

THE FUNCTIONS OF A CHURCH

"But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." John 4:23-24.

One of the principal functions of a church is that of worship.

God's Word has much to say about worship, both false and true worship. Judged by the many times that it is mentioned in the Bible, worship is very important. Worship is inherent in man. It is characteristic of all men everywhere and through all time. Man has always recognized forces larger than himself, and either through fear or through love has sought to acknowledge their superior might. The one mark which forever differentiates man from all other forms of life on earth is that he is a worshiper; he has a bent toward and a capacity for worship.

It is not within our power to decide whether we shall worship or shall not worship. All of us worship somebody or something. Our problem is in choosing what we shall worship, to what we shall bend our knees and give our allegiance.

I. What Is Worship?

Worship is a noble word. It is a contraction of an older word in the English language, "worth-ship." Worship means to attribute worth to an object. It is the paying of reverence and honor to someone who is worth it. Worship is the expression that one gives to what is really important to him. It sounds out what his sense of values is. It points out what he considers to be primary and all-important. It reveals what he loves most.

There are many objects of worship. In the distant past many people had their idols which were made of wood, stone, and metal. Today many civilized people have their idols. They worship their car, home, family, job, money, pleasure, goal in life, or just "things" in general. When the Lord's day comes, they do not make any pretense whatever of worshipping Him, because they are concerned only about driving that shiny car, or riding in that new boat, or operating their business just as they do on the other days of the week. These and many other things have taken God's place. They are nothing but idols. Whatever receives one's first allegiance is what he worships. But when one worships anyone or anything other than God, he is an idolater. Any man who does not worship God accepts a low rating for himself, dwarfs his own life, misses life's highest mark, fails to attain life's greatest goal, and is a miserable failure in life's most important business.

There is a vast difference in simply performing religious services and truly recognizing God's worth and giving honor to Him. In Matthew 15:8 Christ quoted Isaiah's statement: "This people draw nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoreth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me." That is to say, what you see in a church service on a given Sunday morning may or may not be worship. Frequently it is a mere display for the praise of men. Some people think that because they attend a religious service, are reverent in their demeanor, join in the singing of the hymns, listen respectfully to the preacher and place a contribution in the offering plate, they have really worshiped God. Over against this delusion are the words of Christ in John 4:24, which are quite startling in their plainness and pungency: "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." This means that we must spiritually and truly give to God the homage of an enlightened understanding and the love of a regenerated heart. When we truly worship God, we adore Him for what He has made Christ to be to us and for what He has made us to be in Christ.

There is so much misunderstanding about the worship of God. Most church members today think that, if they have attended a worship service, they have worshiped God. But the truth is that many who go to church services with regularity do not worship at all.

Worshiping God involves far more than just being seated in a church pew. It requires intelligent concentration; it cannot be accomplished with the body in the sanctuary and the mind somewhere else. It demands the yielding of the will to the working of God's Spirit.

In real worship one confronts God. In the presence of this holy and righteous God man is made very conscious of his own sin. He is made aware of the fact that his disobedience separated him from God. Then, because he does not want to remain in a state of alienation from God, he is led to confess his sin and ask for God's forgiveness. God forgives him and reconciles him unto Himself, whereupon the man finds a real peace. Then follows communion or fellowship with God.

Perhaps the conception of going to church which is most common today is that of being entertained by the singing and the sermon. This sort of thing is always disappointing and unrewarding, for entertainment is not the purpose of either the singing or the preaching. Going to church for entertainment is an utter perversion of the true nature and function of worship. Worship is the prostration of the soul in the presence of God in loving homage and intimate fellowship. In worship we simply give God His rightful place in our lives.

Public worship is not easy. Even in a familiar place of worship, and among friends of like mind, one must make a conscious personal contact with and worship God for himself. That is one reason why spiritual worship does not appeal to the natural man. That which appeals to him is pleasure, pride, profit, and prominence, but those things do not constitute worship. In worship one is occupied with God. Much that is called worship today is very superficial. True worship demands keen spiritual sensitivity, deep reverence, great humility, and poignant longing. It is a sobering and awesome act when one deliberately comes into the presence of God.

Without the genuine worship of God only the barren wastes of life remain. Worship is the unifying strand of life, and without it life becomes many tangled threads. True worship of God elevates life and guarantees greater achievements. Every time that one ascribes admiration, wonder, adoration, honor, praise, and glory to the Lord, the desire to become more Christlike is quickened in him. After all, in true worship one acknowledges the supreme worth of God and offers himself to Him to do His will. This involves man's intellect, emotions, and will.

Public worship will characterize any life that is truly yielded to God. Occasionally somebody says that he can worship God just as well elsewhere as he can in the house of God. This statement is not true, and besides he does not do it. It is possible to worship God in your home during the hours of the worship services at the church on Sunday, but you don't. You can worship God in various places, but you do not do it, and you know that you don't. The best place in which to worship God is in the building which has been set apart and dedicated to Him for use in public worship. Any life that pleases God will be characterized by faithful attendance upon the services at the Lord's house. On the part of the worshiper there will be genuine adoration of God, communion with God, and dedication to God. The worship of God is the intended and primary purpose of attendance upon the services of the sanctuary. It is always stimulating, refreshing, and enriching to come in contact with God at the place in which He has appointed that we shall worship Him.

Worship is man's response to God's revelation of Himself. It is not overstating the case to say that worship is:

1. The quickening of the conscience by the holiness of God.

Man needs his conscience checked, sensitized, quickened, and renewed. When the child of God is worshiping, in awe and reverence the creature is before his Creator; finite man is before the infinite God; and sinful man is in the presence of the holy God.

2. The feeding of the mind with God's truth.

Worship is the nourishing of the mind with the truth of God. We like to concentrate on ourselves and our desires. But what we want and what we need may be two different things entirely. We want peace of mind and reassurance, but what we need is a more realistic estimate of ourselves, a nobler purpose, and a deeper involvement in the doing of God's will.

3. The cleansing of the imagination by the beauty of God.

What we take away from the house of God, after we have worshiped, may seem very meager sometimes, but who can gauge the wholesome and continually enriching influences of good words, healthy sentiments, and exalted visions?

4. The opening of the heart to the love of God.

Christian worship is a matter of a personal relationship between God Who loves man and man who loves God. When a man truly worships God, he offers himself -- all he is, all he has, and all he may become -- to God.

5. The devotion of the life to the doing of God's will.

In his remarkable vision of the indescribable splendor of God, Isaiah began as a dramatic observer, but he ended as one of the actors. He said: "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:5). Isaiah also said: "I heard the voice of the Lord saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me" (Isaiah 6:8). Worship is never complete until the worshiper serves God.

Man does not worship God in order to receive. He does not attempt to drive a bargain with God. He offers himself to God to be used in His service. As a result of his service he receives from God. Too many people today leave the worship services in their churches saying, "I did not get anything; I was not helped." The reason for this is very obvious. The would-be worshiper had simply been trying to use God. It is at the very heart of genuine worship that man does not attempt to use God for his own selfish purposes, but that he offers himself to God to be used in His service and for His glory.

In worship man's soul meets the One who gave to him the breath of life. One has truly worshiped when he has met, recognized, and responded to God, when his heart has been touched by God's Spirit and he has responded in his will and in his actions to God's purpose. True worship is best expressed in a response to God's purpose and will for our lives.

II. Why Should We Worship God?

We should worship God because of Christ's quotation from the Old Testament, which is recorded in Matthew 4:10, namely, "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve." The Psalmist calls to us saying, "O magnify the Lord with me and let us exalt his name together" (Psalm 34:3). "Give unto the Lord the glory due unto his name" (Psalm 96:8). "For the Lord is great, and greatly to be praised" (Psalm 96:4). "Exalt the Lord our God, and worship at his holy hill; for the Lord our God is holy" (Psalm 99:9). God's desire for our true worship of Him is expressed in the pleading accents of the Psalmist in Psalm 107:8, "Oh that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men!" Our Lord Jesus Christ also testified that God's heart is yearning for worship, when He said: "The hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him" (John 4:23).

There is every good reason why we should worship God. This is something that we owe to God. Worship is due Him. He has a perfect right to expect us to worship Him. It is our

primary duty. Those who do not find satisfaction, enrichment, and joy in the worship of God in the company of His people on earth could scarcely hope to be happy in heaven in the event they ever arrived there.

III. How Should We Worship God?

We should worship God in reverence. Reverence grows out of respect, awe, esteem, and love. True worship is always characterized by humility. Only an humble person can stand before God in true adoration and praise. David expressed the spirit in which every child of God should approach Him when he said: "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me" (Psalm 51:1-3). Another element of worship is thanksgiving. When a Christian's thoughts are centered on God, to Whom he is so deeply indebted, he naturally gives thanks unto Him. Out of thanksgiving to God comes the praise of His matchless worth when we speak of Him to others.

Before any Christian can publicly worship God acceptably, at least two things are necessary, namely, preparation and participation. Each worshiper must prepare his own mind and heart. No one else can do that for him. If he is going to meet God acceptably, he must leave certain things at home, such as an unforgiving spirit, pet peeves, personal likes and dislikes, the practice of judging others, worldly cares, and a critical spirit. Unless these things are eliminated there will not be any worship of God. It is a certainty that God does not have a high regard for either an unprepared preacher or an unprepared listener. It is important that both the preacher and the hearer be prepared when coming to the worship services.

Participation in public worship is exceedingly important. In some church services, most of the people are spectators only; they observe and appraise the worship service rather than participate in it. They do not sing, they do not pray, they do not contribute, and they do not listen attentively to the sermon. They are spectators and not worshipers. Then, they usually go away and criticize. Many church members leave the worship services of their churches tired from sitting rather than refreshed and enriched from worshiping.

Genuine worship calls for active participation. It is something that no one can do for another. Every person who worships makes a personal response to God. Singing is more than cooperating with the minister of music and the choir; it is singing to God. Praying is more than listening to the voice and the words of the one who leads the prayer; it is the entire congregation putting concern behind every word spoken. Listening to the sermon is more than giving attention to what the minister says; it is seeking the truth of God through His revealed and preached Word. Each worshiper should say: "The hymn is my hymn; I will sing it. The prayer is my prayer; I will offer it to God. The scripture lesson is God's Word; I will let Him speak to me through it. The sermon is God's message to me; I will listen to what He has to say to me and apply it to myself." Participation in worship means appropriation. We do not participate in a feast unless we eat. Neither do we participate in worship unless we apply what is offered to meet our needs in that hour. This is where so many people fail so miserably. They go to church services only to "get something," but they refuse to take what the Lord provides for them and offers to them.

It would be so wonderful if people could only see the emptiness and tragic need of self-centered lives. If we could but see the utter futility and awesome fearfulness of the path we attempt to walk in our own wisdom, if we could just be moved by the Holy Spirit to reach up our hands in faith and take hold of the mighty hand of God. If we would receive the cleansing power of His blood in the forgiveness of our every sin, and if depending upon His divine wisdom, we would walk hand in hand with Him through the troubled days of our lives, we would find a dignity and a power and a victory that would make us in every sense more than conquerors through Him that loved us. This is our highest privilege, and this is the result of the true worship of God.