

A Response to Recent Remarks by Outgoing TBC President

I 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, in my opinion, does not reflect a Biblical theology of worship, to say nothing of church history. Of course we mustn’t worship our worship, but neither should we worship, say, our programs. And we mustn’t worship our work—something so tempting and easy to do especially when the work is godly. The modern church was nearly completely successful in fixing in our minds the idolatrous 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 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.

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