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

Surveying the literature on worship currently being published, and listening to the conversations currently taking place among the churches, one can quickly discern that worship is now one of the most controversial issues in the local congregation. As a matter of fact, many current book titles in the evangelical world suggest that what the church faces today is “worship warfare.” The very combination of the words “worship” and “war” should lead us to very sincere and sober biblical reflection. What is worship? And what does God desire that we should do in worship?

Monday, July 24, 2006

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The symptomology of the current confusion over worship is seen in the fact that now many believe some modifier or adjective must be appended to the word “worship” in order to indicate that will take place. Traditional worship, liturgical worship, contemporary worship, blended worship, seeker-sensitive worship, praise and worship! But what in the world is *worship*?

It is true that worship has led to some warfare. In local congregations we see not only confusion, but also fighting, controversy and splitting. And what is the meaning of all of this? Jack Hayford, one of the nation’s most eloquent proponents of “renewal worship,” suggests that nothing less than a new reformation is taking place. The reformation of the sixteenth century was a reformation of doctrine. It was a necessary reformation as biblical truth was recovered. But he says we are experiencing in this generation a reformation in worship that is just as necessary and just as historic.

My concern is that the issue of worship will define not only our church services, but also our theology and our beliefs about God. There is no more important issue for the church of the Lord Jesus Christ than that we worship as God would have us to worship Him.

Geoffrey Wainwright of Duke University reminds us that theology and worship are inextricably linked. Setting the context of missions as primary, he entitled his systematic project *Doxology*. We should be reminded that the purpose of the theologian is to serve the church so that the people of God worship Him more faithfully. By understanding God’s revelation in His Word we know how He would wish to be worshipped. The Lord himself reminded us that God seeks those worshipers who will worship him in spirit and in truth (Jn 4:23). But what does it mean to worship God in spirit? What does it mean to worship Him in truth?

Theology is by definition not an ivory tower discipline. It is not merely a form of academic discourse. When rightly conducted, theology is the conversation of the people of God seeking to understand the Lord whom we worship and how He wills to be worshipped. So, we might ask in that light, what are the proper conditions of evangelical worship? What is the pattern for worship among those persons who claim to be established in the gospel and submitted to the Word of God?

We know the history of worship through the ages. We know what took place in the Reformation. We know what

transpired in the English reforms. We know what took place as features were stripped away that were considered to be unbiblical—and yet we see these same things returning. What is the condition of evangelical worship? It is not an exaggeration to suggest words such as pandemonium, confusion, and consternation.

In the midst of the upheaval, there is a great deal of encouragement to be found from reading the late A. W. Tozer. This is what he said some decades ago: “We have the breezy, self-confident Christians with little affinity for Christ and His cross. We have the joy-bell boys that can bounce out there and look as much like a game show host as possible. Yet, they are doing it for Jesus’ sake?! The hypocrites! They’re not doing it for Jesus’ sake at all; they are doing it in their own carnal flesh and are using the church as a theater because they haven’t yet reached the place where the legitimate theater would take them.

Tozer takes his argument further: “It is now common practice in most evangelical churches to offer the people, especially the young people, a maximum of entertainment and a minimum of serious instruction. It is scarcely possible in most places to get anyone to attend the meeting where the only attraction is God. One can only conclude that God’s professed children are bored with Him for they must be wooed to meeting with a stick of striped candy in the form of religious movies, games and refreshments.”

This has influenced the whole pattern of church life and even brought into being a new type of church architecture designed to house the golden calf. So we have the strange anomaly of orthodoxy in creed and heterodoxy in practice. The striped candy technique has so fully integrated into our present religious thinking that it is simply taken for granted. Its victims never dream that it is not a part of teachings of Christ and His apostles. Any objection to the carryings-on of our present gold calf Christianity is met with the triumphant reply, “But we are winning them.” And winning them to what? To true discipleship? To cross-carrying? To self-denial? To separation from the world? To crucifixion of the flesh? To holy living? To nobility of character? To a despising of the world’s treasures? To hard self-discipline? To love for God? To total commitment to Christ?

Of course, the answer to all of these questions is “no.” As these words were written several decades ago, Tozer certainly saw the future. But there are contemporary witnesses as well. Kent Hughes, who is Senior Pastor of the College Church in Wheaton, Illinois, has written perceptively on this issue. Hughes put it this way: “The unspoken but increasingly common assumption of today’s Christendom is that worship is primarily for us—to meet our needs. Such worship services are entertainment focused, and the worshipers are uncommitted spectators who are silently grading the performance. From this perspective preaching becomes a homiletics of consensus—preaching to felt needs—man’s conscious agenda instead of God’s. Such preaching is always topical and never textual. Biblical information is minimized, and the sermons are short and full of stories. Anything and everything that is suspected of making the marginal attendee uncomfortable is removed from the service....Taken to the nth degree, this philosophy instills a tragic selfcenteredness. That is, everything is judged by how it affects man. This terribly corrupts one’s theology.”

Hughes is right. Our confused worship corrupts our theology and our weak theology corrupts our worship. Are these voices alarmist? They do mean to sound an alarm. But there are others who are saying, “Don’t worry—be happy—go worship.” One recent church growth author has written, “Worship is like a car to get us from where we are to where God wants us to be. Transportation and communication are imperative; the mode or vehicle is not imperative. Some worship God in cathedrals with the rich traditional organ tomes of Bach and Faure from the classics of Europe. They travel in a Mercedes Benz. Some worship God in simple wooden churches with a steeple pointing heavenward. They sing the gospel songs of Charles Wesley or Fanny Cosby. They travel in a Ford or Chevy. Some worship God with the contemporary sounds of praise music with a gentle beat. They travel in a convertible sports coupe. Some worship God to the whine of a guitar and the amplifiers to the max. They travel on a motorcycle, without a muffler.”

But surely there is more to worship than the spectrum of taste from a Mercedes Benz to a motorcycle. There must be something weightier here. “Worship is like a car to get us from where we are to where God wants us to be.” Can that be said with a straight face as we listen to the Scripture speak of worship? We know from the onset that there are many different Christian opinions concerning worship. This does not come to us as news. But the real issue for us this morning is whether or not God Himself has an opinion on this issue. Does God care how He is worshiped? Or is He some kind of *laissez-faire* deity who cares not how His people worship Him, but is resting in the hopes that some people in some place will in some way worship him?

Scripture reveals that God does care. Leviticus 10:1-3 serves as a witness to this point. “Now Nadab and Abihu, the

sons of Aaron, took their respective firepans, and after putting fire in them, placed incense on it and offered strange fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them. And fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, “It is what the Lord spoke, saying, ‘By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, and before all the people I will be honored.’”

These were Aaron’s sons. But they did what God had not commanded them to do in worship. They brought strange fire to the altar and they were consumed. Clearly, God does have an opinion about worship. He is the God whom we have come to know in Jesus Christ, the God who has revealed Himself in the Bible. He is a jealous God—a God who loves us and is calling out a people but a God who instructs and commands His people that we should worship Him rightly.

In one sense, I think you can say looking throughout the Bible that there has been worship warfare even in the Scripture itself. As a matter of fact, I think you can look back to the very first murder and see that it had to do with worship as well. What is an acceptable sacrifice to the Lord? Cain and Abel saw this issue differently.

Well, Scripture makes clear that worship is something that we do, not just something we attend. It is not merely an issue for the pastor and other ministers. It is not just an issue for the musicians and those who will plan the service. It is an issue for the entire congregation, for worship is something we do together. It is our corporate and common responsibility to worship God as He desires.

Where shall we turn for instruction on how we ought to worship? There is only one place we can turn, and that is to the Word of God. The norm of our worship must be the Word of God—this Word that He has spoken. As we turn to this Word, we do see a pattern of worship, a pattern that is replicated throughout the fabric of Scripture from beginning to the end.

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