

SPIRITUAL DEVIATIONS

Worship versus Entertainment

Worship, so central to our personal and corporate Christian life, occupies a prominent place in Scripture. And in contemporary Christian dialogue, the question of how to worship is an ever-increasing concern. This dialogue, however, has become clouded by an increasing emphasis on audio-visual technology, a desperation to reach the “unchurched” with “seeker-friendly services,” and the growing influence of the entertainment industry in North American society. Indeed, many are beginning to wonder to what extent genuine worship has been supplanted by “Christian entertainment.” We should not presume that all worship is profitable or that all our efforts to revere God are satisfactory to Him. On the contrary, it is entirely possible to worship amiss. The Lord Jesus rebuked some for worshipping Him *in vain* (Matt. 15:9; Mark 7:7), and the apostle Paul alerted the Colossian believers against following those who had deviated into false, self-imposed worship (Col. 2:23). One Christian journal exclusively devoted to the subject of worship warns in “The Hidden Dangers in Worship”:

One of the ideas at the heart of worship is the idea of “prizing” or “honoring” something. And in our times of worship we can be snared into prizing something other than the one true object of worship. As our focus slips, we may just end up worshipping something else....When it is done, what is in focus? (*Worship Leader* 31)

This article will examine this very issue—worship as defined in the context of Scripture—in order to clarify what genuine worship *is* as well as what it *is not*.

Worship Is in Spirit

The clearest and most succinct explanation of real worship is provided by the Lord Himself. Jesus told the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well that the genuine worship sought by the Father is “in spirit” (John 4:23-24). Since God is Spirit, believers must learn to contact and receive Him with the organ which He created to correspond to Him—the deepest, most genuine part of our tripartite being, our regenerated human spirit. Just as we use our ears to receive and interpret sound waves and our eyes to visualize light waves, so we also must employ the appropriate organ to worship God—that is, our human spirit. The Lord Jesus stressed that New Testament worship is no

longer associated with a particular physical location, whether the temple in Jerusalem or Jacob’s well. Instead, God can be genuinely worshipped only when His children gather together in spirit. The Lord’s word here restricts and preserves the scope of proper worship: if worship is not in spirit, it is not real. The spirit and soul are very closely related, as illustrated by our physical joints and marrow (Heb. 4:12). It is, therefore, quite easy to mistake one for the other. An interview in *Worship Leader* illustrates how easily soulish release and emotional entertainment can be mistaken for worship. In it, a female worship leader states,

Since women are generally more in touch with the whole person, this allows us to communicate that vulnerability in our worship. Unhindered response and expression to God is the goal. When we model this vulnerability, we allow others to see the freedom that is available to us in worship to incorporate all of our emotions. (Riddle 22-23)

According to the Lord’s word in John 4, the goal of worship is not the unhindered expression of soulish emotions; rather, the Father is satisfied through our worship of Him in our spirit. It is far too easy for us to mistake the soulish expression of “the whole person” for something which pleases the Father. Actually, it is only when *Christ*, who dwells in our spirit, is expressed, when *He alone* is magnified, that the Father is pleased.

Worship Is in Truthfulness

According to John 4, the Father also seeks some to worship Him in truthfulness. When we enjoy and offer Christ to God the Father, Christ becomes the sincerity, genuineness, and truthfulness in our worship. Believers are sincere, or truthful, only when they are in Christ. Hence, our worship is only sincere, genuine, and true when its element and content is the One who *is* truth (14:6). When Christ fills the believers and is expressed through them, He becomes the focus, content, and goal of each Christian meeting. Conversely, when any other element replaces Christ, the meeting is devoid of truthfulness.

Worship Leader wrongly presumes, “If worship is to be vital, we need both information and stimulus” (Kraft 14). No! If our worship is to be vital, we simply need the vital

and genuine One. Our unique concern in Christian worship should be to have the presence of Christ and to gather in His name. *Worship Leader* reflects a misguided modern trend when it states, “What we lacked was something to get our emotions in gear, something to stimulate parts of us that were ignored” (Kraft 14). It exhorts, “Let’s be more conscious of our need for both of these elements....combining useful and accurate information with the proper kinds and amounts of stimulus” (14). In such stimulus-based worship, it falls to the worship leader to figure out how to emotionally stimulate his or her followers. *Worship Leader* explains, “As in any other leading role, the one given the responsibility should be very well versed in her craft. We must know the music, have a working knowledge of how to make it flow” (Riddle 23). Worship is thereby diminished to a “craft” under a skillful leader’s hand. Nevertheless, the New Testament reveals that in Christian meetings it is not the music that must “flow,” but the Triune God as the river of water of life (2 Cor. 13:14; Rev. 22:1).

Worship Is Eating Christ

To the Old Testament Israelites, worshipping God meant holding a feast unto Him. Seven times a year they gathered to offer their best produce to Him, as well as to feast on what they offered. The apostle Paul transferred the notion of worship as a feast to the church age. He explicitly charged the Corinthians, “Let us keep the feast” (1 Cor. 5:8), declaring that Christ is not only the Passover Lamb to the New Testament believer, but also the entire Passover feast (v. 7). Christ in His splendid and varied aspects is similarly typified by all the other Old Testament offerings and feasts. The Bible consistently reveals that God desires His people’s worship to be a feast on Christ and with Christ. Christ is the essential element of worship; thus, when we partake of Him, God is truly worshipped.

If we consider a worship service as an event conceived and controlled by us, the product of our design, we are likely to lose sight of Christ as the unique content and focus of the meeting. Instead of enjoying Christ in Spirit-led, spiritual eating and drinking, we may find ourselves endeavoring to stage a “Christ event” to be feasted on “again and again” (Webber 12), awing the congregation with multimedia entertainment. *Worship Leader* addresses “those of us who produce public worship events” and admits that “the demands of a pseudo-event culture and its effect on the authenticity of worship is plain to see. You know the demand to make something really ‘spectacular’ happen, and you probably know how to do it” (Fromm 4). It then cautions that it is possible to orchestrate a “sacred production” without actually experiencing God (4). The heavy burden of having to constantly dazzle and entertain worshippers is antithetical to the simple and spontaneous meetings described in the New Testament.

Worship Is Offering Christ to God

To worship God in the Old Testament was a matter of following God’s ordained way and worshipping according to His specific, detailed instructions. To an Israelite, that meant to offer to God the various sacrifices prepared exactly as He had prescribed. In the New Testament the believers are to offer Christ to the Father through various types of speaking in the meeting (1 Cor. 14:26; Heb. 13:15). Based on redemption, the malediction of sin is put away, and believers are thus able to experience and enjoy Christ throughout their daily life. This daily enjoyment of Christ causes the believer to be constitutionally enriched with an experiential knowledge of Christ, and it is *that* which is brought to the Christian meeting. Hence, a believer becomes a genuine New Testament priest, offering Christ, who has been experientially apprehended, by speaking for Christ and speaking forth Christ. This is why some translations render the Greek word *latreuo* as “worship” while others render it “serve” (Phil. 3:3); the word refers to the priestly service of offering spiritual sacrifices to God.

When we understand worship as something accomplished by *every* functioning member of the Body of Christ, each one being a priest to offer Christ, then “sacred” entertainment is unmasked as the flimsy counterfeit it is. “Feel good” entertainment defrauds believers of the genuine experience of Christ’s knowledge-surpassing joy, peace, and love by rendering them passive spectators. However, when every member, as part of the royal priesthood, offers Christ to God, we sense the Father’s satisfaction resonating within us. Superficial dramas, hip music, stage props, flag shows, and multimedia sensory stimuli all pale when compared to the genuine experience of the Triune God in simple Christian worship. In order to have genuine Christian fellowship and worship, natural preferences and gifts must pass through the cross.

Worship Is Expressing Christ

At the Old Testament feast, the riches of the good land were abundantly exhibited. Similarly, the New Testament meetings are a *spiritual* feast where, through the speaking and singing of the believers in their spirit, the riches of Christ’s person and work are displayed. The meetings should be a magnification of Christ (Phil. 1:20), an occasion where Christ is both beheld and reflected (2 Cor. 3:18), even causing unbelievers in attendance to acknowledge the presence of God (1 Cor. 14:23-25). This focus safeguards the simplicity and purity of the church meetings. In Christian worship, Christ is not merely a part; He is *all* and in *all* (Col. 3:11).

Genuine worship is in spirit and in truthfulness, drinking and eating Christ, offering Him alone to the Father, and expressing Him in fullness. While music and singing may

assist us in the expression of our enjoyment of Christ and our praise to Him, these are not, in themselves, worship. In Christian worship, Christ must be the essence of our song and our music. Music alone may move us, even to tears; it may also elevate our feelings. Yet if we are not enjoying and participating in Christ as we sing and, instead, are drawn to the vocals, music, and rhythm, we are inadvertently honoring and worshipping the creature rather than the Creator. Consider the sad plight of one author in *Worship Leader*, who describes the obligation he feels to satisfy the tastes of those whose worship he is leading:

Feeding them their favorite dish at every meal is not wise. The Lord has a long term diet plan that includes all kinds of food: celebration, consecration, repentance and intimate love songs. It is good to introduce something new, but it may take them awhile to get used to it. So their response isn't always overwhelming. On the other hand, I try to give them some of their favorite songs at every "meal." If I don't, I end up with a flock of unhappy sheep staring at me. (Park 31)

These two types of worship "diets" should now be clear: One is a feasting on Christ in His rich virtues, attributes, and attainments. The other is a feasting on the worship event itself. One thing is certain: When Christ is offered to God as the unique feast, the flock is always happy—and more importantly, God is satisfied. Genuine worship is not always according to one's preference or taste. Neither does genuine worship depend on one's spiritual gift or natural ability. It is difficult not to sympathize with one "worship leader" who bemoans what sometimes occurs during worship in spite of his gifts and talents.

Sometimes we experience 'the thrill of victory,' and sometimes we suffer 'the agony of defeat.' When the presence of God is strong, and the people are all intensely engaged in worship, there's nothing better. But when it doesn't seem to 'happen,' it's like rowing upstream." (Park 31)

Though the Lord may use our gift or ability to facilitate worship, the meeting should never be driven by our gift or dependent upon it. We risk losing the Lord's presence when worship is abused as a venue for the display of one's talents before a captive audience of "worshippers." Who then is qualified to lead Christian worship?

Genuine Worship Is Led by Christ

As the indwelling Spirit, Christ conducts the church meetings, imparting revelation and utterance to those whom He wills, in the order in which He wills. Thus, the normal Christian meeting should be characterized by an orderly spontaneity under the determinate orchestration of Christ, as the life-giving Spirit. When each member of His Body is inwardly exercised to remain in union with Him,

being gathered into His name, His promised presence is in our midst. In this way, each member contributes his portion of Christ, each adding to the whole until the living Christ is exhibited through His Body to the glory of the Father. This scriptural understanding stands in resolute contrast to entertainment services led, dominated, and orchestrated by talented church members elevated to worship-leader positions. *Worship Leader* even suggests that there is a need for a media pastor "to oversee all of the gadgets, gizmos and whatchamacallits" in order to ensure "a smooth-running church service...within our media-savvy culture" (DiSabatino 6).

In such services, while the Triune God is, at most, vaguely acknowledged as the goal, He is certainly not considered as the means to reach the goal. Yet genuine worship is nothing more or less than man's involvement with the Triune God. Romans 11:36 tells us, "Because out from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen." This simple declaration should govern our worship. The Triune God is the source; all worship should be "out from Him." The Triune God is also the course, the means. Worship should be "through Him." The Triune God is ultimately the aim, the goal; worship should be "to Him." When believers gather in simplicity, worshipping in spirit and truth, they enjoy the Triune God by spiritually eating and drinking Him. Then they express Christ by offering Him to the Father. Such worship is led by Christ in spontaneity and always with the result of bringing His lovers into the fellowship of the Triune God. Natural gift, ability, and ambition, along with all that has not passed through the cross of Christ, are summarily excluded from the sweet fellowship of genuine worship.

by Gary Evans

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