

## The Art of True Worship – A. W. Tozer

Philosophers have noted the vast difference between men and beasts and have tried to find that difference in one or another distinguishing characteristic. They have said, for instance, that man is the thinking animal, or that he is the laughing animal, or that he is the only animal with a conscience. The one mark, however, which forever distinguishes man from all other forms of life on earth is that he is a worshiper; he has a bent toward and a capacity for worship.

Apart from his position as a worshiper of God, man has no sure key to his own being; he is but a higher animal, being born much as any other animal, going through the cycle of his life here on earth and dying at last without knowing what the whole thing is about. If that is all for him, if he has no more reason than the beast for living, then it is an odd thing indeed that he is the only one of the animals that worries about himself, that wonders, that asks questions of the universe. The very fact that he does these things tells the wise man that somewhere there is One to whom he owes allegiance, One before whom he should kneel and do homage.

The Christian revelation tells us that that One is God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, who is to be worshiped in the Spirit in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. That is enough for us. Without trying to reason it out we may proceed from there. All our doubts we meet with faith's wondering affirmation: "O Lord God, thou knowest," an utterance which Samuel Taylor Coleridge declared to be the profoundest in human speech.

In worship several elements may be distinguished, among them love, admiration, wonder and adoration. Though they may not be experienced in that order, a little thought will reveal those elements as being present wherever true worship is found.

Both the Old and the New Testament teach that the essence of true worship is the love of God. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might." Our Lord declared this to be the sum of the Law and the Prophets.

Now, love is both a principle and an emotion; it is something both felt and willed. It is capable of almost infinite degrees. Love in the human heart may begin so modestly as to be hardly perceptible and go on to become a raging torrent that sweeps its possessor before it in total helplessness. Something like this must have been the experience of the apostle Paul, for he felt it necessary to explain to his critics that his apparent madness was actually the love of God ravishing his willing heart.

It is quite impossible to worship God without loving Him. Scripture and reason agree to declare this. And God is never satisfied with anything less than all: "all thy heart ... all thy soul - . . all thy might." This may not at first be possible, but deeper experience with God will prepare us for it, and the inward operations of the Holy Spirit will enable us after a while to offer Him such a poured-out fullness of love.

In the love which any intelligent creature feels for God there must always be a measure of mystery. It is even possible that it is almost wholly mystery, and that our attempt to find reasons is merely a rationalizing of a love already mysteriously present in the heart as a result of some secret operation of the Spirit within us, working like a miner, toiling unseen in the depths of the earth." But so far as reasons can be given, they would seem to be two: gratitude and excellence. To love God because He has been good to us is one of the most reasonable things possible. The love which arises from the consideration of His kindness to us is valid and altogether acceptable to Him. It is nevertheless a lower degree of love, being less selfless than that love which springs from an appreciation of what God is in Himself apart from His gifts.

Thus the simple love which arises from gratitude, when expressed in any act or conscious utterance, is undoubtedly worship. But the quality of our worship is stepped up as we move away from the thought of what God has done for us and nearer the thought of the excellence of His holy nature. This leads us to admiration.

The dictionary says that to admire is “to regard with wondering esteem accompanied by pleasure and delight; to look at or upon with an elevated feeling of pleasure.” According to this definition, God has few admirers among Christians today.

Many are they who are grateful for His goodness in providing salvation. At Thanksgiving time the churches ring with songs of gratitude that “all is safely gathered in.” Testimony meetings are mostly devoted to recitations of incidents where someone got into trouble and got out again in answer to prayer. To decry this would be uncharitable and unscriptural, for there is much of the same thing in the Book of Psalms. It is good and right to render unto God thanksgiving for all His mercies to us. But God’s admirers, where are they?

The simple truth is that worship is elementary until it begins to take on the quality of admiration. Just as long as the worshiper is engrossed with himself and his good fortune, he is a babe. We begin to grow up when our worship passes from thanksgiving to admiration. As our hearts rise to God in lofty esteem for that which He is (“I AM THAT I AM”), we begin to share a little of the selfless pleasure which is the portion of the blessed in heaven.

The third stage of true worship is wonder. Here the mind ceases to understand and goes over to a kind of delightful astonishment. Carlyle said that worship is “transcendent wonder,” a degree of wonder without limit and beyond expression. That kind of worship is found throughout the Bible (though it is only fair to say that the lesser degrees of worship are found there also). Abraham fell on his face in holy wonderment as God spoke to him- Moses hid his face before the presence of God in the burning bush. Paul could hardly tell whether he was in or out of the body when he was allowed to see the unspeakable glories of the third heaven. When John saw Jesus walking among His churches, he fell at His feet as dead. We cite these as a few examples; the list is long in the Biblical record.

It may be said that such experiences as these are highly unusual and can be no criterion for the plain Christian today. This is true, but only of the external circumstances; the spiritual content of the experiences is unchanging and is found alike wherever true believers are found, it is always true that an encounter with God brings wonderment and awe.

The pages of Christian biography are sweet with the testimonies of enraptured worshipers who met God in intimate experience and could find no words to express all they felt and saw and heard. Christian hymnody takes us where the efforts of common prose break down, and brings the wings of poetic feeling to the aid of the wondering saint. Open an old hymnal and turn to the sections on worship and the divine perfections and you will see the part that wonder has played in worship through the centuries.

But wonder is not yet the last nor highest element in worship. The soaring saint has one more mountain peak to clear before he has reached the rarefied air of purest worship. He must adore.

Neither the word adoration nor any of its forms is found in our familiar King James Bible, but the idea is there in full bloom. The great Bible saints were, above all, enraptured lovers of God. The psalms celebrate the love which David (and a few others) felt for the person of God.

As suggested above, Paul admitted that the love of God was in his breast a kind of madness: For whether we be beside ourselves, it is of God: or whether we be sober, it is for your cause. For the love of Christ constraineth us.” In Weymouth’s translation the passage reads, “For the love of Christ overmasters us.” The idea appears to be that Paul’s love for Christ carried him beyond himself and made him do extravagant things which to a mind untouched with the delights of such love might seem quite irrational.

Perhaps the most serious charge that can be brought against modern Christians is that we are not sufficiently in love with Christ. The Christ of fundamentalism is strong but hardly beautiful. It is rarely that we find anyone

aglow with personal love for Christ. I trust it is not uncharitable to say that in my opinion a great deal of praise in conservative circles is perfunctory and forced, where it is not downright insincere.

Many of our popular songs and choruses in praise of Christ are hollow and unconvincing. Some are even shocking in their amorous endearments, and strike a reverent soul as being a kind of flattery offered to One with whom neither composer nor singer is acquainted. The whole thing is in the mood of the love ditty, the only difference being the substitution of the name of Christ for that of the earthly lover.

How different and how utterly wonderful are the emotions aroused by a true and Spirit-incited love for Christ. Such a love may rise to a degree of adoration almost beyond the power of the heart to endure, yet at the same time it will be serious, elevated, chaste and reverent.

Christ can never be known without a sense of awe and fear accompanying the knowledge. He is the fairest among ten thousand, but He is also the Lord high and mighty. He is the friend of sinners, but He is also the terror of devils. He is meek and lowly in heart, but He is also Lord and Christ who will surely come to be the judge of all men. No one who knows Him intimately can ever be flippant in His presence.

The love of Christ both wounds and heals, it fascinates and frightens, it kills and makes alive, it draws and repulses, it sobers and enraptures. There can be nothing more terrible or more wonderful than to be stricken with love for Christ so deeply that the whole being goes out in a pained adoration of His person, an adoration that disturbs and disconcerts while it purges and satisfies and relaxes the deep inner heart.

This love as a kind of moral fragrance is ever detected upon the garments of the saints. In the writings of Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, for instance, this fragrance is so strong as to be very nearly intoxicating. There are passages in his Confessions so passionately sweet as to be unbearable, yet so respectful and self-effacing as to excite pity for the man who thus kneels in adoring wonder, caught between holy love and an equally holy fear.

The list of fragrant saints is long. It includes men and women of every shade of theological thought within the bounds of the orthodox Christian faith. It embraces persons of every social level, every degree of education, every race and color. This radiant love for Christ is to my mind the true test of catholicity, the one sure proof of membership in the church universal.

It remains only to be said that worship as we have described it here is almost (though, thank God, not quite) a forgotten art in our day. For whatever we can say of modern Bible-believing Christians, it can hardly be denied that we are not remarkable for our spirit of worship. The gospel as preached by good men in our times may save souls, but it does not create worshipers.

Our meetings are characterized by cordiality, humor, affability, zeal and high animal spirits; but hardly anywhere do we find gatherings marked by the overshadowing presence of God. We manage to get along on correct doctrine, fast tunes, pleasing personalities and religious amusements.

How few, how pitifully few are the enraptured souls who languish for love of Christ. The sweet "madness" that visited such men as Bernard and St. Francis and Richard Rolle and Jonathan Edwards and Samuel Rutherford is scarcely known today. The passionate adorations of Teresa and Madame Guyon are a thing of the past. Christianity has fallen into the hands of leaden who knew not Joseph. The very memory of better days is slowly passing from us and a new type of religious person is emerging. How is the gold tarnished and the silver become lead!

If Bible Christianity is to survive the present world upheaval, we shall need to recapture the spirit of worship. We shall need to have a fresh revelation of the greatness of God and the beauty of Jesus. We shall need to put away our phobias and our prejudices against the deeper life and seek again to be filled with the Holy Spirit. He alone can raise our cold hearts to rapture and restore again the art of true worship.