

June 97 SEP 11 1997

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KIRKLAND, WASHINGTON Vol. 5 June 1997 98033

## *Reflections on Psalm 33 and 95 Regarding The Attitudes and Content of Genuine Spiritual Worship*

by Dr. Darrell Hobson

Discussions of worship today occur quite frequently in the Church. However, the discussions often seem to focus more on the "style" of worship, the type of music, or the "technology" of worship than the purpose, contents and attitudes of worship that make up true spiritual worship. The Psalms, Israel's "worship book," provide us with the opportunity to reflect on these latter, more substantive issues in our acts of forming worship.

The act of worship begins with the intentional approach of a believer into the presence of God. Of course, Scripture makes it very clear that both the ability to enter the presence of God and the means of approach to God originate with God, not man. Apart from God's inviting and making approach possible, no one can approach the holy God. The worshipper comes in response to the grace of God who invites presence and worship recognizing that it is God, not man, WHO determines what constitutes good and acceptable worship. In the Old Testament, the sacrificial system which God designates along with the ritual holy days (Sabbath, Passover, Day of Atonement, etc.) properly observed provide the basis for forming worship. In the New Testament, Jesus becomes the means and occasion for our approach to the presence of the Father (see Eph. 2, Heb. 8,9). In both cases God-designated and accepted means of approach make the difference between acceptable or unacceptable worship.

As we consider the subject of forming worship—our intentional acts of approaching God for worship—the

Psalms provide for us some insight into the very human side of worship: attitude, actions, and content. They remind us that, while worship cannot occur without divine grace, worship remains a human act. We, as humans, approach the holy place to ascribe to God that which God desires: praise, adoration, reverential awe.

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**Attitude.** Worship begins and ends in an attitude of humility before and dependence upon God. Psalm 95:1-6 identifies clearly the attitude necessary for forming worship. The Psalmist begins by identifying the superiority of God.

God is: great, great King above all "so-called" gods, creator, sustainer of the universe. We are: God's creation, people belonging to God's pasture and care. In response to these facts, the attitude of the worshipper who approaches God can only be that of humility. The verbs in verse six clearly identify this: "Come let us worship, let us bow down, let us kneel in the presence of the LORD our maker."

The verb "to worship" is unique in the Hebrew vocabulary. Scholars continue to debate both its origin and form. Modern grammars present it as belonging to its own unique classification. Usage, however, makes very clear the attitudinal quality present in the action implied by the verb. Histachveh occurs some 170 times in the Old Testament. It always reflects an outward gesture on the part of the subject which demonstrates an inward attitude of respect and reverential awe in the presence of one's superior. The act of "worship" entails

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the subject—worshipper—doing obeisance, humbling oneself in the presence of the superior. The following and supportive verbs in the Psalm amplify this. Bowing down and kneeling outwardly declare the attitude of the worshipper: humility. Without doubt, any formation of worship must be grounded in an attitude of humility before God.

The verb “to worship” occurs frequently in connection with verbs to “serve” and to “offer sacrifice.” On many occasions Israel receives warning against “worshipping” other gods by “serving” participating in their ritual celebrations or “offering sacrifice” to them. To do so means giving to them what belongs to God alone. The positive implication of these negative injunctions is that Israel “worships” by “serving” attending to the divinely ordained rituals and celebrations and “offering sacrifice” bringing to God the divinely ordained sacrificial offerings. Forming worship therefore includes attending to service of God and approaching God by divinely ordained means. To do anything else clearly demonstrates human arrogance, not humility.

As Christian believers, we acknowledge Christ’s completion of both the ritual and sacrificial laws of the Old Testament. Throughout the writings of Paul, often in conflict with the Jewish Christians, he declares that the rituals and sacrifices which the law prescribes have been surpassed by Christ. Our approach to God in acts of remembrance (rituals) now entails remembering Christ and approaching the Father through him. Our sacrificial approach to God for atonement, thanksgiving, fellowship, cleansing from sin and forgiveness of willful trespass must acknowledge the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ and approach God on this basis alone. Forming worship requires that in humility we approach God in Christ Jesus, the divinely ordained and only acceptable means. Worship, for the Christian, begins and ends in an attitude of humility before God in response to divine grace in Jesus Christ, enabled by the Holy Spirit.

**Actions.** Public worship in the Psalms appears to be a fairly noisy affair. Psalms 33 and 95 reflect this in their opening section urging actions like shouting, singing praise, playing instruments in acts of praise, giving

exuberant shouts. Psalm 150 adds to this a catalog of instruments employed in acts of worship. Given the combination of stringed instruments, rhythm instruments, trumpets, shofars (ram’s horns) and wind instruments (flutes etc.), worship at the temple was certainly not quiet. However, the sounds and actions are not worship in and of themselves. Only when such sounds and actions are truly celebrations of God do they form worship.

This awareness about “worship actions” confronts our too easy assumptions about what it means to worship God. It is usually not difficult to engage people in worship music and worship actions like clapping hands or moving to music. Most of those actions are part of our culture. As long as the music is culturally relevant, the culturally relevant “worship” acts readily follow. However, in order for these acts to be worship two conditions must be met: 1. They must be celebrations of God; 2. They must focus on God’s pleasure, not ours.

Worship style may vary from church to church dependent on the cultural makeup of that church. There is nothing particularly spiritual about Israeli folk dance, or high

church hymns. Both can be worshipful, both can be false worship. We are mistaken if we believe that satisfying our aesthetic taste means we are worshipping. God alone is the true audience of our worship. We, the congregation at worship, worship for God’s pleasure. Worship facilitators merely prompt the worship; they are not performers playing to a human audience.

Forming worship begins with the attitude of humility and moves forward in the worshippers’ awareness that God, not man, is the true audience of our worship.

Observing the mode of the verbs in these Psalms provides the awareness that public worship is corporate rather than individual. All of the verbs in Psalm 95 which urge people to worship are cohortative, a mode of the Hebrew verb that encourages the worshippers as a community to join together in extolling and praising God. In Psalm 33 they are plural imperatives addressed to communities of people, urging them to join in corporate worship. Worship thus serves to bind the community together in mutual adoration of God. Participation in worship of this kind celebrates our relationship to God and, in turn, edifies all who participate by reminding us of God and His role

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in our lives. Paul seems to have this aspect in mind as he pens his instructions to the Corinthians concerning spiritual gifts in public worship (I Cor. 14). He recognizes that the individual may be edified in personal praise to God, but urges the corporate awareness in public worship. In this way, public worship serves the ends of glorifying God and edifying the Church. Forming worship, public worship, requires us to be aware of being the corporate people of God at worship—the Body of Christ celebrating God together, being built up as one body to the Glory of God the Father.

**Content.** Worship has a content side as well. It involves proclaiming God's greatness and extolling God's gracious and mighty acts. Psalm 33 provides an excellent example of a hymn. It begins in verses 1-3 with a call to worship. In this section the psalmist identifies who should worship—the righteous, who should be worshipped—God alone, and how He should be worshipped.

Hymns in Scripture have two main themes: God as the Lord of Creation; God as the Lord of History. These themes are often introduced as in Psalm 33: 4,5 by descriptions of God's character. The psalmists proclaim divine qualities such as holiness, justice, loyalty, kindness, love, righteousness and covenant faithfulness. These declarations to the worshippers assembled glorify God in their hearing. The contemporary chorus "Great is the LORD, He is Holy and Just" expresses well the character of God as it celebrates and declares God's worthiness of our praise. Declaration of God's character become an important component in forming worship.

Psalm 33:6-9 focuses on God as the Lord of Creation. It reminds the worshippers of the supreme fact: God created and continues sovereign control of the universe. Awareness of God's creative sovereignty places man in proper perspective. We who tend to think that we exist by and for ourselves must be brought face to face with the reality that our lives depend on God. Extolling God as the Lord of Creation serves to remind us all that God is God and we are not. The hymn "Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee" represents a modern example of a response to God as the Lord of Creation. Humility, and

thankfulness are the appropriate worship responses to this awareness.

Verses 10-19 celebrate God as the Lord of History. In this psalm the theme develops by contrasting God with the nations: His counsel with the counsels and plans of the peoples; His might with the might of Kings and military forces. The psalmist declares that there is no contest, God is the incomparable Lord of History. In other hymns the psalmists develop this theme by acts of remembrance. Remembering that God set his love on Israel, chose them, delivered them, protected them, provided for them. They form worship by remembering and declaring God's acts as the Lord of History.

Other hymns deal with these themes by enumerating and declaring the qualities of God and divine actions. Others focus on a significant event in history, such as the Exodus, in which God's character and actions may be clearly seen. Christian worship will include all of this and connect it with the great event in which the Lord of Creation and the Lord of History entered and redeemed both in Christ Jesus. Luther's great hymn based on Psalm 46 "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" serves as an example. Forming worship requires thoughtful, purposeful declaration of God's character, qualities and actions.

The Psalms contain many other forms as well: Laments, Thanksgivings, etc.

These also inform us as we seek to form worship which pleases God. Laments make us aware that we may worship God in bringing our requests for deliverance. Laments recognize the worshipper's need for divine deliverance. The supplicants call to the only one who can deliver, thus extolling God's greatness. They also state their trust, remember God's past actions, and affirm relationship. In all of these acts they worship God.

Thanksgiving psalms express worship by praising God for specific deliverance (Jonah 2), past actions, God's providence and care, healing and more. Each worships by remembering and declaring God's character and qualities as experienced in the life of the worshipper or the worshipping community. Christians throughout history have captured this idea in their "testimonies" and "testimonial songs." Some of my earliest

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recollections of growing up in the Church involve the exuberant corporate singing of songs like "Love Lifted Me" and "Wonderful Grace of Jesus." These testimony songs remain with me as constant reminder of God's gracious acts in the past and provide hope for God's actions in the future.

Psalm 33:20-22 ends with a response to worship. In this response, the worshippers reaffirm their trust and hope in God, concluding with an address to God requesting his continuing favor. The psalm ends as it begins, in humble recognition that worship belongs to God alone.

Evangelicals and Pentecostals have long recognized other acts as part of worship: The worship of giving, the worship of proclamation of God's Word, the worship of witness. They also have recognized the worship in life; acknowledging that a person who bears the name Christian forms worship in conducting life, work and business, relationships with their neighbor in a manner that glorifies and proclaims God's character and qualities. All of these may draw man's worshipful attention to the Only One Who deserves our worship, God.

Reflection on Psalm 33 and 95 provides the following conclusions on forming worship:

- Forming worship begins with an attitude of humility before God. The true worshipper approaches God on God's terms, and via divinely provided and accepted means.
- Forming worship requires examination of the purpose and focus of our worship actions. The true worshipper starts from the awareness that God is the audience and object of worship. Worship actions must have God as their focus, not merely personal satisfaction.
- Forming public worship requires consideration of the corporate nature of worship. The true worshipper joins with other true worshippers in declaring, in the presence of all, the greatness of God with the result that God is celebrated and the body of Christ is edified to the Glory of God the Father.
- Forming worship requires thoughtful declaration of

the character, qualities and actions of God. The true worshipper carefully calls to mind and declares the greatness of God. Mindless words, meaningless dittys, empty actions will not suffice; only that which carefully and accurately expresses the truth of God will do. Everything we do in forming worship must serve to magnify and glorify God, or it is no worship at all.

Come, Let us worship and bow down, Let us kneel before the LORD our maker.

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The Barnabas Files newsletter is published monthly by Northwest College. It is our intention that this publication, written by our faculty, will be an inspiration and will encourage the reader.

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