

Reforming Worship

By Michael S. Horton

Part 1 of a 6-part series on Worship

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"Surely the first foundation of righteousness is the worship of God. When this is overthrown, all the remaining parts of righteousness, like the pieces of a shattered and fallen building, are mangled and scattered.... What kind of righteousness will you call it if you do not defile your body with fornication, if with your blasphemies you profane God's most holy name? Or that you do not slay a man, if you strive to kill the remembrance of God? It is vain to cry up righteousness without religion."

When Israel was liberated from its bondage, she was taken into the protective care of her Lord and was commanded not to have any other gods. Nor were the Israelites to worship even the true God apart from his own self-revelation, according to their own imagination or whim. Rather, they were to worship him through his Word and sacraments, anticipating through them the coming of the one who would be the incarnate presence of the unseen God. Not a god of stone or gold, but of flesh and blood, Christ Jesus, the Messiah, not only saved us; he revealed to us the meaning of Scripture and, therefore, the understanding of everything we needed to know about God and his redemptive plan. One day, a Samaritan woman--of neither the right race, religion or gender for Jesus to be talking to in his day, asked him whether true worship was taking place in Jerusalem or on the mountain that her people believed was the true temple. Jesus answered her, "A day is coming and now is when people will worship God neither on this mountain or that mountain. For God is seeking people to worship him in Spirit and in truth."

But this is often a complicated business, this worship of God in Spirit and in truth. It's okay when it's all up in the clouds and theoretical, but how can we know we are worshipping God properly when we're putting together the service for next Sunday? Does God accept traditional worship or contemporary worship? Or is it both? How do we know what to put in the order of service? Should there even be an order of service or a liturgy, or does that stifle the Holy Spirit? There are so many questions these days that it is very important for us to go back to this basic subject: What does it mean to worship God properly?

The problem is, we don't often ask this question. We are interested in our own pleasure and happiness, so the biggest questions tend to be about how we can get our problems fixed. But Christianity is God-centered; in other words, God doesn't exist for our happiness, we exist for his. We were created in the beginning to worship and are redeemed to worship. But do we even know what that means? Are we too busy trying to make ourselves happy on Sunday morning instead of God, by making our decisions about the service on the basis of what the people want instead of God's own self-revelation? Israel fell into that trap again and again, and the church constantly faces this challenge in every era, and it must remind itself in every generation that its purpose is not to please men, but God.

At the time of the Reformation, the issue of worship, of course, was a very big question. Martin Luther contrasted the theology of glory with the theology of the cross. By the theology of glory, he meant that fallen human nature is always looking for a secret passage-way to the holy of holies, to see God as he really is, without any mediation. They want to be his buddy, his pal, and they aren't content to know and experience only that which he allows them to know and experience. So, they invent ladders which they climb in order to steal into his presence. Some use the ladder of merit. The churches they build are liable to

be full of hamsters on treadmills. They think that by sticking to a spiritual routine or by exercising their spiritual gifts, they can climb into God's presence, not realizing that they are simply running on a wheel that never goes anywhere. Others create a ladder of speculation. These are the folks who say, "Well, my idea of God is..." and they devise a worship that is based on their own imagination and opinion rather than the clear teaching of Scripture. But still others invent a ladder of mysticism. Luther knew all three ladders well, but this third one was especially useful to the monk. Those who climb this ladder are convinced that if they just purge themselves of their sinful thoughts, restrain their sinful passions, and simply open up their heart to God, suddenly they will be in God's presence. The mystic isn't concerned with doctrines, for these stifle the spirit. Nor is the mystic bound to the Word of God, for there again, which is more powerful, asks the mystic--a Word or an Experience? "I want to experience God directly and have a personal relationship with him," says the mystic. So upward he climbs, thinking he is climbing toward heaven, when at the end of his emotional journey all he arrives at is hell.

The only answer, therefore, is the theology of the cross. We must come to terms with the fact that God cannot be approached by sinful human beings by their own cleverness, in their own righteousness, or through their own experience. God must come to us and save and reveal. And that is precisely what he has done--not through our hunches or opinions or spiritual encounters, but through the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Statistics tell us that many of those who would be classified as "unchurched" today are not necessarily uninterested in Christianity. In fact, many stay away from church, according to George Gallup, simply because they don't think that the real purpose of the church is theological or spiritual any more. And yet, we look around and there is a sense of incredible spiritual famine in the midst of material plenty. One highly praised secular historian, Jackson Lears, suggests an explanation that many other historians and sociologists have found plausible. Says Lears, "As Calvinism softened into platitudinous humanism, Protestant Christianity in America lost the gravity provided by older, sterner creeds. Lacking spiritual ballast, bourgeois culture entered what Nietzsche had called a 'weightless' period." Lears says, "The decline of religion into sentimental religiosity further undermined a solid sense of self, leading to a weightless culture of material comfort and spiritual blandness...breeding weightless persons who longed for intense experience to give some definition, some distinct outline and substance to their vaporous lives."

That's a pretty amazing analysis, coming from a secular historian. But you know what, he's not alone. And the statistics seem to support their account. But notice what they're saying. They're saying that the Reformation faith provided a sense of meaning and purpose even for non-Christians in the culture in a way that modern life simply can't recreate through its sentimentalism.

The entertaining us-centered "worship experiences" or "celebrations," as they're called these days, may stimulate us for a while, the way watching MTV or "I Love Lucy" re-runs can kill an hour. But they can't really change us. They can't reorient our focus from ourselves to God. They can't raise our eyes toward heaven. They can't reconcile us to God, because they aren't that interested in God in the first place. Now, hear me out on this. To talk about God is not the same as taking the time to really proclaim God's attributes and work as that is unfolded through the pages of Scripture. We're interested in relationships, in families, in solving practical problems of everyday life, but we aren't interested in God. If God and his activity in Christ, through the means of Word and sacrament, are to shape our worship, then how are we to understand the church and our relation to it? Now, at first,

that sounds like some abstract, irrelevant topic for systematic theology. But I assure you it is a vital question.

You see, along with the make-it-up-as-you-go, whatever-works, mentality that permeates worship so much these days is a renegade mentality toward the church. Very often, the church is held almost in derision, as one of many institutions that just keeps Spirit-filled, charismatic, enthusiastic, creative spiritual entrepreneurs from being God's gift to humanity. How many TV preachers, for instance, have you seen strut the stage, mocking "those traditional churches out there." And yet, while those strutting peacocks fall one by one from their lofty perch, the "traditional church" out there in some town that's been there, doing its job, often with small success, is still around, standing the test of time.

We must again begin to contrast the first Great Awakening, with its God-centered, Christ-exalting preaching, and the Second Great Awakening, with its human-centered, emotional crusades. That shift not only affected the content and style of worship; it totally transformed the view of the church. Before, Christians were committed to the church in which they had been baptized and raised. Now, of course, it's difficult for us today also because of the mobility of our society: we can't always stay in one place, because of our jobs or related interests. Nevertheless, a spirit invaded the church as a result of revivalism that said, "Hey, let's follow Brother Fred around. His next crusade is the next town over," and church-hopping was born.

Today, consumerism has added to "church-hopping" a penchant for "church-shopping." It's like going to a mall. Do you see anything you like? "May I help you?", asks the clerk. "No thank you," you reply, "I'm just looking." I even get testy when the clerks interrupt my casual glances at the goods with their invitation to assist me. But that mentality is invading our attitude toward church and the things of God in general. Ministers are increasingly becoming clerks who represent an owner whose name might even be on the shop's sign and shopping bags, but who never seems to be around. And what do clerks have to do in order to get a busy and finicky shopper to actually purchase something here rather than somewhere else? They have to quickly and charmingly demonstrate to the casual browser that this sweater or that suit will be more satisfying than anything he or she could get anywhere else.

So too, today, churches are now like shopping malls. And the smaller, more traditional churches that can't afford the lights, cameras and action watch their congregations run off to the biggest, latest mall that's just been built on the outskirts of town. The problem is, you can see a mall that was built just a decade ago and it's already out-of-fashion. Its shops are closing one by one because the consumers have now moved over to the latest megamall. The way of the malls ought to be a lesson to the church today.

Standing before Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Spires in 1544, Calvin declared, "The Church doth always outlive her enemies. We will die, but in death be more than conquerors, not only because through it we shall have a sure passage to a better life, but because we know that our blood will be as seed to propagate the Divine truth which men now despise." Those rousing words seem a bit grand for us to quote today. After all, we're not being threatened with physical punishment by the Emperor and the church. But in a sense, it's even more difficult for us precisely because of that. The church is just as surely threatened today as it was at the time of the Reformation. It may not be at sword-point, but without the firing of a single shot, the church is gradually silencing itself by silencing the Word of God. It is not the emperor who is trying to extinguish the light of truth, but the church itself that is becoming like the world. It's not in danger of being slaughtered out of existence, but of becoming a worldly institution: A business, a political action lobby, an entertainment

center, a self-help center. In short, the salt is in danger of losing its savor. And you know what it's good for once it loses its flavor. As Jesus said, "It's good for nothing but to be thrown out." The lack of the church's influence in society is not due to persecution, but to the judgment of God. It is because the church is not the church and when it tries to compete with worldly institutions, it counters every criticism with the charge of religious bigotry. It's time we recovered that precious Word, which alone can return flavor to the salt, so that it can, in turn bring a richness to those who seek to be nourished by the nail-scarred hands of the Son of God.

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