

Idolatrics in Worship

At a recent worship conference I attended, a speaker had been trying to describe some of the similarities between our present postmodern world and that of the first century, suggesting that a return to some ancient, classic Christian language and pattern may be fruitful for the church. But a young pastor in the group quizzed him about the dangers of postmodernism. “In the books that I’ve been reading,” he warned, “they say that there’s a lot of Eastern mysticism and New Age influences in postmodernism. Maybe we shouldn’t be trying to put this stuff in our worship.”

The pastor was right to be concerned, for there is much to be wary of in postmodernism for Christians and there is much that will challenge and confound us. The bad news about the postmodern world is that it’s an odd, seemingly new place full of conflicting philosophies, strange sights and sounds and colors and tastes, and hundreds of incongruous images with no discernable commonality or context. The good news is that the postmodern world isn’t so new after all, and it gives us many clues as to how it can best be engaged with the gospel. Christian thinkers seem to be split about postmodernism and struggle with one of two basic views: 1) Postmodernism is a post-Christian, uncertain, even strange, future where nothing makes sense anymore, people are mostly pagan, the prospects for the church are bleak, and we might as well let the approaching tidal wave wash over us in defeat; and 2) Postmodernism is a post-Christian, uncertain, even strange, future where nothing makes sense anymore, people are mostly pagan, the prospects for the church have never been greater, and we might as well ride the crest of the approaching tidal wave to victory.

I later thought that perhaps the best way to respond to the pastor’s concerns would have been to point out that there are already some worldly or pagan influences in worship we ought to be concerned about before worrying about chant or candles. Our worship has idolatries?

Here are three that deeply concern me...

1. The idolatry of self.
2. The idolatry of a worldly pace and program.
3. The idolatry of the word over the Word.

1. *The idolatry of self.* I am ever more convinced that the chief challenge we face in worship renewal is that of deciding once and for all who or what is going to be the object of our worship. There is a profound difference between God being the subject of our worship and His being the object of it: Having God be the “subject” of our worship is relatively easy and requires no real skill; having Him in His rightful place of “object” of our worship is another matter altogether. It may also mean casting down several idols we have made to self, including perhaps the most pervasive—and the one that strikes well-meaning pastors and worship leaders as well as the average parishioner: *The notion that worship is mostly about me.*

Most everyone would agree that God ought to be the object of our worship, but things get a bit more cloudy when it's suggested that we celebrate the Table with more frequency or, perhaps, that the service is too word oriented. What might attitudes about Table and spoken word in worship reveal about this "subject versus object" debate?

I recently read with dismay the remarks of outgoing Tennessee Baptist Convention President Kevin Shrum when he suggested that worship should not be the priority of a congregation: "If God wanted worship to be the main priority of the church," Shrum reportedly said, "he would take us on to heaven right after we were saved where we could worship Him perfectly. Satan has used it to divide us. My friends, we've got to stop worshipping the worship. While worship is necessary, the essential purposes of the church are evangelism and missions."

I profoundly disagree. This idea simply does not reflect a sound Biblical theology of worship, to say nothing of an understanding of church history. Of course we mustn't worship our worship, but neither should be worship, say, our programs. And we mustn't worship our work— *something so tempting and even easy to do when the work is godly*. The modern church was nearly completely successful in fixing in our minds the idolatrous and ultimately self-obsessed notion that programs and work come first in church.

At church, electric lights and boilers and restrooms are *necessary*. Worship is *essential*. Why? As Dr. Robert Webber puts it: The source of the church's spirituality, its power, is through its encounter with God in worship. Evangelism and missions are the fruits of that spirituality.

For me, the debate about the proper place of worship in the context of church comes out of a misunderstanding of the church's "purpose" versus her "tasks." The singular purpose of the church is to worship. Her tasks, however, are many, and include evangelism and missions and discipleship. The idea of the church having less to do with purpose and more to do with tasks is something like a bride ignoring her groom because she is too focused on writing wedding invitations, or perhaps better said, a fire wanting to de-emphasize spark and fuel so that it can emphasize warmth and light.

So, why is the church's singular purpose worship? Because we were born to worship. And we must worship— we will worship something. We worship because that's how we were created. Listen to this marvelous quote from A. W. Tozer:

"One of the greatest tragedies that we find, even in this most enlightened of all ages, is the utter failure of millions of men and women ever to discover why they were born.

"Deny it if you will – and some persons will – but wherever there are humans in the world, there are people who are suffering from a hopeless and depressing kind of amnesia. It forces them to cry out, either silently within themselves or often with audible frustration, 'I don't even know why I was born!'"

“...Our first parents in the human race [were] the man named Adam and woman named Eve. Adam had a great fall and he received a terrible bump; involved with him in the catastrophe was Eve, his wife. Then, when they tried to shake the fog out of their minds, looking at each other, they realized that they no longer knew who they were, and they did not know why they were alive. They did not know the purpose for their existence.

“Ever since that time, men and women alienated from God and trying to exist on a sick, fallen planet have been pleading, ‘I don’t even know why I was born.’

“Those who have followed the revelation provided by the Creator God have accepted that God never does anything without purpose. We do believe, therefore, that God had a noble purpose in mind when He created us. We believe that it was distinctly the will of God that men and women created in His image would desire fellowship with Him above all else. In His plan, it was to be a perfect fellowship based on adoring worship of the Creator and Sustainer of all things.”

Worship must be the church’s singular purpose, not only because it’s the thing that we were created to do, and not only because it reminds us why we exist, but because it’s the very thing that we will continue to do for all time, eternally, in heaven. Worship will never end. The tasks of the church, though, are temporary—someday they will come to an end—and *that’s* the reason we must go about them with God-powered, Christ-exalting, and Spirit-inspired enthusiasm.

If worship isn’t the purpose of the church, then we just might be going about the tasks in our own strength— even if that strength is rightly motivated. In the end, for me to go about the important tasks of the church in my own strength is still all about me. How can we possibly go about the tasks Christ mandated in the Great Commission if we don’t go to Him first for strengthening, blessing, and sending? Those things happen in worship. Worship is where we recite the saving acts and deeds of God. If we fail to worship, we might possibly begin to lose the sense of the complete wonder, mystery, otherness, and power of the God we serve. Ultimately, no one wants to go about doing tasks for a small god.

The problem is not that we have paid too much attention to worship, but that we haven’t given it enough of the right kind of attention. We have neglected worship. We have failed to evangelize in our daily lives, so we have wrongly made worship the most important place where we evangelize. We talk about the great importance of Scripture, but we have failed to meaningfully incorporate it into worship. We talk about the importance of prayer, but we have failed to bathe our worship in it. How ironic and sad that in neglecting worship, some have neglected the Lord’s Table, perhaps the single most powerful place and time in worship where we are most connected to God— one of the most important places from where God can, through the power of the Spirit and in the presence of Christ, empower us to go and do the important tasks of the church.

I believe that careful examination of Scripture shows that divine/human encounters begin with God and end with human action. God initiates the encounter; we respond. Isaiah 6 does not begin with the Prophet saying, “Here I am, send me,” but rather with worship. God comes first. He calls us; we respond. He provides the vision; we act.

It is ironic that in a day when worship is rightly becoming less word centered, there should be a call, at least from one pastor, to de-emphasize it. Frankly, this may be more at the root of the problem than some want to admit. The spoken word is not the centerpiece of worship—and neither is music, by the way: The Word made flesh is the centerpiece of worship. I can’t imagine this being a mere necessity or wanting to de-emphasize it.

Our response to the world around us—the world that God created—comes out of our worship of Him. He is the creator; we are the created. It all starts—it must start—with Him

2. *The idolatry of a worldly pace and program.* “Boy, that was deadly.” I have heard some folks use words like this to describe something dull. “Lifeless.” “Deader than a doornail.” Language like this has even been used, I imagine, to describe worship. But I wonder if our idea of dead worship is the same as God’s idea of dead worship. Or, perhaps better said, I wonder if our idea of lively worship is the same as God’s idea of lively worship.

A dear friend in ministry once told me that his pastor was constantly admonishing him not to have any “dead” time in worship. That’s really a modern idea, isn’t it? “Dead time.” After all, the modern age taught us that “Time is money,” and that we mustn’t “waste” our time—especially when we could be filling it with lots of things. The choices before us for filling time are more numerous than ever—and one of the things we spend a lot of time doing is finding ways to save time. Ironic, isn’t it? Life these days is a bit like that wonderful old episode of “I Love Lucy” where she and Ethel took a turn at the chocolate factory production line: Life keeps churning out all those chocolates until they end up consuming us.

The modern life is a fast-paced, zip-zap-zoop life where, if we’re not careful, we even work at our play. The action-packed getaways that some folks use for vacations make me tired just hearing about them. Why is it that the time you most need a vacation is when you return home from vacation? Have you noticed that even many Christians, who ought to know better, seem to have decided that rest is sinful—or at least a weakness—when the biblical model for rest is quite the opposite? My goodness, the calendar of activities we ask our Church folks to crowd into their Sundays doesn’t leave much time for a “day of rest.”

And then there’s worship. I just wonder how much of the fast-paced, zip-zap-zoop modern life has pushed into worship. Not too long ago I had the privilege of hearing Marva Dawn speak to this subject at a worship conference. “Maybe,” she said, “it’s time

for us to start making our worship look like the opposite of what people have experienced the whole week before.” She wasn’t suggesting that we shouldn’t strive to make worship excellent, and she wasn’t implying that worship shouldn’t be colorful and varied and vibrant. So much of our daily life is filled with such things. But our days are also filled with much noise and speed and perhaps too many choices: too many rich chocolates coming way too fast to be appreciated. Our daily lives are, at the least, lively. If that’s the case, and if worship ought to provide a good dose of the opposite of what we’ve been living in the previous week, then should our worship be “dead”?

The idea that the church should present a wide variety of colorful choices— that church should present a smorgasbord of programs— and that her worship should be a fast-paced, variety-packed experience may sound good, but it may also become an idolatry. We must remember that the Good Shepherd, who is the ultimate Seeker, left his fold to go out into the wilderness to find the sheep that was lost. *He didn’t remain behind and try to attract the lost sheep back into the fold, for in order to do so, he would have had to make the fold look like the place to which the sheep had wandered in the first place.* And then, even if this faux fold deception had succeeded, how and when would the shepherd ever be able to reveal the true nature of the fold to the sheep?

3. *The idolatry of word over Word.* This one is a problematic subject. So very many battles have been fought, and even now are raging, over the issue of the appropriate place for God’s word, the Bible, in worship. My own denomination prides itself in being “people of the book,” and yet even a casual glance at the average Baptist order of service reveals little meaningful, significant use of Scripture in worship. Can the Bible become an idolatry? Of course. How did we get to the point where it could become so?

The modern, scientific age was built upon four philosophical “pillars”, as Diogenes Allen calls them, that though in hindsight seem antithetical to matters of faith, were nearly wholly assimilated in one form or another by the Western church. They were: 1) Reason is superior to faith; 2) Science (or politics for some) will lead to morality; 3) Progress is inevitable; and 4) Knowledge is inherently good. Ironic to me is that though there was a schism in the modern era between science and religion, both sides played by the same rules: Religion was lured into defining, analyzing, and communicating matters of faith using the same rules— the same kinds of methods and language— of science.

Arguments based on logical empiricism rise or fall, like vast walls, on the soundness of the factual bricks with which they are built. If one brick crumbles, the wall argument collapses. This is why it has been so important for many to increasingly rely on the unnecessarily distracting issue of “inerrancy” in Scripture. For them, the whole of their faith rests on the soundness of a myriad of logical Bible bricks.

I embrace the Bible because it is truth. It is authoritative and it is God’s word. But most important of all, the Bible is the record of the divine revelation of God: God’s word, the Bible, points us to the Word, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is *the* divine revelation of God. There is a powerfully significant difference between the word and the Word, and if

we're not careful, we can unwittingly slide into a kind of idolatry with the Bible. *Here's what I mean:*

I recently read an interview with one of the world's most influential Bible translators, Eugene Nida. Called the "premiere linguist and translation consultant" by the *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, Nida may not be a familiar name, but he has influenced the Bibles read by most Christians around the world, including the 1976 *Good News Bible* and its 1995 *Contemporary English Version*, as well as the *New Living Translation*.

When asked what further is needed when it comes to Bible translations, Nida sidestepped the question and replied instead, "What is really needed is for people to take the message seriously and share it with other people... So many Christians love to argue about the Bible rather than take it seriously as a message that is important to their lives... [Many people] have grown up worshiping the words more than worshiping God... And as long as they worship words, instead of worshiping God as revealed in Jesus Christ, they feel safe."

This got me to thinking: Can we read the Bible— holding its words in the highest of esteem— and yet miss its message? Sadly, I think the answer is yes. And here's part of the reason why: For years, we've lived in a world where reason and science and logic— measurable things— told us what was valuable. The modern world hoodwinked us evangelicals into approaching the Bible the same way it did: through a kind of scientific methodology in search of truth. And so, as Robert Webber writes, "liberals used reason to demythologize the Bible, while conservatives argued for the exact correctness of everything in the Bible. In this vicious circle the liberals tore the Bible to shreds with biblical criticism while the conservatives continually followed... in trying to put the pieces back together with rational arguments. In the meantime for many the message was lost..."

"The issue in a postmodern world is not to prove the Bible, but to restore the message of the Bible, a message which, when proclaimed by the power of the Spirit, takes up residence within those who know how to hear... The mystery of the person and work of Christ proclaimed is the starting point of faith, not rational argumentation that seeks to prove the Bible to be correct."

The Bible doesn't need defending— we don't have to prove that it is correct. It is truth. Its words are precious and true. It is authoritative and it is God's word. Most important of all, the Bible is the record of the divine revelation of God. But the Bible is not the starting point of our faith. The Bible is a living signpost: It points us to Jesus. *The person and work of Jesus Christ is the starting point of our faith.*

Conclusion. So what about that young pastor's concern about the New Age or Eastern mystical influences in the postmodern world? Well, I for one, vote that we don't try to put any "stuff" in worship just for the sake of trying something new (even if it's old) or for the sake of finding something that "works".

Worship planning isn't a scientific endeavor or, heaven forbid, a kind of religious alchemy where we try to change base metal into worship gold by combining this or that ingredient. Candles and symbols and ancient texts aren't worship cure-alls, but they aren't pagan idolatries either. I think we probably already have enough idols present in worship that need to be destroyed before we can look for renewal to take place.

There is monumental change occurring in worship across our country as we leave the modern era behind and move forward into that unknown element called the "postmodern." Think of it as the collision of two great landmasses on a geological scale: There will be friction, there might be some earthquakes – perhaps even some fire – but in the end, the steady push of the "new" will make its mark and change the landscape forever. The modern, with its emphasis on intellect and the word, is slowly but surely being overrun by the postmodern, with its emphasis on experience and story and symbol. Of course, in some ways the "new" is not that new after all. Many postmodern worshipers, especially youth, are turning to inspiration to the colorful patterns and language of the ancient church. There they are rediscovering classic Christianity and learning to draw strength and spirituality from a deep, satisfying well of time-tested truth and tradition. The postmodern world need not frighten us, for many of its thirsts can be marvelously and even uniquely quenched at that well.

Our purpose as a church is to worship our unchanging God. Our tasks as Christians include offering a cup of living water to a thirsty world.