

THE NATURE OF CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

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WORSHIP is a religious instinct. It is not so much a duty as an impulse; not so much an obligation as a necessity. When Adam was in Paradise, his worship of God was perfect. When Adam fell his worship was marred. There was no longer the same free, frank fellowship with God—no longer the reverence, and the love once quickened into adoring rapture.

As time rolled on, man forgot God entirely; and the instinct of worship led him to pay homage to the creature, and to bow down before material things which he addressed in the language of prayer and praise, and to which he presented sacrifice in order to appease their wrath and to secure their favour. This ignorance of God was a guilty ignorance—“They did not *like* to retain God in their knowledge.” It led to the grossest idolatry, for the religious instinct still survived, and that which was originally meant for man’s health became to him an occasion of failing.

The Hebrews stood alone in the spirituality of their worship. They had first a tabernacle, and afterwards a temple, but both were without an idol, and the use of images was wholly forbidden in the service of religion. It is true that for a wise purpose God gave this people an imposing ceremonial, and an elaborate ritual, for He sought to teach them through the language of symbol and sign, certain spiritual truths, which it concerned them to know. The first covenant had much sensuous beauty and external magnificence. The vestments of the high priests were rich and splendid; the altars of pure gold or fine brass; the, curtains of the sanctuary were of blue, of purple and scarlet, and heavy with wrought embroidery; there was the fragrance of incense, there were the strains of melodious music; there was form, and colour, and scent. But whatever may have been the pomp of the Levitical worship, its object was certainly not to impress the senses of the *nation at large* by an imposing display. The ritual of the Hebrews was confined to a single city of the Holy Land, was performed in one temple alone, and there was but one man only—the High Priest—who was robed in garments of beauty and glory: and which glittered with precious stones.

The majority of the people seldom looked upon the exquisite adornments, or took part in the gorgeous ceremonies of the House of the Lord, and even these who, from living in Jerusalem, had constant access to the Temple, never penetrated beyond the outer court, and saw nothing beyond the altar of brass and the laver of brass. The priests alone were allowed to enter the holy place where was the golden candlestick, and the table with its twelve loaves of shew-bread, and the burning incense; whilst into the inner sanctuary—the Holy of Holies—the High Priest alone was permitted to go, and that only once a year. No eye but his saw the ark of the covenant, the mercy-seat, the Cherubim, the Shechinah, or looked upon the awful ceremony of the sprinkling of the atoning blood. So that the advocates of a sensuous service—a service addressed to the natural senses—find no precedent in the divinely-appointed ceremonial of the Jews.

But again, the Levitical system of Divine worship, which, in some of its aspects, was intended to be a safeguard against idolatry and to imbue the minds of the chosen people with spiritual ideas, was from its nature liable to perversion and superstition. Men turned the symbolism of the law into Pharisaism, substituted the letter for the spirit, bound its precepts on the forehead rather than on the heart; thought more of the stones of the Temple and of its beauty and splendour, than of Him that dwelt between the cherubim, behind the impenetrable veil; so that the religious system of the Hebrews “did not make the comers thereunto perfect.” It was itself imperfect. It was shadow, not substance; bondage, not freedom; childhood, not manhood. So it gradually became corrupted;

“waxed old and was ready to vanish away.” The same Divine hand that reared the Temple, fashioned the sanctuary, and hung the curtain, smote the altar, and laying open the most holy place, rent the veil in twain. He that was greater than the Temple spake its doom in these words: “The hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father.” “God is a spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.”

These words institute a contrast between the worship of the Old Testament and the worship of the New. Our Lord does not mean that no true worship had ever been offered to God before, or that He had been satisfied with an unreal service, or that priests, and prophets, and kings, and holy men of old had rested in the letter which killeth, “having the form of godliness and not the power.” What God is now He always has been. What the spirituality of His nature requires now it always has required. But the Jewish system placed an emphasis on the sanctity of particular places and persons, upon the obligation of daily, weekly, and yearly sacrifices, and on the forms of an elaborate ceremonial. This was to be laid aside as having served the end for which it was ordained. Henceforth an external ceremonial was not to be interposed between man and God. Man’s homage “to the High and Lofty One who inhabiteth eternity” was no longer to be authoritatively united to an elaborate form of service. The true idea of worship, as the faith, the hope, the joy of the soul in God, was to be clearly and fully recognized. “God is a spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit,”—not with a worship material, sensuous, rudimentary, and imperfect,—“and in truth;” not with a typical shadowy worship such as that enjoined by the Mosaic law, or with a merely external service.

Now this statement of our Lord, of what Christian worship ought to be, presents us with an argument for the simplicity of Christian Ritual. Nothing appears to me to be more unscriptural than to appeal to any Jewish precedent for the introduction into Christian worship of an imposing ceremonial and an elaborate symbolism. And nothing can be well more unphilosophical; for the Ritual of the earlier dispensation was only a part of a temporary, and national religious system, and did not rest on permanent principles justified by the necessary relations that exist between the soul of Man and “the Father of the spirits of all flesh.” And as with the Ritual, so with the Temple. You know that an especial idea of sacredness was attached to that noble and beautiful Temple which was built by the command of God, and whose several parts were constructed after His express directions. Call to mind the way in which it was spoken of by the Jews: It was “the house where His honour dwelleth.” The Divine promise to Solomon was this: “I have chosen and sanctified the house, that My name may be there for ever, and Mine eyes and MY heart aball be there perpetually.” Thus the nearness of God to His people was strongly asserted by the existence of the one authorized Temple, and His presence with Israel assured by His Divine condescension in accepting a material structure as His dwelling place. But it is evident that the arrangement was not without its manifest danger. It tended to obscure the spirituality and infinity of the Divine nature. It seemed to localise the Deity. For the more deeply devout men realized God’s presence at Jerusalem, the more clearly they felt the absence of Divine consolation and strength when access to the Temple was denied them. Distance from the Temple seemed like banishment from God; and therefore, although the gracious manifestation of the Divine presence in the Temple was almost necessary to the religious thought and life of the Jewish people, the time came when it was expedient that God should no longer be worshipped only at Jerusalem, or be thought of as dwelling in a material sanctuary, but rather be known as a Being whose Temple was the world, and whose shrine was every regenerated heart. I believe it to be antagonistic to the whole spirit of the Christian dispensation to suppose that God is nearer to us in one place than in another, or to think that He confers peculiar sanctity on mere material structures. God’s special presence is promised now, not to particular places, but to particular persons. “The Lord’s house is his people.” It is built of living stones: it is a spiritual habitation for a spiritual inhabitant. “Ye are the Temple of the living God,” as God has said, “I will dwell in them, and I will be their God; and they shall be my people.” We build houses for the worship of God, but they are not intended to take the place of the Temple; nor are they in any respect like the Temple. No one part of the building is more Holy than another. The consecration of one portion of the edifice belongs to the whole. If, indeed, we regarded the

Christian ministry as an office to be exercised by a sacerdotal order of men who as priests should offer sacrifices, and mediate between the people and God, then we ought to have a holy place fenced off with jealous care from the common body of the church, and dedicated as a chancel, or sacrarium, to their special use. If we conceived that Christ was locally, and substantially present under the consecrated elements of bread and wine, we ought to have an altar which, by its material, its position, its shape, should be a perpetual witness to the awful mystery thereon transacted; but the New Testament condemns such ideas as these; and the Church of England at the Reformation uttered her protest against them, and her martyrs sealed that protest with their blood. Christ Himself is now our only High Priest, and every one of us has direct access to God through Him. His presence is not in consecrated bread; but in regenerated souls. Every believer as a member of His body belongs to a Royal Priesthood, and the promise of Christ assures to us a more sublime form of the Divine presence than that which was conferred by the Shechinah in the old time—"Know ye not that ye are the temple of the Holy Ghost, and the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?" "The Spirit of God and of glory resteth upon you." And for the very reason that the Spirit of God is with us in a sense, and in a measure that He was not with the ancient Church, and that a nearer and truer approach to Him is granted under the present covenant than was granted under the former,—a higher worship is possible to us than to them, and liberated from all that was temporary, and symbolical in the Old dispensation, we glory in a service that is spiritual not sensuous: that we are free to "worship God in spirit and in truth."

It is needful to remember in a day when the spirit which is influencing religious thought is looking back to the past, rather than forward to the future, that there is a higher glory than any which belongs to what is outward and visible. "The king's daughter is all glorious within." Her "apparel" may be "of wrought gold," her "clothing of divers kinds of needlework," but these are far from being her chief ornaments; that which makes her glorious indeed is the faith, the hope, the love which form her meetness for that world where the accidents of worship shall pass away—ceremony and sacrament and symbol—where even the Temple shall disappear,—where we shall "no longer know in part, but know as we are known." Is not the movement a retrograde one which turns from the Gospel to the Law, from "the ministration of the Spirit" to "the ministration of death," which goes back to the shadows, and to the types instead of going forward in the liberty offered by Christ Himself; "the liberty wherewith Christ maketh His people free?"

But I pass on to observe that the very simplicity of Christian worship is a mark of its superiority. You may be inclined to recall, with regret for its loss, the magnificence of Judaism—the splendid vestments; the golden lamps; the ever-burning altar; the pealing music; the awe-struck prostrations; the Mysterious shrine; the whole of that elaborate symbolism which has passed away, and indeed to a Jewish mind a religion without priest, without altar, without sacrifice, without temple—whose places of assembly were the rude upper chamber, the bleak mountain side, the barren sea shore, whose most solemn rites involved no acts more imposing than the sprinkling of water, or the breaking of bread, must have appeared poor and uninviting, bald and tame. But the material splendour of the old religion was but an indication of imperfection, and the ceremonial plainness of the new is its true dignity and glory—and for this reason. The Jew needed all the elaborate formality of type and ceremony, of symbolic persons and objects to help out his idea of the Messiah, of His mighty work and mission—for to him Christ was a Being of whose person and character and office he had but the most shadowy and undefined conceptions. But to the Christian, Christ is no vague and visionary Personage of the future—no shadowy dream. He has been "made flesh." He stands before us with all the distinctness of one with whom we are acquainted; and his words, and deeds, and actions are as familiar to us as those of any dear, well-known earthly friend. Therefore, to bring Him to our remembrance, nothing is needed but what is very simple, the rudest outline—a few drops of water—a bit of broken bread a cup of wine.

But again, the simple character of Christian worship is an indication of spiritual advancement. The ritual of Judaism appealed to the senses, the services of Christianity appeal to the understanding. The Jews were in a childhood state and therefore God gave them a system of symbols and

exercises suited to their comprehension as babes. But the Christian Church has passed beyond the necessity for this. She no longer needs the picture book and the object lesson.

True it is that the Christian heart demands both outward forms, and rites to embody the reverence, the gratitude, the devotion, the love of which it is inwardly conscious. True, the soul in its relation to an unseen Father still craves for some external medium of utterance that shall give expression to feeling, and translate into outward acts or words its devotion to God. But here nothing has been prescribed by Divine direction, as in Judaism; everything has been left to the direction of the Church. In gracious condescension to our needs the Lord has given us the two Sacraments; but with the fullest liberty with regard to their administration, leaving all details respecting forms and times to be added as the varied requirements of His people in different ages and places and circumstances shall suggest. The Church in all lands and ages has ever, out of her love and crying necessities, yearned for a channel of communion with her invisible Lord, and she has found expression for her feelings in the acts of Common Prayer. The deep heart of the Church has ever longed to give a voice to its adoration and thankfulness, and so for the outflow of its devotion she has discovered the channel of Common Praise. But the form in which prayer should be made, or praise offered, is left to herself. Our gracious Lord, in His loving wisdom hath prescribed no one necessary form of speech or song,—no one inflexible language of worship for His Church on earth. “Let all things be done decently and in order,” contains the whole of the Divine will on the subject; details are left to the religious instinct and to the sober judgment of the worshipper.

We hear much in the present day of the duty of making our services bright and attractive, and by means of beauty for the eye, and melody for the ear, winning the unspiritual, who will thus be won to the House of Prayer. Well, I can only say, let us give to God our best. Let beauty and strength be still the pillars of His House. There is no holiness in ugliness. There is no spirituality in slovenliness. We are not justified in irreverence because others may be formal and unspiritual. We need not make worship frigid in order to make it devout. The appointments of God’s House should be in harmony with the purpose for which it is used, and for which it is solemnly set apart. Our hymns, instinct with deep devotional feeling, should be rich in poetical expression, and be wedded to music of the richest harmony. But the singing should not be the performance of a choir, but the worship and praise of the congregation. And few abuses in public worship can be more painful to a heart longing to join in the service of God, than that of a whole assembly of professed worshippers remaining silent, while a choir performs for their pleasure. Can this in any sense be called worship at all? And yet, alas! is such a mockery of worship uncommon? Is not the choir too often made a musical stage for the display of the performers, and the House of God turned into a place of entertainment?

If we wish to hear scientific music,—the artistic harmonies of the grand masters of melody,—had we not better resort at once to the concert room or the Oratorio where we go to be sung to and not to sing? Let us remember that when we are in the House of Prayer we are on Holy ground, that we are in the presence of the infinite and eternal God, who demands that we should worship Him in “spirit and in truth.”

We may attract to our churches by architectural adornments, and ritual and ceremony, and musical services, the carnal and the unspiritual, those who would make the unwelcome bondage of the first clay of the week, as easy, and as agreeable as possible: those who are not content except the lust of the eye and of the ear be gratified even in the holy place, those who cannot confess themselves to be “miserable sinners” unless they do it to the sound of sweet music. But what have we gained? What have they gained? Has pride been humbled? Has conscience been awakened? Are they any nearer to God when they leave His house than when they came into it? Have we only taught them after all to wrap their cloak of self-deception more closely round them? Have we sent them away self-satisfied because they have mistaken their pleasure in the glory of art and the melody of song for religion, and have been too well content to draw nigh unto God with their lips while the heart is far from Him? True Christian worship—what is it? Prayer and praise in The Holy

Ghost—The Holy Ghost so working in us that our hearts are uplifted to God in homage and adoration. Its true inspiration is derived from Him who teaches us to look up to the all-loving face of our Father in heaven. The harp that you place outside your window to catch the breath of heaven cannot vibrate till the wind sweeps across its strings. The breath may touch it gently so as just to awake the whispering notes; or it may come with the power of the storm, and force it to utter loud sounding notes of music. Still, there must be the breath upon the string before we can have any music whatever. So there must be, before true worship is possible, the breath of the Spirit in the soul. The Holy Ghost must quicken it, whispering in the still small voice, or speaking in louder, or more stirring tones; yet in either case awakening the spirit of prayer, and so enabling us to “worship God in spirit and in truth.”

There is no greater danger incident to an elaborate Ritual, than that of mistaking emotion for religious feeling. The music of soft voices, the pealing tones of the organ, the fragrance of incense, the rich light streaming in through the painted window, and throwing a mellow glow over floor, and pillar, and aisle, may thrill the soul with delight, and melt it into tenderness; and these easily excited emotions may be mistaken for religion. Alas! these feelings have only to do with our bodily Organisation and are far removed from a religion of conscience and spiritual conviction. They lead to formalism and self-deception.

The most careless and godless may be moved to tears by the pathos of sweet music, or be held breathless by the touching spell of eloquent words. It is possible to be sentimental without being pious. O, let us beware of mistaking the strange fire kindled by artistic splendour or poetic lustre for that pure and heavenly flame of devotion which is lighted on the altar of the heart by the living Spirit of the living God. “There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.”

We know the desperate struggle that for some time has been made to reintroduce the doctrines and rites of medievalism into our services. You would think that eternal life and eternal death depended upon Ritual.

But what, I ask, can Ritualism do to compass the end which I suppose it proposes to itself—“the salvation of souls?” What can the carnal weapons which it employs—processions, and banners, and incense, and music, and vestments—effect in the translation of sinners from darkness to light? Was it by such weapons as these that the world was won from Paganism to Christianity? Is it by such weapons that we can vanquish the sin that meets us on all sides, raise the fallen, rescue the tempted, save the perishing, or pluck the guilty as “brands from the burning?” Are not all such questions immeasurably trifling, unspeakably trivial, when we think of the infidelity, and secularism, and vice, and worldliness that meet us on every side, and against which we are called to do battle in the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ? And may not the mocking devil of lust and hate, and drunkenness, and scepticism, and crime, say in uttermost scorn to all such attempts to exorcise him, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are ye?”

I have sought to speak fairly on this subject. I have had no desire to treat it in the mere spirit of party. We all know too well that there are men in the Church—in her, but not of her—who are seeking to re-introduce into her services forms and ceremonies the reverse of Scriptural—Popish, not Protestant in conception—forms and ceremonies, vestments, and ornaments, which are unbefitting the gravity, and purity, and spirituality of the Christian religion, and which were swept away by the breath of the Reformation, as by a rushing mighty wind “Christian Worship” is spiritual not sensuous: devotional not dramatic: reasonable not ritualistic. And yet from practices now common in our churches, you would think it to be the reverse of all these. I give you but, one example selected from many. As Good Friday returns year by year we see our risen and ascended Lord treated as though he were dead. The funeral bell is tolled, the church is draped in black, and “the three hours agony” is dramatised. Is this a true representation of the faith of a Christian man? Is this true Christian Worship? Surely not—“Christ being dead dieth no more: death

hath no more dominion over Him." Shall we encourage such childish, theatrical, superstitious services, copied as they are from the Roman Church? I say no! I deny that the Crucifix is the proper emblem of the Christian religion. It is a living and not a dead Christ that we worship and adore.

And what is to be the end of all this growth of error in doctrine and in practice in our Church? Are the "broken cisterns" of a false worship to be repaired while the living fountain is forsaken? Is the idol of superstition to be restored to its pedestal, while God is dishonoured and forgotten? Is the rent veil to be suspended afresh between man and the mercy-seat? Is the "new and living way" that has been opened to us to be closed again, and direct access to be forbidden to our Father in heaven? Is any earthly mediator to obtrude himself between us and that Great High Priest, who with love in His heart, and tenderness in His eyes, and urgency in His voice, stands with outstretched arms ready to receive all to His bosom, crying, "Come unto Me, and I will give you rest." No! I answer, a thousand times "No!" We will not "give subjection, no, not for an hour," to any attempt to rob us of our spiritual freedom. Through God's help we shall take care that the candlestick be not removed, and the lamp be not quenched. We will do all that lies in our power to prevent the story of our Church being read in the history of the seven Churches of Asia now ruined, and roofless, prostrate, deserted, and fallen? It was a saying of Luther's that "the grace of God is like a flying summer shower." Shall the shower pass away from us, and leave us barren, parched, and dry? I am unwilling to think so. I confess, I sometimes fear, but in God is my hope. Still whatever our thoughts on this may be, there is a most solemn duty binding on us as individual Christians and Churchmen, that we should not sanction in any way, or give countenance to that which we believe to be a wrong alike against our Christianity and our Churchmanship.

Yes, and let us as a Church, take heed to the message to the angel of the Church at Sardis: "Be watchful and strengthen the things which remain that are ready to die, for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember, therefore, how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If, therefore, thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee." These words have not a past application only. They come ringing down through the ages, and have a most solemn and urgent voice for us in these latter days, "on whom the end of the world is come." Let us listen to them, and be warned, for "judgment must begin at the House of God." Therefore, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the Churches."

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