

"HAS MAN OUTGROWN HIS NEED FOR WORSHIP?"

INTRODUCTION No civilization as yet unearthed by the spade of the archaeologist has been without a prison, an altar, a cemetery. Regardless of his time or habitat - man sins, man worships, man dies.

In recent years the corporate worship of Almighty God in this country has fallen on hard days. The boom of the Eisenhower years has spent itself. Time was when the man who didn't go to church was on the defensive. Time is that the man who goes to church must now defend his going.

The half inebriated guest bids his party host farewell with a sneering "See you in church on Sunday". Young people occasionally turn off their transistor radios long enough to drop into church - only to report that the whole experience was a colossal drag. Well-letter theologians, by word and example, have suggested that it is more important to realize goals in society than it is to gather for worship - thereby polarizing devotion and action. Except for Easter, churches do not expect to seat their entire membership on Sundays, and built their plants accordingly.

But this is not the whole picture, not by any means. For there are signs abroad that man is still aware of powers that transcend him and yearns to get in touch with them. Hundreds of newspapers in this country carry daily columns on astrology. There's a great interest in this subject. Many of us check our daily horoscope. Even our new Miss America, crowned last night, brought to Atlantic City a crab....live crab....sign of one born under Cancer.

Young people resort to drugs to expand their consciousness and perchance make contact with another world. Students in mainline seminaries from responsible denominations are reportedly gathering in small groups in quest of an experience of speaking in tongues. Modern man is beginning to look for signs and signals of transcendence in the world. Harvey Cox in his latest book is not ashamed to observe that we have a need to celebrate with joyful pageantry the presence of the living God among us.

DEVELOPMENT Man cannot outgrow worship. He can pervert worship. He can suppress worship. He can misdirect his worship. But worship he must - for man is, indeed, incurably religious. Herein lies the church's opportunity. Not to scold men because they do not come to church. Not to bemoan publicly the spirit of the age that seems to militate against the corporate worship of God. But to make worship irresistably attractive to others by making it such to ourselves. And for this to happen we must address ourselves to certain questions: what is worship? How do we strike a balance in our worship between continuity and change? And finally: what must we as members of this church do in order to put some punch and wallop into our service of worship?

WHAT IS CORPORATE WORSHIP What is corporate worship? We need to think of it as something we do for God - and not something that God does for us. To be sure, there are benefits that accrue to the worshipper. But these are secondary, not primary. This is why the Scriptures are candid enough to speak about offering up "the sacrifice of thanksgiving" in the 116th Psalm. Sometimes it is an effort to celebrate the worth of God. ~~But~~ let's be honest and acknowledge that we are not always glad and joyous when someone bids us "go into the house of the Lord". It may deprive us of the opportunity to sleep in an extra hour or two. It may be the last and least exciting thing for us to consider doing with a Sunday morning. It does require something of a sacrifice.

Worship is something we do for God, not, in the first place, something that

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God does for us. For example, worship is not to be understood as a therapy that might help us get around some of our pressing anxieties. It is not to be seen as a form of glue or cement that holds the family or the nation together. It is not to be seized upon as an occasion that brings us into contact with nice people or helps to promote our standing or status in the community. It isn't even an experience that will necessarily inspire us to go outside and do something good for someone else.

It may be that one reason why worship doesn't turn us on more than it does is because we have not fully clarified our expectations regarding it. Some people expect worship to combine the best features of a coffee-break, a lecture, a concert, and a pep-rally. Don't misunderstand me - if someone comes to this church for some occasion of fellowship - a church dinner perhaps - and no one speaks to him, this then is very serious. But I have never felt that it was extremely serious if someone should come to worship and have very little human contact. I think I would worry more if in that experience of worship the individual departed feeling that he had had no contact at all with God.

Put this down then in your thoughts: worship is one of the responses we make to God for our creation, preservation and redemption. It is something we do as the community of faith on behalf of God's whole creation. It is an occasion for us to revel in God; to enjoy his presence; to hearken to His word; to celebrate His worth.

Obviously, there are side effects that are beneficial to the worshipper, chief of which in my judgment, is the ability of worship, when rightly practiced, to get us out of ourselves. Or, as C. S. Lewis once put it:

"To deliver us from the emotional perspective produced by one's own particular selfhood".

I feel that something fine and freeing can happen when in the sanctuary of God the minister opens the service by saying: "Let us worship God - in spirit and in truth". Forget the roast in the oven. Forget the fact that your mother-in-law threatens to come for a visit. Forget the fact that those stocks you nurse so lovingly are now depressed. Forget the fact that you and your mate have had some tension in your relationship. "Let us worship God".

This is why some of those verses from the sixth chapter of Isaiah have long been the paradigm for worship. "In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up". From there the worshipper goes on to an experience of his own unworthiness. ".....I am a man of unclean lips..." And finally he responds to a call that reaches him through that encounter. "Here am I! Send me".

In its essence - worship is not a means to anything else. Worship, ~~dear friends~~, is the one thing that we humans do that stands as an end in itself!

SOMETHING WE DO TOGETHER

Moreover, worship is something we do together. ~~It is not a continuation of one's private devotions. It is not in competition with one's private devotions.~~ Samuel Miller was guiding us wisely when he noted that in worship "we express together what we cannot say alone; we hear together what we cannot hear alone".

A problem with most of us in the Protestant tradition is that we tend to see worship as a performance by the few for the many. Kierkegaard, the Danish

theologian, pointed out that most people have an inverted idea of worship. They think of the congregation as an audience and the choir and the minister as the actors in a performance. "No" says Kierkegaard, "the audience is not the congregation. God is the audience. The congregation are the actors. The choir and the minister are merely the prompters"

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The principle of alternation is a vital part of worship - the minister speaking and the congregation responding. This is why through word and music there are many places and perhaps should be more in our service of worship where the congregation responds.

Worship is something we do for God. Second, it is something we do together. Third, worship is something that involves the whole man in the doing. You can measure a worship experience anywhere by whether at once that experience has stirred the emotions, engaged the intellect, and aroused the will. Worship must never be conceived as an emotional orgy in which we surround ourselves with the kind of language and music that make no demand upon the will or the intellect. At the same time, we must never think of the place where people gather for worship as an auditorium where words go from a man's mouth to the minds of those who listen without making any penetration of the feelings or the will.

re-born
We were speaking a few minutes ago about benefits that indirectly touch the worshipper. Perhaps the most important of these is what the worship does in a slow and gradual way to establish the set of the will. I fear that people come for an experience of worship, perhaps after a long absence, looking for some dramatic spiritual uplift or some dramatic correction of what is wrong in their life. I've always been intrigued by the ads put out by one of our language schools here in the city. The type is big, bold. The offer unqualified. The message is plain: "You can speak French by November 1st.- Six weeks". Sometimes I wish the church could be that direct. "You can have your inner life straightened out by November 1st - Six weeks!". Or, you - "You, too, can be like Jesus - All by December 25th". Or, ~~"You can save that relationship by Palm Sunday"~~. But it doesn't happen that way. When a man has commerce with His maker, the change that is established within is hardly perceptible on a daily basis. However, in a culminative way, it establishes that man within the purposes of God.

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A friend shared with me a cartoon that was in one of our magazines. A man is seated in front of a television set. The picture has misbehaved and the familiar words are seen: "Please Stand By". But above those words is the legend, "We have temporarily lost the will to continue". It is precisely at the point where man has lost the will to continue that the worship of God can give him a new beginning, a new centering moment, a new cause for going on.

What is worship: It is something we do for God. Something we do together. Something that involves all of us that there is.

CONTINUITY VERSUS CHANGE

worship?

Consider for a few moments the question: how do we strike a balance between continuity and change in

I think that a certain amount of tradition is good. Despite insistent pressures to the contrary, tradition is good. I'm glad that when I want to know something about electricity I don't have to go out in a storm with a kite and begin all over again. I find myself more sympathetic to Joseph Wood Krutch when he says:

"Those who are not only over thirty, but over sixty as well still take it for granted that there are some things that are not for a day, but for all time".

I sometimes have the feeling (and I could be wrong) that much that is offered in the way of new forms of worship nowadays is hardly more than a thinly disguised gimmickry that allows the worshipper to meet himself coming back. I confess, just for one, that I am not enthusiastically drawn to familiar terms of address for the deity. Slang does not appeal to me in this particular setting. And I wonder sometimes why we worry so much about trying to translate Scripture and prayer into what we call the idiom of our time.

Now I know that most of us are more familiar with subways than we are with sheep. But I can't believe that because of this we are disqualified from appreciating the 23rd Psalm. There is such a thing as memory that helps us make the translation existentially. David said: "The Lord is My Shepherd" and his words have reference even for those of us who ride the IRT and BMT. Sometimes the desire to be contemporary can leave us discontinuous with our heritage. The spirit of the age can block out the God of the ages.

On the other hand, there is little virtue in reiterating language and using thought forms that do not communicate today or induce participation. And it belongs to every local congregation to ask serious questions about how its worship should be ordered. The organ is not the only instrument proper to praise. There is no reason why the hymn book cannot be expanded and poets and composers commissioned to give us hymns that speak with greater power to our situation. There is no reason why an interpretive dance group cannot help us understand more fully the meaning, for example, of the Lord's Prayer. The Scripture can have renewed force and impact when they are read not by one man in isolation, but by a chorus of trained readers. Some of us here may remember the Speech Choir we had in the Summer of 1957 that interpreted the scriptures instead of having the minister read them. Parables of Jesus

All of this is by way of saying that within the church we should not be afraid to experiment with change in worship. Yet, I would hazard one word of caution: something very fine and vital in our church's life would be lost if the Sunday morning worship experience were to be decentralized.

completely

Worship is often poorly and shamefully done in this land. And I speak of both the Nave and the Chancel. Both preacher and parishioner can become very casual and haphazard in handling the things of worship. Yet, there is something so powerful at the heart of it that even though it is done in such a poor way so often we stay with it. I read recently that in South Dakota that in the Leeds gold mine there - only \$13.00 worth of gold is all that is garnered from one ton of ore. And still they work the mine!

WHAT CAN WE DO

If worship is something we do for God, if it has an element of sacrifice as the Psalmist suggested long ago, then perhaps what we need if we are to recapture its power is some discipline in the pulpit, in the lectern, in the pew. Here I think of discipline enough to prepare ourselves for worship, instead of dropping in after a long, late Saturday night experience. Discipline to anticipate that something can and will happen. On time. Discipline to bestir ourselves to participate in the experience with all we have as it comes to us. Discipline on the part of the preacher, too, to spend one hour of preparation on his sermon for every minute he preaches.

As we begin to launch a new season in our church, I would like to challenge you to make a promise to yourself that you will be present every Sunday - in so far as it is humanly possible - to celebrate in this sanctuary with us the worth of God.....and that you will bring to this experience your very best - of heart, of soul, of mind, and of strength. Has man outgrown his need for worship? No - we cannot outgrow worship because we cannot outgrow God!

William Law once put it this way:

"As everything is dark that God does not enlighten;
As everything is senseless that has not its share of knowledge from
Him;
As nothing lives but by partaking of life from Him;
As nothing exists but because He commands it to be -

So there is no glory or greatness but what is of the glory
and the greatness of God".

PRAYER

O God, Our Fa ther, since we become like what we worship, help us to worship only Thee. Break the fascination that binds us to our idols, that we behold Thee in thy holy love and in that light live each day. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen