

Worship is Not About Us

Editorial: Paul R. House

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One phrase ought to serve as a sober reminder as we go through today's so-called worship wars: worship is not about us, but about God. So much of the current debate revolves around what we want, what we need, what we prefer, what we desire for a service to do for us. We even argue over whether a worship service should focus on evangelism, discipleship, or praise. In all these discussions the emphasis is squarely on us. No wonder we are confused; no wonder we lack the power we so desperately need and, at our best, desire with all our hearts. But if worship is not about us, what is it about?

Worship is about recognizing God's primacy in all things. In the Bible, the most basic meaning of "worship" is "to bow down." To whom do worshipers bow? The creator, sustainer, deliverer, savior, revealer, healer, judge, and covenant maker. In other words, they bow down to the sovereign Lord of all creation. For what purpose do they bow? To give glory to God, who alone deserves such humility and adoration. In *The End for Which God Created the World*, Jonathan Edwards rightly stresses that worship is the ultimate end for which human beings were made. He writes,

And thus we see how, not only the creature's seeing and knowing God's excellence, but also supremely esteeming and loving him, belongs to the communication of *God's fulness*. And the communication of God's joy and happiness, consists chiefly in communicating to the creature that happiness and joy which consists in *rejoicing in God*, and in glorious excellency; for in such joy God's own happiness does

principally consist. And in these things, *knowing* God's excellency, *loving* God for it, and *rejoicing* in it, and in the *exercise* and *expression* of these, consists God's honor and praise; so that these are clearly implied in that glory of God, which consists in the *emanation* of his eternal glory.¹

If God's glory is not magnified in our services, then what occurs is not worship at all.

Worship is about God-centered confession. Scripture teaches that God created human beings "good," but that we have all "sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Ro 3:23; Ge 3:1-19). The Bible also promises that the Lord is merciful, willing to forgive those who confess their sins (Ex 34:6-7; 1 Jn 1:9-10). With these truths in mind, the scriptures lead us to confess our sins in worship settings, knowing that God merits our gratitude (Ps 51:1-19). One of the gravest faults of low church Protestantism in general and Southern Baptist churches in particular is the lack of confession as a prelude to other parts of the service of worship. The altar call thereby is pressed into service for confession, repentance, salvation, rededication, and any number of other matters. Thus, the "invitation" is asked to bear too much weight, and the average worshiper leaves without facing or confessing sin, and therefore without receiving forgiveness for his or her sins either.

Worship is about thoughtful, fervent, theologically sound praise. It is easy to get caught up in the type of music being used, since musical styles are right on the surface of our awareness. After all, anyone

can tell if a song is rock and roll, rap, classical, or traditional church music. What is more difficult, though, is assessing song lyrics. Frankly, I enjoy high church music, but my preference is not what matters. What does matter is what the songs say—what they teach about God. Any song, however styled, does not aid worship if it does not have us sing of God's greatness. Therefore, it is necessary that we take a hard look at our music. Interestingly enough, upon close observation much of our older music is just as vacuous as some of the worst of the newer praise choruses. Conversely, some of the new music is just as substantive as some of the old favorites.

Worship is about biblical preaching. Preaching is an act of worship when it expounds God's word to faithful, obedient hearers. It is worship when it teaches the Bible's great truths about the Lord. It is not worship, however, when it is solely relational talks that trade enjoyable illustrations for the meat of the word of God. Due to weak, barely biblical preaching, many evangelical churches are in danger of apostatizing without the aid of heresy. Sermons that do not focus upon how God's character applies to our situation simply reinforce behavior learned in the culture. God deserves better, as do the best of his people. And we can do better.

Worship is about serving the Lord in our vocations. As we take God's presence into the world we worship while we work. As we mediate God's will and love to those around us we engage in worship. In whatever setting God is primary, there worship is possible.

This journal was founded with a deep conviction that the doctrine of God is the most crucial issue facing the church today. Due to this conviction, over the past two

years we have published substantial articles on the doctrines of God, salvation, and baptism. (Crossway Books will publish many of these articles next year in a volume entitled *Who Will Be Saved?*) This current issue has the same concern as its predecessors, which is that the living God of the Bible be known as he has been revealed in scripture. Nowhere should God be revealed more often or more clearly than in the church's worship. Nowhere is clarity more necessary than in the foundations for that worship. May these articles dedicated to re-laying worship foundations prove helpful to this great cause of proclaiming and serving the one true God, the blessed Trinity. May they help us understand that worship is about God, not about us. May they thereby aid in real worship.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Jonathan Edwards, "The End for which God Created the World," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: Vol. 1* (1834; rpt. U.S.A.: Hendrickson, 1998) 119.