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My Philosophy of the Worship of God

My goal in my "philosophy" of worship is not to simply list views on the theological issues that hold the church captive today. My aim is not to give a perfect, holistic idea of worship (this is impossible for any human), but to give a summary of what I have found worship to be. I do not take this lightly; worship has shaped every aspect of my life, and continues to reform and inform me even to this day. What I want to answer in these pages is a simple question: "What do I mean when I say 'worship'?"

I am compelled to inform the reader that when I speak of "worship" I do not mean "music". I believe it to be wrong and unfitting to do so. Second, I want to give you a definition of what I do mean when I say the word "worship". However, it is foolish to try and nail down one definition of a word; especially words that are dynamic and living. For example: the word "love". Love is a feeling, an action, a commitment, and so much more. So it is with the word "worship". Therefore, I will attempt to give definitions that cover as much as possible, without pretending to provide a tidy and seamless definition of this deeply mysterious and holy act.

One definition of worship that has been most helpful to me is the simple dictionary explanation of the word. Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary defines worship as: "to regard with great or extravagant respect, honor, or devotion". I like this definition not only because it is clear and concise with its evaluation of

worship, but also because it is secular. Because this definition is secular, it is not plagued by many of the preconceptions that Christians face when we think of “worship”. It also makes no mention of the Christian God, which shows that worship can be detached from religion altogether. There is a difference between “worship” and the “worship of God”. I will do my best to explain how I have related this definition to worship in my own life, most especially the worship of God.

I like the term “extravagant respect” in the above definition; and I do believe that it is something we have lost in our American society. “Respect” to the average American seems to mean tolerance or acceptance. When I say that I respect an idea, it does not mean the same thing as when I say that I respect something potentially deadly, like an axe. It is no mere idea or “god” that we come before when we worship God Himself, but the only God of might and power, who is holy and just (Leviticus 19:2, Deuteronomy 32:4). He is not one to be trifled with. When we worship the Ruler of the Universe, we need something deeper and more reverent than simple tolerance of Him.

I also believe that the honor that is mentioned in this definition is very needed in our worship. I assume that most of my readers have never and never will live under a king. I personally have not. From what I have read and heard, there seems to be a deep sense of honor and respect for the one who rules over a multitude of people. Our respect for the president does not seem to match it; at least in my mind. Kings had to personally go to war to keep their people safe. There were no fail-safes if a king was to turn to evil practices or die. They had to

prove themselves by exhibiting dignity and great compassion and care for their people. This what God has done for us. He deserves a deeper honor than I think we many times give Him.

Devotion is also another word that is commonly looked over in the Christian world. Complete devotion is one hundred percent wholesale commitment. One is committed, or one is not. There is no middle ground to devotion.

Then there is the Human relationship analogy that we find in the Bible. The Church is called God's children (Romans 8:16), the bride of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:2), and friends of God (John 15:15). Communication in any relationship is key. My job as a worship leader, I believe, is to facilitate that communication between the people of God and God Himself. This communication is one of deeply personal dialogue between God and us. It is here that we find the intimacy and love that our souls long for. I have found that while the community may understand the feeling of this experience, it is difficult to conceive of a decent explanation of such intimacy. This is a good thing, coming into contact with the inexplicable. It is something that we must be willing to do when we encounter God face to face.

There are three words used in the original Greek of the Bible that are translated as "worship" in our English translation. The first is "proskynein" which means "to kiss toward". This word held the distinct idea of humility in the original language. We must be humble during worship. We must understand whom God is and whom we are in relation to Him, taking on a spirit of submission.

The Greek word “latreuein” means “to serve”. While service requires the servant to be humble, serving is not simply another form of humility. Service is an action, an active form of worship. Worshippers should be people who do something with the love they have been shown and the good news that defines them. It is not simply something of the mind and the heart, but something that pervades every area of life; even the actions that we take. In the eyes of the world that we are a witness to (Acts 1:8) it is not who we are on the inside, but what we do that defines us as Christians.

Finally, there is the word “sebomai” which means “to fear or respect”. It represents the idea of “otherness” and “mystery” in our worship. Western Christianity labels worshippers who buy into the “otherness” as “mystics”. As John Eldredge says, “mystic” is a term that gives a sort of honor while at the same time effecting dismissal. “Mystic”, meaning 'inexplicable', which devolves into 'unreasonable', which is something that our society fears. In my experience, Western society generally says that “if something is unreasonable, it is untrue”. This attitude has taken the mystery right out of western culture. G.K. Chesterton says of the healthy man, the one who believes in mysticism and the unknown, that “He has always left himself free to doubt his gods; but (unlike the agnostic of to-day) free also to believe in them.” To fully worship the only One worth worshipping, we must understand that there are simply things we will not understand. We absolutely must respect the unknown.

Another definition of worship that I have found very compelling is the definition that Howard Best puts forth in his book, *Unceasing Worship*. Best says that

“Worship is the continuous outpouring of all that I am, all that I do and all that I can ever become in light of a chosen or choosing god.” While this can easily be applied to our situation (the worship of God), Best applies it to all the worship of all the things that humanity bows down to. He says: “As God eternally outpours within His triune self, and as we are created in His image, it follows that we too are continuous outpourers, incurably so.” We are always bowing down and worshipping that which is most important to us. The question then becomes, “what is most important to us?” We must place The One at the center of our lives for Him to receive our worship. We will worship regardless of whether we want to or not, but what or whom we worship is fully our decision. Christ is our example in all of this. He was the perfect outpouring man. He is our example for the way that worship of the Father should be. With Christ as our example (1 Corinthians 11:1), and Christ at the center of our worship, we are entering into what God intended His worship to be.

The last definition of worship that I would like to present is that of God’s story. Biblical worship is rooted in an event, expressed in a covenant, characterized by a book, ratified by a sacrifice, and occurs at specific times and places. I believe that this is one of the most overlooked definitions of worship. Sadly overlooked, I believe, because of our modern American culture’s obsession with individualism and self-sufficiency. The event that our worship of God should be rooted in, as I have alluded to before in previous definitions, is the Christ-Event. It was God’s once-and-for-all sacrifice to purify mankind. I will speak more of this later. For now, I want to concentrate on the covenant in which our worship is expressed.

In the Old Testament, God made a covenant with His people, the Hebrews. This form of covenant was known in the ancients as a “suzerainty” covenant. These covenants were between two parties: a stronger party (generally a king), and a weaker people group. In the Old Testament covenant between God and His people, there are obligations for both parties, but God is clearly the stronger party, and initiator of the covenant (see Genesis 15). I believe that this same type of covenant is presented to us, though unconditionally, in the New Testament and up to this day. God is the dominant one in this relationship.

The book that characterizes our worship is no less than the inspired, holy word of God itself. The sacrifice that ratifies (confirms) our worship is the sacrifice that God gave us in the form of His only Son. It occurs at specific times and places because humans are bound by time and space; we are limited in our expression of worship. This worship is corporate in nature, for we are all one in Christ (Galatians 3:28). The people respond to God’s prompting and promises by remembering, anticipating, and celebrating what He has done out of who He is.

I hope that the long-winded definitions and the explanations of those definitions that I have given have left the reader with the distinct feeling that I strive to worship God the way He wants to be worshipped (John 4:23). It is all about Him. Yet, I see the way humanity worships whatever catches its fancy. Health, wealth, money, science, reason, beauty.... the list goes on as far as human decadence does. This leaves us with emptiness. We are sinful, and our world is corrupt. Who then will exemplify for us this worship that God wants? Our example is Christ Jesus.

The Christ event is central to Christian worship. When I say “central”, I mean that it is the centerpiece, the very essence out of which everything else is done. We worship in Christ (Colossians 1:17) and through Christ (John 14:6). We worship Christ Himself. I will admit, while I believe this to be of the utmost importance and cannot help but delve into it, I feel immensely inadequate explaining even the simplest mysteries of Christ. There is so much Old Testament prophecy that was fulfilled in Him. There are volumes and volumes of writings from theologians that describe His life, His work, and His essence. So, as always, I encourage the reader to read The Bible itself rather than relying my narrow-focused commentary.

With all that said, I do feel it necessary to point out what I feel are some of the most important ways that the Christ event informs our worship. I would like to start with a question. While mostly rhetorical, I do believe that this question answers many others. So I ask, how can Christ not be central to our worship? His revelation is what we proclaim, His life is what we strive to live, and He is the reason we can even worship God at all. As David Crowder says, "Our habit is the Christ. He is what covers us. He is what identifies us. We wear him into every moment, and when we live with this awareness, we praise Christ." To misplace Christ at the center of our worship seems not only completely wrong, but also absolutely seismic. To destroy the centrality of Christ is to destroy the worship of God altogether. When even the most important subjects inform our worship too much, the centrality of Christ is ebbed away.

I know for most any Christian, the centrality of Christ is an important thing. There seems to be a discrepancy, however, in our understanding and our practice. I feel as though Christ is at the center of the worship of the church today, but too many other things are ebbing into that centrality. We are letting too many other forces to inform our worship too much. Things like style, culture, tradition, and practice are all important; but they should not be as central as they are today. Perhaps it is simply the way that the English language is structured, but I believe that the words we use when describing church are telling. The words we use often reflect what is most important to us. There are Baptist churches, Evangelical churches, white churches, black churches, and so many more. I find it telling that we can infer more about a local church from its denominational or racial tag than we can from the word “church”. The word church in Greek is “ekklesia”, which means “called out ones”. We, the called out ones, are the body of Christ. I do not believe that there is any such thing as the “Presbyterian body of Christ.” There are no denominations. There is simply the Body of Christ. Christ is central; how can we overlook Him?

I do not mean to bash denominations or traditions. I mean to trivialize them in comparison to the centrality of Christ. We as humans have the good habit of organizing things in a logical way. We also have the bad habit of not wanting to revise our organizational system when it is no longer adequate. I want to be careful in the way I use the word “church”. There is one Church, and the buildings that we endearingly refer to as churches are, frankly, only lot of little places that the Church meets.

How do we as worshippers keep Christ at the center of our worship? We *remember*. We remember the Christ event. Remember what Christ has done for us, for all Christians, and for the world. Mental remembrance is important, but there has to be more if the essence of Christ's death and resurrection is to be passed down to all generations. We must do more than mentally remember; we must recapitulate. Recapitulation means "to make the past present". There are many ways that we can recapitulate. There is one way to recapitulate, however, that stands above the rest. "The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (1 Corinthians 11:23-26) The Lord's Table is our way of making the past death of Christ present in our lives.

There is much theological debate surrounding the practice of the Lord's Table. Some believe that the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Christ during communion (transubstantiation). Others think that the practice of the communion is simply a way of remembering Christ's sacrifice; to them there is no supernatural transubstantiation of the elements (memorial). Then there are those who believe that the elements become the body and blood of Christ, while retaining their physical form of bread and wine or juice (consustantiation).

As with many of the “major” theological debates of our time, I tend to take the position that the argument does not ultimately matter. Not that it does not matter at all; it is simply less important than some of the other issues we are faced with. All this to say; I do have an opinion. Do the bread and the wine change into the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ during communion, as the Catholic tradition holds? I tend to think not. I believe that while in simple remembrance (Luke 22:19) we celebrate Christ’s death, there is also a supernatural connection to God during communion. It is a holy, sacred, and Christ-ordained act. However, simply because I am of the opinion of something does not mean that my opinion is necessarily the only truth. My ultimate stance on all theological issues is this: theology and doctrine are to be written by God alone. We as humans are simply here to receive His words, and believe them. While we are justified in inferring things from Scripture and expounding on the words of God, we have no right to hold our inferences and interpretations higher than we hold the actual words of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now I would like to take a trip through history, looking for present day application in the days gone by. In the Old Testament, worship was much different than it is today. There are still many timeless truths and practices that we can take from the Old Covenant times and apply to our own worship.

The Old Testament contains many general expressions of worship. Things such as fearing God, bowing down, making confession, and seeking the Lord are practices that have survived to this day. The worship of the Hebrews was primarily a corporate event, but we also have examples of personal worship to

look at (such as King David). Physical acts were not at all uncommon at times of worship; in fact, the Hebrews were extremely physical and active in the way they worshipped. Practices such as dancing, bowing, the raising of hands, devotion, and obedience can be carried seamlessly over into the present day. I feel that it is also important to point out that these practices were not always accompanied by music. For example, in Nehemiah 8, the people respond to God without any provocation and no music: "Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, 'Amen! Amen!' Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground." While American culture is very different from that of the ancient Hebrews, we can learn from their deep-seated emotion and unbridled passion in worshipping God.

Even though the Hebrews had many admirable traits in their worship, we can and must take a look at their mistakes and learn from them as well. In Jewish history, eventually worship became rote repetition of actions. Practices that were designed by God to bring His people closer to Him became stagnant rituals. The Pharisees of Jesus' day had even used the Law of God as a cover for teaching whatever they wanted to teach, placing non-biblical rules and regulations on the followers of God. Jesus pointed this out when He quoted Isaiah saying "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men." (Matthew 15:8-9) The Pharisees were striving to obeying the law and to serve God rather than giving

him the love, respect, and devotion that He desires. We cannot afford to do the same.

In the New Testament, Jesus flips the idea of worship on its head. I want to emphasize in what ways the New Testament practices and themes translate into the worship of God in the present day. The entire framework for worship and the standards for it come from the New Testament. It is the ultimate authority that each Christian worshipper or worship gathering must look to when evaluating their practices and ideals. Everything we do should be weighed against it.

The Christ Event is central to worship in the New Testament, and to all worship thereafter. Jesus supercedes the temple cult and the Jewish rituals of the Old Testament (Webber 48). He is the foundation for everything we do. It is extremely important to emphasize that all direct worship of God takes place because of Christ. The writer to the Hebrews says: “Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name.” (Hebrews 13:15) Our worship must be “through Jesus” as the writer says.

The history of the post-Christ church has been plagued with delves into ungrounded mysticism, the blind following of cultural trends, and even killing in the name of Love Himself. Many people wonder if we should heed our heritage at all. Learning from the past, I argue, is a great way, perhaps the only way, to understand the present. Because those who came before us shaped so much of our worship traditions, I do not see how we can ignore their contributions (whether good or bad). I echo Dr. Tom Bergler in saying that “I listen to dead people”.

Being careful to not simply rest on the past, we can take great truths from the millions (maybe even billions) who worshipped God on this earth before we ever arrived. I do not have enough time to even begin to explain how the study of the past has affected my view of the church and the worship of God. Here, in such short a paper, I could not do any form of justice to the great and sincere contributions of the fathers and mothers of our faith. The forms of worship that we practice (liturgies, written prayers, sermons, etc.), our way of meeting as a local church body (church building styles, church leadership hierarchy, etc.), and even our ideas of how to connect with God (quiet times, lectio divina, etc.) have been shaped almost in totality by how those who came before us related to God. It would be a great tragedy to overlook their lives, work, devotion, and worship. Because of this fact, and the forced brevity of this written work, I appeal you to the countless collections of human knowledge that may be found. If the reader trusts my opinion at all, I ask that you trust my recommendation and look into the history of the church. Such a search will not disappoint.

The arts have long been a chosen aid in the act of worship. Creativity is one of the distinct practices that have characterized human kind since the beginning of time. This is not at all unexpected, for we are the “*imago dei*” (the image of God). God is the Creator; it makes sense that we create too. Matthew 22:37 tells us to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind.” Few things come closer to expressing the human heart than creativity and the creation of things that are beautiful in a unique way. This is the expressive

function of art in worship. Art speaks what many times words and thoughts alone cannot.

Art requires emotion; it is devoid of meaning without it. Here we run into a problem. Ever since the Protestant movement, Christians have begun to fear that which is unreasonable. The age of reason, the Enlightenment, and most recently scientific thought have raised reason to an almost God-like status, adding to aversion of the deeply emotional. Some Christian groups even see emotional impulses as vices that must be continually kept in check. Much of the Church has come to rely on reason alone as our basis for belief. This, however, does not represent all of western Christianity. It seems that the other portion of Christians rely almost solely on good emotions, allowing only joyful praise into their worship. Where is the honesty in either of these approaches? Where is the humanity?

I believe that the Psalms can be our rubric for honest worship. King David especially exhibits both extremes of human emotion; despair and ecstasy, yet manages to be honest before and praise God. His relationship with God was just that: a relationship. It was not neat and tidy, it was not always happy, and it was not always easy, but it was real. This is honest worship.

In the time of King David, a new kind of worship emerged that we today call Davidic Worship. It was much different than the "official" worship of the time. As the reader is undoubtedly aware, much of Old Testament worship focused on blood sacrifices as the primary means of worshipping God. David, while continuing to practice the blood sacrifices that God required, led the people of

Israel into worship through sacrifices of praise. Songs were one of the primary ways in which he led, which gives us the Davidic psalms.

As the observant reader has probably noticed, I have avoided as much as possible the topic of music as a means of worship up until this point. My reason for doing this is to allow the reader to fully grasp my opinion on the use of music in worship. Music is such a powerful means to worship God, especially in the corporate setting, for there are few art forms that instantly welcome unlimited numbers of people to participate in unison towards one goal. Music does two things in the corporate setting: it expresses and it teaches. It allows an entire congregation to express their hearts to God. It also teaches the congregation about God and their relationship to Him. Music in worship is both give and take; the more we give in our expression, the more we allow the truth to sink deeply into our souls. There are many reasons to utilize music in worship, but one of the primary reasons, I believe, is the fact that worship and music are very similar in many aspects of their nature. We form music and it forms us. So it is with worship. Both worship and music are an expression, but they also leave an impression on us. Both are informed by knowledge and emotion. They seem to be a match made in heaven.

In our day, in our corner of the world, there is a problem. Music and worship have for so long been associated with one another, I fear that their meanings have become synonymous in western society. When one says “worship” in this day and age, it is almost assumed that the person speaking is referring to music. This is an incredibly sad happening. While I love music, and am overjoyed at its

wide acceptance into the local Church meeting setting, I want more than ever for the two practices to be understood as complimentary but distinctly separate.

There are other problems in the Evangelical faction of the Church that I am very disappointed with. Evangelicals (myself included, I'm afraid) have allowed the ideas and ideals of our culture to erode at the core of our beliefs and misplace Christ as the center of our worship. Just as our culture has adopted a very individualistic, consumer mindset, so has Evangelicalism. Worship is seen as an "add-on" to life, and not seen as all of life itself as it should be. For many Evangelicals, worship seems to happen only during the music at the Church gathering on Sunday morning.

It is a daunting task to go about renewing and reforming that which formed you. In my mind, however, it is something that must be done. I believe that it all starts with instruction on the topic of worship. Once the teaching on worship is sound, music will be displaced as "the worship", and worship of the Spirit and Truth will take its rightful place; worship will begin to change from an experience to a sacrifice. At the point of sacrifice, we as worshippers lay ourselves down, realizing that there is One greater than we. What we worship forms who we are; so once we get our minds out of our consumer mindset and truly worship God, His presence will shape us the kind of people he wants us to be: a people in the likeness of Christ.

Once we become more like Christ in our mindset and actions, I believe that our individualism and obsession with reason as the only source of belief will fade. We will once again be a united body of Christ. Ideally, I would love to see the

denominations of Christianity fade in importance. I know that we will not see (nor do I want to see) their full demise, for our traditions are very important to whom we are today. Each person has a unique way of worshipping God, so differing opinions about worship style will always be with us. What I would like to see, however, is a love and mutual respect breaking down the barriers that divide those of different traditions. All human reason and preference must be less important than the cross of Christ that we unite under.

The ultimate goal in all this is to misplace all that hinders our worship of God, placing Christ, the Lord of the universe, at the center of everything we are and everything we do. This is the ultimate renewal that I know will not be completed until Christ returns to gather His church, but I feel that I am justified in seeking after it and hoping for at least a glimpse of it in this life. Christ at the center is what I seek, what I hope and pray for, and what I long after.

I want to be a worshipper of Spirit and Truth, the kind that the Father Himself seeks after (John 4:23). I have always sought after God, but to be sought after by God Himself... this is the highest honor that one can be granted. I also hope to lead others in this worship that transcends all race, culture and preference. My influence is small, and my thoughts on the subject are clearly inadequate. The subject of my worship, however, is clearly infinite and exercising unlimited influence. He is the One that is adequate in the fullest sense of the word. He is God. All I can hope to do is lead others to Him in worship. I will not call this *my* "philosophy of worship", for as G.K. Chesterton said, "I did not make it. God and humanity made it; and it made me."

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