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1. To encourage *reformation* in the local Christian churches worldwide,
2. To promote the cause of *revival* and spiritual awakening through prayer and the provision of resources to aid Christian leaders.

INFORMATION

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The conviction of the staff and editors of the *Reformation & Revival Journal* is that awakening, of the kind seen in the First Great Awakening in America, wedded to the doctrinal concerns of the historic Protestant Reformation as expressed in the terms *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, and *sola fide*, is needed in our generation.

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

RECOVERING WORSHIP: REGAINING OUR FOCUS

John H. Armstrong

Seven years ago we devoted an issue of *Reformation & Revival Journal* (Volume Two, Number One) to the theme of worship. In that issue we addressed some of "the trends and movements in the church which affect how we do or do not worship God." In the time since I wrote those words (1993) not much has changed in the church of North America. The "worship wars" have continued, almost unabated, and the anthropocentricity of modern congregational focus has continued, with almost no perceptible change.

My own local newspaper, like many, has a Sunday segment on religion. Recently the lead article was titled "Showing the Bible's Relevance Today." It was a piece on how "start-up churches" in our fast growing county attract large numbers of people to their contemporary Sunday services. It included the stories of several who had found, as one pastor put it, "the church for people who don't like church." (I must confess, I still do not understand this in light of the "offense" the gospel inevitably causes for those who do not believe it!)

One convinced participant in a new church plant spoke of "too much pomp and circumstance" in his birth church. But what exactly attracts these devoted followers to these new churches? *Daily Herald* staff writer Judith Cookis answers: "Religious leaders say their churches are just delivering what people have been craving: contemporary services that show the Bible's relevance to their lives now."¹ Her point is well illustrated by one who saw a dramatic re-enactment of the Ten Commandments one Sunday and said it changed him forever. He opined, "I used to think it [Christianity?] was a list of things not to do. It's really a

freedom to know how to live your life."

Many say to this: What's the big deal about style and form in worship? Aren't multitudes going back to church and finding spiritual meaning for their lives? How can anything be wrong with this? After all, isn't worship about me getting my needs met by God? Don't I attend precisely because I need to get something that will actually help me live more authentically? Well, not exactly. This, in my estimation, is precisely the problem. This ongoing revolution in public worship is *dangerous* because many who attend these churches are being led to develop significantly wrong ideas about God! These wrong ideas are staggering if one considers the actual weight of research done by George Gallup, Jr., and George Barna. Let me elaborate.

One convinced attendee of a new church illustrates my point when he concludes, "I was led to believe God was a vengeful God. I thought a bolt of lightning would come from heaven if I screwed up. I've learned God is a forgiving God who will accept you regardless." What any discerning reader should note here is the complete confusion of biblical categories and the abysmal lack of knowledge in this response, from a supposed new follower of Christ. First, the conception this person held of "a vengeful God" is terribly wrong and quite misleading. The God revealed in Holy Scripture is filled with wrath and indignation toward false worship. His wrath does presently hang like a dark and ominous cloud over the lives of those who disobey his gospel (John 3:36). But he is not a "vengeful" deity, not at least as we commonly think of *human* vengeance. His wrath is much more of a settled opposition to both sin and sinners. It is an opposition rooted deeply in the character of who he is, the holy God of heaven and earth.

As for "the bolt of lightning" comment—well, it is quite amazing that God does not strike down blasphemers and rebels on the spot. Several weeks ago a clerk in a Berke-

ley, California, bookstore announced to a friend of mine, who was purchasing several Christian books, "I am the number-one blasphemer in Berkeley!" What was amazing to me, at the time, was that he was not struck down on the spot! The only reason why he was not is that God is patient and kind, even with the most rebellious of wicked people. But what kind of conclusion should a person draw from the fact that the "bolt of lightning" doesn't come down and instantly destroy wicked, sinful people? Certainly not the conclusion drawn by multitudes of casual church attendees in our generation; i.e., that God is good, good, good, and love, sweet love, and not much else! Yet this is exactly what the hard data of the Gallup and Barna research say most of these types of services are producing in those who adopt this approach.

Finally, the answer this church member gives for preferring this style of church is staggering when it comes to the words, "God is a forgiving God who will accept you regardless." For anyone who knows the Bible at all this answer, simply put, takes your breath away. "Regardless" of what? What happened to repentance? And what about the utter necessity of the gift of true saving faith? And what is the result of true faith? Dare we approach God as the "forgiving God who will accept you regardless" and call this worship?

Another one of these contemporary start-up churches conducted research in their community before beginning public services. This research followed the usual script: Survey thousands of homes to find out what it takes to get people back into church. The pastor noted, "We heard a lot of stuff about parenting, marriage, family and a desire for community." So what did his start-up church do? Well, it responded to the market and gave people lots of what they said they wanted. None of this is really amazing since evangelicals have been doing the same for over twenty-five years now. The simple fact is this—many evangelical mission

agencies and denominations in North America, of virtually all theological traditions, have adopted this approach to church planting. To challenge this philosophy is to come under heavy fire for opposing *real* evangelism, evangelism that is said to be both relevant and effective.

For several decades I have been convinced that we are engaged in a struggle for the soul of the church in our time. This struggle is much less about style and tradition than it is about theology and how it actually relates to godly living. This real battle is not *outside* the church, in the postmodern culture. It is definitely not in the political arena. It is *inside* the church and centers precisely on what takes place each Lord's Day when we gather as the church before the living, holy God revealed in Scripture. We may disagree about questions of musical tastes, legitimately and Christianly. I hope this issue and its sequel (Volume 9, Number 3) will demonstrate this and more. But we cannot tamper with the God-centered focus and direction of worship and not ultimately destroy what the church is all about.

In this same article I noted above I am intrigued that one of those who responded the most clearly to what is wrong with this move toward directly fulfilling man's felt emotional needs in "worship" was a Roman Catholic college chaplain. (This caught my attention particularly because I know this priest. He is a serious and reflective man who loves the heart of historic evangelicalism in terms of its desire to bring people to real faith in Christ.) He responded to the *Daily Herald* interview by noting, "A lot of times, they [i.e., those who plant these new churches] don't say what the text means. . . . They ask, 'What does it mean to you?'" He added, "To interpret the Bible, you used to have a sound understanding of history."

I submit that it is an unusual moment in recent history when a Roman Catholic priest is much closer to the truth

of evangelical faith and practice in this arena than multitudes of evangelical pastors. The great role models for evangelicals today are much more likely to be the pastors of megachurches built on these principles, not faithful saints and martyrs of the past. The priest goes on to write of these contemporary services: "It's professional singers and musicians. You've gone to a wonderful concert. You get out of there and you feel great. Nothing is demanded of you."

Another friend, Lyle Dorsett, professor of evangelism at Wheaton College (and also pastor of a fast-growing new church), better sums up a historically Christian and more reflective response to all of this, by noting:

I see a lot of people hungering for a nontraditional and non-typical church environment, but they're also hungering for something that's Christ-centered and worshipful. What you're seeing is a return to traditional values and with that is a return to church.

He is undoubtedly right. People *are* hungering for spiritual reality. This is one of the most "spiritual" moments in recent American history. But "the church of what's happening now" has got it all wrong. If we do not recover God-centered worship, in whatever style or form we offer it, we will sweep the church clean of one problem, only to gain seven greater problems in the next generation. Maybe the rhetoric of recent "worship wars" needs to be turned down a notch or two, but the battle must never be surrendered. Clearly, too much is at stake.

It is time for those who lead the church to develop a serious theology of Christian worship and to put this theology into practice in their respective traditions and appropriate forms. My prayer is that this issue, and the one which will follow (Part Two), will make a healthy contribution to this raging debate. Too much is at stake to not seek for the

recovery of reverent and God-centered worship in the church of our time.

EDITOR

Note

1. *Daily Herald*, Sunday, March 5, 2000, 5: 1. Further quotes are from this same article, "Showing the Bible's Relevance Today."

*J*esus Christ in the whole course of his obedience from his birth to his death on the Cross . . . fulfilled in himself the Word of God tabernacling among men, the covenanted way of response to God set forth in the ancient cult, and constituted himself our Temple, our Priest, our Offering and our Worship. It is therefore in his name only that we worship God, not in our own name, nor in our own significance but solely in the significance of Christ's eternal self-oblation to the Father.

THOMAS F. TORRANCE, "THE WORD OF GOD AND THE RESPONSE OF MAN" IN *GOD AND RATIONALITY* (LONDON, ENGLAND: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1997), 158.

*W*orship is the natural expression of faith. . . . Worship is essentially a dialogical activity in which we stand over against God even when we draw near to him, distinguishing his transcendent nature from ourselves, while relating ourselves appropriately to his holiness and majesty and responding thankfully to the mercy he extends towards us.

THOMAS F. TORRANCE, "THE WORD OF GOD AND THE RESPONSE OF MAN" IN *GOD AND RATIONALITY* (LONDON, ENGLAND: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1997), 156-57.

*T*he presentation of ourselves to God in Christ is the essence of Christian worship.

DAVID PETERSON, "WORSHIP IN THE NEW TESTAMENT" IN *WORSHIP: ADORATION AND ACTION*, D. A. CARSON, ED. (GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN: BAKER, 1993), 68.