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Worship Library

Title: Divine Service and Reverence

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In today's culture, the word "reverence" often conveys an overtone of the artificial. Reverence suggests to many the outward and formal in contrast to the inward and the real. At the same time, that which is informal and casual is viewed as authentic and true.

It is as American as apple pie to question anyone who assumes that they deserve our reverence and respect. From King George of England to the present, Americans dislike distinctions which rank people. King George too, it was said, "put his pants on one leg at a time." We want our leaders to be "one of us."

Now, as helpful as these assumptions may be in the realm of politics, it is important to ask about their value in worship. Does it follow, for example, that more casual and unstructured worship is more authentic and true? Or, does "reverent" worship denote that which is dead and without real spirit?

These questions are important for several reasons. First, few would doubt that the majority of Christians form their thinking about God around what they experience in Sunday morning worship. Scripture reading, devotions, and catechetical training remain elusive for many Christians. Sunday morning is the strategic moment for reaching, teaching, and nourishing. Second, while most Lutherans have historically kept Sunday worship as an appropriate time to be "reverent," significant voices now question whether a more casual and informal mode of worship wouldn't better serve the outreach of the church.

What is at stake in this debate? Is it squabbling over relatively unimportant matters? Or, is something more fundamental at issue? Put simply, is "reverence" necessary for worship? To answer these questions, it is crucial that we do more than hand out questionnaires! If one had conducted a public opinion poll before the flood, the answer would have been obvious: "No way! There has never been nor will there ever be such a deluge." Our "felt needs" are not necessarily our real needs. It would be inappropriate for our physician to say: "What kind of health problem would you like? What sort of therapy appeals to you?"

No, if these questions are to be addressed cleanly and rigorously, we need to go to the God from whom Noah, Moses, and all the saints sought their answers. This God reveals himself in the history of Israel and in the life of Jesus. The prophetic and apostolic Scriptures speak with clarity about this God. "How?" it might be asked. Where is a Bible passage that says "how" we are to worship? Where does the Bible make a case for "reverence" as central to an appropriate response in worship?

It is important to begin, in this case, at the beginning. The first book of the Bible stretches from Genesis to Deuteronomy. There "worship" receives lengthy and detailed attention. Not only do the patriarchs build their altars, the Exodus happens so that the people might be free to worship the true God (Ex. 3:18). After the people are free, numerous chapters are spent describing precisely what sort of surroundings and what sort of worship are appropriate to such a God. The description of the tabernacle follows God's own blueprint (Ex. 25-40). Similarly, the sacrifices and the priesthood of are divinely

stipulated (Lev. 1-10). What these texts tell us is that the God of the Old Testament was very concerned about the way worship occurred!

Similarly, in the New Testament, St. Paul disapproves of worship which is inappropriate (1 Cor. 11:17-22; 14:1-40). The worship of the first Christians, like that of the historic liturgies of the church, was rooted in the Sacred Scriptures. These Sacred Scriptures, for the earliest Christians, were primarily the Old Testament. The apostles, taught by Christ, viewed the Old Testament as a description of Christ and his Kingdom. So, rather than create a form of worship on readily available Greco-Roman models, the church continued the worship of Israel with the confession that the sacrifice had now been offered (Heb. 8-10). Christ, the Passover Lamb of God, was now the center of all community life (1 Cor. 5:7-8).

Why was God so interested? Wouldn't it have been equally appropriate to hold hands in a circle in the desert and speak a spontaneous prayer? In fact, wouldn't that have been better than the routine of offering sacrifices to God in the manner that he prescribed? Wasn't God simply giving a primitive society a set of visual aids?

The answer is "no!" What was at stake for the Israelites was the very nature of their faith. God was the one who had done specific things and revealed himself in specific ways. To say that these details could be bypassed was to create a golden calf. It was, quite simply, to worship another god. It is the character of the God revealed in the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures that calls forth appropriate worship.

Prayers, for example, may reflect our deepest hurts and highest hopes. They may be authentic in expressing our feelings. But, tragically, they may not be prayers which nourish our souls. Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes this point in a book entitled *Psalms: the Prayer Book of the Bible*:

Lord, teach us to pray! So spoke the disciples to Jesus. In making this request, they confessed that they were not able to pray on their own, that they had to learn to pray. The phrase "learn to pray" sounds strange to us. If the heart does not overflow and begin to pray by itself, we say, it will never 'learn' to pray. But it is a dangerous error, surely widespread among Christians, to think that the heart can pray by itself. For then we confuse wishes, hopes, sighs, lament, rejoicing—all of which the heart can do by itself—without prayer. And so we must learn to pray. The child learns to speak because his father speaks to him. He learns the speech of his father and mother. So we learn to speak to God because God has spoken to us and speaks to us. God's speech in Jesus Christ meets us in the Holy Scriptures. If we wish to pray with confidence and gladness, then the words of Holy Scripture will have to be the solid basis of our prayer. For here we know that Jesus Christ, the Word of God, teaches us to pray. The words which come from God become, then, the steps on which we find our way to God (pp. 10-13).

It might be added that our Lord, at the key moments of his life (Maundy Thursday, Good Friday) used the Psalter for his prayers. What this all points toward is the fact that the Triune God of Holy Scripture has revealed himself in specific words and events. They provide us with a true characterization. The Creator. The Holy One. The Provider. The Deliverer. All of these attributes and many more are revealed to us.

Now how do God's people react to such a God? Throughout Sacred Scripture there is a holy awe and respect, a "reverence" on the part of those who are privileged to see God clearly. Moses displayed it. Jesus, the Word made flesh, embodied it. In Scripture, the people who treat God lightly or casually really haven't understood his character. Nor, for that matter, have they faced the facts about their own character before such a God.

Parents mourning at the birth of a healthy child...people laughing at an injured athlete...a golfer weeping when his ball drops into the hole: such reactions are inappropriate! They are unreal. They point to a real problem in perception and attitude. To meet the Triune God with a relaxed, casual, and

carefree response is also inappropriate. Our reactions and attitudes must reflect the real and true nature of God. This does not mean, of course, that an "appropriate" response earns us a place before God. Reverence is not a religious sentiment or virtue within the child of God which bestows merit! Rather it is the characteristic of a relationship that God has freely bestowed. Just as pride must be put aside by the child of God, so reverence comes with the relationship.

When we are baptized into Christ, we put on Christ (Rom. 6:1-11). His attitude becomes ours. Jesus invites us into an attitude of holy awe and respect before his Heavenly Father. Indeed, a text which distills the essence of reverence is Psalm 130:4: "But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared." Many Christian traditions articulate the majesty and might of God, but leave worshipers with a fear of God that misses the heart of the Bible's message.

It is, in a word, forgiveness-the Gospel-that evokes true "reverence" in those who behold the character of God in the Bible. This is the fitting and appropriate response. It is the response that has shaped the historic liturgies of the church. With all their variety and richness, the worship of Christians has been marked from the first by "reverence." Here, in our worship, God is truly present. His words, his meal, his water-specific realities-invite us to him. His gracious character, so definitively revealed in the face of Christ, frees us from our shifting sentiments and religious fashions. As Luther put it so pointedly: "We see the deepest into God's heart when we see his Son on the cross."

When Mary and the apostles stood before the cross, there was no informality. There was pain and mystery and awe and reverence. When we worship before that cross, we behold the true character of the Triune God. Our impulse is not to go after trendy emotions or religious "buzzes." These were offered in abundance by the Baalism of Palestine and every trendy religion of the Greco-Roman empire. No, the cross remains an offense and a scandal today as then because it separates worship of the true God from myriad manifestations of human religiosity. It is also the source of true "reverence." It is authentic and it is real, for it alone reveals the true character of God and true nature of his redeemed children. Such reverence will forever mark the worship of God's people.

Readers who would like a more thorough analysis of worship in Israel and in the early Christian community are invited to consult the following works:

- Oscar Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship* (1953).
- F. Hahn, *The Worship of the Early Church* (1973).
- Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms* (1986).
- J. T. Sanders, *New Testament Christological Hymns* (1969).

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