



CHAPTER 1

PREACHING AS WORSHIP

The Heart of Christian Worship

The subject of worship is now one of the most controversial issues in the local congregation, if a survey of the literature on worship, and the conversations currently taking place among the churches are true indicators. In fact, many current book titles in evangelical publishing suggest that what the church faces today is “worship warfare.” That very phrase—the combination of the words *worship* and *war*—should lead us to very sincere and sober reflection.

It is true that worship has led to some warfare. In local congregations we see not only confusion but also fighting, controversy, and splitting. And what is the meaning of all this? My concern is that the issue of worship will define not only our church services but also our theology and our beliefs about God. There is no more important issue for the church of the Lord Jesus Christ than that we worship God as He Himself would have us to worship.

And just how do we do that? Most evangelicals would quickly

agree that worship is central to the life of the church, but beyond that, there would be no consensus to several unavoidable questions: What is worship? And what does God desire that we should do in worship? Though most evangelicals mention the preaching of the Word as a necessary or customary part of worship, the prevailing model of worship in evangelical churches is increasingly defined by music, along with innovations such as drama and video presentations. Preaching has in large part retreated, and a host of entertaining innovations have taken its place.

Any consideration of Christian preaching must begin with the realization that *preaching is essentially an act of worship*. Therefore, to understand what is required of us as preachers, we must first understand what it means to worship. The Lord Himself reminded us that God seeks those worshipers who will worship Him in spirit and truth (John 4:23). But what does it mean to worship God in spirit? What does it mean to worship Him in truth? And how does preaching fit into all that?

LINKING WORSHIP WITH THEOLOGY

Worshiping God in truth is fundamentally a matter of theology. Yet theology is by definition not an ivory-tower discipline. It is not merely a form of academic discourse. When rightly conducted, theology is the conversation of the people of God seeking to understand the Lord whom we worship and to know how He wills to be worshiped. Geoffrey Wainwright of Duke University made this point poignantly when he entitled his systematic theology book *Doxology*. Theology and worship are inextricably linked.

Thus we should be reminded that the purpose of the theologian—and the preacher—is to serve the church so that the people of God worship Him more faithfully. By understanding God's revelation in His Word, we know how He would wish to be worshiped. So we might ask in that light, what are the proper conditions of evangelical worship? Those persons who claim to be established in the gospel and

submitted to the Word of God, how should they worship?

We know the history of worship through the ages. We know what took place in the Reformation and what transpired in the English reforms. We know what took place as features were stripped away that were considered to be unbiblical, and yet now in so many ways we see those same things returning. What is the condition of evangelical worship today? In answer to that question, it is not an exaggeration to suggest words such as *pandemonium*, *confusion*, and *consternation*.

In the midst of the upheaval, there is a great deal of perspective to be found from reading the late A. W. Tozer. This is what he said some decades ago:

We have the breezy, self-confident Christians with little affinity for Christ and His cross. We have the joy-bell boys that can bounce out there and look as much like a game show host as possible. Yet, they are doing it for Jesus' sake?! The hypocrites! They're not doing it for Jesus' sake at all; they are doing it in their own carnal flesh and are using the church as a theater because they haven't yet reached the place where the legitimate theater would take them.¹

Tozer takes his argument further:

It is now common practice in most evangelical churches to offer the people, especially the young people, a maximum of entertainment and a minimum of serious instruction. It is scarcely possible in most places to get anyone to attend meeting where the only attraction is God. One can only conclude that God's professed children are bored with Him, for they must be wooed to meeting with a stick of striped candy in the form of religious movies, games and refreshments.

This has influenced the whole pattern of church life, and even brought into being a new type of church architecture designed to house the golden calf.

So we have the strange anomaly of orthodoxy in creed and

heterodoxy in practice. The striped-candy technique has been so fully integrated into our present religious thinking that it is simply taken for granted. Its victims never dream that it is not a part of the teachings of Christ and His apostles.

Any objection to the carryings-on of our present golden calf Christianity is met with the triumphant reply, “But we are winning them!” And winning them to what? To true discipleship? To cross-carrying? To self-denial? To separation from the world? To crucifixion of the flesh? To holy living? To nobility of character? To a despising of the world’s treasures? To hard self-discipline? To love for God? To total committal to Christ? Of course, the answer to all these questions is “no.”²

These words were written several decades ago, but Tozer certainly saw the future.

BEING CAREFUL NOT TO CORRUPT OUR WORSHIP

Kent Hughes, senior pastor emeritus of College Church in Wheaton, Illinois, has also written perceptively on this issue. Hughes put it this way:

The unspoken but increasingly common assumption of today’s Christendom is that worship is primarily for us—to meet our needs. Such worship services are entertainment focused, and the worshipers are uncommitted spectators who are silently grading the performance. From this perspective preaching becomes a homiletics of consensus—preaching to felt needs—man’s conscious agenda instead of God’s. Such preaching is always topical and never textual. Biblical information is minimized, and the sermons are short and full of stories. Anything and everything that is suspected of making the marginal attender uncomfortable is removed from the service. . . . Taken to the *n*th degree, this philosophy instills a tragic self-centeredness. That is, everything is judged by how it affects man. This terribly corrupts one’s theology.³

Hughes is right. Our confused worship corrupts our theology, and our weak theology corrupts our worship. Are these voices alarmist? They do mean to sound an alarm. But there are many others who are saying, “Don’t worry. Be happy. Go worship.” One recent church growth author has written:

Does God care
how He is
worshiped?

Worship is like a car to get us from where we are to where God wants us to be. Transportation and communication are imperative; the mode or vehicle is not imperative. Some worship God in cathedrals with the rich traditional organ tones of Bach and Feuer from the classics of Europe. They travel in a Mercedes Benz. Some worship God in simple wooden churches with a steeple pointing heavenward. They sing the gospel songs of Charles Wesley or Fanny Cosby. They travel in a Ford or Chevy. Some worship God with the contemporary sounds of praise music with a gentle beat. They travel in a convertible sports coupe. Some worship God to the whine of a guitar and the amplifiers to the max. They travel on a motorcycle, without a muffler.⁴

But surely there is more to worship than the spectrum of taste from a Mercedes Benz to a motorcycle. There must be something weightier here. “Worship is like a car to get us from where we are to where God wants us to be.” Can that be said with a straight face as we listen to the Scripture speak of worship?

We know from the onset that there are many different Christian opinions concerning worship. This does not come to us as news. But the real issue is whether God Himself has an opinion on this issue. Does God care how He is worshiped? Or is He some kind of *laissez-faire* deity who cares not how His people worship Him but instead is happy with the hope that some people somewhere will worship Him in some way?

Scripture reveals that God in fact does care how His people worship Him. Leviticus 10:1–3 (NASB) serves as a witness to this point.

Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took their respective firepans, and after putting fire in them, placed incense on it and offered strange fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them. And fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, “It is what the Lord spoke, saying, ‘By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, and before all the people I will be honored.’”

Nadab and Abihu were Aaron’s sons. They were priests and so had every right to offer sacrifices to God in worship. But they did what God had not commanded them to do. They brought strange fire to the altar, and because of that they were consumed. Clearly then, God does have an opinion about worship. He is a jealous God—a God who loves us, but a God who also instructs and commands His people to worship Him rightly.

Scripture makes clear that worship is something we do, not just something we *attend*. It is not merely an issue for the pastor and other ministers, nor for the musicians and those who plan the service. Worship is an issue for the entire congregation, for worship is something we do together. It is our corporate and common responsibility to worship God as He desires.

A PATTERN FOR WORSHIP FROM GOD’S WORD

Where then shall we turn for instruction on how we ought to worship? There is only one place we can turn, and that is to the Word of God. The norm of our worship must be the Word of God, the Word that He Himself has spoken. As we turn to this Word, we see a pattern of acceptable worship, a pattern that is repeated throughout the fabric of Scripture from beginning to end. Scripture is, as the Reformers confessed, *norma normans non normata*, “the norm of norms which can-

not be normed.” That is what we mean when we say “*sola scriptura*”—that Scripture is the norm of our worship. There is nothing external to Scripture that can “norm” or correct it.

Scripture itself sets the terms, and so we turn to the Bible to learn how God would have us worship.

HOW AUTHENTIC WORSHIP BEGINS: A TRUE VISION OF THE LIVING GOD

In Isaiah 6:1–8, we are given a picture of authentic worship, one that teaches us what God expects of His people when they worship Him. First of all, the prophet Isaiah experienced a theophany, a vision of the true and living God. And if we are to worship God as He would have us to worship, we also must see God as He is. Right worship begins with a vision of the one true and living God.

Isaiah recounts that it was in the year of King Uzziah’s death that he saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. The throne is a symbol of kingship and sovereignty, indicating that the one who sits upon it is both king and judge. It represents both power and righteousness. But there is even more, for the One whose train filled the temple is not alone. Verse 2 tells us that “above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.” The six wings of these seraphim—which literally means “burning ones”—convey a great deal of symbolism.

The wings with which they covered their faces must certainly indicate humility, while the covering of the feet represents purity. The seraphim knew in whose presence they were, and they dared not look into His face.

He is what we are
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These winged creatures are not merely flying, hovering there in silence. They call out to one another, saying, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of His glory!” Those words—“Holy, Holy, Holy”—are known as the “trisagion.” In the Hebrew language there is no adequate comparative or superlative form, so repetition is used in this way in order to make a point. This thrice-repeated pattern occurs again in Revelation 4:8–11: “And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes around and within; and day and night they do not cease to say, Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come” (NASB). The early church saw in this pattern a reference to the Trinity, and looking back with New Testament eyes, we can certainly understand that affirmation. But the central point of this construction seems to be one of emphasis.

Take Genesis 14:10, for example, where the original Hebrew speaks of someone falling into a “pit-pit.” That construction may be translated as a “deep and great pit.” It is one thing to fall into a pit, but it is quite another to fall into a “pit-pit”! The point is that when the seraphim call out, “Holy, Holy, Holy,” they are declaring God’s essence, identity, and being in terms of an all-surpassing holiness.

The holiness of God refers to His separateness from His creation. He is what we are not. We are finite; He is infinite. In other words, God is transcendent, and His holiness reveals the difference and the infinite contrast between His nature and ours. J. Alec Motyer defines holiness as “God’s total and unique moral majesty.” What a wonderful expression! God’s moral majesty is complete and without rival. E. J. Young similarly suggests that holiness is the entirety of the divine perfection that separates God from His creation. That which is almost beyond our definition is what makes God, God. Holiness includes all God’s attributes. His holiness is what defines Him.

I wonder if the vision of God held by so many who come to worship is anything like what the seraphim are telling us here. Do we worship with the understanding that God is holy and that “the whole earth is full of His glory”? I fear not. I wonder if in our worship we encounter

anything like this vision of God. Do those who come to our services of worship come face-to-face with the reality of God? Or do they go away with a vision of some lesser God, some dehydrated deity? Worship is the people of God gathering together to confess His worthiness, His “worth-ship.” How can we do that if we do not make clear who God is? Our very pattern of worship must testify to the character of God.

Worship has both objective and subjective components. Certainly worship is subjective. There is a personal, individual experience to be had in worship. But Scripture also makes clear that the subjective experience of worship must be predicated on the objective truth of the true and living God, the God who has revealed Himself in Scripture.

Roger Scruton, a well-known British philosopher, has suggested that worship is the most important indicator of what a person or group of people really believes about God. He writes: “God is defined in the act of worship far more precisely than he is defined by any theology.”⁵ In other words, if you want to know what a people really believe about God, don’t spend time reading their theologians. Watch them worship. Listen to what they sing and to how they pray. Then you will know what they believe about this God whom they worship.

I am haunted by the thought that in the average evangelical church, the God of the Bible would never be known by watching us worship. Instead, what we have in so many churches is “McWorship” of a “McDeity.” But what kind of God is that superficial, that weightless, and that insignificant? Would an observer have any idea of the God of the Bible from our worship? I wonder at times if this is an accidental development, or if it is an intentional evasion.

George Hunter III suggests that a thriving church must practice “celebrative worship.” He offers two reasons: “1) To provide a celebration to

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which pre-Christians can relate and find meaning. 2) To remove the cringe factor by providing a service our people would love to invite their friends to, rather than a service they would dread inviting their friends to.”⁶ Here is a fascinating reversal. The purpose of celebrative worship, first, is to provide “a celebration to which pre-Christians can relate.” But, second, he suggests removing anything he identifies as “the cringe factor” by providing a service to which our people would love to invite their friends, not one where the thought of inviting their friends would lead to a feeling of dread.

But isn't there a great deal of the *cringe factor* in Scripture? If you are going to remove the cringe factor from Scripture, then you are going to end up with a very thin book. Hebrews 10:31 reveals that “it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (NASB). I wonder if there is anything that could even be remotely described as “terrifying” about the God we present in our “cringeless” worship. Just look at the decline of majesty and awe in evangelical hymnody. There we see a surrender of conviction and accommodation to the culture, which is really nothing less than a “dumbing down” of the contents of our songs. We have gone from “Holy, Holy, Holy” to “God the Swell Fellow.”

And what is the result of this kind of accommodated Christianity? I quote Tozer again:

We have simplified until Christianity amounts to this: God is love; Jesus died for you; believe, accept, be jolly, have fun and tell others. And away we go—that is the Christianity of our day. I would not give a plug nickel for the whole business of it. Once in a while God has a poor bleeding sheep that manages to live on that kind of thing and we wonder how.⁷

True worship begins with a vision of the God of the Bible—a vision of the one true and living God.

WHERE AUTHENTIC WORSHIP LEADS: CONFESSION OF SIN

Not only does authentic worship begin with a true vision of the living God, but second, authentic worship leads to a confession of sin, both individual and corporate. This is also clear in Isaiah 6:5 (NASB). Seeing God on His throne, Isaiah said, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips. Because my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.” Isaiah was “undone” when he saw the true and living God in His holiness. He came to know the majestic, moral nature of this God, and he came to see God’s righteousness and holiness. In doing so, Isaiah automatically saw his own utter sinfulness. He could not understand himself as anything but a sinner who was undone, dissolved, silenced. He saw himself doomed to die.

I want to suggest that this must happen in our worship as well. If we do not come face-to-face with our sin as individuals and as a congregation, we have not seen God, and we have not worshiped Him. For when we meet God in worship, we see ourselves as God sees us. We see ourselves as sinners. Psalm 51:1–4 models this kind of confession:

Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are justified when You speak and blameless when You judge. (NASB)

Any parent knows the difference between a genuine apology and a get-off-the-hook apology—a quick “sorry, sorry” as the child runs off down the hall. What Isaiah experienced was true conviction and repentance, the contrite and broken heart of one who knows he or she

has done wrong and has insulted the one true and living God. Yet I fear that so much of what we think is confession is not confession at all. It is merely a hasty half apology, not the kind of brokenness we see in Psalm 51 or Isaiah 6. We must be brought face-to-face with our sin.

WHERE AUTHENTIC WORSHIP LEADS: PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL

Third, authentic worship will lead to a display of redemption, by which I mean the proclamation of the gospel. What we see in Isaiah 6:6–7 is a display of redemption: “Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: ‘Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.’”

This scene is clearly an anticipation of the work of Christ. It is a unilateral act of God, a unilateral propitiatory sacrifice. It is a picture of atonement. Isaiah brought absolutely nothing to God. He had been

brought face-to-face with his sin, and he now realizes that redemption is all of grace, and that it is costly. The coal, after all, came from the altar of sacrifice, not from a campfire.

Martin Luther said that Isaiah saw himself first as he truly is—a sinner who was undone—and next as one who knows redemption. Luther states, “But it turned out for the salvation of the prophet that he was thus thrust down to hell, so that he

might be led away and lead others away from that uncleanness of the Law to the purity of Christ, so that he alone might reign. Here now a resurrection from the dead takes place.”⁸ That must happen in our worship as well. True worship requires seeing the true and living God,

Turning to God through confession, we experience the display and declaration of redemption.

and then seeing ourselves as we actually are in our sinfulness. Turning to God through confession, we experience the display and declaration of redemption.

True worship always proclaims the gospel, the good news of what God has done in Jesus Christ. It proclaims the work of Christ, and it centers in the cross. With the apostle Paul we say, “In the cross of Christ we glory.” We proclaim liberty to the captive, and grace and pardon to all who believe in His name.

WHAT AUTHENTIC WORSHIP REQUIRES: A RESPONSE

Fourth, given what God has done, authentic worship requires a response. Isaiah recounts, “Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?’ Then I said, ‘Here am I! Send me!’” (v. 8 *NASB*). We see in this passage a sending out similar to that in Matthew 28:18–20, when the Lord commanded His disciples, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore . . .” Those disciples were to go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that He commanded them. Worship calls for an ongoing response seen in the proclamation of the gospel in personal evangelism and in missions. If our worship is weakened, our missionary witness will be weakened as well. We will forget the God who has sent us, and we will neglect the content of the message of redemption with which He has sent us.

One recent writer on worship has commented, “It is not *how* you worship. It’s *who* you worship.” I would argue that the *who* determines the *how*. Perhaps that is why so many churches have rejected, or at least neglected, the central component of Christian worship—the preaching of the Word. I realize it might seem bold—and maybe even shocking to some—to say that preaching is the central component of Christian worship. But how could it be otherwise? For it is primarily through the preaching of Scripture that we come to a true vision of the living God,

recognize our own sinfulness, hear the declaration of redemption, and are called to a response of faith, repentance, and service.

Despite all that, most outside observers would probably guess that it is music that stands at the center of our worship. The fact is music now fills the empty space in most evangelical worship and provides most of the energy in the worship service. Intense planning, financial resources, and preparation are invested in the musical dimensions of

The heart of Christian worship is the authentic preaching of the Word of God.

worship. Professional staff and an army of volunteers spend much of the week in rehearsals and practice sessions, as many evangelical churches seem intensely concerned to replicate studio-quality musical presentations. All this is not lost on the congregation. Some Christians actually “shop churches” in order to find one that offers a worship style and

experience that fits their expectation. In most communities, churches are known for their worship styles and musical programs. Those dissatisfied with what they find at one church can quickly move to another, sometimes using the language of self-expression to explain that the new church “meets our needs” or “allows us to worship.”

A concern for true biblical worship was at the very heart of the Reformation. But even Martin Luther, who wrote hymns and required his preachers to be trained in song, would not recognize this modern preoccupation with music as legitimate or healthy. Why? *Because the Reformers were convinced that the heart of true biblical worship was the preaching of the Word of God.*

Music is one of God’s most precious gifts to His people, and it is a language by which we may worship God in spirit and in truth. The hymns of the faith convey rich confessional and theological content, and many modern choruses recover a sense of doxology formerly lost in many evangelical churches. But music is not the central act of Christian worship—nor is evangelism, nor even the ordinances. The heart

of Christian worship is the authentic preaching of the Word of God.

This centrality of preaching is seen in both testaments of Scripture. It was the apostle Paul, for example, who told Timothy in no uncertain terms, “I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom, Preach the Word!” In Nehemiah 8, as we will see in more detail in the next chapter, we find a remarkable portrait of expository preaching, when the people demand that Ezra the scribe bring the book of the law to the assembly. Ezra stands on a raised platform and reads from the book of the law, “translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading” (Nehemiah 8:8 NASB). When he opens the book to read, the assembly rises to its feet in honor of the Word of God, and their response to the reading is to answer, “Amen, Amen!”

In far too many churches, the Bible is nearly silent.

This text is a sobering indictment of much contemporary Christianity. According to the text, a demand for biblical preaching erupted within the hearts of the people. They gathered as a congregation and summoned the preacher. This reflects an intense hunger and thirst for the preaching of the Word of God. Where is this desire evident among today’s evangelicals? Moreover, where is the faithfulness of preachers to confront their people with the preached Word of God? There seems to be a sense that people will be more affected by the gospel if it is presented in a slickly produced multimedia production, or even if we dispense with preaching altogether in favor of a purely subjective and emotional worship “experience.” Yet what was it that brought the Israelites to their God-honoring response of “Amen, Amen!”? It was the exposition of the Word. Ezra did not stage an event or orchestrate a spectacle. He simply and carefully proclaimed the Word of God.

In far too many churches, the Bible is nearly silent. The public

reading of Scripture has been dropped from many services, and the sermon has been sidelined, reduced to a brief devotional appended to the music. Many preachers accept this as a necessary concession to the age of entertainment, and are thus left with the modest hope of including a brief message of encouragement or exhortation before the conclusion of the service.

Michael Green pointedly put the problem like this: “This is the age of the sermonette, and sermonettes make Christianettes.”⁹ The anemia of evangelical worship—all the music and energy aside—is directly attributable to the absence of genuine expository preaching. If we as pastors are truly serious about giving our people a true vision of God, showing them their own sinfulness, proclaiming to them the gospel of Jesus Christ, and encouraging them to obedient service in response to that gospel, then we will devote our lives to preaching the Word. That is our task and our calling—to confront our congregations with nothing less than the living and active Word of God, and to pray that the Holy Spirit will thereby open eyes, convict consciences, and apply that Word to human hearts.