

A Theology of Worship *By Matthew Haywood*

This essay seeks to develop a basic theology of worship. In developing a theology of worship, it is first important to define what worship is. After having a working definition in place, then one may proceed to the individual elements, or theological framework, of worship.

Regarding what worship is, many definitions have been put forth, such as David Peterson's definition in *Engaging with God* that worship is "an engagement with God on the terms that He proposes and in the way that He alone makes possible."¹ This is a great definition of what worship is, but perhaps David Nelson's definition takes it a little farther. Nelson defines worship as "the human response to the self-revelation of the triune God."² I like this definition because it identifies more clearly that it is God who initiates the relationship with man (i.e. "the self-revelation of God"). Nelson breaks this human response down into three areas. First, as was just mentioned, God initiates the encounter and "reveals Himself, His purposes, and His will."³ Nelson identifies this as an act of grace, and in light of man's sinfulness and God's holiness, indeed it is. Second, he identifies whom the relationship is with and by what power it is able to take place. It is a relationship, both spiritual and personal, "with the Father, through Jesus Christ, enabled by the Holy Spirit."⁴ Apart from the working of the Holy Spirit and the shed blood of Jesus, which grants access to the Father (Heb. 10:19-22; 13:12), we cannot have relationship with the God. That is why there was a need for the Old Testament sacrificial system, to point the way to the cross and provide a means of God being able to dwell among a sinful people. Finally, the worshipper responds to this revelation and provision of God with "joyful adoration,

¹ David Nelson class notes. *PMN6540: Ministry of Worship*. 2007

² *Ibid*, p.4.

³ *Ibid*.

⁴ *Ibid*.

reverence, humility, submission, and obedience” to God.⁵ Having this understanding of worship really helps us to weed out what is not worship and causes us to examine our worship services to identify any areas where we may need improvement, or where we may not be fully honoring God.

Having a definition of worship in place allows us to develop a theological framework of what worship should include and who may lead the church in worship. One of the most important elements of this framework is to have theological integrity. This consists of two parts: a biblical foundation and biblical elements. Regarding a biblical foundation, great effort is made on the part of many hymnal projects to analyze the lyrics of hymns and worship songs and to seek to include those in the hymnal that say what the Bible says. Despite the efforts of many of these godly men and women, errors can still creep in and if nothing more, a respect for their attempts should cause us to take a look at songs that we sing that are not a part of the hymnal, as well as those in the hymnal to judge them for theological soundness. Do they say what the Bible says and do they present a clear presentation of biblical truths? Second, it is important to include biblical elements in the worship service, such as baptism, the Lord’s Supper, prayer, and Scripture reading. This is not an exhaustive list, but an examination of the Scriptures will inform us as to what should be included.

In addition to having theological integrity in our worship, we should also have personal purity. I using our working definition of what worship is, we need to realize the extent to which God has gone, in order that we may have relationship with Him. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve had perfect fellowship with God and walked with Him in the cool of the day (Gen. 3:8). After their sins, Adam and Eve hid themselves from God’s presence (v.10). They realized the holiness of God. God made special provisions in the Old Testament to help the people realize the

⁵ Ibid.

severity of their sins and to point the way to the cross of Christ and the need for Messiah. With this in mind, we need not treat sin casually in the church, but should seek to have a pure church. This involves analyzing oneself, as is prescribed when observing the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:28), on a continuous basis and making sure that those who are engaged in worship leadership are living lives that match what they are singing. This also means that we sing songs that teach about man's sinfulness and God's holiness and have times of repentance and confession in the church. These opportunities will yield us to examine our own attitudes in worship and should help to motivate the worshipper and help change his attitude towards worship. We need to move away from viewing worship as simply singing songs and begin to understand it as involving the entire being in communion with God. The element of personal purity also manifests itself in making sure that laws and regulations are followed when it comes to things like media and copyright issues. We should never break laws to worship the supreme Lawgiver.

When these first two elements, theological integrity and personal purity, are in place, it helps the third aspect of the framework take place more easily. No one worships in isolation, therefore it is important to develop community in the church. The church should be composed of baptized and regenerate believers (personal purity) and should also have fellowship and community together. This involves sharing life together, which is time consuming. We can't just meet three times a week and expect to have a biblical fellowship with one another. We must live together and enjoy life together. We also need to edify one another in our worship services. Jesus stressed the importance of being in right relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ before giving a gift to the Lord (Matt. 5:23-24). We all have our differences, but it is through the power of the Holy Spirit living within us that we can overcome our differences and have fellowship together.

The fourth element of the framework is that we ought to develop artistic quality. Often churches may be composed of several large families that make up the majority of the population of that community. This is great, and should foster even more the sense of community. However, it can also create an environment in which we become too casual in the way we engage in worship. We may feel that since we are just surrounded by family and they know our flaws, we don't have to give our best and can make mistakes at will. While no one is perfect and mistakes will happen, we must remember that our worship is to the Lord and that we ought to offer our best to him. The Old Testament saints offered the best and first-fruits of their flocks to the Lord as an offering to Him, and there were very specific instructions given to the priests as to how they were to conduct the sacrificial system of the tabernacle. They never entered the holy of holies casually, but very reverently and with the prescribed order that God had given them, or they could lose their lives. We may not be struck down in one of our worship services for missing a note or singing off key, but we should certainly put our best into our worship. This involves time and practice. It involves having a beauty to our worship. There is nothing wrong with using technology and other items to enhance the worship, though they should never distract from them. However, these items used poorly and without a sense of excellency can certainly be distractions. These distractions are not honoring to God.

Finally, our worship should also include pastoral sensitivity. Whether it is the senior pastor or music pastor or worship leaders, it is important to realize that those who lead worship are to lead the flock into the presence of God with gentleness. We are to be examples and we are to demonstrate with our own worship how others should engage with God as well. This is an area that may take time to develop, and we will have a need to give a constant call to return to a biblical theology of worship. As Robert Robinson puts it, "prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone

to leave the God I love; here's my heart, Lord, take and seal it, seal it for Thy courts above."⁶

May we return to a biblical theology of worship and may God empower us through His Holy Spirit to worship Him for what Christ has done for us on the cross.

⁶ Words from "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing" by Robert Robinson.