

The Want of Worthy Worship
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We leave our places of worship, and no deep and inexpressible wonder sits on our faces. We can sing these lilting melodies; and when we get out into the streets our faces are one with the faces of those who have left the theaters and music halls. There is nothing about us to suggest that we've been looking at anything stupendous and overwhelming. Far back in my boyhood I remember an old saint telling me that after some services he liked to make his way back home alone by the quiet paths, so that the hush of the Almighty might remain on his awed and prostrated soul. This is the element we are missing.

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In recent years worship has become the new topic of theological discussion in contemporary American Evangelicalism. Seminars abound to discuss new ways to “do worship.” Books and articles have exploded on the scene articulating every conceivable variation on worship. Even secular America has tuned in and turned on to worship. *Newsweek*, *Time* magazine, and even news programming on prime time network television have commented on American’s return to spirituality and church. And, no one is paying more attention to this trend than Evangelicalism.

On the surface, it might seem a positive thing that worship has come to the forefront of Evangelical thinking. After all, is it not the business of the Church to worship corporately? It is not the aim and duty of the Christian in personal worship to render through his daily life acceptable worship and service to God? On the one hand, we should be thankful that the Church has turned again to the primacy of worship. On the other, we should be concerned that the worship espoused be acceptable to God and not just to man. After all, worship is not about us but about Him, and therefore, as both the source and the object of all biblical worship, God not only merits but has mandated that men everywhere worship acceptably in His sight. It is not enough that we turn our interest to worship. Nor is it sufficient to discuss worship, even in a setting like this. At the end of the day we must worship and we must do so acceptably in the sight of Him Whom we worship.

We are by nature worshippers. Instinctively we all worship something or someone. Left to ourselves we end up either worshipping the wrong object or worshipping in wrong ways. This danger makes it necessary that any profitable discussion about worship begin by observing that man is a worshipper and that he is such necessarily rather than accidentally or incidentally. There is no such thing as an accidental worshipper. Furthermore, the resulting conversation must be confined within the context of what God has said rather than merely with our personal, experiential, religious, cultural, or social observations. It is not enough to be interested in worship, to discuss it, or even to engage in it personally. We must worship acceptably and what constitutes such worship must be measured against God’s unchanging standard, His Word. Consequently, the discussion must go beyond the idea that worship is good and necessary. Any profitable discussion must be radically committed to a certain kind of worship – worship that is acceptable in

God's sight. And that worship will of necessity be Biblical. When it is not, it is neither acceptable to God nor profitable to the worshipper. James Montgomery Boice observed the disastrous results that come from careless or unbiblical worship when he stated,

Whenever in the church biblical authority has been lost, Christ has been displaced, the gospel has been distorted, or faith has been perverted, it has always been for one reason: Our interests have displaced God's and we are doing His work our way. The loss of God's centrality in the life of today's church is common and lamentable. It is this loss that allows us to transform worship into entertainment, gospel preaching into marketing, believing into technique, being good into feeling good about ourselves, and faithfulness into being successful. As a result, God, Christ, and the Bible have come to mean too little to us and rest too inconsequentially upon us.¹

When the focus of worship shifts away from God and to the worshipper, it ceases to be worthy. When worshippers are more impressed or impacted by the worship experience than by the glory and majesty of God something is dangerously amiss. It is time for the Church to return to authentic worship that is Biblical rather than cultural or experiential – worship that leaves us awed and transformed more than entertained and satiated. The kind of worship that causes us to *to make our way back home alone by the quiet paths, so that the hush of the Almighty might remain on our awed and prostrated souls*. But how are we to arrive again at such worship? What constitutes it? How, where, why, and by who is it offered? In short, what is its essence?

The Essence of Biblical Worship

Defining worship is notoriously difficult.² It is perhaps better described than defined. And, of all the various descriptions writers have put forth, the one by William Temple is most striking. He said,

Both for perplexity and for dulled conscience the remedy is the same; sincere and spiritual worship. For worship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by His holiness; the nourishment of mind with His truth; the purifying of imagination by His beauty; the opening of the heart to His love; the surrender of will to His purpose – and all of this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable.

Part of the difficulty in defining worship is its relational nature that precludes all attempts to define it as an object or a mere act. At the heart of true Biblical worship is the creature-Creator relationship. And that relationship must be expressed in ways appropriate to the creature and acceptable to the Creator. This important distinction requires that all worship be evaluated, expressed, and directed for the glory, honor, and pleasure of the Creator rather than the creature. This is evident in the nature, design, and regulation of Israel's worship in the Old Testament. It is also evident in the expressions of worship found throughout the New Testament documents. Interestingly, most of the New Testament references which speak to worship describe rational creatures rendering

worship to God the Father (John 4:21-24; Acts 17:23; Acts 18:3; Romans 12:1-2; 1 Corinthians 14:25; Hebrews 1:6; Revelation 4:10; 14:7; 15:4; 19:10; 22:9). God then is the Who of worthy worship. But what of the where, when, and how of such worship?

The Expansion of Biblical Worship

Even a cursory reading of the Old Testament reveals that acceptable worship happened in a specific location – the temple/tabernacle, at specific appointed times, and in carefully prescribed ways. Additionally, during the Mosaic dispensation worship was primarily seen through the lens of the corporate worship of Israel rather than as an individual personal experience. For redeemed New Testament believers, appropriate worship has been adjusted in three important ways. First, the scope of acceptable worshipers has broadened beyond national Israel. In John 4:23-24, Jesus deliberately sought out a worshiper who would have been disqualified on several grounds had she come to worship at the temple. In His invitation to her, Jesus declared that true worship would no longer be limited to a physical, national context such as Judaism but that all true worship on earth would now be open to anyone who had the Spirit of God regardless of race, gender, or background. Second, although the scope of worshippers is expanded beyond national and religious Israel, it is not open to all without distinction. There is a new and an important boundary. The worship God seeks must be offered in “truth.” While it is true that God demands sincerity of heart and life, this is probably not the main point Jesus was making in this text. All through John’s gospel, he points the reader to Jesus as the “truth.” He is full of grace and truth (1:14, 17). He is the truth that will set men free (8:32). He speaks only truth (8:45,46) because He is the truth (14:6). He has sent the Spirit of truth (14:17; 15:26) to witness of the truth and remind men that He is the truth (16:13). It is through His truth that men will be saved and sanctified (17:17,19). So when Jesus stated that God was seeking worship in “truth” He was stating that all acceptable worship must be offered in Him. Just like all acceptable worship in the Old Testament had to be offered in the place of God’s choosing – the tabernacle/temple, all acceptable worship in the New Testament had to be offered in a place of God’s choosing – a new temple. Jesus replaced the temple (John 2:19,20), and He is the head of a body that has become the new temple of God – the Church (First Corinthians 3:16,17). The way one becomes a part of such worship in such a temple is by being “in Christ.” Only worship that is offered “in Christ,” “by Christ,” and “for Christ,” is genuine worship and only those who are joined to Christ can be such worshippers. The third important adjustment to worship made in the New Testament is the expansion of the sphere of worship beyond corporate formal worship to personal daily worship. This is most clearly seen in Paul’s demand that all worship be offered in the context of personal daily living as an acceptable sacrifice (Romans 12:1-2). Such instruction does not replace or even supersede the importance of regular corporate worship; rather, this instruction demands that such worship be offered by transformed individuals who reflect their worship in daily living. This is significant because it fleshes out Jesus original statement that the Father is seeking worshippers who will worship in Spirit and in truth. Such worship will go beyond merely offering external sacrifices, gifts, and verbal praise. Such worship can only come from worshippers whose lives have been radically transformed by Him whom they worship. As “priests” in the new temple of God, their priestly service must be

offered from a life that has approved that which is good and acceptable in His sight evidenced by a commitment to reject that which God has disapproved in the world around them (Romans 12:2). Since worship contains a relational context between creature and Creator, only worship that measures up to at least these three criteria will be pleasing to the One who we worship. And, if He is not pleased with our worship, then it has been futile and has damaged our souls regardless of what we think we have experienced or been pleased by during the worship experience. But what of the final question – the purpose or goal of acceptable worship?

The End of Biblical Worship

To be sure, worship God's way brought great blessing to the worshippers but their well being was subordinate to God's greater purpose – exalting and extending His glory. This is not just an Old Testament concept. It lies at the heart of all New Testament worship. God's first and primary purpose is to exalt and expand His glory throughout the entire universe, and one of the ways He has chosen to do this is by receiving acceptable worship from worshippers He has made us worthy and equipped to offer such worship. Nowhere is this more evident than in the book of Ephesians where worshippers are exhorted to live in light of their calling as worshippers (4:1). The reason we are to walk worthy is so that all the universe may see the praise-worthiness of God (1:6,12,14) by observing the surpassing riches of His grace to those He has placed in the Church (2:7), and by seeing His manifold wisdom revealed through the Church (3:10). God surpassing wisdom in the plan and design of the gospel is worthy of praise (Romans 16:27). The goal of each individual worshiper is that every action in every sphere of life be done to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31; Philippians 1:11). The goal of corporate worship in the Church is the glory of God (Ephesians 3:21). God's express goal in calling, redeeming, indwelling, and gifting a community of saved sinners for His Son to rule over in love is to show through them the wonderful magnificence of His wisdom, the lavishness of His grace, and the unsurpassed brilliance of His wisdom to all the intelligent beings in His creation (Ephesians 3:10) to the praise of His glory. If this is the true end of worship, then only worship that meets His requirements, is in line with His goals, and centered on His glory is worthy and acceptable. All other worship is worthless and empty regardless of how exciting, acceptable, and attractive it might be to the worshippers. For the most part, such worship is sadly lacking in the modern Evangelical Church and the results have been both tragic and devastating on the corporate level as well as in the personal, moral and spiritual condition of individual believers. May God give His people the grace, wisdom, and understanding necessary to return to a commitment to Biblical worship and to render such worship in a way worthy of Him whom alone is worthy!

¹Cited from the introduction to a work on worship edited by Philip Graham Ryken in honor of James Montgomery Boice after his death in 2000. *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 20003), pp. 6-8.

²Perhaps the best and most theologically developed definition of worship is the one proposed by D. A. Carson in his book *Worship by the Book*. His lengthy definition is followed by a chapter that carefully examines, explains, and defends every phrase from Biblical texts. Carson's defines worship as "the proper response of all moral, sentient beings to God, ascribing all honor and worth to their Creator-God precisely because he is worthy, delightfully so. This side of the Fall, human worship of God properly responds to the redemptive provisions that God has graciously made. While all true worship is God-centered, Christian worship is no less Christ-centered. Empowered by the Spirit and in line with the stipulations of the new covenant, it manifests itself in all our living, finding its impulse in the gospel, which restores our relationship with our Redeemer-God and therefore also with our fellow image-bearers, our co-worshippers. Such worship therefore manifests itself both in adoration and action, both in the individual believer and in corporate worship, which is worship offered up in the context of the body of believers, who strive to align all the forms of their devout ascription of all worth to God with the panoply of new covenant mandates and examples that bring to fulfillment the glories of antecedent revelation and anticipate the consummation." *Worship by the Book* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), p. 26.