

## CONCERNING CORPORATE WORSHIP

Virgil Warren, PhD

As with most experiences, worship involves structural/formal and affective/ emotional elements. It deals with the patterns we use privately and corporately; it involves also the impact these patterns make on us. Definitions of the term *worship* differ according to one emphasis or the other; hence, they range from I-Thou vertical relationship, on the one hand, to subjective religious effect, on the other. One describes worshiping; the other refers to what is worshipful. What different people mean by worship varies, but the structural components of gathered worship itself are readily identifiable.

A natural set of structural components is the vertical, the horizontal, and the introspective. They center around where people direct their conscious minds. In vertical relationship the second person is God; in horizontal relationship it is others present in the gathering; in the introspective the person addresses himself and meditates on things divine. In the vertical, people address God as second person in prayer, giving, vertically directed songs, and in the Lord's Supper. In the horizontal belongs preaching, songs of witness and exhortation as well as testimonies and body-life activities—a significant majority timewise of what occurs in most church services. The introspective includes meditation and self-application. Together these three dimensions comprise what happens when Christians congregate for religious exercises.

The affective-emotional attachments to worship have much to do with subjective preference for the forms worship may use. Insofar as non-moral mechanics of worship impress people differently, custom and expectancy dictate whether a person deems a given practice worshipful. Inasmuch as subjective preference is learned behavior, it can also be unlearned or relearned when circumstances make it advisable to do so. Because form and meaning are inherently separable, meanings may be attached to, or detached from, their accompanying forms of expression. What forms are uplifting can therefore be broadened by invoking the human capacity for self-transcendence.

It is obvious that at least initially Christians can respond positively or negatively to the same thing. Verbal response during presentation will appear to some as exhortation to the speaker but to others as distracting, attention-getting behavior. Some will see clapping response as praise of the performer while others mean it as appreciation for the ministry of the performer. Touch will carry romantic or sexual innuendoes rather than sincere interpersonal affection. Action songs will feel silly and frivolous to some, but to others they are joyous, celebrative, and total-person expressive. Non-keyboard instrumentation may create a secular atmosphere for traditionalists, but seem natural and up-to-date to new Christians and younger people. Prominent percussion and loud volume will connote frenzy and self-abandonment to those with classical tastes, but the absence of volume, the beat, clapping, action, and touch will come across as staid and boring to people who have developed that expectancy in Christian assemblies.

The conclusion seems to be that worship is best defined primarily in structural terms with affective considerations left out because they are not constants, and because they are results on the participant instead of actions by him. Consequently, worship is a conscious, spontaneous self-expression to God as a present, superior, second person. It is therefore not meditation, where God is at best a third-person entity; nor is it communion, which highlights a sense of divine presence aside from I-Thou association. Worship is not horizontally directed to other people by

voice, action, or mechanical instrumentation. It is not habitual, recitative, ritualistic, or stimulus-response. It is not so much what lifts up the worshipper, as what lifts up God. Worship presumably draws on the imagery of the Greek word it translates: *proskyneo* (προσκυνλέω), which pictures a person kneeling or prostrate before another. Therefore, worship is a vertical, interpersonal activity from people to God that creates in the participant various affective responses depending on circumstances, background, and personality.