

WORSHIP: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

by Gene McCoy

PURPOSE

For whom is worship intended? The obvious point to make is that worship is to be of and for God. Man is to give it and God is to receive it. But who were those who assembled to worship God? Can a single reference be found in the New Testament where anyone but believers were encouraged and invited to attend? Does this suggest that much of our practice today is contrary to the Biblical model? If we returned to Biblical worship, would we invite unbelievers to attend? Would we style and structure our worship to appeal to the unbeliever? Instead of using the weekly worship assembly as the primary method for evangelizing the lost, should not our daily worship as individual Christians fulfill that responsibility? Perhaps we should consider the fact that the purpose of worship in the contemporary church may not correspond to the Biblical model. Biblically, the corporate worship did not have evangelizing the lost as a focus, much more its primary focus. Non-Christians were not invited.

What is the focus of worship? Much of the discussion about worship practices is introspective in nature. The question that concerns many relates to what pleases "me" as opposed to what honors God. The marketing strategies advanced by church growth gurus seemingly focus more upon man than upon God. This stems from an incorrect view of the purpose of worship, of course. Whatever benefit man derives from worship, this is not the primary concern of Biblical worship. God, not man, is to be the central focus. Worship is giving, not getting.

ESSENTIALS AND EXPEDIENCIES

What does the Bible say about the elements of worship? It is interesting to note that the most controversial aspects in contemporary worship are things about which the Bible has nothing to say. Conversely, I cannot remember hearing of a church embroiled in controversy regarding the essential elements of worship. This is as it should be from the perspective that we should not debate things which God has clearly stated in His Word, but are free to hold differing opinions about that which God has chosen not to address.

The point I am making is that we should not become overly animated over issues in the realm of opinion, especially to the point that it becomes a distraction to worship and service. One of the big controversies we are told churches will endure relates to the matter of music in the worship assembly. Think about this Biblically. Would we violate any Biblical instruction if we eliminated music altogether? Is there any context regarding corporate worship in the New Testament where music is commanded, much less practiced? Be careful now, because many of the proof texts (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; Matt. 26:30) are not in the context of corporate worship. By the way, would we violate Biblical teaching or apostolic precedent if we eliminated the traditional invitation hymn?

Other examples of things associated with worship that are receiving more attention than the Bible warrants include the order of worship and the length of the worship service. The Bible says absolutely nothing about the order, and the only biblical reference to the length of a preaching service (Acts 20:7-11) is that it lasted past midnight! (Never mind

the fact that it resulted in one worshiper's death!)

What liberties may we enjoy? As long as the essentials are honored (e.g., Lord's Supper, preaching, prayer, scripture reading), and the worshiper is brought into the proper attitude of reverent worship, is not everything else subject to expediency?

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

The church is not a democracy.

There is a tendency, especially in the American church, to approach things democratically. While there are certain aspects of church life, including the worship service, where honoring the wishes of the majority may be acceptable, "the act of worship is far too holy to be entrusted to the democratic process. Worship is a confrontation of the individual and/or the corporate body with Al-mighty God! And where a relationship exists that involves the personhood of God democracy ceases to exist" (Lynn Hieronymus, *What The Bible Says About Worship*, College Press, 1984, p. 113). In our sensitivity to the diversity of our constituents, let us make sure that our worship is consistent with the Biblical model.

Hieronymus (p. 169) suggests some questions to consider as we evaluate our worship. For example, are the objectives and priorities of our worship legitimate from a Biblical perspective? How well does the present structure of this service contribute to the achievement of these objectives and priorities? Are the basic elements of Biblical worship to be found in this service? Hieronymus adds (p. 170) that "the folksy, public-relations-oriented, 'Is everybody having a good time?' approach so frequently observed is probably inconsistent with a biblically-based orientation of ultimate values in public worship. Truly, the church of Christ upon earth is not a community service organization and its worship should not be conducted as though it were!"

Conclusion Like children who, left to their own selfishness, would live on a junk food diet, "a congregation may seek in worship that which they want rather than that which they need" (Hieronymus, p. 112). Let us determine to follow the Biblical model of worship instead of humanly devised models.