

ESTABLISHING WORSHIPPING COMMUNITIES: THE LOCAL CHURCH (I)

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WORSHIP, SERVICE AND OBEDIENCE

“The glory of God is in the fully alive human being!” exclaimed the second century theologian Irenaeus (Johnson 1991:28). His phrase could be restated, “God is worshipped more when the human being is fully alive”.

Now, to understand the meaning of this phrase, it is necessary to interpret the words “fully alive”. We need to understand that the human being was created for communion (literally “union with”) with God, and that this creature is more fully human when he is living this purpose. We affirm that Christ was fully human and because of that, he was more human, freer, and more alive than any of us precisely because his union with God was deeper. So then, we see in the example of Jesus what a human being, becoming more united with God, that is to say, when he lives in obedience to the will of God, he becomes more human and fuller of the true life. To be “fully alive” means to have a restored relationship with God in the free and full communion with God that is possible by means of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.

If the Church of the Nazarene wants to continue affirming that “The mission of the church in the world begins in worship” (*Core Values*, 9) and that “Worship is the first privilege and responsibility of God’s people”, there needs to be a clear definition of the word “worship” (*Core Values*, 9). Today the two phrases mentioned above give the impression that the first responsibility of the church is to give God homage and worship. The meeting of Christians to sing to God, read the Bible, proclaim the Word, pray and give offerings has become the definition of worship. These realities need to be part of worship but are not its totality.

During the Creation, before the Fall, the day of rest is already established, but the Bible does not mention that part of worship that we call the service. There was no need. The humans walked in the presence of God and were in his “image and likeness”. That is to say, God had created a being that had his characteristics. God made a being that reflected Him, that corresponded to Him (co-responder). With great love, God created humanity (the “totally other”) to share His power with a creation that had responsibility (respond-ability); a being with the capacity to be in a profound and perfect relationship. It is in this relationship that God receives glory and receives in a deeper way than in the giving of homage and respect.

We cannot say that God created humans so that he could have persons that prostrated themselves before Him in giving homage. God did not make man so that he could sit in a building talking about Him, singing to Him, lifting his hands to Him. This is a concept of a selfish God. What needs to be affirmed is that worship is much more than ritual or a service. It is living, for human beings, in a restored relationship with God to be as it was at the beginning of creation. If ritual is not tied with obedience there can be no worship.

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This is certainly what Samuel wanted us to understand when he said, “Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Sam. 5:22). The prophets and the Psalms repeat this concept in an insistent manner (Isaiah 1:11-13; Jeremiah 6:15, 20; Hosea 4:14, 19; Amos 4:4-6, 5:21-24; Psalms 51:17-17, etc.). Jesus himself repeated the idea when He said, “You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me’” (Matthew 15:6). Thus it is clear that what God really desires is the reestablishment of the connection or relationship of the human being to the image and likeness of God, more than his homage. Or, in the words of the document, “Worship is the church in loving, obedient service to God.” That is to say, the glory of God is in the man fully alive!

THE TEACHING MOTIVE OF WORSHIP

What I have done here for analytical reasons is to emphasize the Biblical division between obedience and ritual worship to show that the main motive of worship is obedience. Does this mean that the worship service or ritual is dispensable in worship? Not in any way. However, one needs to recognize that the worship service (what is too often understood as “worship”) has a teaching purpose in the life of the church. It is not that God desires that the church give him worship only for the motive of feeling praised. The reason for the establishment of the worship service aspect of praise among the people of God is because by these traditions the community learns to be what it should be in this world; learns to be obedient (the other part of worship). As stated in the *Core Values*, “It is as we are gathered together before God in worship—singing, hearing the public reading of the Bible, giving our tithes and offerings, praying, hearing the preached Word, baptizing, and sharing the Lord’s supper—that we know most clearly what it means to be the people of God” (2000:9).

Robert Rayburn says that God “established ceremonial acts and external adoration so that they would fulfill a teaching function as well as a means or medium of the expression of thankfulness and praise” (1980:52). This act we can see in Deuteronomy 6:20-26 where after the six chapters in which God has been explaining the traditions that the Hebrews needed to put into practice, at the end He shows them why. To summarize, it was to help them remember that they had to be obedient to God because it was He who had saved them.

The participation of God’s people today in the worship service aspect of adoration also has the purpose of our formation as faithful citizens in the Kingdom of God. It functions much like the civic acts, parades, the study of history, singing hymns, knowledge of the symbols, etc., of each of our nations. Knowledge of these symbols and the practice of such traditions makes us good Costa Ricans, Guatemalans, Mexicans, etc. Without the identity that these realities bring us, it is impossible to be good citizens of our countries. It is the same with participating in worship.

When the Jews celebrated the Passover Supper, for example, it was much more than a party with food. As Michael Lodahl says, “for the Jews, throughout their history, celebrating the Passover is not simply remembering historical events of their ancestors’ liberation; rather, it is re-living the events, really being there anew experimenting the Exodus from Egypt as a member of the people of Israel” (1994:181). Also the observance of the Christian worship service in the communities of faith should be more than a memory of what Jesus did. In the worship aspect of

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praise, the church participates in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the events act, and the Gospel is relived in the worship service. In doing such an act in the church, Christians (when they do it well) discover their responsibility and role in the Creation. It puts them in contact with the other part of worship which is a lived obedience. Because of this, the document *Core Values* says, "It is in worship that we understand most clearly what it means to participate with God in the work of redemption" (2000:10).

CONCLUSION: LIVING FULLY BY MEANS OF THE WORSHIP SERVICE

So, we have seen that the worship service in worship was established to cultivate a people that live a new humanity, a people that is "fully alive". With this established today when questions are raised such as what is to blame that the church has a lack of identity? Or, Why does the church not live God's integral salvation in Christ? The response tends to refer to the fact that the church has ceased practicing in a satisfactory way the traditions that give identity and that make believers into an obedient people. The Lord's Supper, in some Nazarene churches, is done three or four times a year (and on some occasions the members possibly partake in with little understanding). On the other hand, Wesley, knowing that it is the culmination of worship, counseled that it be taken as frequently as possible. In some Nazarene churches baptisms are rarely seen and when they are, are done with a "personal" testimony in place of making use of the Apostolic Creed or some form of affirmation of the belief in triune God and entering into a community that goes beyond the individual. The choruses that are sung foment the same individualistic and dualistic concept of the western worldview, instead of being music that reminds us of God's saving activity towards us that promotes gratefulness and obedience in his people. Perhaps the most profound problem is that the doctrine of the Trinity has been left out of our services. This doctrine summarizes all of salvation's history in one mention and is absolutely necessary that its language be used constantly during the Christian worship service.

At the end, one should not hope that the Church of the Nazarene in general can produce communities of "new humanity" in which one seeks that every human being and even the cosmos itself be "fully alive" (full of true life), if there is not a profound emphasis on returning to the responsible use of the traditions that have been established for our services, for the formation of a Christian people. One needs to remember the "The glory of God is in the human being fully alive" and that only he can participate in this "full life" by the exercising of the healthy traditions that permits to do that. One must keep in mind the fact that, by the power of the Holy Spirit one can go back to form a people in new humanity. That is to say, transformed into obedient beings; beings "fully alive".

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