

WORSHIP AND SANCTIFICATION

by
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One year in the late 1970's when I was still a fairly new pastor in the United Methodist Church, I attended a district-level collection of workshops on a variety of topics, of which we each could choose two. The two I chose were worship and evangelism. The workshop on worship was led by a pastor and his choir director, both noted for their expertise in the area. Their workshop idea was to plan their service for Easter Sunday, right there before our very eyes, so that we could see how was done and then go and do likewise. There was much discussion about the lectionary lessons, an appropriate psalter reading, the choir processional and anthem, the lighting of the Christ candle, and so on.

Of great importance was said to be the choice of hymns. Charles Wesley's "Christ the Lord is Risen Today" was judged obvious as an opening hymn. Then the choir director noted that many people like "Low in the Grave He Lay," also known as "He Arose." One pastor visibly winced and then said somewhat sarcastically that if his congregation had to sing that song, it would ruin the Easter service. There was some snickering at this remark by others in the workshop.

Worship was a major concern in the evangelism workshop as well. But the pastor leading this workshop, who had a numerically growing church, was more interested in whether newer and potential members actually liked the worship. He clearly was not to be constrained by a lectionary—instead, he emphasized topical preaching which addressed felt needs. As for music, he was dubious of the value of traditional hymns since they are so much at variance with what people listen to today. Had this workshop been held ten or fifteen years later, I suspect we would have heard more about alternatives to the organ and the hymnal, perhaps even praise choruses projected on the sanctuary wall. This attitude toward traditional hymns has recently been expressed by Doug Murren who, in his book *The Baby Boomerang*, has a chapter entitled "Roll Over, Chuck

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Wesley."

These are anecdotal stories, but they reflect well a real tension which runs through our practice of worship. They represent two entirely different sets of criteria for evaluating the adequacy of our worship. The first was governed by the aesthetic sensibilities of a pastor and choir director, both trained in classical music, who saw worship as the occasion for bringing their best before God. The second was driven by the desire to share the gospel with those outside the church, and sought to remove barriers to their participation.

I do not want to imply that these workshops represent the best thinking from either the liturgical or evangelistic arenas. However, I fear they are typical of how that thinking is often appropriated in the local church. Neither do I wish to deny the validity of the issues they raise. I take very seriously both the concern to be rooted in the tradition — to maintain our identity as Christians—and the concern for contextualization—to be relevant to our culture. The problem is that, while the issues are real, the proposed solutions are often one-sided. Their fundamental problem is that they frame the question wrongly as a presumed choice between "traditional" or "contemporary" worship, or between worship which reflects "high" culture or "popular" culture.

Instead of letting aesthetic or utilitarian concerns provide the governing criteria for evaluating worship, I propose [2] understanding the central purpose of worship as "the glorification of God and the sanctification of humanity." Drawn from the Roman Catholic tradition, this phrase has two distinct advantages for evaluating Christian worship, especially for those of us in the Wesleyan tradition. First, it suggests the obvious two-fold test: does our worship glorify God, and does it encourage or enable the sanctification of the participants?

Second, it raises the question of how the glorification of God is related to the sanctification of humanity. I will argue that worship which glorifies God at the same time sanctifies persons through forming and shaping distinctively Christian affections. However, when worship has as its overriding purpose evangelism, therapy, social activism, or any other human-centered goal, it neither glorifies God nor sanctifies persons. It becomes anthropocentric instead of theocentric.

Authentic worship is necessarily centered on God.

Remembrance and the Glorification of God

What, then, is worship that glorifies God? At its heart, such worship is praise and thanksgiving for who God is and what God has done in Jesus Christ. That is, it is fundamentally doxological and eucharistic, and is so because it is anamnestic — it remembers God’s character, redemptive and creative activity, and promises of salvation and new creation.

Remembrance as *anamnesis* does not mean what we so often mean by the word “remember”—it is not a recalling to mind of a past event or person that is no longer present. Rather, *anamnesis* is remembrance in which the event or person becomes present to us—it is something like experiencing that event or person anew, as a present reality.

The celebration of the Passover is paradigmatic of this remembrance. Central to the meal is a recital of the narrative of the Exodus event. But, as Don Saliers says,

It is clear also that on the *present* night — in this very prayer and ritual action of the meal — the liberating
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power of that past event is here and now, made actual among the community of memory and hope.

The forms which this remembrance take for Christians are many. Certainly the reading of Scripture and the proclamation of the Word are primary means of presenting the story and character of God. The sacraments are enactments through words, signs, and actions of what God has done in Jesus Christ. In addition, prayers and hymns often tell us who God is and what God has done.

To name these elements of worship is to recognize the inextricable linkage of remembrance to praise and thanksgiving. While proclamation might call for a subsequent response to God, sacraments, hymns, and prayers more often integrate the remembrance within the praise and thanksgiving. That is, it is *as* we are praising or thanking God that we remember God and joyfully enumerate the reasons for our thanks and praise.

In our glorifying of God, what, then, do we remember? Described most generally, we remember who God is and what God has done, with the latter the prime indication of the former. For Wesley, the entire sweep of God’s activity from creation to eschaton is a testimony to God’s love and to God’s purpose of transforming and renewing the world. His focus, of course, was on the renewal of the image of God in humanity, and the central event in this entire drama of redemption is God’s act in Jesus Christ. There is a christological concentration in Wesley’s work which evokes not only praise and thanksgiving, but repentance and awe as well. The following stanza of a hymn by Charles Wesley illustrates this:

O Love divine! What has thou done!
Th’ immortal God hath died for me!
The Father’s co-eternal Son
Bore all my sins upon the tree:
Th’ immortal God for me hath died,
[4]
My Lord, my Love is crucified.

This remembrance of what God has done is linked in Wesleyan theology with what God will do. Many of the eucharistic hymns speak of a present experience of eschatological promise, again focused christologically. For example:

By faith and hope already there,
Even now the marriage-feast we share,
[5]
Even now we by the Lamb are fed:...

Of course, in Wesleyan worship there is special focus on the soteriological promises of pardon and holiness. But these are consistently related to God: what God has done in Christ, what God is doing through the Spirit, and what God will do in

the end.

God's redemptive activity reveals the character or identity of God—who God is as God. There is a rich set of descriptive imagery. God's holiness, sovereign majesty, wisdom, and power are examples. All elicit praise. Most centrally for Wesley, God is love, a love manifest supremely in Jesus Christ which governs all of God's other characteristics. As Wesley says, commenting on 1 John 4:8:

God is often styled holy, righteous, wise; but not holiness, righteousness, or wisdom in the abstract, as he is said to be love; intimating that this is his darling, his reigning attribute, the attribute that sheds an amiable
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glory on all his other perfections.

It is remembering this God which elicits our gratitude and praise in worship.

Thus far I have used the terms “praise” and “thanksgiving” somewhat interchangeably. Having described something of the content of remembrance, we can now distinguish the two more carefully. Thanksgiving is when we have gratitude for something which is done on our behalf—an act of compassion, the giving of a gift, an enduring friendship. Praise is an acknowledgment of excellence in another, a recognition of qualities which we deem praise-worthy. In terms of worship, thanksgiving is a response to God's gracious and loving activity in creation and redemption; praise is elicited by who God is. Together, they are linked to such related responses as awe before the mystery and majesty of God and delight
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as the sheer enjoyment of God.

To say that praise and thanksgiving are at the heart of worship is not to say they are the whole of worship. Worship contains a number of other essential elements, such as confession and intercession. What it does mean is that praise and thanksgiving keep all of worship centered in God's character and activity rather than in our own agendas. Apart from this centering, confession could become cheap grace and intercession a personal wish list. When authentic praise and thanksgiving govern our worship, the remembrance of God is central. Confession then is a response to being accountable to this God, and intercession is bringing the world before the God who created, loves, and redeems it.

I emphasize authentic praise and thanksgiving because not everything that goes by these names is integrally related to remembrance. Sometimes what is called praise is only lively singing cast adrift from the biblical story of God. It may be celebratory, but the reason for celebration remains unclear. Even Scripture choruses can have this effect unless those singing them have some sense of the biblical accounts from whence they were extracted. Don Saliers observes “that in liturgy, as in life, we do well to tell the difference between short-term episodes of pleasure and the deeper, more permanent
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sources of joy and delight.”

“Exciting” worship does not always direct us to God. This fact is not, however, a blanket condemnation of exuberant worship in favor of a more solemn worship style. Rather, it suggests as one criterion for worship, whatever the style, the question of remembrance: Does it tell us who God is? Does it set before us the God revealed in Scripture? Saliers reminds us that

... there is no way around the need for the specific character of God's Word. That Word in the Scripture, proclamation, and sacrament keeps stretching us—seekers and “settled believers” alike. Worship well-grounded in the whole Bible continually invites us to ponder the mystery of God's ways just as Mary
[9]
pondered in her heart the awesome work of God.

Glorification of God, understood as praise and thanksgiving elicited by the remembrance of God, is the alternative to all utilitarian forms of worship. As Leander Keck insists, “If praise is the heart of worship, then making worship useful
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destroys it, because this introduces an ulterior motive for praise.” Such worship is always a substitute for the real thing, whether its goal is to reach the unchurched, enlist the church in a social agenda or building program, or just help people

feel good about themselves or to realize their potential.

In lifting up authentic praise, Keck raises an important issue. He argues that praise, and not thanksgiving, lies at the center of worship, for

authentic praise of God acknowledges what is true about God; it responds to qualities that are “there” and not simply “there for me.”... In other words, God is God, because of what God is and does, quite apart

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from what God is and does for me.

Keck’s concern would be understood and endorsed by many in the Reformed tradition, including Jonathan Edwards. But it should give Wesleyans pause because John Wesley characteristically moved in the opposite direction.

Worship for Wesley was often most centrally eucharistic and, therefore, doxological as well. If by this Wesley simply meant gratitude that God in Christ was Savior of the world, there would be no problem. But this the pre-Aldersgate Wesley could readily affirm to the Moravian Bishop Spangenberg in Savannah. No, Wesley insisted that

faith is a divine evidence and conviction, not only that “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself,” but also that Christ “loved *me*, and gave himself for *me*.” It is by this faith. . .that we “receive

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Christ”; that we receive him in all his offices, as our Prophet, Priest, and King.

It is that dreaded “for me” which theologians like Edwards believed undercut authentic praise of God for simply being God.

In Wesley’s theology, gratitude for one’s own justification and sanctification does not compromise praise because the “for me” is what is so revelatory of God as God. As we have seen, for Wesley the reigning attribute of God is love, and that love is revealed in Jesus Christ. It is only natural that our personal experience of God’s love would lead us increasingly to grow in our knowledge and love of God, and thereby in our gratitude toward and praise of God. “We love because God first loved us” (1 John 4:19), and thanksgiving is the central way of expressing our love for God.

This is not to say that there is no danger in beginning with the benefits received. Apart from the trivialization of God as the dispenser of whatever our hearts desire (which, knowing how sinful those hearts are, Wesley would seek to avoid), there is the constant temptation to focus on the salvific gift rather than the giver. “You look inward too much, and

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upward too little” Wesley advises Miss Bishop. This for Wesley was one form of “enthusiasm.” He guards against it by placing pardon and holiness securely within the story of God, continually referencing it to Christ and the Spirit. We’ve seen this already in the hymns, as well as his insistence that we receive Christ in all his offices as Prophet, Priest, and King. He never divorces the benefits of Christ from the remembrance of Christ.

Affections and the Work of Sanctification

This brings us back to the original thesis, that worship is both for the glorification of God and the sanctification of persons, but it can only aid the latter if its focus is on the former. We are now in a position to see the role of the glorification of God in worship in the work of sanctification. To do this, we must first say something of the nature of sanctification for Wesley.

As the works of Gregory Clapper, Richard Steele, and Randy Maddox have amply demonstrated, Wesley understood the Christian life to consist of a pattern of affections or “holy tempers,” rooted and grounded in the hearts of

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believers. For both Wesley and Jonathan Edwards, this way of conceiving the Christian life was in contrast to the typical anthropologies of their day, which presupposed a conflict between reason and “the passions.” The rationalists, for example, argued that reason needed to control the will rather than its being controlled by the passions, for while the latter tempted to sin, the former could ensure moral choices. Maddox has shown how this anthropology supplants that of Wesley in

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nineteenth century Methodism among both the partisans and opponents of the holiness movement. When worship is

related to this type of anthropology, it is going to emphasize those elements that inform and persuade the intellect.

For Wesley and Edwards, the affections provided a more holistic anthropology, integrating the mind and the heart. While some nineteenth-century Methodists, influenced by Scottish common-sense realism or Kantian idealism, found Wesley's anthropology incoherent, twentieth-century writers have been more appreciative of the affections. Both Robert C. Roberts and Don E. Saliers have developed contemporary versions of the affections, with Saliers maintaining that terminology and Roberts calling them "emotion—dispositions."^[16]

In my own appropriation of their insights, I have come to describe the affections as having three characteristics. First, they are dispositions — abiding inclinations in the heart which characterize us as persons. Thus, to be Christian is to have and be growing in certain affections such as love of God, love of neighbor, faith, hope, humility, gratitude, joy, and the like. Affections as dispositions are to be distinguished from what we today often term feelings. While one may or may not feel loving or thankful at a particular time, to be a Christian is to be a loving and thankful person. The affections are deeper in our character than feelings which come and go; they abide in the heart and remain over time.

Second, affections provide a certain perspective on the world. In a way they mediate our experience. When we experience a hungry child, it matters greatly whether one's life is characterized by selfishness or compassion. Affections provide us with a way of evaluating our experience as well as the motive to act on that understanding. If asked why we are involved in combating world hunger, the reason we are likely to give is that we have compassion for those who suffer.

Third, affections are intrinsically relational — they take objects. One does not simply love, one loves someone or something. Christians love God and neighbor; they do not love money — or at least struggle with the latter while growing in the former. In the case of an object who is a subject, the relationship can be two-way: we are the objects of God's love; we love God in return.

The relationality of the affections is central to our consideration of worship and sanctification. We cannot have Christian affections apart from an ongoing relationship with God. To forget, ignore, or reject God is to replace God with some other object of our love. When the object of the love changes, the affection of love and the resulting life change as well. To use Saliers' language, the object forms and shapes the affections. Thus, to love the God revealed in Jesus Christ has a profound formative effect on who we are—it is what makes us Christians in the Wesleyan sense of holiness of heart and life. In contrast, to love money would make us very different people, leading lives reflecting values and priorities at variance from those of the gospel.

If the affections are the content of sanctification, and they are formed and shaped by their object, holiness of heart and life is dependent on our remembering experientially the God who is holy. Here is the essential link between worship and sanctification: it is as we praise and thank God that, through remembering again and again who God is and what God has done, we grow in the knowledge and love of God. Our own lives are continually shaped and our affections deepened by our encounter with this God over time. As we bring our whole lives to worship God, we render our lives worshipful. This is the essential interrelation of liturgy to ethics, or, in John Wesley's language, of acts of piety to acts of mercy.

For clarity, let me state what I do not mean. I am not saying that worship provides information about God which we cognitively appropriate and then will to emulate. Rather, I am suggesting that in worship we encounter the God revealed in Jesus Christ, who is present by way of the Holy Spirit, and made known to us through faith, which is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Thus we do not simply know more about God, we come to know God ever more deeply; and this God is not simply an amorphous feeling, but a God who has a distinctive character revealed in Scripture. Authentic worship, then, is not only anamnetic but epicletic; it not only remembers who God is but encounters the living reality of that God through the Spirit. At one and the same time, it avoids the extremes of a formalism which simply goes through the motions and an enthusiasm

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that substitutes enjoying feelings for knowing God.

It is for this reason that worship which glorifies God at one and the same time sanctifies the participants. Worship that is at its heart utilitarian, or aesthetic, or entertainment cannot sanctify because it doesn't really glorify—it doesn't remember the God of Israel and of Jesus Christ as the ground and motive for its thanksgiving and praise. Worship that

remembers this God cannot but give God thanks and praise, and evoke in its participants ever-growing love, hope, humility, joy, peace, and gratitude in response to the love God has so richly shown in creation and especially in redemption through Jesus Christ.

Endnotes:

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