

Introduction

A mother holds her adopted infant in her arms. Having suffered the indignities of infertility-barrenness heaped high by several unsuccessful operation; expensive examinations and treatments, raised hopes/hopes dashed; now her joy is full as she watches in loving awe. She is totally preoccupied with the movement of her new son's hand, the play of a smile on his face, his eyes searching for her familiar countenance, Her finger traces the baby wrinkle on a soft wrist. She raises her head in wonder and says "It's amazing how much time a grown person can spend watching an infant!"

Worship has been defined as *being preoccupied with God*.

Yet how little Christians know about this kind of devout attention. Some can remember that mad obsession called "falling in love" when the whereabouts, the thoughts, the actions of the beloved filled their minds. Some are often consumed with concerns for their children. Work, the planning and ordering of it, can control the worker so much that he or she becomes compulsive in this accomplishment. We humans are preoccupied with many things: successes and failures, the gaining or losing of possessions, the hurts and joys of living; but we are rarely preoccupied with God.

And yet, in a secularized age, which seems to be racing dangerously along in a rapid moral decline, we need to worship more than ever. As the late William Temple said:

The world can be saved by one thing and that is worship. For to worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God.

To be preoccupied with something indicates a total absorption; it implies (or "necessitates") a passionate giving of our attention. It means to be possessed by a thought or a concept or a person. It means to be engrossed in; to be seized with thoughts about.

How then do we learn to become preoccupied with God? By cultivating *intentionality*. By deliberately turning our minds toward divine preoccupation. By developing worship habits and working on them. Intentional worship means a worshiper is not going to church expecting that worship will just happen; but intentionality means that a worshiper is going to church determined to make worship happen- at least as far as he or she is able.

The word for "worship" in the ancient Anglo-Saxon tongue was the word "woerthscip" (later, "worthship")- meaning to "ascribe supreme worth to God." This exaltation, this adoration does not often happen spontaneously. It takes work on the part of humans, bogged about by the

demands of materiality- by the urgent, by the necessary, but not by the spiritual. A church bulletin aptly described this dilemma: “Too many Christians worship their work, work at their play, and play at their worship.” We must learn to work at our worship so that preoccupation with God becomes delightfully habitual.

One of the deadliest blows to participatory worship is the worshiper as spectator. The biblical ethic regards worship as work. *Av'dh* in Hebrew, *dienst* in German, *leitourgia* in Greek, *service* in English all have the double meaning of worship and work. In fact, liturgy means “common work”—a sacred work in which a people corporately, determined to be enamored with God, find meaningful ways to tell him of this and to remind themselves as well.

We Christians are always in danger of allowing spiritual forms to lose their meaning, to become formulaic. Think, for instance of the hymns we sing without knowing their meaning. Think of the prayers we hear to which we do not really listen. Think of the sermons that are preached which we wish would soon end. Think of the hours of Bible study we attend which have no influence on our daily lives.

The French philosopher, Voltaire, once said “If you want to kill Christianity, you must abolish Sunday.” Contemporary Christianity is in danger of losing the meaning of the spiritual worship forms—the calls to worship, the pastoral prayers, the hymn-singing, the preaching of the Word—with a consequent diminishment of the impact of Christianity on ourselves, our families, and inevitably, on our world and culture.

How frequently do strangers and sojourners enter our sanctuaries because they are drawn by an unexplainable sense of something remarkable? How often do people experience healing (physical and psychological and spiritual) simply because they attend a Sunday morning service? How many times does the Holy Spirit break through our complacency, convicting us of our sin, and producing tears and confession? How many times do we linger in quiet after a service is over because the presence of Christ is so real we yearn to stay longer in His company? How many times are we stirred in our souls by the Scripture readings? How many times do we sing the hymns with an inward, adamant *yes* that affirms the doctrines we are mouthing?

Sundays can be abolished by meaningless routine as surely as by boarding up the church doors. Empty worship has always been anathema to God. Amos declares for the Lord, “I hate, I despise your feasts and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies...Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen.” Israel was expelled from the land because of two lacks: her empty worship and her lack of justice. These two national sins seem always to feed one into the other Contemporary Christians must not become guilty of these sins as well.

How do we become intentional in worship? How do we become participants rather than spectators?

Congregational participation is not developed by blaming the church staff for being inadequate worship leaders. We must make sure that as individual lay people, we are prepared to take our place in the congregation, eager to begin the work of worship.

In the Old Testament Jewish pattern, the Hebrew people observed Sabbath from Friday evening to Saturday evening; and for the observant Jew, that form has continued through the centuries. Jewish religious rituals have been one of the reasons for the maintenance of Jewish life despite persecution, pogroms, and dispersion. It has been said that the Jewish family did not keep Sabbath, but that Sabbath kept the Jewish family.

At a minimum, we Christians can be ready for Sunday morning by Saturday evening. We can have clothes cleaned and pressed, food ready, hearts stilled, the work of the week put aside. We can examine our souls to see if there are attitudes or deeds that are unpleasing to God which need to be confessed. One friend's grandmother raised six children alone after she was widowed, and she always made sure all the housework was done by noon on Saturday, Then she retired to her bedroom and began to study Scripture.

Another friend's mother taught her to go the church with "a full basket, not an empty one." We must begin to retrain ourselves to consider during each Saturday evening/Sunday morning: What have I to give to God and to his people? Am I ready to worship? Am I eager to be preoccupied with Him? We must learn to transform the age-old, self-centered question, What am I going to get out of the service? What am I going to put into the service?

We need to remind ourselves, over and over, that the focus of Sunday worship must be upon the living Christ among us. In truth, if Christ were bodily present and we could see him with more than our soul's eyes, all our worship would become intentional. If Christ stood on our platforms, we would bend our knees without asking. If He stretched out His hands and we saw the wounds, our hearts would break; we would confess our sins and weep over our shortcomings. If we could hear His voice leading the hymns, we too would sing heartily; the words would take on meaning. The Bible reading would be lively; meaning would pierce to the marrow of our souls. If Christ walked our aisles, we would hasten to make amends with that brother or sister to whom we have not spoken. We would volunteer for service, the choir loft would be crowded. If we knew Christ would attend our church Sunday after Sunday, the front pews would fill fastest, believers would arrive early, offering plates would be laden with sacrificial but gladsome gifts, prayers would concentrate our attention.

This is participatory worship.

Yet, the startling truth is that Christ is present, through His Holy Spirit, in our churches; it is we who must develop eyes to see and ears to hear Him.

A hymnal is one of the most remarkable aids to participatory worship a lay person can utilize. Within its binding and pages are contained the doctrines of the faith culled through the

ages and saturated with the devotion of those saints who have been members of the church triumphant. Music by its very nature evokes the soul's response. If we allow it, music can lift our hearts to attend to God; singing heartily, suddenly we discover that for a moment, brief but powerfully, we are absolutely preoccupied with the divine.

Intentionality is important in hymnal usage. Those brief and powerful moments filled with the surprising numinous can be increased by our willing work. These songs, some ancient and some new, can also lose their meaning. The intentional hymn singer will come early enough to church (having prepared oneself to adore Christ the night before) to read through the lyrics of the chosen hymns, so that when the congregation sings, the lyrics will have meaning. The intentional hymn singers will ask: Am I making noisesome sound or do I really believe this? Have I experienced the truths? Am I participating in the praise chorus because it is a means of expressing my preoccupation with God.

When this happens, when Christians learn to sing as unto God, understanding that hymns are more than a musical interlude in a printed worship program, but an aid to meaningful adoration, they may suddenly encounter the spiritual in surprising fashion. "How greatly did I weep in Thy hymns and canticles, deeply moved by the voices of Thy sweet-speaking Church!" cries Augustine. "The voices flowed into my ears, and the truth was poured forth into my heart, whence the agitation of my piety overflowed, and my tears ran over, and blessed was I therein.

One old man I know always weeps when his church sings the doxology, "Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty." The tears run down his wrinkled cheeks. Would that we all could experience that awe, that reality which breaches the borders of the intellect and somehow reaches the affective, the guarded emotional parts of ourselves.

For truly, one day, one eternal day, we will recognize that divine presence, we will kneel in awe, our hearts will sign, will shout, "Holy! Holy! Holy! Lord God Almighty?" We will weep for joy in the Presence of God. We will become utterly preoccupied. We will adore. We will exalt. We will worship. And this time, this one day in time, this Sunday—every Sunday, in fact, Sunday after Sunday; we are preparing our souls, practicing for that Eternity when every day will be a Sabbath without end, for that day when we will know most assuredly, Christ is here!

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