

WORSHIPING GOD IN SPIRIT AND TRUTH

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In our contemporary church culture the word *worship*, along with the word *church*, has all but lost its original significance. Worship has been diluted and convoluted in the minds of most professing Christians to mean nothing more than an event that occurs during the church service. We have *worship+time*; *worship+leaders*; *worship+teams*; *worship+music*; and many churches even intentionally strive to create a *worship experience*. The majority of the professing church has so depreciated and desecrated the worship of God that what most people think of when they think of worship is nothing more than sheer entertainment. Most people understand worship in this way because this is the way they have been taught to view worship by their leaders. In other words, the church is failing at the core of its primary purpose for existing, and when it fails in its primary purpose it ceases to be the church. A group of people getting together to sing repetitive mantras and be entertained by a band is not a church.

Since the church's first obligation is to worship and serve God, then it must worship in the manner prescribed by God, otherwise it fails to qualify as true worship. True worship must flow from a *heart* sincerely devoted to God. As such, true worship comprises all the actions and attitudes of life devoted to the obedience of God's Word. Worship is inseparable from obedience. People who profess to love Jesus in their heart will also love Him in their practice. The Christian is to present his entire life as a holy sacrifice to God (Rm 12:1), and the true worshiper must worship God in spirit and in truth (Jn 4:23). Jesus made it plain in His discourse with the woman at the well that true worshipers cannot be identified by their loyalty to a particular place, group of people, or format of worship, but rather by their worship of God *in spirit and truth* (Jn 4:23-24). From this passage we see that,

Worship must be *essentially God-centered*, made possible by the gift of the Holy Spirit, and *in personal knowledge of and conformity to God's Word-made-flesh*, the one who is God's truth. The worshipers which God seeks worship Him out of the fullness of the supernatural life they enjoy *(in spirit)*, and on the basis of God's incarnate Self-Expression, Jesus Christ *(in truth)*.¹

Consequently, worshiping *in spirit and truth* can only mean rendering to God such honor and devotion in which the entire heart is involved, and *that is in full conformity with the truth of God revealed in His word*. This means it is paramount we have a correct view of our Object of worship and the prescriptions He has mandated for how He is to be worshiped. True worship involves worshiping the true God as He has

¹ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 225. (Emphasis added)

revealed Himself in His word and in the person of Jesus Christ (Jn 14:9; Hb 1:1-3), not a god of our own imagination. All idolatry begins in the mind; imagining God to be other than He is. Most worship a god of their own imagination, not the God of Scripture, thereby violating the second commandment (Ex 20:4-6). True worship will be inward as well as outward; spiritual as well as physical; active, not passive. It will be directed to the true God of Scripture revealed in the Person of Jesus Christ (Heb.1:1-3).

Sadly, the overwhelming majority of worship practiced within the church today is designed to appeal to the senses and emotions. Everything from music to the message is geared to elicit an emotional response . a %worship experience.+But God is Spirit and must be worshiped in spirit and truth. True worship flows from the *mind*, not the carnal flesh. Worship that focuses on outward expressions and emotional highs is usually lacking in spiritual devotion. Just as it is human nature to gravitate to what appeals to the flesh and satisfies the senses (Gn 3:6), so people naturally gravitate to a carnal worship. People want to worship in a way that gratifies their senses. Just as Eve's mind was corrupted from a pure devotion to God (2 Cor 11:3), so our minds are easily corrupted by what appeals to our senses.

God is as much displeased now with a carnal worship as He was with Israel's meaningless sacrifices (Is 1:11-14). They thought God was as pleased with their outward observance as they were, even though they lacked the internal worship of God; a reverential fear of Him; trust in His word and nature; a lovingly obedient disposition (1 Sm 15:22, 23; Hos 6:6). They never gave themselves; they never sought to know Him, and imagined God to be just as superficial as they were (Ps 50:21).

It is impossible to worship and honor God as we ought unless we know Him as He is. It is impossible to know Him apart from His revelation of Himself. Only God can acquaint us with His own nature. Without a true knowledge of God and His true nature people will worship a god of their own imagination; one that is remarkably like themselves. Not only are we dependent on revelation to know God, but to know *how* to worship Him . we must be told from heaven what worship is fit for the God of heaven. Just because God does not forbid certain things does not mean He gave us the license to invent our own forms of worship. God has not entrusted His worship to the fickle, carnal, selfish, self-seeking, and self-gratifying whims of human imagination.

A truly spiritual worship consists in a love for God *as He is*; communion with Him; trust in Him and His word; sincere aims at His glory; a deep abiding affection. Affection is constant and permanent whereas emotion is fleeting, superficial, and temporary. Affection manifests itself in obedience (Jn 14:15, 21, 23) and a holy, crucified life (Gal 2:20; 6:14). To serve God with our body but not our heart, soul, and mind is hypocrisy and paganism; to serve Him with our mind but not our body is sacrilege, irreverent, and antinomian; to serve Him with neither is atheism.

Truly spiritual worship is both elevating and debasing. It exalts God and convicts us of how little we give Him; how little we trust Him; how little we love Him. It makes us aware of our weakness and inability and causes us to grieve how carnal and superficial our worship is. Sadly the trend today is just the opposite . to exalt man and belittle God; to make Him more like us. When the act or performance of worship becomes an end in itself, this is carnal. But when it becomes the *means* of knowing God; communing with Him; growing in Him; to see Him as He is; this is spiritual worship. An emotional experience or joyous feelings are no indication of true worship. A person can invent worship in which people will be aroused and emotions kindled. They delight in their worship, not because they are worshiping God, but because it is their own invention, it suits their preferences, it appeals to their tastes, and generates the desired emotional response. Worship in which God delights must be in conformity to His rules and principles, not our shallow, false, and superficial fancies.

The Bible does not contain a detailed ~~how-to~~ formula for *corporate* worship, but it does provide a framework of activities that should be included in our public worship. Central to all of these is the preaching and teaching of God's Word (Acts 2:42; 20:27; Tit 2:1). Our corporate worship must emphasize and feature biblically based, hermeneutically sound expository preaching of Scripture, the only infallible rule of faith and practice. Every component of the corporate worship service should point to, prepare for, and compliment the sermon, for it is the sermon which is the primary means of feeding the flock of God (2 Tim 2:14-15), and inculcating in believers a true understanding of God's person and nature so they can be better worshipers. Other activities would include, but are not limited to the following: the public reading of Scripture (Eph 3:4; 1 Tim 4:13); corporate prayer (Col 4:2-4; Phil 4:6; 1 Tim 2:1, 8); the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper (Mt 28:19; 1 Cor 11:23-26); giving (1 Cor 16:1-2; 2 Cor 8-9); the use of spiritual gifts (1 Pt 4:10); discipleship (1 Thes 5:14); church discipline (Mt 18:15-20; 1 Cor 5:1-13); praise to God through Word and song (Neh 12:31-43; much of Psalms; Col 3:16). The *personal* nature of New Testament worship is not devoid of outward expressions. The spiritual sacrifices of the Christian involve the ministry of the gospel (Acts 6:4; Rm 15:16), living a holy, self-sacrificial, humble life (Eph 4:1; 25-32; 5:1-2; Phil 2:3-4), prayer (Col 4:2-4; 1 Tim 2:1, 8), sacrificial giving (2 Cor 8-9), thanksgiving (Phil 4:6), and service to others (1 Pt 4:10).

Unfortunately, the word ~~w~~ worship has come to be associated primarily with the music employed in a church. The worship service becomes defined by the genre of music used. If traditional hymns are sung, then it is a traditional service. If praise songs are used, then it is a contemporary service. Some churches have sought to resolve this issue by offering separate traditional and contemporary services. This, however, results in unnecessarily dividing a congregation, and encouraging self-gratification as the motivation for worship. Arguably, no issue has become more divisive in the church

today, or been the instrument (no pun intended) through which so much false worship has been introduced into the church than that of music. As such it will receive special attention here.

Music and singing have played an integral role in the worship of God, both in the Old Testament and New Testament. According to 1 Chronicles 23:5, David assigned 4,000 of the 38,000 Levitical priests to devote themselves to praising the Lord with instruments which David had made for this very purpose. Not only were these priests trained musicians, but they were trained theologians, combining the best of musical talent with theologically profound and accurate lyrics. When King Hezekiah restored the worship of God in Jerusalem after the unfaithfulness of Ahaz, he ordered the Levites to sing praises to the Lord with *the words* of David and Asaph the seer (2 Chr. 29:30). Note that the emphasis is placed on the content of the songs, not the style of music.

While the New Testament makes no direct assertion concerning the use of musical instruments by the early church, there is no reason to assume that the early Christians ceased using them in their corporate worship services. It is interesting to note the variety of instruments used in the Old Testament; stringed instruments (harp and lyre), wind instruments (trumpets), and percussion (cymbals) were all used in Israel's worship (1 Chr. 15:16, 28; Neh. 12:27, 35). No instrument is forbidden or considered taboo. The songs which were sung continued to be the theologically rich psalms of the Old Testament (Eph. 5:19; Col 3:16). Along with the psalms was the singing of hymns and spiritual songs. While it is difficult to draw a clear-cut distinction between them, it seems hymns may be more theological in nature whereas spiritual songs were more experiential in nature. Not only were these sung to the praise and glory of God, but they were also a means of mutual teaching, admonition, and edification (Col 3:16), not merely emotional sentimentalism or monotonous mantras designed to disengage our minds.

Notice in Colossians 3:16 that Paul's command is prefaced with the words *in all wisdom*, and before that he says *let the word of Christ richly (plentifully; abundantly; extremely; fully) dwell within you.* Our worship is to be dominated by the word of God which provides the wisdom to regulate our worship and have it conform to the divine standard. And that standard is mutual teaching, admonition, and edification. The worship music of the early church contained both didactic and hortatory elements. It was intended to teach spiritual truth and edify the saints, not entertain a crowd, emotionally manipulate, or mesmerize into a semi-hypnotic state. The end result of an emotionally charged event is a good feeling and a false sense of spirituality, but the ultimate result of truth is worship.

There can be no true worship apart from a true knowledge of God. Therefore the standard that should be used to regulate the music of the church is whether or not it

promotes a true knowledge of God. Unfortunately, the majority of music in use today fails to meet this standard. In fact, it not only fails to meet the biblical criteria, but it often teaches and promotes erroneous and heretical views of God and man, and stimulates responses that bear a greater resemblance to pagan rather than Christian worship.

Given the combined example of the Old and New Testaments, it is clear that the music of the early church was excellent both in its musical quality and theological content. In other words, there was a high view of God, music, and worship. The worship music of the church today should seek to emulate this biblical standard. In the last quarter of the twentieth century many church's music ministries have almost completely replaced the theologically rich hymns of yesteryear with the contemporary praise chorus. Many of the church's hymns were written by people who were not only trained musicians, but trained theologians; therefore they had a deep theological well from which to draw. The same cannot be said of many praise choruses. Unlike hymns, praise choruses generally have no didactic or hortatory purpose, and more often than not their emphasis is man-centered, not God-centered. Often they never even mention the name of God, employ mind-numbing repetition that is more akin to pagan chants, express an irreverent familiarity with God, and could just as easily be sung to a boyfriend or girlfriend. Because so much of contemporary music focuses exclusively on emotion and is lacking in any theological truth, and quite often expresses unbiblical views of God and/or man, it does not qualify as worshiping God in spirit and truth. It is devoid of both spirit and truth.

It is not necessarily the *style* of music which makes it unbiblical, but the *message* contained in the lyrics. Even a cursory examination of church history will show that any change in style has always been met with much opposition. In the 18th century when Isaac Watts attempted to make the worship music of the church less stale and somber his efforts were vigorously denounced by many church leaders of his time, but now these hymns are some of the richest heritages possessed by the church. Watts and other hymn writers did not sacrifice theological content and accuracy, a God-centered emphasis, and musical excellence in their efforts to modernize the church's worship music. Unlike most hymns which were written specifically for corporate worship, praise choruses are typically written for the mass music market with an eye to what sells, not to theological content; what appeals to the largest possible audience, Christian or non-Christian, and will receive the most air time on radio, not for specific use by the church; what will stir the emotions, not teach theological truth; what will create an artificial worship experience, not edify the saints. They also blur the distinction between the church and the world. Too often, the introduction of contemporary music into the worship service is done for pragmatic, rather than theological reasons; that is, pandering to a narcissistic culture that already suffers from an over-active sense of self-

importance and that places the gratification of personal preferences above what is honoring to God. Entertainment-driven music brings people in the door.

Music, however, is meant to aid and complement the worship of God, not drive or dominate the worship service. Most people today do not even know what congregational singing sounds like anymore because it has been drowned-out by the %worship team+. If the churches today which depend on this type of music to fill their church were to turn down the volume, turn up the lights, use God-honoring music, and teach the Bible, they would soon discover that they are not really a church, but a side-show attraction. Tragically, what passes for worship today is nothing more than emotionally manipulating and mind-numbing mantras designed to stimulate the senses and seduce the mind from a worship of the true God to a worship of self and the world.

Admittedly this is a broad generalization, and not every old hymn is good, nor is all new music bad. There is some wonderful theologically rich contemporary music being written today just as there are many old hymns which are frightfully unbiblical. Many old hymns have been set to new contemporary tunes. The issue is not old versus new, acoustic verses amplified or organ-only verses a variety of instruments, but theological depth, biblically accurate lyrics, and musical excellence versus shallow, man-centered music meant to entertain and manipulate rather than engage the intellect. One promotes the exaltation of the God of the Bible, the other the exaltation of man. One is God-centered; the other tends to be narcissistic.

The church should not abandon the rich heritage of hymnody to which it is heir. Neither should it ignore the contributions of gifted contemporary composers who are producing worship music which is both didactic in nature and God glorifying. If the use of hymns has waned in a church, the pastor can help revive interest in their use by briefly teaching the history of the hymn to be sung, as well as the theology expressed in the hymn. By incorporating both traditional hymns and contemporary worship music into its corporate service, the church can continue to follow the example set by the first century church of worshipping God with music that worships Him in spirit and truth, and avoid needlessly dividing a congregation over music style, or inadvertently perpetuating a culture fixated on self-gratification and self-worship.