

# SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE




HAVE WE OUTGROWN WORSHIP?

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## HAVE WE OUTGROWN WORSHIP?

No civilization as yet unearthed by the archaeologist's spade has been without a prison, an altar and a cemetery. Regardless of his time or habitat, man sins, man worships and man dies.

But the corporate worship of Almighty God has fallen on hard days in this country. The boom of the Eisenhower years has spent itself. Time was when the man who didn't go to church was on the defensive. Time is that the man who goes to church must defend his going.

The half inebriated guest bids his party host farewell with a sneering "See you in church Sunday." Young people occasionally snap off their transistor radios long enough to drop into church, only to report that the whole experience was a colossal drag. Well-lettered theologians, by word and by example, have suggested that it is more important to realize goals in society than it is to gather for worship; thereby polarizing devotion and action. Except for Easter, churches do not expect to seat their entire membership on Sundays, and build their plants accordingly.

But this is not the whole picture, not by any means. For there are signs abroad that man is still aware of powers that transcend him and yearns to get in touch with them. Hundreds of newspapers in this country carry daily columns on astrology, pandering to a rabid interest in the subject.

Young people resort to drugs to expand their consciousness and perchance make contact with another world. Students in mainline seminaries from responsible denominations are reportedly gathering in small groups in quest of an experience of speaking in tongues. Peter Berger tells us that modern man is beginning to look for 'signals of transcendence' in the world. And Harvey Cox is not ashamed to observe that we have a need to celebrate with joyful pagantry the presence of the living God among us.

Man cannot outgrow worship. He can pervert worship. He can suppress worship. He can misdirect his worship. But worship he must, for he is, indeed, incurably religious. Herein lies the church's opportunity. Not to scold men because they do not go to church. Not to bemoan publicly the spirit of the age that seems to militate against the corporate worship of God. But to make worship irresistably attractive to others by making it such to ourselves. For this to happen we must address ourselves to at least two questions. First: What is worship? And second: How do we strike a balance between continuity and change?

\* \* \* \* \*

What is corporate worship? It is something we do for God, not something God does for us. To be sure, there are benefits that accrue to the worshipper. But these are secondary, not primary. This is why the Scriptures are candid enough to speak about offering up "the sacrifice of thanksgiving." (Ps 116:17) Sometimes it is an effort to celebrate the worth of God. Let's be honest and acknowledge that we are not always glad when someone bids us "go into the house of the Lord." (Ps 122:1)

Worship is something we do for God, not, in the first place, something God does for us. For example, worship is not to be understood as a therapy that might help us get around some of our enervating anxieties. It is not to be seen as a cement that holds the nation together. It is not to be seized upon as an occasion that brings us into contact with nice people. It isn't even an experience that will necessarily inspire us to go outside and do something good for someone else.

One reason why worship does not mean more to us is because we have not clarified our expectations regarding it. Some people expect worship to combine the best features of a coffee-break, a lecture, a concert and a pep rally. Don't misunderstand me, if someone comes to this church for a dinner and no one speaks to him, this is serious. But I have never felt that it was particularly serious if someone should

come to worship and have very little human contact. I would worry, however, if in that experience of worship the individual felt no contact at all with God.

Worship is one of the responses we make to God for our creation, preservation, and redemption. It is something we do as the community of faith on behalf of God's whole creation. It is an occasion for us to revel in God; to enjoy His presence; to hearken to His word; and celebrate His worth.

Obviously there are side effects that are beneficial to the worshipper, chief of which, in my judgment, is the ability of worship, when rightly practiced, to get us out of ourselves. Or, as C. S. Lewis put it, "to deliver us from the emotional perspective produced by one's own particular selfhood." 1

Something fine and freeing can happen when the minister opens the service by saying "Let us worship God." Forget the roast in the oven. Forget the fact that your mother-in-law threatens to come for a visit. Forget the fact that those stocks you nurse so lovingly are now depressed. "Let us worship God."

This is why Isaiah 6 has long been the paradigm for worship. "In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; . . . ." (Isaiah 6:1a) From there the worshipper goes on to an experience of his own uncleanness. ". . . . I am a man of unclean lips; . . . ." (Isaiah 6:5a) Finally he responds to a call that reaches him through that encounter. "Here am I! Send me." (Isaiah 6:8b)

In its essence, worship is not a means to anything else. Worship, my friends, is the one thing we humans do that stands as an end in itself.

Moreover, worship is something we do together. It is not a continuation of one's private devotions. It is not in competition with one's private devotions. Samuel Miller was guiding us wisely when he noted that in worship "we

express together what we cannot say alone; we hear together what we cannot hear alone." 2

The problem with most of us, at least in the Protestant tradition, is that we tend to see worship as a performance by the few for the many. Kierkegaard, the Danish theologian, has pointed out that most people have an inverted idea of worship. They think of the congregation as an audience and the choir and minister as actors in a performance. "No," says Kierkegaard, "the audience is not the congregation. God is the audience. The congregation are the actors. The choir and minister are merely the prompters."

It has always intrigued me that people who pride themselves on being "low church" have a way of resisting the parts of the service that are given over to them. The principle of alternation is a vital part of worship, the minister speaking and the congregation responding. This is why through word and music there are many places, and perhaps should be more, in our services of worship where the congregation responds. When one reads the Psalms he is impressed by the number of parallelisms. Frequently the second part of a verse says almost what the first part said. The reason for this is that many of those Psalms were used antiphonally. One group spoke the first part while another group responded with the second.

Worship is something we do for God. Worship is something we do together. Worship is something that involves the whole man in the doing. You can measure a worship experience anywhere by whether at once that experience has stirred the emotions, engaged the intellect, and aroused the will. Worship must never be conceived as an emotional orgy in which we surround ourselves with the kind of language and music that make no demand upon the will or intellect. At the same time, we must never think of the place where people gather for worship as an auditorium where words go from a man's mouth to the minds of those who listen without making any penetration of the feelings or the will.

We were speaking a moment ago about benefits that accrue indirectly to the worshipper. Perhaps the most important of these is what worship does in a slow and gradual

way to establish the set of the will. I fear that people come for an experience of worship, perhaps after a long absence, looking for some dramatic correction of what is wrong in their life. I've always been intrigued by the ads put out by one of our nation's major language schools. The type is big and bold. The offer is unqualified. The message is plain: "You can speak French by April 20th!" Sometimes I wish the church could be that direct. "You can have your inner life straightened out by June 1st!" Or, "You can be like Jesus Christ by Palm Sunday!" But it doesn't happen that way. When a man has commerce with his maker, the change that is established within is hardly perceptible on a daily basis. In a culminative way, however, it establishes that man is within the purposes of God.

A friend shared with me a cartoon that apparently runs in one our current magazines. A man is seated in front of a television set. The picture has misbehaved and the familiar words are seen: "Please stand by." But above those words is the legend, "We have temporarily lost the will to continue." It is precisely at the point where man has lost the will to continue that the worship of Almighty God can give him a new beginning, a new centering moment, a new cause for going on.

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What is worship? It is something we do for God. It is something we do together. It is something that involves all of us that there is. But as we move on to the question: How do we strike a balance between continuity and change in worship? we move away from theory and come down on the harder ground of practice. Tradition is good. Despite insistent pressures to the contrary, tradition is good. I'm glad that when I want to know something about electricity I don't have to go out in a storm with a kite and begin all over again. I find myself sympathetic to Joseph Wood Krutch when he says, "Those who are not only over thirty but over sixty as well still take it for granted that there are some things that are not for a day but for all time." 3

Much that is offered in the way of new forms of wor-

ship nowadays is hardly more than a thinly disguised gimmickry that allows the worshipper to meet himself coming back. I confess, just for one, that I am not particularly drawn to familiar terms of address for the deity. Slang does not appeal to me in this particular setting. And I wonder sometimes why we worry so much about trying to translate Scripture and prayer into what we call the idiom of our time.

I know that most of us are more familiar with subways than we are with sheep. But I can't believe that because of this we are disqualified from appreciating the 23rd Psalm. There is such a thing as racial memory that helps us make the translation existentially. David said, "The Lord is my shepherd," and his words have continuing reference even for those of us who ride the IRT.

As the Greeks read the Iliad and the Odyssey they heard their own past calling in their heart. The desire to be contemporary can leave us discontinuous with our heritage. The spirit of the age can block out the God of the ages.

On the other hand, there is little virtue in reiterating language and using thought forms that do not communicate today or induce participation. It belongs to every local congregation to ask serious questions about how its worship should be ordered. The organ is not the only instrument proper to praise. There is no reason why the hymn book cannot be expanded and poets and composers commissioned to give us hymns that speak with greater power to our own situation. There is no reason why an interpretive dance group cannot help us understand more fully the meaning, for example, of the "Lord's Prayer." The Scriptures can have renewed force and impact when they are read not by one man in isolation, but by a chorus of trained readers.

All of this is by way of suggesting that within this large church we should encourage experiments in worship. Yet, I would hazard one word of caution: Something very fine and vital in this church's life would be lost if the Sunday morning worship experience were to be permanently decentralized.



I recall in my years in Ann Arbor worrying constantly with people about the best way to induce university students to come to church. Basically, there are two approaches, neither one of them phenomenally successful. One claims that you can't expect students to go down to the level of the average parish. Therefore, you build a university chapel and gear the whole service to the academic community. The other approach maintains that students are segregated enough through the week, that they are an inseparable part of the larger family of man, and that they ought to worship where they can see bald heads, gray hair, middle-aged couples and little children. I believe the latter to be the wiser of the two. It would pain me to see the various segments of this church's life move off to enjoy their own particular treasure of worship, rather than bringing it to the larger service for the betterment of us all.

\* \* \* \* \*

Worship is often poorly and shamefully done in this country. And I speak both of the Nave and the Chancel. Yet, there is something so powerful at the heart of it that even though it is done in such a poor way so often we stay with it. I learned in South Dakota last fall that in the Leeds gold mine there, \$13.00 worth of gold is all that is garnered from one ton of ore. And still they work the mine!

If worship is something we do for God, if it has an element of sacrifice as the Psalmist suggested, then perhaps what we need if we are to recapture its power is some discipline in the pulpit, in the lectern, in the pew. Discipline enough to prepare ourselves for worship, instead of dropping in after a long, late Saturday night experience. Discipline to anticipate that something can and will happen. And the discipline to bestir ourselves to participate in the experience as it comes to us.

Lent is not a time for giving things up, but for taking them on. Over the next five Sundays, we will be thinking together in series form on "Searching the Mind of Christ." I'd like to challenge you to make a promise to yourself that

you will be present to celebrate the worth of God with us over those Sundays.

We can't outgrow worship because we can't outgrow God. William Law put it this way: "As everything is dark that God does not enlighten; as everything is senseless that has not its share of knowledge from Him; as nothing lives but by partaking of life from Him; as nothing exists but because He commands it to be, so there is no glory or greatness but what is of the glory and greatness of God." 4

### CLOSING PRAYER

O God, since we become  
like what we worship  
Help us to worship only Thee.  
Break the fascination  
that binds us to our idols,  
that we may behold  
Thee in Thy Holy love  
and in that light live  
out our days.

Through Jesus Christ Our Lord.

Amen.

### FOOTNOTES:

1. Lewis, C. S., Surprised By Joy, p. 226, Harcourt, Brace & Co., New York, 1955
2. Miller, Samuel, The Life of the Church, p. 68, Harper & Bros., New York, 1953
3. Krutch, Joseph Wood, "If You Don't Mind My Saying So," The American Scholar, p. 528, Vol. 38, No. 4, Autumn, 1969
4. Law, William, A Lectionary of Christian Prose, A. C. Boquet, p. 94, Longmans, Green & Co., New York, 1939



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