

## G. THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD AND LOCAL CHURCH MATURITY

Among all of the assemblies of human beings in the world, whether they be for the purpose of government, entertainment, or religion, it is the gathering of Christians in local church fellowships that distinguishes itself, and principally because God is specially present in such meetings of His redeemed children. <sup>19</sup> So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, <sup>20</sup> having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, <sup>21</sup> in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, <sup>22</sup> in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit" (Eph. 2:19-22; cf. I Tim. 3:15). But how are such Christians to respond to this presence? How are children of God to behave before their Father in His spiritual dwelling place? First and foremost, while being involved in loving fellowship and a holy lifestyle, they are to worship God according to their knowledge of Him.

### 1. The character of God as a model of righteousness.

In Christian family relationships, it is the proper moral conformity to and proper honoring of parents by their children that establishes a home where harmony and loving order reign. The parents are seen to be genuine in the wholesome standards they maintain and not hypocrites. Hence the children, in the light of the good character or attributes of their parents, have both proper models and encouragement with integrity as they grow into this likeness. Likewise in the fellowship of a local church, there ought to be similar constraint upon the children of God as they behold both the righteous and gracious character of their Father in heaven. Indeed, Paul directs us in Ephesians 5:1, to "be imitators [μιμηταί, *mimētai*] of God as beloved children." That is, as believers comprehend that God is love and that they are loved by God, they are to mimic or model their lives according to this truth, but especially as it is embodied in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Hence, there is the fitting subsequent exhortation in Ephesians 5:2, namely, "walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us." As believers behold that God is holy, so they are to emulate their Father by means of holy behavior (I Pet. 1:15).

### 2. The character of God as the object of worship.

However, in such godly family life, there is yet something else that even transcends in importance generated and modeled likeness in the healthy growth of children. It is not enough that our sons and daughters should reflect their parents, even morally and spiritually. For beyond this is the desire that our children should spontaneously admire and adore their father and mother, yes even rightly worship or honor them. Here surely is the ultimate reward and delight for any parent. And so it is with regard to authentic children of God. For not only are they to be godly or "God-like" (Matt. 5:48; Luke 6:36; Eph. 4:32), but also, supremely they are to worship their Father in heaven who has begotten them (John 4:23-24). With such a principle in mind then,

consider the following instructive comment of A. W. Tozer with regard to this priority of worship.

The purpose of God in sending His Son to die and rise and live and be at the right hand of God the Father was that He might restore to us the missing jewel, the jewel of worship; that we might come back and learn to do again that which we were created to do in the first place—worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness, to spend our time in awesome wonder and adoration of God, feeling and expressing it, and letting it get into our labors and doing nothing except as an act of worship to Almighty God through His Son Jesus Christ. I say that the greatest tragedy in the world today is that God has made man in His image and made him to worship Him, made him to play the harp of worship before the face of God day and night, but he has failed God and dropped the harp. It lies voiceless at His feet.<sup>84</sup>

### 3. What is biblical worship?

Now while true Christian worship is essentially an internal and individual matter, yet the Bible more often describes it as a corporate response whereby believers are strengthened and encouraged in their common adoration of God. Hence, it is customary parlance for church attenders to describe their gathering as a “worship service.” But what exactly is meant by this expression? The usual Hebrew word for worship is שָׁחָה, shachah, which describes prostration or stooping in submissive adoration, while the Greek προσκυνέω, proskuneō, speaks of bowing to kiss with obeisance and reverence. The English word means acknowledgment of “worth-ship” or “worthiness” with regard to the admirable value and revered estimation of God. Hence, all in all, to worship God means to adoringly, reverently, and submissively admire what we personally, intimately know about Him, and such knowledge brings us to the necessity of a full and rich understanding of His attributes. True worship and a profound appreciation of the character of God are inseparably related, especially with regard to biblical rather than contrived worship in a local church. John MacArthur says it well:

If our worship is to be meaningful, if it is to be acceptable, we must seek to conceive of God as He has revealed Himself to us. . . . An intimate knowledge of the person of God is perhaps the greatest motivation to true, overflowing, whole-life worship. When we begin to know God as He is, our response has to be that of magnifying Him, giving Him glory for who He is and what He does for us.<sup>85</sup>

#### a. Modern evangelical worship.

With this point firmly in mind, it should not surprise us today that much so-called worship is in fact a reflection of widespread ignorance amongst professing Christians concerning the attributes of God, and that within the

<sup>84</sup> A. W. Tozer, *Worship - The Missing Jewel Of The Evangelical Church*, pp. 12-3.

<sup>85</sup> John MacArthur, Jr., *The Ultimate Priority*, pp. 35, 46.

nucleus of local church fellowship. Hence, it is this spiritual myopia which produces a blurred vision of God that has caused the body of Christ in this century to become immature and stunted rather than full-grown (Eph. 4:13). The spirit of the Samaritans has come among us, for the Son of God could, with greater justification, declare to our shameful condemnation that: "You worship that which you do not know" (John 4:22). This being true, then what is the essence of modern evangelical worship? Peter Masters perceptively suggests that the devil has artfully redirected worship away from God towards man.

The devil wants to stop humble, reverent, rational praise rising from the creature to the Creator. To achieve this he has introduced into evangelical fellowships various forms of worship which are earthly, sensual and selfish. The object of this worship is that worshipers should enjoy themselves as they thrill to music, or work up exciting emotional sensations. Some people will throw themselves into orgies of ecstasy, while others will indulge their appetite for vainglory by appointing themselves as prophets. Significantly, the new approach to worship is chiefly promoted by the healing [Charismatic] movement. The new worship is "all-for-me" worship. It is a thrill; a season of uninhibited release. It is a time when the rational part of a person may be subdued or discarded in favor of emotional escapism. This new worship is purely subjective, for it is all about *my* feelings, *my* moods, *my* health. It is not looking at God, leaning on *Him*, worshiping *Him*. If the devil can pervert true, rational worship what a wonderful triumph he scores! If he can make people subjective and petty, how pleased he will be. If he can reduce a congregation of born-again people to superficial emotionalism, mystical mutterings, trembling and weeping, experience of physical sensations, clapping and dancing and banal, repetitive singing, then he will rob God of worship and render the church offensive to Him.<sup>86</sup>

b. Evangelical worship that is biblical.

How then does a church that is weak through being bent over in man-centered navel gazing become upright, mature, and adult? Only by means of an uplifting, mind-enlarging, soul stimulating proclamation of the grandeur and blazing glory of God that snatches the attention of man away from his own mere spluttering flame.

(1) The Corinthian model.

Consider how Paul first judges the church at Corinth to be carnal and childish. <sup>1</sup> And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. <sup>2</sup> I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, <sup>3</sup> for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife

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<sup>86</sup> Peter Masters, *The Healing Epidemic*, pp. 16-7.

among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men? <sup>4</sup> For when one says, 'I am of Paul,' and another, 'I am of Apollos,' are you not mere men?" (I Cor. 3:1-4, cf. 5-9, 21-23). So he condemns that form of ministry which focuses attention on men such as Apollos, Peter, or himself. Then he redirects the Corinthian believers towards the priority of God in everything, and later offers the stern rebuke: "Become sober-minded as you ought, and stop sinning; for some have no knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame" (I Cor. 15:34). Concerning the unsettling mania with regard to charismatic gifts in this same troubled church, it is significant that Paul directs the believer, not further along an emphatically pneumatic, phenomenal path, but rather toward a balanced understanding of God's triunity. <sup>3</sup> Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, 'Jesus is accursed'; and no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit. <sup>4</sup> Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. <sup>5</sup> And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. <sup>6</sup> There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons" (I Cor. 12:3-6).

(2) The Father as the adorable Head.

The testimony of the former Charismatic spokesman, Anglican Thomas Smail, is most relevant at this juncture. While he does not repudiate this so-called renewal movement as a whole, having been deeply involved in it for many years, he does confess to becoming increasingly disenchanted and distant from it as the result of returning to a balanced understanding of the triune God. In *The Forgotten Father* he writes:

[It is] my conviction that the relationship between the divine Father and his equally divine and incarnate Son is at the very heart of the gospel. If that relationship is removed or eroded, the good news of the gospel will inevitably be obscured or destroyed. For me the central contemporary issue for Christians is not about signs and wonders but about how we shall answer the primary and crucial question of Jesus, "Who do you say that I am?" . . . The charismatic experience can most certainly rejuvenate people and churches, but how much evidence is there that it can mature them, by delivering them from their insidious self-concern and making them profitable and outward members of the body of Christ? The answer to that depends in considerable measure on how they relate to the Father. [The] doctrine, worship, fellowship and witness of the Church needs to be related equally and appropriately to the Father, the Son and the Spirit. . . . All one-sidedness in the faith or practice of the churches can be understood in Trinitarian terms as a failure to do due honor to one of the persons of the Trinity, or to realize their proper relationship to one another. There is a thirst for miracles and a disinclination to ask in whose name they are being performed, . . . and to my mind it is largely a *diversion and distraction from spiritual renewal rather than an expression of it*. In the New Testament there is

no such autonomous realm in the Spirit, which evolves from inside itself, building on its own experiences and developing its own techniques. The realm of the Spirit is entirely subordinate to that of the Father and the Son.<sup>87</sup>

This is a profoundly significant statement that should not be limited in application to the Charismatic Movement. Countless evangelical churches, that would reckon on their being doctrinally and confessionally sound, are yet blindly directed according to a distorted trinitarianism resulting in a misplaced Pneumacentricity or Christocentricity that is in fact an insult to the orphaned Father of that same Spirit and Son. This being the case, it is not surprising that contemporary worship is vague, confused, and distorted.

(3) The Jewish restoration model.

If the church of Jesus Christ is to experience genuine renewal that is productive of authentic worship, then it must return to an earnest seeking after the knowledge of God as did Israel under the direction of Ezra and Nehemiah. When the remnant that had returned from Babylon was convicted of its spiritual ignorance and lethargy, the people asked that Ezra instruct them in the Word of God, and this he did at length with great faithfulness (Neh. 8:1-8). As a result, the sons of Israel not only repented of their torpor, but also continued to thirst for the truth of God, so that, "they read from the book of the law of the LORD their God for a fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God" (Neh. 9:3). In other words, three hours of confession and worship freely flowed forth after three hours of expository teaching! And what so permeated this ministry, presumably of Levites under Ezra (Neh. 9:5-38), as we have already seen in pages 436-438, was a graphic portrayal of the perfections and great glory of God as reflected in the history of Israel.

Should we be surprised then today if evangelical churches are so bereft of true worship when they hear so little about the triune God of the Bible? And what shall we say to comfort those passionately faithful preachers who proclaim the attributes of God with power and application, when their congregations rise up in opposition under the pretext that they are not interested in theology? Might we not more realistically conclude that such people are not seriously interested in God?

c. Evangelical worship that is intelligent.

The truth is that the worship of God is fundamentally a matter of the mind involving our intelligence rather than our emotions. Undoubtedly there ought to

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<sup>87</sup> Thomas A. Smail, *The Forgotten Father*, pp. 9-10, 24-6.

be fervent, intense emotional response in worship, but it is nevertheless a response to the truth about God, and that means the knowledge concerning who He is. We might say that true worship is certainly visceral because it is firstly cerebral! This principle is nowhere better illustrated than in the Book of Psalms where a superficial appraisal might suggest the preeminence of emotion over doctrine. Such a misguided assessment is easily discarded when it is understood that the doctrine of sin, especially concerning its thorough pollution of man, is nowhere better upheld than by means of Paul's quotation of at least five portions of the Psalms in Romans 3:10-18. However, consider Sinclair Ferguson's comments in this respect with regard to Psalm 92.

The *basis of worship* in these words is obvious. The worship of the psalmist is the direct consequence of the God-centeredness of his heart and life. His lips make music and are full of praise (verse 1). But notice that he is not interested in the music for its own sake, nor even because of its influence on his emotions, beneficial though they may be. No! What dominates his thinking is that his praise is directed *to the Lord*, and his music is made "*to your name, O Most High.*" That is the difference between going to a service "for worship" and going to a service "to worship the Lord." The distinction appears to be a minor one, but it may imply the difference between the worship of God and the worship of music! The foundation of worship in the heart, therefore, is not *emotional* ("I feel full of worship" or "The atmosphere is so worshipful"). Actually, it is *theological*. Worship is not something we "work up", it is something that "comes down" to us, from the character of God.<sup>88</sup>

#### 4. The character of God as the stimulus to worship.

Hence, if local church worship is to be God-centered, then it is the pastoral responsibility of the elders to be careful in maintaining true worship services where the perfections of God radiate forth from the various ministries, not in a contrived way, but as a result of the elders themselves being, in the best sense of that term, men of God. They particularly focus on God-centered worship with regard to:

- a. The preaching and teaching of the Word of God. The congregation is effected by a sense of the glory and presence of God, not the persona of the preacher.
- b. Prayer, both corporate and individual. The predominant interest is the name, kingdom, and holy will of God, not a grocery list of human needs.
- c. Congregational singing. The biblical truth, complementing the preaching, is sung with emotional agreement and accompaniment that does not dominate.

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<sup>88</sup> Sinclair Ferguson, *A Heart For God*, pp. 109-10.

- d. The administration of the ordinances. Baptism and the Lord's table provide initial and ongoing acknowledgment of what God has savingly done.
- e. Evangelistic outreach by means of the spoken word or printed page. Holy means are employed to accomplish a holy end, the glory of God, not man.

In other words, if God exhorts His children, "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (I Pet. 1:15), then it is incumbent upon the church leadership for the holiness of God to be evident in both demeanor and doctrine. Only then will the congregation be stimulated to sing as they ought. Anglican vicar and hymn writer John Monsell declared, no doubt decrying formal restraint, that "we are too distant and reserved in our praises, we sing not as we should sing to Him and of Him who is chief among ten thousand, the altogether lovely. [Of his ministry it was said that his] Guildford Rectory was 'an ideal household, full of the beauty of holiness, with genial brightness and gaiety playing like sunshine over all the troubles of life.'"<sup>89</sup> So he wrote of that which he embodied.

O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness!  
 Bow down before Him, His glory proclaim;  
 With gold of obedience, and incense of lowliness,  
 Kneel and adore Him: the Lord is His Name!

Low at His feet lay thy burden of carefulness,  
 High on His heart He will bear it for thee,  
 And comfort thy sorrows, and answer thy prayerfulness,  
 Guiding thy steps as may best for thee be.

Fear not to enter His courts in the slenderness  
 Of the poor wealth thou wouldst reckon as thine;  
 For truth in its beauty, and love in its tenderness,  
 These are the offerings to lay on His shrine.

These, though we bring them in trembling and fearfulness,  
 He will accept for the Name that is dear;  
 Mornings of joy give for evenings of tearfulness,  
 Trust for our trembling and hope for our fear.

O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness!  
 Bow down before Him, His glory proclaim;  
 With gold of obedience, and incense of lowliness,  
 Kneel and adore Him: the Lord is His Name!

*John Monsell*

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<sup>89</sup> John Telford, *The Methodist Hymn-Book Illustrated*, p. 11.