

Refocusing Worship

Elder Isaac Guess

On a recent Sunday morning, I stood before the congregation, ready to begin the message. Before I had spoken the first words, my attention was diverted by a group of young men sitting in the same pew sharing a humorous story. I could feel the anger rising within me. My thoughts went something like this: “How dare they distract me from preaching! I’ve spent valuable studying for this message, and not only will they not hear it, but I am not even going to be able to deliver it well due to their impoliteness.” I had a sudden urge to call them down in front of the whole congregation, to embarrass them for their rudeness toward me. I refrained from making the grievance public, but upon further reflection, I had a thought that brought me unexpected shame. My seeming righteous indignation was completely misplaced. My anger had very little to do with a reverence for God. Instead, I was upset because I was being inconvenienced. I realized that my view of worship had become distorted in that if I had liberty and if the congregation was receptive and not rude, then I was satisfied with the worship experience. It was my worship experience that was my chief concern.

This misplaced view of worship, particularly in the public worship service seems to be altogether too common. As Primitive Baptists, we are very careful to be sure that our worship services are accurate – that is, that the only events we want to occur in the worship service are those events that are mandated in New Testament Scripture, namely, the singing of hymns, the offering of prayer, and the exposition of the Word. We are very sharp in our criticism in anything that deviates from these essential, stand alone elements. However, accuracy in performing the elements of worship does not make worship! The hymns may be sung beautifully, the preaching Biblically accurate, and the prayers skillfully delivered, and yet true worship may have never occurred. Consider the meanings of the New Testament words for worship as given by *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*: “to make obeisance, do reverence to, to serve, stressing the feeling of awe or devotion.” Vine notes that worship is “the direct acknowledgment to God, of His nature, attributes, ways and claims, whether by the outgoing of the heart in praise and thanksgiving or by deed done in such acknowledgment.” Worship, then, is an awe-filled, reverent display of praise to God. Notice that it is to be completely God focused.

The question necessarily must arise in our minds: How do we refocus the worship service so that not only are the actions correctly done, but most importantly, a reverential, awe-filled, heartfelt praise to God results? Surely a heavy-handed public dressing down of the congregation as I foolishly contemplated is not the answer. At the worst, that would only produce animosity towards the preacher, and at the very best, would result in a dry, formal, legalistic, ritualistic attempt at worship. God Himself provides the solution to the quandary of lifeless, man-centered worship that we experience far too often. Let’s focus in on two real life encounters with God in our efforts to refocus our worship.

In Exodus 3, Moses is in the self-proclaimed “backside of the desert” in exile from familiar Egypt and from his blood relatives. Moses was certainly familiar with the gods of the Egyptians. He likely had vague recollections of stories of the God of Israel told to him by his birth mother prior to his removal to Pharaoh’s house. On this day, however, Moses was made to focus in on exactly Who this God of Israel was and his view of God was dramatically changed by one brief encounter. As Moses trudged up Mount Horeb, his attention was suddenly drawn to a bush that was burning but was not being consumed. Just as his curiosity was piqued, he heard the voice of God, saying “Draw not nigh hither; put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.” Notice carefully Moses’ reaction in verse 6: “And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God.”

What does this story have to do with worship? Everything! Having an audience with God is a fearful thing. Yes, Jesus Christ has opened the way through His mediatorial work on the cross to allow sinners to come into the presence of God with boldness and free access and to look upon God as our own Father. This free access, however, does not diminish the reality of Who God is. The very real presence of God made the ground that Moses trod holy ground. God, regardless of what our misconception may be, is holy. What is encapsulated in this strange word “holy”? It means that God is separate, different, other, apart, unlike, incomparable. He’s not like us. In each of his attributes, He excels every earthly creation. It is this exalted view of God that must be incorporated into our thoughts as we prepare to come to the public worship service. One of the chief reasons that our services are dry, cold, lifeless, centered on what did I learn or receive is that we are unaware of how exalted that God truly is. Allow the proclamation of God in Isaiah 46:9 to ring loud into your heart: “...for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me.” This verse defines succinctly the holiness of God – there is none, nothing like God. Psalm 113:5, 6 escapes our ability to comprehend: “Who is like unto the Lord our God, who dwelleth on high, Who humbleth himself to behold the things that are in heaven, and in the earth!” Often I overuse exclamation points in my writing. But this passage is deserving of its exclamation point! When we worship, not only are we coming into the presence of the God Who has to condescend to behold our sin-cursed attempts to praise, but this Exalted One must condescend to behold heaven. A refocused view of the holiness of God should naturally result in serving God “acceptably with reverence and Godly fear: for our God is a consuming fire.”(Hebrews 12:28, 29)

Another passage that should refocus our approach to worship is found in Matthew 21. In fulfillment of prophecy, Jesus Christ rides into Jerusalem. A large multitude of people come to welcome His approach into the city. They remove their outer clothing and spread it on the ground where He will ride. The cut branches from the trees and put them on the path. As He approaches, with unbridled joy, they cry, “Hosanna to the son of David: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest.” This remarkable, spontaneous exclamation of praise no doubt was a result of stories the people had heard about Jesus. They had heard tell of His healing of the sick, of the lame, of the dead. They had heard the accounts of His unparalleled preaching and restraint in the midst of adversity. They had heard and believed His claim to be the long sought Messiah. Pure, unadulterated praise resulted. What does this have to do with refocusing our worship services? Everything! What has the message of Christ done for you? Have you heard of His healing, of His death on the cross, of His victory over death, of His ascension to the right hand of God? Was his death and resurrection on your behalf? Praise is not a performance. You see, God is not impressed with performances. Praise is the natural expression of adoration, appreciation, and awe of Who God is and what He has provided on your behalf? And God is very impressed with that.

Does your view of worship need refocusing? Worship is the very reason that we exist on God’s earth. If you realize that your vision of worship has become blurred by ceremony, by formalism, by insincerity, place your eyes upon the nature, the character, the goodness of an awesome God.