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Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever.

Worship, therefore, is the fuel and goal in missions. It's the goal of missions because in missions we simply aim to bring the nations into the white-hot enjoyment of God's glory. The goal of missions is the gladness of the peoples in the greatness of God. "The Lord reigns; let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad!" (Psalm 97:1). "Let the peoples praise Thee, O God; let all the peoples praise Thee! Let the nations be glad and sing for joy!" (Psalm 67:3-4).

But worship is also the fuel of missions. Passion for God in worship precedes the offer of God in preaching. You can't commend what you don't cherish.

JOHN PIPER, *LET THE NATIONS BE GLAD* (GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN: BAKER, 1993), 11.

Now at first sight to speak with unknown tongues and to sing anthems which are beyond the musical capacity of the people would seem to be very much the same kind of thing. It looks as if we ought to extend to the one the embargo which St. Paul places on the other. And this would lead to the forbidding conclusion that no Church Music is legitimate except that which suits the existing taste of the people.

C. S. LEWIS, "ON CHURCH MUSIC" IN *CHRISTIAN REFLECTIONS* (GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN: EERDMANS, 1967), 94.

WORSHIP AND THE GLORY OF GOD

Ren Man

When I was in college studying music, I worked for a while in the choral department of a large music store. The manager of the department was as secular and ungodly a man as they come, yet he was an expert on sacred choral music. I didn't think much about it at the time, because I wasn't a Christian then. But on thinking back on it years later, I realized how sad that was.

I have seen others as well for whom sacred music was merely an area of specialization, a field of expertise in which their interest was merely academic or aesthetic—talk about missing the forest for the trees! If I may reverently paraphrase the apostle Paul: "If we have focused on sacred music in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied!"

Two years ago I attended an excellent one-day seminar on choral vocal technique sponsored by a well-known music school. It quickly became apparent, however, that perhaps the overriding value of that teacher and that institution was the production of beautiful, pure vowel sounds—that regardless of whether the literature was secular or sacred, the ultimate goal was to achieve vowels of true excellence. And I thought, how tragic—this is really what they live and work for! They groom the trees so carefully and never step back and see the forest in all its grandeur.

But, before we get too smug, let us admit that it is all too easy for Christians to get caught up in the details and

logistics of what happens in our church services and forget about what should be the true focus of our endeavor—not in the absolute sense that those I have mentioned above have done, but nevertheless it can be a very real problem for us.

Let us reflect on the immensity and grandeur of worship, and consider the centrality of worship to all of life and to all that we are and do as Christians.

JOHN PIPER ON WORSHIP

A turning point in my understanding of worship came when the missions pastor of our church showed me the introductory sentences of a book on missions, titled *Let the Nations Be Glad*, by Dr. John Piper, pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis. This was simply not your usual introduction to a book on missions. It emphasized the secondary importance of missions, it claiming that it is the second most important activity of the church. That's not how one would normally seek to convince one's readers of the importance of the subject at hand: talking about how it is of secondary importance!

This is what Piper wrote—three sentences which have revolutionary implications for how we understand worship: "Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't."¹

Far from putting down missions, Piper is holding forth the supreme importance of worship—now and for eternity. This is how he goes on to develop this idea:

Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever.²

Worship, Piper says, is the ultimate goal of the church; in fact he says that "all of history is moving toward one great goal, the white-hot worship of God and his Son among all the peoples of the earth."³

Piper is not alone in this assessment of the importance of worship. Many others have come to similar conclusions on the basis of their examination of Scripture. For example, Dr. John MacArthur has written a book on worship, and in his foreword he relates how he was far into his ministry before God taught him to appreciate the centrality of worship. His book is titled, significantly, *The Ultimate Priority*.⁴

THE CHIEF END OF GOD⁵

We want to try to understand the enormous significance which these men, and many others, attribute to worship. To do that, we need to step back even more and try to take in what the Scriptures say about the primary goal, not of the church, but of God himself.

Piper, drawing on the insights of Jonathan Edwards, develops and demonstrates from Scripture that God's overriding purpose and priority is *the display and furtherance of his own glory*.

Now "the glory of God" is one of those theological catchphrases which the mind of man can consider. God's glory speaks of his utter and absolute holiness, his magnificent splendor, the perfections of his character. "God is light; and in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). "His name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven" (Psalm 148:13). "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isaiah 6:3).

His glory is absolute and unique; therefore he declares in Isaiah 42:8: "I am the Lord, this is my name; my glory I give to no other."

God pursues his own glory tirelessly throughout biblical history.⁶

"Bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth—everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made" (Isaiah 43:6-7). (He created us for his glory.)

"You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified" (Isaiah 49:3). (He established Israel for his own glory.)

"And the Word became flesh, and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a Father's only son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

"The light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6). (The glory of God is seen in Christ.)

"In him, you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory" (Ephesians 1:13-14). (The purpose of salvation is to magnify his glory.)

"Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples" (1 Chronicles 16:24). (God's glory is the centerpoint of the missionary mandate.)

"I am coming to gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come and shall see my glory" (Isaiah 66:18). (The climax of history is the glory of God.)

"So that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:10-11). (The purpose of summing up all things in Christ is to glorify God.)

"And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb" (Revelation 21:23). (The essence of heaven is the glory of God.)

"Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. Blessed is his glorious name forever; may his glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen" (Psalm 72:18-19). (The purpose of creation is to display God's glory throughout.)

The astounding fact is that everything that is, and everything that happens, has as its ultimate goal and end the glory of God. God in his power and sovereignty created the universe so that his glory might be displayed (might be "clearly seen," as Paul puts it in Romans 1:20). Psalm 19:1 puts it this way: "The heavens are telling of the glory of God." God made man in his own image, and though man rebelled and sinned, he provided a way for his own glory and love and justice to be vindicated through the work of Christ. Even his righteous judgment of the lost will demonstrate the infinite value of the glory of God, by showing "the infiniteness of the sin of failing to glorify God."⁷

Piper also says: "The biblical vision of God is that he is supremely committed, with infinite passion, to uphold and display the glory of His name."⁸ Now, we are conditioned to consider that anyone who pursues always and only his own glory is rather self-centered. But that's because we sinners choose to glorify ourselves rather than God, who is infinitely greater (cf. Romans 3: 23: "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"). But, as Piper points out, for God there is nothing greater than himself to seek to glorify. In his perfection he seeks the greatest good for himself and for his creatures, and that greatest good is simply *God himself* and *his glory!*

Familiar is the *Westminster Shorter Catechism's* statement that "the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." The astonishing fact is that the chief end of God is also to glorify God!⁹ There is no greater thing for God to glorify. He, and he alone is worthy of all glory. Amen!

So the glory of God is really the greatest of all subjects, and is indeed the *subject* and the *motivation* and the *goal* of worship.

THE CHIEF END OF MAN

God has an inexhaustible passion for his glory, and by application that's what godliness must involve for men and women: we must come to share his passion for the glory of God; we must learn to cherish God's glory. And to cherish God's glory is what it means to worship. Worship is expressed in many different ways, but in its broadest understanding it comes down to cherishing the glory of God.

To go back to the Westminster statement: the chief end of man—as well as of God—is to glorify God and enjoy him forever (those are really two sides of the same coin) and ultimately that is a statement about worship.

Let us consider briefly three New Testament passages which demonstrate—in quite different ways—the utter centrality of worship as mankind's highest goal and reason for existence.

Romans 1. In Romans 1 Paul deals with the issue from the negative side as he describes the fate of fallen man because of his rejection of God.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal

human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen (Romans 1:18-25).

Now of course Paul, in these early chapters of Romans, is portraying sin in all its blackness so that the light of the gospel might shine all the more brightly in contrast as he expounds its beginning in chapter 3. But he has also already hinted at the glories to come in 1:16-17, where he speaks of the gospel being “the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.”

That salvation through faith in the power of the gospel will in effect reverse the downward spiral of sin which Paul describes in chapters 1 and 2. Looking again at Paul's words indicting fallen humanity, we can paraphrase them and see something of God's purposes in redeeming and restoring lost men and women:

For the grace of God is revealed from heaven to fallen and sinful men who have accepted the truth of the gospel, to those whom God has drawn to himself. For now not only is the power and the majesty of God evident through what has been made, but he has also revealed his love, mercy, compassion and grace through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ his Son, so that men may be saved.

And now they not only know God, but they also honor him as God and give thanks, their minds filled with thoughts of him and their hearts filled with devotion to him.

Acknowledging themselves to be fools, they became wise, and exchanged images and false objects of worship for the glory of the incorruptible God.

Therefore God indwelt their renewed hearts with his Spirit unto purity, so that they might present their bodies as

living and holy sacrifices unto him. For they exchanged a lie for the truth of God, and now worship and serve the Creator rather than the creature, to the glory of his name. Amen. (Paraphrase of Romans 1:18-25.)

This grand reversal effected through the redeeming work of Christ brings forth worship in the lives of those who find new life in him. The foundation of sin is the failure, actually the refusal, to worship God and give him the honor and thanks he is due; it's a refusal to glorify him. But as the culmination of his saving work he returns believing people to an attitude and lifestyle of worship.

God intended for the revelation of his glory in creation and in redemption to issue forth in a response of worship on the part of those enabled by grace to do so.

Revelation 5. Let us now make a rather drastic shift from Paul's dark picture in Romans to the glory of the throne room of heaven in Revelation 5. Here we see another picture of the centrality of worship.

(By the way, these scenes of heavenly worship in Revelation 4 and 5 are not just instructive for us; in a very real way we have the privilege in corporate worship in the church in joining our hearts and our voices with that of the heavenly host, taking part in their worship—we have that right and that privilege because, as Paul tells us in Philippians 3:20, "our citizenship is in heaven"—we are citizens of heaven, and enjoy the rights and privileges of that citizenship even while we are sojourners and aliens living in a strange land.)

Here is the scene in heaven which the apostle John portrays for us in Revelation 5: God the Father on the throne, along with the Lamb, in the center; the four living creatures around them, then the twenty-four elders, outside of them "myriads and myriads of angels," and then every created thing in the heavens, on the earth, under the earth, on the sea—all saying: "To the one seated on the throne and to the

Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" (Revelation 5:13). And then we read: "And the four living creatures said, 'Amen.' And the elders fell down and worshiped" (5:14).

In this grand scene of worship the centerpoint is of course God the Father and his Son—everything else gathers around, and fans out from, that centerpoint. But the focus is of course inward, the focus is on that center; the exclamation of that entire throng is that God is worthy of blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever.

Worship is the business of heaven, the preoccupation of heaven, we might almost say the obsession of heaven: all its inhabitants focus on God and proclaim his supreme value and worth and glory. All is focused on worship. And, as citizens of heaven, that should be our focus as well.

In heaven there is no other focus, there are no side conversations or announcements or interruptions of any kind. As Piper reminds us, there is certainly no missions either—only worship! All attention is on God, all glory is given to him. He alone is worthy of that worship—he is the Creator (as Revelation 4:11 emphasizes); everything else which is gathered around has been created. He is the uncaused cause, the self-existent one; all others are dependent on him for their very existence. They recognize his unique worth and majesty and splendor and so heap their praises on him and on him alone. Amen!

John 4. Now we reluctantly set our feet back on the earth, and move to John 4, where we see Jesus in conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. From the lips of Jesus himself we hear what God most wants from his creatures: the Father seeks worshipers—those who will worship him in spirit and in truth.

The Samaritans apparently had a certain degree of enthusiasm and devotion in their worship on Mount Gerizim—but Jesus said they were worshipping what they did

not know (v.22). The Jews, on the other hand, worshiped according to God's revealed truth (Jesus says in v.22, "Salvation is from the Jews"), but for the most part it had become a cold, lifeless ritual. Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that "the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem" (v.21), but rather "the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (v.23)—true worship will no longer be tied to a place, but rather to the attitude of the heart and the understanding of the truth. And both these aspects must be present in order for true worship to take place, for Jesus said: "those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (v.24). Worship must be genuine and from the heart (worship in spirit) and must be in accordance with God's ultimate self-revelation and self-giving in Jesus Christ (worship in truth). This is the worship the Father seeks; these are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. As we saw in Romans 1, these will be those who have drunk deeply of God's grace and who respond with grateful hearts to exalt his name and his glory.

Nowhere else does the Bible speak of God seeking anything from man—he seeks worshipers. That is an amazing thought! In his glorious condescension he has made us and sought us and redeemed us that we might glorify him and enjoy him forever—in worship.

This is true "seeker" worship, if you will: *the Father seeks worshipers*, those who will worship him in spirit and truth. All worship is a response to his gracious initiative. That is a crucial point: worship is our gift to God—the only thing he seeks from those to whom he has given everything—but we must always realize that the idea of worship, the inclination to worship, the desire for worship, and the ability to worship come only as a result of God's gift to us: his saving initiative in our lives and the enabling work of the Holy Spirit.

So we see in Romans 1 the appropriate response of redeemed and renewed humanity to the greatness and glory of God: to honor him and give him thanks, to worship the Creator.

In Revelation 5 we see God in his glory as the central focus of all the created order, and we see worship as the fitting preoccupation of all citizens of heaven.

In John 4 we see what God seeks from us whom he has made: our worship.

The chief end of God is to glorify God—to manifest and display his perfections and his glory.

The chief end of man is likewise to glorify God, through worship. Worship is mankind's highest goal and loftiest endeavor. He was created for that above all else.

THE CHIEF END OF THE CHURCH

That is a rather breathtaking panorama which Scripture lays out for us. But we need to take a deep breath and move on to talk about the church.

For not only is the chief end of God to glorify God, and the chief end of man to glorify God in worship—but likewise the chief end of the church is to glorify God through worship.

The Great Commission. Many churches hold that the mission of the church is found in the Great Commission, as Jesus' words to his disciples recorded in Matthew 28:19-20 are called, where he said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." Such churches rightly see that the Commission not only includes the work of evangelizing the lost, but also of discipling believers and teaching them to obey the commands of Christ. This understanding of the church's ultimate purpose and reason for existence is reflected in many of these

churches' mission statements, such as these examples of actual such statements:

1) "Our Mission: To cause God great joy by sharing his love with others as we have seen it in Jesus Christ."

2) "Our Mission: Developing fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ."

3) "[First Church] exists in order that we may glorify the Lord God through the means he has established in his Word: Evangelism (introducing people to Jesus Christ) and Edification (building believers to maturity in Jesus Christ)."

4) "For God's glory, [Second Church] is committed to developing disciples in our area and throughout the world so that in all things Christ might have the preeminence."

5) "To the glory of God: to win, build, and equip disciples of our Lord Jesus through loving, Bible-centered ministry at home and abroad."

Several of these statements do express a desire to do all that they do for the glory of God. But the means are left at evangelism and edification, which by their very nature are man-focused in nature. Are the evangelization of the world and the edification of the saints the ultimate expressions of God's purposes in creating us and saving us and calling us into his service? Does the Great Commission encompass all which we are to be about as a body of believers? Surely not, in light of some of the themes we have been talking about.

The Great Commandment. And surely not even in light of Jesus' own words. He says in the Great Commission that we are to learn to obey all that he commanded. And elsewhere he makes very clear what the most important command of all is. It is so reminiscent of things we have seen already:

One of the scribes . . . asked Him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel! the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord

your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength'" (Mark 12:28-30).

The Great Commandment tells us that, above all else, we are to love God with all our being. Our primary responsibility is not service or even obedience. We are to be first and foremost lovers of God—people who glorify him and enjoy him forever, and express that love through a life and lifestyle of worship. The connection is obvious: if God made us primarily to worship and glorify him, and if the primary thing he requires of us is our love—then we must be talking about essentially the same thing. Worship, therefore, is loving God with all our being, and cherishing his glory.

God is seeking worshipers. Not evangelists, not disciples, not missionaries, but worshipers—lovers of God who base their whole existence in exalting him in all their endeavors.

The Relationship between the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. Notice the purely vertical focus of the Great Commandment: "Love the Lord your God," period. Not show your commitment to God by doing this, that, and the other. The Great Commandment speaks of worship in that it is purely vertical in its focus; that utter God-centeredness reflects what we have already seen about how ultimately all that we do should point toward God and his glory.

The Great Commission, on the other hand, by definition involves activities that are more horizontal, man-focused in nature (namely, evangelism and discipleship). The fact of the matter is that the Great Commission grows out of and is built on the foundation of the Great Commandment and the second greatest commandment, which Jesus explains in Mark 12: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (v. 31).

The Great Commission grows out of the interworking

of these first and second greatest commandments, to love God and to love our neighbor. If we truly love God, we will follow through with the love of neighbor which he commands and enables, and the greatest love we can show to our neighbor is to help him become a lover of God, a worshiper, in his own right.

Even in Matthew 28 we find worship undergirding the Great Commission: "The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them." When they saw him, they *worshiped him*" (28:16).

Then the Great Commission itself begins with a vertical focus: "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . .'" (vv. 18-19).

We see that the context of the Great Commission is worship (28:16), and its foundation is the authority of Jesus Christ (28:18). Our outreach and discipleship must flow out of an appreciation for the glory of God and out of a heart which is full of worship—otherwise, as Piper points out, "You can't commend what you don't cherish."¹⁰ And our outreach and discipling must lead ultimately to more worship being offered up for God's own pleasure. (It should also be said that a church that genuinely worships will reach out—for if the people do not grow to share God's heart for the lost, we may legitimately question how close they have really come to him in worship!)

A Proper Emphasis and Balance. While the church mission statements mentioned earlier are strong on the Great Commission and are rightly concerned with the glory of God, they are woefully lacking when it comes to acknowledging worship as the primary and ultimate focus of the church. Here are some mission statements which come closer to giving worship its proper due:

1) "As a local expression of the universal body of Christ, we desire to corporately love God with all our being

by worshiping him and loving others through relevant ministry both locally and around the world."

2) "[Third Church] exists for the purpose of: magnifying Jesus through worship and the Word; making Jesus known to our neighbors and the nations; and moving believers in Jesus toward maturity and ministry."

3) "The priorities of ministry of this church flow from the vision of God's glory revealed in Jesus Christ. We exist to savor this vision in worship (John 4:23), strengthen the vision in nurture and education (1 Corinthians 14:26; 2 Peter 3:18), and spread the vision in evangelism, missions, and loving deeds (1 Peter 2:9; 3:15, 5:16; Matthew 28:18-20)."

4) "The Mission of [Fourth Church] is to glorify God through joyful worship, to show God's love to all people, to lead them to faith in Jesus Christ, to make them his disciples, and to call them to his service."

These statements put worship in its proper place: first. And I believe thereby God is honored, because it is clear that when we are putting worship first, we are in fact putting him first.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH

What does this perspective then mean for the ministry of the church? How does it all fit together?

An End in Itself. To quote Piper once more: "Of all the activities in the church, only one is an end in itself: worship."¹¹ As we have seen, there is no higher activity than worship for created beings. Worship is not a means to anything else. We don't primarily worship at church to grow our numbers, to make people feel better about themselves, even to teach believers or evangelize the lost. We worship to actively cherish and savor the glory of God, and when we do that, we've arrived at the purpose of our existence.

And, if worship is the highest goal, then other Christian activities should serve as means to that all-encompassing goal. In fact, they must serve as this if they are to be honoring to God and in line with his purposes.

The Means to the End. So, as Piper puts it, "Missions exists because worship doesn't." But not only that: Sunday school exists because worship doesn't—not to the fullest extent possible. Youth groups exist because worship doesn't. Evangelism teams exist because worship doesn't. Small groups exist because worship doesn't. Discipleship programs exist because worship doesn't. Preaching exists because worship doesn't. The ultimate goal of all these activities is to build more and better worshipers, to the glory of God! Evangelism activities to win more worshipers, and edification activities to build better ones. Only worship is purely vertical in its focus; all these other ministries necessarily focus on people. But our goal in working with people is to point them toward God, toward worship!

All Roads Lead to Worship. But again, this is not special pleading for the inherent superiority of the worship department of the church. Quite the opposite—rather it means that every pastor should have worship as the goal of his ministry! The pastor of worship and music should perhaps be called something like "pastor of corporate praise," in order not to confuse things, because not only his goal is the worship of God's people, but every staff person's goal! The children's and youth pastors have the ministry of developing young people into worshipers; adult ministries pastors should seek to teach adults to prize God and his glory above all things, and to worship him above all other pursuits; the pastors in charge of missions and evangelism have the ministry of seeking to multiply worshipers for God; the preaching pastor has the responsibility of publicly cherishing the glory of God and expounding it and inviting others to share in the wonder of wholehearted, and whole-life, worship.

Every pastor, every staff member, everyone in ministry should have an ultimate vertical purpose to his or her ministry: a purpose of seeking to reflect and demonstrate and display the glory of God in the lives of people; a purpose of building into others (as they seek to also build into their own lives) a preoccupation with God, a loving of him with all the soul, heart, mind, and strength; a cherishing of him and his glory in lives of worship.

That kind of purpose should be conscious and explicit for everyone involved in ministry, regardless of what that ministry may look like in its particulars. All of ministry, as well as all of life—as we have seen—must have that overriding, single-minded purpose if we are to be what we have been created and redeemed to be.

Ministry is the work of seeking, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to build more and better worshipers of God.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Having sought to take in something of the broader horizons of worship as it relates to the glory of God, let us consider a few applications.

Reordering Our Priorities. The first has to do with the pettiness of many of our squabbles over matters of taste and style in worship. The so-called "worship wars" are a scandal and a travesty to the body of Christ!

If God is looking above all else for faces turned heavenward toward him in adoration and worship, how it must grieve him when instead he sees us facing off against one another in our provincialism, our territorialism, and our narrow-mindedness. We acknowledge that worship is primarily for God; but then we assume that our particular taste in music just happens to exactly coincide with God's taste in music!

The unity of the body of Christ is such a precious thing (see Ephesians 4:1-6); yet today issues of worship and

music in the church are causing more disunity in the body than anything else! If there is anywhere that the unity of the body needs to be lived out in the life of a local congregation, it is in corporate worship. How is God's glory served by disharmony among his children? How can we bring a sacrifice of praise to God with our hands defiled from mudslinging? How can we love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and still worry like Martha of Bethany about so many little things?

If worship is our highest calling and our ultimate response to God's work in our lives, then it should overshadow all earthly and human considerations as we find ourselves "lost in wonder, love, and praise," as Charles Wesley put it. And the trivial matters on which we expend so much energy should pale in significance as we bask in the warmth of God's splendor and beauty.

We must earnestly seek the Lord in a dry and weary land where there is no water, to see his power and his glory (Psalm 63:1-2). And we must invite our people to join us in that journey, to thirst and yearn for him as well, to drink deeply of his glory and be satisfied. Only a grander vision of God will overcome our nearsightedness, and cause worship wars to cease.

Growing As Worshipers. Worship is a prerequisite of and the fuel for missions, Piper points out, because "you can't commend what you don't cherish."¹² If we want to be about the work of ministry, which is to build more and better worshipers for God's glory, we must of course be worshipers ourselves.

And if congregations are going to assemble for meaningful times of corporate worship, our people must first become worshipers themselves, and come together on Sundays out of a week of worshiping and walking with God, which in turn must grow out of a heart which seeks God in this way. C. S. Lewis wrote about the intensity of the desire,

even appetite, for God, which one finds expressed in the Psalms. David and the other Psalmists spoke of thirsting for God, hungering for him, yearning for him. They said things like, "For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere" (Psalm 84:10), and "Whom have I in heaven but you?" (Psalm 73:25). We need to cultivate, or ask God to give us, that kind of appetite for God.

It is not a given. How easily we allow busyness for God to supplant an intimate walk with God, and then go through public motions that have no private power supply. As Eric Alexander has expressed it: "It is a mark of a spiritual barrenness in the church when Christians come to worship to fulfill a duty rather than to satisfy an appetite."¹³

The New Testament teaching is that all of life is to be a response of worship to God. Paul wrote in Romans 12:1: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God [harking back to all of the tremendous truths about salvation which Paul has dealt with in chapters 1-11], to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual [or "fitting"] worship."

Our appropriate response to becoming recipients of the "mercies of God" and of the "riches of his grace" (Ephesians 1:7) is to regularly offer ourselves to him as an act of love and worship. The soul that has tasted and seen that the Lord is good, and has learned to cherish his glory, will be ready to present himself in this way.

Worshipping Together. In the children's story *Stone Soup*,¹⁴ three soldiers are returning home from the war. They approach a village, but the villagers, seeing them coming, scurry to hide all their food, because there is a shortage and they do not want to have to share with outsiders. They tell the soldiers that they have no food to give them.

The soldiers, being rather shrewd fellows, tell the villagers that they will make some stone soup, and ask simply for a large kettle filled with water. They choose several

large, round stones and add them to the kettle, with the curious villagers looking on. Then the soldiers remark, "This soup should be excellent; but if we only had a couple of potatoes, it would be even better." One of the villagers says, "I think I might have a few to spare," and goes off to retrieve some potatoes from her stash. The soldiers add these to the pot, taste the soup, and say: "Wonderful! Now if we just had a few carrots . . ." and someone runs off and gets some. The same happens with onions, and cabbage, and so forth, until a hearty soup has been prepared. The soldiers invite the villagers to join with them in their feast, and the villagers are amazed that such a marvelous soup could be made with just stones!

In our corporate worship, our rituals, hymns, anthems, even our sermons are like those stones—they are nothing that particularly impresses God: they're just a framework, a skeleton.

What makes it special and makes it worship is when our members come and add to the pot from what's been stored up in their hearts during a week of worshiping and walking with God, a week of loving God and cherishing and savoring his glory—then we are ready to worship God together. When our corporate adoration is the overflow of many hearts rejoicing in the goodness and greatness of God, which the Spirit can then energize and transform into something far more than the sum of the parts—then our congregational worship will truly be a nourishing and invigorating feast for the people of God, and—more importantly—a fragrant aroma to the God of glory, who delights in the worship of his people.

Author

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Notes

1. John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 11.
2. *Let the Nations*, 11.
3. *Let the Nations*, 15.
4. Chicago: Moody, 1983.
5. *Let the Nations*, 16.
6. Most of these references are cited by Piper, *Let the Nations*, 17-21.
7. *Let the Nations*, 22.
8. *Let the Nations*, 22-23.
9. *Let the Nations*, 16.
10. *Let the Nations*, 11.
11. From "Worship Is an End in Itself," a sermon transcript.
12. *Let the Nations*, 11.
13. From taped sermon on Psalm 63 titled "Thirsting for God" (Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology, 1994).
14. Marcia Brown, *Stone Soup* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947).

It is by its worship that the Church lives, it is there that its heart beats. And in fact the life of the Church pulsates like the heart by systole and diastole. As the heart is for the animal body, so the cult is for church life a pump which sends into circulation and draws in again, it claims and it sanctifies. It is from the life of worship— from the Mass— that the Church spreads itself abroad into the world to mingle with it like leaven in the dough, to give it savour like salt, to irradiate like light, and it is towards the cult— towards the Eucharist— that the Church returns from the world like a fisherman gathering up his nets or a farmer harvesting his grain. The only parochial activities which have any real justification are those which spring from worship and in their turn nourish it.

J. J. VON ALLMEN, *WORSHIP: ITS THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE* (NEW YORK: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1965), 55-56.

Every complaint about worship music, no matter which style, claims to be rooted in theological principles. Yet in every critique, the theology aligns perfectly with the critic's own musical taste.

MICHAEL S. HAMILTON

We refuse to accept as scriptural a simple dichotomy between praise and preaching. Frankly we do not see how any gospel preacher with a heart in him can refrain from praising God as an integral part of his preaching. That need not mean that praise is always the explicit focus of preaching discourse. But neither is praise always the explicit focus of the Psalter itself. In a sense praise is its final purpose, even as praise (the glory of God) is the final purpose of preaching . . . But song is also for confession (Psalm 51), petition (Psalm 22), teaching (Psalm 1; 119), and counseling (Psalm 32:8; 34:11ff).

VERN S. POYTHRESS, "EZRA 3, UNION WITH CHRIST, AND EXCLUSIVE PSALMODY," *WESTMINSTER THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL* (1975), 37:1: 74-94; 218-35).

The Church is the Church in her worship. Worship is not an optional extra, but is of the very life and essence of the Church. Nor is it a false groveling in the dust of the religiously minded. Man is never more truly man than when he worships God. He rises to all the heights of human dignity when he worships God, and all God's purposes in Creation and in Redemption are fulfilled in us as together in worship we are renewed in and through Christ, and in the name of Christ we glorify God. So by the grace of God we seek to voice for all creatures the praises of God and realize our God-given destiny to be the priests of creation under Christ our Great High Priest.

JAMES B. TORRANCE, "THE PLACE OF JESUS CHRIST IN WORSHIP" IN *THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR MINISTRY*, RAY S. ANDERSON, ED. (GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN: EERDMANS, 1979), 363.