

Originally Published in the November/December 1993 edition of Modern Reformation Magazine, "The Church."

The Worshiping Community

By Kim Riddlebarger

It is a tragedy that much of the current discussion of worship takes place apart from the doctrine of the church, which has always been the context for this very important subject. The separation of worship from ecclesiology betrays the individualism of American culture which has been "baptized" and uncritically carried over into the church. When viewed through the filter of biblical and classical Protestant thought, much of the "lone-rangerism" of American Evangelicalism can be readily corrected. If anything characterizes the American church it is not a lack of zeal in worship, but a zeal that is loosed from biblical and ecclesiastical anchors.

There are several theological themes that cement this bond between worship and the church. The first is the doctrine of God. Simply stated, we must know whom we are worshiping and why. We must remember the old theological adage that "the finite mind cannot comprehend the infinite." God is beyond our comprehension, except as he reveals himself to us in creation and in Scripture. We cannot know God by speculating about his essence, we can only know him by contemplating his works and his word. Since God is revealed as a perfect and personal being with three distinct persons of one essence--the blessed Holy Trinity--worship must have a theological basis. John Calvin cautions that

The pious mind does not dream up for itself any god it pleases, but contemplates the one and only true God. And it does not attach to him whatever it pleases, but is content to hold him as he manifests himself; furthermore, the mind always exercises the utmost diligence and care not to wander astray, or rashly and boldly go beyond his will. It thus recognizes God because it knows that he governs all things; and trusts that he is its guide and protector, therefore giving itself over in complete trust in him. (*Institutes* 1.2.2)

Calvin argues that there is a right way to worship. The correctness of that way is directly related to its faithfulness to the doctrine of God as revealed in Holy Scripture. This is one important reason that American individualism is so pernicious to worship. There are many well-intentioned believers, who quite accidentally end up worshiping a god created in their own image. Worship without orthodoxy is not true worship, and may even be idolatry. When individuals cut themselves loose from established constraints to enhance the experience of worship, they do so at their own peril. The teaching office and spiritual oversight of the local church is an essential corrective to problems with private interpretation of worship.

One must have a correct, if limited, concept of the basic doctrine of God before one can worship correctly. This is not to say that worship is not to be emotional or that one is not to experience God during worship, but worship must be based on a correct knowledge of God, not an ecstatic experience of God. Worship has a doctrinal, and not an experiential, context. This intellectual priority in worship is also seen in the prohibitions against idolatry. The Ten Commandments, which are the revelation of the will of God and reflect all his attributes, forbid the worship of false gods. Satan's greatest desire was to have Jesus Christ bow down and worship him. Satan offered Jesus anything he wanted simply for the price of one brief genuflection. The whole theme of the beast and the false prophet in the book of

Revelation (13:4 ff.) is indicative of the heinousness of false worship and idolatry. Take John 4:24 as another example. Here we are told, "God is spirit and his worshipers must worship him in spirit and in truth." The mention of God as spirit is linked to correct worship. To separate the mind from the heart, to emphasize individual experience over the corporate worship of the church as the body of Christ, is a dangerous practice.

A second doctrinal theme that mitigates against individualism in worship is the doctrine of creation. When God created the world and all the creatures in it, he pronounced that it was "very good." This has major ramifications for worship. All of creation, given the divine stamp of "very goodness," testifies to the God who created it. All creatures depend on the providential care of their heavenly father for each breath. Worship not only involves correct belief about God, but also should acknowledge his goodness as Creator. As creatures whom he has made, we are to acknowledge our absolute dependence upon him-"it is he that hath made us and not we ourselves." (Ps. 100) Calvin notes that there is an inseparable relationship between this sense of dependence and true piety:

Indeed, we should not say that, properly speaking, God is known where there is no religion or piety. I call 'piety' that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces. For until men recognize that they owe everything to God, that they are nourished by his fatherly care, that he is the author of their every good, that they should seek nothing beyond him-they will never yield him willing service (*Institutes* 1.2.1)

The doctrine of creation is also in view when we consider that we are created in the image of God. Therefore, our own makeup as human beings comes into play as a consideration of worship. God created us as intellectual, sensual, emotional, volitional, and relational creatures, who are like God in every way that creatures can be like God. The response of the whole person, made in God's image, of which worship is a part, is certainly implied in Jesus' teaching on the greatest commandment. Here, after re-stating the theological truth that God is one (from Dt. 6:4), Jesus tells the teachers of the law that the greatest commandment is to "Love the Lord Your God with all your heart and with all of your mind and with all of your strength." (Mk. 12:30) The whole person (mind, will, emotions and body) is to strive to worship God in spirit and in truth. Worship is not merely intellectual-it involves our emotions, our affections and our senses. For the Christian, intellectual apprehension of the true God will inevitably lead the whole person to worship God "in spirit and in truth." The more one knows about God, the greater will be one's capacity to love and worship him. Worship must have an intellectual priority, but any theology that does not cause the heart to well up with love for God, and that does not stir the will and the affections to desire to serve God with more passion, is not correct theology. True worship is emotional, stirring and motivating, and based upon the truth.

Since we are sensual creatures, the doctrine of creation and the essential goodness of created reality has ramifications for our understanding of the worshiping community. The intricate details of Solomon's Temple and its furnishings (which were all types of the heavenly temple and pointed forward to Jesus Christ) were obviously of great beauty. (1 Kings 6–8) The garments to be worn by the Aaronic priests were carefully crafted and very beautiful. (Ex. 28) Remember, it was God who gave these explicit instructions. Thus, the appreciation of beauty and symbol are part of worship. Biblical symbols have meaning that point to spiritual realities beyond themselves. Colors, sounds, sights and smell are all useful to enhance our appreciation of the God of Creation, as we worship his splendor in the beauty of his holiness. The doctrine of creation, along with the emphasis of the corporate solidarity of the people of God, flies directly in the face of an emphasis on individual experience.

A third theme that links the church as the worshiping community to the doctrine of redemption is the fall of Adam, and the resulting enmity between God and sinful men and women. Since we are no longer granted the privilege of walking with God in the garden in the cool of the day, we do not deserve to be allowed to worship. Instead, we deserve to be sent to hell because of our sin and our participation in Adam's rebellion. But God is gracious, his "property is always to have mercy" (The Prayer of Humble Access), as he has in Jesus Christ.

To appreciate the blessings that we have in Jesus Christ that relate to worship, we need to begin with the Old Testament. Worship was based on the promise that God would send a Messiah, that God would provide a final solution to humanity's sin. Old Testament worship was characterized by hope and by types and shadows pointing beyond themselves to Jesus Christ. There were priests (intermediaries between the people and God) and there was perpetual animal sacrifice. All worship centered around the geographical center of true worship, Jerusalem, with its temple. The people could not approach God directly; the sacrificial system required perpetual appeasement of God.

Jesus Christ came to earth to seek and save that which was lost. God entered time and space and provided a propitiation for the guilt of the sins of his people. God's wrath was turned aside through Christ's death. In Christ's ministry as high priest, the final sacrifice has been made. Jesus Christ has ascended on high and poured out his Holy Spirit on all flesh. The people of God do not have priests—they are now a kingdom of priests, not worshiping in a temple, but together they comprise the temple of God, of which Jesus Christ is the head and the apostles are the foundation. Peter writes:

As you come to him, the living stone—rejected by men but chosen by God, and precious to him—you also like living stones, are built into a spiritual house to be a royal priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Pt. 2:4–5).

Nothing in Scripture argues more strongly against the individualism of modern American Christianity than Christ-centered worship, where each individual is a priest and together they compose the very dwelling place of God on earth. Since Christ has forever fulfilled the role of priest, there can be no notion of priestcraft where one "godly" individual makes intercession for everyone else. Worship is not an event where Christians in the "audience" watch the "priests" and the professionals worship God as they make intercession for the faithful. God the Blessed Trinity is the audience and the congregation, as a whole, worships God.

The church as the worshiping community is a place for individuals to unite and serve in their common bond with others adopted into Christ's body. The doctrines of God, creation, and redemption are the foundation for our response to what God has done. Worship is the response of God's people, the worshiping community, the body of Christ. Worship is not the isolated ecstatic experiences of a dismembered savior.

Dr. Kim Riddlebarger is a graduate of California State University in Fullerton (B.A.), Westminster Theological Seminary in California (M.A.R.), and Fuller Theological Seminary (Ph.D.). Kim has contributed chapters to books such as *Power Religion: The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church*, *Roman Catholicism: Evangelical Protestants Analyze What Unites & Divides Us*, and *Christ The Lord: The Reformation & Lordship Salvation*, and is currently the pastor of Christ Reformed Church in Anaheim,

California.