

12 The Church - Worship

Worship in Redemptive History

I sometimes describe my style of preaching as redemptive historical. Redemption is God's act of saving us, and history is a study of events in our past. God is active in all of history. God was involved in the ancient Chinese empire. God was moving in the Inca civilization. God is active and moving in the United States right now. But redemptive history is the events recorded in scripture. Thus redemptive historical preaching is just a fancy way of saying that I often will trace, in a chronological fashion, how God has moved in the pages of scripture. Right now I want to look at worship.

Adam and Even use to walk with God in the garden in the cool of the morning. They had perfect, sweet, sinless, fellowship with God. It was real, it was intimate, it was the best that man has yet known. But then Adam fell in the garden, and all of mankind fell with him. God saved Noah, but he did not really walk with Noah. For thousands of years, mankind was almost completely alienated from God. Then God called Abraham to enter into relationship with him. Abraham obeyed, and God began to bless him.

Under Moses, God brings the offspring of Abraham (now a great many people) out of Egypt to enter a land that he would give to them. God gives Israel the law a Sinia and calls them into an even more intimate relationship. He commands the building of the tabernacle, and eventually the temple. Now for the first time since creation, mankind is granted an avenue whereby he can worship God.

Mankind was sinful and could not stand in the presence of God. So a sacrificial system was instituted whereby sins could be atoned. Even so, the people could come no closer to God than the outer courts. The priests only could go into the inner court. And only the high priest could go into the holy of holies, and only then just once a year. It was a very limited access to God. It was a very limited form of worship.

All that changes with the coming of Jesus. Jesus is the one greater than the temple. Jesus is our High Priest. Jesus is the sacrificial Lamb. Jesus is the curtain through which we enter into the holy of holies. Therefore, the nature of worship has changed from a come and see style to a go and tell style. In the OT the temple was the only place to worship God. People had to come. Now, as Jesus told the woman at the well, "the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him." We no longer make trips to Jerusalem to the temple, rather we create centers of worship wherever the gospel spreads. No longer do we have exact descriptions as to what the buildings of worship should look like or what instruments should be played. Instead, God has granted great freedom in how each culture develops its worship.

But that is not the greatest change that has taken place. Listen to the author of Hebrews in Hebrews 12:18-29

Heb 12:18-29 For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest 19 and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. 20 For they could not endure the

order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” 21 Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.” 22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

25 See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. 26 At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” 27 This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. 28 Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, 29 for our God is a consuming fire.

As the church we have the awesome privilege to worship God in a way that has not been possible since the creation of man. We get to join with the saints gone by in the worship of God. Our praises are brought into the chambers of God into the presence of innumerable angels in festal gathering. We are part of that! Ladies and gentlemen, that is the kind of thing that should give you goose bumps. So when we worship, do not think of it as only this little body worshiping God in our little way. We join something much bigger and more grand.

Style

What about style? What style of worship should we do? This is where the worship wars have been fought. Do you do traditional worship or contemporary worship? I like what Michael Horton has to say about style:

I resist the labels “traditional worship” and “contemporary worship.” Both terms imply that our worship debates are over no more than whether we will dig in our heels or catch up with the times. Our concern, rather, should be to center our services on God—on his speech and action in saving us.¹

I like that concept because it places worship exactly where it needs to be, focused on God. There is more to this discussion of traditional or contemporary, but the point here is to reiterate that worship needs to be needs to be God-centered first.

"Many of our communicants were raised in churches that respected the Bible tremendously but were anticreedal, anti-institutional, antiliturgical, and suspicious of sharp doctrinal distinctives. These folks would once have regarded a church like ours as dead and traditional. Having lived through the charismatic Jesus Movement of the 1970s and the market-driven seeker movement of the 1980s and 1990s, many come to us with little doctrinal background.

1. Michael Horton, "Beyond Style Wars: Recovering the Substance of Worship" accessed 3/30/10; available from http://www.opc.org/new_horizons/NH99/NH9904a.html

They stayed with our church because it was strange; it pointed them to another world. They came to us not to have the secular world they inhabited baptized, but to be transformed—even shocked."²

Reflecting what we saw above in Hebrews chapter 12, our worship, no matter the style, should point people to another world. We need a higher view of God; we need a higher view of worship. Let us not simply do happy clappy music. Let us worship God with excellence in such a way that our worship points to another world.

"When we ignore historic tradition we break our solidarity with Christians of the past. Part of the richness of our identity as Christians is that we are saved into a historic people."³

You may remember in one of the previous sermons when we looked at the richness of the history of the church. We are part of a very old family. We have an ancient and rich family history. By using God-centered old songs we can keep that solidarity with Christians of the past while singing praises to God. It is a glorification of God that flows from part of who we are as an historic people.

Conversely, we have a large existing family, and it makes sense for us to worship God with a certain amount of the providential cultural flavor that he has blessed us with. If we stay only in the past then we may be wearing blinders to what God is doing in the here and now. We miss that we can add our part of culture to the praise of the universal church in adoration of God alone. In that way God is glorified by people of every tribe, nation, and tongue.

The Place of People

A couple of weeks ago I argued strongly that worship is about God. I wanted to have that settle in our brains for a week or so before qualifying. If there is a problem in our culture it is not that we are too focused upon God. We need to hear it again and again that worship is about God. That absolutely needs to be first in our mind, primary in our heart, and unparalleled in our affections. All of that said, I do not want to swing as a pendulum to an equally unbiblical extreme on the other end.

If we are concerned about being biblical, we also need to understand that people do have a place in worship.

Unbelievers

A couple of weeks ago I mentioned that we should only plan worship for those who can worship. Church is not for unbelievers. Worship is not for unbelievers. That said, we are not so naive as to think that there are no unbelievers present from week to week. Paul, in his letters to the church, will give warnings for those who may be in attendance but who are not yet Christians. I will consciously give the gospel, not just for believers, but for any unbelievers that may be here.

2. Ibid

3. Tim Keller, "Evangelistic Worship"; accessed 3/30/10; available from <http://www.redeemer2.com/resources/papers/evangelisticworship.pdf>

1 Corinthians 14:24-25 But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, 25 the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you. Although the context is one of teaching rather than singing, we can see at least a thought of unbelievers.

Acts 16:25-30 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. . . 29 And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. 30 Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

In Acts 16, this is obviously not church, but it was, in part, the singing of Paul and Silas that made the guard ask the question "What must I do to be saved?" Again, we acknowledge that people may be present when the church gathers. We further grant that they may be convicted by the worship and preaching they hear and so be saved. But this is more of a secondary affect than it is the norm. Acknowledging these secondary effects on believers, worship must still be designed only for those who can worship.

The irony here is that worship will only be evangelistic if it is not made for the unbeliever. Only when genuine worship occurs will an unbeliever be cut to quick. If it is made for them, they may enjoy it but they will not be changed by it. The moment worship is made for them, it loses its transcendent aspect and therefore does not force the gaze of the unbeliever in the right direction. In order for worship to have the effect that we sometimes see it having is if it is real God-centered worship in the first place.

Believers

The Bride for Her Groom

Concerning believers, there is an entirely different story. The first, and the biggest part that we should be aware of is the corporate aspect of worship. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *Life Together*, asks, "Why do Christians sing when they are together? The reason is, quite simply, because in singing together it is possible for them to speak and pray the same Word at the same time; in other words, because they can unite in the Word."⁴ When we gather to worship, it is not a bunch of individuals singing their own private song to God, it is the church collectively singing to God.

When a wife crosses her arms and coldly says "I love you" to her husband, that does not mean much. She expresses it with her lips, but every other part of her says otherwise. But when she says, "I love you" with tenderness in her voice, and a warm expression on her face with arms wrapped around her husband, that communicates something far deeper. She is saying it with her whole body. So too should the church, the whole church, as the bride of Christ, express our love for Christ. Corporate worship is big in scripture.

Psalms 35:18 I will thank you in the great congregation; in the mighty throng I will praise you.

Psalms 107:32 Let them extol him in the congregation of the people, and praise him in the

4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community* (HarperOne, 1978) p 59.

assembly of the elders.

2 Chronicles 29:28 The whole assembly worshiped, and the singers sang, and the trumpeters sounded.

Psalm 135:19-20 O house of Israel, bless the Lord!

O house of Aaron, bless the Lord!

20 O house of Levi, bless the Lord!

You who fear the Lord, bless the Lord!

21 Blessed be the Lord from Zion,

he who dwells in Jerusalem!

Praise the Lord!

The whole of the church as a whole church needs to worship God with one voice and one heart. We, as people, are created in the image of God. But that image was badly marred in the fall. So part of our goal is to be conformed to the image of Christ - that is, to regain the purity of the image of God that we have lost. God is a Trinity, one God in three persons. Each member of the Trinity has perfect love for one another. Part of how we as people can reflect that aspect of the image of God is to worship jointly with one mind and one heart.

Each Member for the Others

In addition to us jointly worshiping God, we can, in a sense, sing to one another as well. I know that this seems to go against what I preached on a couple of weeks ago about how we design worship only for God. So first let me give some biblical support for why I think we can sing to each other, and second, let me explain why I don't think this is at odds with designing worship only for God.

Colossians 3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

Ephesians 5:18-19 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, 19 addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart,

Both of these passages are explicit commands to address one another in song. So there is my biblical justification for it.

Second, why is this not at odds with worship being all about God? Notice that Colossians 3:16 speaks of admonishing one another. It may be helpful to think about a cheerleader. We all go to a football game and we want to support the Bison. They are the hometown team. They are our sons, and our brothers. We want them to win. But sometimes in the heat of the battle, the game is tight, things are tense, we all want them to win, but we are not being very helpful.

But now the cheerleader comes in and tries to rally the people under one cry "Defense, Defense, Defense!" So now with one voice the whole stadium is chanting this. The hearts of the young men are encouraged as they hear the stadium chanting for them. By the cheerleaders speaking to us, they better support the team.

That is how I see this working in worship. Look again at Psalm 135. This is worship of God, but look who it is addressed to. We address one another in song to better promote the kind of worship God should receive.