Philosophy of Worship

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Introduction

People have been worshipping for as long as history can remember. The simplest reason why is because in the way that humanity was created, Tim Keller states that “humans were created to worship; they will always worship”. However, what differentiates the way that one religion may worship from another? It is not about the where nor when but the who. Worship is not about the place or time, but the being of our focus and attention. Christians worship the triune God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God the Father revealed Himself through the Son, Jesus Christ, who died for the sins of humanity, resurrected, and ascended soon to come again. The Holy Spirit guides and counsels us to be more like Jesus and walk faithfully with God. Ron Man says that “worship is a response to who God is and what He does”. Worship is meant to guide people into reverence, intimacy, and remembrance of God and in doing so, empowers people to live from this truth through all of life’s heights and valleys. The structure of how Christians worship has been anchored by scripture, affecting the rhythms of worship that the Church corporately partakes in today. In this paper, the worship principles and rhythms observed in Psalm 138 and Genesis 19 will be gleaned and then more deeply examined to evaluate how their thematic principles influence various aspects of corporate worship today.

Biblical Texts

The first passage of study is Psalm 138. Psalm 138 is a psalm of David, the second king of Israel who God called a man after His own heart. There are eight verses in this Psalm. David begins the Psalm by proclaiming that He will praise the Lord with all of his heart and bow down towards the holy temple. There is an immediate call to praise the name of the Lord recognizing the unfailing love and faithfulness of God. The first five verses expand upon this theme of acknowledging the loving faithfulness of the Lord and bestowing praise, while simultaneously

calling others to praise and bless the name of the Lord as well. Verse six states that “though the Lord is exalted, He looks kindly on the lowly; though lofty; he sees them from afar” (NIV). There is an acknowledgement that the Lord sees the lowly and hurting, suggesting a transition from the triumphant tone of the Psalm toward the current reality of brokenness that people can be in. In verses seven and eight, David says that even in the midst of trouble and danger from His enemies, the Lord is with him. David continues that the Lord is a vindicator and does not ever abandon His people. David is recognizing the danger around him in his worship unto the Lord and reminding himself that the Lord is still good, mighty, just, and His protector.

The second passage to be evaluated is Genesis 22. Genesis 22 is about when God called Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his “only son” as God said in verse two. God acknowledged Isaac, not Ishmael, as Abraham’s only son as Isaac represented the promised legacy from the Lord. Abraham and Sarah waited on the Lord for 25 years until the promised child of Isaac was born through the barren womb of Sarah. The cry of Abraham’s heart was for legacy and descendants; Isaac represented the fulfillment of this. In verse two, when God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, God was telling Abraham to give Him what Abraham had wanted most up through now. Despite what is at stake, Abraham demonstrates His heart of worship and faith in verse 5 when he said to his servants “stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you”. Abraham was planning to worship the Lord through His sacrifice of Isaac. Before Abraham sacrifices His son, the Lord stops him and says that “I now know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me”. Following this, the Lord provides Abraham a ram to be the burnt offering in place of Isaac. Following this, an angel of the Lord calls to Abraham and declares a message from the Lord of blessing, victory, and promise that through Abraham, all the nations would be blessed.

Principles of Worship

Through the two passages above, there are four key principles of worship that can be understood. Worship unto the Lord involves praising Him for who He is. David begins the Psalm with a declaration of the character and attributes of God. He declares that God is unfailing in His love and faithfulness; he declares that the Lord is great and exalted. David models the importance of singing about how great God is in worship; he invites others to do the same corporately. David also calls people to bow down towards the holy temple; there is an acknowledgement of the holiness and majesty of God. David demonstrates this through bowing down towards the temple. Second, worship invokes us to remember the faithfulness of God. We can be quick to forget God's faithfulness. But David chooses to remember in His worship that God has exalted His decree and has been true to His word. David remembers that when He called upon the name of the Lord, the Lord answered Him. The Lord has been faithful in the life of David and thus, he demonstrates how important it is to recount the faithfulness of God. Third, worship acknowledges that life is hard. David describes that there will be trouble in life. He sings that there will be a need for vindication and justice; he acknowledges the anger of his enemies. David recognizes that in life, there are valleys where it can be easy to fear; there can be moments where people face deep injustice and reasons for worry may arise within us. David demonstrates that even through this, He acknowledges the character and faithfulness of God. In the midst of trouble, the Lord will preserve him. In injustice, the Lord will vindicate Him. The Lord will not abandon him. Worship acknowledges the difficulties of life, creates of space to process our broken circumstances, and directs us to look to the Lord in all things. Lastly, worship incorporates sacrifice. In Genesis 22, God commands Abraham to sacrifice His son, Isaac, and lay down His dreams of legacy and lineage. In the story, we see that Abraham's posture is to

sacrifice Isaac as part of his worship unto the Lord. This principle is fascinating in that worship encompasses sacrifice; a death of ourselves as an offering to Him. God desires the heart of His people. The full surrender of people's dreams, hearts, and selves pleases the Lord.

Aspects of Worship

In summary, the four key principles from the passage are that worshipping God is praising God for who He is, invoking people to remember His faithfulness, reminding people to trust Him through highs and lows, and sacrificing and surrendering to Him. These four principles inform various aspects of worship seen across a wide expression of Christian liturgy across history and tradition.

The principle of praising God for who He is calls all people to fix their gaze on God. Overall, the Psalms were written as corporate songs for the people of God to sing unto the Lord. In Psalm 138, David's praise of the Lord to begin this song highlights the corporate call that we see in worship to come together and bless the name of the Lord. From Roman Catholic to Evangelical to Orthodox liturgy, the corporate call to worship is a staple that begins the order of worship in a given service. This corporate call always involves blessing the Lord and praising His mighty name and character. As stated above, David bows down toward the Holy Temple of the Lord as his sign of praise. In recognition of the holiness and reverence with which we are to approach God, bowing down in the presence of the Lord is practiced across traditions either in liturgical practice or through personal expression in worship. Some church traditions such as Roman Catholics and Orthodox require the church leaders to wear long flowing robes of white, visually highlighting the reverent act of worship that congregants and all are to partake in. All this is to done to further highlight the nature, character, and attributes of God. Praising God is also a powerful act of worship that is followed through every circumstance of life. No matter

how difficult life may get, there is always a reason to rejoice because of what God has done, who He is and remains today, and the hope that we can look forward to when He comes again. The Psalms invoke the people of God to remember His faithfulness. This theme of remembrance is pivotal in helping form the way Christians worship God. Worship service is structured to help us remember the Gospel tradition, His nature, His faithfulness in the lives of His people, and His word and promises. This has been foundational in the formation of liturgy. In *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape our Practice*, Bryan Chapell clarifies liturgy as "the public way a church honors God in its times of gathered praise, prayer, instruction, and commitment"[1]. Chapell illustrates that "all liturgies of the Word have a sequence in common: Adoration, Confession, Assurance, Thanksgiving, Petition, Instruction, Charge, and Blessing"[2]. He highlights that this sequence is a pattern of the progression of the gospel in the human heart[3]. Within worship services, we see sacraments are powerful reminders of the Gospel narrative as well. In *Christ, Baptism and the Lord's Supper*, Leonard Vander Zee states that sacraments are "physical reminders of the word of God; a physical, visible sign to humanity"[4]. One sacrament that is shared across the branches of Christianity is the Eucharist. The Septuagint accounts of the original Passover use the Greek word *anamnesis* to translate the Hebrew "remembrance", the same word used in the Gospels for Jesus' command that the Lord's Supper be done in remembrance of Him[5]. Jesus even commanded His disciples to partake of the Eucharist in remembrance of His name. Remembrance of the faithfulness of the Lord is a powerful foundation exercised within a service through it's Gospel-centric liturgical structure and the sacraments used. Remembrance is a worship rhythm used to help us navigate the seasons of life.

[1] Chapell, Bryan. *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape our Practice*. Grand Rapid MI: Baker Academic, 2009, 13.

[2] Chapell, 16.

[3] Chapell, 118.

[4] Vander Zee, Leonard J. *Christ, Baptism and the Lord's Supper*. Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2004, 23.

[5] Vander Zee, 149.

This is evident in the structure of the liturgical year and even in resting on the Sabbath. Worshipping God in rhythm with a liturgical year meets the need to worship God through all seasons of life, through all mountains and valleys. The life of Jesus is followed in the liturgical year, from his birth to death and resurrection. We look back on the life of Jesus, recognize His power and presence today, and the future glory to come as we live through the joys and challenges of our present realities. Liturgical year offers a rhythm of remembrance, joy, exaltation, and even sorrow. The third worship principle from the passage, of trusting God in highs and lows, influences various aspects of worship today as well. As mentioned, the liturgical year carves space for times of sorrow in life. The Psalmist, David, knew the importance of lament in life. Psalms of lament are the most common type of Psalm of the 151. Lament is needed because “all is not right within the world”. Lament involves a confession of truth about God, a call to God to solve the problems being faced, and a confession of hope and confidence in Him. Lamenting creates space to express grief when things go wrong. As the Psalm says, there are times of injustice, when enemies encircle him, and when fear and disappointment come to him; David is acknowledging the valleys and hardship that he is facing. However, through acknowledging and grieving, he is able to call upon the name of the Lord to help him through his problems. This rhythm of lament is seen in worship today. In times of great tragedy in the community such as the death of a loved one or a national crisis, there are worship services centered around these moments in life to help people process and look to the Lord. Lastly, the principle of sacrifice is evident across the entirety of worship service. Sacrifice is a discipline of abstinence; that which is refrained from to cultivate a hunger for God and His presence. Worship involves our time, efforts, focus, attention, being, surrender. In history, sacrifice would often involve an animal being slain on an altar in the presence of God. In the Genesis passage, we see

God calling Abraham to sacrifice his dreams of legacy, his son Isaac, on the altar. God intervenes and acknowledges Abraham's faith and eventually provides the sacrifice Himself, a ram. This passage highlights the nature of sacrifice and the faithfulness of God. True worship is the giving of the self to the Lord. The Lord wants the heart, dreams, obedience. Sacrifice is a joy of worship; the great exchange, and the natural response to the revelation that Jesus gave Himself for the redemption of the world. Elements of sacrifice are evident across nearly all of worship as the theme of the Gospel revolves around God who gave Himself for the sins of the world. Roman Catholic and Orthodox services feature elements of incense and aromas that fill the space of worship, emulating the aroma of sacrifice and worship arising unto the Lord. The sacrament of baptism emphasizes the death to self and resurrection with Jesus; the surrender of our old lives in exchange for the new. These two passages are just a few of many that illustrate the nature of worship in its remembering, surrendering, declaring, uniting activity unto the Lord.

Conclusion

What is fascinating about worship services today are how diverse they are across the spectrum. Roman Catholic traditions value strict adhesion to ordered passages, call and responses, incenses, and ritualistic practices. Orthodox traditions utilize and venerate icons heavily in their services. Evangelical traditions retain a loose following of structure without the need to adhere to the same passage as other Evangelical churches across the world. Yet, there are commonalities that unite all the different types of service. The four worship principles from Psalm 138 and Genesis 22 highlight praising God for who He is, remembering His faithfulness, trusting Him in hardship, and sacrificing in surrender and love to Him alone. These principles are unitedly expressed across the varying aspects of liturgical tradition. Liturgical year, sacraments, and the general structure and flow of worship services as illustrated through Bryan Chapell

demonstrate that there are far more commonalities than differences across the traditions. Christians are united and grounded by these foundational, theological principles in worship of God.

Bibliography

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