

Whatever Happened to Worship?

Psalm 150:1-6 *NKJ Psalm 150:1 Praise the LORD! Praise God in His sanctuary; Praise Him in His mighty firmament! ² Praise Him for His mighty acts; Praise Him according to His excellent greatness! ³ Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet; Praise Him with the lute and harp! ⁴ Praise Him with the timbrel and dance; Praise Him with stringed instruments and flutes! ⁵ Praise Him with loud cymbals; Praise Him with clashing cymbals! ⁶ Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD!*

Back in 1962, a pastor preached a series of sermons entitled "Worship, the Chief End of Man". They eventually were compiled into a book entitled "Whatever Happened to Worship?" His premise was simple – our churches are busy, our churches may even be full, but we are not busy with worship. We have attenders, but not adorers. We have adherents, but not admirers. We have workers, but not worshippers.

That was fifty years ago. The half-century since then has not improved things. Worship is a dying art, if not a lost one. I don't mean that there aren't a lot of people doing things they call worship. I don't doubt that there are a lot of people *interested* in worship but that doesn't count as worship.

How do I know that we are still where Tozer said we are? Let me bring a few pieces of evidence to the table. Look at the faces of teens and youth during church. Look at their expressions. Tozer said, "Worship is to feel in your heart and express in some appropriate manner a humbling but delightful sense of admiring awe and astonished wonder and overpowering love in the presence of ... Our Father Which Art in Heaven..." Do they look like people who are adoring, who are admiring, who are in wonder, in awe, in raptured attention? Do they look like people who have been charmed by the beauty of God, who are humbled, intimidated even by His glory and might? Or do they look bored? Just for contrast, catch them afterwards, and ask them about cars, clothes, gadgets, movies, pop stars, food. Watch the life come back into their eyes. The glazed look they had while we sang of God's glory disappears and they light up with interest over the things they really know and love. I mention the youth because the youth are the most visible result of what our churches and families are producing. Our youth are a living test of what is being cultivated. But of course, the problem is not limited to them. Look at the faces of the adults, and then listen to Christians as they speak to one another. What do we hold in awe? What do we delight in? What transfixes our gaze, and fills our heart, so that we are almost interrupting each other to heap praise on it? Is it God? Is it Christ and his Work? Is it the Triune God? Whatever happened to worship?

The second piece of evidence I bring to you is that the church today is doing everything but focussing on worship. We have programs and organised ministries till they could fill two pages of a church bulletin just listing them out. Ministries for toddlers, and pre-schoolers, for primary school and youth, for young adults, and young marrieds, young families, men's and women's, seniors, and divorced, and sports ministries and hunting ministries... Find an activity, and there's some church somewhere that has a Christian spin on it to, supposedly, attract the lost, and keep up the flagging interest of the professing Christians. So we tailor-make our churches for every taste and target-market and demographic, and we end up filling churches with hundreds, maybe thousands of people. But do those people come to adore God? Do they come because they have been intoxicated with the beauty of Christ and are chasing Him as a thirsty deer hunts for the rushing stream? No, we don't have worshippers, we have consumers. We have people who judge a church by the quality of its children's programs, or its youth programs. We have people who come and judge the church on what kind of friendly attention was lavished on them when they arrived. We have people who come and judge the church based on the convenience of the seating, or the parking, or how much the band reminded them of the radio on the morning drive. These are the attitudes that consumers have, not

worshippers. And the modern church does not confront and oppose these attitudes - it cultivates and feeds and strengthens them, posing as some kind of service organisation, some kind of business where the customer is king, rather than a house of worship where people offer a sacrifice of praise.

The third piece of evidence I bring to you today is that among Christians we can no longer even agree on what it is to worship. Visit just a sample of churches within a twenty square kilometre radius of where you are, and watch what happens on Sunday mornings. Compare the experiences. Some think worship is singing about what great and sincere worshippers we are; some think worship is feeling maudlin and sentimental for an hour; some think worship is a scaled-down rave, or a kind of cheap entertainment; some think God is background for our own sense of wellness and wholeness and goodness. Some think worship is motivational music to go and pursue your own goals for the week. Some think worship is paying homage to dead Christians.

Since we are so far past being able to agree on what it is to worship God, and since we don't want to face that elephant in the room, now churches hold different services at different times. If you want to worship God like this with old hymns, come at 8:30. But if you want to worship him with band-music, come at 10:30. That's what it's come to. Not a community of commonly shared affections – rather different shows for different folks. If you were a visitor from an unreached tribe, and you came to these churches, you would think they worshipped different gods - and maybe they do.

Worst of all, if someone raises his voice to point out that we cannot all be worshipping God if we do it in completely different ways, out come the legalist-police, shouting that such a person doesn't understand Romans 14, and does not understand that these are just different styles, different preferences for how we worship. That's supposed to end the conversation.

Well, it doesn't. It doesn't matter what the majority says - that our God is worshipped in profane ways is a scandal; that our God is treated as a light thing is a travesty of the highest proportions. It's high time we stopped putting plasters on skin cancer. It's high time we stopped pretending that the answer will be found in bigger conferences, and nicer Christian book stores, and better evangelism programs, and revival meetings, and all other kinds of shot-in-arm, quick-fix, short cut solutions. The problem in modern Christianity is a heart problem. Heart problems are not solved by organising and advertising and marketing and inviting guest speakers and getting the latest book or DVD. Heart problems are solved by repentance, faith and obedience. The confession of evil works is the beginning of good works. One of the best Scriptures to help us here is Psalm 150.

Of all the Old Testament characters, my hero and favourite is David. I take it as a sweet providence that my unbelieving parents named me after the man I would admire most, besides the God-Man, Jesus Christ. David wrote at least 73 of the 150 Psalms in our Bible. The psalms are inspired examples of worship. They are inspired vehicles for worship. If we spend time in the psalms, we would go a long way towards knowing what it is to worship.

The Psalms are divided into five books. Psalm 150 closes the fifth book, and closes the psalter as a whole. In some ways, it is the climax of the symphony; it is the crescendo of the music; it is the last and spectacular fireworks. David is going to take all other 149 calls to worship, and condense them into one short song. In this song, David sings of *who* should worship, of *why* they should worship and *how* they should worship.

David is not going to answer all our questions on worship in one psalm. Nor is he going to teach us how to worship in six verses. What he is going to do is whet our appetites for worship. He is going

to stir us up to worship, remind us of its importance, and its nature.

I. We Must All Worship God

Praise the LORD! Praise God in His sanctuary; Praise Him in His mighty firmament!

⁶ Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD!

David says, praise Yahweh. What is praise? To enjoy and express that enjoyment; to admire and express that admiration; to adore and express that adoration. Everyone praises. The world is full of praise. People are praising cars and places, meals and books and technologies, famous people and historical events, paintings and faces and mountains and so on. What we admire, trust in, enjoy, we praise.

David says, this praise is to terminate ultimately on God. God is the source and sum of all beauty, goodness and truth. He is to be wondered at, He is to enthrall us, amaze us, hold us in raptured awe - which leads to praise.

Who is do this praising? Look at the two locations mentioned. Praise God in His sanctuary; Praise Him in His mighty firmament. The sanctuary refers to His temple, the place on Earth where Israel centred their worship. The mighty firmament is the heavens, stretching from the air above, through the cosmos, into the third Heaven, where seraphim and cherubim and angels ceaselessly praise and serve. In other words, praise Him in the centre of praise on the Earth, praise Him in the centre of praise in the Heavens. David is drawing a big circle to encompass everyone that should praise God, and it stretches from Jerusalem, includes the globe, and takes in where Gabriel and Michael dwell.

Who must worship? Everyone. In fact, this psalm has a feature of Hebrew poetry we know as chiasm. This is where the first and last thoughts are parallel, then the second and second-last. Look at verse 6. It ends with the same words that the psalm begins with: Praise the LORD. But look at the words that stand in parallel to praising God in the sanctuary and in the firmament: Let everything that has breath, praise the Lord. If it breathes, it should worship. Worship is a universal obligation.

It's not only a universal obligation; it's the supreme obligation. Remember when that scribe came to Jesus, and asked him what the first and greatest commandment was? What was Jesus' answer?

Mark 12:29-30 ²⁹ *Jesus answered him, "The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. ³⁰ 'And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment.*

This is the greatest obligation: to love God ultimately. Loving God in this way is worship-love. It is depending, delighting, being devoted to God ultimately. This is what every man is made for: to know and love His Creator. In Romans 1, Paul says that this is the great indictment against man:

Romans 1:21 ²¹ *because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful,*
Romans 1:25 ²⁵ *who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.*

Unsaved man stands today under condemnation because He will not worship God. In fact, the gospel we are supposed to take to him is the message that God will grant a new heart of worship to people who repent and believe in His Son.

I wonder if sometimes our language betrays us. We speak so much today of who is saved, and who is not saved. And don't get me wrong, it is not wrong to speak of people as saved – Roman 10:13.

But the way we use it as a noun, the saved, the unsaved, makes me think – where is our focus? Is it only on getting people out of hell? Getting them delivered, rescued, saved from judgement? Is that all? Is this God's goal? Does He not want worshippers? Do we want converts or do we want worshippers?

It is common for pastors to desire large churches. Today, if you use the right marketing technique, you can fill a room or an auditorium of nearly any size on a Sunday. But are we filling those halls with adoring worshippers, or with self-interested consumers who believe they have bought fire-insurance? To have 7000 people who have only an intellectual fascination with some biblical facts does not thrill me. What is preferable, a group of 3000 religious consumers who gather to have their own prejudices confirmed each week, or 100 worshippers, who are seeing the same thing in Scripture and adoring God? Who say to each other: "Did not our hearts burn, as He was among us?"

I want my son and daughters to be worshippers. I long for them to trust Christ. I look forward to their baptisms and partaking of the Lord's Supper. But if in ten or fifteen years, my son and daughters care little for knowing and loving God, if they are excited only about sports and gadgets, computer games and movies, cars, and money, I believe my heart will break. Even if they have prayed a prayer, and attended church, and perhaps dabbled less in the world than others, this is not my goal. I want my son and daughters to admire, and adore, and be entranced with God. I want them to love people and hate sin in this life, for God's sake. I want them to love what God loves and hates what He hates. I don't just want them saved – that's just the door that opens the house of worship.

This is the supreme obligation, and it is a universal obligation. From heaven to earth, everything that has breath should praise the Lord.

The next question is why.

II. We Must Worship God For His Beauty

² *Praise Him for His mighty acts; Praise Him according to His excellent greatness!*

David here gives two grounds for worship: God's mighty acts, God's excellent greatness. We worship God for His works, and we worship God for His Person. What He has done, and who He is.

Notice David ties worship directly to God's works and person: praise Him *for* His mighty acts, praise Him *according* to His excellent greatness. The worship is not some creative ideas we come up with to flatter God. Worship is not thinking of some really high-sounding praise words, and sending them in God's direction. Worship is a response. We see and understand the greatness of His works: creation, redemption, providence. We see His works recorded in Scripture. We see His handiwork around us. We see His work in history. We see His work around us. As we contemplate it, reflect on it, it leads us to a response of admiring, adoring, wondering praise.

As we consider His nature, revealed in His Word, and in His Works, we see His beauties – His power, His knowledge, His wisdom, His love, His patience, His sovereignty, His justice, His kindness, His anger, His presence, His faithfulness. Like holding up a perfect diamond, studying its facets, seeing the refracted rainbow light through each perfect facet, so we see and savour the many glories of God.

Worship is all about admiration, adoration and wonder that arises from contemplation, meditation,

and God's illumination.

There is a cheap substitute around today. It is loving your own happiness in the name of God. It is loving the idea of worship, because of the consolation it gives you. It is loving the thought of how worshipful you are. It is enjoying yourself as you worship. This is not worshipping God for His mighty acts, or according to His excellent greatness; it is worshipping my own feelings and comforts.

Don't get me wrong, true worship will bring you the deepest satisfaction your soul can know. True worship will bring you enjoyment that surpasses a small-minded love of self. Worship will console and satisfy and fulfil, but it does so because we take our eyes off our own satisfaction, and consolation and enjoyment, and fix them on God's beauties, and enjoy God for God's sake. Loving God for Himself - His excelling glory, and the works that reveal that.

You rob yourself when you look for worship inside yourself.

Have your children, or your friends, or your spouse, or your brothers and sisters ever heard you reflect on God's beauties? The way someone might describe in detail, something they love, or admire, or wish they had. Have you ever given the contemplation of God your patient attention, like you would a hobby that requires lots of steady focus? This is where worship begins, a humble, sincere, submissive seeking of God to know Him and see Him.

What then? What do we do with the affections welling up in our hearts as we see and appreciate His excellence?

III. We Must Worship God in Artful Expression

³ Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet; Praise Him with the lute and harp! ⁴ Praise Him with the timbrel and dance; Praise Him with stringed instruments and flutes! ⁵ Praise Him with loud cymbals; Praise Him with clashing cymbals!

David lists out seven instruments to worship God with. The trumpet was the shofar. The lute/ lyre was a ten-stringed instrument, probably with sounding box. The harp slanting yoke, with 10 strings. The Timbrel was the tambourine. Dance refers to the artful folk dances of Israel. Stringed instruments refer to other kinds of instruments to be plucked or strummed. The flutes would have been something like our panpipes. David is really listing out every class of instrument available to ancient Israel: wind, strings, percussion. Just as every human is to praise God, so let every instrument be enlisted.

Why? Because of all the things God has created, no other has the potential to express deep feeling, and complex feeling like music does. No other creation can capture and reflect and express the range and depth of feeling that a human has, as he responds to and encounters God. David goes from the affection in the heart to the expression of this with music.

We must learn not only who God is, but what He deserves and how to express that. We must learn not only to see God for who He is, but then to rightly respond. God calls for a response. It is not enough to simply be an echo chamber for other men's praise. It is not enough for us to merely parrot what others have said. You must bring your offering to the throne. You must put into words, and into song, if possible, your expression of God's mighty works and excellent greatness.

And as if we needed a fourth piece of evidence that we have lost worship, let me ask you how well

attended are prayer meetings. That place where God's people get to put into their own words, their admiration for God, their desire for God, their wonder at God. Are those the meetings overflowing with people? What happens when we call for nothing but prayers of adoration? I think people stay away from prayer meetings for several reasons, but one of them is that they have nothing to say to God.

"I'm not good with words'. Are you able to praise things in your life that you think are good, or beautiful, or true?" You are. What is missing is the sight of God, and the practised ability to say to God what is good or true or beautiful of Him.

We teach our children language. But we do more than teach our children words. We also teach them how to say those words and when. We teach them manners. We teach them appropriate responses.

So we must learn how to respond to God. We must learn not only who He is by seeing Him in the preached Word, but we must learn how to rightly express our adoration for Him. That will help us to understand why Wesley and Watts and Bach did, and why they are useful for worship. More importantly, it will teach us to be able to love and worship Him.

I say this not to scold you, but, as your brother, to alert you, if not alarm you. If we do not worship, all else will eventually count little. If we neglect first principles, everything else is wood, hay, and stubble.

I speak as one raised in a secular home, who attended public schools, whose mind was fed on TV, and pop music. I speak as one who knows how difficult it is to worship, where my powers of reflection, and meditation, and contemplation, and right expression have been blunted. I feel with Isaac Watts when he wrote:

In vain we tune our formal songs,
In vain we strive to rise;
Hosannas languish on our tongues,
and our devotion dies.

But we are not without hope. If we will pursue God, pursue Him as our end, and give ourselves to the hard but Spirit-empowered work of worship, He will enable. To that end, we are beginning a Sunday School course which I think will be the most important we've ever run. Beginning this Sunday we will begin considering worship, the affections, and learning right expressions towards this great God of ours. I don't place my faith in this course. I place my faith in the work of the Spirit in our hearts, as we use His Word and common grace to become better at worship.

It is all too easy to become another church that sets up ministry treadmills to keep God's people busy, while we avoid the hard, heart-work of knowing and loving God.

If worship "is to feel in your heart and express in some appropriate manner a humbling but delightful sense of admiring awe and astonished wonder and overpowering love in the presence of ... Our Father Which Art in Heaven...", then I trust that's your goal, for your own heart, for your family.

I believe if you desire to know Christ, then your heart is already resonating with David's. You're saying, Yes, I want to worship God. Yes, I want it to be a response to God, not a made-up personal experience, and yes, I want to express that worship. I want it to be heartfelt praise coming from my mouth to God. Then let us take Psalm 150 as our inspiration, as our marching orders, and as our

pattern. Let us all, praise the Lord.