

The Joy Of Worship - November 1987

John sat straight-backed at the organ. His slender hands moved skilfully across the keyboard while his feet worked furiously on the pedals, pumping air into the weary lungs of the tired organ. Despite rasping squeaks and rushes of air, the organ did its best to respond to his efforts as though not wishing to destroy his confidence.

Meanwhile, the pastor, suitably clothed in his dark Sunday suit, stood with hymnbook in hand to lead in worship while the subdued and wearied followers sat before him scattered throughout the rows of pews.

Endurance test

Among all creatures on earth, only man is a worshipper. The symbols of man's desire to worship — the church building, temple, synagogue, mosque or shrine — are there for everyone to see. Yet how empty it all seems!

I remember that warm summer morning, rising from the pew, which tried to hold me down by my trousers because the heat had stuck them to the varnished seat. I stood leaning on the seat-back of the row in front of me, like some half-awake Saturday night leftover, resigned to a miserable morning, and thought to myself how dreadful it was that the hymn we were singing had so many verses. Most of the lines made no sense to me at all. Worse still, there were three more hymns like this before the meeting finished! The whole thing was dreadfully boring.

I tried my best to inject feeling into the 'worship', but it was like squeezing a shrivelled orange for the last drop of juice, only to be disappointed when nothing came.

Worst of all, I kept thinking over what the pastor had said at the start of the service. He told us that we would spend eternity engaged in worship. I couldn't think of a more dreadful prospect. Surely that would be eternal endurance, not eternal life!

A revelation of God

Happily, I've changed my mind —not because I suddenly found the hymns to be full of meaning. No, I discovered that what I was engaged in was not really worship. True worship springs from a revelation of God — not the words of a hymnbook.

True worship never becomes stale as long as the revelation remains fresh. It's not a case of trying to understand what others meant in their words generations ago, but expressing what you feel today in your love for God.

Eternity need not be tedious for us in worship because our revelation of God won't be complete even when we receive our redeemed bodies. On the contrary, God is so great that the whole of eternity couldn't exhaust the revelation of him. Not one song of praise, shout of glory or confession of adoration will ever need to be repeated. The continued wonder of his unfolding nature will provoke in all his creatures new songs of praise and adoration. We will experience the evolution of our worship with each unveiling of God's majestic greatness.

Extravagant love

Looking back to those uncomfortable Sundays and tediously long services, I can see now that what made 'worship' so boring to me was the sense that we were engaged in a religious form in which there was so little genuine feeling.

The whole thing seemed unreal. My life was neither affected nor involved. I was engaging in a religious exercise, totally devoid of any personal emotion. It lacked both sincerity and passion. It is strange how we are so afraid of expressing emotion in relation to God for fear of being accused of 'emotionalism'.

We can get excited when our favourite team wins at sport or weep when our TV hero is struck down with tragedy. But somehow, when it comes to God, we suddenly have to be straight-faced, dry-eyed and totally without feeling. How silly! It isn't new for people to misunderstand the extravagance of love. Mary brought a jar of expensive perfume — a means of financial savings in those days — and poured it all on Jesus (John 12:1-8). Judas, whose heart had never felt the love for Christ that this woman did, complained that it was a waste of a year's salary. His cold, calculating mind saw her action as religious fanaticism.

He couldn't understand her passionate feelings of love for Christ. All he saw was money that could have been used for better purposes — probably to line his own pocket.

To him, Jesus wasn't worth this 'waste'. No one who doesn't feel the Lord's worth can engage in worship. The mind and affections will always occupy themselves with what they value most.

Heart response

I'm glad that worship in spirit and truth embraces the demonstration of our feelings. Those feelings are the greatest motivations in our life. We needn't be ashamed or afraid of them. Even though our faith doesn't rely on feelings, it is made more joyous and warm because of them. By faith, Jesus performed miracles, but he let it be known that they were also the result of his compassion (see Matthew 14:14; 15:32; 20:34; Mark 1:41).

It is impossible for us to engage in any area of life without involving our emotions — anger or joy, peace or fear, happiness or disgruntledness. These are the reasons for our attitudes and actions in all daily life.

Many Hebrew words show the wide variety of emotional responses involved in praise — shouting, raising hands, bowing the knee, prostration at God's feet, joyous singing and enthusiastic dancing.

To empty worship of the expressions of feeling is the same as robbing springtime of its flowers, nature of its colour, the birds of their song. Everything would become dull and drab.

Instead, let us rise to worship God with our hearts as well as our minds. Let us worship him in our tears and our laughter.

Let us praise!