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# Authentic Worship — Glimpsing the Truth of God

Paul Anderson

## Truth and Liberation, Chapter 2

### Authentic Worship: Glimpsing the Truth of God

Jesus says in the Gospel of John, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.” (John 8:32) But what does that mean in terms of our relationships with God? As Saint Augustine confessed, “Thou movest us to delight in praising Thee; for Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee.”[1] When the woman at the well asked whether the Temple Mount in Jerusalem or Mount Gerizim in Samaria was the divinely authorized place to worship God, Jesus rejected the human claims of both centers. God is spirit and truth, and authentic worship takes place in spirit and in truth. Further, those who worship authentically are the sorts of people God actively seeks to draw into worship (John 4:21-24).

But what does it mean to worship God in spirit and in truth? Like the woman at the well, we might feel our ways of approaching God are best; religious leaders in Jerusalem and Galilee probably felt the same way about their traditions and practices. What we see in Jesus’ response, though, is that God’s spiritual presence and reality in worship transcend the boundaries of time and space. Memorable places may be special to us, but they never privilege or delimit access to God’s presence in one place or another. Likewise, our ways of doing worship may have special meaning for our communities, but the divine presence is never restricted to a particular form or practice. The central key to worship is *authenticity*—glimpsing the truth of God and responding to God in openness to the truth—regarding our own lives, who God is, and the condition of the world.

Unlike other members of God's creation, humans are the only creatures who have a choice as to whether they will worship God with their lives. Here in the Pacific Northwest, towering fir trees and redwoods bespeak the grandeur and glory of God simply by their being. Trout and salmon in rivers and streams, snow on the volcanic peaks of the Cascades, the fertile fields of the Willamette Valley, the diverse flora and fauna of the high-desert plains—all of these gifts magnify the glory of God simply by the beauty of their being. Likewise, the animal kingdom plays its roles in God's creation, revealing God's glory in lively ways. As the Psalmist says, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows his handiwork." (Ps 19:1) The theme continues further in Psalm 148, and not only does all creation declare the Creator's praise, but all humanity is invited to join in with nature's grand chorus in lifting praise to God, as well.

Praise you the LORD. Praise you the LORD from the heavens: praise him in the heights.

Praise you him, all his angels: praise you him, all his hosts.

Praise you him, sun and moon: praise him, all you stars of light.

Praise him, you heavens of heavens, and you waters that be above the heavens.

Let them praise the name of the LORD: for he commanded, and they were created.

He has also established them for ever and ever: he has made a decree which shall not pass.

Praise the LORD from the earth, you dragons, and all deeps:

Fire, and hail; snow, and vapors; stormy wind fulfilling his word:

Mountains, and all hills; fruitful trees, and all cedars:

Beasts, and all cattle; creeping things, and flying fowl:

Kings of the earth, and all people; princes, and all judges of the earth:

Both young men, and maidens; old men, and children:

Let them praise the name of the LORD: for his name alone is excellent; his glory is above the earth and heaven.

Again, unlike the rest of creation, though, humans have a choice as to whether their lives will glorify God with intentionality, or whether they won't. Glorifying the Creator begins with acknowledging the Ground and Source of our Being. The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God" (Ps 14:1), and yet glimpsing the truth of God in the created order yields undeniable impressions of something greater than ourselves being real. And, as the poet says, by the works one also knows the workman.

Indeed, the world, the universe, and our lives could have come about by chance, but what are the chances that this blue planet should have the water and atmosphere needed for life to develop? And, in many ways humans are like other animals in terms of capacities and actions, but how did we come to reflect upon meaning and purpose in life? Did being stem from non-being; are the highest of human values mere inventions; did life come from non-life? These might be possible, but the more plausible inference is that there is a living source of life and that our being as humans is grounded in an origin greater than ourselves. That source is what we call "God" in the Abrahamic religions, and acknowledging the Creator leads to the fulfillment of meaning and potential for the creature. So, beginning with acknowledging the Creator, and saying thanks, is the beginning of being most fully human. Embracing the Ground and Source of our Being—the author of life—thus connects us more fully with the meaning and purpose of life, itself.

Following the belief *that* God is, though, is just the beginning. As we learn more about *who* God is and *what* God has done, our lives become filled with praise and thanksgiving. As the ancient Israelites contemplated ways God had called them, protected them, guided them, and provided for them, their lives were filled with thanksgiving. Leviticus 23 spells out prescriptions for Jewish worship, which functioned to remind people of God's mighty acts of deliverance, inspiring gratitude and thanksgiving.

On a weekly basis, setting aside the *Sabbath* as a time to worship God and to spend time with the community of faith was set as a priority for the children of Israel (v. 3). If God got all of his work done in six days, his children ought to be able to do the same. The feasts of *Passover* and *Unleavened Bread* recalled God's deliverance from Egypt, as the Israelites were guided through the waters and the

wilderness, without having time to let the bread rise; they had to be on the move (vv. 4-8). The feast of *First Fruits* was celebrated at the first harvest. Upon gathering the crops, the community would come together offering sacrifices to God and sharing their bounty with one another—thanking God for the harvest (vv. 9-14). Fifty days later, the feast of *Weeks* (Pentecost) would be celebrated, wherein the bounty of the grain harvest would be shared together, and bulls and goats were to be sacrificed and shared with the priests and their families. In addition, the corners of the fields were to be left unharvested so that local people without means of support could glean enough to be nourished, themselves (vv. 15-22). The feast of *Trumpets* would follow on the first day of the seventh month, simply as a special Sabbath observance with no work but reminding the nation of God's deliverance into the Promised Land, and the tenth day of that month would be the *Day of Atonement*. On that day people would fast in solemnity over their sins, and the high priest would offer a sacrifice on behalf of the nation (vv. 23-32). The feast of *Tabernacles* (tents) followed on the fifteenth day of that month as the final harvest feast, and Jewish families would stay in Jerusalem in tents for an entire week, offering sacrifices to God and sharing their produce with one another, as a reminder that in the wilderness their ancestors had spent forty years camping in the wilderness (vv. 33-43).

In addition to these feasts, several others were added. The feast of *Purim*, outlined in the Book of Esther, celebrated the ways God had protected the Jewish people in a foreign land by means of using a faithful Jewish woman to subvert the wicked plots of Haman. The festival of *Dedication* (Hanukah) celebrated the rededication of the Jerusalem Temple in 164 BC after its being desecrated by Antiochus Epiphanes three and a half years earlier. Other festivals abound, but the point is that the Children of Israel called to remembrance the great things God had done in the past in their festivals of worship.

And, Christian traditions do the same. At *Christmas* we recall the birth of Jesus; at *Easter* we recall the empty tomb and the power of the resurrection; at *Pentecost* we embrace the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Likewise, numerous faith traditions call to remembrance what God has done in the past by celebrating days of special remembrance. Even birthdays and anniversaries become occasions for being grateful for a person's life, or appreciation for a valued relationship. In that vein, the American celebration of *Thanksgiving* was declared a national

holiday by Abraham Lincoln in 1863, as the nation was invited to observe a special day of thanksgiving and praise.

Therefore, when we contemplate the truth of what God has done, we cannot but be filled with deep gratitude for his mercies and goodness. And, when we are grateful to God personally, this attitude becomes a way of being. We thus become people who are grateful to others, and our lives become a blessing as we express that gratitude with liberality. In terms of God's truth, we thank God for what God has done, and we praise God for who God is.

At this point, clarifying the character of praise is important. Too easily we think of praise as something needed by the insecure—a half-sincere expression of flattery designed to appease the ego of the needy. While offering affirmation to another can be encouraging, though, the motivation for offering praise to God is nothing of the kind. Our Creator and Sustainer does not need our flimsy words or paltry offerings, as though the Ground and Source of our Being suffers feeling of inadequacy or is somehow insufficient. Nor is praise offered as an appeasement of a needy deity. Neither is praise rightly offered to God in order to obtain an elevated feeling or a spiritual blessing. Rather, praise and adoration are the spontaneous results of glimpsing the truth of God and affirming that understanding inwardly and outwardly.

When we contemplate God's glory, beauty, and majesty, praise and adoration are the only conceivable responses of the heart to the truth about God. Jesus invites us into praise and adoration at the beginning of the prayer he offered his followers as a pattern: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed (praised and adored) be thy name." (Matt 6:9) The Psalmist leads out in praise: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name." (Ps 103:1) In contemplating the depth and riches of God's love—even the unsearchableness of God's knowledge, wisdom, and judgments—the Apostle Paul breaks out into praise: "For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things, to whom be glory forever Amen!" (Ro 11:33-36)

Therefore, the key to authentic worship is contemplating the truth of who God is and what God has done. As we reflect on the power, majesty, beauty, love, and grace of God, there is no conceivable means of being before God other than to be filled with praise and adoration for our Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer. In that

sense, authentic worship is both impressive and expressive. In being impressed by the truth of God's presence and love, we are filled with inward praise and adoration. In expressing our love and adoration back to God, we celebrate the goodness of God and affirm the wonder of his character.

However, in the planning of worship, as well as our experience of it, the main goal is not to orchestrate a set of activities in order to make something happen spiritually. Rather, the goal of the leaders of worship, as well as the community, is to point the focus toward God, who is the object of our praise and adoration. In that sense, authentic worship is not an audience-performance event; it is a celebration of who God is and what God has done, leading to our embracing the divine embrace, so that we might be extensions of God's transforming love and presence in the world. And, that encounter can only happen as we create space to encounter the divine presence for ourselves, which is the central key to transforming worship. As Henri Nouwen says,[2]

Finally, I would like to stress the importance of silence in the ways a minister organizes his [or her] own life and that of others. In a society in which entertainment and distraction are such important preoccupations, ministers are also tempted to join the ranks of those who consider it their primary task to keep other people busy. It is easy to perceive the young and the elderly as people who need to be kept off the streets or on the streets. And ministers frequently find themselves in fierce competition with people and institutions who offer something more exciting than they do.

But our task is the opposite of distraction. Our task is to help people concentrate on the real but often hidden event of God's active presence in our lives. Hence, the question that must guide all organizing activity in a parish is not how to keep people busy, but how to keep them from being so busy that they no longer hear the voice of God that speaks in silence.

[1] Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.

[2] Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981) 63.