

Defining Worship  
Part II: *The Essence*

*"It is a mark of a spiritual barrenness in the church when Christians come to worship to fulfill a duty rather than to satisfy an appetite."*

*Eric Alexander*

To refresh your memory on the preceding article, I defined the essentials of worship to be the following: that in all we do God is to be the Subject and Object, the Infinite Creator of our worship. The ultimate aim is to so experience God that our response moves us to bow our whole self before Him in praise and adoration. Now the question is, exactly how is that done, what is involved in true worship, what is to be the essence of our worship?

In John 4, Jesus states a revolutionary approach and a new paradigm for worship. It is no longer an event to take place in a specified place or style, as in the mountain (Samaritan) or in Jerusalem (Jews). Jesus strips away all pretense, all outward ritual and boils it down to the essence: spirit and truth, "for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers" John 4:23 "Jesus was saying that the reality of worship and the sincerity of the worshiper are more important than a church's location or liturgy."<sup>1</sup> Luther's understanding on this very subject caused him to boast "The worship of God...should be free at table, in private rooms, downstairs, upstairs, at home, abroad, in all places, by all people at all times. Whoever tells you anything else is lying as badly as the pope and the devil himself."<sup>2</sup>

If all the outward appearances and activity that were essential to Old Testament worship are stripped away, then how does Jesus want us to approach worship? His answer is addressed specifically in Matthew 15:7-9. After a verbal tongue lashing from Jesus to the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus says this, "You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying. 'THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME.'" (Isaiah 29:13). Jesus implies that worship can be thought of as a series of actions or words that are performed in obedience to Biblical commands or liturgical tradition, though this is only part of the entire picture. Worship throughout Biblical history always involved action. The main word for worship in Hebrew means "to bow down." Worship was performed in bowing, lifting the hands, kneeling, singing, praying, reciting scripture. All this can be called worship. But all this can also be done when the heart is far from God.

Can we get this into clear focus? Authentic worship is more than actions and it is more than a matter of willing. True worship is never a mere act of going through

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<sup>1</sup>"True Worship: Reclaiming the Wonder and Majesty," Hustad

<sup>2</sup>"What Luther Says," vol. III, ed. by Ewald M. Plass

the motions at will. All the activities involved in a worship service require the exertion of our will. But they do not become authentic by virtue of that. When God says, "Their heart is far from me," he does not mean they don't have the will power to go through the motions. Sure they do. But their heart is still far away from God. John Piper revealed this in a sermon entitled "Worship Is An End In Itself," and it deepened my understanding. Piper states "the drawing near of the heart to God means the coming alive of our feelings for God. Worship is an affair of the heart. It is an affair of feeling and of emotion."

There is a fascination with feelings today. Psychology is the dominant science and it is so easy to be categorized by emotionalism. That is not the goal of true worship. Piper goes on to explain that "genuine worship is based on the mind's perception of historical and Biblical truth. It has solid intellectual content. It is not the frenzied emotional product of manipulation."

But that is not our problem today. We are not in danger of emotionalism. Far from it. Our problem in understanding the essence of worship is that we do not realize that there is no genuine worship where feelings for God are not brought to life. There is no authentic worship where the heart is far from God. The heart's approach to God is shaped in the quickening of our feelings for God. Therefore, where feelings are dead, so is worship.

The essence of worship in spirit and truth: "true worship that pleases God is the drawing near of the heart to God – the quickening of the heart with genuine feelings in response to God's glory." (Piper).

*We pray to You, O God, who are the supreme Truth,  
And all truth is from You.  
We beseech You, O God, who are the highest Wisdom,  
And all the wise depend on You for their wisdom.  
You are the supreme Joy, and all who are joyful owe it to You.  
You are the greatest God, and all goodness comes from You.  
You are the Light of minds, and all receive their understanding from You.  
We love you-indeed, we love You above all things.  
We seek You, follow You, and are prepared to serve You.*  
**Alfred the Great, King of England, 849-899**

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