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Reverence:

The Missing Discipline of the Evangelical Church

by David Dunlap

The prophet Isaiah unfolds to us the holiness of God unlike any other prophet before him. The holiness of God had gripped his heart with unusual power and conviction. He was humbled by Him who is exalted high above all His creatures with infinite greatness. He saw, like never before, that there was a great chasm between the holiness of God and the unholiness of man. Israel's corrupt spiritual condition demanded a fresh and powerful manifestation of God's holiness. In Isaiah chapter six God reveals His holiness in a powerful way.

Israel's Spiritual Condition

King Uzziah had reigned in Judah for 52 years. Although this king had protected his people from its enemies and brought a measure of economic prosperity and a sense of security, inwardly the nation was morally corrupt, spiritually empty, and superficial in its worship of God. As a result, in Isaiah chapter five, Isaiah pronounces six judgments of woe upon Judah. Many in Judah falsely believed that they were in a proper spiritual condition because of its economic prosperity. But in 740 B.C., King Uzziah died of leprosy when God struck him down because of his pride. When Uzziah died, the nation's sense of security was shattered, and Isaiah felt the need to enter into the presence of God. Isaiah, who sought to mourn a departed king, found himself bowed before the exalted King of glory. It was here that God gripped Isaiah with an awesome sense of His presence and holiness. He saw the Lord high and lifted up. He heard the seraphim cry back and forth, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of Hosts, the whole earth is filled with his glory" (v. 3). He is broken by his own unworthiness. Why was Isaiah so visibly shaken by all that he had seen and heard? He tells us the reason, "... mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts" (Isa. 6:5).

Likewise, when we are gripped by the holiness of God, our instant and only reaction must be worship and reverence. Without such a revelation or conviction, we cannot truly worship God. Devotion and reverence are the life-blood of worship. Worship that is marked by a fresh vision of God's holiness is never casual, flippant, and superficial. True worshippers do not rush into His holy presence unprepared to bow in reverence. Sincere worshippers of God possess deep convictions about the holiness and glory of God.

“Spiritual tone is difficult to describe, but is nevertheless very real...There is a sense of the presence of God, of the reality of unseen but eternal verities, and the hush of reverent awe that quiets the spirit and prepares the soul for worship.”

Alfred P. Gibbs

(1890–1967)

Respected author Alfred P. Gibbs (1890-1967), explains in his book entitled *Worship*,

*“Spiritual tone is difficult to describe, but is nevertheless very real... There is a sense of the presence of God, of the reality of unseen but eternal verities, and the hush of reverent awe that quiets the spirit and prepares the soul for worship.”*¹

However, just as in Isaiah’s day there was great spiritual apathy, so also is there much spiritual indifference and casualness in the church today.

The Need For Reverent Worship

Many are concerned that today there is too much shallowness in our worship of God. Irreverence in worship is now becoming all too common in modern churches. Unfortunately, New Testament assemblies are not immune to this affliction. Increasingly, believers are sashaying into worship meetings 10-15 minutes late without the slightest hint of embarrassment. The retelling of personal anecdotes, the singing of favorite hymns, and nonchalance have replaced holy and reverent worship. Psalm 111:9 exhorts, *“Holy and reverend is His Name.”* Hearts full of Christ have now given way to hearts full of competing interests. Many still attend times of worship, but have lost their first love. The stirring hymns of the faith are still sung, but rarely with passion and conviction. Gripping passages of Scripture about Christ and the cross are still read, but with little apparent devotion or heart-felt affection. Eloquent prayers of praise and worship ring hollow.

True Reverence

It was not always this way. In earlier days the assemblies were known for men of God whose passion to worship the Son of God was unrivaled. The believers in the Lord Jesus Christ might have gathered in a grange hall or a refurbished building, but the gathering place was not as important as the gathering Center, the Lord Jesus Christ. The hymns were sung heartily. Worship was mingled with tenderness and devotion by men of God who knew the Word of God. There was a beauty of holiness that attracted all true saints of God. The holiness and reverence that characterized the meeting were evident to all. Concerning the character of those meetings, one writes,

*“I sometimes smile when I hear ministers state the assumption that a new type of building will create a worship atmosphere. In my late adolescence I occasionally worshiped with those known as ‘Plymouth Brethren’. Meeting in the barest halls, adorned only with signs carrying Scripture verses, they had the most worshipful services that I have ever attended. No organist in whispering conferences, pushing or pulling stops. Greeting, giggling, whispering, and coughing were all hushed by the miracle drug: reverence. Children were quieted. People tiptoed to their places in the circle to sit with bowed heads or read their Bibles. The keen anticipation of the movement of the Spirit of God in leading one of the assembled men to announce a hymn, read the Scripture, or to offer prayer was sensed in these moments of deep reverence, which sharply contrasts with the hubbub of many Protestant services.”*²

***“Come let us
worship and
bow down;
let us kneel
before the
Lord our
Maker. For
He is our
God, and we
are the
people of His
pasture and
the sheep of
His hand.”***

Psalmist (David)
Psalm 96:6-7

Reverence is not something we can bring to God or create in ourselves, but rather, it is a spiritual grace we receive when we begin to see God as He truly is. Reverence acknowledges in our hearts the glory of God as presented in the Scriptures, and then yields to God His rightful place in our lives. Reverent worshippers acknowledge their unworthiness and in godly fear bow before an awesome and holy God. Concerning this source of holy reverence, the Swiss reformer John Calvin writes,

“Reverence is that dread and amazement with which holy men were struck and overwhelmed whenever they beheld the presence of God...Men are never duly touched and impressed with a conviction of their insignificance, until they have contrasted themselves with the majesty of God.”³

Just a sudden glimpse of the holiness of God will change us forever. As Isaiah is thrust into the presence of God and the seraphim cry out, “Holy, holy, holy,” the prophet confesses, “Woe is me! For I am undone.” Isaiah, the righteous prophet, in one brief moment, is exposed and broken under the gaze of the Almighty. In an instant he is measured by the ultimate standard of holiness; he is weighed in the balance and is found wanting. The holiness of God has seized his heart, soul, and mind. He cannot forget what he has seen. Boredom, casualness, and lukewarmness about the things of God are gone forever. “Mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts” (Isa. 6:5).

The Biblical Standards For Reverent Worship

All too frequently churchgoers gather to worship God who have never had a fresh vision of God's holiness. Nice songs are sung, religious thoughts are offered to God, and well-crafted words are uttered, but all this falls far short of true worship. This worship may be more psychological and fleshly than spiritual. This kind of worship bears no resemblance to the worship that we find in Scripture. The psalmist writes, "He is to be feared above all gods...splendor and majesty are before Him, strength and beauty are in His sanctuary...O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness: fear before Him all the earth" (Ps. 92:4-6, 9). Godly fear, majesty, the beauty of holiness, and splendor were ready themes in the hearts of the worshippers of old. How this should challenge our hearts! There are many who study theology, but where are those who study to be worshippers of God? Where are the churches today whose passion is to "worship God in spirit and truth"? Where are the books exhorting, teaching, and equipping this generation to worship God?

A. W. Tozer exhorted the fundamentalist-Bible-believing church prior to his death in 1951,

“Many of our popular songs and choruses in praise of Christ are hollow and unconvincing. Some strike a reverent soul as being a kind of flattery offered to One with whom neither composer nor singer is acquainted. How different and how utterly wonderful are the emotions aroused by true Spirit-incited love for Christ. Such love may rise to a degree of adoration almost beyond the power of the heart to endure, yet at the same time it will be serious, elevated, chaste, and reverent. Christ can never be known without a sense of awe and fear accompanying the knowledge.

“A true worshiper comes into the presence of God in healthy fear. ‘Reverence’ carries a positive connotation. It describes a sense of awe as we perceive the majesty of God. ‘Godly fear,’ on the other hand, can be seen as a sense of intimidation as we see the power and holiness of God.”

John MacArthur
from *Truth Matters*,
2004, p. 17



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*"He is the fairest among ten thousand, but also the Lord high and mighty. He is the friend of sinners, but also the terror of devils. He is meek and lowly in heart, but He is also the Lord and Christ who will surely come to be the judge of all men. No one who knows Him intimately can ever be flippant in His presence. If Bible Christianity is to survive the present world upheaval, we shall need to recapture the spirit of worship."*⁴

May God raise up such an army of worshippers, those who long to reverently remember Him who first remembered us at Calvary. Might God raise up tender-hearted worshippers; but more than this, may He raise up those whose passion and aim is to equip others to worship God.

A Call to Reverent Worship

Sadly, there are many today to whom the idea of reverence in worship sounds too old-fashioned, so out of step with the times, and at odds with contemporary worship trends. Indeed, many believers seem to be strangers to the foundational truths that form the basis for our worship. The New Testament teaching concerning worship, the Lord's supper, and the person of Christ no longer seem to hold their interest. These do not seem to be popular. We are a spiritually carefree generation. Unfortunately, the broad road has always been more appealing than the narrow way. But the apostle Paul's exhortation must not go unnoticed, "For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit and rejoice in Jesus Christ, and have no confidence in the flesh" (Phil 3:3). Therefore, let us draw near unto Him, who in mercy, first drew near to us and humbly bow our hearts as worshippers in His holy presence. May our reverent worship once again shine bright as the hallmark of our devotion to Christ.

Endnotes

1. Alfred P. Gibbs, *Worship*, (Kansas City, KS: Walterick, 1980), p. 226
2. John Drakeford *The Awesome Power of a Listening Heart* (Grand Rapids, MI : Zondervan , 1985)
3. R. C. Sproul *The Holiness of God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1985), p. 72
4. A. W. Tozer, *That Incredible Christian, The Art of True Worship* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1964), p. 125.