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CHAPTER 30

Worship Wars

Broadly defined, worship has evolved. It now represents a wide range of attitudes and activities. So called worshipers integrate various features in their worship gatherings such as: songs and prayers, chants and creeds, bible reading and preaching, offerings and sacraments, repentance and benediction. Various worship models incorporate both prearranged and spontaneous elements in sacred ceremonies. Symbolism and ritual heighten divine awareness through sights and sounds supplemented by aromas and flavors. Sensory enhancements facilitate a meaningful connection with God as they enrich liturgical traditions and celebrate non-liturgical conventions.

Helping us recall notable quarrels over the style and substance of worship, Elmer 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 alternative traditions and disputed doctrine.

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 in a dramatic lament that “Today's most agonizing battles are over worship!!”¹

¹ Elmer Towns, *Putting an End to Worship Wars*, Broadman & Holman Publishers, Nashville, TN, 1997, p.47.

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.

Elmer Towns, "Putting an End to Worship Wars"²

Throughout history, religious leaders (often with political, territorial, and/or monetary implications) have imposed harsh penalties for not "worshiping" according to their preferential viewpoint. Noncompliant behavior has earned reproof, rebuke, and reproach. Condemned heretics have experienced excommunication, torture, and execution. Casualty statistics regarding militant religious battles are staggering.

Opposing denominations (e.g., Catholic and Protestant) have suffered immense persecution from so-called fellow believers. Affected individuals from generations far removed, still require healing because the body of Christ has failed to connect with the truth about God and the truth about worship. Despite ulterior motives and unwarranted abuse, a trend for tolerance towards diversity restrains severe forms of discipline. Religious tyrants no longer burn perceived heretics at the stake—and they do not stone nonconformists to death.

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 lament,

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

² Elmer Towns, *Putting an End to Worship Wars*, Broadman & Holman Publishers, Nashville, TN, 1997, p.44.

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.

and divisive experience, we have had to resort to a doleful term like “war” to describe it.⁴

The Heart of Worship

Failing to worship God in spirit and truth has opened the door to a wide range of descriptive labels. As unique options for “worship” emerge, our Heavenly Father continues to seek “*true worshipers*” who worship Him in spirit and truth. For better or for worse, descriptive labels have redefined so-called worship services. With dramatic variety, congregations accommodate a wide range of preferences and convictions. Some descriptors 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, virtual worship, electronic worship, DJ led worship, ekstasis worship (venturing outside oneself to experience the ecstasy of God), worship and warfare, and praise and worship.

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