

CHRISTIAN STUDIES

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"The Pleasures of Worship"

Heartfelt Devotion in Stone and Campbell

Gary Holloway

Next to the beatific vision of God in his own glorious heaven, there is nothing on earth to compare with the pleasures of a soul-absorbing protracted interview in prayer with God; or in the celebration of the Lord's supper in the solemn silence of a sincerely pious and well informed Christian community

Alexander Campbell¹

Much of the current agitation for change in the worship of Churches of Christ is based on a critique of our current and past worship practices. All we really cared about was getting our ticket punched each Sunday by completing the five acts of worship (prayer, singing, Lord's Supper, contribution, and sermon). Because of the rationalism of the early leaders in the movement (particularly Alexander Campbell), we had little place for emotion in our assemblies, and became concerned solely with fulfilling the requirements of the acts of worship in an orderly manner.

This description of unemotional worship, although overstated, may ring true for some of us who grew up in the church between the 1940s and 1970s, but it certainly is an unfair characterization of the thought of Alexander Campbell and other early leaders of the Restoration Movement. In fact, as we shall see, they were concerned with the same issues that face us in worship today: How can we insure our worship is heart-felt? What forms of worship are most appropriate? How can God remain the focus of our worship? How can our worship draw the outsider?

Worship from the Heart

The quote that begins this article makes it clear that Campbell believed worship should be heart-felt. We would do well to recover his language of the "pleasures of worship." When was the last time you heard someone describe worship as a pleasure? However, it is true that in his day Campbell had to fight extremes of

¹ *Millennial Harbinger* (1849) 9.

emotionalism in worship. Frontier revivals were notoriously emotional and many confused "spirited" worship with spiritual worship. Campbell fought these excesses with an appeal to reason and order. However it is grossly unfair to characterize him as an unfeeling rationalist who cared only for restoring the external forms of worship.

Indeed, Campbell realized the danger of overreacting to the extremes of emotional worship. He prints with approval the following letter from James Henshal:

They who come over from a noisy, irregular, and external form of worship, are too apt to place reform in being singularly quiet and contemplative; and where animal excitement has been mistaken for true devotion, reform is likely to consist in eradicating the feelings altogether. Ah me! We are so prone to extremes. Lord have mercy upon us!²

Although these are Henshal's words, Campbell often published letters in his periodicals that expressed his own views (when he disagreed with a writer, he made a clear rebuttal). I believe that Campbell wholeheartedly agreed with Henshal's further statement that what he feared most was a "dry, informal, intellectual worship, performed in an insipid and indifferent manner."³

Campbell was not alone in calling for worship to be from the heart. His contemporaries Walter Scott, Robert Richardson, Robert Milligan, and others made the same plea.⁴ Some may claim that more recent worship in Churches of Christ emphasized the correctness of the acts and ignored the heart, but in fact David Lipscomb and E. G. Sewell at the turn of the century, G. C. Brewer at mid-century, and our more recent leaders have all been remarkably consistent in condemning empty ritual and calling for the true worship that springs from the heart.⁵

But how is one to promote heart-felt worship? Should we change what is done in worship to make it more exciting? Must worship be in tune with our "heart-language?" Does "noisy and irregular" worship produce more true devotion?

To Campbell and other leaders, these questions place the cart before the horse. Worship must not be changed to appeal to our hearts, rather our hearts must be prepared for worship. Worship did not come naturally to his age any more than it comes to ours:

² *Millennial Harbinger* (1834) 34.

³ *Millennial Harbinger* (1834) 34.

⁴ Walter Scott, *The Evangelist* (1842) 80; Robert Richardson, *Millennial Harbinger* (1847) 340-41 (later reprinted as the first chapter in his book, *Communion in the Sanctuary*); Robert Milligan, *The Scheme of Redemption* (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1868) 432.

⁵ *Questions Answered by Lipscomb and Sewell* (Nashville: McQuiddy, 1957) 294; G.C. Brewer, *The Model Church* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1957) 142. For more recent views on heart-felt worship, see the quotations from the Abilene Christian lectures in William S. Banowsky, *Mirror of a Movement* (Dallas: Christian Publishing, 1965) 243-244.

The present age is not an age given to devotion. Men have not time to meditate, to pray, to examine themselves. They have too many newspapers to read, too many political questions to discuss, too much business to transact, too many doctrines to debate, too many faults and errors to censure—and too little taste for communion with God.⁶

How does one promote heart worship in a busy, secular, entertainment-oriented age? Not by changing what is done in worship, but by changing the attitudes of the worshiper. True worship does not come easily or naturally; it requires effort and preparation:

No religious offerings, services, or worship can be acceptable to the Lord without the proper preparation of the heart; and it is out of the question for any person to rush from the midst of worldly thoughts, words, and actions, into the presence of the Lord, either acceptably or profitably. This is to offer the sacrifice of fools...⁷

Campbell would remind those who do not find worship exciting, uplifting, or relevant that the problem is most likely in their hearts, not in outmoded forms of worship.

Orderly Worship

Any discussion of order in worship conjures up pictures of dry, dull, and rote services where we do the same thing each Sunday and no honest emotion is ever seen. In this view, order implies lack of sincerity, while disorder and spontaneity are exciting and spiritual. However, this contrast between order and heart-felt worship cannot be found in Scripture. Indeed, order is given as a hallmark of true worship. This does not keep some from preferring disorder in our day as well as in Campbell's:

The worship of false gods is a scene of superlative tumult, confusion and disorder. So is the corrupt worship of some who acknowledge the one only living and true God.⁸

Orderly worship can certainly become empty ritual, but it may also be sincere and heart-felt. Campbell says, "Every one that speaks or acts must feel himself specially in the presence of the Lord. . . ."⁹ Having spoken of the feeling of worship, he launches immediately into a discussion of the ordinances or acts of worship.

⁶ *Millennial Harbinger* (1838) 392.

⁷ *Millennial Harbinger* (1838) 392. Robert Milligan, *The Scheme of Redemption*, 36, also sees the need for "preparation and discipline of both head and heart" for worship.

⁸ *Millennial Harbinger* (1835) 507.

⁹ *Millennial Harbinger* (1835) 508.

The five acts of worship have been discussed at length recently in Churches of Christ. No doubt some are correct in their criticism that we have at times in our past treated these acts as legal requirements that must be performed each Sunday in order to fulfill God's command to worship. This was not the understanding or practice of the early leaders of our movement. Although Campbell is maligned as a mere rationalist who had no place for emotion in worship, we have seen his clear call for deep feeling in worship. However this feeling is not to be expressed in whatever way we see fit, but in the ordinances God has established. Indeed, it is by these acts that the early church expressed its faith, and it is by these acts our feelings can best be expressed.

Some are critical of the five acts because they believe other actions—drama, dialogue, dance, or musical performances—can better express the devotion of contemporary worshipers. In reply Campbell would argue that we are bound by the ordinances delivered to the early church by her Redeemer. By arguing that the early church practiced these five ordinances—singing, prayer, preaching, the Lord's Supper, and the contribution for the poor—Campbell anticipated the conclusions of modern scholars on New Testament worship.¹⁰

Some also are critical of the five acts because they claim they lead to a stifling uniformity in the sequence of worship ("two songs and a prayer," etc.). By order Campbell does not mean each church must have the same sequence of worship; those questions are up to each local church. This is part of the genius of Christian worship: it is "designed for all nations, and is adapted to all the varieties of human circumstances, from east to west, and from pole to pole."¹¹ The insistence on order and ordinances then is not a disguised plea for a Western, American form of worship, but rather a call to return to the New Testament practice of worship that is applicable to all cultures.

Serious Worship

Campbell's talk of the pleasures of worship and of worship from the heart does not mean he measured the quality of worship by the quantity of emotion that was outwardly expressed. Worship is no good without sincere feeling, but this feeling is directed to the One who is a consuming fire. Reverence is a component of all true worship, and reverence is shown by worshiping in a serious manner. Worship should be from the heart but also from the mind; one should not take precedence over the

¹⁰For example, see Oscar Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953); Gerhard Delling, *Worship in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962); Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (New York: Revell, 1964); and C.F.D. Moule, *Worship in the New Testament* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1961). Of course, Campbell was not the first to speak of these ordinances; he here shows his debt to Calvin and the Reformed Church.

¹¹*Millennial Harbinger* (1835) 509.

other. In speaking of the excesses of emotion in the worship of his day, Campbell says, "Then it is, that heart-religion usurps the throne of reason, proscribes common sense and propriety, and rends the welkin [tears the sky] with its hideous shouts."¹²

Some criticize current worship in Churches of Christ as lacking in visible emotion. However their solution is to go to the other extreme and campaign for clapping, swaying, and shouting. Again, our age is no more naturally given to common sense and decorum than was Campbell's. Worship must be serious, planned, and sincere. We should strive for a middle path between the extremes of uncontrolled display of emotion and empty unfeeling ritual:

In the solemn assembly simplicity of dress and manners—gravity, sobriety, and serious cheerfulness, equi-distant from the morose austerity of Pharisaic sanctity and the thoughtless gaiety of Sadducean levity, are essential elements of christian decency and order.¹³

This rage for order, decency, and seriousness in worship cannot be simply dismissed as springing from Campbell's rationalism. Barton W. Stone, whom some call a pietist,¹⁴ uses even stronger language concerning seriousness in worship. In commenting on "a want of solemnity in the Lord's supper," he says, "such irreverent conduct ... has no good effect on by-standers."¹⁵ Stone was not a believer in unruly, spontaneous, worship but rather felt such worship actually drives away the outsider.

But what does a solemn assembly look like? When people arrive they spend a few minutes in private prayer. Members sit near to each other in order to make the serving of the Lord's Supper more convenient and less distracting. Songs of praise are sung, preferably standing. Scripture is read accurately, distinctively, and solemnly. Members leave the assembly respectfully, but greet one another affectionately. In all these actions is a spirit of joy and celebration, but it is a serious cheerfulness, appropriate to the worship of the Living God.

Campbell's and Stone's picture of a solemn assembly should serve as a model for our time. Too many of us approach worship flippantly or at least with no thought of preparation. Some confuse informality with sincerity, assuming God wants us to be spontaneous. Lack of planning is considered a virtue. We need to be reminded that God desires our best in worship: heart, soul, and mind. Since worship is an encounter

¹² *Millennial Harbinger* (1842) 86.

¹³ *Millennial Harbinger* (1835) 508.

¹⁴ In the video *Like Fire in Dry Stubble* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1992) Richard Hughes says, "Campbell was a rationalist and Stone was a pietist." Since he does not clearly define these terms, it is difficult to accept this distinction. When it comes to their writings on worship, however, it is clear that one cannot make this distinction. Stone's comments on worship generally sound more rationalistic and less pietistic than do Campbell's.

¹⁵ *Christian Messenger* (1843) 168; see also *Christian Messenger* (1822) 280.

with the transcendent Father who loves us, we must approach it with a serious cheerfulness.

Worship that Draws the Outsider

A concern of many in Churches of Christ today is to provide worship opportunities that will draw the outsider. To draw the unchurched, some propose a separate "seeker service" where worship is quite different from what has been our practice in the past. Others would change the Sunday morning service to fit the outsider.

This concern for outsiders (those we used to call "the lost") is certainly biblical and is to be commended. However it raises two important questions. The first is, "How far can we go in changing worship to make non-Christians comfortable without making it something other than truly Christian worship?" Drama, dialogue, musical performances, and dance may draw the outsider, but are they pleasing to God? Has God not chosen certain actions (the ordinances mentioned above) as the appropriate ways of corporately expressing devotion to him? Our practice of worship for over 150 years has been to praise God by these ordinances alone. If a church may acceptably worship God in any manner it finds comfortable or that it thinks will draw the outsider, then we, not God, have become the final arbiters of worship, and any form of worship, no matter how bizarre, is allowed.

Does this mean we should have no concern for the outsider at our assemblies? Of course, we should. The second question raised by this concern is: "Can our current practice of worshipping God according to his ordinances (the five acts) draw the outsider?" The answer is a resounding "Yes," provided our worship is clearly sincere and from the heart. In his discussion of heart-felt worship and the ordinances, Campbell urged that the outsider be a prime consideration. Visitors will be "favorably or unfavorably disposed towards the assembly" depending on whether they perceive both our sincerity and our order:

When we survey the countenance of a religious assembly on the Lord's day, if we discover an evident vacuity of devotional thought, of sentiment, of feeling (to say nothing of the positive appearance of levity, of vanity, of pride, of carnality), the forms of worship, were they as pure and uncorrupt as those of the virgin church of Jerusalem, would neither illuminate the understanding nor propitiate the heart of the intelligent and reflecting spectators.¹⁶

It is a gross distortion of Campbell and our heritage to picture him and our other spiritual ancestors as being solely or even primarily concerned with restoring the forms of worship at the expense of feeling. The outsider will not be drawn, even

¹⁶ *Millennial Harbinger* (1836) 179. As we saw above, Stone had a similar fear that lack of seriousness in worship would repulse the outsider.

if our forms of worship are perfectly correct, by a lukewarm, emotionless worship. However, to draw outsiders, we must not appeal to their natural wants, desires, or needs (what Campbell calls "carnality") but to their desire to truly worship the Lord God. Campbell was convinced that right forms, when performed thoughtfully and with feeling, will draw the outsider:

[T]he open, but unostentatious display, of all the christian affections, feelings, sympathies, joys, and delights, in our meetings—in our songs, prayers, and christian feasts, are part's of God's appointed means of quickening and exalting our piety, and of producing it in others. . . .¹⁷

A Model for Today

If Alexander Campbell, Barton Stone, and other leaders were around today and visited many of our assemblies, no doubt they would join with those who are calling for change in our worship. Their call however would not be to change our forms of worship to make them more meaningful to us or to outsiders. These forms are biblical and should not be changed. What should be changed is our hearts. We should take worship seriously. We should prepare our hearts and minds for worship instead of rushing in at the last minute (or twenty minutes late). Those that plan worship should work to insure that our songs and prayers focus on the Almighty God. We should in a dignified and orderly way show our heart-felt, sincere devotion to God. Such display of genuine devotion will appeal to the outsider.

Campbell and Stone were right about worship, not just for their time, but for ours. To improve worship in Churches of Christ, we do not need to jump on the bandwagon of each new form of worship that comes down the pike. What we do (and have done for years) in worship is what the early Christians did and what God desires: we pray, sing, learn, give, and eat the Lord's Supper. What we need to do is to approach these acts with more planning, thought, and feeling. Outsiders who see such worship will be drawn to the One to whom all worship belongs.

¹⁷ *Millennial Harbinger* (1836) 181.

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