



Issue #35
August 30, 2004

Years ago, when I was in the thick of *performance* mode—back when most of my creative juices were being channeled into writing and producing plays and musicals for the church—I often expressed pique over a pastor’s insistence on including some other component of traditional church life. Even if I had meticulously organized a complete hour of material, the pastor or worship leader would want to add announcements, the taking of an offering, the singing of a hymn or two, or the reading of a Scripture passage. In my position at the time, this was received grudgingly. After all, I had put great effort and genius into crafting a cohesive dramatic statement; how dare he dilute the impact of my creation with his more pedestrian traditions.

But then, years ago I was an idiot.

The Foundation

Sunday last we visited a church in which the morning service was given over to a concert by two singers. Pretty standard fare for these times: young, grating, over-amplified voices arm-twisting us “into the Spirit”; forcing the congregants’ approval by use of the ubiquitous “Amen?”; their set populated with repetitive choruses of doctrine lighter than air. Okay, so far we can agree to disagree.

As we begin to focus upon God, the things of the spirit will take shape before our inner eyes. Obedience to the word of Christ will bring an inward revelation of the Godhead. It will give acute perception enabling us to see God even as is promised to the pure in heart. A new God-consciousness will seize upon us and we shall begin to taste and hear and inwardly feel God, who is our life and our all. There will be seen the constant shining of “the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world”. More and more, as our faculties grow sharper and more sure, God will become to us the great All, and His presence the glory and wonder of our lives.

(A.W. Tozer)



We can chalk it all up to different worship styles, different musical tastes, different ways for earnest believers to connect with their God. Fair enough.

More troublesome, however, was the fact that during a Sunday morning worship hour, in what was billed as a “conservative” Baptist church, we were not once invited to open our Bibles. My copy of God’s word remained in my hand but unopened for the

entire time we were in attendance. Neither did the resident pastor or either of the performers make any reference to God’s word.

Is it possible to worship God without even an oblique reference to His written revelation? Or is it enough that the choruses we sing lift a three-word phrase from the Psalms and repeat it twenty times?

Here. Right here in my hands. Right here on the thin pages between the black

leather covers. This is substance, the reality and foundation of our faith. This is the one, tangible piece of God upon which we can establish and practice our faith—the only part of God we poor earthbound souls can hold in our hands. Is it possible to worship without it?

Truth

The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshippers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

(John 4:19-24)

Driving home from "church" last Sunday, I pondered the whys and wherefores of my response to the previous hour. Was the Spirit actually present, but His ministry squelched by my predilection for and anticipation of a different worship style? Was everyone else truly worshipping, and only I the odd one out? Was I correct that a critical component of worship had been omitted—or was it just my latent traditionalism rearing its unsightly visage?

My conclusion was that in those times when I have truly and deeply worshiped "in spirit and truth" it has been worship based on and fed by the powerful, moving truth of God's word. Some times it was God's word spoken or silently read—when, for example, a speaker so movingly explained the word that my spirit was powerfully joined to God's, or when in my own private moments God's word had supernaturally lifted off the printed page to sear my heart. At other times it was God's word put to music. Music can be a strong and substantial vehicle for communion with God; heaven itself surely must be filled with its strains. But simplistic, repetitive music meant only to force us into a prefabricated swoon is not that substan-

tial vehicle. It is plastic. It is insincere. It is immodest.

The Whole Truth

Jesus instructed the woman at the well that God-honoring worship is that which is based on truth. For the Christian there is only one truth. It is absolute. It is settled. It is God's truth revealed in His word.

The two components of Christ's authentic worship form a synergetic whole. Because it is authored, energized, and revealed by the Holy Spirit, God's word itself is "Spirit filled." Without the ministry of the Spirit in the individual believer, the Bible is little more than black ink on white paper. The work of the Holy Spirit is essential. Thus it is possible for that same Spirit to reveal God's truth to the believer without the person actually cracking open the pages of his or her leather-bound tome. It is true that the Spirit can so inculcate God's words that they need not be reread each time from the printed page.

But the believer's life—and, more specifically, the believer's worship—is colored by the hard reality that he is yet an imperfect being who dwells in an imperfect land. Truth—God's truth—must continually be referenced and ingested for it to take hold in a believer's life to the extent that God intended. And worship that fails to reference God's word, relying, instead, on simple-minded catch phrases and emotion, is fragile and insipid.

It is too easy for even the most dedicated Christian to be lulled into complacency, thinking the truth he ingested several weeks earlier remains full-bodied and accurate in his memory. But then he joins in the singing of a chorus projected on the wall, and fails to notice that the lyrics are not faithful to Scripture. Without realizing the inaccuracy, he finds himself unwittingly singing to God an untruth—words or a concept not found in His word.

Nothing But the Truth

Years ago, during that same period in which I was in performance mode, there was a parishioner who would quite often challenge the music minister on the words of one or more of the hymns used in a worship

service. A friend, he would sidle up to the music minister after the service, crack open his hymnal, and request a ruling on a questionable phrase. And the leader would have to explain to the parishioner's satisfaction, or admit that the hymn text was in error.

To the best of my knowledge, this music minister (with whom I worked closely) never resented this third degree, but, for two reasons, welcomed such interrogations. First, this told him that, unlike so many in the congregation, his friend was actually paying attention to the words that had been selected for that Sunday's worship. He was being an active participant in the process. Second, the music minister welcomed the goad to remain authentic and truthful in his selection of hymns. Every week, as he put together the various components of that week's worship service, he knew there would be someone sitting on a front pew, checking everything for accuracy. He realized that his responsibility to God and His people was well worth a few moments of discomfort on those few occasions when something accidentally slipped through.

For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

(1 Corinthians 3:11-15)

The Bible is our friend sitting on the front pew. It keeps us honest in our worship. And any service conducted without it runs the risk of being consumed along with the rest of the chaff.