

# JOINING THE APOSTOLIC TRAIN

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*10/2014*

We live in a time when worship is often identified as the most important thing we could possibly do. Which it very well is. The claim, however, often accompanies other claims: “Come worship with us!” is an invitation on church marquees, magazine advertisements, and promotional fliers. Music publishers advertise their music as “anointed,” nearly guaranteeing an authentic worship experience. Other slogans about worship are common as well: “It’s not about us. It’s all about Him!” or “Our worship here is just a practice run for heaven!”

After awhile, we may wonder if we really know what worship is. Is it something we experience only when we sing? Do certain styles of music facilitate true worship more than others? Do we worship only when we are in church? Is our worship here only preparation for worship in heaven, or is it integral to our life and witness in the world? If it is only practice, how often do we need to do it?

The Bible never defines worship. It simply commands right worship. We learn what it is by watching what is approved as true worship and what is condemned as idolatrous worship. The Bible also assumes that we are worshipping beings. We worship rightly and truly when we worship God. We worship wrongly and abominably when we worship either idols or ourselves. But we are always worshipping.

Isaiah’s dramatic encounter with God, recounted in Isaiah 6:1-8, can be understood as a description of worship. Incidentally, we get to see this again in Revelation 5 when a remarkably similar encounter occurs. In a few short verses we are given the essential components, a model if you will, of true worship.

First, this worship occurred in a historical context: “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord.” Isaiah encountered

God in time, in the midst of a specific set of circumstances and issues. It was not an encounter disconnected from his situation – some mystical escape or a merely emotional experience.

Second, Isaiah experienced the presence of a glorious, holy God. God is holy, holy, holy, and his glory fills the whole earth. Worship is more than intellectual assent: in worship we encounter the living God. This encounter is personal and touches our whole person, reaching every part of us, resulting in awe and mystery.

Third, as Isaiah takes in the incredible scene, he is overwhelmed with a complete sense of unworthiness. In short, he comes apart: “Woe is me! I am undone! For I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” In worship we see ourselves for who we are. Worship leads to an admission of unworthiness and a realization that we need to align ourselves with the holiness of God. Furthermore, Isaiah sees himself in the context of a group of people, God’s people, and he identifies with them as he confesses. Worship has corporate implications.

Fourth, God atones for Isaiah’s sin and removes his guilt, restoring Isaiah by sending one of the seraphim with a live coal from the altar to touch his mouth. When we turn to God, he heals and cleanses us. God sanctifies and restores us when we worship him.

And finally, Isaiah responds to the invitation of God by asking God to send him to fill the need of the hour. Isaiah is sent. In worship we respond in love and obedience to a mighty and merciful God whose purposes encompass time and eternity. God is already engaged in a great work, a project if you will, and he calls Isaiah into that ongoing work and purpose. In worship,

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we are called and we find our place in the ever active and purposeful work of God.

Reflecting on the implications of Isaiah's profound encounter, we can propose some further statements about worship.

First, worship is the appropriate response to the initiating revelation of God. God reveals himself and I respond. When God reveals himself and his glory to us through Scripture, in the person of Jesus, in a beautiful sunset, or in the artless love of a child, we respond in worship. We may feel repentant, grateful, humbled, or adoring, but all of these are a response to the revelation of God and his glory. Implicit in these responses is the clear sense of reverence for God as the one to whom we owe everything. Worship is not a manufactured experience that meets some self-defined, existential need in the human psyche. Neither is worship something I generate on my own simply because I ought to do it. Rather, worship is always a response to God himself, to what he has already done, to what he is doing, and to what he will do.

Second, the purpose of worship is both to glorify God and to sanctify human beings. Our worship ought to bring us before the ever living Lord of the universe, and it should result in sanctified human beings. While this may seem self-evident, James White observes that "many of our debates about worship have revolved around [the] question: Which takes precedence, glorifying God or making people holy?" White goes on to observe that most denominations tend to emphasize one over the other, but "both glorifying God and sanctifying human beings characterize Christian worship."<sup>1</sup> As Anabaptists, our emphasis on obedience and humility can have the unintended consequence of skewing our worship toward the sanctification side to the loss of focusing on God himself who makes all this possible. The Apostle Paul captures this reality in eloquent terms: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18 ESV).

Third, worship involves physical expression. The picture of the seraphim touching Isaiah's lips with a live coal is a striking image, given the setting. Even there, we have a physical demonstration of an unseen reality. The Hebrew word for worship means "to prostrate oneself before another," especially before a respected person. Understood this way, to worship means that I prostrate myself before God. In the New Testament, the several Greek words translated worship mean collectively, "to revere, to serve, to render religious service or homage," meaning that in worship I revere, I offer myself to or perform something for God, as in Romans 12:1 when I offer my body, for example. In our own language

the Old English worship signified ascribing worth, or respect, to someone – enacted by bowing or serving.

On one level we struggle to acknowledge the physical component of worship. Given the excesses that we have all seen, caution is both understandable and necessary. Yet it may be helpful to understand the origins of our reluctance. While we could blame our stolid Swiss-German roots, we can point out more fruitfully that, in some matters of worship practice, we are children of Zwingli. When Ulrich Zwingli took down the images from the walls of the Grossmünster in Zurich in 1524, he also whitewashed the paintings and decorations, nailed the organ shut, and silenced the congregational singing.<sup>2</sup> Conrad Grebel, a student of Zwingli, also argued against congregational singing.

Zwingli and Grebel defended these changes from Scripture, arguing that Colossians 3:16 commands us to praise and glorify God with our hearts, not with our voices. For Zwingli, the material could not participate with the holy, or convey grace. Noting John 6:63, Zwingli told Luther, "Spirit and flesh contradict each other." Those who worship God must worship him "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24).<sup>3</sup>

We can feel some sympathy for Zwingli's aversion to physical expressions when we consider the corruption of worship in the Catholic church of his day. Zwingli had seen firsthand the hypocrisy of people reciting Scripture and creed in pious demeanor but whose lives were anything but pious. He concluded that recitation and form were not guarantors of true worship, that only silence and the Word were appropriate for worship.

Our roots in Zwingli have bred in us an inherent distrust of physical expression in worship. However, as Anabaptists we became known for our martyr ballads and hymns. In addition we sing four-part hymns, take up offerings, wash feet, serve communion, and greet each other with the holy kiss. These practices are rooted in the commands of Scripture, yet they represent the necessity of physical expression in worship. We are certainly not Quakers in our worship practice. Their meetings were mostly silent after a certain point, and they rejected all ordinances as unnecessary for a more advanced believer.

Fourth, understanding the physical dimension of worship helps us to appreciate the habituating capacity of worship. In worship, we habituate, or cultivate, certain orientations and patterns of being and doing. When we do something repeatedly, we are formed by that practice. We come to respond reflexively to life situations out of a different way of being and doing. We respond as God would have us to respond. We respond to situations with the character of Jesus.

Perhaps an example from outside our experience will help to demonstrate this reality. When the tragedy of Nickel Mines occurred, the world was incredulous at the immediate response of the Amish to the murderer and his family. The Amish expressed forgiveness and loving care. Was it possible, people asked, that these families could respond authentically with forgiveness while still in the initial stages of shock and grief? If so, how? Would it not be completely natural to have feelings of anger and revenge that would then more gradually, over a reasonable period of time, align with a commitment to forgive? Instead, the Amish had become the very thing that seemed so counterintuitive: they had become forgivers, lovers of enemies who reflexively did the right thing in a moment of terrible crisis. Understood in this way, though the analogy is still inadequate, worship does become a practice run for heaven! As we repeatedly engage in the activities of worship, we begin to live and respond out of a new reality, the reality of God.<sup>4</sup>

And finally, to worship is to place ourselves in the great story of God's ongoing work in the world. In worship we recall and re-tell the great stories of God's redeeming work in history, His-story. Recalling these stories, we place our faith in God as One who will also do for us what he has done for others. And in this worship God reclaims, redeems, and restores us, calling us into his great work. In worship we find our place in the work of God because we respond in surrender and obedience to the great call: "Whom shall I send? Who will go?" Worship is never an end in itself. Worship does not leave us where we are. True worshippers of God are sent into the world.

The great fourth century hymn, "Holy God, We Praise Thy Name," beautifully captures this understanding of worship as joining God's Story. The first stanza declares God's reign in heaven and on the earth. The second stanza follows with the declaration of Isaiah 6: the seraphim cry "Holy, Holy, Holy" continually around the throne of God. The third stanza then links to that worship by declaring what the early church believed to be true: whenever God's people on earth sing and worship him, they join the praise that is ascending continually around the throne of God (cf. Revelations 5). The third stanza:

Lo! the apostolic train  
Join Thy sacred name to hallow;  
Prophets swell the glad refrain,  
And the white-robed martyrs follow;  
And, from morn till set of sun,  
Through the church the song goes on.

Through the age the church goes on, linking all the participants in this great work of God. The fourth stanza concludes in a glorious doxology:

Holy Father, Holy Son,  
Holy Spirit, three we name Thee;  
Though in essence only one,  
Undivided God we claim Thee,  
And adoring bend the knee,  
While we own the mystery.

And so we end where we started, responding to the initiating revelation of God. He reveals himself and we claim him, adoring, bending the knee, while we own the mystery.

### Endnotes

1. James White, Introduction to Christian Worship, 3rd ed., 2000, p. 24
2. While a few historians have argued that Zwingli opposed only choirs and priestly chanting, not actual congregational singing, the common understanding is that he did, in fact, oppose it and that congregational singing was not reinstated in the Grossmünster until 1598 (see Westermeyer, *Te Deum*, p. 153).
3. Westermeyer, *Te Deum*, p. 151
4. I am indebted to James K. A. Smith's book, *Imagining the Kingdom*, for developing my understanding of this dynamic.