

## Baptist Worship: A Call for Renewal

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The phrase *worship service* creates a variety of images and reactions. Some think, that's *the eleven o'clock hour on Sunday morning*. Others think of "church" as distinguished from the "Sunday School" hour. Some differentiate the Sunday morning service in general from other church meetings.

Does the phrase *worship service* prompt images of preaching? praise? singing? fellowship?

The diversity of worship practices in today's Southern Baptist churches makes any attempt to discuss this subject a big challenge. The variety of hymns, choruses, and gospel songs in the new *Baptist Hymnal* (1991) underscores this observation. Southern Baptist worship practices reflect high church Anglican styles with an emphasis on the liturgy; a Reformed emphasis that concentrates on the Word of God; Free Church frontier styles of worship that see revivalistic preaching as primary; praise/celebration styles; and newer "body life" and "seeker oriented" services. This article does not advocate any particular style. Instead, I simply want to issue a call for renewal in Southern Baptist worship that focuses on exalting God and reaching people.

### What is Meant by Worship?

The English word *worship* comes from the Anglo-Saxon *weorthscipe*, which developed into *worthship* and finally *worship*. As can be seen from the word's derivation, *worship* is *the act of giving honor to someone of worth*. Thus, to worship God is to ascribe to Him the supreme worth that He alone is worthy to receive.

The Bible does not give a formal definition of worship, but its meaning may be determined from several Bible terms.

The primary New Testament word for worship is *proskyneo*, which literally means "to kiss the hand of one." The verb form occurs 59 times in the New

Testament. The word emphasizes exclusive worship addressed to the Lord. Where this verb is used absolutely, it means to share in public worship, to offer prayers of adoration (see Rev. 4:11; 5:9; 7:12; 19:1,3,4).

The most frequently used term is *sebomai* and its various cognates. The word has "fear" as its root meaning and involves reverence that stresses the feeling of awe. The term is used frequently to express a sense of worship (see Acts 18:7,13; 1 Tim. 2:10; 5:4; 2 Pet. 1:3; 3:11)

A third term, *latreuo*, is a general term for worship denoting prayer (see Acts 13:2-3); giving (see Rom. 15:27, 2 Cor. 9:12); or the ministry of the gospel (see Rom. 15:16). The word *liturgy* is derived from this word. Basically, *litreuo* describes the total manner of life pleasing to God.

### **What is the Essence of Worship?**

The essence of Christian worship is grounded in the Old Testament revelation, though there are two new elements that are at the heart of the New Testament.

First, Christian worship is the active response to God the Father through the Son. The worshiper stands in a personal relation of son-ship to God on the basis of adoption in Christ. Praise, prayer, preaching, the celebration of ordinances, confession, and giving are all Christ-centered actions. The focus of the church's worship on the exalted Christ gives a new depth and content that could not be achieved in the Old Testament period.

The second new factor is that the worship of God through the Son is in and by the Holy Spirit. Fitting and acceptable worship can only be offered by and through the enabling ministry of the Holy Spirit.

### **Why is Worship Renewal Needed?**

The preceding brief overview shows that worship is God-centered. Our worship needs renewal because our church services tend to be human-centered. The biblical view of worship tell us worship is not primarily for people, but for God, as we recognize His glory and exalt His name.

Renewal in our worship will be characterized by at least three thing: (1) a significant emphasis on reading and hearing the preached Word; (2) a high degree of congregational involvement in praise, prayer, singing, giving, and

confession; and (3) a view of the ordinances that affirm their mystery and value for spiritual formation.

By contrast, much of Baptist worship tends: (1) to be confused about the purpose and order of worship; (2) to evidence a minimal use of the Bible, especially its public reading; (3) to be passive; and (4) to have an adequate view of the church ordinances, particularly the Lord's Supper.

A variety of circumstances has contributed to our present low view of worship. At least four matters can be identified.

1. The current shift toward an entertainment mentality has created an atmosphere in which church leaders and members come to church expecting to be entertained.
2. The result of the Enlightenment has created overemphasis in some quarters on the rational element of worship.
3. The rise of revivalism has in other sectors created an unbalanced emotional appeal aimed at unbelievers.
4. The general trend toward secularization and adaptation of our culture has diminished the differences between the Christian community and the world.

Each of these has had a different impact on our worship practices, but the combination has created an unwelcomed situation. Worship, which should stand at the heart of our Christian experience, is unable to form, shape, challenge, inspire, enhance, motivate, nourish, or feed us.

### **How Can Worship Be Improved?**

The first step in rediscovering the missing jewel of worship is simply to help the redeemed community recognize that the worship of God is a primary function of the church.

Second, we must help people learn that worship is not passive but active. Worship is the work of the people directed toward God. We gather on the Lord's Day not so much to receive, but to offer sacrifices of praise (see Heb. 13:15-16). We acknowledge what God has done for us and is doing for us. Thus, we bless Him, Hymn Him, and offer our gifts to Him, as well as our praise and adoration. We learn to see worship as active participation.

This stance helps us overcome our misconception that the hymns, Scripture reading, and the offering are merely the preliminaries before the preaching or that the ordinances are something we tack on at the beginning or end of the service.

Third, we need to understand that Christian worship is primarily rooted in an event, the Christ event in which God revealed Himself as our loving and compassionate creator and redeemer. Worship is a response to the birth, ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ.

Hymns, confessions of faith, doxologies, sermons, Scripture readings, symbols, and benedictions all grown out of God's ultimaded revelation in Christ. Our response of remembrance, thanksgiving, prayer, praise, and proclamation must be congregational, participative reenactments of the Christ event.

Fourth, we need to emphasize that worship is primarily spiritual and symbolic. Worship is only possible in and by the Holy Spirit, who prompts our love and praise of God. At the same time, we need to rediscover the wealth of resources available to help us highlight those symbols handed down to us by Christ, the apostles, and the experiences of the saints of the ages. Much that is dismissed as form and tradition can be rebaptized by the Spirit to shape our congregational worship.

Last, we must help people realize the need to prepare for worship. Worship leaders need to structure services to have coherent movement that is theologically, biblically, and thematically informed. Worshipers will gather not just to sit, listen, and be informed, but to exalt God and to affirm their faith.

### **What Are the Effects of Renewal in Our Worship?**

Our churches will refocus an emphasis on the importance of all things being done for the glory of God (see 1 Cor. 10:31). We will move away from our individualistic and secular emphases to concentrate on the whole body so that all things will be done for mutual edification (see 1 Cor. 14:26). This mutual upbuilding of the body involves the development of mutual relationships (see 1 Cor. 12:7; 14:3ff). It takes place as each member, enhanced by congregational participation, ministers the gift bestowed to him or her by the Holy Spirit. Edification

takes place in sharing with, and thus mutually receiving from, others. True worship produces such interaction and freedom of the Holy Spirit.

When genuine worship takes place, not only is the entire body enhanced and built up, but the mission and outreach of the church is strengthened. Notice that in Isaiah 6:1-8, after the prophet had authentically encountered God, three things resulted: (1) a recognition of who God is; (2) a realization of the need for repentance and forgiveness; (3) a renewed desire for mission.

The people of God who have worshiped their God and who have been mutually strengthened are prepared to enter the world to touch lives, meet needs, counsel hurts, speak to unjustices, and by life and witness proclaim the saving message of the gospel. Reaching people and exalting God are hardly in conflict. As a matter of fact, real outreach is prefaced upon genuine worship.

An emphasis among Southern Baptists is the theme "Let's All Go to Church". Let us pray for renewal in our worship and our outreach mission. And as we all go to church, let's focus our attention on exalting God, affirming our faith, and reaching people.