

# OPINION

## *Worship Then and Now*

by DAVID K. GILLETT

*When some unbeliever or ordinary person comes in, he will be convinced of sin by what he hears, his secret thoughts will be brought into the open and he will bow down and worship God, confessing, 'Truly God is here among you.'*

### *A Credibility Gap?*

That, according to St Paul, is what should happen when an outsider enters our regular times of congregational worship (1 Cor 14:24f). There should be such a clear sense of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in our worship that an outsider is compelled to notice something different, something powerfully supernatural, something that radically transforms his life. Yet often such a person confesses to be untouched, uninterested or even bored!

This credibility gap that often exists between our experience of worship and that described by St Paul prompts the question, 'What is real worship?' Jesus in his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well provided the answer: 'The time is coming, and is already here, when by the power of God's Spirit people will worship the Father as he really is, offering him the true worship that he wants. God is spirit, and only by the power of his Spirit can people worship him as he really is.' (Jn 4:23f). This translation (from the Good News version) faithfully conveys the meaning of the more traditional rendering, 'in spirit and in truth'. These two factors—the presence of God's Spirit, and our appreciation of the truth of Christ—are at the heart of all true Christian worship.

### *Worship in the Power of God's Spirit.*

It is the activity of God's Spirit which transforms a human ceremony or liturgy (whether written or not) into an encounter with the living God. The Spirit makes worship an event; He creates within the congregation that openness and expectancy which are the necessary preparation for worship. The worshipper thus anticipates being 'lost in wonder, love and praise,' he waits for the word of God to speak directly to his mind and heart, he desires to see God's

power at work in conversion, healing, prophecy and the like, and he expects to go home *changed* by the work of God's Spirit in which he has been involved (2 Cor 3:17f).

We see this supernatural quality of worship in many incidents in Scripture. When Moses was confronted with the presence of God in the burning bush he had to remove his shoes; he was on holy ground. The response of Jacob at Bethel reveals the deep awe and wonder that overtakes us when we realize the unmistakable signs of God's presence: 'The Lord is here! He is in this place and I didn't know it! . . . It must be the house of God; it must be the gate of heaven.' (Gen 20:16f). When, on the island of Patmos, John saw the vision of the glorified Christ, he fell involuntarily at His feet as though dead (Rev 1:17), so overawed was he by the wonder of God in that encounter.

Since the day of Pentecost the Spirit has been poured out on all believers so that worship for all can be an event, an encounter with the living God. After being baptized with the Spirit the disciples ran out into the streets of Jerusalem praising God in the new tongues they had been given. The presence of the Spirit led first of all to joyous and spontaneous praise, which in turn brought significant evangelistic results. This note of praise is one of the clearest marks of the Spirit's presence within the worshipping community. The Spirit leads first to praise and thanksgiving as the basis for all worship, confession and intercession. All too easily our prayers can become centred on ourselves and our problems with a consequent heaviness and hopelessness that rarely rises to that level of faith and expectancy which Jesus encourages us to exercise (Matt 18:19f). It is when our hope is raised by prayer and thanksgiving for all that we have received in Christ that we will know true power and effectiveness in our intercession (cf. Phil 4:6).

St Paul recognises the centrality of the Spirit in our worship when he encourages us—'Be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with words of psalms and hymns and sacred songs; sing hymns and psalms to the Lord with praise in your hearts.' (Eph 5:18f). This praise has a liturgical element (psalms) which draws on the tradition, as well as a creative and spontaneous element which the Spirit inspires within the congregation. Any church which is open to the direction of God's Spirit will find a natural blend of old and new, liturgical and spontaneous, structured and free.

It is the direction of the Spirit that also leads to participation by the whole Body. St Paul's rubrics for worship in the early church were as follows: 'When you meet for worship one person has a hymn, another a teaching, another a revelation from God, another a message in strange tongues, and still another the explanation of what is said. Everything must be of help to the church.' (1 Cor 14:26). To enable such creativity and the sharing of spiritual gifts which are given to different members of the congregation (1 Cor 12:7) there must be a clear framework and a leadership which ensures that all is done in peace and harmony (1 Cor 14:33). As this kind of leadership fosters such creativity and spontaneity within the structure, so corporate worship becomes that encouragement it should be for the individual believer. For we not only approach God in worship but we speak to one another (Eph 5:18), and it is in

this horizontal interaction that we help one another into that place of praise and expectancy. This encouragement becomes more necessary as we live in an increasingly secular and materialistic age (see Heb 10:19-25).

### *Worship God as He really is*

This Spirit-filled activity of worship must also be 'in truth'. Christian worship is not interested in experience for experience's sake: it must always be a response to God as He has truly and definitively revealed himself in Jesus Christ. Hence we must be cautious about the growing tendency in the West to adopt Indian approaches to prayer and worship (e.g. Transcendental Meditation and Yoga) under the misleading assumption that because they seem to work they are consequently helpful and valid for a Christian.

While we can, of course, learn from other religious and spiritual traditions we must also be aware of the radical difference between the Christian and the Indian approaches to the spiritual life. The object of Christian worship is to lead to the unity of our whole beings with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we praise God 'with hearts and hands and voices.' The Indian approach is quite different. The attempt there is to escape from the body and enter into the transcendental realm unhindered by our bodies, our minds or our emotions. In contrast we, as Christians, are looking to God to redeem our fallen humanity and bring our whole beings, body, mind and spirit, into the presence of God through Christ.

To worship 'in truth' also points to the importance of the will. We shall not always be stirred to active and spontaneous participation in worship by the encouragement of our fellow believers, nor indeed, at times, by the presence and power of God's Spirit, but, because we know the truth of what God has done for us in Christ, we shall *determine* to praise him and remember all that he has done for us (Psalm 103:1-5). Thus although worship should involve our whole beings, including our emotions, it is not dependent on our particular psychological make-up or our emotional state at any given time.

Christian worship will always be a response, among other things, to the revealed actions of God in scripture—to the truth as we see it supremely in Christ. It is for this reason that liturgy has come to play an important part in most Christian traditions; it ensures that Christian worship is set firmly within a framework of biblical truth.

### *Spirit and Truth together*

History reveals the tendency for the church to swing to one extreme or the other: to settle *either* for the Spirit *or* for Truth rather than the fulness of *both together*—in fact neither can be truly present on its own, and any such worship that majors on the one to the detriment of the other is bound to be impoverished. Paul had to warn the Corinthian church about a too exclusive concern with the Spirit and spontaneity, but for most of the Christian era the danger has been to ignore the Spirit and be left with an arid ceremonialism (largely in the more Catholic traditions) or a dry formalism (widespread among Protestant churches).

The various renewal movements that have arisen, often in reaction to formalism and ceremonialism have, at times, tended to err in a Corinthian direction. Perhaps in our time the early days of charismatic renewal showed too little concern for truth and order, so heady was the experience of the new wine. Now, as the more restrictive word 'charismatic' gives way to the broader, fuller description, 'spiritual renewal', we are seeing a maturity coming in the area of worship. Increasingly there is that blend of biblical and liturgical worship with the free spontaneity and eventfulness of Spirit-directed worship.

The New Testament challenges us all to pray for the Spirit's presence in our worship, that our structures may be filled with the power, the awe and the eventfulness of true worship—a foretaste of that in which we shall all one day share in heaven.