

Doing Worship

Jeremiah 44:1-10; Titus 3:1-10



There is much discussion about worship these days. For some, worship is the central element of Christian action and purpose. For others, worship is the practice and ritual experience that makes us feel good. Many confuse worship with praise. Some consider worship simply a means to maintain God's favor. What is worship? What does or should worship involve?

The Greek and Hebrew terms for worship essentially refer to service. Bowing or kneeling were expressions of submission to another's will. Our word liturgy comes from the term for public service—in the New Testament, "to perform the will of God."

In Jeremiah's day, there were plenty of activities called worship going on, but they were not directed toward fulfilling God's will. They were directed toward pleasing the people. Many were involved in the worship of false gods. Serving *Yahweh* was not the central motif in their actions. They people and their leaders were more concerned with serving themselves than with serving the One they called God. Idolatry was interested in cajoling the gods of the nations to do the people's bidding. It was about currying favor with these supposed deities, in order that the gods might do the people's will. Many wanted to follow the same regimen, attempting to somehow force *Yahweh* to submit to the will of the people.

They knew God's will and instructions. They knew what God required of them. They knew that they were to live in submission to *Yahweh* to the exclusion of all other supposed deities. They had plenty of knowledge, but they did not act upon the knowledge. Theirs was an attitude of defiance toward God's will. They wanted God to serve them, rather than submit to serving God.

Paul wrote many instructions to Titus regarding what should be taught to the people of Crete. He writes of sound doctrine. He mentions moral and ethical living. He encourages submission and self-control. In summary, he reminds Titus that there is a purpose to salvation and the message of the gospel. That purpose is to fulfill God's will in obedient service. Paul writes of the submission of all believers to fulfilling the Lord's will in unity.

As in Southern Baptist life today, there were ongoing discussions of theology and doctrine in Paul's day. There was disagreement among believers on issues that were very important to them. Paul had been accused of denying his Jewish heritage and preaching a liberal message that relaxed the strict requirements of Jewish worship and ritual practice. These were considered important, as they reflected the "proper" way to serve and worship God. Paul's words to Titus on this issue could not be much stronger. Such discussions are unprofitable and useless, he says. "After a first and second warning to a divisive person, shun him, knowing that he is perverted and self-condemned."

Such are most of the discussions on worship, theology, and church life today. They are not so much questions of how best to serve God. Rather, they are discussions that are directed at imposing one's ideas upon those of another. Whether by design or oversight, they actively divide believers into opposing camps.

It is highly interesting that Paul does not tell Titus to warn and shun those engaged in immorality. Paul does not instruct Titus to shun those whose doctrine is imperfect. The gospel is not about being right or being righteous. It is about accepting God's grace set forth in Christ Jesus and submitting our own will to serve God.

This is worship. This is living the gospel. We do not fulfill God's will because we have correct knowledge, doctrine, and theology. We do not fulfill God's will because we have a correct format for our gatherings. Rather, we are enabled to worship and serve God on the basis of the mercy of Christ Jesus displayed for us. It is now God's grace and mercy pouring through us that enables us to worship God in spirit and in truth.

As Karen and I waited to meet up with our team in Gulfport, we walked into a Burger King for something to drink. A gentleman in line recognized my Virginia Baptist Disaster Relief badge. It did not matter to him our differences in theology, church polity, or geographical background. What mattered to him was that we were there to serve God by helping people in need. He called us to his table to thank us for the work we were there to accomplish. We were there to tear out carpets, wet sheetrock, cabinets, clothing, and furniture spoiled by flooding waters. More than that, however, we were there in witness to God's presence, love, concern, and mercy.

Last Sunday morning, Karen and I did not attend a traditional worship service. We left the comfort of a church building to locate the homes of three people who had requested help. Worship was being God's presence, touching the lives of three women through simple tasks they could not handle on their own. Worship was granting encouragement to an elderly widow caring for her older sister-in-law. Worship was cleaning brush debris from another woman's yard, playing with her granddaughters, hearing their stories, and involving them in the cleanup process. Worship was sharing with a neighbor the reason we had left Virginia to grant aid to people in need. Worship was setting aside our own issues, needs, and priorities to submit ourselves in service to God.

As we gathered our tools upon finishing one job, we talked and prayed with a neighbor. We shared God's love with someone we had never met, for we knew that God's love goes beyond our circle of friends and family. We tried to see people from God's perspective, not judging their worthiness, their education, knowledge, morals, ethics, or righteousness. We focused on the fact of God's love for them and others.

Judah was too focused on itself to worry with the needs of others. Paul categorizes the Cretans as focused on themselves to the exclusion of others. He reminds Titus that such is our own focus apart from Christ Jesus. From selfishness, the gospel enables us to focus upon the needs of others, laying self aside.

Worship includes what we gather to do in the confines of these walls. It does not end here. If our worship ends at the doors of this building, we have not worshipped. To worship is to serve. It is to fulfill God's will, rather than our own. How will our daily lives express worship to God? We call ourselves Christians and proclaim Christ Lord. Do we live to fulfill God's will, doing the things that true worship demands? Worship is doing—God's will, not our own.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*