



## Marks of a Healthy Church

### Mark Nine: A Biblical Understanding of Worship

Fr. William Klock

May 30, 2010 — Trinity Sunday

This morning I want to wrap up this series on the marks of a healthy church by looking at what it means to have a biblical understanding of what worship is. It seems like an appropriate place to end, because worship is where everything else we do ultimately takes us. And that points to the difference between this mark and all the other marks that we've talked about—between worship and *everything else* we do. In fact, that difference is so important that if we get it wrong, our worship ceases to be worship. The book of Revelation shows us the end of redemptive history, and there we see that the story ends with God's people finally restored to his presence, living in eternal worship of him as we give him the glory he is due. That's the end. The whole story of redemption and everything we do in the Christian life is for the purpose of getting us to that point of living in eternal worship. Worship—the giving of glory to God—is the end. It's the one thing we do as Christians with no other purpose. Worship is the point and the end goal of the Christian life.

Earlier this year I read a book on worship written by a friend who attends our old parish in Vancouver, Washington. After thinking on the nature of worship—on what it is—she chose to title her book “A Royal ‘Waste’ of Time”. The title is a little off-putting at first. Worship isn't a waste of time! But she was approaching it from the standpoint that everything else we do—all the work of the Church—is aimed at worship as the end result. Think about that. Again, what is the picture the Bible, especially the book of Revelation, gives us of the New Jerusalem and of eternity with God? It's a picture of the saints, finally made perfectly holy, gathered to worship around the throne of God. The story—all the work, all the pain, all the suffering, all the tribulation, all the blessings, all the mercy, all the grace, all the love—the whole story of the redemption of God's people—a story we're still living out today—is played out in order to bring God's people to the place of worship. Preaching, the study of theology, the gospel, evangelism, our life together as the church and our loving and being accountable to

each other are all work, but all that work is moving us toward worship. Worship, as the end goal, is the one work we do with no other purpose. Worship is to give God the glory he is due. It's the fulfilment of our very being. The first question of the Westminster Catechism asks us, “What is the chief end of man?” And the answer is that we are *to glorify God* and to enjoy him forever. Everything else we do serves the purpose of bringing about our worship. Worship is work, and yet it's work for no other purpose. When we're worshipping we've doing something *unique*. When we worship we are fulfilling the very purpose for which God has made us as we give him glory. This understanding of worship as a unique and God-centred activity is critical if we are to be a healthy church, because if we start treating worship as an end to something else, our worship will cease to be worship.

When we understand that worship is unique in being an end in itself, it helps us put everything else in the right perspective. Everything else we do has some other purpose behind it. As an example, consider that fellowship with our brother and sisters is not an end in itself. Scripture tells us that fellowship is for the purpose of encouraging faith and stirring up love. Hebrews 10:24-25 tells us: “Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” It's good for us to be involved in fellowship *for the purpose of encouraging faith and stirring up love*. But even though worship can encourage faith and love too, the genuineness and authenticity of our worship is threatened if we try to make it a means to those other experiences.

Fellowship is not an end in itself and the same goes for all the other ministries of the church. Christian education is not an end in itself, because knowing—even knowing about God—is not an end in itself. We seek to know so that we will be moved to hope in God. Psalm 78:5-7 tells us the aim of Christian education: “[God] established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, *so that they should set their hope in God.*” The Bible never gives us knowledge for its own sake, but to build our hope and faith in God. St. Paul wrote to the Romans, saying, “Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4). Knowledge of

God and knowledge of his acts moves us to worship him.

What about our giving—especially our tithes and offerings? Are they an end in themselves? That's an easy one to answer. How upset would you be if we simply took your money and burned it? Our giving is not an end; we give to enable the work of the church: to support missions, to support ministry in our own parish, to take care of the place where we worship. It's the same with everything we do as believers. They aren't ends in themselves. Only worship is its own end. Worship is the one thing we do that should never be done with some other end or purpose in mind.

Now, because I know how sharp you guys are and that you're all paying attention, I know you're all biting your tongues right now, because you want you all want to shout out: “But Bill! Our fellowship when we gather and the knowledge we get from the sermon and the tithes and offerings we collect, aren't those all *parts* of our worship? How can you say that none of them is an end in itself and yet have them as crucial parts of our worship, which you are saying is an end in itself?” That's a good question, and you can calm down because I want to answer that. We need to look at what worship is and to do that I want to look at Matthew 15:8-9.

Jesus addresses the Pharisees in these verses and quotes from Isaiah 29:13. He says:

**This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.**

Notice that Jesus draws a parallel between “this people *honours* me” in verse 8 and “they *worship* me” in verse 9. This is one of the passages that teaches us that the essence of worship is the act of recognising God's honour. What does that mean? It doesn't mean that we give God honour or that we make him honourable. When a kid does well in school, they put him on the honour roll. Being on the honour roll doesn't make him honourable. His hard work is made him honourable. The honour roll simply recognises it. When you write a letter to our MP and address it to the Honourable John Duncan, you're calling him honourable doesn't make him honourable. You honour him with the title, because as our MP he's worthy of that honour. In the same way—but to an infinitely greater degree—our honouring God means that we recognise his honour, that we feel the worth of it, and that we ascribe it to him in all the ways that are appropriate to his character and that we glorify him for it all. Psalm 96:6-8 says,

“Honor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary. Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength! Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name” (RSV). That’s the first thing we need to understand about worship: Worship is an act of reflecting back to God his own glory.

The second thing we should take away from what Jesus tells us here is that worship can be approached from two different angles. When God says, “In vain do they worship me” or, “they honour me with their lips,” he’s saying that we can think of worship as acts and rituals that we perform in obedience to biblical commands or liturgical tradition. It’s true that worship through the Bible always involves action. The main word used in Hebrew for worship means “to bow down.” Worship was performed in bowing, in lifting the hands, in kneeling, in singing, in praying, in reading and reciting scripture, and all sorts of other actions. The word “liturgy” comes directly from the Greek word *leitourgia*, which literally means “the work of the people”. That’s worship—at least in terms of the externals. The problem is, Jesus says, that all these acts can be done even by people whose hearts are far from God.

We know how it works. In the company where I used to work, they would throw parties for people when they were leaving us. There were plenty of people we were truly going to miss. The cake and ice cream, the gifts, the goodbyes, and the honouring of those people for the good work they had done were genuine. But I remember going to some of the parties we held for people I didn’t even know. They worked in a different department, or they spent most of their time travelling. I’d eat the cake and enjoy the party and shake hands with the guy as he left and smile, but for me I was just going through the motions. I was doing it for the cake, not to honour a person I didn’t even know.

With that in mind, consider that while “worship” can describe our outward acts of piety, it also refers to the experience of the heart. In condemning the Pharisees, Jesus tells us that for worship to be true, we can’t separate these two things. When Scripture commands us to worship, it’s not commanding us to honour God with our lips when our heart is far from him. That’s like going to the party and eating the cake just for the sake of eating the cake. When David writes, “Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness” (Psalm 29:2), and when Jesus

says, “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve” (Matthew 4:10), and when the angel says to St. John in Revelation 19:10, “Don’t worship me; worship God,” we can be sure that they weren’t commanding some liturgical act regardless of where the heart is. Those commands to worship refer to an experience of the heart that is anything but far from God. That’s the second meaning of worship that Jesus addresses—and it’s the worship we’re talking about when we say that worship is an end in itself.

What is this experience of the heart? We’ve already seen that it’s more than action. It’s more than singing, and praying, and kneeling, and reading Scripture. Those are all parts of true worship—they’re the outward acts of that inner experience of the heart. The problem is that we can, and often do, go through the outward acts without them being motivated by the heart. We eat the cake because we like the cake, but we ignore what the cake celebrates. We come and sing the songs because we like the songs or because we like the way they makes us feel, while ignoring the God they’re about or to whom they’re sung. When God says, “Their heart is far from me,” he wasn’t complaining that the Pharisees were neglecting outward acts of piety. The problem was that they went through all the motions simply for the sake of the motions. Their acts of piety weren’t motivated hearts that were close to God. The drawing near of the heart to God means the coming alive of our feelings for God. Worship is a matter of the heart. It’s about feelings and emotions. And those feelings are what give rise to the outward acts of worship.

Now, having said that, let me be clear. In saying that true worship is about our emotions, I’m not talking about true worship as simply *emotionalism*. Emotionalism is not any more true worship than acts without emotion are true worship. Worship is about feelings and emotions that well up from our understanding of biblical truth: who God is and what God has done. And yes, that means that true worship requires that we know God as he reveals himself in Scripture—it requires intellectual content. True worship is motivated by the heart, but the heart first has to be motivated by thought and by the knowledge of God that the Scriptures give us. That means that the feelings and emotions that create genuine worship aren’t the result of manipulation. This is one of my major concerns with a lot of what passes for worship today. The Revivalists of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century were masters of manipulation, especially when it came to

music, and that manipulation became so mainstream that people are still writing books and holding conferences to tell us how to do it, based on the mistaken idea that real worship can come from emotions generated by musical and psychological manipulation. Friends, music is a powerful too, but if your emotions on Sunday morning are the result of the music instead of being a genuine and inevitable response to your *knowledge* of who God is and the great things he has done, your heart is far from God regardless of how emotional you may be.

This is why the historic liturgies of the Church *begin* with the reading and exposition of Scripture *followed* by the responses of the people. Morning and Evening Prayer begin with a confession of sin and an absolution and declaration of God’s gracious forgiveness followed by the readings and sermon, which are only then followed by the singing of the people’s praises. We’re first reminded of God’s grace and mercy and our praise is the natural result of our gratitude. The Prayer Book was composed in a time before modern hymns. The liturgy itself was sung by the people, but the one great hymn that was included, the *Gloria in excelsis*, came at the end—*after* the readings, *after* the sermon, and *after* the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, because it was understood that our worshipful praise is inspired by a knowledge of who God is and what he has done; so Scripture and Sacrament came *first* and the worshipful response of the people came *after*. In the modern world we seem to have turned that upside down. Now we start out with praise, then we receive Scripture and Sacrament, and in comparison offer very little to God in praise afterward. It’s backward...and especially so if we’re using all the singing at the beginning to “get us in the mood” for worship. The emotions that create true worship don’t come from *our* singing, they come from the knowledge of the greatness of God and his mighty deeds. Really, they should *already* be present as we gather on Sunday morning having lived out our week in his service, experiencing his mighty and saving acts for the last six days, and as we live with our hearts close to him.

So, if feelings and emotions are necessary in order to turn outward acts into true worship, what are they? What are the feelings toward God that turn external acts into genuine worship? The place to look is the world’s richest book of worship: the book of Psalms. Every Christians should be taking time each day, along with their other Scripture reading, to meditate on these divinely inspired hymns. (As an aside, it used be *common* for

Christians to have the whole book of Psalms memorised because the church printed Psalters in which the psalms were each set to specific chant tones or metrical settings that were sung regularly. The Prayer Book runs through all 150 each month and when you chant or sing the psalms that way it doesn't take much time to begin to memorise them.) In the Psalms we find that some of the highest worship actually begins with feelings of *brokenness* and *contrition* and *grief* for sin. "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (51:17). "I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin" (38:18). And with the feeling of genuine contrition we usually see feelings of *longing* and *desire*: "As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?" (42:1-2). "Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (73:25-26). And with our sense of sin and our longing for God's mercy are feelings of *fear* and *awe* before the holiness and greatness of God: "I will bow down toward your holy temple in the fear of you" (5:7). "Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him!" (33:8). And as he comes near, forgiving our iniquity, crowning us with honour, and satisfying us with good (103:3-5), our hearts well up with feelings of *gratitude*: "Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name!" (100:4). And with our feelings of gratitude are feelings of *joy* and *hope*: "Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!" (32:11). "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation" (42:5).

These are just a *few* examples of some of the feelings that motivate real acts of worship: contrition, sorrow, longing, desire, fear, awe, gratitude, joy, and hope. The reason they create true worship is because they draw our hearts close to God and move our acts from being lip-service to genuine and authentic worship.

And that brings us full-circle, making it clear why we have to accept that true worship is an end in itself. If the thing that turns lip-service into true worship is the stirring in the heart of these feelings, then true worship can never be performed as a means to some other experience. Feelings aren't like that.

Genuine feelings can't be created as stepping stones to something else. If a policeman comes to your door to tell you that your son or daughter was just killed in a car crash, you don't sit down and say, "Now, to what end—why—should I feel grief? What can I accomplish if I cry for half-an-hour?" No. The feeling of grief is an end in itself. You don't grieve as a means to anything.

If you've been shipwrecked and floating on a raft with no food or water for a week and see an island in the distance, you don't say, "Now, to what end should I feel desire for that island?" Even though the longing in your heart might give you the power to get there, you don't "perform" that longing to get there. The longing overcomes you based on the knowledge that that land can save your life. Even though the longing is always for something we don't have yet, it's not just some concoction of the will; it's not planned and performed as a means of getting what we desire. It's something that comes about spontaneously in the heart—and as a feeling it's an end in itself.

If you're hiking over there in Sandwick Forest and you hear a bear snorting nearby and the sound of his paws as he runs toward you, you don't stop and think, "Now, to what end should I feel fear?" You don't stop to think about the good ends that fear might lead you to. When you see the sun setting over the Comox Glacier you don't say, "Now, to what end should I feel awe for this beauty?" It's an end in itself. When a kid opens his Christmas presents and finds his "most favouritest" toy that he's wanted all year, he doesn't think, "Now to what end should I feel happy and thankful?" And when a kindergartener gets picked on by older bullies and is rescued by his big brother, he doesn't choose to have confidence and hope swell up in his heart. They just do. They're not acts performed as a means to some other end or purpose. And that's the case with all genuine emotion, and for that reason, for all genuine worship. Worship is an end in itself, because God is the policeman at the door. God is the island on the horizon. God is the bear. God is the setting sun. God is the "most favouritest" toy. God is the big brother.

So now back to the question you were all dying to ask me: If fellowship, and preaching, and giving are not ends in themselves, why are they crucial parts of our worship service, since worship is an end in itself? The answer is that what makes worship authentic and genuine and pleasing to God is the stirring of our hearts with

emotion, but that that stirring doesn't happen in a vacuum. On the one hand it's caused by the truth of God's glory: who he is and his mighty deeds. For that reason there has to be substantial theological and doctrinal content in our service: in the words of our hymns and songs, in the prayers, in the Scriptures, in the Sermon, in the Sacrament. And this is right where our fellowship as the body of Christ is important. This is where those other "things" we do come into play. You might hear a stirring truth in a song, but see it with power in the face of a brother or sister across the room. So on the one hand there are elements of a worship service that are crucial in order to help the heart see and know God, but on the other hand, as hearts are stirred with feelings for God they need outlets for expression: opportunities to give, to sing, to pray, and all the other outward acts we do.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus said, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me." We too often fall into the trap of going through the motions of worship and thinking that we're honouring God in it, but Jesus warns us that true worship is to truly give God the honour—the glory—he is due and that can only happen when our hearts are close to him—when we know him and when our hearts are stirred as we think of who he is and remember the great things he has done. That means that our worship must be centred on knowing God through Word and Sacrament and it means that we each need to be actively cultivating fellowship with him during the week instead of living far from him Monday through Saturday and then showing up on Sunday morning and expecting to somehow draw near. Take time especially Saturday night and early Sunday to prepare yourselves to meet him here, praying with the Psalmist, "Open my eyes that I might behold wondrous things in your word" (Psalm 119:18), and, "Unite my heart to fear your name" (Psalm 86:11).

Please pray with me: Almighty and everlasting God, by your mighty acts and by your character you are worthy of our worship. Let us be so immersed in your Word and in your Sacraments that our hearts might be intimately drawn to you, turning our outward acts into true worship of the heart as we give you the glory you are due. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.