

Swept off your Feet

Beyond Worship-as-Usual

Connecting with God for a Strong Finish

CHAPTER 10

Placebo Singers

Saint Jerome translated Psalms into Latin for the Vulgate Bible. The word *vulgate* refers to a common language spoken by ordinary, uneducated people.¹ Jerome rendered a phrase in Psalm 116:9 as “*Placebo Domino*”, which means, “I shall please the Lord”.² Translated from Hebrew however, this phrase literally means, “I will be in step with the Lord” or more conventionally, “I will walk before the Lord”.

During evening Vespers, Psalm 116:1-9 became known as “The Placebo” with verse 9 serving as the antiphonal response for recitations.³ By the 8th Century, the Roman Catholic Church adopted this refrain for funerals and the Office of the Dead.

False mourners occasionally infiltrated funerals under the pretense of knowing the deceased person. They sang “*The Placebo*” with ulterior motives. Along with family, friends, and hired grievers, they hoped to win favors from a wealthy relative, receive monetary benefits offered to guests, or at least eat part of the traditional after-meal. These funeral-crashing sycophants earned the reputation of being *Placebos* because they sought to please themselves. The French labeled them, *Pla-*

¹ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vulgate> (accessed 11-25-11)

² Psalms 116 appears as Psalms 114 in the Latin Vulgate Bible
<http://www.biblestudytools.com/vul/psalms/114.html>

³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vespers> (accessed 11-25-11)

cebo Singers because they sang songs to please relatives of the dead for personal gain.⁴

God invented singing for His pleasure, for the pleasure of others, and for our own pleasure. Music and song enrich our connection with Him and with others; they promote cherished blessings both in heaven and on earth. Wanting to please the Lord, we sing songs of praise during worship services. Somewhat like the placebo singers, we say and do religion to please God while hoping to receive benefits for ourselves.

As beneficial as singing may be, the Bible does not emphasize singing as a response of worship. Demonstrative gestures of reverence differ fundamentally from singing songs of praise. They transcend the warm and fuzzy emotions generated by a placebo effect. In response to a divine encounter or spiritual revelation, songs certainly facilitate worship. Sometimes however, they may pose as worship when they become a placebo to please ourselves.

Trick Trials

In Medieval Europe, certain individuals attracted widespread attention. Uttering inflammatory comments about the Protestant Reformation, they flaunted demonic manifestations. Such bizarre behavior served to either promote or refute claims made by Reformers and Counter-Reformers. These self-professed demoniacs interfered with diplomatic peace talks, which aggravated tensions between warring factions.

To expose the troublemakers, King Charles IX (England, 1565) and later Henri IV (France, 1599) commissioned royal investigators to devise trick trials.⁵ They compared holy water, holy relics, and Latin Scriptures (used to exorcise demons) with ordinary water, common articles, and Latin literature (used as placebo controls). The aim of these placebo-

⁴ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Placebo_\(at_funeral\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Placebo_(at_funeral)) (accessed 11-22-11).

⁵ Kaptchuk TJ, Kerr CE, and Zanger A, Placebo Controls, Exorcisms and the Devil, *Lancet*, 2009 October 10; 374(9697): 1234.

controlled trials was threefold: to test the authenticity of demonic manifestations, to validate subsequent exorcisms, and to avert disruptions in military negotiations.

Medical Placebos

Pharmacologist Jeff Aronson describes how the meaning associated with the word placebo has shifted since Jerome in the 5th Century where it originally meant, “to please”. Writing in 1999 for the British Medical Journal, Aronson explains that by 1785, the New Medical Dictionary defined placebo as, “a common place method or medicine.”⁶ He asserts that in 1811, Hooper’s Medical Dictionary defined it as, “an epithet given to any medicine adapted more to please than benefit the patient.” Aronson offers the following synopsis concerning the semantic shift of this word.

From being a popular medicine with a useful if minor effect, a placebo became a medicine without any effect at all, or not one that you could rely on.”⁷

In modern clinical trials, placebos pose as drugs or therapies. They may be sugar pills, fake treatments, mock surgeries, or sham interventions. The pharmaceutical industry uses placebos to evaluate the safety and effectiveness associated with new drugs or medical treatments.

By the power of suggestion, placebos generate positive expectations and therefore, affect experimental outcomes. Some placebos induce a subtle but measurable influence while others are more potent. As instruments of deliberate deception, placebos ignite rigorous ethical debate in the medical community.

A Placebo Posing as Worship

Properly understood, true worshipers do not express worship for their own benefit or for the sake of others. Their worship targets God

⁶ George Motherby, *New Medical Dictionary*, Second edition, London, 1785

⁷ Aronson, J, *When I use a word, Please, please me*, *British Medical Journal*, Volume 318, 1999, p. 716.

and God alone without consideration for personal or public pleasure. We may derive important benefits from singing and from other religious activities. Worship however, as described in the Bible, is not a means to an end performed to gain a personal advantage.

While other people may watch or listen, worshipers send their message directly to God. They do not cater to backsliders or potential converts. They do not use worship as leverage to meet a need, promote a cause, fight a battle, or support a ministry. By design, music and singing along with prayers, liturgies, rituals, sacraments, and preaching support these important causes. True worshipers however, venerate their Heavenly Father without ulterior motives; they offer sincere reverence without an agenda.

Praise—Not a Substitute for Worship

Tempting Jesus in the wilderness, Satan did not solicit a song of praise from Him. No, he tempted Jesus to *“bow down and worship”*.⁸ When various instruments sounded in Babylon, King Nebuchadnezzar did not command multitudes to sing praises. No, he commanded them to *“fall down and worship”*. The King did not punish Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego for singing out of tune. Either individuals bowed before the golden image or they faced death in a blazing furnace. The royal herald loudly proclaimed:

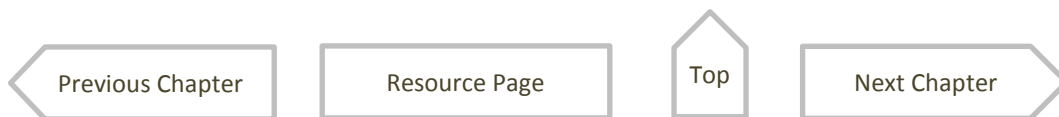
*“To you the command is given, O peoples, nations and men of every language, that at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe and all kinds of music, you are to **fall down and worship** the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king has set up. But whoever does not **fall down and worship** shall immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire.”* (Daniel 3:4-6 NAS)

⁸ Matthew 4:9 NAS

The Bible distinguishes praise and worship as two separate but related expressions. It emphasizes songs of praise and highlights gestures of facedown worship. Revelation 13 and 14 portray inhabitants of the earth offering worship to Satan, the Dragon, and the Beast. Songs of praise are not mentioned; they will not suffice at this level of veneration.

Before Jesus returns for His bride, a decisive showdown will transpire. It will revolve around worshipers and the direction of their bow. Ultimately, all the earth will sing praises to Jesus, and they will also worship Him.⁹

Like the placebo effect in medicine, false religion offers fake promises; it arouses false hopes in phony gods. While many individuals know how to recognize a bogus Messiah sporting counterfeit miracles, few connect with Jesus for all He is worth and then offer a response of radical reverence.



⁹ Psalm 66:4 NAS