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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD 3

HOLDING THE AUDIENCE OR PROCLAIMING THE MESSAGE:
THE WORD IN WORSHIP
James W. Thompson 5

SORTING THROUGH THE CONFUSION ABOUT WORSHIP:
APPRAISAL OF TWO PARADIGMS
Allan J. McNicol 20

AMUSING THE SAINTS:
EDIFICATION WITHOUT TRANSCENDENCE
Michael R. Weed 46

BOOK REVIEW: Foolishness to the Greeks by Lesslie Newbigin
J. Robert Reynolds 59

CONTRIBUTORS 62

AMUSING THE SAINTS: EDIFICATION WITHOUT TRANSCENDENCE

By Michael R. Weed

Observers of the American religious scene have been telling us for some time that there is considerable confusion and uncertainty among the churches regarding the meaning and practice of worship. This observation holds true not only for the broader religious world but also for churches in the Restoration tradition.

In the following discussion I will note certain broad societal factors which shape the modern climate and affect all religious groups, including those in the Restoration tradition. Subsequently, I will indicate tendencies within Restoration churches which are presently having a negative impact upon the understanding and practice of worship. In this regard I will give attention to the increasingly popular view that the purpose of the assembly is edification rather than worship. Finally, I will conclude with some general observations relevant to the present situation in churches of Christ.

Societal Factors

It has long been recognized that religions tend both to reflect and to sanction the values and beliefs of the particular

society in which they exist. Religion provides a "sacred canopy" which serves to authorize and legitimate the various values and aspirations of a given society (e.g., "the American Way of Life"), nation ("ein Gott, ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Fuhrer"), or ideology (" . . . let no man him abuse, comrade Jesus has paid his dues"). In this fashion religions have come to serve as vassals to the countless kings of this world.

Church history vividly illustrates that Christians have not been immune to this temptation. The church under Constantine, Luther's relationship with the German princes, and countless other examples stand as stark reminders of damaging misalliances. It would be naive to assume that contemporary Christianity does not continue to face the temptation to accommodate faith to the modern environment--and to do so occasionally with the best possible motive (e.g., relevance, contextualization, etc.).

American society is rapidly becoming a highly individualistic, self-indulgent, relativistic, and secular society. It is a society in which religion--religious concepts and religious institutions--plays an increasingly marginal role. Surprisingly, however, religion in America has managed to survive (even thrive) in this climate by accommodating itself to its environment--i.e., reflecting and legitimating the dominant values and beliefs of its surroundings.

Obviously all of this compromises the integrity of a religion that recognizes no God but Yahweh and would steel the faithful against all idolatries. The history of the Christian movement also indicates that the only defense against such fatal compromises lies in an unswerving awareness of God's

transcendence. The prophetic word overturns false gods and exposes our constant tendencies to manipulate and use the true God as if he were at our disposal.

And this is precisely the ingredient of Christian faith that is most often missing or distorted in contemporary American religiosity, viz., a sense of awe and reverence before the Transcendent One. Commenting on religious programs on television, Neil Postman asserts:

Religious programs are filled with good cheer. They celebrate affluence. Their featured players become celebrities. Though their messages are trivial, the shows have high ratings, or rather, because their messages are trivial, the shows have high ratings.¹

He continues:

I think it both fair and obvious to say that on television, God is a vague and subordinate character. Though His name is invoked repeatedly, the concreteness and persistence of the image of the preacher carries the clear message that it is he, not He, who must be worshipped.²

Postman concludes, chillingly, that in our society so much under the influence of television, the content of all religion threatens to become the shallow, self-centered, entertainment-oriented stuff of television religiosity.³ Postman suggests that the creed underlying all this is best described by the traditional term "blasphemy."⁴

Obviously this process has tremendous impact on what is envisioned as the heart of the Christian faith and what is understood to be the nature and purpose of Christian worship. In essence, however, it amounts to a crowding out of God--a muffling of the radical claim and a dimming of the blinding light of the One who is totally Other from ourselves. It promotes a

religiosity in which God becomes but a vague and subordinate reality at best.

Worship in the Church of Christ

It would be a mistake to assume that churches of Christ are immune to the social pressures and influences shaping American religiosity. In fact, it may be argued that churches of Christ are doubly vulnerable to these influences--both because of an assumption of being invulnerable and because of certain factors--attitudes and tendencies--at work within churches of Christ. Several of these factors may be identified.

First, many have recognized that attempts to understand worship solely as the observance of five specific acts are a bit artificial and promote a somewhat mechanical understanding of worship.

Second, a lack of attention to the Old Testament (a functional "Marcionism") has led to a tendency to deemphasize and to ignore the Jewishness of the early church--especially with regard to the influence of the synagogue on Christian worship.

Third, however unintentionally, there is a certain irreverence almost built into the Restoration heritage. Unlike those in many other traditions, Restorationists have no special representatives, no vestments, no sacraments, no sanctuary. Correlatively, it is not surprising that one frequently finds Restorationists with very little reverence for or sense of the sacred.
5

Fourth, among churches of Christ there is a stout resistance to anything that appears intentionally formalized, ritualistic,

or "high church." That is, one finds a resistance to any formally fixed liturgical practices or terminology, e.g., invocation, benediction, eucharist, and so forth.

These internal tendencies have contributed to a climate of considerable uncertainty and even confusion among churches of Christ. Unfortunately, the situation has inspired few serious and responsible attempts to recover the true meaning and practice of Christian worship and to revise contemporary worship accordingly. More often than not, the lack of clarity regarding worship has simply left churches uncertain and doubly vulnerable to countless innovations, fads, and gimmicks designed to make worship more "meaningful."

The Edification Thesis

An exception to the lack of serious attempts to reexamine the nature and meaning of Christian worship has appeared in the last two decades.⁶ Essentially, this view holds that "all of life" is worship and that the primary purpose of the assembling together of Christians is not "worship" but "edification" ("upbuilding," or occasionally "one-anothering"). That is, Christians gather not to worship God--which they do in the whole of their lives--but rather to edify one another.

Obviously this thesis has far-reaching influence on what is done when the church assembles. One does not speak of the "worship service" or gathering "to worship." Many hymns are deemed inappropriate for the assembly (e.g., "The Lord is in His Holy Temple"; "Lord, We Come Before Thee Now"; the Doxology).⁷ Further, it is said with regard to the Lord's Supper, a focal

point of the Christian gathering, that "all of its purposes . . . are directed not to God, but are rather aimed toward the edification of 'the body.'"8

While it is not my intention to engage in a detailed analysis of this view, I do suggest that, no doubt contrary to the intent of its framers, this understanding of Christian assemblies and worship has led to serious distortions of the nature and meaning of Christian worship--and even defeats its own best intentions.

Three Ironies

Three closely related ironies resulting from the edification thesis capture the difficulty of its understanding of the nature and purpose of Christian assemblies. They also indicate the severity of the problems it promotes.

First Irony: The Exclusion of Worship from the Assembly.

The edification thesis can be said not merely to extend worship to include daily life; it also excludes worship from what has traditionally been called "the worship service."

"Reverence" and "awe" in the New Testament refer to the proper response of the disciples to God's working in their lives (Acts 2:43). These qualities relate to our daily worship of God (Heb. 12:28) in the "real tabernacle," and not to an artificially contrived "atmosphere" in a building "made with hands."¹⁰

Thus the edification thesis suggests that there is less justification for awe, reverence, and an awareness of the mystery and majesty of God in Christian assemblies than when at work, mowing the lawn, or playing golf.

Second Irony: The Americanization of the Assembly. While criticizing the Restoration tradition for reflecting Catholic and

Protestant corruptions of the real meaning of Christian assemblies, the edification thesis itself not only permits but actually promotes the "Americanization of the church," i.e., accommodation to various fads of American religiosity in general.

"Edification" in a climate severed from any openness to transcendence degenerates into multiple distortions. Without any clear transcendent point of reference, edification simply legitimates the social impulse at best. One remembers sociologist Peter Berger's observations regarding American religiosity over a quarter of a century ago as he noted the tendency for American religiosity to degenerate into countless activities other than confronting the reality of God:

Petty-bourgeois gregariousness is regarded as Christian koinonia and the back-yard barbecue takes on the aroma of the agape meal in countless church picnics or ladies'-aid gatherings.¹¹

At its worst, "edification" degenerates into a highly subjective self-indulgent pragmatism:

The individual no longer asks, "What is the Truth?" Instead, he asks, "What do I feel?" And that is but one step to the next question: "How does this make me feel?" Emotional pragmatism now takes the place of the honest confrontation with the Christian message.¹²

Without any clear criterion or standard, or transcendent point of reference, "edification" inevitably reflects the shifting tastes and values of the surrounding society. Not surprisingly, in numerous churches Christians assemble to be "edified" as they are amused, entertained, and pursue their own interests.

Consequently,

the way is opened for the attitude of the religious consumer, who shops around the denominational supermarket for just the right combination of spiritual kicks and thrills to meet his particular psychological needs.¹³

In short, the edification thesis has amounted to opening the door to society and society's values. It has amounted to permission if not license, for individual and group tastes to dictate the shape and direction of Christian assemblies along the lines of society's confused values.

Third Irony: Transcendence is Irrelevant. The edification thesis, concerned to show that all of life is worship, has, by its removal of transcendence from the center of Christian assemblies, cut off the very avenue through which the assembly--as worship--is relevant to the daily living of faithful lives. By default, attention shifts to the edification offered by amusing and entertaining social activities, group dynamics, and various therapeutic techniques.

Concluding Observations

I will conclude this discussion with four observations which appear relevant to the situation within churches of Christ.

The Influence of the Edification Thesis. It must be recognized that the edification thesis is popular for several reasons. Not the least of these is that it attempts to take the biblical record seriously. It also has the admirable intent of claiming the relevance of all of life to be the zone of Christian worship and to avoid distinctions between "sacred" services and secular life. Nonetheless, there are other ways of showing the relevance of Christian faith to daily life, and one is led to

suspect that there are other explanations for the widespread popularity and attractiveness of the edification thesis.

Employing a "sociology of knowledge" approach,¹⁴ one may suggest that the edification thesis has proven attractive for reasons perhaps foreign to the conscious intentions of its first advocates. Namely, the edification thesis appears to solve two problems: (a) it offers a way out of the uncertainty of what to do with worship for those who, dissatisfied with the "five acts" approach and with little sense of the sacred or reputation for reverence, are thrashing about for ways to make the assembly more "meaningful"; and (b) it legitimates an irrepressible temptation to draw on the popular and seemingly successful techniques and devices of TV religion to put on a good show and have a "little something for everyone."

In short, the edification thesis seems to provide biblical warrant for us to do what we already want to do, viz., to accommodate ourselves to what is going on in surrounding religious groups and in society at large. It is not by accident that the edification thesis should appear among churches of Christ at a time when Jews, Catholics, and Protestants write Ann Landers complaining that their respective services are more like amusement parks than worship services.¹⁵

All of Life is Worship. Advocates of the edification thesis assert that Christians do not assemble for worship, since all of life is worship. This view is best responded to by paraphrasing C. F. D. Moule. Moule agrees that all work done and life lived for God's sake is worship. However, he also observes that

the surest way to profane the whole week would be to try to make every day equally holy.¹⁶

For

(o)ur work and recreation would be less efficient and worthy if we tried consciously to think of God while working out a mathematical problem or shooting a goal.¹⁷

Consequently,

. . . here on earth it is necessary to set aside specific times for the rendering to God of articulate praise and for the conscious dedication to Him of our whole life and work.¹⁸

Thus Christians set aside a portion of time consciously to hallow the whole, just as our participation in the collection recognizes God's claim on all our possessions.

The Relevance of Transcendence. Worship points us beyond the realities of this world to the transcendent reality of that one who is totally Other. In so doing, worship puts all the other realities of the world in their proper place. In this, worship unmask and dethrones the false absolutes which absorb our time and dominate our lives. It releases us from thralldom to the various gods of the nation and the market place. Ultimately, worship frees us from the chief idol, the self--the bloated ego which transforms and distorts all that it surveys. Before the awesome reality of God--his majesty and mystery--one is released from self-absorption. Thus true worship has nothing to do with the creation of an artificial atmosphere and the manufacture of various moods and the titillating of emotions.

Paradoxically, it is in its very irrelevance that worship proves relevant for the living of faithful--and worshipful--lives.

Fellowship in Christ. First John 1:3 states that our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

Christian fellowship is not founded on the social impulse; it is not the esprit of old comrades in arms, teammates, or school chums. Christian fellowship is not even the conviviality of Christians. Our fellowship with one another is founded upon the cross and the blood of Jesus Christ (vs. 17). It is this selfless love which Christians are called to emulate in their daily lives.

Christians assemble in the name and presence of the one who said, "where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." To deny, diminish, or make incidental the presence of the Father or the Son in the Christian assembly, much less at the Lord's Supper, cuts the very ground out from under Christian identity and faithful living; it makes the Christian assembly merely an assembly of Christians.¹⁹

Presumably, for Christians, worship is edifying. The answer to the problem that many modern Christians do not find prayer and praise to God edifying does not lie in arranging assemblies that are more entertaining or in spawning Christian interest groups--skit shooting and art shows--for those who do not find the cross "their thing." Rather, the answer lies in fuller instruction in the Christian faith.

NOTES

1

Neil Postman, Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business. (New York: Penquin, 1985), 121.

2

Postman, 122.

3

Postman, 124.

4

Postman, 123.

5

I illustrate this point simply by citing the frequency with which one hears supposedly humorous stories about misadventures occurring during Christian baptisms.

6

Ervin Bishop, "The Christian Assembly," Firm Foundation (series of five articles in 1973); also see "The Assembly," Restoration Quarterly, 18:4, 1975, 219-228.

7

Bishop, "The Christian Assembly," 5:503.

8

Bishop, "The Assembly," 226. See also "The Christian Assembly": "Although the Lord's Supper is accompanied by prayers of thanksgiving and certainly evokes thoughts of praise, its purposes, as they are presented in the New Testament, are not basically God-directed, but are rather aimed toward the edification of the body" (4:407).

9

The edification thesis suffers most of the problems connected with attempts to draw too much from word studies. Cf. James Barr, Biblical Words for Time (London: SCM, 1962). Further, to note that early Christians did not apply sacrificial terminology of Jewish and Hellenistic cults in describing their assemblies in part reflects their understanding of the finality of Jesus' atoning death. It does not establish that they thereby discarded any concept of worship or transcendence from their gatherings--only that they wanted to avoid certain misunderstandings of their actions, e.g., sacrificial and propitiatory. See T. W. Manson, "hilastērion," Journal of Theological Studies, 46, 1945, 10.

10

"The Christian Assembly," 5:503.

11

Peter Berger, The Noise of Solemn Assemblies (New York: Doubleday, 1961) 85.

12

Berger, 126.

13

Ibid.

14

A sociology of knowledge approach would maintain that social circumstances variously and subtly influence the acceptability and attractiveness of ideas and concepts as well as play a fundamental role in their formulation. For example, it is often noted that had Freud not existed he would had to have been invented due to the social and intellectual climate of late 19th-century Europe.

15

Ann Landers, "They'd Like to Get Religion at Church," Los Angeles Times, Nov. 16, 1987. Landers' column contains letters written by Protestants, Catholics and Jews from Florida to California. Although not all writers are critical, the majority complain variously that their worship services have degenerated into "social activities and fun stuff," "video tapes,"

"applause," "show-biz time," and are "so laid back that you might as well be in an amusement park."

16

C. F. D. Moule, Worship in the New Testament (London: Lutterworth, 1961) 82.

17

Moule, 85.

18

Moule, 82.

19

Interestingly, while Bishop utilizes some of Cullmann's insights, he ignores Cullmann's argument that "the primitive Lord's Supper gravitates around . . . two poles: the presence of Christ and the fellowship of those who experience that presence." It is the presence of the risen one which transforms the gathering into an eschatological community. To ignore or deemphasize the presence of Christ radically alters the self-understanding of those gathered and the nature of their fellowship. See Oscar Cullmann and F. J. Leenhardt, Essays on the Lord's Supper (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1958) 16.

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