

## CHAPTER 1—WORSHIP

To a gathering of like-minded people studying the nature and purpose of their church, the Church, the question was asked: “What is the primary purpose of the C/church? Under what umbrella do we put the functions and ministries of the/a C/church?”

A short pause followed with responses that began, with much explication, that the primary purpose of the C/church is evangelism. Then, perhaps, from another person, something like, “Yes, but shouldn’t we include evangelism under missions?” Yet another individual would suggest that the primary purpose of the C/church is to make the Gospel relevant to the culture and so should be engaging in social justice projects.

Such repartee could go on for another few minutes until the leader suggested that each of those purposes/functions named can be considered important in which a congregation be involved.

But, drawing upon not only Christian history, but reviewing the wide sweep of Scripture, the primary purpose of the people of God, and since the First Century Church, is that of worship.

If that thought gets traction in one’s mind and is allowed to ferment, likely one will see how this perspective holds substance. Depending upon one’s sense of worship, that one will engage in

extending the Gospel beyond the boundaries of that person's congregation. Certainly, one's sense of comprehension of worship should make a difference in how one's fellow worshipers are treated. The dynamic of conversion, whether one considers conversion has to be a punctiliar experience or a process, finds rootage in worship at the beginning and along the way.

With these thoughts in mind and back to the wheel image, the center of the wheel, the hub, is the first point from which the energy extends which turns the wheel. Among Christians, worship forms/styles have taken a number of directions of development.

#### The Purpose of the C/church

There are those who speak disdainfully of the nones and dones of organized religious practices. The disdain takes the form of "they say they are "spiritual but not religious. Fertile ground for nominalism, secularism, agnosticism, liberalism." The disdainful ones are missing a couple of points. From one perspective the critics apparently have identified with their own particular form of worship as the "right and correct" one. That kind of egocentrism is off-putting. As well, they fail to comprehend the matter of spirituality. That quantity, quality, content, entity, commodity, characteristic of human beings goes much deeper into the core of being a person than does being religious. Being religious frames the practices, the modes, the articulation of spirituality. What if those modes simply are not relevant, connecting, to people who are innately spiritual?

The exclusionary tone and action of those who disdain the "spiritual but not religious" types forms both an intra-faith and inter-faith barrier to better interrelationships locally, regionally, and globally. The constantly de-evolving state of denominational and para-denominational infrastructures, and congregational fragmentations among Christians demonstrates the intra-faith

organizations' lack of collaborative and coalitional processes needed for an organization to hold together.

What amounts to an attack, usually listed under the rubric of apologetics, on other religious traditions besides Christianity, declaring them inferior to Christianity misses some points, too. An interesting commonality can be found across the Great Religion frameworks, for instance, with regard to ethics. All of them at their core want a better society, individuals and groups with character that uplifts and encourages rather than deteriorates.

All of them have something similar to the Christian Golden Rule. The core/essence of each tradition upholds the idea of a peaceful, civil society and culture. Each of the world's great religions have some practices, for instance meditation, about which Christians could learn from. And, not the least of the problematic dimensions is that when Christians spend so much time and energy judging others' worst traits as being beneath our best traits, then Christians fail to develop introspectively. Such practice, character, should develop not only because we profess to worship Jehovah God, but we actually do that.

Worship—Noun, Verb, Adjective, Direct Object?

The response to the question just above is not an either-or one. Rather, yes, “worship” is both a verb and noun, at least. One is on the better track to consider the idea to be a verb first. Perhaps, the noun use has been some of the reason why results of whatever has been passing for worship have been truncated, diluted, less than fulfilling.

Or, perhaps the lack of life changing worship is because of another use of the term. The avoidance of considering worship primarily as a verb, or even as a noun, has lent energy to “worship” being an adjective, as in worship service.

If worship is a verb, there is more than implied the matter of a consequence, of an objective, an object being in play. To what end is the action, the movement, the energy, the focus?

The innate spirituality in humans provides some of the energy. Whatever this, dare I call it commodity, is it is searching for, looking for significance, even transcendence, something/someone to whom can be given deference moreover reverence.

However one uses the term, “worship” informs and forms how one lives out of one’s sense of worship. And, not the least of the ramifications is how does one, a congregation, format, engage, worship? Since this little book has Christian ethics in mind, the focus now begins to narrow to the resources referenced for millennia for informing and forming worship.

### The Reference Point for Christian Worship

Several references in Hebrew scriptures frame Judeo-Christian worship practice. Without any sense of providing a proof-text, Leviticus 19:2-18 provides a helpful summation of the several connecting points throughout the Old Testament about worship. By the time these words were in common oral tradition of the Hebrews, there was no longer a search as to how they arrived at these conclusions. We could surmise the perspectives had become self-evident over the centuries. The object, reference point, of their worship was revered so much that the name was unspeakable. We know eventually the naming became Jehovah.

The self-disclosure, evidently to characters like Abraham and Moses, was that “Holiness” was interacting with the Hebrews. This identification included that humans should try to imagine what perfection, wholeness, integrity, in all matters of especially character and personality would be like, that would be the reference point for their character and personalities. The self-identification was very similar to those comments at the burning bush with Moses (“I am that I am”—a tautology, perhaps). This characterization of holiness became the closure of the five verse (pentads) in verses 9-18.

The self-disclosing personality gave guidelines for how the Hebrews would authenticate they would be worshiping this character. These guidelines were all expected actions taking place in the cultural context of the Hebrews. Notice, a portion of v. 18 forms a part of the greatest commandment(s) of Jesus—love your neighbor as yourself. Authentic worship of the Holy One was preceded by, or followed by, or perhaps both at the same time with relationships, actions, considerations with fellow human beings that paralleled the same value content as the Holy One personified and enacted.

Absorbing, assimilating, expressing holiness to the best of an individual’s or group’s abilities calls for further dissection and analysis. The questions of the good journalist—what, who, when, where, why, and how—are those which can frame further our sense of understanding worship.

### A Model for Worship

What is worship, its object?--Isaiah 6:1-9 could be highlighted with the journalist’s questions.

WHAT is worship is recognized mostly intuitively in the passage. When seen, though, it jumps

right out at you. Notice how Isaiah's attention was caught. From then on, he zeroed in on the rest of the action.

The image finds expression throughout the Old Testament, especially among the prophets as they offer a "thus says the Lord" prefacing what they have learned being in the presence of God. They built upon an understanding of the human drivenness, need, search for worship, and pointed consistently to Jehovah as the object, the WHO to be worshipped.

In Isaiah's case, the figures circulating about the temple gave a terrestrial-extraterrestrial declaration that, if Isaiah needed any more assurance, he was captivated by the Presence addressing him. The "Holy, Holy, Holy" chant is one of those examples of Hebrew parallelism. The repetition of a word, phrase, line did not constitute an echo, but rather an amplification of the word, phrase, line. Intensity, force, power multiplied. More than a curiosity is the fact that this same chant appears in the Revelation, in a setting intended to depict the heavenly realm. John, in his first epistle, exhibited the understanding of worship at the end of the First Century. He used sense perception terms, as an apologetic to the Gnosticism all about him, to relate the power of the Incarnation. He noted how he, and the other first disciples, had touched Jesus. He used two words for seeing. One would be parallel to 21<sup>st</sup> century English of noticing, awareness, detect, spot. The other captures the idea of not just seeing and passing on, but seeing and pausing, even allowing one's attention to be caught; that one begins to behold, lock on, the object of affection.

In retrospect that was Isaiah's experience. He beheld God. A short definition, the "what," of worship, then, is "Beholding the Holy One," and blends with the who.

The When of Worship-- His time in the Temple was not the first for Isaiah. He is one of the major prophets of the Old Testament, after all. I doubt if he would have predicted these events that transpired, though. There is an instructive principle there for us regarding WHEN one is caught up in the experience of beholding God.

The Bible speaks of two kinds of time accounting. There is *chronos*. This is clock time, calendar time. We set a schedule. We make appointments. We wear a watch, or keep track of our day on our cell phone. Then, there is *kairos*. This kind of time does not fit our ordinary approaches to keeping track of time. *Kairos* is the kind of time that the prophets, Jesus, the apostles have in mind when they talk about the Kingdom of God. *Kairos* is descriptive of God's appearing in the affairs of humans not on any schedule of those humans. Considering God's intervention on a short scale of time, like a human generation, might give a sense of God being capricious, unpredictable. On a longer scale, though, one can recognize perhaps something of a rhythm to God's moving in human time frames.

With Isaiah, the two ways of describing, or telling time, came to bear: "In the year King Uzziah died. . . ." We can get fairly close to what that year was. There are clay tablets, documents, in existence with Uzziah's royal seal impressed. To say, our reference point for a worship experience can be dated so that event begins to spawn, or build upon, other associations.

Either way—a lesson from Isaiah, and others, is that we should be more alert to the possibility of God's interfacing with us all the time. That is the imperative from Paul to the Thessalonians—Paul's first addressees and to whom he related specifically they should be ready for Christ's returning—"pray without ceasing." A literal reading of those three words is "Be God conscious all the time."

Some of the genius behind the journalists' questions is that the questions begin to link information that can provide a relatively complete image of an event, or description of a person. We must admit that a great deal of mystery must be understood about God and worship of God. So, the term "relatively" may even be too strong. The mystery gets revealed ever so slightly, calling for continuing attention.

With worship, for example, the WHEN is always connected to a WHERE. A place, a location—and, it's not too far fetched to think in terms of where we were in a time frame of our lives. Some persons relate their experiences with God beginning with a time frame--a date, a time of day, a chapter of life—and can make a quick connection to where they were when that experience or those experiences were so vivid to them.

The Where of Worship--Thus, as with an unpredictability with regard to a time of/for worship, a degree of unpredictability characterizes the where of worship. Christians have generally been educated that worship happens, did happen, will happen where a group of people gather for the purpose of worship. "Where two or three gather together" and/or "Do not forsake the gathering together of yourselves" were constant phrases in my rearing years, supposedly used to reinforce why we met every Sunday.

Back there, and in other congregational experiences since, there was little emphasis toward understanding how other locations could be places of worship. Sure, there were expectations of finding a quiet, solitary place at points during a retreat. Subtle, and not so subtle, peer pressure was made toward having a "quiet" time, usually prescribed to be at the beginning of one's day. The assumption, of course, was the quiet time would occur in one's bedroom, dorm room, somewhere close to home.

The longer I've lived, though, the more I've come to understand that the place of worship can be anywhere. The locations are as limitless as where we are day by day. Maybe our sense of worship can increase if we think not of how we decide worship is going to happen in a given context set by our choice; rather, that anytime, anywhere, worship comes upon us. That realization certainly gives us reason to explore more in depth of WHY we worship.

Why Worship?--A quick response to the "WHY do you/I/we worship" question, could drop back to some of the earliest comments. Humans are spiritual—we cannot help but engage in worship, something, someone. Though that may sound like a simple, perhaps simplistic, response. To say "we worship because we are made that way" takes us quickly into a more profound, and ultimate questions, mode. It is not a far leap to move from that thought to the description in Genesis 1 that humans have something about them which the ancient Hebrews identified as "the image of God." The image seeks its original, the prototype. Augustine said, "Our heart is restless until it rests in you."

So, looking, seeking, searching, researching, exploring—all are parts, at the least the beginning parts, for humans a constant, looking for a rest spot, a sanctuary, a peaceable existence, worship. Certainly, some, lots of, people may sense this restlessness, an itch if you please, but won't address the disturbance unless they are told to do so. And, the Hebrews saw the match between the itch creator and from the Creator the imperative to worship said Creator. Doing so puts the puzzle pieces together.

For, in the dialogue called worship, people discover that we are built, made, for relationship, and relationship that pulls us above and beyond the level of life in which we move. No one, or even group, of humans can provide the emotional filling and fulfilling that we do or think we need. Worship of God provides such filling and fulfilling.

The intimacy, the companionship, the awe, of worship causes introspection to happen. For Isaiah, he realized his sense of character, his integrity, fell way short of this Holy One—the One beyond perfection. The comparison spawned his self-perception to be “I am a man of unclean lips.” The statement can be called confession. The self-identification is not meant to take one into a depressive mode but find a bottoming out. From the self-recognition then comes a sense of gratitude when the confession passes through God’s response of generosity, compassion, kindness, love. And rather than a continual decline, one has to try to respond in kind—with appreciation, thanks, thankfulness.

The Apostle Paul broke into his second letter to the Corinthians three times with the phrase, “Thanks be to God.” Each time, the phrase was followed by a substantive naming. For what should I be, am, thankful to God? The next breath, the next heartbeat, friends, the giftedness of those around us who keep the functions of a culture moving? For what, for whom, can you speak “Thanks be to God for. . . ?”

How do we worship?—With regard to worship in a congregational setting, too much energy has been given to deciding if one’s congregation engages in low-church or high-church worship. The defining quality is formality, types of music, the style of preaching, how the congregants engage the context. So, body language, posture, manuscript or not, praise band or not, organ or not, moments of silence or not, a printed order, bulletin or not, and on and on. Still, attendance or not is determined by responses to these kinds of choices.

Too little attention, then, is given to these matters that are really form questions. They are relatively superficial in nature if the basic “w” questions above are not considered, especially the WHO question. Whether the worship service is formatted as a more spontaneous, informal, one

or whether there is formality to the degree that requires a constant reference to the order of service, the format could be the object of worship rather than God.

Do the elements considered direct worshippers' attention, thinking, focus, contemplation, hearing toward God? Or, is there really an egocentric, even narcissistic, emphasis at play?

Does the worship format give room for carrying the ideas away from the congregational meeting and they can be implemented in the relationships one has outside that context? Are there themes which cause persons to think about the congregation and its cultural context as more inclusive and collaborative toward the good of the society? Or, are there discriminatory dimensions, even using Scripture to prove one's discrimination to be truth, which present an exclusionary organization to the social context?

Conclusion—The what, who, when, where, why, and how of worship may best be considered as happening as one gives retrospective attention to an experience or experiences. As one focuses on one of the “w” or the “h” questions, do associative images come to mind. Did the “Mystery” appear, even for just an instant? Did a clearer perspective about life or some facet of life become apparent? One gauge is to ask yourself, “Am I different, as a person, in regard to the right, good, and happy dimensions of life after this/these experience(s)?” If you can answer in the affirmative, then you are on track to understanding worship as a centering experience of life. With that in mind, then the spokes of the integrity wheel begin to make themselves plainer, especially “calling,” the theme of the next chapter.