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THE SCRIPTURAL DOCTRINE OF WORSHIP

THE classical passage for the subject allotted to me—the Scriptural Doctrine of Worship—is found in John iv. 24: “God is a spirit and they that worship Him, must worship Him in spirit and in truth”. This is the very essence of the whole Biblical teaching. Worship to be in any sense real or true must be spiritual. It means that there can be no contact or communion save between spirit and spirit, and that alone in the realm of reality. The nature of God conditions the whole approach of man to God. The other side of the truth and teaching is that the nature of man as also spirit must be manifested and expressed in his worship of God. Man does not worship, when his spiritual nature is inactive or when it is falsely active. The basic principle of worship as revealed in the Scriptures is accordingly, that worship must be sincerely spiritual.

This is a far-reaching principle. Its very simplicity involves the whole expression of worship. Guidance is afforded by the terms in use in the Bible to describe this worship of God, as spiritual men offered it to Almighty God.

I

The first element of spiritual worship is Humility. I find that the most frequent word in both Old and New Testaments is one which means to make obeisance, to bow down, to prostrate. The Hebrew word is *Shahā* שָׁחָה, and the Greek word is *Proskuneo* προσκυνέω. This suggests that the outer posture of the body is in harmony with the inner attitude of the soul. If this is not so, we are outside of the realm of reality and so violate the basic principle of true worship. The prostration of body signifies and expresses the prostration of soul. Such humility of the human worshipper implies two things, which find their corroboration in scripture.

(a) Confession of the Divine perfection.

(b) Confession of the human imperfection.

Humility is always relative. The degree of abasement depends on the distance between the worshipper and the worshipped. In the scripture there is portrayed for us a prostration of the human soul, which is inspired, on the one

hand by the glory of God, and on the other by the shame of man. God is conceived in all the perfection of His being and attributes as Creator and Redeemer, “the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and the Lord of lords, Who only hath immortality dwelling in the light, which no man can approach unto ; Whom no man hath seen, nor can see ; to Whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen.” On the other hand there is the open confession of sin and unworthiness. Not only does man feel his dependence upon God but in his true spiritual activity he casts himself upon the mercy of God the Father for all his sins and shortcomings. Whether it be a David : “Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean ; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow. . . . Hide Thy face from my sins and blot out all mine iniquities ” ; or whether it be a Peter : “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord ”, the spiritual man of the Bible abases himself before the awful purity and unfailing goodness of God. Thus in genuine worship humility, which is the flower and fruit of a right relationship between God and man, and the true direction of man’s spirit, is a permanent element. It must always be present and in the scriptures it is presented as a constant and invariable attitude in worship.

II

A second element of spiritual worship is Reverence. I find that the next term, in order of frequency in the sacred writings, is one which conveys the idea of veneration or standing in awe or simply reverence. The Old Testament word is *Yarē* יָרֵא and the New Testament synonym is *Sebomai* σέβομαι. The meaning is “fearing God”. It is not the fear which destroys the soul and renders it incapable of self-expression, the fear which represses and fills with abject terror. It is rather the fear which excites wonder, love and praise. It is that quality of the soul we call reverence. It is the human spirit’s recognition of divine greatness. The Hebrew race were the most God-conscious of all the peoples of the earth ; this they were because God chose them as the people through whom to reveal Himself to humanity. They were God-fearers in opposition to others, who revered idols or feared neither God nor man. This veneration of God was the test of their spirituality. Only a true spiritual nature could recognize true spirituality. Greatness revered greatness. The Hebrews were great in spirit and they, of all the

peoples of the earth, worshipped the one living and true God. In the Greek world of the New Testament this element of reverence was conceived as piety. The religious sense found expression in the reverence of things connected with the higher world of spirit. The Christian was pious in the highest and best sense, for all, related to his Lord and Master, was sacred to him and all, revealed through the Son, became the sum of his spirit's adoration. There is something fundamental in this element of worship, something, which can only find expression in terms of spirit, and something which may at the highest baffle the soul to articulate. On the opening of the seventh seal, whatever the vision was that met the gaze of the spectators, "there was silence in heaven for the space of half an hour". The first element looks primarily inwards—that is the direction of Humility. The second element, Reverence, looks outwards, and the sight thrills the whole soul. Dr. Jowett in his day was called "the apostle of reverence" because in season and out of season he insisted upon the need of reverence in the worship of the Church. If we learn nothing else about worship, in its scriptural presentation, than this vital place of reverence, it is well worth our while to have studied the Bible teaching.

III

A third element of spiritual worship is Service. The Hebrew word is 'Abhadh עָבַד, and the Greek word is *Latreuo*, λατρεύω. They both mean "to serve". So we speak to-day of the Morning, the Afternoon, and the Evening Service, or of Divine Service. The "servers of God" in the Old Testament were His loyal and faithful worshippers amidst a heathen and godless environment. The "servers of God" in the New Testament were those who excelled their Greek brethren in their public devotion to the true God. A Greek in those days did a public service to his idol, when, in the name of the people and for the people, he gifted some temple or some money to his god. The whole idea of Divine service as worship involves three ideas :

- (a) A fellowship.
- (b) An offering.
- (c) A series of rites.

It has been said that the Bible knows nothing about "the solitary saint". The whole trend of its teaching is to unite

saints into a fellowship. The Bishop of Croydon in his newly-published volume, *What Is This Christianity?* defines Christianity in successive chapters as an Event, an Experience, a Fellowship, an Adventure, a Society and a Victory. What I want to point out is that Christianity is described as both a fellowship and a society. Indeed, the one presupposes the other. The fellowship comes first. The author says "Jesus never produced any system of ethics, and He did not seem to be particularly interested in social programmes. He was concerned first and foremost, at all costs to get men into a right relationship with God, to restore the broken fellowship with their Father. Get that right, He said in effect, and the relationship with men will right itself. The art of living is after all the art of right relationships—to God, to one's fellow human beings, and to the material environment which is life's setting." This fellowship of right-minded and right-made people is the material out of which the Christian Society or Church is formed. To be "born again" implies being born into a family. Worship is not described in the scripture as an affair of the individual, but as an exercise of the church. Worship is a common service which is performed by a group of like-minded people, whose qualification is not that they are advocates of a certain style of fellowship such as Episcopalian, Presbyterian, or Independent, but that they are right with God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. So this Divine service signifies a fellowship, a society, a spiritual family among which and through which the service can be rendered, a church, whose bond of union is common fellowship with God and with each other.

Again the idea of Service involves an offering. A service of fruit means that in a company fruit is offered. And indeed Divine Service implies an offering first to God and then to all, for all share in the spiritualities of worship, share in the giving and in the receiving. The main idea of Divine Service is the offering to God of our material and spiritual gifts. The material is given in a spiritual manner, and the spiritual sacrifices themselves are a contrite heart, praise, adoration, thanksgiving and prayer. Behind this purely spiritual offering lies the whole history and training of the Old Testament sacrifices. These gifts, laid upon the altar and devoted to God, are the types of the real spiritual sacrifices, which we now offer in accordance with the basic principle of true spirituality in worship.

IV

Once more in this connection of Divine Service, it is possible only in a fellowship of right-made and right-minded people, and only when something spiritually, or itself spiritual, is offered, and only when such service is expressed by rites recognized as appropriate. There are some who would go further and maintain that such spiritual rites, as the necessary expression of the service behind, must not only be *appropriate* but *appointed*. This position is worthy, in that it serves to sound a warning against what the fathers called "will-worship". It is the salutary precaution of the Apostle Paul, when he says to the Colossians, "Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind and not holding the Head". The teaching of the Old Testament is perfectly definite in its treatment of acceptable worship, where even the rites were determined and the Children of Israel instructed how to approach God. The ritual of the Tabernacle in the wilderness and later of the Temple, was not from the earth but from heaven, not from the will of man but from the will of God. At the same time there is a warning against the legalistic spirit and the dependence upon a correct ritualistic approach to God. The prophet Micah adjusts the balance. "Wherewith shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before the high God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" The desire for rules and regulations, for exact rites and ceremonies, is here met with the oft-repeated ethical demand for an upright life. In the later revelation of the New Testament this same desire is further answered by the great principle of spirituality in worship, which we have found to be fundamental. In accordance with the mind of the Master He issues for His church not rules but principles.

It is in harmony with this great principle—"they that worship God must worship Him in spirit and in truth"—that the New Testament Church, with the models before them of the

Temple and the Synagogue, served God in their fellowship with certain elements of ritual. Divine service, we gather from the New Testament, was composed of

- (a) Prayer.
- (b) Praise.
- (c) Lessons from the Scriptures.
- (d) Exercise of spiritual gifts.

These are the rites of spiritual worship. Prayer was a spacious offering as we learn from the first epistle to Timothy: "I exhort, therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings and for all in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty, for this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; Who will have all men to be saved and to come unto the knowledge of the truth." We have also received from Christ Himself the Prayer, that teaches how to pray. That the disciples of Jesus in the first century disregarded this example of perfect prayer is unbelievable. I am glad that the fear of ritualism in its use does not in our day ban it entirely from our services. In recent years the Church of Christ everywhere has re-discovered its amazing catholicity and unifying force.

V

The praise of the New Testament Church has been the subject of much controversy. The critical points are, first whether the primitive church used any other material for praise than the Hebrew psalms, and second, whether the church has the right to produce its own praise on the principle of spiritual worship, and third, whether such spontaneous praise is inspired or uninspired. As far as the New Testament is concerned the answers to these questions are not too hard. In Ephesians and Colossians the Apostle Paul directs the church fellowship to praise in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. The psalms themselves were called by several names, such as Mizmer, Tehilla and Shir, and we may have here simply the rich variety of names employed for the Hebrew psalms. There is no doubt that the reference in Matt. xxvi. 30, where our Saviour and His disciples "sang an hymn and went out into the Mount of Olives", was to the Hallel or group of psalms always sung at the close of the

paschal feast—the psalms cxiii-cxviii., called by the Jews Hallel, from the first word of Psalm cxiii., Hallelujah, “Praise ye the Lord”. On the other hand it is quite true, that we do have, in the New Testament writings, examples of song and praise and doxology. But however one may elect to vote upon the exegesis of the passage, it is always to be remembered, that we are still in the region of the Word of God, and such psalms and hymns and spiritual songs of the early church came into being through a pentecostal inspiration. Hence in reply to the second problem of the creative right of the Church to supply its own praise, the question would not arise in the days of the inspired leaders. In after years, remote from the age of inspiration, the question did arise. The Church which I represent—the United Original Secession Church—has always taken the conservative side and hesitated to declare the right and the freedom of the Christian Church to formulate its own praise. So the third point of inspired and uninspired praise, also, did not trouble the New Testament Church, guided, as it was, by men of God moved by the Holy Spirit. All their praise was inspired whether they used only the psalms or in addition such ascriptions of praise as we read in the New Testament. Our test to-day, when the unique inspiration of the early church is past, is the principle given us by Jesus of the true spirituality of worship. I think most of us will agree that the terms, inspired and uninspired, do really signify a difference of quality, and are therefore ready to give the Hebrew Psalms the pre-eminence and to prefer them in the worship of God. I am convinced that this is the strongest line of defence to-day—supposing an apologetic must be made—for a psalm singing denomination, that the spiritual quality as uniquely inspired is supreme and satisfies the demand of the basic principle of spiritual worship. Personally I would prefer this argument alone, without the other, which in time past was, and also now may be, employed, that such secondary and uninspired material is unappointed and is offering, in reality, strange fire to God.

In the primitive Divine service we know that the Word of God was read. The New Testament Church was modelled from the Synagogue and we have the Lord’s own imprimatur upon the custom of reading out of the Law and the Prophets. We also read the command of the Apostle to the Thessalonians: “I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read unto all the holy brethren”. This rite of the Divine service is an important part

and ought not to receive less attention than that which the primitive Church were commanded to give it. The word of God must ever be more potent in the ministry of the Spirit than the word of man.

Another part of the early ritual was the exercise of spiritual gifts. The Synagogues recognized this in Christ's day. Any stranger, who had the gift, was asked to interpret the passage read, and this formed the prototype of the modern sermon. In the New Testament Church these spiritual gifts were used for three ends :

- (a) Witness or testimony.
- (b) Edification or instruction.
- (c) Exhortation or inspiration.

At Pentecost, especially, the gift of tongues manifested itself in praises of testimony to the marvellous grace of God. In the Corinthian Church, those, who were gifted with the Spirit, spoke both in enlightenment and in encouragement. It may be that the ritual of our Scottish Presbyterianism does not permit the full exercise of all the gifts of the Spirit for all, who are gifted, but the good intention is there to allow licence to all who are duly qualified according to the great basic principle of spiritual worship.

VI

It has been my privilege to try and set forth the Scriptural Doctrine of Worship. The fundamental principle is sincere spirituality according to the standard of God. This involves the three great attitudes of Humility, Reverence and Service.

This Divine service in turn involves a fellowship based on a genuine fellowship or communion with God, and an offering of the human spirit to God, and a series of rites without which the Divine service could neither be made nor maintained.

Whatever our present mode of worship may be, the New Testament, which fulfils the Old Testament, sets before us the all-embracing principle of worship in spirit and in truth. This same principle led our fathers to emphasize simplicity of worship as the best medium for the exaltation of the spirit both human and divine.

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