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A Call to Worship

Robert C. Shannon

Condensed from a sermon first preached at First Christian Church, Mountain City, Tennessee, on October 21, 1997.

O come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD our maker. (Psalm 95:6)

My wife and I were house hunting. We found a beautiful little house, but the price seemed very high for so small a structure. Eventually, we discovered that we were only seeing part of the house. It was built on a very steep lot. Beneath the part we were seeing was a lower level. And beneath that, an even lower level. You could not see the deeper levels from the front. From the street it appeared to be a one-story house; it was, in fact, a three-story house! That house is a picture of worship, rightly understood.

The Visible Part

When we worship, we do something! The visible part of worship consists of the deeds we do. We call them acts of worship: song, prayer, giving, Communion. The sermon is a part of worship, too. And baptism is an act of worship, not just an act of initiation.

We should recognize that worship is *multi-faceted*, just as we are. Consider our singing, for example. Some of us like old songs; some of us like new songs. One song may bless some and not others. Few songs minister to everyone. At a state convention, I counted the times we repeated the same line in a particular song. We sang it sixteen times in succession! That hindered me from worship. When I spoke of it to a friend, he said that the repetition had helped his worship—that each time he had sung the line, he had thought of it in a deeper and fuller way.

Because *we* are multi-faceted, our worship should be multi-faceted as well.

Worship is also *multi-focused*. It looks inward and upward, but also outward. Again, consider our singing as an example. Singing in worship is more than praise; it is also instruction. We teach each other in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (Col 3:16). Songs also encourage. When we sing them, we encourage both ourselves and others. Songs comfort. Songs inspire. Songs are evangelistic. The Christianization of Russia began with the conversion of Grand Duke Vladimir I, who was converted by a service of worship that impressed him deeply. Worship should not be limited to a single focus.

The Deeper Level

When we worship, we feel something! We must not simply think about what we do in worship, but of *why* we do it. Worship without emotion is just motion. In fact, the “acts” of worship may not be worship at all. They may be only that which enables or enhances worship.

Why do we worship, anyway? Is it because of habit? Do we worship from a sense of duty? Is it in obedience to a command? At the Last Supper, Jesus said to the twelve, “With desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you” (Luke 22:15). We worship because we desire to.

What feelings lie beneath the outward acts? Excitement? Sometimes. Calmness? Sometimes. Joy? Sorrow? Worship generally involves a mixture of joy and sorrow. Even that solemn moment of Communion has both: sorrow over our sins, joy over our forgiveness. There is a mixture of contentment and discontent, even a mixture of love and hate. We love God; we hate the sin that breaks his heart. Underneath the deeds we do in worship are the feelings we experience, feelings that bring us to a per-

sonal encounter with God. But do you remember that house with the three levels? Worship has a third level, a level that is deeper than feeling.

The Deepest Level

When we worship, we know something! Feelings are based on knowledge. That is the deepest level of worship. What is the knowledge on which the feelings rest? It is, first of all, knowledge of God. It is knowing that in worship we are not the audience. God is the audience. Knowledge of God includes knowing that he is here, not far removed from the scene of our difficulties. It is knowing that he is holy, commanding our reverence as we enter his presence. It is knowing that he is love, that we need not fear to come into his presence. Above all, it is knowing that he is worthy. God deserves our praise.

Second, our feelings rest on knowledge of Jesus: his equality with God, his sinless life, his sacrificial death, his resurrection and ascension, and his return.

Finally, our feelings rest on knowledge of ourselves. Many of the things we know about ourselves are the opposites of what we know about God. He is holy, but we

are not holy. Worship is a time to recognize the magnitude of our sin and of his mercy. God is worthy, but we are not worthy. That does not mean that we are not welcome, but only that we are not worthy. We do not invite God; God invites us. The worst of us are welcome!

The Final Home

Worship is a preparation! We shall worship in Heaven, and what we do on earth is in some sense a rehearsal. The book of Revelation pictures twenty-four elders and four heavenly creatures singing night and day without stopping: "Holy, holy, holy . . . Lord God Almighty!" Their song never ceases.

O that with yonder sacred throng
We at his feet may fall!
We'll join the everlasting song,
And crown him Lord of all.

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Notes continued from "The Spirit of the Fathers"

⁹John Rogers, *The Biography of Eld. Barton Warren Stone* (Cincinnati: J. A. & U. P. James, 1847), 5.

¹⁰Barton Stone, *Christian Messenger* 10 (1836): 20.

¹¹Quoted in James Madison Mathes, *Works of Elder B. W. Stone, to which is added a few discourses and sermons* (Cincinnati: Moore, Witstach, Keys & Co., 1859), 343.

¹²Barton Stone, *Christian Messenger* 13 (1843): 168.

¹³Phillips, 70.

¹⁴William Baxter, *Life of Elder Walter Scott* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., n.d.), 257.

¹⁵Dwight Stevenson, *Walter Scott: Voice of the Golden Oracle* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1946), 140.

¹⁶Phillips, 71.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁸Barton Stone, "Non-Worship Families," *Christian Evangelist* (April 1840): 89–90.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 109.

²⁰Quoted in Mathes, 210–11.

²¹Richard Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 105.

²²Leroy Brownlow, "Review of Some of the Assertions and Charges in 'The Worldly Church,'" *Firm Foundation* 106 (1 April 1991): 16.

²³Quoted in Hughes, 105.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵William Lipscomb, "Are We a Devoted People?" *Gospel Advocate* (1856): 136ff.

²⁶Leonard Allen, *Distant Voices* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1993), 65.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 66.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 79.

²⁹Jeanene Reese, "Reflections on an Anniversary," *Image* 11 (1 July 1995): 18.

³⁰1997 Forum, "Experiencing Meaningful Worship"; 1994 Forum, "Styles of Worship in Churches of Christ Today."