

## IS WORSHIP THE ONLY WORD FOR WORSHIP?

### I. TO WHAT KIND OF LIFE ARE CHRISTIANS CALLED?

*A. A life circumscribed and driven by faith, hope, and love.*

Faith is itself the substance and evidence of everything that is *of* God and *from* God through the Word of His power, summed up in the very Person of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, the Author and Finisher of this faith. Faith is itself the substance and evidence of the unseeable and the hoped for. It is in itself the substance and evidence of everything made ours in the unassailable work of the Triune God. It is the substance and evidence of which utter trust, utter confidence, and utter belief are the consequence. It is both a magnanimous gift from God and, on our part, a radical act of the will. It is foolishness to the world, yet utterly sensible to the believer. It neither is nor can be caused by anything temporal, artifactual or circumstantial. It is its own filled-to-the-full condition. Our faith may be weak; it may be like a smoking flax or a bruised reed, but it is still faith, leading out from faith even to more faith. So we safely pray, “Lord, increase our faith. Lord, I believe, help Thou my unbelief.” Praying this way, we leap from the arms of the seen to the unseen; we leap from the arms of creature to those of Creator, and God puts us in the right, and showers his grace, mercy unending, and a peace that passes all understanding.

But faith is not left to itself just as no person of the Trinity is. Faith sires hope. Hope is the inevitable and only possible condition for those who live by faith. Hope is the forward concretion of faith. Hope is what faith’s substance and evidence guarantee. It verifies that which will eventually be seen, for hope that is temporally seen is not hope. Hope then is seeing ahead with the eyes of faith, the eyes that are focused on the finalities that every word of God promises. Hope extends faith’s substance and evidence into every quarter of our sojourn. It urges us to extend our joy, our hunger for purity, our lament, our light and darkness into the promises of the new creation where faith and hope become sight, where we’ll know even as we are known.

Love is God Himself in that He neither needs faith or hope as guarantors of anything contained within His sovereign design. As He Himself is love above all, containing everything of His character within its infinity, He commands that we love with the same absence of condition that He exemplifies. We are commanded to love, yet it is a gift given in order that the commandment may be fulfilled. Even as we are commanded to love we learn to love the very desire to love, even though we may do so as mere smoking flaxes and bruised reeds. As with faith and hope, love is expected of us irrespective of temporal conditions. Love is the engine of faith and hope. It is, according to I Corinthians 13, even greater than each. And in the words of Galatians 5:6, love is the effectualizer of faith, even as it roots and grounds it according to Ephesians 3: 17. These three, faith, hope, love, are gifts from God through Jesus Christ, the Author, Finisher. They are themselves a trinity in which each part participates fully in the other parts yet separately known and lived out. The just—the ones declared by God to be in the right—

loved and loving, hoping against hope, live by their faith without which it is impossible to please God, without which we are lost and undone, for whatsoever is not of faith is sin.

*B. So this question: what kind of life marks those folks—let's call them by their right name: the people of God—what kind of life marks those who live by faith, hope, and love?*

\*A personal life marked by an unquenchable thirst and hunger for righteousness bathed in unceasing repentance; a holiness, without which no one shall see the Lord. This is not a mystical state or a particular brand of theology. It is biblical, therefore pre-theological. Living up to the full reality of imago Dei, the people of God are poor in spirit, comforted in their mourning, meek, hungry, thirsty—merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, blest or persecuted for righteousness' sake, humbled, salt and light.

\*A rigorously enjoyable pattern of biblical and theological study, the development and refinement of our redeemed intellects, in a way that reaches into and informs our vocations, the difference between being in and of the world, between the things of culture, and the mind of culture. This is the kind of faithful stewardship that grants easy transit from the simple to the complex—back and forth again and again.

\*A life of proclamation and reconciliation as if God were making His appeal through us.

\*A life of unceasing prayer dominated by adoration and intercession, especially for the lost, the down trodden, and the persecuted, as well as for what the Anglican prayer book calls “the whole state of Christ's church.”

\*A life of comprehensive material stewardship dominated by wisdom, temperance, hilarity, and generosity.

\*A life, in summary, of pressing on, of glorying in the glory of the Triune God, taking holy pleasure in God's pleasure in glorifying Himself, glorifying equally Father, Son, and Spirit, now and forever.

## **II. NOW WE CAN ASK IF IT'S TIME TO TALK ABOUT WORSHIP**

If we were to base our answer on the best part of current worship talk, the answer would be yes, because it appears to be new territory. But it would be an uninformed, nearly heretical, and certainly unbiblical answer.

But if we were radically to take all of the foregoing into account, then we've been talking about worship as the all-embracing sum and substance of a life of bowing down to and serving the living God.

But if we choose to bring worship into being out of a separate or limited set of components, a reduction down to a few things like time, place, medium and style; or actions like adoration, a sense of the holy, or meditation. If worship is nothing more than

a start-up and consummation of pre-defined “experiences”. And, error upon error, if worship is an exclusive territory variously called “worship-time or “the worship” or the so-called “worship set”—musically driven, musically substitutionary, musically causational, that somehow leads us into and out of a piece of our day, then we have forsaken everything biblical and more than likely created our own Gold Calf. For when we read this story correctly, the Golden Calf, was not a sign of Israel’s departure from God, but a way to get Him near to hand, tangible, sensate, touchable, feelable, self-contained, and manageable.

If we are to talk about worship in a biblical way, we must guarantee from the git-go that something like the following rules our living:

*Worship is the sum of the full living out of the Christian life as living sacrifices, undertaken in spirit and truth, the beauty of holiness and unceasingly unto God through Christ by the Holy Spirit: Romans 12, John 4, Psalm 29, Hebrews 12.*

Definitionally we can say this:

*Worship is a continuous outpouring of all that I am and all I can ever hope to be in light of the completed work of Christ Jesus effected in my redemption.*

Neither private nor corporate worship, by itself, is the sum and substance of worship. The two together are the seamless uniqueness within the comprehensive uniqueness of unceasing worship is undertaken.

Corporate worship, therefore, is a compact whole of the unceasing worship, undertaken where two or more are gathered under a called-out and humbled leadership, wherein Word, Sacrament, Proclamation, and Prayer hold primary sway. When there is music (texted or untexted), it is never to be understood as a means or end or special entity, but a simple, humble, carefully placed, unpretentious fulfillment of the command to sing and play. The only worship team worthy of the name is the congregation, the people of God. If there is a named worship leader, he/she should never be primarily known or identified by his/her music-making, because this only further solidifies the ever-present and worldly addiction to music as personal magic and re-establishes it as the new sacrament. This person should be known by a collection of liturgical skills that are simply lost in the greater surge of Word, Proclamation, Prayer, and Sacrament. Any undue emphasis, from an overly prominent organ and choir loft to acoustically and inter-personally overpowering “worship teams” is as out of place as Balaam’s ass is in the pulpit. In short, worship is first of all substance and only then style.

### **III. WHAT WORSHIP IS NOT.**

\*Just a Sunday thing

\*A specific segment in the corporate gathering: “First we’ll worship and then...”

\*Just a music thing or just a style thing—a feeling I get only when music is there—and of course, music I’m already used to. “First, we’ll worship and then . . .;

\*Not the cause of corporate unity or growth.

\*Not, in the words of many a pastor, the act of “getting the ball to the one yard line so that he can score”. Yes, I’ve heard this.

What is my praise like without music

\*A divider of age groups—difference between multiple services for logistical reasons and multiple services for different tastes. Since when does the family of God have the right to separate itself on the basis of style?.

#### **IV. WHAT IS YOUR WORSHIP?**

\*Is it entirely about life itself or just pieces of it?

\*Is it entirely about God in Christ, the centrality of the Cross, and the glorying in the glory that is God’s alone?

\*Is it about the sum total of being Christian, or does it need a weekly style-based music-push to fire it up?

\*What would Word-centered worship be like without music?

\*If there were no word worship, how would you describe what you’re doing both now and all week long?

\*Is there a Person, who is Himself our Worship, before whom, by whom, and within whom all of our lives are lived?

\*If so, then our worship will be total, continuous, and unconditioned by any circumstance. It will no longer be an isolated part of the whole, the music, a style, a divider of people and churches.

\*In fact, this presently overused and restricting word might just fall away for a while until it can be re-introduced in all of its Christ-centered endlessness.

Amen.