

Swept off your Feet

Beyond Worship-as-Usual

Connecting with God for a Strong Finish

CHAPTER 22

Worship Wars

In “Putting an End to Worship Wars”, Elmer Towns states:

Christians have disagreed, and they have fought. They have destroyed churches, split churches, and quit churches.... They have ostracized pastors, criticized pastors, and fired pastors—all over worship.¹

Abusive leaders have imposed harsh penalties for not honoring God according to their traditions. Divergent parishioners experienced unwarranted reproach, reproof, and censure. Convicted heretics experienced excommunication, torture, and/or death for alleged violations.

Helping us recall a few historical quarrels, Towns mentions the punitive vengeance of Servetus whom John Calvin had burned at the stake for a theological dispute. He cites the tit-for-tat turf war between denominations as they fought over the right to evangelize islands in the South Seas. He notes how European Crusaders fought against unredeemed infidels occupying Jerusalem. He also includes the “blood and guts” battle of 1531, which claimed the life of Ulrich Zwingli, who died defending the Bible against tradition.

¹ Elmer Towns, *Putting an End to Worship Wars*, Broadman & Holman Publishers, Nashville, TN, 1997, p.44.

According to Towns, “the church has fought over doctrine, polity, wicked leaders, corruption, appointing people to positions and even the iconoclastic battles of statues in churches.” He then asserts that “Today's most agonizing battles are over worship!!”²

Churches have suffered and individuals are in need of healing because the body of Christ has failed to connect with the truth about God and worship Him accordingly. Despite ulterior motives and legalistic abuses, tolerant trends are restraining church discipline. Religious tyrants no longer burn perceived heretics at the stake—and they do not stone nonconformists.

Ironic Terminology

Reviewing “*Worship by the Book*”, by D.A. Carson and others, Greg Gilbert writes,

Far too many churches have been torn apart in recent years by the “worship wars.” To be honest, I am not quite sure what to think about that term, “worship wars.” Whoever coined it is either completely oblivious to the meaning of worship, or a genius at identifying sad ironies in the church's life.³

Because people use this term with such light-hearted humor, Gilbert wonders how many people feel the “cognitive dissonance” between the two words. He goes on to state that,

If there is ever a time when God's people ought to be unified with one another and with their Lord, it must be when they meet together for corporate worship. But somehow, corporate worship has become such a contentious and divisive experience, we have had to resort to a doleful term like “war” to describe it.⁴

² Elmer Towns, *Putting an End to Worship Wars*, Broadman & Holman Publishers, Nashville, TN, 1997, p.47.

³ <http://www.9marks.org/books/book-review-worship-book-da-carson> (reviewed 3-2-2010, accessed 1-8-2013). © 9Marks. www.9Marks.org. Email: info@9marks.org. (888) 543-1030.

⁴ <http://www.9marks.org/books/book-review-worship-book-da-carson> (reviewed 3-2-2010, accessed 1-8-2013)

Overlooking the Heart of Worship

Failing to worship God in spirit and truth has opened the door to a wide range of creative expressions. As distinctive models emerge, our Heavenly Father continues to seek “*true worshipers*” who will worship Him in spirit and truth.

For better or for worse, creative labels have redefined so-called worship services. With dramatic variety, congregations accommodate a wide range of preferences and convictions. Some categories include: liturgical worship, traditional worship, contemporary worship, blended worship, seeker-sensitive worship, contemplative worship, corporate worship, intercessory worship, evangelistic worship, renewal worship, antiphonal worship, flag worship, free worship, expressive worship, abandoned worship, kinetic worship, electronic worship, DJ led worship, ekstasis worship (venturing outside oneself to experience the ecstasy of God), worship and warfare, and praise and worship.

Broadly defined, worship represents a wide range of attitudes and activities. Worshipers integrate some or all of the following features in their gatherings: prayers and songs, chants and creeds, Bible reading and preaching, offerings and sacraments, repentance and benediction. Various models of worship incorporate both prearranged and spontaneous elements in sacred ceremony. Symbolism and ritual heighten divine awareness through sights and sounds laced with aromas and flavors. Sensory enhancements facilitate a meaningful connection with God as they enrich liturgical tradition and celebrate non-liturgical convention.

