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

Not only does authentic worship begin with a true vision of the living God, but second, authentic worship leads to a confession of sin, both individual and corporate. Isaiah was “undone,” when he had seen the true and living God, when he saw God in his holiness. He came to know the majestic, moral nature of this God, and he came to see God’s righteousness and his holiness. In reflection, Isaiah automatically saw his own utter sinfulness. He could not otherwise understand himself but as a sinner who was, by his own words here, undone, dissolved–silenced. He saw himself doomed to die.

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Not only does authentic worship begin with a true vision of the living God, but second, authentic worship leads to a confession of sin, both individual and corporate. We see it directly in this passage: “And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke.” What did Isaiah do? He said, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips. For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.” Isaiah was “undone,” when he had seen the true and living God, when he saw God in his holiness. He came to know the majestic, moral nature of this God, and he came to see God’s righteousness and his holiness. In reflection, Isaiah automatically saw his own utter sinfulness. He could not otherwise understand himself but as a sinner who was, by his own words here, undone, dissolved–silenced. He saw himself doomed to die.

I want to suggest that this must happen in our worship as well, “the cringe factor” aside. If we do not come face to face with our sin as individuals and as a congregation, I do not believe we have seen God, and we have not worshiped Him. How could it be otherwise than that, meeting Him in worship, we see ourselves as sinners? Isaiah spoke both individually and corporately. He said of himself, “I am a man of unclean lips.” His confession is tainted. His testimony is impure. Isaiah saw himself to the core, and understanding himself perhaps for the very first time, saw himself as God saw him. As he stands before God, he says, “I am undone.” True worship takes place among the people of God when we come face to face with our sins and confess them, knowing that He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us of all unrighteousness (1 Jn 1:9-10).

Psalm 51:1-4 models this kind of confession: “Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against You, You only have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are justified when You speak and blameless when You judge.”

Any parent knows the difference between a genuine apology and a “get off the hook apology,” a quick “sorry, sorry,” as the child runs off down the hall. There is the contrite broken heart of one who knows he or she has done wrong, has offended a moral standard that is not arbitrary, but fixed, and insulted the one true and living God. That is what Isaiah has done. Yet I fear so much of what we think is confession is not confession at all. It is just a hasty half-apology, not the kind of brokenness we see in Psalm 51. We must be brought face to face with our sin.

Third, authentic worship will lead to a display of redemption. A display of redemption means the proclamation of the gospel. What we see in Isaiah 6:6-7 is a display of redemption: “Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with the tongs. He touched my mouth with it and said, ‘Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven.’”

This scene is clearly an anticipation of the work of Christ. It is a unilateral act of God. It is a unilateral propitiatory sacrifice. It is a picture of atonement. Isaiah brought absolutely nothing. Isaiah had been brought face to face with his sin and now realizes redemption is all of grace, and that it is costly. The coal, after all, came from the altar, not from a campfire.

Reflecting on this two-stage movement, Martin Luther said that Isaiah saw himself first as he truly is—a sinner who was undone, and next as one who experienced this redemption. Luther states, “But it turned out for the salvation of the prophet that he was thus thrust down to hell, so that he might be led away and lead others away from that uncleanness of the Law to the purity of Christ, so that he alone might reign. Here now a resurrection from the dead takes place.” That must happen in our worship as well. True worship requires seeing the true and living God and then seeing ourselves as we actually are in our sinfulness. Turning to God through confession, we experience the display and declaration of redemption.

True worship always proclaims the gospel, the good news of what God has done in Jesus Christ. It proclaims the work of Christ and it centers in the cross. With the apostle Paul we say, “In the cross of Christ we glory.” We proclaim liberty to the captive, grace and pardon to all who believe in His name. If sinners come to Him, He will by no means cast them out.

Fourth, given what God has done, authentic worship requires a response. Isaiah recounts, “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?’ Then I said, ‘Here am I. Send me!’” (v. 8) We see in this passage a sending out similar to Matthew 28:18-20, when the Lord commanded his disciples, “All authority is given to me under heaven and earth; therefore, go.” He makes very clear in the Great Commission that those disciples were to go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that He commanded them.

Worship calls for an ongoing response seen in the proclamation of the gospel, in evangelism, and in missions. If our worship is weakened, our missionary witness will be weakened as well. We will forget the God who has sent us. We will neglect the content of the message of redemption with which he has sent us.

One recent writer on worship has commented, “It is not *how* you worship. It’s *who* you worship.” I would argue that the *who* determines the *how*. Does that mean that all issues are absolutely simplified and we can turn to scripture and see a specific outline of order for every week’s corporate worship? No. Does it mean that there is no diversity and should be no diversity in worship? No. Does it mean that styles will change? Yes. Does it mean that there will be a diversity of styles in worship? Yes. We must make a distinction, however, between style and form. The biblical form must be constantly followed. The biblical pattern must always be honored. There will be different styles, there will be different languages, there will be a different vernacular for each people, and there will be different contexts, but the essential marks of true Christian worship must always be present.

We must not be satisfied with a *laissez-faire*, cafeteria-style worship combination at our pleasure. There is a biblical pattern that must be followed. Will styles change? Yes. But the worship must always be God directed. Will there be a diversity of styles in worship? Yes, but there must be one glorious purpose following this clear biblical pattern: to measure everything by the norm of scripture, in which God has revealed how He wishes to be worshiped. We must learn from each other in this process that as the people of God we must get this right as we stand before God and under scripture.

We were created to worship God. The whole story of our redemption retells how we were created to worship God but by our sin became disqualified from that true and authentic worship. By God’s redemption in Jesus Christ, we were created anew for the purpose of worshipping God. And every glimpse of heaven we have in Scripture indicates that worship will be our eternal occupation. It is for that purpose that we are being prepared even in the present.

