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## CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

### DEFINITION OF WORSHIP

IF we are to seek for an adequate definition of Christian worship, we shall perhaps not be far amiss to frame it as follows :

*Christian Worship is the endeavour on the part of Man, under the guidance of the Spirit of God and with the use of such means as the Spirit provides, to so conform his will to the Divine Will that in that hour more especially, but in all of life as well, he may show forth God's praise through the consecration to Him of all that he is and has.*

This definition, it will be apparent, includes the following four propositions :

- (1) Worship is essentially man's attempt to conform his will to the Divine Will, the former consecrating to God all that he is and has at that hour.
- (2) The object of Worship is that man may show forth at once and in all of life as well God's praise.
- (3) This attempt is made under the guidance of God's Spirit.
- (4) This endeavour on man's part does not disregard the proper use of formal or material means to promote its object.

Let us look at each of these propositions in turn.

*First, worship is essentially man's attempt to conform his will to the Divine Will.* Our Lord's own prayer life furnishes us with the best models, as His teaching on prayer contains the final statement of principle, from which we may discover what our worship should be like and what the ideological foundation beneath it should be. Our Lord prepared no Liturgical Manual for His Church, He wrote no hymns, He gave no instructions on the art of homiletics, He had very little to say regarding the proper constituents of Christian worship. It is all the more impressive, therefore, that He did comply with His disciples' request that He teach them how to pray ; and we should be very foolish, indeed, to imagine that the model prayer He gave to them had no more than casual significance.

On the contrary, it should go without saying that such a model would contain a treasury of His richest insight into prayer's meaning and purpose, as well as into its sub-structure in doctrine.

It is not by chance, then, that our Lord places in the forefront of that prayer, before any plea for self is offered up by the worshipper, this general petition—"Thy Kingdom come; Thy Will be done on earth as it is in Heaven." Here is the plea that man may be led, now in worship, and always, to adopt the proper subjective attitude toward God, and that attitude—the surrender of his will to God's Will. This is man's part in life; he must ever go about seeking to accomplish it, to make God's will his own. For God's Kingdom or Rule to come among men means first of all that He shall rule their wills. Man may build up an external structure of social, national, international fraternity, and trick himself into thinking that he is building the Kingdom; but in reality if man's will has first been surrendered to God, if God's will is not the basis of all this fine display, it is all tinsel and froth. For God's Kingdom to come among men means that men dedicate their wills to Him, make His will their law, and nothing else. It is this goal for man of which Jesus spoke when He said, "Seek ye first the Kingdom (or Rule) of God and His righteousness."

Worship's part in accomplishing this goal of life for man lies just in this—that it serves as the occasion for his allowing his thoughts to dwell on the will of God and on the demands—however multifarious and obscure, of that will upon man. It gives the worshipper the opportunity to seek through prayer adjustment of self to what God's will demands of him individually and corporately as a member of Christ's Church. In worship man seeks to forget self and the will of self; he seeks to bend his will into conformity to the will of God.

*It is not primarily knowledge of what God's will is that is sought in worship.* Here, I think, we oft-times make a grievous mistake. We ask to know what God's will is for ourselves, for our friends, for the Church, for anyone, and we go away dissatisfied with our worship if we have not found out. But there is a vast difference between seeking to *know* what God's will is, and striving to conform our wills to that will, whether known or not. Jesus did not teach His disciples to pray—"Thy will be *known*" to me or to anyone. He said, "When ye pray, say . . . Thy will

be *done*." Accordingly, in His own last season of prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, when the way looked dark before Him, He did not pray, "Reveal thy will to me now." He prayed, "Thy will, not mine, be *done*." It cannot be accidental that both in teaching and in practice our Lord laid the emphasis on God's will being *done*, rather than on its being *known*. We do not so much need to *know* God's will, as we do need first, last and always to so bend our wills as always to will that God's will may have free course and may be accomplished in our lives and in all the earth.

It is foolish, then, for us to arise from our knees with discouraged hearts if the hour of worship has not brought us a clear understanding of God's will for the moment. We have made a mistake if we imagined that to discover that will was the purpose of our worship. If we have been led of the Spirit to surrender our wills to God's will—whatever it may be, then our worship has been true worship—it is enough. This is not to say, of course, that God does not reveal His will to men. Our Lord said, "He that willeth to do His will, he shall know." Knowledge is the fruit of the surrendered will. But—the fruit does not come to full maturity at once. It appears in God's own time. This is a simple matter of the Christian experience of twenty millenniums. What is of primary importance for us is that we learn to surrender our wills to His.

This, then, is the essence of true Christian worship—it is neither an endeavour to see, nor to know, nor to acquire, nor to embrace God: it is simply an endeavour to bring our wills into conformity with His will, to will what He wills. It is, to repeat a phrase quoted sometimes "the costing and difficult uplifting of our wills towards God's."

*Secondly, the object of Worship is that man may show forth at once and in all of life as well God's praise.* This is really wrapped up in the first proposition we have just discussed. For, if man's endeavour in worship is to conform his will to God's will that must simply be because that will is praiseworthy in the highest degree; it must be because, except for God's will, man knows of nothing worthy of praise. Accordingly, the object of man's whole life, but more especially of the hours he spends in worship, can only be the accomplishing of God's praise. This he does in his daily life by working out with hand and mind, heart, conscience and intellect the will of God as it becomes

progressively clear to him. In the hour of worship, the self-same praise of God he sings in hymn and psalm, extols in chant or prayer, declares in sermon or Scripture reading.

It ought to be clear, I think, that neither worship nor service is an ultimate end in itself. In both the end in view is the serving of God's praise. Both service and worship are instruments to that end. No estimate of either is complete which does not carry through to the final goal of both. They are not mutually conflicting goals of life. Neither is a goal in itself. They are rather parallel lines of effort to the accomplishment of a common end—the glory of God, *Soli Deo Gloria*. This much, however, may be said—that without the humbling of the will of man into conformity with that of God, a *desideratum* which only true worship can accomplish, service pleasing to Him and helpful to men cannot be rendered. Service becomes genuine service to man and so service to God only when worship intervenes and bends man's will to the will of God. *The reason for this* is the most profound one—that only God's will can determine what is ultimately good for man—no one but God knows. For me to strive to serve my fellows, therefore, without conforming my will to God's can only spell disaster. With my own will dictating my course of action I shall render, not service, but a distinct disservice to my fellowmen. Worship, then, must intervene—that medium by which I conform my will to God's. Thereafter I can serve in true humility, and through both worship and service, through life's activities and worship's prayer and praise, there will sound forth a harmony—a symphony, if you will, to the praise of God.

The third proposition which we made concerning Worship was this—*Man's attempt to conform his will to the Will of God through Worship is made under the guidance of God's Spirit*. This is but another way of saying that true worship is that in which the current flows from the Godward pole of the worship nexus. Worship whose aim is the complete subjection of the will of Man to the Will of God cannot arise from any natural desire within man himself. Such holy desire is too high for him. It must emanate from the Godward pole of the nexus. It must be what Paul calls “worship by (or in) the Spirit of God” (Phil. iii. 3; Eph. vi. 18; Gal. v. 25). This is what Dr. Robert S. Simpson is referring to in his book on *Ideas in Corporate Worship*, when he writes, “Worship is essentially from beginning to end,

a supernatural action.”<sup>1</sup> “From beginning to end”—ay, that is exactly the point. Our worship to be real, to be true, must be made “in the Spirit”, “by the Spirit”, under the Spirit’s guidance from first to last. “The heart of the Gospel”, continues Dr. Simpson, “is that God has come very near to us. We do not reach Him at the end of a long process. He is first stretching out His arms to us.”<sup>2</sup> This is as true of worship as it is of any other part of our lives. In worship, the primary fact is that God comes to meet us; He stimulates our spirits to worship Him; He guides our prayers; He directs our thoughts; He frames the hymn upon our lips; He—He is the originator of our worship and not we ourselves. Let me give you this thought in the words of Canon Lilley. Pagan prayer, he says, is distinguished from Christian prayer in this that, whereas in the former “it is mere man that prays”, in Christian prayer “it is God in us that prays.”

It is our nature penetrated by the Divine Spirit and assisted by the Divine grace that is alone capable of prayer in the fully Christian sense. Prayer on this view is an essentially natural act. The natural man, man remaining within the circle of natural desire and appetite, is incapable of true prayer. . . . For the less spiritually developed religious prayer is a natural act, or rather a series of discontinuous acts, of the natural man. For Christianity it is a continuous spiritual state within which separate acts, indeed, find their place, and to the support and even gradual formation of which they can contribute. But the simplest act of prayer of the Christian type is already an effect of Divine inspiration and it is not their mere repetition, however frequent, but their separate and varied representation of a continuously inspired state of soul that constitutes them authentic instances of prayer.<sup>3</sup>

Man cannot pray save as the Spirit of God leads him. The disciples were quite right when they said, “Lord, teach us to pray,” for save as the Lord teaches man to pray he cannot pray. “We know not how to pray as we ought.”

What I have just been saying about the necessity of the Spirit’s presence, if our worship is to be genuine Christian worship, will perhaps appear less paradoxical if I say that this is but of a piece with that supreme need we have of the Holy Spirit for living the whole of our Christian lives. It is not only that we cannot worship without the Holy Spirit, we cannot fulfil any task of the Christian “Way” without that Spirit.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Simpson: *Ideas in Corporate Worship*, p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>3</sup> Canon Lilley: *Prayer in Christian Theology*, pp. 8, 9.

<sup>4</sup> The reader may note here some very fine statements on this aspect of the matter in E. Brünner, *The Word and the World*, p. 81, and in Birch Hoyle’s, *The Teaching of Karl Barth*, p. 191.

Our last proposition was this—*Christian Worship does not spurn to use such formal or material means as may be legitimately employed in furthering its object.* I do not propose to dwell upon this point at any length. I simply record that it is a part of our definition of true worship lest some object that criticism of the Acting type of Mysticism, in which the worshipper employs formal or material means to gain control of the Deity, would be unjust when we ourselves are willing to employ such means in the accomplishment of worship's aims. My reply to such objection would be that it is not the employment of such means *per se* that is objectionable; it is rather the object for which they are employed that gives them tone and renders them acceptable or otherwise. So long as men are men, composed of body as well as of spirit, some tangible and formal means will be required in the worship of God. Some liturgy, some hymn, some spoken prayer, water, wine and bread—these and other material means will always be requisite. What distinguishes Pagan and Christian worship at this point is, not the use or non-use of means, but whether the control of these means is by the Spirit of God, or whether it is by man that he may become master of that Spirit.

In conclusion, permit me to point out two corollaries which follow upon the definition of worship as a supernatural event wherein man consecrates his will and thereby all that he is and has to God. In the first place, it follows that once the worshipper has consecrated his all to God, *he forthwith receives it all back again.* No longer, to be sure, in his own right. No longer as *his* all. But by virtue of his having consecrated it to God and of its being within the compass of the Divine will. He can now make his petition for everything that concerns him—whether material, physical, social, spiritual—always, to be sure, observing the claims of the Divine will upon all these things.

This is the meaning, I take it, of the balance of the prayer our Lord taught His disciples. Everything following the clause—"Thy will be done," is asked under the shadow of that clause and is sublimated in it. "Give us this day our daily bread"—life's necessities viewed in the widest possible manner—physical, material, intellectual, the needs of relatives and friends, all social relationships. "Forgive us our sins"—man's spiritual needs are not forgotten and it is within God's will that they should be fulfilled in the richest possible way.

Furthermore, it is important to note that all these needs of

man are now put upon the same plane ; the material and the spiritual both receive the same recognition. Both are given back to man, once his will has been consecrated to the will of God, and both are given back on the same level and with a similar claim. One cannot say, then, that the Roman Catholic who seeks for the "vision of God" above all things else has no right to do so, provided he has consecrated his will to God and seeks for that vision *that God's glory may be made manifest in him*. Similarly, the Roman Catholic has no right to taunt the Protestant with his petitionary prayer, provided the Protestant prays for his daily needs as one who has first settled all that he is and has on God as His right and as contributory to His praise. "Confident and fervent prayer for all those things which are beyond all doubt and question according to His will"—this has its legitimate place in Christian worship.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, without it our worship and God's glory, which is manifest in everything He has made, would be incomplete.

The second corollary, resulting more especially from that part of our definition of worship which draws attention to its supernatural character, is this—worship conceived as we have conceived it, that is, as an inspiration of God's Holy Spirit, as proceeding from the Godward pole of the worship nexus, is not an esoteric matter. It is within the reach of every one of God's children, even of the humblest—nay, it lies nearer to hand to those who are already by reason of poverty, or distress, or failure humbled before God and man, than to those whom the world counts successful. Like everything else it is a gift of God's grace, but it cannot be arrived at except by him who humbles himself—"except ye become as a little child." It is for God's "little ones", for the "meek and lowly." One need never fear, then, lest the humble villager—the *chamar*, the *bhangi*, or *chubra* cannot learn the secret of real worship. The condition of genuine worship is already present in his humble heart. It only requires the movement of God's Spirit within his soul—a movement which the Bible calls "faith", and which is induced by the spoken Word as it impinges upon his conscience and mind and heart, to open his soul in a song of praise or a prayer of faith, and that is genuine worship.

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<sup>1</sup> Canon Lilley : *Prayer in Christian Theology*, p. 7.