

The How and Why of Worship

By The Rev. Steven Peay, Ph.D.

Why do we worship? Why do we bother to come together Sunday after Sunday to do what appears to be the same things? These two basic questions need to be answered if we are to understand the nature and purpose of worship.

Human beings are rational creatures, “the symbol using animal” was the term used by literary/rhetorical critic Kenneth Burke. We are possessed with the ability to reason, to feel and to be reflective. While we may use these abilities to explore and attempt to explain the world around us, we come to an awareness that there is something more to us. This awareness leads to longing and, eventually, is articulated in different ways. The most authentic and effective of these ways is worship.

The longing that we feel is for the Transcendent, that which is Wholly Other than we are, yet which completes us. We feel within ourselves this pull and desire, but there is also an accompanying fear. That which draws us also repels us, because it is so different and so unknown. So the Transcendent is shrouded in mystery and we experience what Rudolf Otto described in *The Idea of the Holy* as “the mystery which is awe-inspiring, yet fascinating” (*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*). We cannot understand and are frightened at our lack of understanding, but also cannot escape the desire we have to grow closer and closer to this ‘bright darkness’ that is so different from us.

Our worship, then, is a response to the deep need we feel inside ourselves to be one with that ‘something more.’ Augustine described this longing better than anyone in his *Confessions* when he cried out, “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You, O God.” There is a part of us that is missing and can only be filled by union with the One. We worship because we are responding to that missing part of ourselves and are looking for the God who seeks us in relationship.

Christians believe that God has initiated this relationship by our creation and by God's ongoing self-disclosure. Christian worship, then, enables us to respond to God's self-disclosure and gracious activity in salvation history. The ultimate act of revelation was the Incarnation, when God enters into human history in a definitive way through the person and work of Jesus Christ. This is why we come to worship Sunday after Sunday, because we seek to respond to God's gracious invitation to relationship as expressed in the Christ. How, then, do we go about doing worship? First we must understand that the gathering of the community of faith, the church, is primarily to offer worship (from the Old English word ‘to ascribe worth’) to God. Thus, worship constitutes the center of church life. In the act of worship individual believers are called to an ecstatic (to stand outside of one's self) fellowship with other believers in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit. That fellowship unites us and makes the church the body of Christ and lifts us beyond ourselves into the experience of the Transcendent. So how we offer worship is as a part

of a community. For the Christian there is never really any `private' worship (from the Latin word *privatio* - robbery) since every act of worship joins an individual with God and with others. We are most `church' when we are at worship. It is in the act of worship that we declare to the world who God is for us as we respond to God's gracious acts toward us.

How do we express our worship? Evelyn Underhill did groundbreaking studies in the areas of spirituality and worship and described this basic human approach beautifully in her classic book *Worship*:

Here then is Man, the half-animal, half-spiritual creature; living under the conditions of space and time, yet capable of the conscious worship of a Reality which transcends space and time. He has certain means at his disposal for the expression of this worship, this response to besetting Spirit; and again and again he tends, at every level of development, to use these means - which indeed are characteristics. Of these, the chief are (1) Ritual, or liturgic pattern; (2) Symbol or significant image; (3) Sacrament, not merely to signify, but also to convey invisible realities; and (4) Sacrifice, or voluntary offering - a practice too far-reaching in its importance, and too profound for brief definition here. [p. 20]

Christian worship has appropriated these four elements of worship in various ways, but has chiefly done so through the proclamation of the Word and the celebration/administration of the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. In these acts the community `remembers' itself as the Body of Christ. Thus, how we worship expresses what we are as church.

Our testimony in worship to the God we serve and to who we are implies a consciousness and a conscientiousness on the part of the worshipper, both as a community and as individuals. If there is a question as to whether our worship is effective or timely it could be arising from complacency or a `rote' orientation to the worship act. Don Saliers addresses complacency in worship rather powerfully in *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine*. He writes:

The American writer-contemplative Annie Dillard has taught many of us about prayer and worship. In her book *Holy the Firm*, she contrasts the compelling and fearsome mystery of life in nature with the timid and superficial behavior of those of us who gather in churchly assemblies to worship. She speaks about our surface meetings with God, referring to the "set pieces of the liturgy as certain words which people have successfully addressed to God without getting killed." Elsewhere Dillard challenges the clichés and commonplaces of our worship art: "on the whole," she quips: I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible, aware of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blindly invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children, playing on the floor with the chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. [p. 21]

What we hear in Salier's and Dillard's words is a reminder of the ultimate purpose of worship: encounter with the living God.

Thus, worship recognizes afresh the ultimate end of relating to God, to the search for connection with the Transcendent. The purpose of worship is to place us in the Divine Presence. We are offered an incomparable gift. Scripture tells us that “no one can look upon the face of God and live” and yet we are invited not only to look upon the face of God, but to call God ‘Father,’ ‘Brother,’ ‘Teacher,’ and ‘Friend.’ In the act of worship we are invited to walk with God. We are gathered to come into God's presence and realize that our longing for ‘something more’ can be satisfied that we are in relationship with the Creator of all that is. What is more, we are incorporated into the living Body of Christ and we, ourselves, become vehicles of God's presence in the world.

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