

Holy, Holy, Holy

In the name of him whose glory fills the earth, dear friends in Christ: Today I'd like to talk about our worship of one true God: what it is we do when we gather in his name, why we do it, and how we should understand it. It's important that we do this because especially in our times there are some strange ideas out there that well-intentioned but misguided people are determined to foist upon the congregations of Christ's holy Church.

Let me give two examples. Perhaps the most widespread and potentially destructive idea comes from what is known as the Church Growth Movement. Don't get me wrong, growing churches is good; but the basic philosophy behind this movement is that the Sunday worship service is not so much for the feeding the faith of members of the congregation. They're already Christians, so we don't have to worry about them. Instead the service should be an outreach tool for attracting new members to the church – especially people who aren't Christians. With this in mind, we need to make our Sunday gathering open, inviting, non-threatening, and never very deep or thought provoking. You can't talk to people about their sin because that makes them feel bad, nor can you challenge anyone to think about Christian doctrines that are difficult to understand like the Trinity of God or how it is that God became man in the person of Jesus Christ. Such things scare visitors off. So instead, we've got to make it light, easy-going, and kind of fun. Like marketing experts we need to target particular segments of society by appealing to their preferences. If we want young people in the church, then we need to create the atmosphere of a rock concert 'cause kids like that sort of stuff. If we're targeting rural folks, we'll put a country western spin on everything. Depending on where your church is, you can do the same for bikers, Goths, seniors, yuppies, Gen-Xers, or whatever high density racial minority happens to be in your area. The idea is to tailor the service to the felt needs and special interests of the segment of the culture that you want to pack the pews with. Get them in the door, make them comfortable, and then slip them Christianity in small doses over a long period of time. That's the idea anyway; unfortunately, it doesn't work very well. Sure, you may get initial success. People will come see what's new and attracts them. But because there's never any substance, they soon get bored and move on to something else. So churches that adopt this philosophy of worship are always welcoming and entertaining newcomers; but rarely making long term disciples of Christ.

Recognizing the limitations of that approach, some churches try to achieve success by maximizing the participation of the members. The thought is that the first method fails to keep up people's interest level because they're too passive. They're just being entertained. Ah, but if we can get them involved in doing something in the service – especially something that puts the spotlight on them for a few moments, they'll be more invested in what's going on and thus more likely to stick around. So what happens now is that worship each week becomes sort of a congregational talent show. We'll have five or six different bands and choirs, skits that people can perform in, we'll take turns doing the readings and maybe even the sermon. If nothing else we'll have you hand out bulletins. We've got to get you involved somehow—more than that, we'll name you the minister of something so that you'll feel important. So now we've got the minister of children's puppet shows, the minister of coffee distribution, and the minister of offering collection. Better yet we'll have a time for testimonials each week, when anyone can come up front and talk about what Jesus is doing in their life: how they used to be such terrible sinners and how they are so much better now that they know the Lord, or how the Lord has blessed them in recent weeks with good health, a new car, or a promotion at work. It's *show and tell* for Christian adults: "Look what God did for me. See how much he loves me?" This

idea comes to what is probably its highest (read that *worst*) expression in some Pentecostal circles when there is a part of the service set aside for everyone to showcase their spiritual gifts by speaking in tongues all at the same time. It's a way to show off how much of the Holy Spirit they have. The louder and more ecstatic their speech, the more violently they shake or roll around on the floor, the more "Spirit filled" and therefore better a Christian they must be.

There are other misguided approaches to worship; but what they share in common with the ones I've already mentioned is that they all think of worship as something that belongs to us. The overarching thought is that we, the people or the pastors of the Church, are the principle actors in worship; and therefore we have the right to make it our plaything and shape it however we please, and furthermore that we can use worship to accomplish whatever purposes we desire. But nothing could be farther from the truth. The Church does not belong to us. It belongs to the Lord Jesus who bought it with his own blood. Likewise the worship of the Church is not ours. It too belongs to the Lord. And in his Word he has a lot to say about it. There are whole chapters dedicated to the Lord's very clear and specific prescriptions for the worship of his people. Even so, if we could distill it all down to a single word – one word that would describe the Lord, the proper worship of his Church, and the way we should think about and approach it – that word would be "holy". God is holy. His Church is holy. And therefore the worship of God that takes place in his Church should be *holy*.

Having stated it that way, I don't think anyone would dispute it; the trouble is that word *holy* is usually misunderstood. People usually take it as a synonym for *sinless* or *pure*. I suppose there's some connection there; but the primary meaning of *holy* as it's used in the Scriptures is not so much sinless as it is "set apart", "distinct", or "separate". When the seraphim, the glowing, fiery angels, hovering around the throne of God declare that he is "Holy, holy, holy" they don't mean that he hasn't done anything wrong—that pretty much goes without saying. No, these angels are declaring that the Lord God is completely separate from the created order, that he is altogether "other than" anything we can comprehend. By crying out that God is holy they are saying that he is the transcendent One who dwells in the light unapproachable so far beyond our reason and highest aspirations that it impossible for us even to talk about him properly. Lacking even the concepts much less the vocabulary to describe him, we have always to resort to metaphors or figures of speech – and even then everything we say falls short.

But now here's the amazing thing: this holy God, so high above us in majesty and glory, condescends to make himself available to us. He comes down to our level of reality, entering into our time and space in order to establish and maintain meaningful relationships with us. It's really an incredible thought that this Being as above and beyond us as God is would want to do that. And that was true even before the fall of man into sin. How much more so now that we are in a state of rebellion against him? It beggars the imagination. If it were not true, if God in his Word did not reveal it, no one could have conceived of such a fantastic idea.

But it is true. And with this as our foundation toward understanding God's holiness, we can begin to understand the worship of the Lord as he directed it to be done in Old Testament times. Central to this worship was the Temple in Jerusalem. It was built in the days of King Solomon at the height of Israel's glory days, and it was made of the finest and most costly materials. More importantly, it was laid out according to the pattern that God himself had directed Moses at Mount Sinai. We've talked about this before: how the Temple courts were arranged in a series with barriers in between that limited access to people. The outermost court was for Gentiles. It was as close as foreigners could approach the Temple of God. Inside that was the court for Jewish women. It was as far as women and boys who had not yet reached the age a majority could go. Next was the court for Jewish men. The thought there was that each

man served as the priest for his own household. Then there was the court for the priests. This is where the sacrifices were offered on the altar; but mind you, all of this was still outside the Temple itself. That was a magnificent but relatively small building that stood in the center of the court of the priests. It was divided into two chambers. The outer room was called the Holy Place. Twice daily, at sunrise and just before sunset just one priest was chosen to go inside and perform certain prayers and rituals. The inner chamber was called the Holy of Holies. It was divided from the first room by a heavy curtain that extended from the ceiling to the floor. Behind that curtain sat the Ark of the Covenant. Above the lid of the Ark, which was called the Mercy Seat, hovered a visible manifestation of God's glorious presence known as the Shekinah.

All of this was meant to communicate two important ideas: first, that the holy God was truly present with his people; that is God, who is wholly other and completely separate and beyond nevertheless made his presence with his people manifest. He was truly a God *with us* – and not just in that fuzzy “God is everywhere” sense. Sure, God is everywhere; but you can't get a hold of such a God. The people of Israel knew that the God who is everywhere made himself present *for us* in that building. The second idea enforced by all the barriers and levels of access had to do with sin, and specifically how our sins separate us from that God who condescends to be here for us. So the two ideas were held in tension. Yes, God wants to be with us, to embrace us and be a Father to us – and yet our sins separate us from him, for sin cannot come into the presence of the holy God. With him sinners can never dwell.

The way this seemingly impossible tension was resolved was sacrifice. In his mercy God directed that animal sacrifices be offered up before him. The idea was that God would allow his people to confess their sins and thereby transfer their guilt to the animals they brought. The animals stood in as substitutes and bore the punishment of death that God demands from the soul that sins. By this gracious arrangement the Law of God could be satisfied and God himself could be present in the midst of his people who, for the sake of those animals that died, he would declare to be without sin. So what's vitally important to see is that the sacrifices were the principle acts of worship and that they were for the benefit of the people. They were what made it possible to maintain the otherwise impossible condition of the holy God living on earth with sinful people.

That was the idea. Unfortunately it's an idea that people have a hard time dealing with. Sure, the initial impact is tremendous. The very idea that God the King of the universe would make it possible for sinners like us to come before him, and that he actually wants to treat us as his own beloved children ... it's enough to make your head explode. Words fail us. But in time, as with all things, the wonder wears off after a while. People take it for granted. And because sacrifices were awfully easy to do – I mean I'm not dying here, some dumb animal is – it soon happens that people begin to think of their sins as no big deal: oh well, just kill another goat and be done with it. And because God was sort of out of sight behind that curtain, it didn't take long for the miracle of his presence to fade into the backs of people's consciousness. It was one of those out of sight, out of mind situations. That's what was happening in Isaiah's day. People were forgetting about the holy presence of God in their midst. They were becoming casual about their worship. They began to think of their sacrifices as favors they were doing for God, instead of the other way around. And since they were doing things for God now, they thought of more things they could be doing – which oddly enough is the way pagans think. Pagan worship is all about what we do for the gods to make them happy. The worship of Israel was supposed to be about what the holy God was doing for us to make us his holy people. But now, having adopted pagan thinking, they began to adopt other pagan worship practices including even idolatry, ritual prostitution, and the sacrifice of infants. They copied these unholy abominations from the surrounding cultures, and they brought them into the courts of God's Temple thinking that by so doing they were pleasing him. In truth, they were only gratifying themselves.

It's against this backdrop that the prophet Isaiah is given the vision described in today's Old Testament lesson. While everyone else was doing what they had thought up to please God, the prophet was blessed to see what no one else could—the truth that they had blinded themselves to: the reality of God's holy presence in the Temple. In the vision Isaiah sees the Lord high and exalted and seated on a throne. It's like the walls of the Temple have expanded and its roof is now the sky. Far above he sees the Lord whose long flowing robes fill the floor of the Temple. And from the Lord shines forth the brilliant light of his glory. Even the hovering angels who continually declare his praise shield themselves from its brilliance with their wings. And though the vision is wonderful, Isaiah doesn't feel good about it. No, the light of God's glory beams like X-rays on his soul revealing every sin within him. They stand out like black, filthy stains against the whiteness around him: every inappropriate or selfish thought, each shameful deed, the words he spoke in anger or course jesting ... all these seem magnified a thousand fold. It's especially his lips that he sees as unclean. He's given to understand that even the praises he's come to offer God are dirty.

This fills Isaiah with an overwhelming sense of dread. He feels as if he's trespassing – that he doesn't belong here, and that for this violation of God's holiness he's about to be thrust into the deepest pit of hell where he knows he belongs. But that's not what happens. Instead one of the angels flies to the altar and takes from it a glowing coal with a pair of tongs. He flies to Isaiah, touches it to his lips, and proclaims God's Words of grace and absolution: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, your sin atoned for."

That is what worship is all about. It's about the holy presence of God making his people holy by touching them with something that takes away their sins. And there is only one thing that can do that: the sacrifice of Jesus Christ who died on the cross to atone for the sins of the world. In Old Testament times it was pictured by animal sacrifices. In Isaiah's vision it was portrayed as a burning coal. In both cases God used the image to declare the truth about what he was going to do for his people through his Son. And his people, hearing the declaration of God's forgiveness and believing that Word, received Christ and his sacrifice. He touched them and took away their sins. In the same way we worship by confessing our sins and receiving to ourselves Christ's sacrifice through his Word and Sacraments. What they looked forward to, we look back upon. But in both cases the holy God who is truly present makes us holy by touching us with Christ and his saving work on the cross.

And we no longer need a Temple for this. Since the death and resurrection of Christ we are that Temple in which the Spirit of God dwells. His holy presence makes us holy, people whom the Lord has separated out of the sinful, dying world to be his own – a people through whom he can work his will in the world and call others to come into the light of his glory. God is holy. And by his gracious presence he makes us holy. O come, let us worship him. (The service continues with the confession and absolution.)

Soli Deo Gloria!