

WHAT DID WE COME HERE FOR?

by Ray C. Stedman

Last Sunday we sought to explore the fact that everyone basically worships. Worship is a human condition. The only question is: Are you engaging in true worship or false? True worship, of course, involves a God who is actually there, and who is worthy of worship. False worship adores an idol or an image of a god, an imaginary god, an illusion, something that really is not there; or if there, is not worthy of worship. But everybody worships in one way or the other. This morning we shall look together at what it means to gather in a corporate experience of worship. We are essentially answering the basic question: What did we come here for? Through the years I have observed many reasons why people come to church. I have been listening to them for well over four decades, and I probably have heard them all.

- Most people come because they derive some personal benefit which they may be hardly aware of or which they cannot articulate clearly. They simply say, "I just like church. It helps me. It does something for me." That is rather vague, but nevertheless is an adequate reason for coming. We do many things on the basis of simple enjoyment.
- Other people come because they feel a need for meeting people, for being with others, for socializing. That is not quite as adequate a reason as the above, but it is understandable because we are social creatures. We like to be where other people are, at least for most of the time.
- Some, I am sorry to say, come because they feel they have to. There may be some teenagers here who feel that way. There may be children present who would not otherwise come but their parents have made them come. I have to say that is not necessarily a bad reason. I had to go to church when I was a child, and at first I didn't always appreciate it. But later I began to understand what lay behind that demand. Although it should not be done with cruelty or with insistence against a very strong or determined will, nevertheless, it is responsible parental behavior to train our children to come to church and to bring them for that purpose.
- Some like to come because they enjoy the music and the singing. They appreciate hearing people raise their voices in a harmonic expression of their faith. They like the words of the great hymns, or enjoy the music of a good choir. I greatly enjoy the singing of hymns. I feel they are a tremendous way to teach theology. I hope you do not ever sing hymns that you do not listen to while you are singing.
- It is amazing how many people enjoy hearing hymns even though they don't agree with the words. I met a woman once who declared herself an atheist and a feminist, yet she said, "I do go to church every once in a while because I like to hear them sing the 'herms' of the church." I told my wife afterward, "I hope she did not sing them too lustily lest she suffer from a 'himnia!'"
- But at least some people come because they like the preaching. I do hope that is why you are here this morning. People say, "I do like to hear a good message. It makes me think." That is a good reason because the Scriptures are designed to make us think. They are contrary to the spirit of the age in which we live, so they make us face up to issues, and ask questions about things. This is a helpful reason for coming to church.
- Some like the preaching, of course, because it makes them sleep! Someone has said that preaching is the art of talking in someone else's sleep. That may be true, although I must say that I have never observed much of that going on here. If the sermon is so empty of content that people drift off to sleep, I always feel that they ought either to arise greatly strengthened, or awake greatly refreshed! One man said that the sermons he listened to reminded him of the coffee can at home which had on it the words "vacuum packed!"

None of these reasons are really wrong (except the last one, of course). But whatever may be the reason you come to church, most people feel they come for a good reason and that their reason is the correct one. Yet, even then, there is a wide range of expectations of what a church worship service ought to be. If we tried to choose everything that individuals wanted in a service, we would be engaged in endless controversy.

- Some want more ritual. People have said to me, "Why don't you ever sing the doxology?" or "Why don't you have the Lord's prayer?" or "Why don't we recite the Apostles' Creed?" I have no objections to these additions. They are wonderful expressions of truth if they are done meaningfully. Perhaps, from time to time, we ought to add them to our service because they are rich in meaning. But some people can't feel they have been to church unless they have recited something like that.
- Other people say, "No, what we need is a different music style. I don't like all these guitars. What I want to hear is a great organ thundering away. Then I can really worship." Young people, in particular, urge, "Out with the organ! We like guitars. They are the Lord's instruments." We had an elder once who actually proposed that we have 200 banjos leading the service. Fortunately, his request was not carried out.
- There are some people who like less formality in the service. They want to encourage the raising of hands when people sing or pray, and to feel freedom to do so. There ought to be such freedom because the Scriptures ask us to raise our hands at times unto the Lord. Some feel nervous about this, and are unused to it. It looks like they have signed an "arms limitation" treaty. There are various desires in this regard and it is difficult sometimes to walk a middle course, as you can understand.
- Some want a shorter message. They think all services ought to end promptly at noon. Anyone who goes beyond that is virtually criminal. Some want a longer message. They want more exposition because they enjoy it so.

There are many different opinions. It sounds very much like a poem I ran across once by Sam Walter Foss on the various ways that people should pray:

"The proper way for a man to pray,"
Said Deacon Lemuel Keys,
"And the only proper attitude
Is down upon his knees."

"No, I should say the way to pray,"
Said Reverend Doctor Wise,
"Is standing straight with outstretched arms
And rapt and upturned eyes."

"Oh, no, no, no!" said Elder Slow,
"Such posture is too proud.
A man should pray with eyes fast closed
And head contritely bowed."

"It seems to me his hands should be
Austerely clasped in front
With both thumbs pointing toward the ground,"
Said Reverend Doctor Blunt.

"Last year I fell in Hidgkin's well
Head first," said Cyrus Brown,
"With both my heels a-stickin' up
And my head a-pointin' down."

And I made a prayer right then and there,
The best prayer I ever said,
The prayingest prayer I ever prayed

A-standin' on my head!"

I give you that, not to make you laugh, but because I believe it hits the proper note of worship. Worship should arise from a deep and urgent sense of need. We humans are designed for more than ourselves. It is what makes us worship. As the book of Ecclesiastes says, "God has set eternity in men's hearts," {cf, Eccl 3:11}. Deep within us all there is a cry for God. That is what makes us worship.

Both Scripture and the experience of the church through the centuries tell us that there are three essentials to a worship service -- three things necessary to make corporate worship satisfying and fruitful, producing something worthwhile in our lives:

1. The first one is that we must come basically and essentially to honor and to praise God. God must be central in worship. We do not come for any other reason, fundamentally, than to express our praise and thanksgiving unto Him. As the psalmist puts it, "Give unto Him the glory due unto His name," {Psa 26:2, 96:8}. God is our Creator. He made us. He fashioned us. He sustains us. We live and breathe because of his creative power. But more than that, he is our Redeemer. We would have destroyed all that he created, including ourselves, had he not found a way to solve the problem of our sin and guilt, to cleanse us and forgive us, and give us gifts of life, of truth, of insight and power which we would never have had otherwise. We come to thank him for those gifts, to praise him for his mercy, to express to him the glory due unto his name.

If this is not the fundamental element of worship, then the service quickly deteriorates. As many of you have experienced (as I certainly have), a so-called "Morning Worship Service" can become nothing more than a religious entertainment, a public entertainment. Today many people go to church services because they are entertained by them. They like the music, the snappy jokes, the clever comments made by leaders. It is almost like a theater where a stage play is being put on. But that is not worship, not in the biblical sense of the word.

Or perhaps a service deteriorates into empty and boring ritual, the same thing every Sunday. We know exactly what is going to take place. It is utterly predictable we will rise at this point; we will kneel at this time; we will bow our heads; we will say these words. It can all become nothing but an empty performance, and people go away as empty as the service itself was.

Or it may be so man-centered, focusing on our needs, our desires, our feelings, that it becomes nothing but a narcissistic performance. That, too, does not satisfy the hunger of the heart. We must put God central in worship. We must come to glorify him, to give thanks unto his name. That does not mean that it has to be the same thing every Sunday. God is an infinite Being. He reflects many qualities and many different moods. Therefore worship services ought to be varied in their emphases. Most often, they should be a joyful celebration for all that we have received. A modern hymn we occasionally sing puts it beautifully:

Sometimes, Alleluia,
Sometimes, praise the Lord,
Sometimes gently singing,
Our hearts in one accord.

Some services ought to be a solemn time of heart-searching, a time when perhaps a passage of Scripture powerfully portrays our broken humanity or the beauty and glory of the Lord and the whole congregation is made solemn before God. Some of the Psalms reflect this, the majesty of the Lord and the beauty of his holiness: "The Lord is in His holy temple, let all the earth keep silence before him," {cf, Psa 11:4, 33:8}.

Sometimes they may be characterized by a sense of grateful thanksgiving. Perhaps, we have been delivered as a nation from some crisis. I well remember after the Cuban missile crisis that many church services reflected a sense of a burden lifted, a peril removed, a danger evaded. We were, properly, grateful to God for that. Maybe it will be a local event that awakens our deep gratitude.

Certainly, from time to time throughout the year, there ought to be opportunity for expression of God's marvelous goodness to us.

2. Now and then a service should be characterized by a comforting sense of reassurance. If we, as a people, have been made afraid, or been threatened, we need reassurance; perhaps our faith has been shaken by some event. Many Scriptures are designed to quiet our fears and make us rest in God and know again that all will turn out well. That should be a repeated theme in many of our services in these troubled times.

Occasionally a powerful proclamation of a truth that addresses itself to the conscience will leave a congregation stirred, excited, and galvanized into action. Or a service may feature a giving of honor to someone, the recognition of how God has used a man or woman as an instrument of his grace. We had a case of that this morning with these grade-school boys who shared with us about running a race. We recognized their accomplishment, and it was delightful.

Whatever the nature of a service, it is determined by the events we are passing through as a congregation, or by the Scripture passage to which we have come and the theme that it presents; or by some obvious social problem or need that needs to be confronted and to have the light of the Word of God applied to it. But no matter what the theme, it all ought to be centered upon God -- God's power at work, God's character as the fundamental basis of our lives, God's work of redemption, God's wisdom in applying it in many different ways beyond our ability to perceive. That theme, whatever it is, ought to flow through the music, the prayer, the Scripture, even the offering, and culminate at last in the preaching. Preaching ought to be the climax of a worship service because it is the time when the congregation, through the preacher, actually hear the voice of God. The preacher is giving us the mind of God about ourselves, our nation, and our problems. Preaching, therefore, ought to be the culmination of all that has gone on in a service. This has been well expressed by our dear friend, John R. W. Stott, one of the great preachers of our day.

Far from being an alien intrusion into worship, the reading and preaching of the Word are actually indispensable to it. The two cannot be divorced. Indeed, it is their unnatural divorce which accounts for the low levels of so much contemporary worship. Our worship is poor because our knowledge of God is poor. And our knowledge of God is poor because our preaching is poor. But when the word of God is expounded in its fulness and the congregation begins to glimpse the glory of the living God, they bow down in solemn awe and joyful wonder before his throne. And it is preaching which accomplishes this. The proclamation of the Word of God in the power of the Spirit of God -- that is why preaching is unique and irreplaceable.

I would say a hearty "Amen!" to those words.

Now the second element that worship must contain, if it is to be worthy, is that it must involve a recognition of the body of Christ; and an opportunity to grow in knowledge of one another, of our needs, our problems, our hurts, our pain, our distresses, our joys, and our thanksgivings. There must be a time when we enter someone else's life who is sitting beside us. We must grow in unity, in a sense of belonging, of caring, and of loving one another. That is why we make time for you to greet those around you. We do not want anyone to feel lost or lonely, or a stranger in our midst, that no one talks to them or cares for them. This is the commonest complaint about church services. Folks go away and complain that no one spoke to them. They may say, "I have been going to that church for weeks and no one has even asked my name, or said a word to me." That is a failure of worship!

Worship must include the body of Christ. We belong to each other. We are part of a worshipping congregation together. I believe that the motivation to do this is awakened by the worship of God. You see this all through the Scripture and you often see it in human experience. When a congregation worships God truly, they also begin to be concerned about each other. When you love God, you will begin to love your brother. John points this out in his first letter. He says, "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love," {1 Jn 4:8 NIV}. We are so designed that we express our love for God by our concern for each other.

Remember what Jesus says in that great passage in Matthew 25 where he describes the events that will ensue when he comes again. He will sit on his glorious throne and gather before him all the living nations which he calls "the sheep and the goats." Sheep are true believers and goats are apparent believers, but not real ones. He is going to distinguish between them, to separate the goats from the sheep. How does he do it? The test is, what did you do or not do to each other. He will say, "Inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these, my brethren, you have done it unto me," {cf, Matt 25:40}. What does this mean? By helping others you have worshipped God. That is the test of true religion.

We are also exhorted in the Scriptures to pray for, to comfort, to encourage, and to admonish one another. That wonderful text in Hebrews 10 which we read this morning said:

Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but encouraging one another. {cf, Heb 10:24-25}

I remember visiting the University Presbyterian Church of Seattle some years ago and listening to Dr. Bruce Larson. He was telling the people that Christians ought to be like the great sand cranes of the Midwest, these birds that fly through the skies together in a "V" formation. He said there were two unique qualities about them:

- o First, they are always changing leadership. One bird is not always the leader for they each take their turn.
- o Second, while they are flying they honk to each other. They are encouraging each other, "That's fine! You're doing great! Keep it up!"

That is what Christians ought to be doing -- encouraging one another and helping one another in their walk.

Another passage of Scripture that which speaks directly to this is found in Colossians 3:16-17:

Let the word of Christ dwell within you richly; as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. {Col 3:16-17 RSV}

Notice the elements of worship there. Preaching and teaching -- "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom as you teach and admonish one another." Then there is singing -- "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs," sharing together in a mutual expression of faith through a song or a hymn. Then there is serving -- "Whatever you do in word or deed, let it be in the name of the Lord Jesus," serving one another in that way. That ought to be a part of every worship service, a recognition of our unity in the body of Christ.

3. The third element essential to true worship is to recognize afresh the ultimate end of relating to God and relating to each other. What is that purpose? What does worship prepare us for? The answer is -- to serve the needs of the world! The church is here to teach and bless and help the world. God's ultimate objective is the world -- this unredeemed society around us, these people without faith who are stumbling blindly through life and destroying themselves in the process. There is plenty of hurt also in the church, but there it is being cured and corrected in order that we might learn how to help people out there, in the desperate conditions of life.

Remember that wonderful scene in Isaiah 6 where Isaiah sees the greatness and glory of God, high and lifted up with his train filling the temple. The angels bow before him, crying, "Holy, Holy, Holy." Isaiah falls on his face and declares himself unworthy, "Woe is me, for I am undone! I have a dirty mouth. I am a man of unclean lips!" And God sends an angel with a burning coal to cleanse his

mouth. After that, Isaiah says, "Lord, here am I. Send me!" {Isa 6:8b RSV}. That is what worship ought to do for us. It ought to make us ready to say, "Lord, here am I. Here is a need that I am aware of in our community. In my neighborhood there are people who are hurting and need help. Here am I. Send me!"

That is why we take an offering in church. It is not just to pay the expenses of the church, although it does that. It is designed to permit you to share the ministry that reaches out to those in distress around us. That is also why we pray for each other. It is why we hear reports of missionary activities, of various local ministries -- to inform us of where people need help -- because we are being equipped to help them.

To draw this to a conclusion, let me just say that the test of true worship is threefold. You can ask yourself these three questions:

- First, does worship help me experience God's presence in beauty and power in a manner true to his word? Am I in touch with the real God? You can have worship experiences that do not reflect the reality of God. They often reflect God in a perverted or distorted way. They may minister to your emotions, but they do not teach you anything about the real God. A true worship service ought to send us out feeling that we have been standing in the presence of the real God. We know something more of his greatness, his mercy, his compassion, and his love.
- Second, does worship foster a sense of unity in the Body or does it damage it? Do I go out feeling closer to my brothers and sisters, more understanding of them, or do I go out angry and upset at them, ready to cut them off and have nothing to do with them? The purpose of worship is to increase the love and unity of the body.
- Third, does worship motivate me to take practical steps to help others? Do I feel stimulated, motivated, to do something about the woman down the block who has no one to help her with her shopping? To help that young teenager in our neighborhood who is causing so many problems? Could I talk to him, not to bawl him out but to be a friend? Whatever the need may be, am I motivated to meet it?

Let me close with these words from the first chapter of James:

If anyone considers himself to be religious, and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself, and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this, to look after orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. {Jas 1:26-27 NIV}

That is true worship. Worship ought to do that for us. Ask yourself: Do I get help in these areas? Do I understand more about the greatness of God and his mercy and his love? Am I stirred to gratitude because of what I have heard? Do I sense a close companionship with other believers? Do I see them, struggling as I am, to work out various problems. Do I want to do all I can to encourage them and help them? Am I stimulated to do something practical this week to bring this all about, to help someone, to serve and to minister to those who are in trouble in this troubled age?

That is what true worship is before God.

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