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The God We Worship: Encountering His Person

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and gives up something of his or her's as an acknowledgement of a relationship which exists between God and the worshipper. The sacrifice symbolizes the total person of the worshipper. God has the right to our complete obedience, our full love and our total devotion.

Take another "act of worship." Often in the Bible people fall down before a manifestation of God or before Jesus. They need not speak or move. The mere position of the body is worship. When the human person confronts God the appropriate thing to do is acknowledge the right of God to all honor and glory. By falling down the human being gives up any pretense to an autonomy apart from God or to any claims on God. This is the negative aspect. But the worshipper also gladly points to God as the One worthy of all glory, and in doing so does what he or she was created to do! The creature achieves the highest glory and fulfillment by giving all glory and praise to God.

So What is Worship?

In worship human beings acknowledge consciously and joyfully, in rituals and symbols the truth that God is God. In worship we correspond bodily, in appropriate words, and ritual and symbolic deeds to the reality of God as our Creator and Savior. Worship is taking delight in being a creature of God, and is more than mere surrender to a greater power, for in worship we recognize that it is **right** that God be Lord, and that God is truly worthy of our whole devotion.

Who is this God we worship? One might point to God's omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence. Another might direct us to God's creation, the thundering waterfall and the billions of suns which we call stars. However these qualities focus on God's abilities or nature. And we too have some power, knowledge and presence. But our abilities and qualities are not us. They are qualities of humanity in the abstract, but they do not disclose to you who I am. In the same way we can have an extensive knowledge of the divine nature and qualities but not know who God is. As Thomas a'Kempis says somewhere in **The Imitation of Christ**, "What good doth it do thee if thou discourse profoundly concerning the Trinity but art devoid of humility before the Trinity?"

When we ask **who** God is we ask for more than information about natures and qualities, but about this God's free saving activity in history. We ask "Who is God for us,

for me?" We ask about the One whom God shows Himself to be in His revelation. When I want to reveal myself I tell my story — the story of my free activity and my reaction to what has happened to me. In a similar way we meet God in the story of His saving activity as it is recorded in the Scriptures. Here we come to know God, not as an abstract concept of divinity, but as a concrete person, one with whom we can talk and to whom we must listen; one with whom we can have an ongoing relationship.

In the Scriptures we come to know a God who calls forth the first human pair from the dust of the ground and places them in the garden. When they prove unfaithful God remains faithful to the work of His hands. He creates His special people, Israel, out of some unruly desert nomads, and makes a covenant of love with them. But they break it, going after other gods and seeking other means of security. God punishes the chosen people, not for their destruction, but for their salvation. God remains faithful to the covenant of love. And when it becomes clear that human beings, even those of the chosen race, cannot keep faith with the covenant, God shows His faithfulness to the extent of sending Jesus Christ. Jesus honors the covenant, pouring out his life in service to us and in obedience to God.

In Jesus we see the radical faithfulness

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of God, to Himself and to us. For us who seek to be gods God became a man. For us who lust after immortality God experienced death. For us who secretly desire to take God's place on the throne God openly took our place on the cross. God's humility has exposed and defeated our pride. Once confronted with this God how can we but worship?

To be sure, for you to know me I must

tell you my **story**. But it is also I who must tell you my story. I am the only one who can do it. In the same way only God can tell God's story. Only God can reveal God. I may read the Bible story in your hearing, but that does no good unless God at the same time tells this story to you. As a preacher or a worship leader I cannot make God

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present to you. God is a person, not a concept, and is always free to withhold His presence from our solemn assemblies. But without His presence we cannot worship, for to worship we must confront God Himself in his personal presence. Impressive information about God will not do.

This is the most challenging and humbling thing about Christian worship. Were it not for God's gracious promise to be present "where two or three are gathered together in my name" we would have to despair. But God has promised that when we read the Scriptures He will speak, when we pray He will listen, when we eat the Lord's Supper He will come to our table, and when we sing He will lift our hearts with His Spirit.

But why is God worthy of worship and why is God's Lordship not mere fact but right? If I attempted to answer this two-fold question it would immediately prove that I was not speaking of the true God. If I could tell you why God was worthy of worship it would mean that God's worth and right could be judged in human terms. And anything which can be evaluated by human standards should not be worshipped. It is an idol! We cannot say from our own resources of wisdom whether God is worthy of worship and has the right to be Lord. In fact we worship God precisely because God is the Mystery whom no human wisdom can comprehend.

But when God (personally) confronts us as the Lord, as the Creator, as the savior, as the Crucified and Risen One, as the Providence over our lives—then we have no doubt that He is worthy "to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"

(Rev. 5:12). Only God can tell God's story. Only God can assure us of His surpassing worth. Only God can make us sure that His Lordship is not simply the supreme instance of "might makes right." In His presence we know for certain that our right and proper place is on our faces before Him; that our highest glory, our highest joy is to rejoice in Him and Him alone.

Three Suggestions

If this is the God we worship how ought we to worship? What are the implications for our "worship services"? I have three suggestions. First, our worship ought to be focused on God. We sing many kinds of songs in our worship, some of which teach valuable lessons, such as patience and love of the Bible; some express a desire for the "home of the soul" or encourage us not to envy the wicked. I enjoy singing many of these songs. Some of them make me nostalgic for my childhood days and some of them are just plain fun to sing. And if I criticize them it has nothing to do with an uptown elitism which cannot tolerate "bad" music and "hokey" lyrics. God is equally beyond all such cultural distinctions. However, I have reservations about any song which does not point us to God in praise, or thanksgiving or some appropriate response to God's grace. I would not ban, even if I could, all songs which fall short of this goal. We do assemble to teach, fellowship and encourage, as well as to worship. But every service ought to include songs which glorify God for His great works of creation and salvation, and the total effect of the service should be to point in God's direction.

Second, each service ought to be planned and conducted in faith that God will keep His promise to be present among us and reveal Himself to us. The mood should be one of expectation. Our tradition of worship takes its stand on the rational end of the spectrum, the mind definitely being the focus of our assemblies. An organized, information oriented sermon has always been the centerpiece of our service. We should not, however, worship information about God, but rather God Himself! We have wrongly shunned an appeal to the emotions or esthetic sensitivities, for confronting God is an awesome experience, affecting our whole person. To plan a service so as to consciously reduce emotion and beauty to a minimum is to close ourselves off from any possible meeting with God. On the other hand to plan the service so as to heighten

emotions is equally obstructive to an encounter with God. We cannot engineer God's presence by emotionalism any more than by rationalism. The key is to avoid worshipping the worship, whether rational or emotional. We must maintain an awareness of incompleteness and the sign-nature of all our acts and deeds of worship. Amidst the paraphernalia of worship expect to meet the living God!

The third suggestion concerns prayer. If it is **God** whom we worship and we really **worship** God, then prayer must play a central role in our assemblies. Prayer is address to God, a meeting with God. If the church comes together to meet God then some representative or the whole church in unison must acknowledge God's presence by speaking to God directly. For how can we become conscious of God's presence if we do act "as if" God is really there? How can our hearts believe what our bodies and tongues do not acknowledge?

Prayer is primarily petition and only secondarily thanks and praise; thus prayer is the appropriate response of sinful and needy human beings when confronted by the God of Jesus Christ, and it ought to be central to assembly of the sinful "saints." And petition itself is indirectly thanks and praise because it does God honor to be asked, for in asking we acknowledge that God is God, the Giver of all good gifts. There is a sense then in which prayer is the most central aspect of our worship. Even the Lord's Supper is a "eucharist," a giving thanks. Jesus blessed God and "gave thanks" before he broke the bread. When the Scripture is read or expounded do we not petition — to our shame sometimes we do not — the living God to speak again through the Word? We begin our services

with a prayer of invocation and end them with a benediction. Is this practice not indicative of the nature of all that goes on in between these boundaries? Are not all worship assemblies prayer meetings?

A practical suggestion or two. Should we not pray with our bodies as well as our lips? Would not the use of kneeling benches enhance our experience of prayer? Or perhaps you prefer the Jewish position of standing with uplifted hands? Or maybe the Muslims have a point in their prostration before God? In whatever way is appropriate for us let us involve our whole self in prayer. At least let us initiate more responsive or antiphonal prayers. The second suggestion is for a long overdue addition to our worship. Let us finally join the rest of the world's believers who throughout history have spoken the Lord's Prayer every Sunday. What a joy to participate in an activity which unites us with all believers everywhere, all of us speaking the same words and thinking the same thoughts as did our Lord twenty centuries ago!

"Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God and Him only shalt thou serve." May our assemblies be the symbolic fulfillment of this first commandment. May the real world, unveiled in worship — the one where God is real and all things point to Him — be the model for our every day world. May these times of worship give us insight and power to rid our work-a-day lives of the idols which we serve. May the songs of praise inspire us to establish a music-like harmony in our daily relationships, and may the special prayers of the worship service impart a prayer-like character to our secular lives. May our whole life be transformed into worship of the only One worthy — God.