

The Perversion of Biblical Worship

The Sound of Worship

Mid-America Conference on Preaching
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Text: John 4:23

John 4:23 “But the hour is coming and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him.”

Leviticus 9:22 – 10:3 Then Aaron lifted his hand toward the people, blessed them, and came down from offering the sin offering, the burnt offering, and peace offerings. ²³ And Moses and Aaron went into the tabernacle of meeting, and came out and blessed the people. Then the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people, ²⁴ and fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar. When all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces. **10:1** Then Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. ² So fire went out from the LORD and devoured them, and they died before the LORD. ³ And Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the LORD spoke, saying: 'By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy; And before all the people I must be glorified.' " So Aaron held his peace.

Introduction:

Any discussion about music in worship must begin with a proper understanding of worship as it is described and prescribed in the Bible.

While it is true that God is passionately seeking worshippers who will worship Him – He is equally committed that those worshippers come with right hearts and with acceptable worship! He is looking for worshippers who will come and offer Him acceptable worship that comes out of authentic hearts and is offered in accurate ways – that measures up to the Biblical requirements and reflects the Biblical truths set forth in the Bible.

In His prayer to His Father recorded in John 17, the Lord revealed that His Father had given to Him such worshippers – *people who had received eternal life*, who had *received true enlightenment about God*, and who had *received and were*

keeping His Word. These are the only kind of people who can render God authentic, accurate worship that is acceptable and pleasing in His sight.

Furthermore, Jesus went on to reveal that these worshippers were left in a particular context– in the world. They were to magnify God authentically and manifest Him accurately in the midst of a hostile culture!

Jesus observed that when believers rendered this kind of worship, consisting of lifting up Christ (glorifying Him as did the Father) – then God would shine light in the hearts of many others so that they would also come to right conclusions about His Son – they would see the glory of God in the face of Christ!

This was the process God designed by which He would find the worshippers He was seeking and by which they would bring Him glory as they rendered acceptable, authentic, and biblically accurate worship.

However, somewhere along the way, the people who were supposed to carry out this plan failed to do so! And at some point, their failure affected their worship!

God told us who to worship, why we are to worship, and how we are to render that worship. And when we take His worship into our own hands and do it in ways that seem right in our own eyes – we become no different than the surrounding pagan world. And this has happened consistently when God’s people who were left in the world to worship properly begin to be “of the world” they were sent to reach!

And the sure evidence that this has happened is when the pagan culture begins to characterize and shape the worship of the people who were redeemed from that way of life!

The Scripture is very clear on this – and God give us very strong warnings about the danger of worldly worship. Not all that is offered in worship is accepted by God as worship!

And to render careless worship is dangerous business – especially when that carelessness is produced by a carnal mind and a worldly life characterized by an open disregard for obedience to something that God has said!

The dangers of disobedient or careless worship are presented in this text by an unforgettable graphic display of divine displeasure that left no room for questions or doubts about God’s feelings on the matter.

Two priest – Nadab and Abihu – sons of Aaron, the first high priest – offered insolent worship from impudent hearts and God’s fire fell on them and consumed them and they died there in His very presence and in the very act of worship! And the text clarifies what drew this graphic display of God’s displeasure – they offered profane fire on God’s altar in willful disobedience to and disregard of the clear command of God in this matter (how He wanted to be worshipped).

And to indelibly mark the dangerous folly of worshipping God with profane means, every time Moses listed out the names of Aaron’s sons – Nadab and Abihu are named with this descriptive warning – *“But Nadab and Abihu died before the LORD when they offered profane fire before the LORD in the Wilderness of Sinai; and they had no children.”* (Numbers 3:4; 26:31)

Nor were Nadab and Abihu the last of God’s people to offer profane worship at the altar of God – this has always been a temptation to God’s people who have been called to worship in ways that are clearly distinct and counter to their surrounding culture. We see this tendency throughout the OT as Israel constantly attempted to saturate her worship with the pagan influences and practices of the day. And this goes on today!

For example – **Spurgeon warned of this very problem creeping in the church in his day almost 150 years ago** when he gave the following warning:

An evil is in the professed camp of the Lord, so gross in its impudence that the most short-sighted can hardly fail to notice it. During the past few years it has developed at abnormal rate, even for evil. It has worked like leaven until the whole lump ferments. The devil has seldom done a cleverer thing than hinting to the church that part of their mission is to provide entertainment for the people, with a view to winning them. From speaking out as the Puritans did, the church has gradually toned down her testimony, then winked at and excused the frivolities of the day. Then she tolerated them in her borders. Now she has adopted them under the plea of reaching the masses.

Had Christ introduced more of the bright and pleasant elements into His mission, he would have been more popular when they went back because of the searching nature of his teaching. I do not hear Him say, “Run after these people, Peter, and tell them we will have a different style of service tomorrow, something short and attractive with little preaching. We will have a pleasant evening for the people. Tell them they will be sure to enjoy it. Be quick, Peter, we must get the people somehow!” Jesus pitied sinners, sighed and wept over them, but never sought to

amuse them. In vain will the Epistles be searched to find any trace of the gospel of amusement. Their message is, "Come out, keep out, keep clean out!" Anything approaching fooling is conspicuous by its absence. They had boundless confidence in the gospel and employed no other weapon. After Peter and John were locked up for preaching, the church had a prayer meeting, but they did not pray, "Lord grant unto thy servants that by a wise and discriminating use of innocent recreation we may show these people how happy we are." If they ceased not for preaching Christ, thy had not time for arranging entertainments. Scattered by persecution, they went everywhere preaching the gospel. They "turned the world upside down." That is the only difference! Lord, clear the church of all the rot and rubbish the devil has imposed on her and bring us back to apostolic methods.

The mission of amusement fails to effect the end it desired. It works havoc among the young converts. Let the careless and the scoffers, who thank God because the church met them half-way, speak and testify. Let the heavy laden who found peace through the concert not keep silent! Let the drunkard to whom the dramatic entertainment has been God's link in the chain of their conversion, stand up! There are none to answer. The mission of amusement produces no converts. The need of the hour for today's ministry is believing scholarship joined with earnest spirituality, the one springing from the other as fruit from the root. The need is biblical doctrine, so understood and felt, that it sets men on fire!

*C. H. Spurgeon
Metropolitan Tabernacle
Feeding Sheep or Amusing Goats*

More recently – Warren Wiersbe expressed the same sort of concern for the modern church in our day.

Worship is serious business! It is at the heart of all that the church is and does! However – a strange thing has happened to the church in the last fifty years – worship has been turned into a means or a tool for growing the church! The result has been 'worship wars.' . . . When we worship because it 'works' and produces large results – we are not longer rendering acceptable worship. We don't worship because it works – we worship because of who God is! Any otherwise motivated worship is in reality false worship no matter how similar it may look to the true. . . In many evangelical churches a subtle shift has happened. The sanctuary has become a theater, ministry has become performance, worship has turned into entertainment, and applause rather than the glory of God has become the measure of success. . . The modern church has for the most part trivialized worship. If our

worship is not followed by obedience then it is false worship and we are worse off for our hypocrisy. . . . We can go to church and sing, clap, lift our hands, and even weep – and by this convince or impress those around us that we are sincerely worshipping – but we can't deceive the God we are claiming to worship!"

Warren Wiersbe
Selections from Real Worship

And Os Guinness confronts us with the inescapable question – How have we Christians become so irrelevant when we have tried so hard to be relevant?

By our uncritical pursuit of relevance we have actually courted irrelevance; by our breathless chase after relevance without a matching commitment to faithfulness, we have become not only unfaithful but irrelevant; by our determined efforts to redefine ourselves in ways that are more compelling to the modern world than are faithful to Christ, we have lost not only our identity but our authority and our relevance. Our crying need is to be faithful as well as relevant!

Prophetic Untimeliness, p. 15.

This is a sobering warning that forces us to take stock of the actual state of American evangelicalism – of which we, and churches like ours, are a part!

And part of arriving at a Biblical answer to all of this involves making sure we understand where we took a wrong turn – and worship became perverted.

(Reference Ryken's City on a Hill as a work that provides us some help with this) Tonight – we are just going to try to talk our way through what happened to see if we can trace out where things went wrong – and we want to chart a way back!

I. What Happened to Produce Profane Worship?

- A. ***In a Culture Dominated by _____ the Church Changed Her Message because God's Word is Downplayed or Ignored.***

- B. ***In a Culture Driven by _____ the Church Changed Her Audience in search of an Experiential, Entertainment, Egocentric approach to Worship.***

II. Why did it Happen – What Factors Produced this Problem?

There are a host of answers that can (and have) been given – from my perspective, you can take virtually all of the reasons and sum them up into two things:

- A. *The Church Lost Her Confidence in the _____ of His Word*

- B. *The Church Looked to _____ to frame her Worship*

III. How did it Happen – What Steps Led the Church Down this Path?

- A. *The Unashamed Embracing of a Worldly _____*

- B. *The Uncritical Employment of a Worldly _____*

- C. *The Unabashed Enjoyment of a Worldly _____*

IV. What Must We Do to Return to Biblical Worship? How should we respond in Light of all This? (Col 3:16-17)

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. ¹⁷ And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

- There is only one thing we can do – and that is to return to the Bible and submit our worship to the dictates instructions the Head of the Church put there to shape and direct our worship.
- We must allow our worship – every part – to be tested by the Word of the God to whom we are offering that worship.
- And we must adjust our ideas, practices, and tastes in worship by the Word rather than by the world around us!

- We must let God be sovereign in our worship and over it!
- And for that to happen – we must let the Word from Christ and about Christ dwell in us richly – that is what must shape us instead of the world and its ideas and tastes (Romans 12:2).

A. *Our Worship Must Be* _____

B. *Our Worship Must Be* _____

C. *Our Worship Must Be* _____

Conclusion:

The problem in our day and in our context is that we live in a culture *dominated by Relativism and Driven by Narcissism* – and such a culture is neither logo-centric nor theo-centric and so consequently it cannot be Christo-centric. Instead – what will replace Christ as the central focus of worship is self – and so worship instead of being Christo-centric becomes Ego-Centric! And that is bald and bold Idolatry!

Here is Os Guinness’ answer to all of this and it might be worth serious consideration – on all our parts:

When I first came to the faith, if the church was in bad shape, there would be prayer for revival. Today if the church is in bad shape, we talk about reinvention. But what the church needs I revival, not reinvention. It’s not something we do by getting up-to-date, it’s something the Lord does by bringing us back to the power of His truth and His Spirit!”

Amen!