

Reassessing God's Expectations of Our Worship

What type of worship honors God?" or, to look at the question another way, "After all, theologically speaking, what is it that actually makes worship worshipful to God?"

Even though I have practiced, led, studied and preached about worshiping God for over five decades as a Christian leader, I still refuse to suggest I have any expertise on the subject. A lifetime of entering and experiencing His presence has a way of keeping me mindful of how little I know, and how dependent I am on Him for today's guidance in leadership—not my experience.

I open with that context for what follows—my offered answer to the above pair of questions presented to me, with the request: "Set forth the theological basis for our thematic study of worship." At first a certain reticence tempted me to conform to what I supposed was expected—a treatise on the glory of God, and the propriety of humankind bringing worthy expressions of worship before His Throne. Of course, His grandeur and greatness does recommend our humble and our highest expression of praise as well as our utmost in devotion and adoration, but I felt the need to get to "the heart" of worship. So I have chosen to press an issue—not less theologically correct, to my view, but one that might seem unacceptable for failing to parrot the usual reply when a "theology of worship" is proposed.

To my perception, most theological presuppositions about worship focus on the cerebral, not the visceral—on the mind, not the heart. In most western Christian tradition, a virtual scorning of either the subjective experience or the mystical nature of encountering God finds common approval. A usual theology of worship centers on an objective analysis of God's

revealed person, nature and attributes, with the accompanying presupposition that worthy worship is essentially constituted of our reciting this information back to Him. This focus on the mind's ideas about God, rather than the heart's hunger for Him, overlooks the truth that worship is actually a gift from God to us more than one of ours to Him; that He is more interested in helping us so that we are capable of interpreting Him.

We have been inclined to conclude "mind" and "spirit" are synonyms, when the Bible shows the "heart" is a more likely candidate to answer to the meaning of "worshiping in spirit." That in truth is a companion phrase that indicates the active participation of the intellect as well is undeniable, but it is also inescapably second—and dependent upon the heart's fullest release in worship first. This priority is usually held suspect, if not resisted outright, because our intellectualized value system minimizes the worth of emotions, and our hearts, as the more emotionally motivated center of our human response sources, is deemed less worthy for being governed more by affections than by reason; seen as more vulnerable to deception than the intellect because of the heart's pro-emotional bent. But to turn on these terms, from "heart-begotten" (i.e. "spiritual") worship to an intellectually based approach is to entertain a dual delusion: first, that the mind is less subject to deception than the heart (an unsupportable concept—2 Corinthians 4:4); and second, that the mind is ever the means by which God is "contacted" in worship (which is denied in the Bible—Job 11:7).

This is not to denigrate the priceless value of God's gift of human intellect, nor to deny that human intelligence is contributive to worship. But our quest is for an answer to, "What kind of worship God prefers from us," and honesty with the limits of any human being's brainpower forces the issue. In the last analysis, His Word indicates that He is not

looking for something brilliant, but something broken: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart—these, O God, You will not despise" (Psalm 51:17).

It is not that our minds are unworthy vehicles to receive divine revelation but that they are too limited to respond to the divine invitation. The intellect may discover truth about God's worthiness of worship and may choose to do so. But to fully enter into the dimensions of our Creator-Redeemer's presence—to open to the intimacy to which He invites us, as well as to that ecstasy with which Eternal Love desires to enthrall the human soul—only the spiritual capacities of the worshiping heart will suffice. The exercises of our enlightened minds may deduce God, but only our ignited hearts can delight Him—and, in turn, experience His desire to delight us. That is His desire, without question.

So, I would contend that what is on God's mind when we worship Him is not how many grandiose thoughts we have about Him, but how passionately our hearts desire Him; and that what He most wants to achieve in the intercourse of our spirits with His is the transmission of love, life and joy.

Thus, I tread the risky territory of seeming to minimize "worship" by not focusing first on "God's holiness and our unworthiness" by proposing that, from God's viewpoint, worship is a means designed to unlock the human heart that God may answer to human need and serve His own heartfelt interest in the well-being of His most beloved creatures. Of course, I also hasten to emphasize that God's excellent glory and man's sin and need are not in question or subject to debate here: He is holy, and we are unworthy. But once the redemption provided through Jesus' Cross has been received by faith, I want to assert:

That the worship God most welcomes is neither essentially or primarily intellectual (though it is certainly not unintelligent); and

That God's primary focus in giving us access to worship Him is to provide an exposure and experience intended for our benefit, not His (though it is unquestionable He delights in our coming to Him.)

I propose such a "theology of worship" upon the evidence of His pleasure with worship we find offered to Him in settings reported in His Word, as well as in direct statements He has made, revealing that the worship that God welcomes and honors is:

1. Worship that treasures His presence. First and foremost, God welcomes those into His presence who want Him. Their quest may be one of desperation or of delight, of frantic need or of a loving hunger for fellowship, but the motivation is clearly focused—and so is His pleasure with it.

2. Worship that humbles the heart. Perhaps the most memorable encounter between God and man in all the prophets is the occasion of Isaiah's call (Isaiah 6:1-8). The abject cry of a sinful man, "Woe is me, for I am undone," was not an achievement of intellectual analysis, but of a self-discovery faced upon entering God's presence with unabashed passion and with childlike openness. "I saw the Lord..." he says with neither apology or arrogance, as a breakthrough of grace produces a breakup of pride—a viewpoint even more deeply affirmed later in the same book (Isaiah 57:15).

The starting place for confronting pride is in how we approach worship. Isaiah, who is known to be from the cultural, educated elite of Judah describes a childlike humility and teachability that can only attend an unpretentious entry into God's presence. His cry, without a vestige of style-consciousness and revealing an unreserved availability to God's revelation of Himself, is the very thing to which Jesus calls us all:

"Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become

as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven ... Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 18:3, 10).

3. Worship that sacrifices and expects something from God.

Hebrews 11:6 puts it clearly: "He that comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who humbly seek Him." The text is based on the proposition that worship always brings a sacrifice to God—that "he that comes," whether with praise, an offering, or in the laying down of something being asked by the Holy Spirit's call, is presenting something of themselves to Him. But simultaneously, we are told that the worshipper is with equal faith to believe something will be given in return by God Himself—something rewarding, enriching, benevolent and good.

The tension between these two—bringing a sacrifice and expecting a reward—provides a venue to common argument today. Some feel obligated to "defend God" against human selfishness and would refuse the balance in proposition the text declares. But the truth is, God does freely offer the rewards of His blessing—and delights to do so.

4. Worship that extends God's love by every means.

If indeed God-pleasing worship addresses human need more than it supplies a divine one (if, indeed, there is such a thing as a need on God's part), it is to be expected that worship which honors the desires of the Almighty will beget reaching hands. It is, thus, unsurprising that our Savior's summary definition of the "greatest commandment" issues into "the second, which is like (in importance) unto it." The vertical mandate, which focuses on our worshipping God ("You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength"), issues in the horizontal ("...and your neighbor as yourself"). Basically, the only true divine approval our worship will find is when it results in our hearts being focused on such things as:

- Forgiveness toward others, with peacemaking and reconciling efforts evident in our day-to-day agenda for living;
- Gracious, life-style evangelism characterizing our conduct and communication, so that the glory found in His presence is manifest in our shedding a warm, attractive “light as a believable, winsome witness.”
- Unselfish, servant-minded availability to assist in human need—seen in a heart of care for victims of neglect and injustice, nourished by a merciful mindset toward those whose cheapened values reveal their blindness.

It is this conviction that drives an inclusion of “prayer circles” in nearly every worship at our church. “Ministry time” is the formal name we use for an approximately 10-minute segment of small group interaction and prayer, usually following an extended season of sensitive, intimate and praiseful worship to God.

The habit was formed decades ago at the same time my thinking about worship was being revolutionized. The four to five minutes of that time, during which three to six people share their personal need or concern and then pray for one another, is an estimable key to our effectiveness as a congregation.

Over the years, the bottom line of worship seems to have been and continues to be served as we pursue these values on the basis of the theological viewpoint I have presented. We have never lost sight of Him as First and Foremost, but we have not based our approach on the supposition that we understand anything more than the splendor of His love shown to us in Jesus—and that love-gift ignites our worship. What begins, in treasuring Him, proceeds to humble our hearts, awaken our sacrifice and release our service. What is birthed in the heart finds expression in the hands—hands that rise in humble praise and serve with gentle grace.

With such sacrifices, God seems to be well pleased.

Jack Hayford *is the founding pastor of the Church on the Way in Van Nuys, California, where he served as senior pastor for more than three decades. He is also founder of The King's University in Dallas, Texas, and the author of more than 100 books.*