

TRUE WORSHIP

Ray C. Stedman

Since the first century the churches of the world have recognized a threefold mission: worship, evangelism, and edification. But of these three the greatest is surely worship because true worship is the source of the other two. The proclamation of the good news to the lost and the building up of the church by the maturing of each believer flows from hearts that are made warm and vital by the worship of the living God. Jesus spotlighted that fact with the words: "...and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind..."this is the great and first commandment!" (Mark 12:30, NIV)

Worship is a heartfelt encounter of men and angels with the true God. It is an act of attention to the living God who rules, speaks and reveals, creates and redeems, orders and blesses." The essence of worship is genuineness. "It is to be with all your heart, your soul, and your mind. Worship may find expression in thought, in prayer, in praise, in song, in body position, and in activity such as dancing or uplifting of arms-but without genuineness all becomes false worship. Jesus instructed the woman at the well in this matter, saying: "But the hour is coming, and now is, when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father seeks such to worship him." (John 4:23, RSV)

True worship reflects the biblical truth that we are made in the image of God. It is a way of discovering God and in that discovery becoming more like him ourselves (2 Corinthians 3:18). It is therefore an essential to finding out who we are as men and women. Since we are made in the image of God we must find out what that image is in us by discovering what God is like. Worship itself does not invoke the presence of God---rather, worship is a response to the presence of God. If we fail to truly worship we will be something less than human, living shallow and often hollow lives. "Failure to worship consigns us to a life of spasms and jerks, at the mercy of every advertisement, every seduction, every siren. Without worship we live manipulated and manipulating lives. We move in either frightened panic or deluded lethargy as we are, in turn, alarmed by spectres and soothed by placebos. If there is no center, there is no circumference. People who do not worship are swept into a vast restlessness, epidemic in the world, with no steady direction and no sustaining purpose."

The knowledge of God obtained through the reading and proclamation of the word of God is indispensable to true worship. "When the word of God is expounded in clarity and power, the congregation begins to sense and see the glory of the living God. It is then they are ready to bow down in awe and joyful wonder before his throne. Therefore acceptable worship is impossible without preaching, for preaching is making known God's Name, and worship is praising the Name of the Lord made known." The preaching of the word of God is the great corrective to false worship, continually calling the people of God away from unbiblical extremes and the sinful exaltation of self, and refocusing their attention upon the greatness and majesty of God and his work of gracious redemption.

The individual worship of a believer is likened in Scripture to fragrant incense arising to delight the heart of God. It is not because God needs to be worshipped that he is delighted, but because he

knows we need to worship and it delights him to see us fulfilling that which is essential to all spiritual health and ministry. The danger in worship is that of pretense or self-deception. Words and phrases may be uttered with the lips which are not felt in the heart. Prayers may be spoken mechanically or repetitiously; intercession for others may be a mere recital of names with the superficial catch-all, bless so-and-so. All this is false worship, for the heart (which God is reading) is not in it.

Another threat to worship is unacknowledged sin. Lack of self judgment is a common hindrance to genuine worship. Also, true worship cannot happen without the horizontal relationships with our brothers and sisters being cleared up, as Matthew 5:23-24 and 6:14 make clear. We are to forgive others because we have ourselves been forgiven. Those who claim they cannot forgive implies that they have forgotten their own gracious forgiveness, or perhaps never really known it! God requires that we genuinely forgive those who have offended us before we can worship him with a clear conscience and a true spirit of praise. "Freely you have received, freely give," says Jesus. (Matthew 10:8, NIV)

God is not only to be worshipped individually, but also corporately, in company with other believers. We can learn much about corporate worship from the Old Testament. There God taught Israel that there was a divinely predetermined place for corporate worship in the Tabernacle, corresponding to the congregation of believers today (Hebrews 3:6; 1 Corinthians 3:16-19; Ephesians 3:20-21). Also there was an acceptable basis for worship in the sacrifices offered (1 Corinthians 5:7; 1 Peter 1:18-19), picturing the death of Christ as our sin-bearer, and the continuing emphasis of the cross in believers lives. Further, there was a visible result of worship made evident in healed antagonisms, confessed rebellion, restitution, and restored relationships, followed by passionate joy and praise uttered for the grace and mercy of God.

Corporate worship, like individual worship, can easily drift into external expressions without heartfelt participation. The motive for worship may subtly shift from the praise of God to gaining the attention or approval of others. Hymns may be mouthed with no comprehension of what is being sung. Rituals may be observed mechanically or biblical phrases chanted in a formal or routine manner. Frigid formalism requiring bodily stillness and solemn, expressionless faces; harshness and authoritarianism from leaders; guilt-appeal centered offerings; showmanship and attempts to program the Holy Spirit; use of exalted titles; claiming of special access to God-all these vitiate worship and reveal it as fleshly and unspiritual. Many passages of scripture describe God's revulsion at that type of hypocrisy. He is not honored but rather insulted by such phoniness. Such worship becomes a pathetic charade in which people often try to get God to pay attention to them or to do something for them. It is destructive and deadening, and will soon result in a terrible drain of spiritual vitality from an individual or congregation. But authentic worship breaks down personal antagonisms, eliminates selfish ambition, produces genuine humility and thankfulness, and links heart to heart, building the church up in love.

It is the responsibility of leadership to correct congregational worship when it begins to become artificial, predictable, or routine. Leaders must be aware that the world, the flesh, and the devil are all at work to make worship superficial, shallow, and performance oriented. Leaders can best oppose this by maintaining truly worshipful hearts themselves. They must teach the whole congregation what God desires in worship and resist the constant drift toward mere entertainment rather than devotion. They must take prompt action to limit excesses of movement or voice which call attention to the worshipper and not to the Lord. At the same time they must resist attempts of individuals or groups to deny proper biblical expressions of worship because of tradition or prejudice.

Some of the excesses which have marred the worship of many congregations, both in past awakenings and in contemporary practice, find no support from Scripture. Quaking, shaking, barking, arm-flailing, leaping, running wildly, have all been reported occasionally to accompany true revival. But the leaders of these revivals have often expressed uneasiness as to the source and character of such behavior. One such practice is that of suddenly falling to the ground or floor under the supposed impact of the Spirit and remaining prone for a time. Though a phrase sometimes used to describe this is "being slain of the Lord," this phrase, in Scripture, always refers to physical death. There may be occasions when a worshipper is completely overwhelmed by the presence of the Lord, as Daniel was in Daniel 10:8 and 15. This phenomenon is today called, "being slain in the Spirit." It is also termed an ecstatic swoon. Such response, however, is not treated in Scripture as a normative experience and should not be taught as a deliberate act of worship.

Other disruptive phenomenon are the uttering of repeated sounds or nonsense syllables under the mistaken impression that this is the biblical gift of tongues, the use of incense pots, icon worship, prayers to saints, and other non-biblical practices. The biblical pattern of tongues is that of actual languages requiring interpretation and used to praise and magnify God (Acts 2:8-11; 1 Corinthians 14:2). A careful observance of the restrictions Paul gives on the use of tongues in public services, found in 1 Corinthians 14, should serve to keep this manifestation from becoming disruptive and divisive in the church gatherings. Even biblical patterns of worship should be expressed with sensitivity to the feelings and judgments of others.

The sign that true worship is being achieved is a maturing congregation. Personal witness is widespread, loving service to those who hurt should be increasing; friction among members should be decreasing; appreciation for benefits and public thanksgiving should be often manifest; moral standards are held in high regard, but deviations are not coldly treated and the steps of discipline given in Matthew 18:15-17 are lovingly followed. The exposition of the Word of God lies at the heart of every ministry, and the exercise of personal gifts is continually encouraged. When these things are happening a congregation has clearly become the household of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth, is people belonging to God. Remember that the Father is seeking such to worship him!

The closing chapters of the book of Revelation make clear that the ultimate exercise of God's people is worship. When the long agony of sin is over and creation is restored to its pristine glory, the angels and the redeemed are seen around the throne, endlessly praising God for His wisdom, love, and power. That may sound boring and routine to many, but in reality it represents the awed wonder of creatures who continually are discovering new aspects of God's nature and character. So awesome is our God that we shall never reach the end of his amazing attributes. In true worship something happens to the worshippers. Minds are cleared, perceptions come into focus, spirits are renewed, truth breaks out in new clarity. That is what sends us out to tell the good news to those who long for hope, or peace, or freedom from guilt.
