passages have been read, ask group members to respond with a brief description on how they see, feel or hear God speaking to them.
 - a. Preparing the Humble (Luke 2:8-20)
 - b. Preparing the Great (Matthew 2:1-12)
 - c. Preparing the People (Luke 3:1-17)
7. Have group share some general reflections on how God touched and challenged them through the scripture reading and/or the narrative.
8. Invite prayer requests that deal with the importance of “preparing” for the Lord’s coming, either this Christmas or in eternity. Close with time for communal and private prayer.

Advent Week Three – “Responding to the Lord”

1. Ice Breaker Question: How do you and your family respond to the arrival of a special guest in your home?
2. Open with Prayer
3. Begin with reading the story of “The Innkeeper” by Richard Exley in *The Indescribable Gift*, asking group members to reflect on the Innkeeper’s response to the birth of Jesus Christ. How may we respond to an unexpected visit or expected visit from Jesus?
4. Ask different people to read the following scripture portions that talk about how different people “responded” to Jesus Christ. Follow each passage up with two minutes of silence and an invitation for group members to reflect on the scripture reading with a brief one or two sentence response of how they see, feel or hear God speaking to them. (Members are welcome to write or draw out responses as well on the paper provided.)
 - a. Responding with Prayer (Luke 2: 25-33)
 - b. Responding with Thanksgiving (Luke 2:36-38)
 - c. Responding with Obedience (Mark 1:16-20)
 - d. Responding with Faith (Matthew 8:5-10)
5. Have the group share some general reflections on how God touched and challenged them through the scripture reading and/or the narrative.
6. Invite prayer requests that deal with the importance of “responding” to the coming of Jesus at Christmas. Close with time for communal and private prayer.

Advent Week Four – “Celebrating the Love of the Lord”

1. Ice Breaker Question: Finish this sentence with five words or less, “Love is
2. Open with Prayer
3. Ask people to read the following scripture portions that talk about the importance of “love”. Follow each passage up with one minute of silence and an invitation for group members to reflect on the scripture reading with simply a one or two word response. (Members are welcome to write or draw out responses as well on the paper provided.) Have others reread the passages, pausing again after each reading for two minutes of silence. After the four passages have been read, ask group members to respond with a brief description on how they see, feel or hear God speaking to them.
 - a. Love is Kind (Luke 10:30-37)
 - b. Love creates Hope (Mark 2:1-12)
 - c. Love Casts out Fear (1 John 4:16-21)
 - d. Love Never Fails (1 Corinthians 13:1-8)
4. Read Luke 2: 1-7 concerning the “Birth of Jesus”.
5. Follow this reading with the narrative of “The Birth” by Richard Exley in *The Indescribable Gift*.
6. Pass out Christmas gifts of “love” to each attendee and celebrate the “Greatest Gift of Love” with a closing meal together. During this time have group members share how God touched, challenged and prepared them during the past four weeks of Advent, have a time of celebratory prayer together and then close with some Christmas carol singing.

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