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The Whole Earth Is Full of His Glory: The Recovery of Authentic Worship, Part Two

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Scripture is, as the Reformers confessed, *norma normans non normata*, “The norm of norms which cannot be normed.” *Sola Scriptura*. This is the norm of our worship. There is nothing external to Scripture that can norm or correct it. Scripture sets the terms, and in Isaiah 6:1-8 we see a picture of authentic worship.

In this well-known “call” passage of Isaiah, the prophet experienced a theophany: a vision of the true and living God. Out of this encounter, Isaiah received his call as a prophet.

Isaiah recounts that it was in the year of King Uzziah’s death that he saw the Lord sitting on a throne lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple.

What does it mean that God sat on a throne? Well, clearly it is a symbol of kingship and sovereignty. The throne indicates that the one who sits upon it is both king and judge. It represents both power and righteousness.

But there is more to this high and exalted Lord who revealed himself to Isaiah. The one whose train filled the temple with His glory is not alone. Isaiah is not alone. There are beings here with him. Verse two tells us that “seraphim stood above him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.”

These seraphim (literally, “burning ones”) had six wings, and these six wings convey a great deal of symbolism. “With two he covered his face.” That must certainly indicate humility. They dared not look at the holiness of God. “And with two he covered his feet.” Surely this represents purity. “And with two he flew.” But these winged creatures are not merely flying. “And one called out to another and said, Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of His glory.”

We know the words, “Holy, Holy, Holy” as the “trisagion.” In the Hebrew language there is no adequate comparative or superlative form, so the pattern of repetition is used in order to make a point. We see this thrice-repeated pattern again in Revelation 4:8-11: “And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes around and within; and day and night they do not cease to say, Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God, the almighty, who was and who is and who is to come.”

The early church saw in this pattern a Trinitarian understanding. As we look back with New Testament eyes, we can

certainly see that affirmation, but the central point of this construction seems to be the same as in Genesis 14:10. There we find reference to the construction “pit, pit,” which may be translated “deep and great pit.” It is one thing to fall into a pit. It is another thing to fall into a “pit, pit.” But here we see God’s essence, identity, and being characterized by the attribute of holiness.

What does the holiness of God mean? It means certainly His separateness from his creation. He is what we are not. We are finite; He is infinite. God is transcendent. God’s separateness certainly reveals the difference, the infinite contrast between His moral nature and ours. Holiness also certainly refers to His majesty and power.

J. Alec Motyer defines holiness as “God’s total and unique moral majesty.” It is a wonderful expression—God’s total and unique moral majesty. E. J. Young suggests that holiness is the entirety of the divine perfection that separates God from His creation. That which is almost beyond our definition is what makes God, God. Holiness includes all God’s attributes. His holiness is that which defines him.

I wonder if the vision of the God held by so many who come to worship is anything like what the seraphim are telling us here. Do we worship with the understanding that God is holy and that “the whole earth is full of His glory?” I fear not. I wonder if in our worship we encounter anything like this vision of God. Do those who come to our services of worship come face to face with the reality of God? Or do they go away with a vision of some lesser God, some dehydrated deity? Worship is the people of God gathering together to confess his worthiness, his “worth-ship.” How can we do that if we do not make clear who God is? Our very pattern of worship must testify to the character of God.

There is a polarity between the objective and the subjective. There is the subjective in worship. But what Scripture makes clear is that the subjective experience of worship must be predicated on the objective truth of the true and living God, and on an experience of the God who has revealed Himself in Scripture.

Roger Scruton, a well-known British philosopher, has suggested that worship is the most important indicator of what persons or groups really believe about God. These are his words: “God is defined in the act of worship far more precisely than he is defined by any theology.” What Scruton is saying is, in essence: “If you want to know what a people really believe about God, don’t spend time reading their theologians, watch them worship. Listen to what they sing. Listen to what they say. Listen to how they pray. Then you will know what they believe about this God whom they worship.”

My haunting thought concerning much evangelical worship is that the God of the Bible would never be known by watching us worship. Instead what we see in so many churches is “McWorship” of a “McDeity.” But what kind of God is that superficial, that weightless, and that insignificant? Would an observer of our worship have any idea of the God of the Bible from our worship? I wonder at times if this is an accidental development, or if it is an intentional evasion.

George Hunter III suggests that a thriving church must practice “celebrative worship.” He offers two reasons: “1) To provide a celebration to which pre-Christians can relate and find meaning. 2) To remove the cringe factor by providing a service our people would love to invite their friends to, rather than a service they would dread inviting their friends to.” Here is a fascinating reversal. The purpose of celebrative worship, first, is to provide “a celebration to which pre-Christians can relate.” But, second, he suggests removing anything he identifies as “the cringe factor” by providing a service to which our people would love to invite their friends and not one that they would dread to invite their friends to attend. But, as we read the Scripture, it is clear that there is a great deal of the *cringe factor* in there. In fact, if you are going to remove the cringe factor from Scripture, then you are going to end up with a very thin book.

Hebrews 10:31 reveals, “It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” I wonder if there is anything that could even be remotely suggested as a terrifying reality as we present the God we claim to worship in what we do and what we say. Just look at the decline in our hymnody.

Scripture tells us that we should speak “to one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Eph 5:19). But how are our hymns to be measured? We must measure them by their content, by the God they reveal, and here we see a decline in evangelical hymnody. We see a surrender of conviction and accommodation to the culture. We see nothing less than a “dumbing down” of its contents. We have gone from “Holy, Holy, Holy” to “God the Swell Fellow.”

In her book, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, Marva Dawn has suggested that so much of contemporary music is an evacuation of Christian conviction. It is not just a matter of taste and style, it is not just the abandonment of meter

and form and hymnody and structure— it is the abandonment of content. We must avoid such an abandonment. But we must also be clear that not all that goes under the label of “praise and worship music” is an abandonment of doctrinal truth. Much of it is richly biblical. Much of it is taken directly out of the Psalter and other biblical passages. But the salient question is “By what standard are we to judge worship?” Is it simply the taste or style of the congregation’s choosing? So much of what passes for music, for praise, in our congregations comes down to endless repetition of choruses which, as one critic has suggested, comes down to this: “one word, two notes, and three hours.” We have all been there.

What is the result of this accommodated Christianity? I quote Tozer again: We have simplified until Christianity amounts to this: God is love; Jesus died for you; believe, accept, be jolly, have fun and tell others. And away we go—that is the Christianity of our day. I would not give a plug nickel for the whole business of it. Once in a while God has a poor bleeding sheep that manages to live on that kind of thing and we wonder how.

True worship begins with a vision of the God of the Bible—the true and living God.

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