

The Incarnation of Worship

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Chapter 1

I would like for us to begin our journey in defining worship by allowing for a broad range of experiences in all modes of life. This suggestion might seem implausible, and yet in so doing it seems that we should give some special label to an activity, action, word, or setting that we would elevate to the category of worship. Thus, two principles emerge for our initial discussion of worship: On the one hand a willingness to recognize any human activity that glorifies Christ as worship and on the other hand a desire to place such activities into categories that match the transformed nature of such experiences (usually spiritual, aesthetic, or artistic terms). For example, one might use an artistic term to describe the most menial of tasks as worship. To be more specific, when Bro. Lawrence explains that washing dishes became a worship activity, the reader envisions this dishwashing activity in an artful manner.¹ Perhaps you can imagine a scene of Bro. Lawrence, pausing to look heavenward, with a cup in one hand and a rag in the other.

Indeed there are experiences in life that move beyond mundane action; these experiences are somehow more real or deeper. These experiences often have relational aspects, and we might recognize them cognitively or emotionally. I'm speaking of phenomena that philosophers call aesthetic moments (e.g., Langer)² and social-psychologists call flow.³ We recognize these experiences as being possible on a basketball court, at the beach, in the mountains, in the lawn outside the chapel, at the family dinner table, or in a sanctuary. And we recognize these experiences--even some agnostics recognize these experiences--as the feeding of the soul at the highest level. I love C. S. Lewis' description of such experiences. In Surprised by Joy he explains that he tasted the aesthetic allure during imagination games in childhood and while listening to Wagner at a later age.⁴ He eventually came to understand that what had been a vague sense of otherness, or what he describes elsewhere as the heavenly (as cited in Zacharias online lecture),⁵ was—is the compelling love of Christ.

What has been described thus far is the hint of heaven drawing us, a vague otherness that eventually comes into focus in the person of Christ. Most believers don't initially come into contact with the fullness of Christ's glory in an overwhelming physical sense as Paul did, yet all Christians have

¹ Light Heart, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, <http://www.practicegodspresence.com/brotherlawrence/practicegodspresence09.html> (accessed September 2, 2011).

² Susan Langer, *Feeling and Form* (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1953).

³ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990).

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (Orlando: Harcourt Books, 1955).

⁵ Ravi Zacharias, *If the Foundations Be Destroyed: Part 1*, <http://www.rzim.org/resources/listen/letmypeoplethink.aspx?archive=1&pid=1480> (accessed August August 19, 2009).

experienced the warmth of His presence or His drawing to some perceived emotional or even physical degree, moving beyond foundational cognitive awareness of the truth of Christ. And this invitation by the Father for relationship with humans is the other-worldly experience we are most longing for in the midst of activities that at times seem to take on greater meaning.

Please don't think for one minute that I'm simply offering the perspective of a manzy-panzy musician who just wants to talk about the fuzziness of God. I dare say that I am as susceptible as any average religious academian to the allure of the sea of information about God we call theology. I love swimming in this sea, and it is utterly unsearchable and quite pleasing in its own right. Some would even claim aesthetic moments while partaking of such information. But may we never forget that the real It of spiritual moments, whether they be called aesthetic moments by the philosopher, flow by the social-psychologist, or worship by the theologian—the real It is the reality of our relationship with Him. And to deny the affective qualities of life, particularly what we experience through relationships, is to deny our humanness, specifically the manner in which God created us.

I hope you are beginning to see the point of these inquiries into the nature of worship: Even though worship can be experienced through any activity, it's not really about the activity anyway. To be specific, it is possible to have some of the most profound worship experiences in one's life driving in a car with one's spouse across the country as some powerful worship music is playing or while jogging around a beautiful seminary campus as God suddenly answers a question you have been struggling with for days, weeks, or years. Either of these scenarios is quite plausible, and yet it's not about trying to recreate these or other events you might have experienced; it's about experiencing the Creator in fresh personal ways and giving God the glory for initiating and sustaining a relationship with us.

Although worship in its purest form goes beyond artistic description and can enter most any phase of human activity, let's practically recognize that corporate worship is commonly and most happily experienced through artistic mediums (e.g., the art of preaching).⁶ I'll not judge which mode of artistic presentation is most important at this point. However, when studying the history of cultural religious activity, one sees certain patterns emerge (architecture: Indian temples, Parthenon, Dome of the Rock, Gothic cathedrals; Drama: Passover and Rig Veda; music: Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan [Pakistani Sufi songs available on Youtube], Haydn Lord Nelson Mass, Gregorian Chant; visual art: Michelangelo's Pieta, Hindu idol sculptures). These icons represent the best of religious artistic discoveries by anthropologists.

And, of course, the purely scientific anthropologist sees Christian religious art as merely a subcategory of general religious art. Furthermore, the agnostic or atheist anthropologist would argue that all religious art has emerged through evolution. But it might be instructive for both anthropologists and Christ-followers to consider the following fundamental question: What aspect of humanness makes us want to express art for the purpose of worshipping a spiritual being?⁷ We seem to be genetically

⁶ If you've ever experienced anyone trying to preach who does not recognize this act as an art form you understand why I am calling it an art

⁷ Eric Kandel and Eric R. Kandel, *The Age of Insight: The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind, and Brain, from Vienna 1900 to the Present* (New York: Random House, 2012); Kandel and Kandel's recent book reveals

predisposed to do this: Pascal (1623-1662), of course, argued that we were created with a void or need in our life, and the fact that this need exists proves God's existence: "There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the creator, made known through Jesus."

To the extent that one accepts Pascal's argument that humanity's common need for God suggests His existence, one could also argue that the common human desire to create religious art reveals that God endowed us with the gift of creativity for the purpose of honoring Him, or, if you will, let me suggest the Christian artist's creed derived from the Westminster Confession: God specifically gave us artistic abilities and sensibilities to glorify Christ, and in acting upon these creative impulses in a biblically sound manner we enjoy Him and celebrate God-honoring relationships with others. So we can't just ignore these artistic expressions of worship. To do so would be to ignore our humanness.

Another question we might consider as we seek to understand our God-given desire to worship is related to the validity of our worship expressions: Are some worship experiences more valid than others? In seeking to answer this question, often sincerity is emphasized. Certainly, the Bible mandates sincerity as a necessary component in proper worship: "If with all your hearts you seek me, you shall surely find me" (Deuteronomy 4: 29). But even in this statement a good deal is assumed beyond sincerity. "Seek[ing] me" establishes the God of the Bible as the object of worship. And the manner in which one was to seek God with all their heart was carefully explained in the Old Testament. For example, killing your children as an expression of seeking God was strictly forbidden.

Thus the typical recognition of sincerity as a partial answer to the question of validity must be expanded to the following questions: 1) What is the object of our worship. You have or will deal with this question thoroughly in Systematic Theology. To say it concisely, we engage in worship with the Triune God of the Bible, who has revealed Himself to us most clearly in the person of Christ. 2) Are there some cultural religious practices that are more valid than others? (Of course, but the purely scientific anthropologist's worldview might prevent her from asking this question.) The answer to this question regarding validity, which is addressed to some degree below, reveals one of the basic points of differentiation between Christian worship and all other religious practices. And this is a fundamental question with which you will need to wrestle in terms of filtering culture in worship.

In every instance of religious practice, no matter how powerful or aesthetically wooing, humans are exhibiting their best to engender some particular response from God or the gods. By contrast, only in OT and NT worship do we see God revealing himself to mankind and explaining what he desires from worshippers. If one compares instructions for worship in the Old Testament with instructions for worship in the New Testament, one finds multiple sets of instruction for worship in the OT as compared to few sets of instruction for worship in the New Testament. Can we assume something from the difference in the amount of specificity? Is God--was God surprised when His call to worship in Spirit and in Truth began to take on many different cultural forms (Greek Orthodox Iconic Art, Palestrina's motets, Mexican posada song, Christian Indian music with tabla and sitar)? Thus, an intended consequence may

that even current scientific thinkers continue to be fascinated by the human desire for aesthetic experiences and by the human ability to create art.

arise as each culturally embedded Christian generation discovers the germative nature of Christ's instructive words: freedom engendered by a command within broad parameters.

Can we argue that any one Christian culture among the vast subcategories of Christian cultures is superior to others in their understanding of Christian worship? If there is an argument that any one cultural form of worship has superior status, it would certainly be the Jewish culture within the context of first century Christianity. And in saying this, I'm not suggesting we should be legalistically returning to Jewish worship practices. Paul certainly did not suggest such a return. My ulterior motive in recognizing Jewish culture as the only potentially more authoritative worship culture is to warn against the labeling of Western worship art as superior in a spiritual sense. As much as I love the great Western history and in my view, the aesthetic superiority of the worship art created by the West,⁸ we cannot, we must not suggest that Western hymns or other Western worship practices are inherently more spiritual than other cultural manifestations of worship just because they are Western. Unfortunately, although evangelicals have made great strides in their scholarly and philosophical explorations of worship over the past 75 years (Many recognize Tozer as the beginning of this new wave of thought), we find this subtle theme of Western superiority in some of the great books on worship produced since Tozer.

To summarize, I have emphasized two points thus far: 1) Worship in its purest sense goes beyond human activity descriptors, and the seemingly contradictory point is that 2) Worship tends to be most consistently and most impressively experienced through artistic mediums. Together these two principles form a philosophical foundation for the primary theme that will emerge in the next chapter: The Incarnation of Worship.

⁸ As one of my former professors said behind closed doors requesting anonymity: "Don't tell me some kid sitting in the sand in a third world country with a home-made drum is creating something that could be compared to Mozart." At the time, this institution had one of the largest number of world music ensembles among institutions of higher education world-wide.

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