

The Nature of Worship

Churchman 071/2 1957

Revd D. B. Knox

What is the chief end of man? A generally accepted answer is “to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever”. But how is God glorified? The Scriptures answer that man glorifies God by trusting Him and living by His promises: “Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver thee and thou shalt glorify me” (Ps. 50. 15). “Looking unto the promise of God Abraham wavered not through unbelief, but waxed strong through faith, giving glory to God” (Rom. iv. 20).

Absolute faith and trust in God is the true worship and honouring of God. This is clear from a consideration of the character of God. For our concept of God’s character controls the worship we offer Him and our worship reflects our concept of His character. For example, the action of the priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel reflected clearly their concept of their deity. Christian worship should reflect the Christian concept of God. The most distinctive feature of the doctrine of God in the New Testament is the stress laid on the righteous love of God, and it was this aspect of God’s character that was once more made the centre of worship in Reformation times.

Medieval doctrine and worship obscured the love of God. Purgatory was the anticipated lot after death, while life here was made miserable by the belief that God was pleased by asceticism, self-torture and painful “good works”. That God was a cruel tyrant was, in Tyndale’s judgment, the opinion of the common people of his time, who dared not pray to God directly, but only through the intercession of the Virgin and the saints.

The Reformers emphasized the biblical doctrine of the love of God. The leading theological concept which controlled the thought of all the Reformers, Calvin and Zwingli, as well as Luther, was their sense of the love, goodness and beneficence of God. The love of God is not an abstract attribute but is ever active in self-giving. Its most distinctive activity is the provision of complete redemption in Christ. The attempt to patch out this complete redemption by the addition of our own good works was, as is well known, the centre of the Reformers’ controversy with the Church of Rome. The Catechism of the Council of Trent declared that “painful and laborious works are a compensation for past sin. They must in some way be disagreeable.” But the Reformers insisted that this Roman doctrine was not to be found in Scripture, and moreover was contradicted by Scripture, which clearly teaches that there is complete and full forgiveness of all sin to all who will call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The gratuitousness, or gift character, of salvation is the outcome of, and is itself a revelation of, the wonderful love of God. The full provision and the free offer of salvation in Jesus Christ is the supreme example, as far as sinful sinners are concerned, of God’s love.

How should such a God be worshipped? How do we honour and acknowledge His character? The Reformers answered that trust in God’s love is the only adequate way of acknowledging this His nature. Other elements of worship, as adoration, praise, thanksgiving, offering, are

consequences of the supreme worship and acknowledgment that God is the God that He is. Such acknowledgment is rendered by our trusting Him and by our accepting His provision.

The statement that faith (i.e., trust in God's promises) is the essence of Christian worship occurs frequently in the Reformers' writings. Thus in Joye's Primer of 1529 (which is the earliest Prayer Book to appear in English) there is this anthem: "The highest praise and greatest glory that we may give to God is to believe His promise and to verify it with our faith". In his preface to his translation of Isaiah, published in 1531, Joye wrote: "Praise and glorify we God when we believe that Christ is given us to die for our righteous-making". This doctrine finds support in Scripture, e.g., in Psalm 1, where the writer deprecated worship through animal sacrifices and said that the true worship acceptable with God is to put trust in Him in time of trouble (Ps. 1. 15). Similarly, in Psalm cxvi, the Psalmist states that the true worship of a thankful heart, sensible of God's mercies already received, is rendered, paradoxically, by the acceptance of God's supreme mercy in the provision of salvation (Ps. cxvi. 13; cf. John vi. 29).

The Reformers taught that faith is worship and is the basic way of acknowledging God's essential character of self-giving. The application of this doctrine to the private devotional life is straightforward. Every day brings its opportunities of trusting God, and so acknowledging that He is trustworthy, that He is indeed a God of love. So all life becomes worship and there is no divorce between Sunday and the weekday.

Private Bible reading is an essential concomitant of the worship of faith. In order to live the life of faith the promises of God must be known. For faith in something which has not the promise of God is superstition, and indeed, idolatry. For it involves trust in something created by men's imagination and will, in place of trust in the true God as He has revealed Himself. This thought was the basis of the repeated charge of idolatry that the Reformers brought against the Papists. To put trust for salvation in rites which had no other support than church tradition was idolatry, and the depriving of the true God of His due honour. Yet medieval worship consisted in almost nothing else than this. For this reason, the reading of the Bible and its exposition in the sermon are essential and central elements in public worship. For unless the people hear the Scriptures in their own language and understand the meaning, their faith cannot be rightly directed to the true promises of God.

The Holy Communion office of the Book of Common Prayer illustrates how the Reformers applied the doctrine that faith is worship to that service. It begins with the recitation of the Ten Commandments, the summary of God's law, so that the worshipper may realize his need of God's mercy. The law drives us to Christ.

In the Absolution which follows the Confession, it is noticeable how the emphasis falls on the promises of God to forgive repentant and believing sinners. This was deliberate; for, years before, when the Bishops' Book was being revised, Cranmer had protested to Henry VIII about the form of absolution in the King's amendments to that book, "The promise . . . is stricken out, which chiefly ought to be known". (Incidentally, it is worth noting that all the forms of absolution in our prayer book mention God's promise of forgiveness. It is a defect of the 1928 book that it is not so in it.)

As the service proceeds there are many foci for faith in the passages of Scripture, in the sermon, in the exhortation, and especially in the four comfortable words, which were introduced into the service by the Reformers. But God's character is seen supremely in the

words of institution, in the fraction and in the distribution. Here ear, eye and taste combine to write on the soul's consciousness the fact of God's love in Jesus Christ for lost sinners. The Reformers insisted that the manual acts of the celebrant should be visible, and the words which accompanied them clearly enunciated in the common language. For these things strengthen faith, which adores God's grace by receiving His provision. The worshipper's action of coming forward and receiving and eating the bread and wine when he hears the words of our Lord, "Take, eat, this is my body which is given for you . . . for the remission of sins," expresses his consciousness of his need and of his faith in God's provision for it. On the other hand, the action of the non-communicating attender, continuing to sit in his seat when he hears the invitation of his Lord, is expressive of an attitude inconsistent with a true Christian worshipper. That is why the 1552 prayer book, as well as the Homilies, direct the non-communicating attender to leave before this part of the service is reached. Incidentally, the excellency of the order in our present canon may be noted in which the invitation in the words of institution is closely followed by the response of faith accepting God's provision, and our offering of ourselves to God follows our acceptance of the primary offering, God's offering of Himself to us.

Faith is essentially personal. A faith which does not accept for itself is an undetected lie. In this connection it is noteworthy the fourfold repetition in the brief words of institution of the words "for thee", "given for thee," "shed for thee". John Frith, martyred in 1533, almost twenty years before this communion service was composed, showed what was the Reformers' intention in stressing these words "for thee". He wrote:

"In this supper we hear Christ speaking to us, feeding us with His body, proffering us that we should drink His blood for eternal life. When He saith, 'Take, eat, this is my body, which for you is given . . .,' good brother, think that these words be spoken to thee. Print them most deeply in thy mind, for when He speaketh to all He speaketh also to thee, to thee; to thee I say they profit. All things that Christ hath supplied shall profit thee no less than they do help Peter and Paul, for the promise soundeth so, the which he that receiveth by faith and believeth that which He hath saith 'given for you and shed out for you', hath and obtained without doubt remission of his sins."

Faith and worship reach their climax in the service in "taking the cup of salvation" which the love of God provided for needy sinners. There follows further faith for daily needs (the Lord's Prayer); the offering of ourselves, our souls and bodies; the prayer of thanksgiving, and the adoration of the Gloria.

The whole emphasis of the service is on God's movement towards man. Our movement towards God, the response of faith and thanksgiving and offering, is secondary and complementary. That is why in our reformed Prayer Book the "People's Offering" of bread and wine is omitted, as a ceremony which distracts from the emphasis that should fall on the all-important offering that God makes to us in the service, the offering of the benefits of the death and passion of our Saviour. As a ceremony omitted from the Prayer Book it cannot, of course, be introduced legally into the service without an alteration of the Prayer Book by lawful authority. Humans are always inclined to emphasize their offering to God rather than God's to them. For example, the Roman Mass is taken up with the offering being made to God. We are wise if we follow the Reformers in not making the provision of the bread and wine into a conspicuous ceremony.

The essence of petitional prayer is faith. The worshipper, in bringing his needs to God, in specific petition, full of faith that he will be heard, worships God, for he acknowledges by

this action that God is a God of love who cares and provides for His children. This is God's essential character. And it cannot be acknowledged by the worshipper in any other way, this omitted. Petition (though not selfish petition!) is the chief element in Christian prayer. Our Lord, when asked to teach His disciples to pray, gave them a prayer which consisted in nothing else than petition.

It is good to notice that the Anglican Congress at Minneapolis put this Reformation emphasis on personal faith first in its definition of worship. "In our worship we accept by faith God's gift of Himself to us. . ."

DAVID BROUGHTON KNOX