

A REVERENT AGNOSTICISM

What Should I Bring To Worship (Part 2)

Text: Romans 11:33-36

Last week, we began a series of reflections on the subject of how to make our time in worship everything it can be and is meant to be. I suggested that many of us have lost, or maybe never developed in the first place, an accurate picture of what worship really is. For example, some of us are still judging the success of a service by whether we "GOT something" out of it.

In Christian worship, however, the question of whether worship pleases US is infinitely less important than whether it pleases God. The word "worship," you see, is literally a contraction of the term "worth-ship." Worship is the act of expressing to God what he is worth. The question is: By the end of our time today, will we have sung with such devotion, or prayed with such humility, or realigned our giving and thinking and acting with such faithfulness that God will be pleased by the knowledge that we have at least some idea of what he is worth? That's what I meant when I said last week that the first thing to bring to worship is *a passion for the applause of heaven*.

And yet, in order to do that, we have to know Who it is that we are playing to when we attempt this symphony we call a worship service. That brings us to a SECOND attitude we need to bring with us each time we come to a place like this. As we prepare to explore that, would you bow with me in prayer?

I

A newsstand vendor on the streets of Manhattan was once asked by an out-of-towner if he could tell him which direction was north. The vendor looked at the inquirer as if he'd come from outer space. "*Look, buddy, we got uptown, we got downtown, and we got cross-town. We don't got north!*" The more I think about it, the more I wonder if you and I aren't often painfully like that newsstand vendor. We probably don't hold such a parochial view of the city in which we live. But many of us, I suspect, are dangerously limited in our view of God.

This is the concern that motivated Don McCullough to write his award-winning book, *The Trivialization of God: The Dangerous Illusion of a Manageable Deity*. McCullough observes that many Christians today boldly claim to know God and his worth, when a study of their attitudes and behaviors suggests that that they are more devoted to some "pseudo-god" or "godlet" than the deity described in the Old and New Testament. McCullough goes on to describe several of the most popular of these "trivialized" gods. I wonder if we might recognize the God *WE* know in this catalogue of descriptions.

Is it possible, for example, that you are worshipping the God-of-My-Cause? He's a popular deity these days, and for good reason. There are so many important causes for which divine help seems needed. We watch technology eroding our ability to be truly

present to one another. We see our hurried kids becoming more anxious or depressed. We face a crisis of opioid abuse and climate change. We watch as millions of babies are thrown away and millions of children consigned to refugee camps. We know of the violence that reigns in our city and the many religious, ethnic, racial, and political conflicts that are tearing nations apart.

It seems clear from our reading of the Scriptures that God would be or should be concerned for all of these issues and more. So, it's just a short hop to thinking that God is *primarily concerned* about the particular cause that primarily concerns us. We don't intend for it to happen, but our conception of God begins to shrink to fit our cause. The Eternal God becomes reduced in our minds to the God-of-the-Right-to-Life or the God-of-the-Right-to-Die or the God-of-Progressivism or the God-of-Conservatism. Like the religious leaders in Jesus' day, we become certain that God is for our cause.

In Civil War times, Abraham Lincoln was asked: "Don't you feel, Mr. President, that God is on the side of the North?" Lincoln responded: "*The real question is not whether God is on our side, but whether we are on God's side.*" It seems to me that we may need to spend more time in prayer and self-searching before asserting too boldly that God plays exclusively for our team, our faction, our party, or nation. Remember how absolutely certain the Pharisees were that God was on their side, as they were crucifying him.

But maybe it's not the God-of-My-Cause that you worship most. Perhaps it's the God-of-My-Understanding. Over the years, great scholars have struggled to systematize our understanding of the God described in Scripture. Their work has yielded wonderful creeds, doctrines, and treatises that have given us a common way of talking about God's character and work in the world. But theologians -- from Thomas Aquinas to Karl Barth -- have always recognized that these formulations are both useful AND limited ways of describing a transcendent God.

Many voices within Christian publishing and broadcasting today seem to have lost that humility. They speak with such absolute clarity about who God is and what he wants. They connect the dots of Scripture to define theologies and denominational orthodoxies as if theirs is the necessary and exclusive home of God. "God help someone who doesn't worship the God-of-My-Understanding-of-Creation, or the God-of-My-Understanding-of-Men-and-Women, or the God-of-My-Understanding-of-Scripture." Yet how often did God have to send prophets to his people to disrupt their understanding?

And then, there is what McCullough calls the God-of-My-Experience. His followers are the ones who believe that if you haven't experienced conversion like I did; or if you haven't experienced the Holy Spirit as I have; or if you don't experience God's presence through this particular style of worship as I do, then you haven't experienced the true God. What do such believers do then, with the God of whom Jesus speaks -- the one whose Spirit moves like the wind... who shows up in often unexpected ways and places... who seems to delight in manifesting his grace in an amazingly diverse range of ways?

Speaking of grace, the God-of-My-Comfort is a tempting object of devotion too. We can come to see God as someone who'd never want one of his beloved creatures to experience pain or loss, and who's greatest aim is to make us happy. Or maybe you worship the God-of-My-Success. You've been told that if you just follow this plan – he will surely grant you a prosperous, influential, and stress-free life. There are dozens of evangelists of that gospel who cite scripture passages out of context and win millions of followers (not to mention dollars) with that "good news." But what of all that other scripture that speaks of a God who refines and redeems his children through times of suffering (Heb 12:5-6, 10-11)?

III

By now, some of you have to be wondering: "Dan, what are you trying to say?" I am saying that alongside of a passion for the applause of heaven, one of the most important things to bring to worship, is an attitude of "Reverent Agnosticism." Don McCullough, points out that we have all kinds of negative associations with that word "*agnosticism*." Agnosticism has come to suggest a lifestyle of spiritual shrugging – an attitude that says: "Since I can't be absolutely sure if there is a God or what that God's like, I don't really need to trouble myself with seeking to know him, much less acting on whatever I do know of him." But "Agnosticism" doesn't necessarily mean a lack of belief in God, so much as a wariness of trying to contain God within a specific box.

Reverent agnosticism is the attitude of a Christian who knows that there is a God -- that this God has met us supremely and with the power of salvation in Jesus Christ -- but who is realistic about her own sinful tendencies when it comes to perceiving God. Reverent agnosticism is the attitude of a Christian who knows that if left utterly to his own devices, he would likely reduce God into a trivial idol -- small enough to be manipulated and managed to suit his own interests and tastes -- but far too small to redeem and transform us. As McCullough points out: "*It is worth noting that God gave the commandment against worshipping other gods not to pagans but to Israel, the very people of God.*" And then he adds this chilling reminder: "*Being saved never guarantees [continued] worship of the true God.*"¹

IV

Now, here's what I want to know, and maybe you will too. Perhaps there's no way to guarantee that when you come to worship, you'll be encountering and growing in relationship with the true God. But is there a way to increase that likelihood dramatically? I think there is; and the recipe is found in the words of the Apostle Paul in the eleventh and twelfth chapter of his letter to the Christian in Rome. Let me encourage you to put Paul's prescription in the form of three simple prayers that you might pray before and throughout your worship practice each week.

Here's the FIRST prayer: God, awaken me to your mystery today. Have you tuned in to how much of life is mysterious? Do you know that we can't even explain the mystery of a watermelon seed? Botanists can't figure out how a mere watermelon seed can draw

from the ground and through itself 200,000 times its weight in nutrients. They can't unravel how it takes this material and uses it to color an outside surface beyond the imagination of art, and then forms inside of that skin a white rind, and within that a sweet red heart, thickly inlaid with black seed, each one of which is capable of drawing through itself 200,000 times its weight again. We can't encompass the mystery of a common watermelon seed. So what gives us the audacity to think that we can circumscribe the mystery of God?

The Apostle Paul puts it like this: **Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? (Rom 11:33-36)** Paul is saying that we can make all the idols we want, but we'll never be able to reduce the mystery of who and what God really is. We cannot know God on our own. We cannot tell God what to do. We cannot manipulate, manage, or buy him off with our gifts. We can only pray that God will graciously deign to awaken us to his presence and reveal to us something more about himself than we knew before we came. Make that your prayer throughout each worship service.

Then add this SECOND prayer to your list: Lord, give me humility in the presence of other believers. A newly commissioned ensign, at sea for the first time, bumped into a lowly seaman as he entered the wardroom. The ensign barked out: *"And where do you think you're going in such a hurry, sailor?"* The flustered seaman responded: "I'm going downstairs to mop the floor sir." The ensign snorted: *"You'd better learn naval terminology, sailor. You're not going downstairs to mop the floor, you're going below to swab the deck!"* The sailor replied meekly, "I'll try to remember that sir." *"You'd better,"* replied the ensign, *"because if I ever hear you say 'downstairs' again, why I'll throw you out that little round window over there!"*

That's just like us, isn't it? We're often far too concerned about pointing out the failure of other people's terminology or concept of God, to even consider how far off the mark we probably are as well. That's why Paul says: **For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you (Rom 12:3).**

As you worship here, pray for humility. Ask for the sober judgment necessary to recognize the limitations of your perspective. Ask for the capacity to remain open to that fresh something about God's person and plan which some unlikely person round about you could teach you, according to the measure of faith that God has given to him or her. Who knows, it might be your spouse, your child, a friend or that stranger down the row who knows something of God that you need to know. Every now and then, it might even be the preacher! Only now and then.

And if the people around you and I are doing our job, then we'll be inspiring you to a third and final prayer: "Spirit, ignite my desire to explore the vast expanse of your

Word.” When I invite you to approach worship with a reverent agnosticism, I’m not saying that we don’t know who God is at all. On the contrary, as Christians, we know a great deal – not because we are geniuses, but because God has taken the trouble to reveal himself to us. He does it most profoundly in the Bible. Some of you know parts of it fairly well. But do you know the vast expanse of it?

The point is, don’t let what you think you already know about God keep you from continually seeking to grow in your knowledge of the fullness of what God is trying to tell you about himself. Let an attitude of reverent agnosticism fill you with a zeal to know more of God than the world is telling you, more of the God about which this Word will tell you. As the Apostle says: **Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Rom 12:2)**

PRAYER: Thus may you, God, bless to us this reading and reflection upon your Holy Word and by its light, lead us into a greater knowledge of who you are, who we are, and that more abundant and eternal life which we may yet discover and live. Amen.

¹*Op. Cit.*, p.15.