



The Immanuel Approach and Worship

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I. Notice distraction and deliberately focus attention: One problem I often have in worship is being distracted by the many immediate concerns in my life. To be able to worship, I often need to choose to take my focus off these distractions and choose to focus on the Lord. A piece of good news is that this is a brain-skill. As we learn and practice the brain-skill of noticing distraction and then deliberately focusing our attention on worship, distraction will become less and less of a problem.¹

II. Keep relational circuits online: A second problem, closely related to the one just mentioned, is that I am sometimes subtly triggered. If I am subtly triggered to the point that my relational circuits are offline, this will seriously hinder my ability to connect with the Lord, to connect with the rest of the congregation, and to experience joy.² With respect to this second problem, lots of practice with both noticing when my circuits go off, and with interventions for bringing them back online again has been a huge blessing.³ Having had a lot of practice, I can actually apply these principles and tools during a worship service – I can usually notice when my relational circuits are off, and I can usually get them back on again by employing some combination of 1. Talking to the Lord about my trigger and receiving His attunement; 2. Calming to reduce the intensity of any negative emotions that are stirred up; and 3. Deliberate appreciation.

III. Perceive and connect with Jesus: When I use the initial steps in the Immanuel Approach process to perceive the presence of Jesus and establish an interactive connection, my perception and connection are usually very subtle. Fortunately, when I work with a practice partner or facilitator, so that the benefits from how our brains work best in community can help me to recognize the meaning and feel the importance of my usually-subtle perception and connection, my perception of Jesus's presence and my interactions with Him are always profoundly satisfying, even though subtle.⁴ In contrast, when I go through the Immanuel Approach steps to establish an interactive connection just by myself, without a practice partner or facilitator, my perceptions, connection, and interactions with Jesus are usually much less satisfying. So I usually

¹ It is becoming more and more important to learn and practice this brain-skill, as video games and smart phones are training our brains in the opposite direction.

² For discussion of relational circuits, how being triggered will push them offline, and how having them offline will block you from connecting with the Lord, connecting with others, and experiencing joy, see chapter twelve in *Outsmarting Yourself*.

³ For discussion of how to recognize when your relational circuits are offline, and then how to bring them back online again, see chapters fifteen through twenty three in *Outsmarting Yourself*.

⁴ For additional discussion of how our brains work best in community, and how working with a practice partner or facilitator helps us to recognize the meaning and feel the importance of subtle content, see chapter sixteen in *The Immanuel Approach: For Emotional Healing and for Life*.

do not use the initial steps in the Immanuel Approach process as a resource to enhance my worship experience.⁵

However, there are some people who perceive and connect with Jesus much more easily, and who have perceptions and connections that are usually clear and strong. These people usually have satisfying experiences when they go through the process without a practice partner or facilitator, and many of them do use the first steps in the IA process – to the point of establishing an interactive connection – as a resource to enhance their worship experience.

IV. Dismantle memory-anchored distortions regarding the Lord’s character and heart: In my personal experience, for many years a huge hindrance to worship was that I didn’t have internal unity regarding whether or not the Lord *truly deserved* worship. I knew, cognitively, that the Lord is faithful, loving, powerful, always with me, truthful, just, etc. – *deserving of worship and praise*. But experientially there were parts of my mind where these things didn’t *feel* true. What *felt* true came from many childhood memories – perceptions and emotions from negative experiences with authority figures that would get triggered forward and then transferred onto the Lord.⁶ What *felt* true was that God does *not* protect His children (like the teachers that were in the lounge drinking coffee instead of on the playground protecting the vulnerable children from the bullies). What *felt* true was that God does *not* know and see everything (like my father when he accidentally closed the car trunk on my head). What *felt* true was that God will criticize and blame me for being stuck, but not give me the help that I need to solve the problem (like my first grade teacher when I couldn’t read because of my dyslexia). What *felt* true was that God won’t come when I need him (like when I was 18 months old, my mom got really sick, my brother and I got sent away to stay with friends, and my parents did not come when I called and called for them). What *felt* true was that God ignores injustice (like my grade-school gym teacher who seemed blind to cheating, and made little effort to prevent it). What *felt* true was that God can’t *really* be trusted to keep His promises (like the politicians of my childhood).⁷ To be painfully honest, the words of many worship songs felt like flattery and propaganda, and I felt like a hypocrite when I sang them because they didn’t *feel* true.

A strange part of this experience is that I initially had no insight regarding the true roots of my negative perceptions and emotions towards the Lord. It seemed like there were understandable reasons in my current adult life for my negative thoughts regarding the Lord’s character. For example, I truly believed that my perception that the Lord couldn’t be trusted to take care of His children was primarily an adult, cognitive struggle. “But He *doesn’t* take care of His children – look at all of the Christians that have been murdered in Turkey and that are starving to death in

⁵ There are rare exceptions.

⁶ When I first wrote this essay, it was written with a mixture of present tense and past tense because many/most of these distorted perceptions regarding the Lord’s character and heart still felt true. Thankfully, now most of these distorted perceptions have been resolved. Over the last twenty-plus years of regular healing work, I have noticed that each distorted perception that I resolved made it easier for me to worship. Before starting this healing process, I couldn’t figure out why anybody would *want* to worship, and I thought that the people who worshiped enthusiastically must be faking it. Now I actually enjoy worship, and have even been one of the worship leaders at our church.

⁷ For additional description and discussion regarding each of these examples, see supplementary chapter 35c, “Memory-anchored Distortions, Hindrances, and Blockages” (available as a free download from the “Immanuel Approach book (draft version)” section of the Resources page of our Immanuel Approach website, www.immanuelapproach.com).

Angola!” Before getting healing with the Immanuel Approach, I had no awareness of the true roots of the problem, and I spent *thousands* of hours trying to resolve the problem in my adult cognitive mind. I have sixteen books on the subject of “how can we believe that God is good and trust Him to take care of us when he allows so much suffering,” and I have spent hundreds of hours going through the 3,306 pages contained in these volumes. I received wise pastoral counsel, and discussed and thought and prayed about this question endlessly. But it never seemed adequate. No matter what I did, it still *felt* true that the Lord couldn’t be trusted to take care of His children.

No amount of teaching, reading, thinking, discussion, or praying was able to resolve my negative perceptions of the Lord because they were still anchored in underlying childhood memories. However, when I went to the underlying traumatic memories and resolved the memory-anchored distorted perceptions about the Lord, all of a sudden the cognitive answers I already had were adequate. I didn’t discover any new insights with my cognitive mind, but it finally *felt* true that the Lord is good and that He can be trusted to take care of His children.

Another example is that for most of my life it has *felt* true that God is scary, unpredictable, and unsafe. I realize that there are good and true ways in which God is scary, unpredictable, and not safe – like Aslan in the Chronicles of Narnia.⁸ However, what *felt* true to me was that God is scary, unpredictable, and unsafe in a bad way – like a person who gets triggered, and then acts unpredictably and frighteningly out of his or her triggered thoughts and emotions. “But this is a reasonable perception!” some part of my mind would argue. “Look at all the stuff in the Old Testament – where the Lord orders the Israelites to commit genocide,⁹ and strikes a man dead for trying to be helpful.”¹⁰ I worked for decades trying to resolve this feeling that God was bad-scary, receiving counsel from wise pastors, reading thousands of pages on the subject, thinking, discussing, journaling, and praying. But the results were very mediocre. I could sort of combat my negative perceptions and feelings with all the cognitive material, but the negative perceptions and emotions would come rushing back every time something triggered the underlying memories. Thankfully, when I finally found and resolved the underlying traumatic memories that exactly matched my distorted, negative perceptions and feelings towards the Lord, the issue resolved.

I didn’t have any new cognitive insights, but suddenly all of the material I already knew *felt* adequate, whereas before it hadn’t. All of a sudden I was able to just let it go. I still have questions about the same passages in the Old Testament, but now it feels like the evidence for the Lord’s goodness is adequate to balance my questions. Before, what *felt* true was “I can’t figure it all out, and the summary of all the evidence seems to indicate that the Lord is bad (scary, unpredictable, and unsafe).” Now, what *feels* true is “I still can’t figure it all out, I still don’t have

⁸ As Mr. and Mrs. Beaver tell the children: “...if there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly....’Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good.” Lewis, CS. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, (Harper Collins: New York, NY.) 1950, p.80.

⁹ Deut 20:16-17 “However, in the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the LORD your God has commanded you.”

¹⁰ 2 Sam 6:6-7 “When they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out and took hold of the ark of God, because the oxen stumbled. The Lord’s anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down and he died there beside the ark of God.”

all the answers, but now I can trust the evidence indicating that the Lord is good. It *feels* true that the Lord is good.”¹¹

Ever since I began getting healing for old trauma, *every* time I identified and focused on a negative perception regarding the Lord, it eventually went back to some childhood memory with negative content that exactly matched the negative perception I had towards the Lord.

I think that one of the most important things I can do for my ability to worship in spirit and in truth is to address these trauma-anchored distortions regarding the Lord’s character and heart. The more I know the truth about God *experientially* – the more the truth about God *feels* true, the easier it is to worship. If I fully knew and felt the truth about God’s goodness, I would have to discipline myself to take breaks from worship so that I could sleep.

A good analogy is driving through the Grand Teton mountains. When I drive through the Tetons, I *experience* their grandeur. I see and experience that they are awesome, IMMENSE, spectacular, and beautiful. This is not just cognitive thoughts about them, but rather experiential reality. And I experience internal unity. There are not parts of my mind where it *feels* true that the Tetons are really small, ugly, and dirty – there are not child memory places in my mind that are disagreeing with the attributes that my adult self is admiring: “the Tetons are rugged, pristine, beautiful, and HUGE!!!” When I drive through the Tetons, I don’t need to work to focus my thoughts on the attributes of the Tetons in order to praise them, but rather experience spontaneous praise. Appreciation and praise flow forth involuntarily – “Wow!” “Incredible!” “Look! Look at THAT!” “Spectacular!” “Isn’t that beautiful?!” I would have to concentrate and discipline myself to *not* praise them.

As a worship leader there have been times when I challenged the congregation regarding their lack of enthusiasm, as if the problem was that they were just lazy, or choosing to withhold enthusiastic worship for some strange reason. I think it is important to recognize that it is not helpful to scold ourselves into trying to manufacture feelings for the Lord that are inconsistent with what we actually believe, or to try to stir up more vigorous outward expressions that don’t flow from our true hearts. I think that if we practice the discipline of turning our focus away from our distractions and towards the Lord, if we learn to keep our relational circuits online so that we can experience the relational joy of connecting with the Lord and with our community, and if we resolve the memory-anchored distortions that prevent us from seeing and *feeling* the truth regarding the Lord’s goodness, we will experience worship that is wonderfully enthusiastic, and free of the bad feelings that come with forced or embellished emotion and expression.

Prayer: As I have been working to find and resolve the memory-anchored distortions that hinder my worship, I have found the following prayer to be helpful: “Lord, I confess that I still carry many lies about who Your character and heart. I ask your forgiveness for believing these lies about who You are. I ask that You would bring these lies into the light. Lead me to the memories where they are anchored and replace them with Your truth, so that I may know, experientially, the truth about who You are – so that appropriate praise will flow spontaneously from my heart and mind – so that I will be more able to worship You in spirit and in truth. Thank you, Lord,

¹¹ For additional description and discussion regarding this example, see supplementary chapter 35c, “Memory-anchored Distortions, Hindrances, and Blockages” (available as a free download from the “Immanuel Approach book (draft version)” section of the Resources page of our Immanuel Approach website, www.immanuelapproach.com).

that You are worthy of praise.”

V. Applications for corporate/congregational worship: Church leaders have asked about using these principles and techniques in congregational/cooperate worship settings. A few quick thoughts:

1. Help more people in your congregation to embrace and IA lifestyle: The simplest application is to help more people learn the Immanuel Approach and embrace an Immanuel Approach lifestyle. Congregational/corporate worship will improve as more and more individuals are applying the principles and techniques described above, so that they are worshipping with a stronger foundation of increased internal agreement, worshipping with their relational circuits on and feeling relational connection joy, and worshipping while perceiving the tangible, living, interactive, personal, friendship presence of Jesus.

2. Deliberate appreciation: Deliberate appreciation can be used to activate people's relational circuits in corporate worship settings, but there are problems with the way this is usually done. Deliberate appreciation in corporate settings usually involves just inviting the congregation to take ten to fifteen seconds to name things they are grateful for. One problem with this is that deliberate appreciation is a skill that many have not practiced, and therefore are usually not able to engage in successfully when occasionally surprised with the challenge. Another problem is that it usually takes the brain three to five minutes of recalling positive memories and/or naming blessings to actually generate strong appreciation. Therefore, most participants experience minimal benefits with the way deliberate appreciation is typically carried out in corporate settings. Sadly, many participants come away with the assessment that deliberate appreciation is well-intended but disappointing.

However, if the congregation has had good teaching about this kind of deliberate appreciation, so that they have a vision for taking adequate time and really leaning into it; if they have had some practice so that they don't just flounder in a way that is unsatisfying; and if adequate time is allotted, then deliberate appreciation in a corporate/congregational setting could be really valuable.

3. Perceive and connect with Jesus: As mentioned above, there are some people who perceive and connect with Jesus fairly easily, and who have perceptions and connections that are usually clear and strong. These people usually have satisfying experiences when they go through the process without a practice partner or facilitator, and many of them use the first steps in the IA process (that is, to the point of establishing an interactive connection) as a resource to enhance their worship experiences. In light of this reality, church leaders (and especially worship leaders) understandably ask about being much more deliberate with respect to including this piece in corporate worship – what if the worship leader could coach the whole congregation through the first steps in the IA process, so that people would be experiencing interactive connections with the living, tangible, personal presence of God as they worship? This seems like a brilliant idea!

Unfortunately, this will only turn out well for some of the congregation. As also mentioned

above, there are people (like myself) who have subtle perceptions and connection.¹² If these people can take advantage of the way our brains work best in community by describing their mental content to a practice partner or facilitator after each step in the process, they will be able to recognize the meaning and feel the importance of their subtle perceptions and connections, and they will have very meaningful, satisfying experiences. In contrast, if these people try this in a group setting, where they are *not* working with a practice partner or facilitator, they will usually have disappointing, unsatisfying experiences. Furthermore, many people initially encounter hindrances when they first try the Immanuel Approach.¹³ If they are working with a facilitator who can provide troubleshooting, they can almost always resolve the hindrances and then perceiving and connect with the Lord. However, if they do not get help with troubleshooting, they will have disappointing, unsatisfying experiences.

One problem with this picture is that a significant percent of the congregation will have disappointing, unsatisfying experiences. A second, more serious problem is that these people will be inoculated. Going forward, whenever they encounter opportunities to learn and/or receive the Immanuel Approach, their response will be some form of, “No thank you. I’ve already tried it, and it was an unsatisfying disappointment.” Please, please, please don’t do this.

This being said, including the first steps in the Immanuel Approach process as part of corporate worship can turn out well if conditions are ideal. I know of one small church where everyone in the congregation is experienced with the Immanuel Approach and has embraced an Immanuel lifestyle. So one ideal condition is that they have already resolved most hindrances that might get in the way of just perceiving and connecting with the Lord. A second ideal condition is that they have all had a lot of practice, so that they are comfortable with the process and skillful in applying the practical techniques involved.¹⁴ Finally, they are all aware of the possibility of difficulties with blockages and subtle experiences, and they know how to address these difficulties, so they do not become inoculated. This congregation has experienced good benefits with minimal problems when they include the first steps in the IA process as part of corporate worship.

4. Start with retreat-type settings: One thought that comes to me is to start in smaller retreat-type settings, as opposed to Sunday morning services. With deliberate appreciation, you could experiment with teaching about deliberate appreciation and relational circuits, and also practice deliberate appreciation exercises, in a retreat-type setting where there would be more time and different expectations. When you get to the point that most in the congregation understand the principles, and have become comfortable with persisting with deliberate

¹² My rough estimate is that twenty to forty percent of people in first-world congregations have subtle perceptions and connection.

¹³ My rough estimate is that twenty to forty percent of people in first-world congregations need help with troubleshooting when they first try the Immanuel Approach.

¹⁴ If subtle-perception-and-connection participants are comfortable with the process and skillful in applying the practical techniques involved, they can sometimes have subtle-but-satisfying experiences even with group exercises. This would particularly be true if the worship leader is providing a conducive space by leading the congregation through the process, as opposed to participants trying to go through the process on their own in the middle of other worship activities. (In section III above, where I talk about not using the IA process for connecting with Jesus as a resource for enhancing worship, I am referring to this second, more difficult scenario.)

appreciation until they *feel* strong gratitude, you could experiment with larger worship settings. And again, make sure to include enough time.

With incorporating the initial steps of the IA process into worship, the challenges just discussed above would be easier to address in a smaller, retreat-type setting. You could more easily take the time to explain how some people will have very subtle perceptions and connection, you could take the time to explain how some people will initially encounter hindrances that require troubleshooting, and you could take the time to explain how it is *very* important to *not* be inoculated – to *not* conclude that the Immanuel Approach doesn't work if they have a disappointing experience in the group worship setting. Furthermore, it would be ideal to have some/many participants who have already had experience with IA, so that they are comfortable with the process and skillful in applying the practical techniques involved. And it would be ideal to have some/many participants who have already resolved many of the blockages that might hinder them from perceiving and connecting with the Lord. My guess is that it would be easier to arrange for these ideal components in a smaller, retreat-type setting. lifestyle.)