

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 11:2; 17-26

Theme Notes: Rev. Thomas Murphy, October 1986, South Bend, Indiana

I heard a story about a man who was in Moscow for a visit. He asked his guide to take him to worship in a Russian Orthodox Church. The Communist guide warned him that it was at least a three hour service, and reluctantly attended himself. At their arrival, the man saw numerous old women and took heart. *If they can stand for three hours, I can too.* There are no pews in the church.

About an hour and a half into the service, the fascination began to wear thin. The visitor began rocking on one foot, then on the other while gawking at the frescoes, beautiful mosaics, and icons. As he counted the pieces in the stained glass windows, he felt a tap on his shoulder. The Communist guide whispered, *You are not worshipping.*

Too many people have sought escape worship-boredom by playing mental games. Many yawn at the mention of *worship*, while others escape *Dullsville* by cranking up with *holy-hype* – turning it into an unending *vaudeville* with a parade of *stars*, church-sized *carnival acts*, and *dog and pony shows*.

For many people, worship is a religious duty that has little to with life; much the same as the woman who sat in church with an utterly blissful expression. For several weeks the newcomer was observed with her peaceful countenance. The pastor call on her one day, determined to find out why she was always so tranquil, and why she had become unusually faithful.

Is it the choir? he asked her. Her negative response challenged him onward. *Perhaps the beauty of our sanctuary?* He wondered. Then, cautiously he asked, *Is it the sermon?* Still fishing for the secret, he was exasperated by failure and finally asked, *Well, what is it that brings you so regularly and gives you such peace?* The woman replied, *Reverend, I'm the mother of five children and I work hard all week. Our home is a madhouse, and I come to church where I can be left alone and have absolutely nothing on my mind for one hour!* While she may have obtained *peace*, her experience could hardly be defined as *worship*.

Karl Barth once described true worship as, *The most momentous, the most urgent, the most glorious action that can take place in human life.*

Reading these words I wondered if they were the *addlings* of senility or a *white lie* of a preacher. The uncomfortable thoughts lingered, that his words may have been the secret of a great soul who walked with God: a description of something too many of us rarely experience.

If so, how sad. *Worship is* the critical element of life – humanity's great distinctive!! One sociologist distinguished humanity as *the worshipping animal*.

Billy Graham was once involved in debate with some scientists on life's origins. Following a presentation by evolutionists, two questions were posed: 1) Before your 'beginning', what was there? 2) Do you know of any nation, tribe, or people on earth without the instinct to worship?

The scientists were troubled by both questions. Their spokesperson responded to the second, and could not identify any people anywhere that did not worship.

God used the Hebrew people to summarize it at its best in The Shema: (*Deuteronomy 6:4-6*).

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.
Love the Lord God your God with all your heart and
with all your soul and with all your strength.
These commandments that I give you today are to
be upon your hearts.*

If worship is the central issue of life, then to attack it – whatever the nature of that assault – is to strike a blow to the heart of our humanity; and that was exactly what was happening at Corinth.

Many Bible scholars divide Corinthians into sections, with Chapter 11 evincing a discourse on the order of praying in the church, followed by a consideration of the Lord's Supper. Chapter 12 considers the gifts of the Spirit and their meaning. Chapter 13 reviews *agape* love, while Chapter 14 is a reaction to the whole business of tongues and the general disorder they have caused. Too often, the greater problem is missed because of sectionalization – the problems which were undermining their worship.

While the complex of worship problems has changed, tension over it hasn't. An author has asked, *Can order and ardor coexist in worship?* He continued with a review of the frustration between those who love free and easy worship, and those who delight in ritual and order.

A Lutheran minister spoke to a woman who had wandered into a liturgical service. Following the rituals and the pastor's preaching, the woman was stirred to say aloud, *Praise the Lord!* When she repeated the phrase two or three times, a woman leaned over to her and said, *Excuse me, but we don't praise the Lord in the Lutheran Church.* A man overhearing her whisper, corrected her with, *Yes we do – it's on page 19.*

We are too critical of how others worship when it differs from our own comfort and customs. Those who worship *loose-leaf*, accuse the ritualists of *dead formalism*; while those who are *more ordered*, fault the *free and easy* as guilty of *confusion and noise*.

Dr. Donald Allen of Dallas Seminary said, *Slander becomes too easy a matter when we look at different traditions.* Perhaps it was not slander, but worship decension that Corinth that Paul had to speak to. Christian women were being confused with street-walkers because of their approach to prayer – they were praying with their heads uncovered in a city which associated a woman's uncovered head as an advertisement for prostitution.

The Communion meal had degenerated into a matter of feast or famine, depending on the wealth of the person. Varied gifts were being twisted into status symbols to reinforce human egos. All of the problems were, in fact, Satanic attacks on worship. Although the apostle considered particulars which were appropriate for the specific situation in Corinth, there are some universals which apply to us today.

The centre of worship is Christ – a constant subject for Paul. Contrary to modern *dime-store starlets*, who would turn local worship into a stage show for self-display, the centre of worship is God Himself! Anything drawing attention from God is both idolatrous and a Satanic intrusion.

Archbishop William Temple wrote, *To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to*

the love of God, and to devote the will to the purpose of God. Worship is to attribute ultimate honour and worth to God.

The Anglo-Saxon word, ***weorthscipe***, was later modified to *worth-ship*, and finally into our *worship*. The British still address significant dignitaries as, *Your worship*. We use the same format when we in respect us the word, *your honour*. These words attribute respect and worth.

*... many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands,
sang: **Worthy** is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and
strength and honour and glory and praise!* (vv. 11-12).

A second universal is *submission in life and worship*. The heavenly scene just described, revealed the celestial throng prostrate before the Lamb in submissive adoration, an event to prelude a greater one, in which *every knee shall bow ... of things in heaven, on earth, and under the earth ...* (Phil 2:10)

Two problems had developed at Corinth which exposed the issue. Christian women were inappropriate in their prayers, following pagan patterns which reflected on the whole scheme of God's order (cf Ch 11). Paul's directions were for the men to pray with their heads *uncovered* (contrary to regular Jewish custom). The reasoning behind his instructions was not to be *different* for difference sake, but to witness to their submission: the man to God, and the woman to both her husband and her Heavenly Father.

The second problem involved the spiritual gifts, distributed by the Holy Spirit among believers, which were to be operative under His direction. They were to benefit the Church while honouring the Lord, and were to be in submission to God.

The critical issue then, is that worship cannot occur without submissive hearts. If submission is absent from heart or home, worship will be either quenched or destroyed.

How we pray, and how we rise from prayer to employ our gifts, exalts Christ above all else. There cannot be exaltation without submission.

The *source of worship* is in the heart. Whether formalism occurs *informally* or *ritualistically*, nether are valid expressions of worship if there is no heart.

One noon hour, a woman with a tangled life question Jesus about worship, wondering whether it ought to be done in Samaria or Jerusalem. The Lord responded, *God is Spirit, and His worshippers must worship in Spirit and in truth* (Jn 4:24) – a worship of the heart.

Gordon Borrer referred to the ***if-only*** syndrome as an excuse for faulty worship. *If only our place of worship were more beautiful, we'd sense the Lord's presence; If only it were more comfortable and had more (or less) symbolism; If only Communion were done differently; If only we were more free (or more structured), we could worship.*

Borrer identified the essential with the sentence, *The real factor in worship is a heart desire for God; the reason worship fails to occur in the pew is because it fails to occur in the daily routine of living.*

The prophet Joel cried, *Rend your hearts and not your garments* (Joel 2:13), knowing full well the real issues of worship have little to do with rituals or their absences, but everything to do with what is happening in a heart before God. Candidly, there is *no* worship without heart-worship.

Finally, *the substance of worship* is love. Amid all the discussion of prayers, Communion, and gifts, the apostle interrupted by saying:

If I speak with the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging symbol (1 Cor. 13:1 ff).

Without love, it matters very little what kind of religious paraphernalia is employed – worship is dead. The Church at Ephesus, according to Rev. 2, had a lot going for it. Its critical fault however, was the loss of its first love, without which all of its orthodoxy and devout labour meant nothing. The angel urged the Church:

*Remember the height from which you have fallen!
Repent and do the things you did at first.* (Rev. 2:5).

How were they to get back? What must be remembered for love to be rekindled in the heart? Though it is not specified, my guess is that they were to remember the Cross. When people lose a sense of what Christ did for them at Calvary, their love tarnishes and then diminishes.

A teenager was embarrassed by her mother's horribly scarred hands and suggested that she should wear gloves when her friends visited. A neighbour, overhearing the conversation, pulled the peer-conscious teen aside and explained how the scars came to be. *When you were a baby, your blanket caught fire, with the flames igniting your little dress. In a flash, your mother smothered those flames with her bare hands. Those scars are the very stuff of your life.* Then with apologies and passionate tears, the girl smothered the scars on her mother's hands with kisses. Lose the reality of Calvary from your life, and love grows cold. Love kindles to flame near the Cross!

Repentance, ordered the Angel to the Church at Ephesus, is to be followed by doing *the first works*.

Perhaps it is different with others, although I grew up in a Christian home, when I came and committed to the Lord, I literally devoured the Scriptures, found sweet times in prayer, and longed for fellowship with God's people. None of it was *duty* or *necessary* daily devotions. Love made those moments precious and my greatest delight.

Worship dare never be an idle hour for empty minds. It must be the soul's moment to touch God and catch fire – where hearts enjoy the excitement of great worship in the presence of God and His people.

Amen.