A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership
Volume 9 • Number 3 • Summer 2000

And when you often assemble together, the powers of Satan are overthrown and his ruinous work undone by the harmony of your faith. Nothing is better than the peace wherein all the warring of celestial and terrestrial powers (against us) is brought to nought.

IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH, *LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS*, 13:1FF.

Every complaint about worship music, no matter which style, claims to be rooted in theological principles. Yet in every critique, the theology aligns perfectly with the critic's own musical taste.

MICHAEL S. HAMILTON

If "there is no longer any 'cultus' in the ancient sense," it is equally true, conversely, that all life has become 'cultus' in a new sense. Life has no other purpose than to be rendered up to God in adoration and gratitude.

DAVID PETERSON, *ENGAGING WITH GOD: A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF WORSHIP* (GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN: EERDMANS, 1993), 136.

WHAT THE CHURCH NEEDS NOW: WORSHIP PERSPECTIVES FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM

Ron Man

As the church of Jesus Christ enters a new century and a new millennium, (along with the rest of the world) we find that her worship is characterized by profound contradictions.

THE GOOD NEWS

On the one hand, the last thirty years have seen an explosion of interest in, and focus on, worship among evangelical churches. A. W. Tozer, who bemoaned the state of worship in his day by calling it "The Missing Jewel in the Evangelical Church,"[1] would certainly be amazed at the worship reformation (or revolution) which has transpired since his prophetic call in the 1950s. Worship has become a primary concern in much of evangelicalism today. Conferences and books on the subject abound. We have witnessed a landslide of printed and recorded worship materials, and a trend has even developed away from "Directors of Music" to "Pastors of Worship." As a result, there has been a God-honoring return to genuine worship in Spirit and truth in many churches.

THE BAD NEWS

At the same time, worship has erupted out of its former benign neglect to become the leading hot button and center of controversy in the church today. Churches and staffs have split over the issue, while in other situations there is at

least constant foment or an uneasy truce exists. Scarcely any congregation has been spared the debates over individual tastes, music styles, instrumentation, dynamics, audio-visual aids, etc. And whatever decision (if any) has been rendered by the church leadership on these areas of disagreement, it has often resulted in someone leaving the church out of dissatisfaction (or, worse yet, staying with a grudging spirit).

WHAT'S AT STAKE

Sadly, there is no sign that the storm is abating. It is scandalously true that the supposed worship of our holy and almighty God is among the leading sources of dissension and division in churches today. Tragically, that activity which should most powerfully express the unity of Christ's body under its Head is all too often the seedbed for disunity, strife, and distrust. In short supply is evidence of the apostle Paul's prayer, "May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 15:5-6). In many congregations "harmony," togetherness, and "one voice" hardly seem to characterize either the debate on worship or its outworking; and without those things how can we hope, in Paul's words, to "glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ"?

FOUNDATIONAL TRUTHS

In the swirl of debate and controversy we have all too often lost sight of some foundational truths which *must* undergird and fortify our worship practices, regardless of which direction those practices may take. Only by agreeing on these fundamental premises concerning worship can we move forward together on common ground. And we must

strive for unity, even in our diversity, if we are to truly act as Christ's universal body and be pleasing to him in our worship.

We Must Focus on God's Glory. "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen" (Romans 11:36). Since "all things" are for his sake and unto his glory, certainly this would be preeminently true, among our human endeavors, of worship. In worship we echo Paul's doxology: We acknowledge the supreme greatness, utter majesty, and all-surpassing worth of God; and we consciously and deliberately "honor him as God [and] give thanks" (Romans 1:21). We engage in the defining and central activity for which we humans were created, and return to him that which he will not tolerate being deflected in any other direction: "'My glory I give to no other'" (Isaiah 42:8).

Are we preoccupied in our worship with God and his stupendous glory? Do we dwell on his absolute holiness, whereby he stands infinitely above and distinct from everything else—because he created everything else? Are we so intoxicated with the wonder of his love and mercy and condescension towards us in the Lord Jesus, that "the things of earth . . . grow strangely dim in the light of *his* glory and grace"?

What aspect of the worship debates is so weighty that it deserves even mentioning in the light of his ineffable glory? Do we really think that the God who flung a billion billion stars into space, who calls each of them by name (Isaiah 40:26), and who keeps each of them in its course, is really that concerned about whether it is a hymn or a chorus which we lift up to him in praise, or whether the text is in a book or printed in a bulletin or flashed on a wall or screen? If the nations themselves are but "a speck of dust on the scales" to our great God (Isaiah 40:15), how much

less must such issues, which loom so large in our sight, seem to him?

Are our best worship energies expended in ways which are worthy of the One to whom our worship is due? To be sure, God delights in the praises of his people; but he who "looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7) of the worshiper is surely concerned with more than the "outward appearance" of the proceedings.

If we could really grasp something of the glory of God and commit ourselves to its display and celebration in corporate worship, many of our squabbles would quickly fade into insignificance.

We Must Remember That Worship Is First and Foremost for God. The lack of specific instruction on worship in the New Testament would seem to allow for considerable freedom in terms of the actual expressions of our worship. That freedom has found expression in an incredible diversity of worship practices in the church of Jesus Christ, both through history and around the world today. Yet freedom in worship is only viable, is only true worship, as it is founded in immovable, non-negotiable truth. The fact is that *worship is for God,* primarily and fundamentally; and all decisions about style or taste, while inevitable and necessary, must be made in the light of the fact that worship must be utterly God-centered. God must be both subject and object in our worship; all other considerations are secondary. Hence, talk about personal tastes, about the "appeal" of this or that kind of music, about style preferences, about "relevance," about being "user-" or "seeker-friendly" must always take a back seat to the primary focus of our worship, which is God himself. Rather than these man-centered issues, our main concern must be that our worship is acceptable to God and gives him the honor and reverence which he is due. God is the true Seeker, and what he seeks is our worship (John 4:23). We must devote ourselves to pleasing *him,* not "playing the house."

Worship is for God, not primarily for the people. Though edification and evangelism will be present in congregational worship they are secondary to the true focus of worship. Whatever other factors are considered in settling on the structure or style of our corporate expression, the first and primary concern must be that our worship will truly reflect and magnify the glory of God in the company of his people.

We Must Not Be Afraid to Contextualize Our Worship. A corollary truth developed above is that worship necessarily involves communication, thus to be meaningful communication *must* be intelligible to its hearers. Hence, though our worship must be radically God-centered in its focus, neither should we neglect the worshipers and the issue of their understanding (as the church did when it insisted on services and Bibles in Latin, which almost no one could speak or read).

God works in human history in the context of human culture. The incarnate Son was born into a Jewish society with Jewish customs, traditions, dress, worship forms and songs. God calls us to a discerning and reflective use of culture and its possibilities for expressing worship and communicating the gospel with relevance and impact, rather than to a kind of cultural amnesia or asceticism. Obviously we nee great wisdom, as culture has been infected by sin and is often used by Satan for his purposes. And of course, the whole issue in our churches is infinitely more complicated by the fact that in our day there are profound cultural differences between whole generations within our society (probably more so than at any previous point in church history). But culture is not our enemy, any more than our bodies or our minds are (though of course infected by sin as well). Rather, we must cling to and use the good and reject the evil. "For everything created by God is good, and noth-

ing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer" (1 Timothy 4:4-5). These issues are at the forefront of missiological thought in our day (as exemplified by such trends as contextualization and ethnomusicology); of course, great discernment is called for in deciding what aspects of another culture are "redeemable" and which are not—but actually the issues are no less important or complex in our own culture!

John Calvin (normally considered a pretty rigorous and unyielding practitioner) recognized that worship practices should be prayerfully allowed to change according to time and place:

> [The Master] did not will in outward discipline and ceremonies to prescribe in detail what we ought to do (because he foresaw that this depended on the state of the times, and he did not deem one form suitable for all ages) . . . Because he has taught nothing specifically, and because these things are not necessary to salvation, and for the upbuilding of the church ought to be variously accommodated to the customs of each nation and age, it will be fitting (as the advantage of the church will require) to change and abrogate traditional practices and to establish new ones. Indeed, I admit that we ought not to charge into innovation rashly, suddenly, for insufficient cause. But love will best judge what may hurt or edify; and if we let love be our guide, all will be safe.[2]

We Must Obey Paul's Admonition. The Apostle exhorts us to "regard others as better than yourselves" (Philippians 2:3). To be sure, this command runs against our natural instincts since the Fall, and in our pride we will struggle our entire lives against our tendency to see ourselves as number one in every area of our lives.

But have we even thought to apply Paul's principle to the practice of worship in our churches? How often in our

considerations concerning worship do we rise above thinking only about what *I* like, what *I* think is good, what *I* think honors God and is worthy to be offered to him? We are so prone to assume that God's taste in music amazingly happens to coincide exactly with our own!

The application of Paul's exhortation, along with his teaching that every member of the body has something crucial to contribute (1 Corinthians 12:12-18), must begin with a recognition that what does not "bless" me may, indeed, bless the person next to me. C. S. Lewis makes this point beautifully:

> When I first became a Christian, about fourteen years ago, I thought that I could do it on my own, by retiring to my rooms and reading theology, and wouldn't go to the churches and Gospel Halls. . . . I disliked very much their hymns which I considered to be fifth-rate poems set to sixth-rate music. But as I went on I saw the merit of it. I came up against different people of quite different outlooks and different education, and then gradually my conceit just began peeling off. I realized that the hymns (which were just sixth-rate music) were, nevertheless, being sung with devotion and benefit by an old saint in elastic-side boots in the opposite pew, and then you realize that you aren't fit to clean those boots. It gets you out of your solitary conceit.[3]

We must realize that "being blessed" is of secondary importance to God being exalted. And God may, indeed, consider himself to be exalted by my neighbor's musical contribution, even if I consider it sub-standard, petty, too esoteric or boring—if his or her heart is genuinely engaged and desiring to make a spiritual sacrifice to the Lord. And even if "being blessed" is an issue, then the direct application of Paul's principle is that my neighbor's blessing should matter more to me than my own.

This is difficult terrain to traverse. The fact of the matter is, we'd far rather others defer to us than for us to have to defer to them. But the sobering truth is that, as soon as we wonder why that other person is not deferring to us, we have by that very act broken the spirit and the letter of Paul's command to consider the other more important.

And as we previously noted this is especially true in our own time. We are facing *profound* cultural differences between generations. This is obviously at the root of many of the worship conflicts in our churches. Of course, cultural diversity (and the conflicts which so easily arise from it) goes back to the church's very beginning—Jews and Gentiles in the same congregation resulted in huge challenges the apostles had to squarely face (Acts 15; Galatians 2, etc.). But now diversity occurs even *within* our own families. Surely there is an even greater application of the principle of Philippians 2:3 and of letting "love be our guide."

Let us not consider the comfort of the person in the pew (believer or unbeliever) as of first importance, but rather how God would be honored and pleased if we sought genuinely to defer to one another in self-sacrificial love in the body—even in the area of worship. What a healthy and wholesome spiritual exercise for the people of God to root out "selfishness [and] empty conceit" (Philippians 2:3) in this area where the self can so easily predominate. What a gift to offer God—a corporate sacrifice of praise infused with self-effacement and mutual humility.

We Must Understand the New Testament Teaching on Worship. The emphasis is clearly on "whole life" worship. One of the main points Jesus makes in his conversation with the Samaritan woman in John 4 (obviously a pivotal passage on worship in the New Testament, since the term itself occurs in the context some ten times) was that his coming accounted for the transformation of worship into something which was no longer centered in a place nor oriented to one event. As Jesus said: "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither *on* (Greek: *ev*) this mountain nor *in* (Greek: *ev*) Jerusalem" (v.21). What changed in the new era that Jesus introduced was that true worshipers must *now* worship God only "*in* (Greek: *ev*) spirit and truth" (v. 23). This is set in contrast with a particular place or cultural pattern that was previously part of the old covenant.

Yet we tend to revert to the Old Testament model of place-centered, event-oriented worship, which Jesus was very clearly abrogating in John 4. How quickly we forget that, while worship may well (indeed, should) culminate and find its climax in the corporate gathering, it does not, must not, and cannot begin there. What shallow, undernourished Christians we will be if we come on Sunday morning for a fix of "weekly worship."

In Romans 12:1 Paul gives us a more balanced perspective, one totally in keeping with Jesus' teaching in John 4. Paul urges his readers to respond ("therefore") to the "mercies of God" (those saving mercies which he has just expounded in chapters 1 through 11) by presenting their bodies (that is, their entire being) as a "living and holy sacrifice." This, he says, will be both "acceptable to God" and a "fitting/reasonable/spiritual (depending on the translation) service of *worship*." In other words, an appropriate worship response to God for his saving work through Jesus Christ is a life and lifestyle of worship, a moment-by-moment, week-long offering of ourselves for God's pleasure and glory. "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Colossians 3:17). "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Corporate worship flourishes when believers come together out of a week of walking with and worshiping

God, both in times of focused individual worship, and in a life-permeating attitude of gratitude and prayer. The Holy Spirit can take a people thus prepared and forge a precious and powerful corporate expression of worship. On the other hand, "corporate worship is irrelevant, however beautiful its protocols may be and however nourishing its sacraments are, unless it participates in the seamless life of continuous worship, and unless it is seen as a symptom of how we live and act all week long."[4]

Those who are called worship pastors in our present setting should humbly acknowledge that such a title is, in reality, a misnomer according to the New Testament understanding—as if a *single* staff member could possibly oversee and stimulate the whole-life worship of the people. Rather, as noted above, all those involved in localized ministries (both staff and lay leaders) must see themselves as catalysts for the week-long worship of God on the part of the people, and as those who seek to channel the fruits of that worship into focused corporate activities.

We Must See the Entire Ministry of the Church as Ultimately Directed Toward Worship. John Piper, in his book *Let the Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions*, explains that worship is the ultimate and eternal purpose of the church, while missions is but a "temporary necessity." He also shows how missions must flow *out of* worship and thus it inevitably must lead to worship being offered up by those from "every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9). As he puts it, "Worship, therefore, is the fuel and goal in missions."[5]

What Piper says about missions could indeed be applied to all ministry, and to all ministries of the church: "Worship is the only Christian activity which is an end in itself."[6] In other words, worship is unique in its purely vertical focus. All other ministries and Christian endeavors necessarily include a horizontal aspect which is focused on

people. At the same time the ultimate purpose of all these activities is to direct people's gaze heavenward, to bring them to that place of vertical focus—to "make worshipers out of rebels"[7] and to draw believers into a closer walk of God-glorifying worship. In short, the goal of all Christian ministry is to make *more and better worshipers* of God.

So let us take a more unified, holistic view of the Christian church itself and thus see its singular goal in all of its diverse functionings—not just the worship service—as the deepening and enhancing of people's worship, to the glory of God. "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen" (Romans 11:36).

CONCLUSION

How easily we lose sight of the forest for the trees. To be sure, church leaders must make decisions concerning musical selections, forms, instrumentation, and so forth. But these are decidedly secondary concerns and pale in importance next to far more weighty biblical considerations: the primacy of God's glory; worship being for *him*; the necessity of cultural contextualization; the importance of practicing humility and mutual submission in our practice of worship; the pervasiveness and centrality of worship in the life of the church and of the individual believer.

These things *must* be pursued or our worship *will not be pleasing to God*—no matter what the quality or how big the crowd. We must worship in *unity*, or we worship in vain. Let us be reminded, as James Torrance has put it, that "There is only one way to come to the Father, namely through Christ in the communion of the Spirit, in the communion of saints, whatever outward form our worship may take."[8]

"To him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen" (Ephesians 3:21).

Author

Ron Man is a missionary serving as a worship and arts resource consultant with Greater Europe Mission. He lives in the Black Forest region of Germany and travels to teach on worship in seminaries and Bible schools in Western and Eastern Europe. Prior to this new appointment he was pastor of worship at First Evangelical Church, Memphis, Tennessee. He received his Master of Music degree from the University of Maryland and Th. M. from Dallas Theological Seminary. He has published three choral anthems, as well as a number of articles on worship in various periodicals. Most of these articles may be accessed at: www.firstevan.org/articles.htm.

Notes

1. A. W. Tozer. *Worship: The Missing Jewel of the Evangelical Church* (Camp Hill, Pennsylvania: Christian Publications, no date). This useful booklet is still in print.
2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill, ed., Ford Lewis Battles, trans. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), IV: 10.30. Also to the point, the annotation of the critical edition of the *Institutes* (II: 1208) adds: "F. Wendel observes that Calvin does not require 'a servile imitation of the primitive church.'"
3. C. S. Lewis, "Answers to Questions on Christianity," *in God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1970, 61-2. See also "On Church Music," in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1994), 96-97.
4. Harold Best, "Authentic Worship and Faithful Music Making," http://www.acdaonline.org/ncmw/authenticworship.html
5. John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1993), 11.
6. John Piper, "Worship Is an End in Itself," sermon transcript, http://worshipmap.com/sermons/piper-worship.html
7. A. W. Tozer, *Whatever Happened to Worship?* (Camp Hill, Pennsylvania: Christian Publications, 1985), 11.
8. James F. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1996), 143.

In many evangelical churches people do not truly worship God in their hearts until the last hymn, after the sermon has focused their attention on who God is so that they begin to rejoice in God with a heart full of praise. But then, just when heartfelt worship has begun, the service abruptly ends. It should be just beginning! If genuine worship is lacking in our churches, we should ask how we can bring ourselves to experience much more of the depth and richness of worship, which is the natural response of the believing heart to a clear awareness of God's presence and character. [Note: Of course, God's character can be revealed not only through the preaching of the Word, but also through the words of the hymns that are sung, through prayer, and through the reading of Bible passages even without comment.]

WAYNE GRUDEM, *SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY* (GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN: ZONDERVAN), 1994, 1011.

The nature of worship, then, is to offer God worship from the depths of our inner beings in praise, prayer, song, giving, and living, always based upon his revealed truth. The person who would worship God must therefore have a faithful commitment to the Word of God. Worship does not happen by a zap out of heaven that makes us fall down. It is the overflow of our understanding of God as he has revealed himself in the scriptures. That is worshiping in spirit and in truth.

JOHN M. FRAME, *WORSHIP IN SPIRIT AND TRUTH* (PHILLIPSBURG, NEW JERSEY: PRESBYTERIAN & REFORMED, 1996),125-26.