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WORSHIP and DAILY LIFE

By Wendell Willis

The Fountain of Virtue

We live in hard days for real appreciation of either worship or real Christian living. On the one hand, we suffer the realization that both have been by the “media evangelists” to such a degree that real credibility is difficult — even if we were never fans of the incriminated. It is painfully clear in our time that religion can be/has been manipulated for unholy ends. On the other hand, we are also in bondage to the “marketplace” mentality of American consumerism that has little concern about truth and is only interested in the pragmatic (read: “what works”) issues.

It is with great reticence that I take up the question of the **affective** benefits of worship upon the worshippers, because I am committed to the belief that worship is a worthy goal in itself, apart from any alleged benefits to the worshippers.¹ Nevertheless, there are Biblical testimonies, and testimony of Christians ever since, of the value of worship for personal life. To affirm these benefits, and to urge their appreciation, is not to sell out to the lure of pragmatism — at least, not necessarily! (Speaking of another matter, C. S. Lewis made a helpful distinction of those rewards which are a logical end of the intent of some action, and those which are only sought for their own benefit, and thus wrongly sought).²

Perhaps an illustration may be helpful. Jonathan Edwards, the most important influence on American Protestantism, preached about God so as to evoke a vision of the enthroned Majesty by his hearers. His very theocentric preaching resulted in a revival of religious

sentiment and of common life throughout New England. This was a genuine surprise to Edwards, who had not sought the revival that resulted. Charles G. Finney, the founder of “Revivalism” as an American religious staple, had similar results from his preaching, but he had learned how to produce the revival by “techniques” (what was termed “the methods”) and taught them to other revivalists.

Thus while observably both revivals resembled each other, the intent of the revivalists was different, and the proper evaluation of worship was quite different too.

What Does Worship Have to Do with Life?

The first and most important benefit to the worshipper is to remind him/her of God. It serves to focus our lives on the most important reality there is, and thereby puts in proper perspective all of life. To focus upon God in worship is like locating the center point from which to describe the circle. Worship is the time when we try to get the Christian story straight, and when we do so, we understand that we must be straightened ourselves by the Christian story.

During the turbulent sixties and seventies, with many crises at home and abroad, many Christians began to wonder whether worship was not unnecessary at best, and a distraction from really crucial concerns at worst. Still, there remains — partly from habit, I grant — a deep set belief that worship really is important for Christian life. There is a connection between what we do on Sunday and what we do on Monday. But if we are clear that there is a connection, we are not at all clear about how there is a connection.

Is worship an island of retreat from the problems of life? Should we leave our cares and worries at the door, and in worship find a “quiet rest” a “safe retreat”? Many hymns point us in this direction, even if we may reject its logical

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end — monasticism.

Or should we regard worship as a time to prepare us for the week? Is worship a “filling station” for the Christian life? (This image worries me, because we commonly say we are going to “drop in at the filling station,” which implies a rather infrequent, and ad hoc importance). It recalls the story of a sign above the door to an Amish meeting house: “Enter to worship; leave to serve.”

As is usually the case, either extreme understanding is a half-truth, but both have captured truths that we cannot afford to neglect. To begin a response to the question of the relationship of Sunday and Monday, let us look at two Biblical examples.

Worship as Profanity: Amos 5:21-24

This paragraph is part of an oracle that God sent to his people through his prophet that is a strong attack upon them and a rejection of their worship. We must be clear that these are folks who are contentious in their worship, taking part in the divinely stipulated sacrifices. Based upon their worship, they have great confidence in their relationship with God.

A. We learn here that taking part in proper worship does not insure divine approval. Once Lanny Henninger did a study of all the lectures on worship that preceded his own at the Abilene Christian College lectures.³ He discovered that virtually all dealt with the “five approved acts” and their scriptural basis. This is a legitimate concern, but not the key question. Because of our concern about the approved “acts of worship” we may have left the mistaken understanding in some minds that what “counts” with God is that every Sunday worship have the proper five items. The nation of Israel in Amos’ day was offering the worship that God had commanded, but that did not lead to worship which was acceptable to him.

B. The first criteria of whether proper worship is God-approved has to do with the character of the worshippers. The failure was not in their prayers or sacrifices, but in the people who offered them. Their character was something which God could not sanction — so their worship could not be approved either.

C. This incident makes clear that not only is worship important, and character important, but that God expects some connection between the two! The connection is not just “good deeds,” but character. These were people

in love with the wrong values.

Worship as Life: Romans 12:1-2

Because this passage is more widely appreciated, studied and commented upon, and because I have written elsewhere about my understanding, I can be brief.⁴ The same point is made about the relationship between worship and life, but from the other end. The point is not just that life must be compatible with worship, but that life is genuine worship itself. This is clear in how Paul uses all the cultic language of sacrifice and transposes it into another key to describe daily life.

People of Character: Worship Makes Us Who We Are

William Willimon, a creative and prolific student of worship tells the story of a young couple in his congregation who learned through tests that the child they were expecting would very probably have Downes syndrome. As is well-known, that is a stressful collection of medical problems that greatly restricts the possibilities of those who have it. It is both financially, and more importantly, psychologically devastating. The physician assumed they would not want to carry this baby to term and was explaining the abortion procedure. The couple insisted that they would go through with the pregnancy. Greatly surprised, the doctor

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began to give the reasons why they should not do so: the cost, the demands, the strain on both, the anguish and inconvenience. He summed up, “This child will cause you to suffer greatly.” They responded, “Our Lord suffered, we can suffer too.”

Note that the issue is not whether or not to abort, not just over deeds and consequences, but over character. The couple understood who they were in such a way that this specific issue

was taken up into a larger frame of consideration. What intrigues me about this story, however, is where did they learn that?

The biggest need for Christians today is to know who we are in relationship to God. In a time of moral ignorance, with competing visions of the purposes and rules of life, when we are distracted and seduced by the intense materialism and secularism of our society, we are hard put to have Christian character.

Character is very hard to describe, but

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we do tend to recognize it when we see it. If we know someone of Christian character (not just a “real character”) we see that the whole is more than the sum of the parts. That is, character is not just good ideas — although they exist. It is not good deeds — which exist as well. Character is the consistent collection of views, habits and values that make for predictable and virtuous behavior. But Christian character is not easily, nor accidentally, formed. It must be consciously developed. I suspect it takes place most in worship. Let me suggest three ways in which worship shapes Christian character:

1. In worship we share with a community of like values. There are all types of communities, with all sorts of values present in our world today. Being social by nature, we tend to line up with a community whose values we share — or are led to share. That is why as parents we are so concerned about the “peer group” (or community of value) of our children. This group, both by overt teaching and by subtle nudging, will shape us to its values — whether good or ill. Participation in worship with others who worship the one God creates in us a set of values.

2. Worship cultivates our habits. On a more individual level, what we do repeatedly, habitually, shapes our character as well. Every-

one who has tried to diet, or quit smoking or another habit, knows that the problem is to move from conscious and deliberate actions to habit. The same is true for regular Bible study and prayer. Habits are not easily broken, but neither are they easily acquired. We have to cultivate the habits we want and to weed out the habits we do not want. **Worship habituates us to keep God in mind.** In prayer, in song, by reflection, and most of all by repetition, we develop the habits of Christian character.

3. Worship provides us with a shared vision of the world. The world simply does not “look” the same to everyone. Once William Blake, the English poet, stood on the seashore with a wealthy London merchant, watching the sun set. Blake asked the man, “What do you see?” The merchant replied, “It reminds me of a large gold coin, the sun looks just like a gold piece.” In turn, he asked Blake, “What do you see?” Blake said, “I see the throne of God, surrounded by flames and the angels singing, ‘Holy, Holy, Holy.’” Both saw the same sunset, but both saw very differently!

Once some people went out to the Sea of Galilee and heard a preacher. He told them of a man who was attacked by highway men, beaten, robbed and left for dead. He told about a racial enemy who rescued him, cared for him. He told about a father who had two boys — one of whom was dependable and reliable, the other a vagrant near-do-well. But the father loved them both! Some people heard these stories and went home saying, “The Kingdom of God!” Others said, “Ah, just some foolish tales.” What was the difference between the hearers?

Jesus gave this explanation to his disciples about why some heard his stories about the Kingdom and responded in faith, and why others heard the same stories and turned away. “Some have eyes to see, but others don’t see.” In a sense to **be a Christian means to see the world in a certain way, until I become as I see.** Adoration is a part of our formation as Christians. Worship teaches us to see the world correctly.

Three Specific Suggestions.

Lest this essay remain too much theory and touch upon practice too little, let me conclude with some specifics. In what ways does worship shape Christian character? I want first to emphasize that the greatest thing that wor-

ship can do for us is make us focus upon God and not ourselves. It affords the best means to see ourselves in the light of knowing God. But to conclude with some illustrations:

1. *The Singing*. Have you ever noticed that virtually every group and every regular gathering includes some singing, whether it is Boy Scouts or Rotary, Sororities or camps? Singing is a common way that communities form, teach and celebrate. What music we find memorable reveals and shapes what values we hold to.

It is vital to realize that more than music is going on in the song service. It is not decisive if the music is creative or the voices skilled. Nor is it solely a matter of comradeship, but rather of expressing as a group how we feel about the world we are in. Music pictures the world for us — as we see it, and/or as we would see it become.

I suspect that in the civil rights struggles of the sixties, the great speeches given were not nearly as powerful or community-shaping as the singing of “We Shall Overcome.” That old song pictured a world that was sought after, believed in, struggled for. Whether or not the world would exist in this generation or the next, it was the vision of a world of racial equality that empowered men and women to literally risk their lives.

A few years ago it was popular in churches and youth rallies to have special lectures on the dangers of “rock” music. Even apart from those very creative speakers who tried to identify Satanic imagery embedded in the sub-conscious by masking techniques, it was not hard to see that the values fostered by much of such music could not square with Christian character. Personally, I never saw why we needed to shout the obvious, especially with adolescents, for whom shouting has a reverse effect!

A youth-minister friend spoke about these concerns to his congregation one Sunday evening. After the service, in the foyer a couple came up to him dragging their teenage son — who was obviously there against his will. The father complimented my friend’s message, but his words were clearly aimed at their boy. “That was really great! You certainly showed how un-Christian and terrible that rock music is! I keep telling my boy here, but he won’t listen to me. I don’t listen to anything but good ol’ country myself!”

My friend shot back, “Country music is

probably the worst there is. Every song is either about getting stoned or being unfaithful!” (“Cheatin’ songs” is the genre designation). Our songs tell how we see the world — and what the world is we would like to see. Singing in worship shapes our vision of our world — and ourselves.

2. *The Lord’s Supper*. Eating may be the most community identifying thing that people do. Apart from cafeterias, if we pay attention to who we choose to share table with, we can identify what group we value. One term for the Lord’s Supper in the New Testament is “koinonia,” which literally means “that which we have in common.” The communion reminds us that as Christians we have in common Jesus Christ — and in some ways that is all we have in common (coming from different cultures, families, education and social levels, etc.).

The Lord’s Supper helps us identify other meals with the memory of the Lord. It is something of a “first fruits” of the sustaining food that we receive from God’s hand. The food we have Sunday for lunch, the ice cream after supper, the dinner on Wednesday are all meals when we should recall the communion on Sunday. It is a representative sample of all God’s provisions for life and for communion with others.

3. Finally, *the Offering*. My own suspicion is that few aspects of Sunday worship are as misunderstood as the offering. Too often it is regarded only as a necessary financial intrusion (we have to pay the bills) into the spiritual worship.

But the offering is much more than

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financial expediency — or at least it ought to be. It reminds us that all of our possessions are not really our own anyway. That is a truth that all Christians may confess in prayers but tend easily to forget. Biblically, what we have to use is on loan from God, and he will receive them back. The offering serves as a weekly reminder of this truth. (This also should remind us that the rest of our money in the week is not ours either!).⁵

Conclusion

How could the people of God so lose the connection between public worship and community life that we saw in Amos (as well as elsewhere in the Bible)? How can we? The question puzzles me, and I don't believe that I fully know. I suspect that it is closely related to forgetting that God is the Almighty and regarding him more as room service. If worship does not focus our hearts on God, it seems safe to assume that they won't be focused there other times of the week.

I want to conclude with a quote from Caryle Marney that I think sums up with great insight, and yet brevity, what it will take for the church to recapture not only the power of worship but the relationship of worship to daily life. It comprehends in one sentence the past, present and future dimensions of worship. "Worship has to do with who God is, but also with who we are, and who we wish to God we were."

Notes

¹The criticism of pragmatism in Richard Hughes, Mike Weed, The Worldly Church, (Abilene: ACU Press, 1988), is precisely the point I wish to recall as we begin. That brief booklet probably should be read as preliminary to this essay.

²C. S. Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, (Oxford: Collins Edition), p. 133 (chapter on heaven)

³Lanny Henninger, ACU Lectures, 1972, (Abilene, TX.)

⁴Wendell Willis, Worship, (Austin, TX: Sweet Publishing, 1970), Such terms as "good", "acceptable" and "perfect" (in RSV) are all taken from sacrifice, as is "present" and "worship" (literally, "liturgy").

⁵A close study of 2 Cor 8 and 9 would make clear that the "collection" has theological dimensions that are as important as the money given—and that it is as spiritual as any other part of worship. After all, James has some stinging words about "disembodied concern" (2:14-16). See Jeremiah 7 or Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, (Matt 5: 23,24; see also: 19:16-22; 23: 23,24).