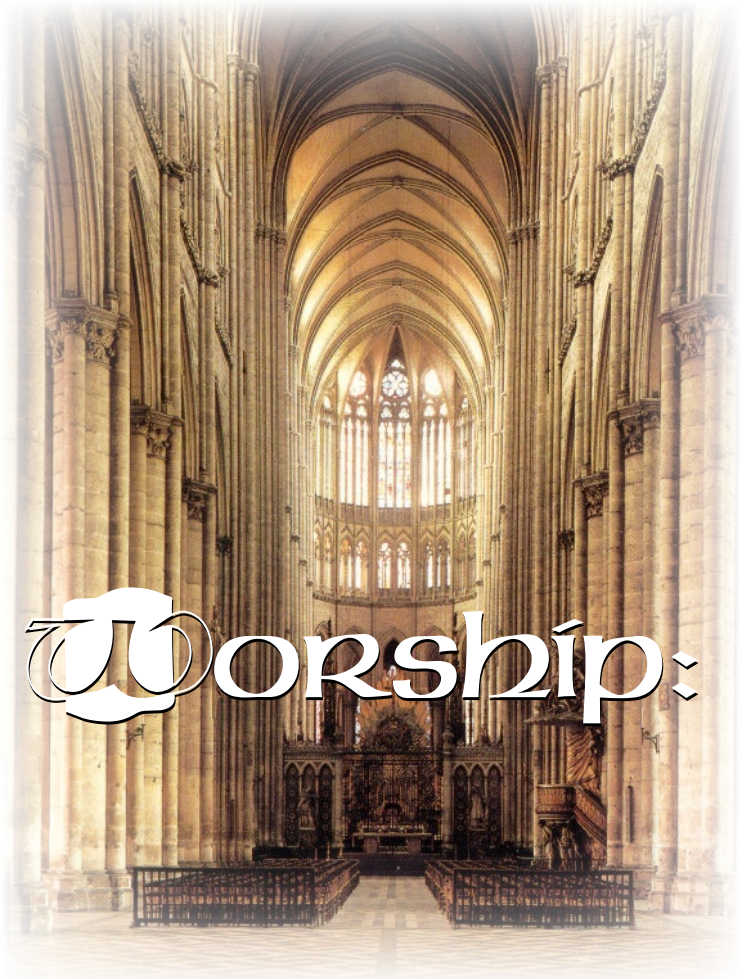


The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship 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 worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

John 4:19-24



flowing from the throne

TO GRASP THE IMPORTANCE OF WHAT WE REFER TO AS "SPECIFIC WORSHIP," one must begin from the position that everything in the Christian's life flows out of his or her time with God. He—that is, the tri-unity of the eternal, uncreated Godhead: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is our source, our revelation, our motivating force. Our life does not flow into His, but His into ours. No matter what we do, say, or think He does not change, but He changes us.

One must also begin from the position that almost everything about this earthly environment in which we sojourn works to draw us *away* from God. Save for His natural creation and the body of fellow believers, this world does its best to keep us from meaningful time in God's presence.

Thus the typical Sunday morning experience may be looked upon as a contemporary model of the ancient temple-experience of the Jews—a systemized transition from the church building's parking lot, through the front door to the gathering place of the foyer or narthex, through the next set of doors into the Holy Place of the sanctuary. Here, in this sanctified place designed for this purpose, believers are given the opportunity and privilege to enter the once off-limit Holy of

Holies: specific worship of our God and Lord.

Because the veil separating the temple's Holy of Holies has been permanently removed, we no longer restrict access to the various outer courts. Everyone is welcome. One need not show credentials to enter; one need not even be a believer to enter the Holy Place of the sanctuary. But there still is a "veil" of sorts, for only a heart filled with the Spirit may bow down in spirit and in truth before the throne. Only those cleansed by the blood of Christ can rightly worship God; "worship" under any other guise is an unholy lie.

Which makes it all the more tragic that so few believers avail themselves of this privilege. To many in the body of Christ today every room and every moment in the church building is a model only of the ancient temple's Court of the Gentiles, that most outer, public area where anyone could enter and had, in Jesus' time, become little more than a common public marketplace.

Then they came to Jerusalem. And He entered the temple and began to drive out those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers

and the seats of those who were selling doves; and He would not permit anyone to carry merchandise through the temple. And He began to teach and say to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a robbers' den."

Mark 11:15-17

a portable temple

The irony in today's church is that ever since God relaxed His rules, giving the believer greater freedom and opportunity for worship, we avail ourselves not more but less of that holy privilege. Now we need not be a priest, we need not slaughter an animal and sprinkle its blood upon an altar, we need not go to a Jerusalem temple. Every believer now carries the temple around with him; specific worship is portable, beginning in the heart, and is not associated with any time or place.

Because the telephone is now portable and compact, most people carry it around with them and use it constantly. Practically every other person one meets in public is conducting his or her life with a small plastic device clamped to one ear. Today, by the blood of Christ the place of worship is portable and compact; every believer carries the temple around with him. Yet, unlike the ubiquitous cell phone, it is rarely used.

Since we so seldom worship God on our own, the corporate, Sunday morning experience is made all the more important. Without it, some of us would never worship at all.

priorities

Today's church, unfortunately, is more often centered around the horizontal, rather than vertical relationship. In our emphasis on "fellowship" we have lost sight of what Jesus said should be our priority.

One of the scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them well, asked Him, "What commandment is the foremost of all?" Jesus answered, "The foremost is, 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Mark 12:28-31

Our neighbors *are* important. Fellowship *is* important. But loving God comes first.

informed worship

Specific worship is *informed* worship. It is knowledgeable and discriminating. It is purposeful. Specific worship is also a holy place that should not suffer intrusion. Heaven knows the believer has an abundance of natural distractions, both benign and insidious, that seek to stifle adoration of God. But these distractions should never be designed into the worship service.

The integrity of specific worship, more than any other component of the contemporary Sunday morning gathering, should be respected, for everything else flows from it. Singing, fellowship, instruction,

prayer, giving—all are energized by the individual's spirit being reconnected, by the Holy Spirit, to the throne of God.

For this reason worship leaders should respect the holy moment of specific worship. Those bowed before the throne in reverent adoration should not be unceremoniously pried away from the Holy of Holies to, for example, shake hands with their neighbor. The sanctity of that moment should be respected for what it is: the individual's privilege of communion with God.

Modern worship services include many important elements—most mandated by Scripture. It falls to the worship leaders to carefully, even artfully blend them into an informed, God-honoring, church-edifying whole.

For example, the Sunday morning offering can be a meaningful time of specific worship. It can be a time when the believer looks upward and declares to his Lord, "O God, everything in my life is from You. My very life belongs to You. So, because I love You, and because my life is devoted to You, I gladly give back to You some of what You have given me. I come before Your throne, and in humble adoration place my tithe at Your feet." Sadly, in today's church the time of tithes and offerings is more often treated as an intermission—a break in the service, a time for chatting with one's neighbor over the *Muzak* of the organ offertory. It is up to those leading the service to, well, *lead* those attending into a better knowledge of what this time of offering should be for the individual.

It is up to the leaders, as well, to artfully order the time of singing (in today's church, very often the time for specific worship to take place) so that it is not a haphazard hodgepodge of praise/testimony/worship/evangelism/prayer—darting to and fro, never dwelling for long in any one place. For example, a logical progression might be to begin with one or more songs that are *calls* to worship, followed by songs that *are* worship. These songs should not be interrupted by anything else, but, prompted by the words and behavior of the worship leaders, the worshippers should be encouraged, and given every opportunity to come before the throne on a personal, as well as corporate level. After this time of specific worship, the leaders can then prompt the church into songs of joyous praise, thanksgiving, and testimony.

sweet communion

In the Holy of Holies we get our mind right. Everything else in the church flows out of that sweet and reverent communion before the throne. Without it our service is little more than earth-bound activity. Worship—real, specific worship—energizes everything else. From worship flows attendance, fellowship, singing from a full heart, instruction, service, supplication and intercession, testimony and evangelism. All are vital to the health of the body and the individual believer, but all flow out of that time on our knees where, with a broken and contrite spirit we declare, "O God, You are my God."

Come. Enter into the Holy of Holies, and worship the Lord.

"Blessed are You, O Lord God of Israel our father, forever and ever. Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, indeed everything that is in the heavens and the earth; Yours is the dominion, O Lord, and You exalt Yourself as head over all."

1 Chronicles 29:10b-11

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