

11-08-09

Colossians 3:12-17 (How Is God Worshiped?)

Introduction

What experiences have shaped your life as a worshiper? Let me ask that one more time: What experiences have shaped your life as a worshiper? For better or worse, I'd have to say that my worship background is 'somewhat eclectic.'

I grew up in a fairly 'high church' Methodist family...so most of my childhood worship experiences were steeped in the hymns of Charles Wesley...songs like "O, For a Thousand Tongues to Sing" and "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today." And of course, it's not just the hymns that I remember from the churches of my childhood. I was shaped as well by the chiming of the hour and the recitation of the Apostles' Creed and the offering of the Lord's Prayer. But I'm thankful, too, that the experiences that have shaped my worship life didn't end there.

- I became a Baptist when I was in high school...so from that point on my worship has included more gospel hymns and personal testimonies and people who say, "Amen" (or at least people who secretly want to).
- For thirteen years, I served as a campus minister—working with young adults. And in that environment, I came to love contemporary songs of praise and worship and services that encouraged you to get up and move around and interact with people.
- Along the way, family members and friends have given me opportunity to worship with Catholics and Presbyterians and Episcopalians and Pentecostals. And I've got to say that at every place along that journey...I've been blessed by people who worship with all their heart, soul, mind and strength...and through all those different doorways, I've been ushered into the presence of God.

What about you? What experiences have shaped your life as a worshiper? What's your 'comfort zone'...and what are those worship environments you've experienced...but didn't really care for? How have you stepped outside your comfort zone...and perhaps have been surprised to discover that God was there, too?

- Let's take a minute to share with each other, if we could. Why don't you turn to someone near you (preferably not a member of your own family) and share your answer to the question: What experiences have shaped your life as a worshiper? I'll call us back together in a few minutes.
- [Time for Interaction]

Transition

As always, I wish we had more time so we could have everyone share favorite memories...and testimonies about people and experiences that have made a difference in our worship life. And if we did that, it wouldn't surprise me at all to discover that we've got quite a bit of variety in our respective 'worship backgrounds.'

- There'd be those of us who remember (and still long for) more times of reverent silence and reflection in worship. But there'd also be those who love a good, toe-tappin' gospel song...and wish we could clap our hands more often. There'd be young people who'd like Sunday morning to ROCK a little...and folks who wish the preacher would stop lookin' at his notes all the time and just walk around and SPEED from his heart. [Looking down] Oh, excuse me...that was 'SPEAK' from his heart.
- Of course, no matter WHAT we do in worship—no matter what songs we sing and what prayers we pray—there'll always be those who just wanna sit back, fold their arms, and take a little mental vacation.

And when you get right down to it, all of these experiences and desires (with the possible exception of the 'zoning out') have their appropriate place. All of the backgrounds and all of the longings and all of the preferences that we bring with us to worship are neither good nor bad in and of themselves. They simply are.

- And yet, I hope you can see almost immediately what a challenge this creates...because it forces us to ask: How is God worshiped?

- In this place and this time...among this people—who bring so many different experiences and needs and wants with them when they enter this sanctuary—how do we find a way to create a gathering of worship that will speak to our hearts (both as individuals and as a people)...AND that will allow us to declare the praises of Him who has called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light?

Trust me: it's not an easy question to answer. But with the help of the passage that we heard a few moments ago—and with the convictions that form the foundation of my own thoughts about worship—I want to try to offer 'a perspective.' Now I'll be clear up front... it might not be a perspective that you agree with...but that's okay; because all of us need to wrestle with our experiences and desires and with God's Word. All of us need to confront—both our own sinfulness and the command to love each other. And in the end, all of us need to worship. It's what we were made to do...and it's a task we've been called to do together.

Worship Begins with God

Colossians 3:12 begins, "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved..." and right out of the gate I want these words to remind you of a key truth that we mentioned last week: Worship begins with God.

Nothing that we do here is the result of our initiative or ability. It's all the result of God's initiative and ability. He has chosen us. He has made us holy through the sacrifice of His Son. He has loved us...

- And therefore, everything we do—in this hour of worship and in every other part of our lives—is simply a response to His grace. And this means, of course, that everything we do— in this hour of worship and in every other part of our lives —should not be determined by what we want. It should be determined by what God wants.
- Worship is not about our plans or our preferences. It's about God's greatness and God's glory. And so before we spend too much time worrying about what we desire when we worship, we'd better spend some time pondering what God desires when we worship.

Of course, that only begs the question: What does God desire? And you'll be pleased to hear...that I do not pretend to know. I cannot and will not claim for a second that I have a 'holy hotline' to the mind and heart of God. All I've got...and really, all any of us have got...is God's Word. And the good news (or the not-so-good news, depending on your perspective) is that God seems to desire a lot of different things when we worship.

- As we noted last week, just a glance through the psalms—the closest thing we have to a 'worship book' in the Bible—reveals that God desires for us to keep silence before Him...and to shout for joy. He wants us to lift our hands and to fall on our knees. He invites us to clap and to dance and to stand in awe. He calls us to sing...and to make music on the harp and the lyre and the timbrel (which, by the way, is a kind of drum or tambourine).
- Speaking scripturally, of course, God's ultimate desire seems to be that the worship of His name would join people of every race and tribe and nation and language. So if we want to evaluate our worship biblically—if we want to ask: Are we doing what God desires—I think it would be fair to say we've got a long way to go. But I wouldn't want you to miss the main point:
 - Worship begins with God. All of our humble offerings are just a response to His grace, His sacrifice and His love...and so we worship—not in order to express to our particular set of tastes and preferences—but simply because God deserves it.

Worship Forms Our Character

Now if we continue with our passage from Colossians 3, we find not only that worship begins with God, but also that worship forms our character. We talked last week about how worship is expressed in the way we live...and (in a similar way) this passage moves—from the truth that we are "God's chosen people"—to the call for us to 'put on' certain virtues. We are told to clothe ourselves with "compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." We must "bear with each other" and "forgive one another"...and "over all these virtues [we must] put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity."

- All of this, of course, is just another way of saying that worship is meant to reproduce within us the character of Christ. And unless our worship does that...unless it makes us more and more like Jesus...then it's incomplete. It's something other than the worship that God desires from us and for us.

One of our great challenges, however, is that it's not always easy to tell whether worship is doing this. Growth in Christ-likeness is a process—one that we don't always understand and one that we're not always good at being honest about. And so—rather than thinking about worship through the lens of our character formation—it's so much easier to think about worship through the lens of our personal satisfaction.

- Because we come to worship with different backgrounds and different needs and different preferences—it's easier to ask: "Did I 'get out' of worship what I wanted? Did I like it?"
- But if worship is meant to form our character, then maybe those are the wrong questions.

Marva Dawn is a professor of theology who has written several books on worship...and the challenge of worshiping in a diverse and changing culture. And she suggests that if we want to assess "what we do in worship and why," we should always look to "three fundamental criteria: 1st) that God be the Infinite Center...2nd) that worship build up the Body...and 3rd) that believers be nurtured in faith and life."ⁱ

- So if there's any merit to that (and I think there is), instead of asking, "Did I like that?" we need to ask, "Was God lifted up?" "Did worship bring us together as a family of faith?" and just as important: "Did worship offer me an opportunity to live a life more like the life of Jesus?"

This becomes even more important, I think, when we see that the specific elements of Christian character that our passage mentions—things like compassion and kindness, humility and gentleness, patience and love—all of these focus on the ways we relate to and treat one another. In fact, if we move on just one more verse, we read, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts since as members of one body you were called to peace."

However, instead of wrestling with this biblical emphasis on the unity of the body, one of the ways churches often respond to different tastes and preferences is to create different worship expressions that cater to each one. If you like 'traditional' worship, you can go to a 'traditional' service. If you like 'contemporary' worship, we offer a 'contemporary' service. And—if neither of those fit the bill—you can try our Celtic or contemplative or jazz or cowboy services. We aim to please!

- Now I can't deny...that there's a sense in which that approach 'works.' Everybody gets what they want, and because of that—a lot of churches report that they grow bigger and more quickly because nobody has to experience worship that isn't geared to their preferences. But of course—precisely for that reason—this approach robs us of the opportunity to practice what it means to live together as the Body of Christ.

One author suggests that when we offer a service of worship...and when—as a result—we learn to set aside our preferences for the sake of others...we gain real world experience in what it means to 'have the mind of Christ' as Paul described it in Philippians chapter 2: "value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."ⁱⁱ

- Even stronger than that, Rodney Clapp (an editor for Christianity Today) says that "it is utterly dangerous for churches to offer choices of worship styles...because by doing so," he writes, "we reinforce the idolatrous, consumer-oriented way of life that worship is intended to expose, disarm and conquer."ⁱⁱⁱ
- How is God worshiped? In ways that shape our character in the image of Christ. And I would suggest this happens best when we worship together—as a united Body of Christ.

Worship Blends Old and New

Now there's one more lesson I want us to see in our reading from Colossians. We're told that worship begins with God. We're told that worship forms our character as God's people. But we're also told that worship blends the best of old and new.

Verse 16 says we must “let the message of Christ dwell among us” as we “teach and admonish one another through psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.” (Col. 3:16) Have you ever stopped to think what those words must have meant to the early Christians who first read them?

“Psalms” would have referred to the same psalms that we read today—straight out of the Hebrew scriptures or the Old Testament. Psalms were the ‘traditional worship’ of the early church...a connection to the rich history of faith (and especially the rich musical history of faith) that had been passed on by God’s people from generation to generation.

“Hymns,” on the other hand, referred to the specifically Christian forms of music that were being written right around the same time as the New Testament. In fact, Paul’s letters are filled with quotations from these early hymns.

- There’s one in Philippians 2, that describes how Jesus—“who being very nature God...did not consider equality with God something to be grasped...but made himself nothing, and took up a servant’s nature.”
- There’s another in 1st Timothy 3, that celebrates how Jesus “appeared in a body...was vindicated by the Spirit...was seen by angels...was preached among the nations...was believed on in the world...and was taken up in glory.”
- All of which is to say that hymns were the ‘contemporary worship’ of the early church. They offered music that was being composed and passed along to express the joy of knowing Jesus in a new era.

Finally, Colossians talks about ‘spiritual songs’...and (unfortunately) most scholars don’t seem to know for sure what those were. Some say they were songs composed on-the-spot...music not really intended to be written down and preserved—but offered spontaneously as an expression of praise. Others think this might be a reference to ‘ecstatic utterances’—a kind of ‘musical speaking in tongues.’ But whatever ‘spiritual songs’ were, I like the way that this scholar sums up the debate:

- “What we do know...is that God cannot be contained in what we already know. There is always a need for new compositions...new settings of old texts and new texts for old melodies...new arrangements...new instrumentations...new expressions of the infinitely incomprehensible God.”^{iv}

And this really brings home the point I want to make. You wanna know how God is worshiped? Well... speaking out of my own convictions and (I think) out of scripture, I would respond: In every way we can.

Why should we get caught up a debate about whether worship should be ‘traditional’ or ‘contemporary’... when the freedom we have as God’s people allows us to honor and praise and glorify God with words and music—with actions and symbolism—that reach out to embrace both...

- The theological depth of the Book of Common Prayer and the spontaneous joy of a Baptist hymn sing?
- Both the artistry of a stained glass window and the relevance of a video clip from this week’s news?
- Why not rejoice in the grandeur of Handel’s Messiah and the energy of a rock-n-roll praise song and the heart-stirring beauty of Amazing Grace? Why limit ourselves when it’s all ours...all of it our birthright as children of God...and all of it capable of moving us...transforming us...and allowing us to respond to the splendor of our great and awesome God?

Of course, I can almost hear some of you thinking, “I don’t know pastor. After all, I’m not familiar with some of the stuff you just mentioned. Worshiping like that sounds like a lot of work to me.” And to that I’d respond: Of course it is. Worship is work...hard work. That’s why one of the words that we use to describe worship—the word “liturgy” (which, by the way doesn’t mean formal prayers and such; it just means ‘what we do when we worship’)...liturgy literally means, “The work of the people.”

Like we said last week...true worship always costs something. It cost God the life of His only begotten Son... and it ought to cost us—at least the time and effort it takes—to learn how to worship God in ways that allow our whole church family to love and respond to Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

Besides...if we show up for worship every week...knowing we're gonna get exactly what we always get... how will we ever stay open to the new and surprising things that God might want to do among us? One artist said, "If you know what you're looking for, you'll never see what you don't expect to find."^v

Conclusion

There's so much more I wish we had time to talk about this morning...because I do feel passionately about this.

- I wish we could talk about the way that blending old and new in worship expands the variety of talents and gifts that people are able to offer in worship.
- I wish we could talk about the way that those who prefer 'traditional' worship quite frequently need the energy and passion of worship that's more contemporary...just like those who prefer 'contemporary' worship need the depth and reverence of worship that's more traditional.
- I wish we could talk about the way that all these terms we use in these debates hardly mean anything in the first place. After all, when we say we like 'traditional' worship, which tradition are we referring to? The tradition of the early church...the tradition of the Protestant Reformers...the tradition of Baptists in the South in the 1950's and 60's.

And even if we're trying to say something important about our tradition in this church...doesn't that beg the question who and what 'our tradition' includes? After all doesn't this church include both children and senior adults...men and women...blue collar workers and white collar workers...long-time members and new arrivals?

- When you get right down to it, isn't this church always changing...and, therefore, don't even our traditions have to change...to make sure that they remain (as one scholar described them) "a living faith of those who have died...rather than a dead faith of those who remain alive."^{vi}

But we don't have time to talk about all that, so let's just end where our reading from Colossians ends: Whatever you do, in word or in deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

- When everything else is said and done, "Worship isn't about music or techniques...songs or methodologies. It's about our hearts. It's about what and who we love more than anything."^{vii}
- And if we love Jesus, I can't help but think that we'll be less concerned about how we worship...and more concerned about who we worship with:
 - both our brothers and sisters who meet with us in here on Sunday morning...
 - and those 'potential' brothers and sisters who meet with us out there on Monday morning...
 - where our words and our deeds must demonstrate: the grace of Christ our Savior...and the love of God our Father...and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

ⁱ Marva J. Dawn, *A Royal 'Waste' of Time*, (Eerdmans, 1999), p. 202,

ⁱⁱ Bob Kauflin, *Worship Matters*, (Crossway Press, 2008), p. 100.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rodney Clapp, quoted by Marva J. Dawn in *A Royal 'Waste of Time,'* p. 98.

^{iv} Dawn, *A Royal 'Waste' of Time*, p. 16.

^v Peter Marty, quoted by Marva J. Dawn in *A Royal 'Waste' of Time,'* p. 191.

^{vi} Adapted from Jaroslav Pelikan, quoted by Dawn in *A Royal 'Waste' of Time,'* p. 66.

^{vii} Kauflin, *Worship Matters*, p. 25.