

## REDISCOVERING CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

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**"May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and one mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."  
Romans 15:5-6**

### INTRODUCTION

Every decade in the life of the church brings some type of crisis. The current one began around the middle 1990s and became full blown in the 21st century. This crisis has effected every aspect of the church's life--its theology, its ecclesiology, its rituals, its education, its music and its programming. At the very core of this crisis is Sunday worship.

My affirmation this morning is that Christian worship--its biblical understanding and practice in many congregations is changing the very nature of Christ's church, My conviction is this: Christian worship is absolutely central to the life of the church. Everything else the church does--everything, while very important, is secondary to the worship of the God of creation and salvation.

#### I. WORSHIP IS CENTRAL

Noah was the first person to build an altar to worship Jehovah God. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their descendants erected altars of wood and stone where the Spirit of the living God communed with them. Altars, tabernacles and temples in the Old Testament and synagogues in the New Testament were constructed by the Hebrews and considered sacred and holy places in which to worship the Lord their God. This strong biblical thread of worship runs throughout the Bible. All Christians affirm we should worship God "in Spirit and in Truth."

Dr. Marva Dawn in one of her latest books on Christian worship writes: "No activity of the church is more tinkered with, more changed, more experimented with than the Sunday morning worship service with very little, if any, positive results." Why is this she asks? "Because of too many mistaken ideas of what Christian worship is all about."

#### II. MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT WORSHIP

I think it is helpful to consider some of the misconceptions about worship in order to more rightfully understand worship.

A. Worship is not Entertainment -- There is often a subtle, but real, temptation to get oneself into a passive "entertain me" mode. We are members of an audience society. I like to be entertained by TV (especially sports), dramas, music, movies, etc. These are not bad, but it is not surprising that when we enter into the sanctuary for Sunday morning worship subconsciously the thought runs through our minds-"entertain me"! This reality drives many a minister or worship committee to prepare "market-driven" or "feel good" worship services. The central focus becomes horizontal and not vertical. Good feelings replace the communion of our souls and our minds with the Living God. Christian worship is not meant to be entertaining.

B. Worship without Awe -- I understand our Anabaptist history and the reasons why they did not allow religious symbols in their meeting places-- even the cross itself. I think there is a rightful place for an open Bible, lit candles, crosses, banners and other appropriate Christian symbols as aids to help us focus our senses on God. The utter simplicity of many Mennonite sanctuaries is not particularly awe-inspiring.

Marlene and I recall when we formed a committee in Bogota, Colombia to discuss plans to build the first Mennonite Church in that city. I asked the Colombians what kind of building they envisioned. Their response? "We don't want to build 'evangelical ugly'" (Protestant ugly)! The symbols that point us to Jesus Christ can enhance our worship of God. The notion that Christian symbols are idolatrous in the sanctuary is flawed. We need, through word, music, symbols, silence, and prayers, to put some "awesome-ness" into our worship services to stimulate all our God-given senses.

### III. WHO DO WE WORSHIP?

To raise this question appears naive, if not, ignorant. Of course, Christians worship God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. However, I wish to point out a truth that is often overlooked, if not completely forgotten. God is not only the object of our worship, He is also the subject. Our worship flows from God, the subject, and returns to God who is also the object.

Why is this important? Many of us understand and accept that God is the object of our worship, but often think the worshipper is the subject. When the worshipper sees him/or herself as the subject of the worship experience this then becomes self-centered worship or self-fulfillment worship. Therefore, singing the great hymns of the faith, praying, hearing God's word become "me-centered" and "self-directed". This is a distortion of worshipping the living God both in Spirit and Truth, both as object and subject.

### CONCLUSION

Jesus responding to the third temptation thrown at him in the desert by Satan replied: "Worship the Lord your God and serve Him only."

A renowned British minister, Dr. James Stewart, had just completed leading an inspiring worship service and had preached a great sermon. He stood at the door greeting the people following the service. One highly respected parishioner said to him, "Pastor, that was the most wonderful, inspiring worship service I have ever attended in this church." To that comment Dr. Stewart respectfully replied, "THAT REMAINS TO BE SEEN."

AMEN.