

Increase My Faith

My Faith & the Beauty of Worship

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Lights...Camera...Action! Commonly heard words on a set where a performance of some kind is taking place, and yet these same words have come to characterize much of what takes place in politics and business. You see, we live in such an entertainment-driven world today that it is extremely difficult to gain and hold people's attention with anything less than cutting-edge technology, emphasizing energetic movement, lights, color, digital surround sound and an abundance of emotion. Even when considering professional athletics, it is safe to say that a great deal of planning, organizing and financing goes into half-time shows and time-out activities. Additionally, the spirit of competition and the desire to win that lurks throughout western culture constantly pressures competitors to try to outdo each other, even to outdo themselves, in order to keep gaining more patrons. And, of course, human nature tells us that the entertainment should only get better each time, otherwise, we become bored and disinterested.

While many people may not be bothered by the effects of this entertainment mindset, the same has led to a problem of tremendous proportions in the area of religion. Motivated by an attempt to boost interest and increase membership size, particularly among the young adult group (especially college-age and young professionals), churches find themselves engaging in practices and

MY FAITH & THE BEAUTY OF WORSHIP

activities that will appeal to them and draw them in. One of the most obvious areas in which this trend can be seen is the corporate worship (general assembly). With a greater exposure to all kinds of entertainment, younger adults tend to view what has been traditionally practiced in religion as dull, boring, spiritless, outdated and in need of "flavor." I believe the more attractive and politically correct label that has been given to describe the desires of many people today is "contemporary worship." Some churches even demonstrate this mentality in the advertising of their services by saying, "**Come and Experience Worship with Us!**" In his article entitled, "Worship or Entertainment," listen to the following observations made by Bob Prichard of Oxford, Alabama:

In our entertainment-oriented culture, many churches find themselves trying to "out do" themselves with more and more elaborate additions to worship. What began as special music by a choir becomes a full orchestra with professional soloists. A dramatic reading necessitates a full Broadway stage production. And as long as those who come to worship enjoy what is offered, anything goes. The expectation is that sermons will be shorter, wittier, and more uplifting. Anything in worship that cannot be "jazzed up" must be abandoned as boring, we are led to believe.

And although this used to be an issue only among denominations, it has been a very real and present issue among churches of Christ for some time now. Was Christ's aim in establishing Christianity to develop mega-churches, complete with praise teams, choirs, drama teams, step teams, pulpiteers and exciting programs in order to satisfy man's ever changing interests? God forbid!

Man has absolutely missed the mark on the meaning, purpose and design of corporate worship and, thus, he fails to differentiate between it and entertainment. Terms such as pure, reverent and sacred no longer characterize the assembling of God's people on the first day of the week in many places. However, when worship is truly understood as it is revealed in Scripture, and when we participate in it by following the New Testament pattern, we can then appreciate the beauty of worship, the nature of worship and the necessity of faith in worship.

THE BEAUTY OF OUR WORSHIP

What makes our worship beautiful? One might assume that only subjective answers exist to this question. However, a proper grasp of what Biblical worship *is* will lead one to recognize that the appeal spoken of is not simply "in the eye of the beholder" (i.e. according to the personal preferences of the worshipers), but should be first and foremost appealing to the One responsible for purposing and designing worship. Since the awesome Creator of all things is satisfied with mankind giving Him exactly what He has requested in accordance to the teachings of Christ (Matt. 28:18-20; 2 John 9-11), then we, as His creation, ought to find beauty in offering Him just that (nothing more or nothing less)! As Jesus discussed worship with the Samaritan woman in John chapter 4, He stated: "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:23-24). It is here that the Savior of the world succinctly informs humanity of the three elements that make our worship beautiful: (1) having the right object of

worship, (2) having the right disposition in worship, and (3) having the right authority to worship.

The Right Object of Worship

According to *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, the Hebrew word translated "worship" means "to prostrate oneself, bow down" (295). Consistent with this meaning is that of the word most frequently rendered "worship" in the New Testament. Vine states that in the Greek language, the word means "to make obeisance, do reverence to...used of an act of homage or reverence," literally, "to kiss [*the hand*] toward" (686, emp. added). And whether bowing down before or kissing the hand toward, the act was a display of humility, reverence and recognition for one who occupied a superior position or rank. For example, in Biblical times respect was shown to various ones, such as kings (1 Sam. 24:8) and to social or economic superiors (Ruth 2:10). But, religiously speaking, there is only One Supreme Deity worthy of our utmost respect and adoration. Jesus acknowledged before Satan that man is only to worship and serve **the Lord God** (Matt. 4:10). Why is this so?

Let us consider for a moment the words of the sweet Psalmist of Israel that are found in Psalm 66:1-5:

Make a joyful shout to God, all the earth! Sing out the honor of His name; Make His praise glorious. Say to God, How awesome are Your works! Through the greatness of Your power Your enemies shall submit themselves to You. All the earth shall worship You and sing praises to You; They shall sing praises to Your name. Come and see the works of God; He is awesome in His doing towards the sons of men.

As man honestly and rationally considers the very sophisticated design and order found within the universe

and everything within it, and especially God's love and concern for His crowning achievement (i.e. humanity - Psalm 8:3-5), he cannot but agree with the words of the Psalmist and all the other Biblical writers, who have thoroughly expressed why God is worthy to be praised, glorified and honored. God created man in such a way that he is naturally inclined to recognize the existence of a greater power than that which resides within himself (Job 37:7). However, from the earliest days of man, he has erroneously sought to recognize and worship the imaginations of his heart rather than God as the true source of life and all blessings (Gen. 6:5; Rom. 1:18-23; e.g. Ex. 20:4-5; 32:1-8; cf. Jas. 1:17).

When it comes to worship, one must not only have an object of worship (the person or thing that worship is directed toward), but he/she must have **the right** object of worship. In Paul's discourse to the overly-religious Athenians on Mar's Hill (Acts 17:22-31), he sought to teach them about the one and only, true object of worship – **the God of heaven and earth**, whom they were ignorantly worshipping as a part of their polytheistic ideology. He told them who God is, all that He is responsible for through His great power, how He had been acknowledged by some of their own respected poets, that He is a living being and not a statue or work of art, and how He has assured us of a future day of judgment by raising Christ from the dead. While God may have overlooked man's ignorance long ago prior to Christ, He will no longer do so, for He "...now commands all men everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30). Jesus clearly informed the Samaritan woman that the object of worship for **true worshipers** is "the Father" (John 4:23), and not wood, clay, straw, precious metals, animals, angels, people (including self), buildings, mountains, celestial bodies nor anything or anyone else!! Our worship

is beautiful because the instructions given by the inerrant, all-inspired Word of God are very clear about the object of our worship.

The Right Disposition in Worship

A second element that makes our worship well-pleasing in God's sight is having the right disposition while doing so. As Jesus further expounded to the Samaritan woman on what God demands of true worshipers, He stated, "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship **in spirit** and truth" (John 4:24, emp. added). The latter word "spirit" comes from a Greek word that is used figuratively in this case (based on the context) and refers to "mental disposition." The American Heritage Dictionary defines "disposition" as "temperament or the manner of thinking, behaving, and reacting characteristic of a specific individual" (699). Simply put, it is maintaining the proper attitude toward God and the Divine system of worship that He has ordained, which will be reflected in one's conduct during the designated period of worship. Contrary to the thoughts and ways of many religious people, church-goers and part-time Christians, the corporate worship assembly is not play time, walk-around-and-about time, note-writing time, snack time, nap time, nor social time. Rather, it is a time in which our offerings should be presented to the Lord with the dignity and reverence appropriate for God Almighty. The wise King Solomon wrote, "Walk prudently when you go to the house of God; and draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they do evil. Do not be rash with your mouth, And let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and

you on earth; Therefore, let your words be few" (Ecc. 5:1-2).

Solomon exhorted the Israelites to literally "watch their step" (conduct) when going to worship Jehovah and to be more prepared to listen and learn, rather than desiring to be heard. Oh, how beautiful it would be if every Christian today, from the pulpit to the pews, would come to understand and accept this great wisdom in reference to the humble and reverent disposition that we should exhibit in worship. In the article, "The Serious Business of Worship," an anonymous writer penned the following words:

No matter how well prepared and delivered a lesson may be, an atmosphere of irreverence, frivolity, or slovenliness [carelessness] in worship can nullify its impact on the hearts of sinners...Whenever we worship Jehovah, always keep in mind that: "Holy and reverend is his name" (Psa. 111:9). Our service should exhibit proper reverence for the Great I AM.

Without a doubt, our hearts must be focused on that which really matters to God, lest we find ourselves in the same position as those scribes and Pharisees to whom Jesus said, "Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, **But their heart is far from Me**'" (Matt. 15:7-8, emp. added).

The Right Authority in Worship

The third element that Jesus spoke of to the Samaritan woman, which makes the worship offered by true worshipers appealing to God, is having the right authority for everything done within it. Not only was it mandatory that worship be carried out with the right disposition, but Jesus declared that it also had to be in

MY FAITH & THE BEAUTY OF WORSHIP

harmony with **truth** (John 4:24). On one occasion, Jesus told His disciples, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31-32). Yet, again He prayed to the Father and said, "...Your word is truth" (John 17:17). It seems both evident and necessary, by Jesus' use of the same Greek word translated "truth" in these three passages, that we recognize truth can only be ascertained from the Word of God, which is the same Word given by God to Jesus Christ (John 12:49-50). Therefore, when we consider that acceptable worship must be according to truth, it must be consistent with what God's holy Word reveals about acceptable worship through Jesus Christ. In his exhortation to the Colossian church, the apostle Paul reminds us, "...whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him" (Col. 3:17). As Christians, everything we do, whether in teaching or in practice, **must be** authorized by the Lord Jesus Christ in order for God to receive the glory...and this includes worship!

THE NATURE OF OUR WORSHIP

Historically, those who have sought to recognize the God of heaven through worship have done so in many different ways. But Scripture evidences the fact that God has not and does not accept just any method of worship. In Matthew 15:7-9, Jesus revealed that God is worshiped vainly when the commands and traditions of men are followed rather than His commands. Of course, in the absence of a true knowledge of God's will in relation to His identity and how He desires to be worshiped, "ignorant worship" will result (Acts 17:22-23). Then, there is what Paul referred to as "will worship" or "self-imposed

worship," in which one's own personal preference determines what takes place in worship instead of God's Word (Col. 2:20-23). However, the only worship that is acceptable to God is that which is "in spirit and truth" (John 4:24). And although we looked at this phrase used by Christ regarding proper disposition and authority in the previous section, let us reconsider the context of His words here to gain an even deeper understanding of worship in order to see the true beauty that lies within.

While ample time was taken to explain the sincerity and authority necessary to offer appealing worship to God under the New Covenant or New Testament, we must realize that worship under the Old Testament was to also be sincere and in accordance to God's commands (Cf. Isa. 1:10-18; Deut. 5:32-33). Apparently, Jesus had something else in mind, primarily a contrast in the nature of Old Testament worship and that of New Testament worship. Dan Flournoy wrote an excellent section (pages 51-52) in the Permian Basin Lectures book of 2005 entitled, "The Nature of Christian Worship." All thanks and credit is given to brother Flournoy for the insight shared here in regards to this topic:

Since God is a spirit, worship must be spiritual worship. In Jesus' discourse with the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-42), he contrasted worship which is spiritual in nature with that which is largely physical and outward in nature as was true under the law of Moses and under the Samaritan system instituted by Jeroboam (1 Kings 12)...Thus, Christian worship is in opposition to the "carnal" ordinances of those ancient systems.

Old Testament worship consisted largely of that which was but a shadow of that which was to come. There was a special

MY FAITH & THE BEAUTY OF WORSHIP

priesthood which served in a physical structure, the tabernacle or, later, the temple. Within the temple were physical items such as the table of showbread, the lamp stand and altar of incense. There was an altar upon which the physical sacrifices were offered. The Jews observed feast days and Sabbaths, which were regulated by divine ordinances. The entire system of worship under the Law appealed to the physical senses. This system was but a “shadow” of that “true” worship that would characterize Christian worship (Hebrews 10:1).

In contrast, brother Flourney wrote:

Christian worship is spiritual in nature and includes a spiritual temple, which is the church (1 Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 2:19-22). All Christians are priests who offer up spiritual sacrifices through Christ, who is The Great High Priest (1 Pet. 2:5, 9; Hebrews 9:11; 13:15). Rather than burning incense on an altar, Christians offer their prayers to God, the Father (Revelation 5:8; Hebrews 13:15). Instead of using mechanical instruments of music, the Christian uses the heart from which to sing praises to the Almighty (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). The weekly observance of the Lord’s Supper was foreshadowed by the weekly eating and renewing of the showbread by Aaron and his sons (Leviticus 24:5-9)...Rather than a reading of the law, Christian worship involves a study of the New Testament (Colossians 4:16; Acts 20:7).

As he concluded his thoughts on the true nature of New Testament worship, brother Flourney stated the following:

The physical ordinances of the Law were until “the time of reformation” (Hebrews 9:9-10). This occurred with the inauguration of

the New Covenant. Jesus explained to the woman by the well that the time was coming when true worshipers would worship God in truth rather than in symbol. The emphasis would be on the spirit of man, not his physical senses!

What, then, is the contrast between the worship rendered by the Jews and that worship which is to come? It is not between true and false worship, but between that which is *real* and that which was but a *shadow!* A kind of worship was coming (and has been authorized since the days of Acts 2—ALW) that would be more in keeping with truth and reality than in ritual and symbolism.

God is still seeking “true worshipers” in the twenty-first century and for as long as He will allow this world to last (John 4:23). How beautiful it is to know that a universal invitation remains extended to become such a worshiper who understands the spiritual nature of New Testament worship!

THE NECESSITY OF FAITH IN OUR WORSHIP

Brethren, allow me to present one more thought for consideration on what makes our worship absolutely beautiful. Remember, the beauty of worship must be evaluated from the angle of its appeal to our sovereign God, not from our own vantage point. The mature-minded Christian believes that if it pleases God, then it is sufficient to please him/her. Of course, God’s satisfaction is predicated on two factors, which the Holy Spirit reveals in Hebrews 4:1-2. “Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. For indeed the gospel was preached to us

MY FAITH & THE BEAUTY OF WORSHIP

as well as to them; but **the word** which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with **faith** in those who heard it" (emp. added). In this particular passage, the Holy Spirit calls our attention back to the rebellion of Israel against Jehovah following their release from Egyptian captivity (Heb. 3:16). As they were led by Moses through the wilderness in search of the promised land of Canaan, the Israelites found reason to murmur, whine and question Jehovah's power continuously despite all of the convincing evidence. Therefore, Jehovah's anger was aroused against that generation and most of them died during the wilderness wanderings, never inheriting the promised land of rest (Heb. 3:17). And the cause you ask? Disobedience due to unbelief (Heb. 3:18-19)!

Having used this historical reminder, the inspired writer makes the point that those under the New Covenant must take heed in order to secure the promise of rest that awaits us in heaven (Heb. 4:1). Then, he expounds upon the cause of Israel's failure in the very next verse. It was not that they had not been taught or passed on the right message from Jehovah. No, the right message had been taught by those designated to teach it, but it did not benefit them because they ultimately failed to exercise trust in Jehovah by refusing to accept and put into practice what they had heard. In other words, Almighty God is satisfied with us when our obedient faith is mixed equally with the authoritative Word that He presents to us by the proclamation of the gospel of Christ. Paul said, "So then, faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). Yes, faith, or our personal confidence in God, is established and cultivated by what we are taught from the Word of God. But there has to be a demonstration of our faith in Him by humbly, consistently and efficiently functioning in accordance to what we learn.

James expressed these very same sentiments when he stated, "You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only...For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (Jas. 2:24, 26).

With this in mind, our approach to corporate worship must lie within the same vein. The specific acts of worship that are delineated within the New Testament (i.e. singing [Heb. 13:15]; praying [1 Tim. 2:1-2, 8]; giving [1 Cor. 16:1-2]; observing the Lord's Supper [Acts 20:7]; edification [1 Tim. 4:13, 16]) must not only be taught and understood, but they must be followed and practiced as we have been commanded or shown in Scripture. And in a day and age where the concept of "up-sizing" impacts religion as much as it does the fast food industry, our faith in God and desire to offer only what He requires, according to His Will, are the only factors that will prevent us from indulging in all the extras (unauthorized innovations)! Many brethren have gotten caught up in orchestrating their assemblies in such a way as to possess the "wow-factor" in order to win people over to their fellowship. However, as churches of Christ, the aim of our worship should not be to incite the emotions of members and guests in attendance (like a pep rally). Instead, our aim should be to establish a sacred atmosphere that is conducive to members collectively offering the specified acts of worship as mandated by Jesus Christ, while providing an opportunity for growth in the knowledge of God's Will and for mutual edification. Contrary to popular belief, people will be saved and added to the church when the gospel is boldly and lovingly proclaimed in its purity without modifications (1 Cor. 1:18-21; Acts 2:47).

The Bible houses numerous examples of those who failed to mix their faith with the inerrant Word of God that

MY FAITH & THE BEAUTY OF WORSHIP

had been given to them. Consider the end results of those such as Cain (Gen. 4:3-12), Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:1-2), Uzzah (2 Sam. 6:1-7), and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11). However, the Bible also reveals the beautiful outcomes of those who humbly submitted themselves to the pure Word of God when it was presented to them, such as Noah (Gen. 6:8-13, 22), the inhabitants of Nineveh (Jonah 3:1-10), and the apostle Paul (Gal. 1:10-24). As we follow these worthy examples in mixing our faith with the truth of the inspired Scriptures concerning corporate worship or any other aspect of the Christian life, our heavenly Father will be glorified, our Christian character will be fortified, and the spiritual and physical growth of the church will be multiplied!!

FINAL OBSERVATIONS

There is really no simpler way of saying that the beauty of worshiping God lies in our demonstration of faith in offering God exactly what He requires. And since God's ways and thoughts are much higher than ours (Isa. 55:8-9), we cannot improve what His Son has established! All we can do is follow that which has been approved in New Testament Scripture. However, the Christian system of faith was "once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3), and, therefore, no further revelations are needed nor will be given. May we all learn the beauty of offering spiritual worship to God according to the New Testament pattern and learn "not to think beyond what is written" (1 Cor. 4:6).

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