

Let the Lord Define Worship

THERE ARE no physical elements or actions in New Testament worship apart from baptism and the Lord's Supper, which were ordained by the Saviour only as figures. Thus the Lord keeps to His own words — 'God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.' It should be obvious from this that we cannot worship by dancing or by any other physical action. (Dancing and hand raising will be touched upon in later chapters.)

We have already repeatedly observed that worship cannot be conveyed by melody or instruments, music being no more than a wonderful help in the singing of praise. So, we should never abandon or minimise words, and try to worship through music instead. Another biblical source for this principle is found in the last book of the Bible where the worship of believers both in Heaven and on earth is portrayed in a magnificent, spectacular vision.

The Lord's own definition of worship is set out in remarkable detail in a vision given to John, recorded in *Revelation* chapters 4 and 5. These chapters present a view of God's rule over His Church, and also of the Church's worship. At the centre of the scene is the glorious throne of God, with all three Persons of the Trinity present there (*Revelation* 4.2 and 5; 5.1 and 6). Exalted language is used to describe the throne, which projects powerful phenomena symbolising the attributes of God.

Around the throne appear four 'beasts' or living creatures, most usually identified as God's cherubim of justice protecting the holiness of God (*Revelation* 4.6-9). Also, before the throne is a great sea of glass, representing (according to most interpreters) the atoning merits and the offered-up righteousness of Jesus Christ — the only means of approaching the throne (*Revelation* 4.6).

Outside and around that sea of glass, often pictured as forming a vast circle, are twenty-four elders, very obviously representing twelve patriarchs and twelve apostles — in other words, all believers of both Testaments. This is the Church, both Jew and Gentile, past, present and future; the entire company of redeemed people (*Revelation* 4.4 and 10). Outside and around that circle is the angelic host, numbering ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands.

In the course of this vision we discover how God's people, both in Heaven and upon earth, worship God. The choice of words is of tremendous significance. In *Revelation* 4.8 we read of how the cherubim of justice, perhaps the very highest angels, worship. 'And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, SAYING, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty.' The word to notice is that single word — 'saying'.

They *said* their worship. (We shall take this up in due course.) In verses 10 and 11 we read of how the Church of all ages worships. 'The four and twenty elders fall down before him... and cast their crowns before the throne, SAYING, Thou art worthy, O Lord.' They *spoke* their worship.

In chapter 5.8-9 we read: 'And when he had taken the book, the four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials

full of odours, which are the prayers of saints. And they SUNG a new song.? They sang words of worship.

In verses 11 and 12 we are told how the main company of angels worship. ‘And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne and the beasts and the elders: and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands; SAYING with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb.’ They *spoke* forth their magnificent statement of adoration.

In verse 13, the record says that every person and every angel, possibly including both good and evil, will acknowledge (gladly or as defeated beings) that God is over all, and they will do so in intelligent words. ‘And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I SAYING, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne.’ In the very next verse we are told once again that the ‘four beasts SAID’. This is the worship of God in both Heaven and earth. They all *said* or *sang*.

In this vision of true worship, we see only one form of worship — and that is words. We must affirm this most emphatically — *worship is words*. Worship is not words *and* music. Music assists, but the efficacious or valid part is the words, whether thought, said or sung. There is no other vehicle of worship aside from words. The rational mind is the seat of worship. Certainly, worship is by faith and love, but it has to be in words, and this fact is a central standard of historic biblical Christianity. This is why the Reformation cast aside Roman Catholic theatricalism.

When we say that the Bible defines worship as something expressible in intelligible words, a query arises about praying with ‘groanings which cannot be uttered’, mentioned by Paul in *Romans* 8. Is this not prayer without words? The answer is, no, for the simple reason that these groanings are not ours, but those of the Holy Spirit. With our words we pray, and the Holy Spirit sifts them, translates them into the language of Heaven, and conveys them to the eternal throne on our behalf. We do not know what to pray for, or how to pray as we ought, but the Holy Spirit takes our stumbling efforts, beautifies and perfects them, and presents them before the Father.

We should never say, therefore, ‘I may pray just by feeling, even though I cannot express it in words.’ It may happen that a believer feels so strongly about something that his feelings seem to outpace his mind. But if he were asked — ‘What were you praying for just then?’ — he would be able to reply. There is no prayer that cannot be put into words. We pray, says Paul, with the understanding. Every genuine prayer passes through the rational mind. This alone is true worship. Anything other than this is mystical worship — the very essence of occult religion — and is not historic biblical Christianity.

It is a matter of fact that if this chapter had been written 100 years ago, most Bible-believing readers would have thought it too obvious to be printed. They all knew this. It was fundamental to them that *worship is words*. In recent times, tragically, this principle has been so widely forgotten that even some ministers are not aware of it! Great fundamentals have slipped out of sight. If Christians of a few generations past were to be resurrected today, they would be amazed at the scene.

In my now rather elderly book *The Healing Epidemic*,* I have a chapter called ‘The Law of the Sound Mind’, a topic of pressing relevance to ecstatic worship, or the stirring up of feelings by physical means. The chapter title came from Paul’s words to Timothy — ‘For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.’ It is about the centrality of the sound mind. Very strong feelings should be exercised in our worship, but should always arise from and support the intelligent thoughts of our mind. We must feel things because we think them. If we truly understand and mean the words, then the Holy Spirit (Who inspires all genuine worship) will touch our minds so that we see these things even more clearly, and He will also touch our hearts so that we *feel* what we see all the more strongly. The emotional system is a system of support and response. It is not the prime mover in worship. It must never be stirred into action or ‘worked up’ by musical techniques.

In the pastoral epistles, the apostle Paul makes many exhortations about sound-mindedness. He calls for rational control at all times. He insists on sensible words and thoughts. He says that the rational faculty must always be switched on. By these exhortations he condemns purely sentimental worship (and trances also). This matter is so important that the apostle goes to the length of making separate exhortations to ministers, older men, older women, younger men and younger women. He repeatedly makes this call to keep the mind at work. In *I Corinthians* he tells us that we pray and sing in the spirit, but always with the understanding also. In worship we think and comprehend.

Guided by the Lord’s own definition and picture of true worship, we do not major on instrumental excitement and pleasure, but meaningful word-content in hymns, prayers, and preaching. Here will be the deep things of God, and distinctive reverence, power and glory.

Is traditional worship too cerebral?

One well-known writer critiquing modern worship rightly charged its promoters with ‘dumbing down’ worship. The promoters claim that traditional worship is too cerebral, and its defenders are held captive by matters of ‘taste’. Theologian John Frame says the trouble with defenders of traditional worship is that they are musical and theological snobs. But it is not snobbery to be alarmed at the new worship. John Frame tells us he is delighted with choruses and other short, repetitive songs simply because there are very few thoughts in them. For him this is a virtue. He takes a verse from a hymn of Wesley and pronounces it inferior to a conspicuously vapid chorus as a means of efficient communication. His problem with Wesley and Watts and every other traditional hymn writer is that they say far too much. No one, apparently, can grasp all their thoughts, for they are too numerous and too sophisticated. Millions of believers over the centuries have (in Frame’s opinion) been left behind by over-complex worship.

Frame attempts some curious interpretations of Scripture to justify his denigration of great hymns. He looks at Job, noting the fine speeches he prepared to hurl at God when the opportunity arose. But when Job heard God’s voice, he put his hand over his mouth, and choked out the simplest words. Says Frame — that is the right way. That is the difference between traditional worship and new worship. *Traditional* is like Job’s fine speeches, and *contemporary worship* is evidently what Job should have done all along. It all proves that the fewest words and the strongest feelings are best. Moses and Isaiah are also brought into the argument by John Frame. They fell silent before the Lord, and said very little. This fact apparently supports the shortage of meaningful words in contemporary Christian worship. Such arguments will strike most readers as being irrelevant and even absurd, but we have not

yet seen an advocate of new worship who can offer anything more credible. They simply cannot find scriptural support for the downgrading of words.

Writers like John Frame say repeatedly that we must be biblical in these matters, but they never refer to the Lord's own hymnbook — the *Psalms* — in deciding what hymns should be like. It is a fact that the 'mathematics' of the *Psalms* are quite closely represented in most traditional evangelical hymnbooks. The complexity factor is similar, the ratio of praise to petition is strikingly close, and the same range of topics is accommodated. This is surprising, as it is unlikely that all editors sought a conscious correlation. It surely indicates the natural psalm-like balance of traditional reformed worship. However, the song books of the new worship scene in no way reflect the balance of the *Psalms*. New worship songs almost cry out against the balance and structure of the *Psalms*. It is worth noting, for example, that the modern chorus has no equivalent in the *Psalms*, as our table at the end of this chapter shows. We value choruses for children, but should they be found in adult worship, when the Lord never inspired any? Are our traditional hymns too complex? When God compiled a hymnbook for an agricultural people (who were probably 95% illiterate), He gave them not a book of choruses, but the book of *Psalms*. (We are not, of course, objecting to choruses that appear as refrains at the end of hymn verses, but to the substituting of hymns with choruses.)

There is a world of difference between 'traditional' worship and new worship at this point. If we bring short choruses with oft-repeated lines and shallow sentiments into adult worship, we severely strain the Lord's demand for meaningful understanding of profound and glorious truths.

From the Psalter all the way down to the Reformation, and through subsequent centuries, great hymns (contrary to what is claimed by new worship promoters) have been clearly understood and appreciated by the Lord's people. Indeed, hymns have lifted up Christians not only spiritually but even intellectually. The Bible first, and godly hymns second, have taught the great truths of the Word, liberating generations from ignorance and naivety, and articulating intelligent praise. Today, the new worship is pulling believers down to an intellectual and spiritual level lower than ever before in church history.

Our point throughout this chapter is that the only vehicle of worship is intelligible thoughts and words. Contemporary or new worship discards this central fact, minimising the role of the mind and emphasising the artificial stimulation of feelings.

The Psalter is Nothing Like a Book of Choruses

All psalms (except five) contain sufficient matter to be converted into paraphrases or hymns of at least five hymn-stanzas in short or common metre. Most psalms are *much* longer than this. Only the following psalms (3%) have fewer than five verses, and these cannot be regarded as choruses for the following reasons:

Psalm 117 (2 verses). Obviously a closing doxology, either for singing at the end of other psalms or the

Temple services.

Psalm 123 (4 verses). This is still too long for a chorus, with too much matter. Lyte's 'Unto Thee I lift my eyes' tracks this psalm in four verses.

Psalm 131 (3 verses). A very personal psalm to be uttered in great humility. Designed to be sung annually by pilgrims going up to Jerusalem, it is utterly unlike a modern chorus.

Psalm 133 (3 verses). Another annual pilgrimage song, this has the character of a 'grace' for meals, or for times when relations gather in reunion.

Psalm 134 (3 verses). Last of the pilgrim songs, this is an antiphonal blessing. In verses 1-2 the people bless the priests and Levites, and in verse 3 the latter reply.

The refrain of *Psalm 136*

Each verse of *Psalm 136* (26 verses) includes the refrain, 'For his mercy endureth for ever'. This is not a chorus, because each time it occurs it accompanies a line making a fresh, substantial point. A similar refrain is found in the first four verses of *Psalm 118*. Nowhere else does this occur in the Psalter.

**The Healing Epidemic,*

Dr. Peter Masters, Wakeman Trust, 1988, Metropolitan Tabernacle London.