

The Nature of Christian Worship

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SOURCE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF WORSHIP

Man's worship begins with God. "When thou saidst, Seek ye my face; my heart said unto thee, thy face, Lord, will I seek" (Ps. 27:8). Worship is man's response to the nature of God. It is the acknowledgement of the "worthship" of God. The basis of worship ultimately rests on God's self-revelation. God imparts Himself to man, and man responds in self-giving. Man's response to the divine overtures is itself divinely inspired. "No man cometh to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him" (Jn. 6:44). Since it is God who creates the desire and brings about the response to grace, it can never be said that worship is a work of merit.

God is worthy of worship because of who He is. This objective worship is at once the hardest and most needful lesson for evangelical Christians to learn. Let the Church be never so zealous in winning men, its mission remains unfulfilled until it recognizes the need of cultivating in them the spirit of reverence and awe that leads to adoration, the most self-abnegating devotion of which man is capable.

How else is the Church to survive except through her vision of the glory of God! Is there any other activity of her life to compare with that of worship? Here is the vital spark of heavenly flame that is to inspire, promote, and sustain the life of the soul. Here is the chain that is to bind mortal man to eternal God. Here is the door through which men are to enter to apprehend something of the dimensions of both worlds. "I saw the Lord,..." said the prophet (Is. 6:1). And what a vision was his of two worlds! It is the worship experience that charges the soul with the dynamic of God's presence and that invests the commonplace with that light that never was on land or sea.

All too often we attend church, and nothing happens. We do not expect anything to happen. We go through the routine of the ritual undisturbed by any realization of the presence of the Almighty. And we return to our tasks unrefreshed and unchallenged. We let ourselves be robbed of the very thing for which our hearts yearn. John

Henry Jowett's remark to an earlier generation is highly relevant for our day:

We leave our places of worship, and no deep and inexpressible wonder sits upon 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 theatres 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 home alone, by quiet bypaths, so that the hush of the Almighty might remain on his awed and prostrate soul. That is the element we are losing.¹

Indeed, the Church's main excuse for existence is in its providing a meeting place for God and man, a place where man responds with all his heart and mind to the mystery, the majesty, and the mercy of God. Short of this the Church may be a social institution, a center of religious discussion, or a mutual benefit society, but it is not truly the Church.

WORSHIP: OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE

In worship we are to think of God first, and ourselves only in relation to God. It is the very nature of worship to look away from ourselves to behold the reality of God and the spiritual world. True worship delivers us from preoccupation with self. The subjective element, however, is a genuine part of worship. If worship were altogether the outgoing of the soul in adoration, if it did not do something to and for the individual, Christian life would become sterile.

Worship may be said to be in its incipient stage when a man, finding himself in God's presence, experiences conviction, penitence, confession. The vision of God enlightens, transforms, purifies. Through worship, God continues His redemptive activity whereby the soul is nourished and inspired. "Strength and beauty are in the sanctuary" (Ps. 96:6b). In Scripture, sermon, prayer, and song God meets with His people and ministers to their need. The extent and variety of need among God's children is legion. The trouble represented by the average congregation is far greater than the unthinking onlooker would ever guess. The following list is suggestive:

An elderly man in whom the pulse of life grows weak, and who feels spiritually insecure.

1. John Henry Jowett, *The Transfigured Church* (London: James Clarke and Co., 1910), p. 22.

A youth torn between the moral standards demanded by his peer group and those of the Christian home in which he was reared.

An overworked mother who, struggling alone under severe handicaps, sees to it that the children are decently clothed and in Sunday school and church every Sunday.

A businessman tempted to resort to questionable ethical practices in order to meet ruthless competition.

A young woman who has never known good health and who is easily discouraged.

A college student earnestly seeking God's will for his life.

A family trying to live down a reproach caused by a wayward daughter.

A young man who by reason of early circumstances has never had a fair chance in life.

A teacher who, after years of dedicated service in a community, is disillusioned because of political pressures in the local school system.

A middle-aged couple on the verge of separating.

A daughter who has sacrificed her own future in order to keep the home together.

A widow who finds it hard to forgive herself for her lack of patience with her husband.

Christian parents burdened for a married son who is lost to God through worldly success.

A teen-age girl trying to live the Christian life in a home that offers no encouragement.

A farmer apprehensive over the outcome of his labors.

Men come to church for the therapeutic values which the Christian faith has to offer. In these days of global storm and stress, many testify that were it not for the comfort and consolation of the Church they would be in danger of losing their sanity. The habit of churchgoing, of hearing the saving truths of Christianity, helps us handle life with a heightened inner competence and a surer touch. However small our spiritual understanding, faith is stimulated, vision clarified, and insight deepened. Here the mind clears, the dust of confusion settles, fears are allayed.

While there is a valid subjectiveness to all true worship, whereby something redemptive and spiritually creative is happening to the worshiper, it is nevertheless obvious that much of today's worship is almost entirely subjectively conceived. Too often it appears to be directed to the worshiper, concerned primarily with his personal gains and satisfactions, and with seeking to influence his mental state. Its object is not the glory of God but the spiritual culture of the individual—a legitimate aim but a man-centered one. There is nothing wrong with seeking emotional satisfaction or with desiring to be stirred to high resolves, but these

motives unrestrained can become the sole rationale for church worship. It is by no means easy for us to learn that the center of attention in Christian worship is not the individual but God.

Securing a proper balance between the objective and subjective aspects of worship constitutes the major problem in Protestant church worship. Our theology of God conditions our worship perspective. Some see God primarily as transcendent, others as immanent. But man's nature cries out for both a sense of the Ultimate and the Intimate. When men magnify one at the expense of the other, religious experience is in danger of becoming either cold and legalistic or over-familiar and sentimental. The true worship of God is a blend of both awe and love. Basically it is the problem of making God real—the miracle that should happen every time men gather for worship. "Surely the Lord is in this place . . . this is none other but the house of God, and this the gate of heaven" (Gen. 28:16, 17).

THE SEVERAL ASPECTS OF WORSHIP

The revelation of God is never one of Presence only; it is always also one of Purpose. The patriarchs and others who experienced visions of God were not only conscious of His presence but informed concerning His purpose. Of Moses it is recorded, "The angel of the Lord appeared. . . And . . . God called unto him out of the midst of the bush. . ." (Ex. 3:2, 4). Of Isaiah, "In the year that King Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne. . . . Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send. . . ?" (Is. 6:1, 8).

Nor is man's worship of God to be divorced from moral and ethical content. God's self-disclosure of Himself is inextricably bound up with the life of righteousness. Worship apart from morality and ethic is something less than Christian. The qualification for fellowship with God is fitness for it. "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully" (Ps. 24:3, 4).

Worship in the New Testament is inextricably related to obedience and service. "Why call ye me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not the things which I say?" (Lu. 6:46). Our right response to God, as Arthur John Gossip insists, is of the very essence of worship:

Since He is here, and speaking to us, face to face, it is for us, in a hush of Spirit, to listen for, and to, His voice, reproving, counselling, encouraging, revealing His most blessed will for us; and, with diligence, to set about immediate obedience. This and this, upon which He has laid His

hand, must go; and this and this to which He calls, must be at once begun. And here and now I start to it. This is the heart of worship, its very core and essence.²

It is the whole man who worships God. The absence of the intellectual breeds instability and impermanence. The suppression of the emotional reduces religious experience to a matter of moral rectitude. Men worship God not only because they are intellectually convinced of the validity of the Gospel but because they have had their hearts "strangely warmed" through the "expulsive power of a new affection."

Worship then is no exercise for a "cloistered corner of the soul." It embraces all man's faculties and controls every area of his life. The comprehensiveness of worship is suggested by the late William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury:

Worship is the quickening of conscience by God's 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 the will to His purpose; and all of this gathered up in adoration—the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable, and therefore the chief remedy for that self-centeredness which is our original sin.³

The consensus of many is that the peak of worship is adoration, such as that expressed in the seraphic hymn in Isaiah 6:3:

Holy! holy! holy! is the Lord of hosts,
The whole earth is full of thy glory.

And again in Revelation 4:10, 11:

The four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.

"Such disinterested delight," says Evelyn Underhill, "is the perfection of worship."⁴

It must not be thought that this experience of self-effacing homage is reserved only for those souls who seem by nature fitted to dwell in the rarefied atmosphere of the spiritual heights; for capacity to love God with all one's heart is the divine standard for all men (q.v. Mk. 12:30). One need not be a Saint John of the Cross or a Saint Theresa to experience that "wonder, love and awe" which comes from the Divine Presence.

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2. Arthur John Gossip, *Experience Worketh Hope* (New York: Scribners, 1945), pp. 24, 25.
 3. William Temple, *Readings in St. John's Gospel* (London: St. Martins Press, 1947), p. 68.
 4. Evelyn Underhill, *Worship* (New York: Harper, 1937), pp. 5, 8.

WORSHIP: A CORPORATE EXPERIENCE.

Before quitting this brief treatment of the nature of worship, it needs to be emphasized that worship is above all a *corporate* experience. It is the response of the Church, the Body of Christ, to God's mighty act of redemption in Jesus Christ. Worship is a family function. The individual approaches God as a member of Christ's body. It is interesting to note that the word "church" in the New Testament always denotes not a building but an assembly of people. A congregation at worship is not a collection of individuals praying according to their personal interests. It is a community of kindred spirits united in a common purpose.

In church we kneel with all kinds of people—the learned, the ignorant, the rich, the poor—for we are all one in Christ. Much of today's worship is lacking in this awareness of corporateness in Christ. One need but recall the fact that in many of our churches the popular hymns are those stressing "I" and "me" rather than "we" and "us" in the God-man relationship. The corporateness of the worshiping body is reflected in I John 1:3, "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us. . . ."

Since worship is communion between God and His people, ministerial-centeredness of many prevailing patterns of Protestant worship is alien to its nature. In some churches the worship practices reflect a ministerial monopoly as much as does the Roman Mass. The service of worship is the people's service. The worshipers are not spectators but participants. Not only are they to be invited to share in the hymns, prayers, and responses but occasionally a lay member should be asked to assist in the conduct of the service, and in particular to read the Scripture lesson—customs for which there is ancient precedent. Such lay participation bears testimony to the fact that leadership in public worship is not the exclusive privilege of men set apart by ordination.

To insist on the essentially corporate nature of worship is not to reflect upon the value or necessity of private prayer. Corporate worship is not a substitute for individual worship; it is an addition to it. Even in our personal devotions the sense of togetherness in Christ is never far away. Sooner or later we find ourselves bringing our brother with us. When rightly understood, our personal devotions are seen to be a part of the corporate worship of the Church, the Body of Christ, rather than just the acts of individuals in isolation.