

Issues in Charismatic Theology

Worship

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1. Introduction

This topic may be the most surprising issue yet in our series in light of what non-Charismatic believers say about the Charismatic Movement. Often there are comments on the positive benefits of the Charismatic Movement where the vibrancy of worship is highlighted as a blessing to the church. They reference the music and other forms of dramatic events as contributing to greater worship of God. This class will examine true worship and the challenges that worship in the Charismatic Movement brings to God's people.

2. True worship

The first place to begin examining worship within Charismatic settings is to understand the importance and the nature of true worship. Jesus describes true worship in John 4:24, "God is Spirit and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." Therefore, worship is internal from our spirit, not external from our flesh and worship must correspond to truth.

Internal worship is by nature from the heart. It is the commitment of ourselves to God in totality. It is the living sacrifice of ourselves to the Lord that Romans 12:1 describes as "our spiritual service of worship." This worship must correspond to biblical truth, which is precisely why Romans 12:1 follows eleven chapters of theological instruction. Furthermore, the result of such sacrificial commitment to God is to "be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2). True spiritual worship brings transformation through learning.

So we must worship God with both spirit and truth. We cannot worship apart from the personal commitment of our spirit to the Lord and we cannot worship apart from the truth of God. Just as we cannot worship God without truth and without the commitment of our spirit, the essential manifestation of this worship is our love for God, which is the greatest commandment (Matthew 22:36-37).

To assure that our worship is true and that we are not deluding ourselves, the evidence of true worship is the love of God. And the evidence of our love of God is our obedience to God, "if you love Me you will keep My commandments" (John 14:15). To profess to worship God and not follow the Lord in obedience is merely lip service.

3. Form vs. function

The history of the church is full of opinions of how the worship of God ought to look and negative perspectives about many cultural forms of worship. Part of worship of God is that it must be according to truth. We must have a clear understanding of what the Bible says about worship as well as what it does not say about worship.

Some critics of the worship of Charismatic churches have based their criticism on what the Bible does not say about worship rather than what it does say. Their criticism becomes a call for Charismatics and others to prove from the Bible their worship practices are valid. This is an argument from silence, holding to the view that because something is not in the Bible it ought not to be done.

This way of thinking builds on the teaching of John Calvin who wrote, “God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by His word.” Calvin’s target was the idolatry that he saw within the Catholic Mass. This belief has become known as the “regulative principle of worship.”

The idea of biblical authorization of worship practices may sound good but this principle leads to questions about how to interpret what is allowed. The Westminster Confession of Faith in advocating for regulative principle of worship said, “there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.” So there are allowances for accommodations to be made and once you make allowances where do they end?

No Scripture passage directly supports the belief in the regulative principle of worship. There are only applications of Bible texts that are used to direct the worship. So it is actually those holding to the regulative principle that are teaching the precepts of men as doctrines of God by forbidding what God himself has not expressly prohibited.

If we are going to examine the worship practices of any church, we must understand the basis on which our evaluation is made. We ought to be guided by what the Lord is teaching in His word rather than look for what isn’t addressed. If those who criticize Charismatic worship on this basis were honest they would recognize that much of their own practices are not explicitly found in the Scripture.

Therefore, the basis for this analysis of Charismatic worship ought to be the Scripture, not simply issues that one person or church may feel uncomfortable with. We cannot argue against a worship style based upon our culture but based upon the Scripture. Our choices of musical style, decor, aesthetics, etc. has been influx over centuries and according to cultural variations. God has clearly provided allowances in His word for differences in our practice of worship in order to serve the spread of the gospel throughout the world.

4. The role of the local church in worship

The worship of God is an individual activity. Worship must be exclusively directed to God alone (Luke 4:8). No one can worship God for you and you cannot worship God for someone else.

Yet worship is also an activity that we participate in together. As we present ourselves as a living sacrifice to God, which is our spiritual service of worship (Romans 12:1), this sacrifice is done also in the context of the body of Christ, the church: “you also as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house to a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5).

Therefore, our worship of the Lord necessarily involves the local church and the fellowship of the saints. Just as we need each other to effectively obey the Lord, we need each other to effectively worship the Lord. Just as the “one anothers” of the New Testament requires the body of Christ, our worship of God is not devoid of the context of our fellow believers in Christ.

While we certainly ought to continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God (Hebrews 13:15), regardless of whether we are with our fellow believers or not, we also ought to praise Him in the congregation of the godly ones (Psalm 149:1). The sense of praise with one another is part of worship. The singing of psalms and hymns and spiritual songs is part of the instruction of one another in the body of Christ (Colossians 3:16).

There are many forms of worship that churches choose. Just as some churches are quite narrow in what they consider to be acceptable forms of worship. There are churches that do not believe in instrumentation in worship at all. Other churches view the use of percussion negatively. None of this is essential to worship but Psalm 150 depicts various instrumentation included in the worship of God so it is difficult to argue against instrumentation from the Bible.

Although the Scripture allows for a variety of forms of worship, it does not follow that every form is equally able to serve the true worship of God effectively. Some considerations of the result of worship choices are warranted. Charismatic churches have led the way in bringing a heightened sense of personal experience to the worship service. In the modern age there has been an emphasis upon the individual worship over the worship of the church.

Approaches that individualize worship in the context of the local church, such as the darkening of the room and the use of effects such as fog machines may enhance the sense of personal worship at the expense of corporate worship. The diminishing of the sense of community in worship does not reflect either the significance of our present worship with believers or our future worship of the Lord with His redeemed (Revelation 4:8-11, 5:9-14, 7:9-12).

5. The role of Scripture in worship

To worship God requires truth (John 4:24). The worship of God in a church service also requires truth. Since spiritual truth comes from God's word, we can say the degree that the worship reflects God's word is the degree that we worship God in truth. There are several categories of how we can evaluate the Scripture in our worship of God:

- a. Songs that are a direct repetition of Bible verses

These are Scripture songs from the Bible.

- b. Songs that are a restatement of Bible verses

These songs may have Scripture verses in them but they also have Scriptural content stated in other phrasing that fits the meter of the songs.

- c. Songs that are a theological equivalent of Bible verses

These are the majority of songs that have been sung in churches over the years. The lyrics may not each be some version of a particular Scripture verse but they are correctly reflecting the theology of the Scripture.

- d. Songs that are not directly connected to Bible verses

This has become more and more commonplace. Must every line of every lyric be a theological statement or Bible verse? How much can we deviate from such truths before the song becomes worthless for the worship of God? This is subjective but in modern times, worship songs have become more focused upon the person who is singing and less upon the God who to be sung about or to.

- e. Songs that have some aberration of theological truths

The question with these songs is whether the popularity of the song and the enjoyment factor is worth the confusion of biblical truth. Commonly, truth is the loser. One example of this is the top song (according to iTunes) from Hillsong Worship, *What a Beautiful Name*. In the midst of a good deal of biblical truth is the lyric "You didn't want heaven without us so Jesus you brought heaven down." This is more than a concept absent from the Bible, it misses the purpose of Christ's redemption, which was to display the righteousness of God (Romans 3:21-26). God's love in salvation was not to solve His loneliness.

- f. Songs that communicate falsely about God

Obviously, songs that reflect outright bad theology ought to be avoided. Our worship must be in truth and if truth is lacking then our worship is necessarily compromised.

6. The goal of the worship service

If we surveyed Christians with the question “what is the goal of a church worship service” the overwhelming answer would be the worship of God. But if worship is dependent upon the individual worshipping in spirit and truth, can this actually be accomplished? Certainly there will be some percentage of people in a worship service who are not worshipping God.

If this is so, then the one leading the service is merely providing an avenue for those who are worshipping God in their lives to express this worship together with their fellow true worshippers. If hindrances to worship exist then it affects the meaningfulness of those who have gathered to worship the Lord in spirit and truth from a pure heart. These hindrances occur in three major ways:

a. Distractions

When Paul wrote to correct the Corinthians’ practices of their church he noted that “all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner.” The chaos that can exist in some Charismatic churches is one of the issues that even fellow Charismatics will object to. But tolerance of distractions has become the norm in modern times. There is a sense that individual expression of worship must not be curtailed regardless of its effect upon the person’s fellow worshippers.

There is no finite list of the type of distractions that may hinder the worship of God. Beyond the distractions from other worshippers, often distractions exist because of the church itself. From musical distractions (lack of musical skill or the demonstration of musical skill) to props and aids to worship, there is no end to what distracts from worship. While we cannot produce worship, we can make worship more difficult.

b. Externalism

Generally, Charismatic worship favors singing to God over singing about God. Sally Morgenthaler in *Exploring the Worship Spectrum* writes, “in a recent study of two hundred songs regularly used in charismatic worship services, only thirteen focused on the person or work of Christ.” What replaces central biblical truth is external emotional connectedness. Joe Horness adds, “the emphasis of the contemporary worship service would be primarily focused on the internal moving of the Spirit in the hearts of our people while the charismatic worship movement would embrace and encourage more outward signs of the Holy Spirit’s presence as well.”

This external focus on the worship experience over the God who is worshipped has led to many varieties of expressions of worship. Our lips can praise God while our hearts are far from Him (Matthew 15:8-9). The fruit of true worship in spirit is the character of our life (Galatians 5:22-23) and ministry (Matthew 7:15-23).

c. Manipulations

No one wishes to be manipulated. In the attempt to lead a church to worship, people can take liberties in order to help create a worship experience. Worship leaders are often taught to create a worship mood through the dimming of lights, the use of art, banners, candles, the expressions of those on stage, long repetitions of musical phrases, emotive video presentations, etc. Such attempts to produce an experience with God is harmful in that those who are not worshipping God in reality are led to believe that they have drawn close to God by an experience than has been created for them. Their true spiritual condition is masked by an artificial spiritual mood. Furthermore, those who are worshipful may become put off by the sense of an artificially manufactured experience.

The goal of worship music ought to be to lead a congregation into worship together as a fellowship. We are not inviting the Holy Spirit or packaging the presence of God. God is omnipresent and as we through faith draw near to him in humble submission we are worshipping. No one can do this for us, it comes from our heart.

7. The effect of worship music upon churches

Music is a powerful tool for good or bad. Many people attach themselves to the musical experience in a church service. Many enjoy a variety of spiritual songs that have been marketed by the Christian publishing industry. In the age of digital recordings, worship music is with us at all times. We no longer need to even attend a church to gain personal satisfaction from worship songs. Due to this ubiquitous nature of music today, the Church has never been as influenced by musical artists. Add to this the concerts, along with the related promotions and talks, and the effect of music upon churches is significant.

It is normal for people to assume that if they enjoy the music of an artist then they would also benefit from other things associated with the ministry. This ability to expand influence through worship music is why we see the advent of musical artists that represent large mega-churches. Charismatic churches have been at the forefront of this with Vineyard Worship, Hillsong Worship, Hillsong United, Hillsong Young and Free, and Bethel Music. Such endeavors are more than making music available, it is the marketing of church movements with doctrine that spreads beyond just lyrics. Through the medium of music, unbiblical teaching abounds in evangelical churches who do not consider themselves to be Charismatic.

8. Conclusion

Outward expressions of emotionalism in Charismatic worship are meaningless without a heart of submission to God. The inner work of the Holy Spirit in purifying our hearts is central to true worship. The true evidence that our worship is real and not manufactured is the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our character and our ministry. Exuberance is no substitute for integrity and faithfulness.