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Christians are accustomed to thinking that the main purpose of corporate worship is personal transformation and renewal for Christians. While this is certainly *part* of what happens when we meet with the living God, we often remain unaware of the impact that worship is designed to have on the church as a whole, on our towns, cities and regions. We relegate evangelism to activities done outside of our “religious” time on Sunday—to politics, personal evangelism, private prayer etc. But rightly understood, corporate worship is the fountainhead of all life transformation, and the church is called to understand its centrality. It’s no use carrying a weapon if you don’t know how to use it.

Cleansing the Temple

And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the table of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you make it a den of robbers.” (vv12-13)

Following his triumphal entry into Jerusalem which got the entire city stirred up (v10), Jesus’ headed for the temple. We’re not told that he used a whip as he did the first time he cleansed it (John 2), but tossing the tables of the temple money changers would’ve set off a healthy brawl because of the enormous sum of money the high priestly family gleaned from this practice. Every year all the Jews would pay a temple tribute tax which had to be paid in domestic currency. This created a cottage industry for the money-changers as Jews and God-fearers arrived to tithe at the Passover feast from all over the world—Persia, Tyre, Syria, Egypt, Greece and Rome—bringing their currency with them. You can imagine the haggling and bustle of a crowded eastern flea market, and what a sacrilege it would be inside God’s holy temple.

Jesus draws from two Old Testament passages, Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11. Isaiah prophesies of the calling of the gentiles, including foreigners potentially separated from Yahweh and eunuchs who could have no familial covenant line to love God (56:3-5). Yahweh would give them “an everlasting name that shall not be cut off,” the name of Jesus. But when Jesus, the hope and desire of the nations, came to the place where the gentiles should have been welcomed to worship God (1 Kings 8:41-3), it was overrun by those exploiting the weak and ignorant. The quotation from Jeremiah 7:11 is part of a prophecy that declared unless Israel stopped oppressing the sojourner, fatherless and widow, committing immorality and bringing idols into worship, the temple would become like Shiloh when God’s house was desecrated and Israel trampled by the Philistines. The implication is that unless Israel repents of her idolatry, she too will be destroyed and sent into exile. God made good on his promise in Jeremiah’s day, and Jesus’ word about the destruction of the temple was fulfilled within a generation just as he said: not one stone would be left upon another (Matt. 24).

Coming to Christ

And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests

and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” they were indignant, and they said to him, “Do you hear what these are saying?” And Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read, ‘Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise’?” And leaving them, he went out of the city to Bethany and lodged there. (vv14-17)

The departure of the money changers allowed the blind and the crippled to come to Christ in the temple for healing (v14). The outcasts, foreigners, lame and oppressed are liberated by worship, by their access to the Christ who is the life of the world. Throughout the story of Israel, worship of the true God is a *liberating*. Yahweh sends Abram into Canaan where he would bless the inhabitants enslaved to horrific sin (infanticide, slavery, oppression). God would make Abram a blessing to these families and to all the families of the earth, and Abram begins by *worshipping* in the midst of the Canaanites (Gen. 12:3, 6). In Scripture, right worship simultaneously brings glory to Israel and conversion to the nations. Solomon builds the temple and prays at its dedication that people from all over the earth—including non Jews—would pray toward it and that God would hear them. The Queen of Sheba comes from far to worship and admire all that Yahweh had accomplished and given to the king.

Accessible, Reverent Worship

While worship at the temple was regulated with certain areas reserved for circumcised Jews, another for priests, and one for the high priest only once a year, the court of the Gentiles provided a place for uncircumcised God-fearers to tithe and worship without compulsion to become Jews. We see that worship is uncompromisingly focused on God and regulated by him, but also accessible and inviting to those led by the Spirit to come near. In the New Testament we see evangelistic worship in full.

- Pentecost - A mixed multitude from different nations and regions gathered together at Jerusalem for the feast. Peter’s prophetic preaching challenges, perplexes, and ultimately converts the hearers who were *cut to the heart* (Acts 2:12, 37), fulfilling the prophecy of Joel just as Peter declared it: “And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Joel 2:32, Acts 2:21). Paul mentions the same verse from Joel in Romans 10 when speaking about the salvation that had come upon all nations through the means of preaching—all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved (v13).
- Corinth - In his discussion about the right use of tongues, Paul argues that worshippers must not speak in tongues without an interpreter on account of what unbelievers would think if they showed up—that the Christians are nuts (1 Cor. 14:23). On the contrary, prophecy (or preaching) should not only be intelligible, but relevant and convicting to an outsider so that “falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you” (v25). Audiences consisting of believers and unbelievers can in fact be addressed effectively with the same message just as we see in the New Testament. Paul’s letter to the Romans is written to all the saints (v7), Jews and Gentiles, new and seasoned believers, and some on the edge of apostasy and heresy. The letter is plain enough for a pagan considering the faith to understand the gospel (as so many have experienced who have converted reading it), yet deep enough for the most mature Christian to probe for decades.

While unbelievers ought to overhear, be drawn to and welcomed into worship, we must never lose sight that *worship is for God* and not man of any stripe. Misunderstanding this causes the confusion of both seeker sensitive and anti-seeker sensitive camps. One says that worship is for believers, and the other for unbelievers. While the passages declaring God’s desire to be praised and worshipped among and by the nations could be multiplied (Ps. 105:1-2), we never see Yahweh taking a poll or doing market research to learn about how the Canaanites dress or prefer their music. Hebrews, which

it turns out is a New Testament book, says that living under Christ's reign is much scarier than Moses' since Jesus shook heaven as well as earth. He requires *acceptable* worship with reverence and fear since God is a consuming fire (12:25-29). While we don't live under the tutor of the law and the requirements of animal sacrifice, the arrival of something better means that God is much nearer and therefore more to be feared and loved. Churches that have embraced a casual approach in worship need come to terms with the objective fear and reverence required before the living, awesome (in the old, staggering sense) God. And "traditional" churches need to remember that being reverent isn't the same as being quiet, well-dressed and bored. Right worship combines joy and enthusiasm with beauty and awe, and thus draws the nations. Evangelistic worship is no substitute for the friendship and discipling that happens throughout the week as Christians meet, serve, and interact in the community. If this is happening the way it ought to, non-Christians will be drawn to worship naturally. Believers will be delighted and motivated to bring non-Christians to worship, and conversations will occur outside the service just as they did in Acts 2. The result will be congregations that grow not just by attracting Christians and the birth of new covenant believers, but also by the unconverted being gathered to God.

Jerry Owen – July 22th, 2007