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I can safely say, on the authority of all that is revealed in the Word of God, that any man or woman on this earth who is bored or turned off by worship is not ready for heaven.

W. TOZER

I will . . . honor the king. . . . But God . . . I worship.

THEOPHILUS OF ANTIOCH
TO AUTOLYCUS

The worldly religious have contrived for themselves a worship that calls for no humiliation before God, and no complete surrender of heart and will to him.

MARCUS DODS

To worship God in truth is to worship him as he commands.

R. C. SPROUL

Soul worship is the soul of worship, and if you take away the soul from worship you have killed the worship.

C. H. SPURGEON

Worship is the highest moral act.

JOHN PIPER

SEEKING BALANCE IN WORSHIP

Eric E. Wright

In a cartoon, worshipers are greeted as they enter a church with a question concerning the section where they would like to sit, "Clapping or non-clapping?" The cartoon captures one of the differences that polarize Christians today. Some demand exuberant praise while others lobby for sedate singing. Love for the "old hymns of the faith" vies with a yearning for the latest choruses.

Variations on this theme have been with us through the centuries. After all, differing approaches to worship energized the formation of many of our denominations. Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Baptist, and Pentecostal churches have crystallized particular views about worship into fixed traditions.

Can Christians from differing backgrounds find common ground? Can we strike a balance even within our own local church between the "traditionalists" and the "innovators"? Are there biblical principles the Holy Spirit can use to lead us to put down our "arms" and join hands in exalted worship of the one true God?

Yes, I believe there are common principles that bind us together—principles that God can use to help us strike a balance in our local worship—and enable us to reach out more lovingly to believers in other denominations.

Balance, of course, cannot be found until we return to worship—as worship. Worship is not entertainment, per se, although true worship ought to be enlivening. Worship is

not a product we peddle to attract people to church, although nothing is so attractive as genuine worship. Nor is worship something we go to church to get—consummate consumers that we are.

Worship is an offering we bring to God in response to who he is and what he does. The Psalmist cries, "Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; bring an offering and come into his courts. Worship the Lord in holy splendor" (Psalm 96:8,9a). Worship is not necessarily what we get nor what we enjoy, but what we give to God. As our joy in the Lord overflows we respond to him by bringing a multiplicity of offerings.

VARIETIES OF OFFERINGS WE BRING TO GOD IN WORSHIP

Praise. The infinite worthship of our Triune God woos us to happily bring offerings of praise. "Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name" (Hebrews 13:15). The God-centered heart, like a magnet, sweeps through the dross of our days and picks out the heavenly blessings God has strewn on our pathway. The result? We "give thanks to the Lord for he is good" (Psalm 136:1).

Testimony. Besides praising God for his recognized providence and grace we will want to speak to one another about what God has done in our lives. "Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, those he hath redeemed from the hand of the enemy" (Psalm 107:2, κiv). In our small groups and congregational meetings we rise to bear testimony in the midst of the congregation about God's dealings with us.

Preaching. The praise portions of Scripture are interlaced with a recognition of the foundational place preaching plays in worship. David cries, "I will proclaim your great deeds." God, who has "exalted his word above his own name," will not long tolerate the devaluing of preach-

ing and teaching. Great preaching characterized all great revivals and must occupy a crucial place in our worship.

Celebration. Psalm 145 talks of joyfully singing and abundantly uttering God's praise. The root of the word used here denotes to pour forth or gush forth. While good preaching enlightens the mind it also touches the heart and will. Celebration is the overflow of our hearts. Neither contrived nor exhibitionist, true celebration manifests a fresh exuberance and joy.

Evangelism. Even evangelism cannot be pursued correctly unless conceived as an offering we bring to God. The Psalms are filled with witness precisely because the Psalmists' hearts were full of God. Allen writes:

The cause of our failure in evangelism and edification is probably not our programs or plans, though these must have attention. The cause is our failure to understand that heart worship is a lifestyle, not the result of a cleverly planned and presented corporate hour.¹

Confession. When we meditate on the holiness of God and the sufferings of Christ on the cross we are struck by our own sinfulness. Isaiah "saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, . . . Seraphs . . . called [one] to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory"" (Isaiah 6:1-3). In response, Isaiah fell down before the Lord and brought a confession offering as he cried, "Woe is me! . . . I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:5).

After his sin with Bathsheba, David's worship lay in tatters until he brought the Lord a confession offering as described in Psalm 51. "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you

alone, have I sinned." David knew that confession must precede praise. "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Psalm 51:2-4a,17).

Generosity. Another mark of devotion is generosity. If we truly worship God we cannot worship money. "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil." "You cannot serve God and wealth" (1 Timothy 6:10; Matthew 6:24). Paul urged Timothy to teach "those who in the present age are rich . . . not to . . . set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches . . . but to put their hope in God . . . to do good, to be rich in good works, generous and ready to share" (1 Timothy 6:17-18). Malachi concluded the Old Testament with teaching about the necessity of bringing monetary offerings to further God's work (3:8-10).

Service. Since we are to glorify God in all we do, our service ought to be an act of worship. In responding to Satan's temptation, Jesus linked worship and service. "Away from me Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only'" (Matthew 4:10). Conversion is turning from idols to "serve a living and true God" (1 Thessalonians 1:9). Love for others leads us to serve them. The Lord treasures this form of worship. "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40).

Prayer. Even prayer is worship. The first two sections in the book of Psalms end with the sentence, "The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended" (Psalm 72:20). Before the throne stand "golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints" (Revelation 5:8). In prayer and intercession we are saying to God, "Lord, you alone have the answers to life. I come to you. I trust you. Please answer my prayers." Prayer assumes that we have a high view of the worthship of God.

Fellowship. John wrote of how inseparable our love for

each other is from our love for God. "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen" (1 John 4:20). When we love one another in the body of Christ, we love Christ. This too is a type of worship offering.

Consecration. Worship is impossible without a consecration offering. Paul urges believers to offer their bodies as living sacrifices, because this "is your spiritual worship" (Romans 12:1). Commitment, consecration, submission to God, openness to the Spirit—without these attitudes true worship cannot take place. Heart consecration inevitably moves our feet to walk in paths of obedience. "If you love me you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). Perhaps no offering is as precious to God as a heart of love that is moved to joyfully walk the path of humble obedience.

Remembrance. We regularly gather with other believers around the Lord's Table to "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26). Remembering his broken body and poured out blood is such a central part of our ongoing worship that Paul resolved to not allow anything to distract him from remembering "Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). We gather as a church periodically, but we daily "take up his cross" to follow him. All our days and all our praise is cross-centered.

Too often we overemphasize one element of our faith. Life in Christ, however, embraces a multi-faceted diversity energized and permeated by worship. Worship is a lifestyle which overflows with offerings of praise and thanksgiving, testimony and preaching, celebration and evangelism, confession and money, ministry and prayer, fellowship, consecration and remembrance. No one aspect should be emphasized beyond its biblically designated place. But if any facet is missing our worship becomes distorted.

William Temple stated:

Worship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by his Holiness; the nourishment of mind with His truth; the purifying of imagination by His beauty; the opening of heart to His love; the surrender of will to His purpose—and all of this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable and therefore the chief remedy for that self-centeredness which is our original sin. Yes—worship in spirit and truth is the way to the solution of perplexity and to the liberation from sin.²

Warren Wiersbe wrote:

Worship is the believer's response of all that he is—mind, emotions, will, and body—to all that God is and says and does. This response has a mystical side in subjective experience, and its practical side in objective obedience to God's revealed truth. It is a loving response that is balanced by the fear of the Lord, and it is a deepening response as the believer comes to know God better . . . the result? . . . transformation.³

Since God is the polestar of our universe, our redeemed hearts will always point to him. We ought to worship with every breathe we take. "God has ordained that everything we are and do shall flow out of worship as 'blessed by-products' of our fellowship with God."⁴

Sanctification, of course, proceeds as the Spirit corrects sinful distortions in our psyche so we can more consciously respond to reality—the reality that "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Christ alone lived a perfect worship-life, but the Spirit moves us to hunger and thirst for a more Christ-like expression of the verities

of God at work in his universe.

Too often we chase experiences, jump on bandwagons, or pursue some distant star in the mistaken notion that true Christian faith is extremism. How mistaken we are. Redemption restores harmony and balance. At the center of that harmony is worship. With worship so crucial let us carefully plumb the dimensions of balanced worship. Psalm 145 yields fertile ground for such a study.

THE DIMENSIONS OF BALANCED WORSHIP

First, balanced worship is both invisible and visible. In John 4 Christ calls us to worship in spirit and in truth. By mentioning "spirit" to the Samaritan woman in this context he sought to draw her attention away from an exclusive emphasis on the externals of worship so she could focus on the invisible internals. Throughout history God's complaint has been reiterated: "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me" (Matthew 15:8). In practice, worshipers have been repeatedly sidetracked from worshipping "in spirit" by an emphasis on specific postures and ceremonies and places of worship.

Genuine worship emanates invisibly from the regions of the heart and mind. David's Psalms began in meditation. Only after he pondered the glory of God did he pen phrases which we take up in worship. He wrote: "the Lord is good to all . . . your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, . . . the Lord upholds all who are falling . . . he also hears their cry and saves them" (See Psalm 145).

We can worship as we walk, as we drive, as we work, or as we lie awake in our beds. Whether or not you and I worship depends not on our surroundings but upon the invisible workings of our own soul.

Of course, if genuine worship wells up in our hearts it will almost inevitably manifest itself visibly as it did in

David's life. Our worship may become evident when we burst into song or are led by the Spirit to seek out other believers for prayer and praise. We may bow our heads or kneel in prayer. We may lift up our hands. Expressions of awe or joy or anguish may play on the screen of our faces. Tears may moisten our eyes.

We join others around the Lord's Table to give visible expression to our invisible faith in Christ and his atonement. The bread and the wine symbolize invisible spiritual realities.

Baptism, too, gives visible expression to our invisible faith. The Holy Spirit who convicted us of sin and led us to repentance and faith moved us to manifest our conversion by baptism. Something invisible had already taken place in our hearts and minds. The Spirit had led us to believe that Christ died and rose again, and that his death and resurrection could be the basis for our redemption. We were born again, saved, forgiven, and adopted into the family of God.

But these invisible realities have to have visible manifestation both in our progressive transformation and in our voluntary desire to be baptized. The day came. We went down into the water to symbolize our death to sin through Christ. We rose from the water to symbolize our new life in him.

Subsequently, the invisible condition of our hearts continues to be manifest by how we act. Grumbling and anger, gossip and bragging show that worship is stifled within us. Ego rides again. Subtle peer pressure at church may move us to go through the externals. But the well of worship has dried up. Devotional study of the Word may fall away. Assembly with God's people may suffer.

The source of all genuine external religion can be traced to that invisible fire which the Spirit kindles on the hearth of our hearts.

Second, worship is both fixed and flexible. To some

extent worship is unchanging. It is the same today as it was two thousand years ago, and yet the manner in which we express our worship has changed over the years. What is fixed and what needs to be flexible?

Imagine with me a group of sixty refugees airlifted by the government from Liberia, or some land currently riven by civil war, to a camp near your community. We would seek to help them as best we can. Suppose that upon visiting them we discover that most speak English and come from a Christian background. We would invite them to church.

Our hearts would be thrilled to see the whole group joining us for worship. As we get to know them we come to realize that many are truly converted. We worship the same Lord. Their faith finds its echo in our hearts. It is part of that unchanging fixed heritage of truth recorded in Holy Scripture and fleshed out in the repeated miracle of regeneration.

Imagine further that one Sunday they bring tambourines to church and ask if they can help us lead the worship or chant a praise song to us in cadence. What would we do? Would we be able to adjust? Could we work out a way of worshiping God together that would enable all of us to praise God while using differing means? Or would we ignore Paul's teaching that the wall that separates peoples has been broken down so that we are now "all one in Christ Jesus"? Would we banish them to their own ethnic service?

You may consider such a scenario unlikely. Don't be too sure. Besides ethnic diversity, we already have in almost every congregation a dramatic variety of backgrounds. Those under thirty come from a completely different cultural milieu and enjoy a different style of worship. Faster music, Scripture put to song, and hand clapping may characterize many in this generation. Those over forty-five may

prefer a different style. Some in their sixties may yearn for the quartets they heard in all-night sings. Many seasoned saints love the stately old hymns of the faith with their slower music and deeper lyrics. In their view clapping is undignified exhibitionism.

Besides the gap between the generations—depression era retirees, post-depression retirees, boomers, busters, generation Xers, echo generation, and tweeners—we have Scots and English, Welsh and Irish, Trinidadians, Sri Lankans and Filipinos, Jamaicans and Polish. What can we do? Biblical worship ought to manifest flexibility and variety.

Yes, the great truths of Scripture which we celebrate are changeless. But the ways we worship God ought to manifest a creative variety and cultural adaptability. So we must balance an unchanging adherence to what Holy Scripture has revealed about the Triune God, his sovereign glory, his pervasive providence and transforming redemption, along with flexibility of worship form.

A study of Old Testament worship hymns demonstrates that flexibility and variety characterized even the highly structured temple worship. In Psalm 145 David praises the Lord in the form of an acrostic poem. Each verse begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In Psalm 150 he worships with the help of an orchestra of instruments: trumpets, harp, lyre, tambourine, strings, flute, and cymbals. In Psalm 3 David totally changes the literary genre to worship God by means of a complaint about his foes.

The Shepherd Psalm (23) illustrates worship using an extended metaphor in which God is likened to a shepherd. Psalm 51 leads us through the necessary element of confession. The Lord is worshiped in Psalm 78 by means of a lengthy review of the history of his dealings with Israel. Psalm 119, on the other hand, makes use of both the acrostic style and a lengthy meditation on the laws and statutes of God.

The New Testament era finds the church using psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in worship (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). Worship may entail fasting and prayer. Clearly, preaching and teaching occupy a central place in all New Testament worship.

The Bible demonstrates that there are a broad range of options open to us as we seek to worship God “in spirit and in truth.” Flexibility of form and creativity of expression are encouraged as worthy ways of reflecting the unchanging content of the inspired Word of God.

Worship never calls us to promote personal opinions or novel experiences. The Word of God sets up the parameters of content and experience appropriate to divine worship and keeps us from esoteric or inappropriate forms of expression. While creativity and innovation in worship are encouraged, worship never goes beyond its primary purpose of enabling us to review fixed realities. Novelty of content is anti-Christian. But our creative instincts, part of our nature as image-bearers of God, inherently lead us to flexibility of expression.

The principle of flexibility should not lead us on a never-ending search for novel experiences and tingly feelings. Here is a danger. Novelty is worshipped today more than truth! And continual change can be disrupting. Predictable patterns make us feel comfortable. They may not detract, but rather help us worship better. For this reason most churches find the need for a fairly familiar order of service.

Imbalance always threatens the church. Fear of novelty may scare some into never allowing variety of expression in worship. Resistance to change in its own way, however, may distract us from true worship. Genuine worship involves the mind and heart and compels us to respond to God with thought and feeling. Overly familiar patterns of prayer and praise may sink us into a deep rut which stifles personal response and encourages us to become automatons. It is

often easier to do what we have always done than to gird up the loins of our mind and exercise our creativity. Balance is obviously needed to keep us from the opposite dangers of excessive change and stultifying sameness.

An uncompromising place for the Word of God in all our services will aid us in holding onto the fixed core of truth essential to real worship. Reading, preaching, and teaching the Word must be at the heart of our praise.

Third, worship is for young and old. David writes that “one generation shall laud your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts” (Psalm 145:4). The closer we get to balanced worship the less trouble we will have with the generation gap. The concerns and insights of different generations when brought together as an offering to God will enrich us all.

Intergenerational worship will give expression to the concerns of different age groups. We may acknowledge this by asking children to come forward during the morning worship for their story. Comments afterward demonstrate that all ages particularly enjoy this part of the service. Using some choruses and hymns that appeal to younger believers demonstrates a sensitivity to the fact that worship is not the province of seasoned saints alone. A children’s choir would be a great addition to our worship from time to time. David reminds us, “From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise” (Psalm 8:2 NIV).

When we sing some of the great old hymns of the faith in slower time we acknowledge generational differences. Too often, however, the power structure in our churches remains in the hands of older saints who refuse to acknowledge the preferences of youth. A careful study of the Psalm book of the Old Testament church will yield helpful insights into the breadth and variety of musical styles and poetic expressions that God deems best.

Fourth, worship is both solemn and exuberant. The

Bible records strange contrasts. John fell at the feet of Jesus as if dead when he caught a glimpse of the glory of the reigning Christ. David danced before the ark of God as it was brought into Jerusalem. Jesus, in his turn, compared worship to the celebration of a wedding feast.

We need to strike a balance in our worship between reverential fear and joyful exuberance. (Since exuberance can be reverent, I have used the contrasting word “solemn” in the title.) A contemplation of God’s greatness, incomprehensibility, might, and majesty results in wonder and awe. A vision of the holiness of God cuts through flippancy and creates a solemnity that the Bible often describes as “the fear of the Lord.” David writes, “The Lord is near to all who call on him. . . . He fulfills the desire of all who fear him” (Psalm 145:19). If our worship is to please God then we must approach him in godly fear. “The Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him” (Psalm 147:11).

Much worship today is flippant and frothy. Used to being entertained, too often we come to church looking for sanctified entertainment. Services are judged not on the basis of what pleases God, but what titillates our consumer sense. We approach the Lord with an unbecoming familiarity as if he were a heavenly buddy rather than Almighty God. Such an attitude dismally fails to catch the breath of heaven that shocked Isaiah into awe.

At the burning bush Moses heard God call him to take off his shoes in such a holy place (Exodus 3:1-5). In deference to this precedent, many worshipers in Asia remove their shoes before entering the church auditorium. This sign of humility recognizes the greatness of God.

Balance, however, reminds us that worship should not always be solemn and serious. David writes, “They will celebrate your abundant goodness and joyfully sing of your righteousness” (Psalm 145:7).

The goodness of God, as perceived by Old Testament

saints, sometimes so overpowered them that they danced for joy.

Let Israel be glad in its Maker; let the people of Zion rejoice in their King. Let them praise his name with dancing making melody to him with tambourine and lyre. For the Lord takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with victory (Psalm 149:2-4; see also Psalm 4:7; 16:11; 33:1).

Our societies, of course, have come a long way from the folk dances of old with their healthy expression of exuberance. Unfortunately, dancing in our day is freighted with immoral baggage that *may* keep it, for the foreseeable future, from being a viable medium in which to express praise. Nevertheless, worship, calls us to joyful exuberance while at other times we need to be solemn and serious.

Fifth, worship is both silent and audible. As mentioned earlier, any piece of praise begins in the mind and heart of the author. It begins in silence. David writes, "I meditate on the works of your hands" (Psalm 143:5). Meditation is a silent act.

Meditation requires an atmosphere of quietness if it is to bear fruit in rich worship. Today we are afraid of silence. We seem to love noise. The radio is always on. We listen to Walkmans when we walk or jog. Ghetto blasters shatter the silence of our parks.

David realized the creative power of silence. "When you are disturbed, do not sin; ponder it on your beds, and be silent" (Psalm 4:4). In Psalm 23 he describes God leading us "beside the still waters." We are exhorted to "be still and know that I am God." Our trees and flowers grow in silence. If we knew more silence, we would probably know more growth.

We all need times of quiet reflection. No wonder personal devotions have come to be called "The Quiet Time." I

hope you have a time and place where quietness can descend to enable the Holy Spirit to gently plow up the fallow ground of your heart. On Sundays, some prefer that we enter into our church auditorium quietly in order to prepare our hearts for congregational worship. In most of our churches we have not been too successful in letting a "holy hush" fall over the preservice period. Silence, of course, stifles talking with one another which is a prerequisite for fellowship. Since worship on Sunday mornings is a corporate activity, much could be said for the need to re-establish contact with one another after a week apart before we give ourselves to worship. Ah, balance—how hard to maintain.

True worship is not only silent but audible. We express our heart-felt love for the Lord with our voices. Note the repeated phrases in Psalm 145. "Declare . . . meditate . . . declare . . . sing aloud . . . my mouth will speak the praise of the Lord" (Psalm 145: 4, 5, 6, 7, 21). Genuine worship requires us to open our mouths in testimony and praise.

Sometimes we even need to make loud noises! "Shout to God with loud songs of joy"; "Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth"; "Let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation"; "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth" (Psalms 47:1; 66:1; 95:1; 98:4). Worshipers sometimes get so excited they shout.

Genuine worship, then, will balance our need for quietness and reflection against the need for verbalized praise. Occasionally our services ought to be broken by a period of quiet reflection. We must find space in our noisy, busy lives to sit quietly and meditate on the glories of God.

Sixth, worship is both personal and congregational. Psalm 145 began as a private meditation of David. Reality in worship will be seriously stifled if it is not fed by our own personal study of the Bible, our meditation on the Lord, and our life of private prayer.

We are all so different. No wonder then, that we have so many opinions about worship! There is nothing wrong with a diversity that reflects our own individualities. Our praise and thanksgiving, our confession and celebration will be highly personal.

You may love to walk and talk with God. You may wake up at night and pray. You might spend time on your knees or be so overcome by the holiness of God that you fall on your face before him. We can't dictate to others that worship must always follow a certain pattern—as if the Scripture has given us an inspired template.

Personal worship, however, must feed congregational praise. Ours is not a private religion. David got so excited about his meditations that he wrote a Psalm about them to be used in congregational worship. You will note that the personal pronoun "I" used in verses one and two soon changes to plural pronouns denoting the whole congregation.

Warren Wiersbe in *Real Worship* writes:

We do not go to church to praise God: we bring our praise with us. The worship service should not be an interruption of our praise, but rather a continuation and augmentation of our praise as we join hearts and voices with other believers.⁵

The fellowship we enjoy with each other before and after services and during fellowship meals helps us to open up to each other about the wonderful things of God. Worship that leads us to lock away our private experiences of God in the vaults of our minds and never share them with other members of the body is surely an aberration.

Incidentally, the act of joining a local church is a visible testimony that we believe in congregational worship. When we join hands with others in a commitment to serve God together, we open ourselves up to the blessing of cor-

porate life where "God is enthroned on the praises of his people."

Worship involves many diverse elements in a delicate balance. There are intellectual, emotional and volitional elements of true worship. Worship can be either planned or spontaneous. But space does not permit further examination. Worship is woven inextricably into the whole fabric of every healthy Christian. It is the warp and woof of a lifestyle that delights in the Lord and responds to him in awe and exultation.

Worship, however, does not just happen. Like most good things it takes cultivation and effort. Wiersbe writes:

If you decide you want to pursue a meaningful worship experience, do not expect (only) encouragement. True worship examines us deeply; our motives and our values are scrutinized by God. In worship, God is calling us to wholeness; but first He must reveal our brokenness and our blemishes.⁶

He continues:

In short the most dangerous thing we can do is to return to spiritual worship. It would mean the end of the personality cults that have invaded the church. It would also mean the end of the "Christian consumerism" that has so twisted our sense of spiritual values. I have no doubt that the church that returned to true worship would lose people—"important" people—and probably have to make drastic cuts in the budget.⁷

Are we ready to face the danger and the delight, the sacrifice and the scrutiny that goes with real worship? What other response can we make to a heavenly Father who so loved us that he gave his Son? "Oh Lord, our Sovereign,

how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (Psalm 8:1). Why then does worship ignite such controversy?

WHY CHRISTIANS DISAGREE ABOUT WORSHIP

Diverse opinions about how to worship God have led to more disagreement down through the years than almost any other issue. Greek and Latin branches of the church have gone to war over worship.

Since the way we choose to worship is so much a matter of personal preference, it is no wonder that down through the years I've received more suggestions, more complaints, and more criticism about the details of how to worship than about any other issue. These disagreements may reflect little more than how human we are. On the other hand, perpetual discontent about worship may be symptomatic of a series of misunderstandings about the very nature of worship itself.

Misunderstandings About the Nature of Worship. Worship is often equated with participation in a scheduled service, whether the ritual be formal or informal. Singing a prescribed number of hymns, listening to a choir, participating in prayer, and listening to a sermon may give us the feeling that we have "worshiped." Traditionally, our very presence in a "service" with other worshipers has meant that we have worshiped.

From this perspective worship is a planned program. If we had no say in the programing, we may be irked by patterns that aren't to our taste. If the hymns were too slow or too fast, the prayer droning, the sermon dull we may feel cheated out of worship. Irritation with the order of worship, however, leads us to focus our concern on how we worship rather than on whom we worship.

How we worship is important. The program ought to enhance worship. But worship is about God. It is a kind of God-intoxication. To get hung up on how we approach

God is to short-circuit the very process. To change the metaphor, God is the destination of worship. To become distracted with how we get there is like spending all our time enjoying the journey to Niagara Falls, only to forget to look at the Falls themselves when we arrive. We can go by plane or car, bus or train or even by motorcycle. How we travel to the Falls is not so important. The Falls themselves are one of the wonders of the world! True, in our culture, the trip is often half the fun of going. But from God's perspective we have not worshiped until we have met God and bowed in awestruck wonder.

Worship is not a ritual. It is not a service. Worship is not about you and me and what we feel comfortable with. It is a response to who God is and what he does. The Psalmist cries, "I will exalt you, my God the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever. Every day I will praise you and extol your name" (145:1). On and on the Psalmist goes in rhapsodic response to God's majesty and might, his goodness and compassion, his love and righteousness.

Worship should be the most God-centered activity a human being is capable of exercising. Why then do we tend to look around at the way different denominations do it? Why do we trip over methodology when God is looking for true worshipers? When we worship, thoughts of other Christians shouldn't even enter our minds—unless they lead us to turn to one another and cry, "Isn't God great?"

As discussed earlier, worship is an offering we bring to God in response to who he is. For an offering to be acceptable to him, it must come from the integrity of our own hearts. Jesus taught the Samaritan woman at the well about true worship when he deflected her attention away from the differences between Jewish and Samaritan worship form by saying, "God is a spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). True worship is

the overflow of our hearts, not mere words formed by our lips in semi-automatic response to music.

You may reply that Jesus did correct the Samaritan woman by pointing out to her that Samaritan practice was faulty. Their error lay in their failure to acknowledge that "salvation is from the Jews" and in being distracted by the place and form of worship instead of seeking to worship the true God. Their great crime was, "You Samaritans worship what you do not know."

To be authentic, a worship-offering must express appropriately one's true relationship with God. Depending upon our own condition it may express different things at different times. It should always express the humility of a creature relating to the Creator. It may express the conviction of a sinner facing a holy God, or a child coming to the heavenly Father, or an ignorant soul turning to the fount of wisdom, or a needy person fleeing to the Rock.

Depending upon the state of our relationship with God and the needs of our own hearts, various occasions of worship will manifest different nuances. No wonder worship is impossible to program.

Spirit-produced attitudes such as these will lead us far afield from the egocentric concerns of our fallen world into the very throne room of God himself. We are very far amiss if we must always think of worship as something we can control or from which we can derive satisfaction. Worship should strip us of self-consciousness and leave us speechless in the presence of our Lord. A. W. Tozer has written:

With our loss of the sense of majesty has come the further loss of religious awe and consciousness of the divine Presence. We have lost our spirit of worship and our ability to withdraw inwardly to meet God in adoring silence. Modern Christianity is simply not producing the kind of Christians who can appreciate or experience the life in the Spirit. The

words, "Be still, and know that I am God," mean next to nothing to the self-confident, bustling worshiper in this middle period of the twentieth century.⁸

A Misunderstanding About How to Evaluate Worship.

Another problem stems from our self-absorption. As consummate consumers we too often approach worship as if it were another product for us to consume. Reginald Bibby has written about this problem in his book, *Fragmented Gods*.

For some time now, a highly specialized, consumer-oriented society has been remoulding the gods. Canadians are drawing very selectively on religion, and the dominant religious groups are responding with highly specialized items—isolated beliefs, practices, programs, and professional services, notably weddings and funerals.

The problem with all of this is that religion, instead of standing over against culture, has become a neatly packaged consumer item—taking its place among other commodities that can be bought or bypassed according to one's consumption whims. Religion has become little more than a cultural product.⁹

And so we shop for churches. We ask ourselves, "What church conducts a worship service that will give me a pleasant feeling?" After all, we evaluate a concert, a play, the rides in an amusement park, or a day at the beach on the basis of how they make us feel. Was the experience enjoyable? Did I come away with warm fuzzy feelings—or at least a nice tan?

No wonder so many scan the religion page to check out who has arranged the best program. And after attending we may unconsciously ask ourselves whether or not we came away with a tingly "religious" feeling running up and down our spine.

Now, true worship can be the most profound and moving experience a human being can ever have. "Let them praise his name with dancing and make music to him with tambourine and harp . . . Let the saints rejoice in his honor and sing for joy on their bed" (Psalm 149:3, 5). Obviously worship can be so powerful that believers dance and sing even on their beds.

Nothing parallels the exhilaration, the joy and peace, the encouragement, excitement, and vision that floods the soul of real worshipers. But, as already noted, pleasant emotions are not the only accompaniment of worship. Deep conviction, malaise, a yearning for God, a sense of fearful awe may all reflect worship at different times. And inevitably, true worship breaks down self-will, fosters humility, and leads to sacrificial service. Do we have a problem finding enough volunteers? The problem can be traced to a scarcity of true worshipers. Worship produces obedience and brotherly love. Worship leads us to volunteer to use our gifts in mutual edification.

We dare not evaluate worship as if it were a product. We don't come to God as consumers, but as fallen creatures responding to him in devotion.

A Misunderstanding About the Place of Music in Worship. Over the years we have developed an exaggerated view of the importance of music in worship. Let me be careful here. I am speaking in general terms.

All of us have heard horror stories of this church, or that, thrown into confusion by the demands of an organist or the choir leader. Occasionally a soloist demands her way. By itself such a fact is not remarkable. Pastors, too, have been the cause of many a church fight. Indeed, Christians in a variety of responsibilities have from time immemorial proved themselves cantankerous.

But the problem can often be traced to a perception that musical instruments of a certain kind are absolutely

indispensable to real worship—or that musical instruments like the guitar have no place in worship. Several years ago I argued at length with a brother, with little success, concerning his view that the organ is a heavenly instrument, more suited than any other to promote worship.

Such a perception fails to take into consideration the fact that many churches down through history have been mightily blessed of God without the use of musical instruments at all. Other eras did not have such a wide choice of musical accompaniment as we enjoy today. Think back, if you will, to the greatest English church of the last century. Spurgeon's Tabernacle had no organ or piano. Hymns were sung without any musical accompaniment. Obviously, churches have gotten along quite well without musical instruments.

Personally I enjoy both the piano and the organ. But then again I have also had the privilege of singing with congregations in Pakistan to the accompaniment of the harmonium, drums, and even water pots! I strongly disagree with those who want to banish musical instruments from the church. I recently read a paper in which a researcher made a case for restricting music in our churches to congregational singing without benefit of instruments. A cursory reading of the variety of instruments used in Old Testament worship leads me to quickly reject such a plea.

But let me make my point. I have searched the entire New Testament for every reference I could find on "music," "musicians," "singing," etc. I was startled to find only sixteen references altogether, with three of those in the four gospels. There is no mention of musical instruments in the New Testament.

We do read about the importance of singing. After recording the completion of the Lord's Supper the narrator writes, "When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the

Mount of Olives." Paul exhorts us, "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God" (Matthew 26:30; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16).

Not a very extensive array of textual evidence for something that takes up at least a third of our services! Clearly, congregational song was—and should continue to be—an important vehicle of worship and edification. We have to say, however, that there is little textual evidence for any particular kind of musical accompaniment or for solos, duets, or choirs. I am not suggesting that we argue from silence to conclude that we should dispense with these ministries. The freedom we enjoy in Christ liberates us to use any neutral (non-moral) means available to glorify God. But the normative nature of the New Testament cautions us about giving to anything so little emphasized in the Bible as prominent a place as we do today.

Music, certainly accompanied music, is not as foundational an element in worship as current evangelical practice leads us to believe. Please note that I am not seeking to devalue the tremendous blessing that we receive through a choir or through praise skillfully led. Perhaps the blessing, however, falls upon us more through content appropriately expressed than because of a particular instrumentation. Instrumentation should aid us to focus our attention on God and on the great truths of our salvation.

Johann Sebastian Bach, one of the most gifted composers of all time, caught the purpose of music by his notation "JJ" (Jesus Help) at the beginning of his works, and "Soli Deo Gloria" (to God alone the glory) at the end. He

wrote, "The aim and final reason . . . of all music, should be none else but the Glory of God. . . ."¹⁰

One of the great reformed synods wrote the following about music:

The music of the church should be . . . in spirit, form and content . . . a positive expression of scripturally religious thought and feeling. It should serve the ministry of the Word . . . the full range of the revelation of God, . . . contribute to the service of the Word . . . be in harmony with the whole counsel of God.¹¹

Since the content of Christian music is crucial, musical expressions brimming over with ambrosia from the Word capture our hearts and uplift our minds in adoration and praise. Without that heavenly ambrosia, musical expression can entertain but not uplift, tickle our ears with fancy sound but fail to move our wills to respond to God. Our worship services must be punctuated with music which vibrates to the harmony of heaven as revealed through the inspired content of the Word rather than music for its own sake or for its entertainment value.

A danger stares us in the face at this precise point. At the same time as this tendency to give to music an exaggerated place prevails more and more, a twin tendency works to de-emphasize the place of preaching. The two are closely linked.

A Misunderstanding About the Place of Preaching. Our era tends to exalt images, sounds, and special effects while content becomes more and more diluted. Contrary to Marshall McLuhan's dictum, however, the medium is *not* the message.

God exalted his Word above all else. He spoke a word and creation came to be. He inspired prophets and they declared his word. Of the coming of his Son we read, "The

Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14).

No wonder Scripture repeatedly highlights the importance of communicating the words of God. Deuteronomy contains the content of several sermons Moses preached to Israel across from Jericho. Likewise, Ezra proclaimed the word.

The priest Ezra brought the Law before the assembly. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon. . . . The Levites . . . instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read" (Nehemiah 8:2, 3, 7, 8).

While we find only one reference to Jesus singing, a multitude of citations speak about his preaching. "Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God" (Mark 1:14). He commissioned us to "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation" (Mark 16:15). Acts records portions of at least fourteen messages the apostles preached.

Paul instructed Timothy,

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, . . . I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction (2 Timothy 4:1-2).

Down through history revivals have accompanied the preaching of men like Whitefield, Wesley, and Spurgeon who took this charge seriously.

Unfortunately, preaching has fallen from its historic place in the eyes of Christians. While preaching time continues to be reduced, time for musical expression continues to increase. Novel approaches to communication, such as dra-

ma, are touted as the answer to evangelism in the new century. Some feel that preaching, where "one man stands three feet above contradiction," fails to recognize the supposed autonomy of man and our imagined right to debate the Word. "Sharing" is all the rage. A dearth of good preaching, of course, has contributed to this lamentable trend.

Let us be sure of one thing. The Word of God is just that, God's Word. And his Word is truth. It is to be accepted, not debated. Nothing will ever take the place of Spirit-endued, authoritative preaching that probes the conscience of man as it confronts him with invisible reality.

John Stott makes the point:

Word and worship belong indissolubly to each other. All worship is an intelligent and loving response to the revelation of God, because it is the adoration of his Name. Therefore acceptable worship is impossible without preaching. . . . Far from being an alien intrusion into worship, the reading and preaching of the word are actually indispensable to it. The two cannot be divorced. Indeed, it is their unnatural divorce which accounts for the low level of so much contemporary worship. Our worship is poor because our knowledge of God is poor, and our knowledge of God is poor because our preaching is poor.¹²

Disagreement over worship may be traced to a series of misunderstandings about the relative place of preaching and music, the God-centered nature of worship, or the degree and kind of emotions that true worship engenders. Disagreement also occurs, as described earlier, because of a lack of balance in our church life.

Worship challenges us to give to God the best we have. But in order to establish a balance in worship we must reach out to each other in understanding. Since God is one and we are one in him, genuine worship ought to unite us,

not divide us. Even in churches faithful to the Word of God, diversity will always exist, not in content, but in expression.

Unity in diversity will require humility. Worship by its very nature calls us to approach God humbly. And if we can humbly worship God, surely we can meekly approach each other with an attitude of understanding that makes allowance for freedom of worship expression even while we insist on unchanging biblical content.

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Notes

1. Ronald Allen and Gordon Borrer, *Worship—Rediscovering the Missing Jewel* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1982), 39.
2. William Temple, *Readings in St. John's Gospel*, First Series (London: MacMillan and Co., 1939), 68.
3. Warren W. Wiersbe, *Real Worship* (Nashville, Tennessee: Oliver-Nelson, 1986), 27.
4. *Real Worship*, 29.
5. *Real Worship*, 10.
6. *Real Worship*, 37.
7. *Real Worship*.
8. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 6.
9. Reginald Bibby, *Fragmented Gods* (Toronto, Ontario: Irwin Publishing, 1987), 1-2.
10. Quoted in *Chalcedon Report*, No. 288: 1.
11. *Chalcedon Report*, 1.
12. John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 82-3.

The Anglican "Articles of Religion" (1563) make it a matter of belief "that Traditions and Ceremonies . . . at all times . . . have been diverse, and may be changed according to the diversity of countries, times, and men's manners."

JAMES F. WHITE, *PROTESTANT WORSHIP: TRADITIONS IN TRANSITION* (LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY: WESTMINSTER/JOHN KNOX PRESS, 1989), 17.

The concept of participation changes. In the late medieval West, participation primarily meant seeing, whereas the Reformation understood the term largely to mean hearing. At stake in the Reformation conflict was whether real participation was by eye or by ear.

JAMES F. WHITE, *PROTESTANT WORSHIP: TRADITIONS IN TRANSITION* (LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY: WESTMINSTER/JOHN KNOX PRESS, 1989), 18.

When Jesus was taken up into heaven, the disciples "worshipped him" (*proskynesantes auton*) and then returned to Jerusalem with great joy, where they stayed continually at the temple, praising God (Luke 24:52-53). Perhaps Luke reserved the term for this climactic moment to indicate that this was at last the real recognition of Christ by the disciples.

DAVID PETERSON, "WORSHIP IN THE NEW TESTAMENT" IN *WORSHIP: ADORATION AND ACTION*, D. A. CARSON, ED. (GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN: BAKER, 1993), 65.