

Worship Design

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I. Introduction

Through this paper this writer will provide a very brief overview of the Biblical foundations for worship, theological foundations for worship and finally the historical foundations for worship. At the conclusion of these overviews, a brief comment will be offered to clarify what major points this writer feels have been made through each of these observations.

II. Biblical Foundations for Worship

A. From the Old Testament

The Old Testament asserts the importance of the assembly of those that God has called so that they may worship Him. In Exodus 7:16b, God makes plain to pharaoh that he is to "Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the desert." Clearly God brought His people to Sinai to be in His presence so they could receive His word and worship Him. Rather than worship, the Israelites built an idol and strayed from God's design. Exodus 20:5 clarifies the nature of our God as He says, "I the Lord your God am a jealous God." Worship, therefore, is biblically grounded in the Old Testament acknowledgement that God has created us and called His people to worship Him. God declares, "my glory I will not give to another" (Isaiah 48:11).

There are many examples in the Old Testament of worship being an appropriate activity at the tabernacle (Exodus 29), David's tabernacle (1 Chronicles 16:4), in the synagogue (Deuteronomy 6:4-9) and during festival celebrations (Exodus 31:2-17). One other example that this writer would like to highlight is how the act of worship even occurred on the battlefield in the Old Testament.

As Israel was being threatened by the armies of the Ammonites and Moabites (2 Chronicles 20:15-22), King Jehosephat sought deliverance through prayer and fasting. God responded through the prophet Jahaziel who instructed them to march against the opposing army without fear or discouragement (v15) because the Lord would deliver them (v17). The king appointed men to lead the army singing praises to the Lord for His splendor and holiness. The army of Judah declared God's love for them as they marched and the scriptures say "as they began to sing and praise, the Lord set ambushes against them...and they were defeated" (v22). It later took the army of Judah three days to carry away all the spoils of war that the opposing armies left behind. The valley was renamed "Beracah" or "The place of Praise" (Wardle, 190).

The utilization of praise to build confidence and trust in the goodness, glory and strength of God is evident in this passage from the Old Testament. This sets the standard for praise to be and do more than celebrating a festival or joining in the worship at the "holy place," but to integrate praise into every facet of kingdom life.

B. From the New Testament

Early Christian worship was rooted in both the traditional Jewish context of worship and "the crucible of those events surrounding Jesus that were recognized as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies to Israel" (Webber, 41). The New Testament records no distinct statement of worship but rather contains hymns, confessions, benedictions and prayers that guide a reader in worship. This writer would suggest that the very inspiration and direction for the authors of the New Testament was so impacted by the transforming presence of Jesus' life, resurrection, teachings and gift of the Holy Spirit to them that the writings themselves constitute an act of worship that seeks to compel the reader to worship as well.

As Jesus is seen supporting Israelite worship in the gospels, He also reinterprets the customs of Jewish worship for His believers. Such rules as what was clean and unclean (Mark 7:1-23) and rules regarding fasting and prayer (Matthew 6:5-8, 16-18) were realigned into new acts of worship that depict Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament rituals. Worship through praise for the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy in the birth, death and resurrection of Christ can be seen throughout the New Testament. New worship events such as Baptism in which believers identify with the death and resurrection of Christ (Romans 6:1-4) also take place in the New Testament along with the pastoral instructions that were delivered to these new believers and worshippers by the Apostles. Certainly the New Testament provides a window for us today into the actual practice of worship as guided, practiced and taught by the Apostles in the life of the early church.

III. Theological Foundations for Worship

Dr. Robert Webber defines the theologian's task as "to think about the Biblical narrative teachings and then to systemize these materials into a coherent whole. In this sense theology is a reflective discipline" (Webber, 65). The early church utilized the adage *lex orandi, lex credenti*, which means the rule of prayer is the rule of faith. This encourages the Christian to acknowledge that the faith of a worshipper is strengthened, nurtured and expressed through the act of worship.

A theology of worship may be applied to all of a Christian's life; everything should be an act of worship and all that the church does should constitute the glorification of God. Another way to examine a theology of worship is as it relates to the music and words that Christians direct to God in praise to God, as well as the attitudes that accompany praise when Christians assemble together. This writer's call to ministry brings a heightened awareness of

theology as it applies to the worship activities of the assembled church. Following is a list of seven theological dynamics that could be utilized to evaluate the worship of an assembled body of believers. This list constitutes the framework of this writer's theology of worship.

First in worship, we delight in God. In Psalm 16:11 David states,

“You have made known to me the path of life; you
will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal
pleasures at your right hand.”

Acts 2:46 also shows a picture of the early church continually assembling and praising God together. The book of Revelation displays a glimpse into heaven where we see a great assembly of saints worship "the Lamb that was slain" (Revelation 5:12).

Next we seek to draw near to God. Hebrews 10:22 states, "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith." As we draw near to God our praise joins those who are already worshipping God in heaven and we should be mindful of how the writer of Hebrews exhorts us to "offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:28-29).

Third, God draws near to us. James 4:8 says, "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you." God inhabits the praises of His people and in this way as we worship God, He draws near to us.

Next, God ministers to us as we worship Him. As we draw near to God, He meets us there and ministers to us. Hebrews 4:16 encourages us to "Draw near to the throne of grace" and we will "receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." Another aspect of God's presence constitutes the sixth theological dynamic of worship in which God's enemies flee. As discussed previously, the narrative regarding King Jehosephat's army in 2 Chronicles 20

displays the power of praise as it builds the confidence of the believer and causes the enemies of God to flee.

Finally, worship allows unbelievers to experience God's presence. Paul exhorted the Corinthians to be sure that they considered outsiders and were sure that Christians worshipped in understandable ways (1 Corinthians 14:23). Thus unbelievers could recognize that "God is really among you" (1 Corinthians 14:25).

Theologically reflecting on the purposes of worship for the church is imperative as it reminds us that only God is worthy of our worship. Peter encourages the church to utilize the spiritual gifts of the saints in such a way that "in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 4:11). This is the continuing goal of the Christian assembly; to lift our eyes so that we may see His glory and to this end Theology and worship are inseparable in their utilization.

IV. Historical Foundations for Worship

Dr. Webber points out the common view of the North American Protestant to the subject of church history and suggests the relative youth of the country and its proclivity to value rugged individualism are key factors (Webber, 93). This author's assertion that God has continued to work through the history of His church and not simply during the time in which scripture was written makes a compelling argument for any modern minister to be more involved in the study of the history of worship in God's church through the ages.

Many noticeable transitions have happened in the history of the Christian church. One such transition was the change in the social acceptance of Christian worship. During the second and third centuries Christians were forced to worship in homes and share both the gospel and the Lord's table in this intimate setting. In the mid-fourth century this changed

when the Roman emperor Constantine became a Christian. Following this, large buildings were constructed and the format for worship became far less intimate and much more public in worship style and substance.

The pathway from the liturgical and medieval church to the reformation, from the reformed church to the modern evangelical and charismatic church there is much to learn regarding the impact of differing worship styles and formats. Each has sought to utilize scripture as a basis for how to worship to the people of that assembly.

V. Conclusion

Throughout this assignment, this writer has been impacted by the importance of worship to reside in every aspect of the believer's life and the life of the church. Whether at church or 'in battle' (the most unlikely of places), worship needs to be continual in its practice. The New Testament was written in part to inspire and lead worship and it reflects the impassioned and continual worship of early Christian believers.

A theology of worship for the church needs to be a tool which is utilized to promote the principles of worship that God intends for His people to embody. The history of the New Testament church continues to explore the ways in which we can follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit and scripture and bring God's people before their king in worship. Current trends of home small groups and a changing and sometimes hostile culture intensify this need as God's church continues to worship until He returns.

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