

Authentic W♥rship



The Challenge of True Worship in Contemporary Culture

by Dick Jones

Introduction

In the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, the Introduction poses an important question -- “What is the chief end of man?” The answer which follows is that “Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.” Consequently, the most important activity which man may undertake is the true worship of God.

Sadly, many bible-believing churches are terribly deficient in their worship of God. Robert Rayburn writes in his book *O Come, Let Us Worship*,

“...worship of God is at once the true believer's most important activity and at the same time it is one of the most tragically neglected activities in the average evangelical church today ... there remains ... among sincere believers today a woeful ignorance concerning the significance of true worship and the means of attaining the blessing of rich, rewarding corporate worship.”¹

It is axiomatic that our methodology in worship reflects our theology. Further, our methodology often defines our *raison d'etre* for gathering corporately to pursue worship. What is not explicitly stated regarding a church's purpose in corporate worship is revealed implicitly in the forms it chooses in its pursuit of worship.

In churches in which the congregation's “felt needs” are the primary determinate in choosing the means of worship, one finds an anthropocentric approach toward worship rather than theocentric approach. Consequently, ipso facto, God is not receiving all due honor, glory and devotion, which should be the preeminent concern while engaging in worship. Anthropocentric inclinations are often an indication of deficiencies regarding the church's pursuit and practice of theological truth. In other words, worship which is man-centered reflects a poor or ill-defined understanding of who God is.

Culture and Worship

Many churches today are simply baptizing cultural fads and fashions and calling it worship. Beginning with “felt needs,” the order and activities of their worship service reflect what the unbelieving world is comfortable with rather than what the bible says about true worship. If the starting place in worship is “How do I feel about this and so?”, it is likely the worship service itself will continue to reflect this emphasis. Eric J. Alexander explains, “The important thing is not what is acceptable to you, but what is acceptable to God!”² John

Armstrong puts it a different way. “We do not attend the worship of the church assembly on the Lord's Day primarily to receive, but to give.”³

The contemporary worship service which is growing in popularity with evangelicals today often reflects an anthropocentric approach to worship. One advocate of the contemporary worship service describes their service this way.

“It's more than singing choruses, it's a service designed for meeting the needs of contemporary people. It may not even be so much worship-oriented, as we know it. It's more of a need-oriented service.”⁴

In our attempt to reach people in our contemporary culture, we may find that we have lost the essence of the highest and most important activity to which believers are called -- true worship.

Many of the trends evident in contemporary worship services are the result of the Baby Boomers' generation gaining positions of responsibility in the Church. Baby Boomers are characterized by David Wells in *God in The Wasteland* thusly:

“There is a hunger for religious experience but an aversion to theological definitions of that experience. There is a hunger for God but a disenchantment with dogma or doctrine -- they abandon boundaries between God and self -- between one religion and another -- the result is a smorgasbord of spirituality which is based on pragmatism ... they want to experience life directly, to have an encounter with God or the divine or nature or other people without the intervention of inherited beliefs, ideas, and concepts.”⁵

The characteristics of the Baby Boomer's generation listed above are anathema to corporate worship which is theologically sound. In this particular demographic group, the invasiveness of cultural exigencies simply overwhelms more subtle theological concerns. The result is obvious. In churches in which the Baby Boomers' characteristics are predominant, the forms and emphases in worship are almost entirely culturally determined. Theological concerns are either undermined or ignored entirely because of the efficacy of pandering to the “felt needs” of the congregation.

Much of evangelicalism's worship services today reflects contemporary culture rather than theological convictions. While the forms and modes of the contemporary worship style are not necessarily unbiblical, the reasons most evangelical congregations adopt them are decidedly unbiblical. They often reflect

exactly what the Apostle Paul warned against in Romans 12:2, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Today, four emphases are evident in most evangelical worship services. They are (1) the effort to satisfy the needs of self, (2) a shift from an emphasis on biblical truth to intuitive or subjective concerns, (3) a consumer orientation, and (4) a focus on experience rather than biblical truth.”⁶ Each emphasis above is antithetical to true theocentric worship. Further, each emphasis originated in the culture (world), and subsequently has been accommodated by the Church. This is the sort of syncretism Paul warned against in Romans 12:2.

General Principles Regarding True Worship

Chapter twenty-one of the *Westminster Confession* expresses what is usually referred to as the regulative principle of worship. In article I we read, “But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture.” According to Edmund Clowney, for Calvin writing in his *Institutes*, and for the Westminster divines, the regulative principle was concerned with liberty of conscience.⁷ In a culture in which Roman Catholicism attempted to order worship utilizing unbiblical modes of worship, coercion regarding the elements of worship was a matter of great concern.

The *Westminster Confession* also states in Chapter One, Article Six, “There are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.” Clowney explains that the use of instrumental music constitutes just the kind of “circumstance” of culture addressed in this portion of the *Westminster Confession*.⁸

The regulative principle, properly understood, establishes parameters in which both form and freedom may be reflected in worship. While the outer limits of the proper form may appear vague at times (for example, concerning the use of drama in worship), there is a certain freedom which may be enjoyed in true worship. The freedom in worship is to be superintended by the Holy Spirit's guidance and direction of the minds of men. The leaders of the Church must be very conscious of the danger of choosing arbitrary or unbiblical modes for worship. This was a lesson Israel learned when Aaron's sons Nadab and

Abihu broke God's law by bringing incense with fire that had not been taken from God's altar (Leviticus 10:1-7).⁹

In responding to the question “How specific is the bible about forms of worship and how much does it tell us as far as actual details concerning what we should do and not do?”, Francis Schaeffer replied,

“I reverse what some of my brothers in Christ would say. They say 'Everything that is not specifically denied or negated is (not) *sic* affirmed.' I would say 'No, that is not true. To me, the silences in scripture are very, very pregnant. They are important. God did not make a mistake in leaving these things out. He deliberately left some things out to be under the leadership of the Holy Spirit in the individual situation ... to give real creative freedom, but also to meet the individual moment, so it would not become static. What is best at one moment is not best at another.’”¹⁰

Here Schaeffer is expressing the best understanding of the parameters established by the *Westminster Confession*.

True worship will not ignore what God has clearly revealed to us through His special revelation. (Psalm 19:7) Hence the Church should look first to God's Word, as explained by the regulative principle. The form and freedom of our worship should be an expression of our theology and our knowledge of God. As one theologian expresses it, “The shortest route to deeper and richer worship is a clearer theology.”¹¹ Hence, true worship is necessarily framed in theologically sound truths and founded upon a true knowledge of God.

The point of origin for true worship must be theological rather than methodological. This ensures that worship will be theocentric rather than anthropocentric. “Theology is so intimately related to worship that it not only supports worship, it is fundamentally an act of worship.”¹² This orientation to worship is just the opposite of the approach described above in the section entitled “Culture and Worship.” The form and freedom of true worship is not ultimately concerned with how the congregation responds, but rather how God responds. This is the *raison d'etre* for true worship.

Introduction to the Elements of Worship

The dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman establishes the proper orientation for understanding the elements of true worship.

John 4:21-24: Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall you worship the Father. You worship that which you do not know; we worship that which we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

Erik Alexander explains that in this passage, Jesus makes it clear that God is no more indifferent to how we worship than He is to whom we worship.¹³

The Samaritan woman had asked how God may be properly worshiped. Jesus' response is recorded in John 4:21-24. She knew that the Jews worshiped in Jerusalem, yet her people worshiped at Gerizim. "Which is right?" she was asking. "Gerizim worship or Jerusalem worship?" The Samaritan's worship was "sincere" and "enthusiastic ... yet it was void of truth." The Samaritans had "rejected the greater part of the Old Testament and therefore worshiped in unbiblical ignorance." They had developed their own mode of worship which was not rooted in biblical truth.¹⁴

The Jews' worship at Jerusalem was according to "the letter but without the Spirit." Jesus addressed this problem in Matthew 15:8. He said, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me." The Jews had the opposite problem of the Samaritans. Gerizim had "zeal without knowledge" or "spirit without truth." Jerusalem had "knowledge without zeal" or "truth without spirit."¹⁵ Neither approach to worship was proper. Jesus replied to the Samaritan woman that God must be worshiped "in spirit and in truth."

True worship must not be mere formalism, devoid of the Spirit. True worship is spiritual. The condition precedent for true worship to occur is that one's heart must be right with God. To worship in the Spirit means that one must be spiritually alive, spiritually assisted and spiritually active. The consequence of the proper spiritual state will be a concern for what the worship experience does for God as opposed to what it does for us. Worship in the Spirit means to seek God's honor, glory and pleasure.

True worship will never be simply an emotional experience. It is necessarily rational in nature. It involves truth and is therefore concerned with mental activity. In the process of true worship, one's mind must be engaged and occupied with thinking of "God's character and glory, reviewing His works and His Word,

pondering the wonder of redemption, and remembering all that God has wrought for us in Jesus Christ.”¹⁶

Those who worship “in Spirit and in truth” will always pursue worship which is purposeful. This is the litmus test for true worship. In other words, true worship will result in service to the living and true God. Worship will overflow into every area of our lives. The bible knows no Platonic separation of body and soul. True worship will engage our hearts, minds, souls and bodies. The Apostle Paul expressed this in Romans 12:1. “I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.”

The Elements of Worship

The essential elements of worship are identified in Scripture. Robert Wagner includes seven elements of true worship in his book *Back to Basics - Rediscovering the Richness of The Reformed Faith*. The following is a list of these elements with scripture references.

1. *Calling the congregation to worship and pronouncing benedictions* -- Num. 6:22-27; Rom. 1:7, 15:33; I Cor. 1:3, 16:23-24; II Cor. 13:14.
2. *Praying*-- Acts 2:42; Eph. 5:20; Phil. 4:6; 1 Thess. 5:17
3. *Reading the Word of God* -- II Thess. 3:14; I Cor. 14:33; Col. 4:16; II Peter 3:15
4. *Preaching and teaching the Word* -- Acts 2:42, 20:7-12; I Cor. 14:26; II Tim. 4:2
5. *Administering the sacraments* -- Matt 28:19; Luke 22:14-20; Acts 2:42; I Cor 11:17-34
6. *Singing Praises* -- Exod. 15:1; Psalm 7:17, 96:1; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16
7. *Giving and receiving tithes and offerings to support God's work and the poor* --
I Cor. 9:3-12, 16:1-2

Wagner describes true worship as being antiphonal in character. As God speaks, His people respond. God calls His people to worship, speaks to them through the reading and preaching of His Word, the words of institution of the sacraments, and the benediction. God's people respond in prayer, confession and petitions,

praise and thanksgiving, participation in the sacraments, and in the presentation of their tithes and offerings.¹⁷

Further Consideration of Two Elements of Worship

Each of the seven elements of worship listed above is integral to true worship. In that regard, one cannot arbitrarily dispose of one or the other as though they were of lesser importance. Notwithstanding this, two of the elements listed are especially impacted by the culture in which we live. Therefore, it is necessary that we examine the “preaching and teaching of the Word” and the “singing of praises” in more detail.

Both the “preaching and teaching of the Word” and the “singing of praises,” often reflect the current tendency in evangelicalism to accommodate cultural pressures to the detriment of true worship. By virtue of the nature of these two elements of worship, they are vulnerable to the methodological and stylistic preferences of the congregation. Consequently, opinions and viewpoints regarding both elements are strongly held and widely divergent. It is in the approach to “the preaching and teaching of God's Word” and the “singing of praises” that the Church is most apt to stumble into sub-biblical modes and outright compromise.

The trend toward anthropocentric worship is easily recognizable in preaching. This can be seen in the content of sermons as well as their delivery. Many preachers are reluctant to preach and teach on unpopular topics. The cross, the atonement, and sin are viewed as negative subjects by many.

David Wells states that the “psychological culture” in which we live has “a deep affinity for what is relational but a dis-ease with what is moral.” Subjects like the holiness of God are often ignored by preachers. “God's love” is emphasized to the extent that the Church often hears a truncated description of the attributes and nature of God. Church growth experts warn that negative topics will turn people off and drive them away.¹⁸ However, Robert Wagner explains the folly of failing to preach the whole counsel of God:

“if we ... encourage sinners to approach Him without a profound sense of their sin and the forgiveness and reconciliation that Christ alone has provided through the cross, then we have not really done them any favors. Indeed, only as the knowledge of our sinfulness humbles us more and more before the presence of God, and causes us to embrace the cross of Christ with deeper confidence, will we experience the

cleansing and liberation that can issue in true joy and peace with God. ...deep and lasting comfort comes not from ignoring or minimizing the problem of sin in the worshiper's life, but by confronting it in all its depth by an even deeper appreciation of the definitiveness of the atonement and the forgiveness it brings.”¹⁹

Today the incongruence of messages expounding on the centrality of the cross, the efficacy of the atonement, and the call to self sacrifice is obvious. In a culture that prefers “mysticism over cognitive conviction, self-fulfillment over personal surrender, and self-image over character,” the biblical themes of orthodox Christianity are anachronistic to many.²⁰

Wells further excoriates those who dumb down their biblical exposition in order to make them user friendly. He writes that “God has described Himself and His work to us in the language of the Bible, and it is quite presumptuous for us to say that we have found a better way.” He continues by explaining that... “sustaining orthodoxy and framing Christian belief in doctrinal terms require habits of reflection and judgment that are simply out of place in our culture and increasingly are disappearing from evangelism as well.”²¹

If the preaching and teaching of the Word is to represent true worship, it must cut right to the heart of the errors and tendencies cited above. Biblical preaching frames biblical truths in biblical language, in an uncompromising fashion.

The Apostle Paul presented us with a model for solid biblical exposition which is recorded in Acts 20:20-21, 27. This passage reflects the three dimensions of Paul's biblical preaching which emphasized the teaching of the principles of discipleship, the proclamation of the whole counsel of God, and the uncompromised proclamation of the gospel.

In Acts 20:20, Paul states that he is preaching “anything that would be helpful.” In other words, he was implementing the principle he stated in 1 Timothy 3:16-17. He explained there that Scripture “teaches, rebukes, corrects, and trains in righteousness so that believers will be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” This is discipleship.

In Acts 20:21, Paul states that he is “declaring to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.” This is evangelism.

In Acts 20:27, Paul further declares that he did not hesitate “to proclaim to them the whole counsel (will) of God. This would include what Wagner describes

as “a systematic theology, which is comprehensive and doctrinal in scope.”²² It is a prerequisite to developing a Christian world and life view.

The preaching and teaching of the Word should be central to true worship. Exposition of the Word should challenge, provoke and stimulate the people of God. While proclamation of the gospel is one component of biblical preaching, it is not the only component. Three-dimensional biblical preaching will call God's people to a genuine biblical faith which is ultimately concerned with truth.

A second element essential to true worship listed above is singing praises. As explained by Robert Wagner, our antiphonal verbal responses to God are often given through the singing of hymns, psalms and praise songs. Therefore, the content of the songs used in worship is very important.²³ Unfortunately, stylistic differences which have nothing to do with substance or content often cause the most disagreements in music and song selection. Taste and stylistic preferences fall within the realm of the liberty of the believer, hence they should not be allowed to become divisive.

Michael Horton explains that most contemporary evangelical Christians have been immersed in modernity. This means they are often most concerned with issues involving consumerism, psychology, touchy-feely sentimentalism, and individualism. He maintains that the exclusive use of contemporary praise songs in the contemporary worship service reflects modernity. Further, he states that much of 20th century man's narcissism is reflected in a desire to express ourselves in the manner of much of the contemporary praise music. According to Horton, they tend to be “autobiographical” (man-centered) with a “focus on me and my experience, my resolve, my obedience, my happiness and joy.”²⁴ For example, the popular praise song “Lord, I Will” by Brent Chambers.

Lord I will, Lord I will;
I will love You, I will praise You, Lord I will.
I have made up my mind to bless You,
Lord. Lord I will, Lord I will.

Lord I will, Lord I will;
I will love Your chosen people, Lord I will.
I have made up my mind to bless them,
Lord. Lord I will, Lord I will.

Lord I will, Lord I will;
I will follow You and serve You, Lord I will.
I have made up my mind to live by Your Word.
Lord I will, Lord I will.

Compare the verses above to those written by John Newton in “*Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken.*”

Glorious things of Thee are spoken, Zion, city of our God;
He whose word cannot be broken, formed thee for His own abode.
On the Rock of Ages founded, what can shake thy sure repose?
With salvation's walls surrounded, Thou mayest smile at all Thy foes.

Consider also the classic hymn “*Praise the Lord! Ye heavens adore Him.*”

Praise the Lord! Ye heavens, adore Him;
Praise Him, angels in the height;
Sun and moon, rejoice before Him,
Praise Him, all ye stars of light.

Praise the Lord! For He hath spoken,
Worlds His mighty voice obeyed;
Laws which never shall be broken
For their guidance He hath made.

Horton continues “before the mid-nineteenth century, believers wanted to understand God and redemption.”²⁵ Slowly, a change in emphasis within the lyrics can be observed during the late nineteenth century as the lyrics begin to reflect romantic and sentimental themes. Today this trend has deteriorated into rampant narcissism.

While contemporary praise songs tend to emphasize God's immanence, the older hymns emphasize God's transcendence. David Wells explains that contemporary Christians tend to overemphasize God's immanence and neglect the elements of worship that convey a sense of His transcendence. Further, he states that “modernity is by its very nature hostile to any expression of a traditional understanding of the transcendence of God.”²⁶

It is often argued by advocates of contemporary praise songs that people can't relate to the great old hymns written prior to the mid-nineteenth century. Some comment that the older hymns are difficult to sing. Michael Horton argues that the problem is two-fold. Today many display an “arrogance toward the past,” thus are disinterested in what the hymn writers of past generations had to say. Additionally, there is an “unfamiliarity with the theology” which is contained in the older hymns. Hence contemporary worshipers are intimidated by the great truths expressed in the lyrics.²⁷

Consider this great hymn, “*Holy! Holy! Holy! Lord God Almighty*” by Reginald Heber.

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee;
Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty!
God in three persons, blessed Trinity!

And Martin Luther's classic hymn, "*A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.*"

A mighty fortress is our God, A bulwark never failing;
Our helper He amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing.
For still our ancient foe - Doth seek to work us woe -
His craft and power are great, And armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not His equal.

Now thoughtfully consider the contrast between the hymns above and this popular praise song by Alliene G. Vale, "*The Joy of the Lord.*"

The joy of the Lord is my strength,
The joy of the Lord is my strength,
The joy of the Lord is my strength,
The joy of the Lord is my strength.

If you want joy you must praise for it,
If you want joy you must praise for it,
If you want joy you must praise for it,
The joy of the Lord is my strength.

True worship will require churches to carefully consider the content and lyrics of their music. The principle of Christian liberty requires that we respect differences in taste and stylistic preferences between believers. Both emphases, biblical fidelity and truth as our criteria for judging lyrics, as well as respect and concern for the differences in taste and preference, must guide our choice of songs. True worship will embrace the dual values of truth and love.

The great Reformer John Calvin required any hymns used in their corporate worship to meet three requirements. They had to be "faithful to the doctrinal teaching of Scripture and not merely the expression of experience or tradition." They had to "magnify God," and "not just entertain." In other words, they had to be theocentric rather than anthropocentric. Finally, they had to be of "the highest literary and musical quality."²⁸ These three criteria would be as appropriate in our day as they were in Calvin's day.

Conclusion

If worship is truly the most important activity in which believers can be engaged—if true worship is the primary means of rendering to God all due honor,

glory and devotion, then it must be guarded and protected from sub-biblical influences. It is a congregation that is doctrinally grounded and theologically informed that will respond to God in true worship. Indeed, it is biblical theology that “awakens, motivates, and compels men and women to bow in worship and adoration before the One from Whom, through Whom, and to Whom are all things.”²⁹ (Romans 11:36) The church that knows God in His various attributes will be least likely to bow to the god of humanism through syncretism and compromise in its pursuit of worship.

END NOTES

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- (4) Ibid., p. 10.
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- (29) Ibid., p. 127.