

HEBREWS 12:22-29

WE CANNOT WORSHIP WITHOUT GRATITUDE

“You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

“See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, ‘Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.’ This phrase, ‘Yet once more,’ indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.”¹

Considerable energies are spent attempting to “worship” among modern church goers. Tragically, much of what is identified as worship appears merely to be efforts designed to gratify the personal desires of the worshippers. Worshippers are focused on how they feel rather than focusing on Who they are to meet. Worship is defined as the ascription of worth to One who is superior to the worshippers. Worship is not about me—worship is about God! Worship is ascribed to the Lord of Glory according to the Psalmist.

“Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness.”

[PSALM 29:1, 2]

Worship is acknowledging the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me; it is rendering to Him the glory and honour due His Name. Only incidentally can we say that worship is about how I feel or even whether I enjoy the worship experience. After Job had met the Lord God, he confessed, “I despise myself” [JOB 42:6b].

I do not mean to imply that we must content ourselves with a dull liturgy and leaves us feeling empty; neither do I mean that we will be emotionless as we worship—we will experience a range of emotions; however, our feelings must not lead in worship! Meet the True and Living God and we will worship involuntarily! We will be lost in wonder at His majesty, stunned into awed silence in the presence of His glory and dumbstruck with fascination before His grace. Coming into the presence of the Lord our God, our senses will be excited as they could never otherwise be stimulated. Above all, we will experience reverential attitude, finding ourselves suffused with gratitude that we are recipients of unimaginable mercy and that He has revealed such marvellous love.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Wheaton: Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Perhaps that points to the reason so many worshippers fail to worship—we cannot worship without gratitude. The writer of the Letter to Hebrew Christians scattered in the Diaspora spoke of this very subject. It is appropriate on this day before Thanksgiving to consider what that ancient writer said, applying His words to our own lives today.

IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD — “You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

“See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, ‘Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.’ This phrase, ‘Yet once more,’ indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain” [HEBREWS 12:22-27].

Moses had led the people of Israel to Mount Sinai where God would deliver the Law. God had used Moses to deliver Israel from Egyptian bondage. He did not merely turn them loose, trusting that they would somehow work out the business of knowing His will on their own; He brought them to the mountain of Sinai so they could worship Him. Since the writer is providing instruction to Hebrew Christians, it is appropriate to bring Mount Sinai into the picture. However, we need to ask what the significance of this particular introduction is for contemporary believers who are less familiar with the giving of the Law.

I suggest that this is an excellent reminder that we have been delivered from sin so that we may worship and serve the True and Living God. A saying that was once current among the churches reminded believers that they were “saved to serve.” Underscore that concept in your mind—*we are saved to serve*. We are not given the assignment of somehow influencing culture, though we should so live that we do influence culture; we are responsible to worship and serve the One whom we call “Master.” The author brings Mount Sinai into the picture in order to contrast what was then with what is now.

I want you to go back to the time when the Law was given. The writer speaks of that in **HEBREWS 12:18-21**. “You have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, ‘If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.’ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, I tremble with fear.” He is quoting liberally from Exodus and Deuteronomy when he tells us, “You have not come to what may be touched.”

Refresh your memory by turning to **EXODUS 19:12**. There, God instructed Moses, “You shall set limits for the people all around, saying, ‘Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death.’” There was a separation between man and God at the Mountain of Law. Man could not approach God directly. God’s holiness and man’s sin ensured a separation that could not be ignored.

Also, a “blazing fire” kept worshippers from approaching the mountain. This was not a faux fire pictured on a television channel. This was blazing fire, fire that menaced people with its hot flames. This was fire that would consume anyone venturing too close. This fire was akin to the flaming sword that kept our first parents from returning to Eden.

Then, there was “darkness and gloom” to keep worshippers from coming too close to God. The darkness and gloom was intensified by “a tempest.” To approach God under the Law was to experience genuine terror. There was the sound of “a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them.” Worshippers could not bear the voice of God! Therefore, they sent Moses up into the mountain to mediate for them.

Get the picture! The writer rattles off the setting to ensure that we are aware of the terror worshippers felt. Even Moses, a man who spoke with God face-to-face, was terrified. The writer states that even the stalwart of the Faith, Moses, quailed. “I tremble with fear,” was his testimony. This is the mountain to which Israel was brought after they were delivered from bondage. This was worship under the Law. One stalwart of the Faith from a past generation has written, “The mountain is lost in the fire and smoke. It was, so to speak, no longer a mountain. It becomes a manifestation of terrible majesty, a symbol of the Divine Presence.”²

The writer abruptly introduces a transition when he writes, “But!” The Greek conjunction *ollá* is presenting a logical contrast. Those to whom the writer pens this letter understood that this was not their experience in worship. Just so, we who are redeemed know that this is not our experience in worship. We’ve been brought into the presence of God Himself. We’re brought to a mountain; but it is not that mountain! Like Israel, the people of God have been brought out of bondage in order to honour and serve the Living God. As the people of God, we Christians are brought into His presence where we are appointed to worship.

One scholar has written, “Such were the terrors of Sinai, the mount of God’s law, where because of their sinfulness the people were unable to draw near to God’s presence. How different are the circumstances of Zion, the mount of God’s grace, where, thanks to the perfect law-keeping and the all-sufficient sacrifice of himself offered by the incarnate Son in our stead, we are invited to draw near with boldness into the heavenly holy of holies.”³

Having presented the terrifying spectre experienced during worship under the Law, the writer makes a contrast with our present situation. “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering” [HEBREWS 12:22]. The author says, “You have not come to *that* mountain; rather, you have come to Mount Zion.” Mount Sinai spoke of blazing fire, dark gloom and raging storms accented by blaring trumpets and a terrifying voice. Mount Zion speaks of grace and peace, freedom and love in the presence of the True and Living God. This is the city of God, the heavenly city “whose designer and builder is God” [HEBREWS 11:10].

The writer shifts our gaze from the Mountain of God to the Mountain of Grace. At Sinai, sinful man was condemned and kept from coming to God. Terror seized the sinner; no man or woman, no child, not even a beast, could set foot on that awful mountain. A voice boomed out forbidding any from coming near. Here, on Mount Zion, a voice invites sinners to draw near that they may find grace. The darkness has been taken away, replaced by light. Terror is displaced by love and the mountain of fear has been transformed into the mountain of grace. The transformation has been effected through the coming of Christ Jesus our Master. We read, “You, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross” [COLOSSIANS 2:13, 14].

² Brooke Foss Westcott, ed., **The Epistle to the Hebrews the Greek Text with Notes and Essays**, 3d ed., **Classic Commentaries on the Greek New Testament** (Macmillan, London 1903), 412

³ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, **A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews, The New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament** (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI 1977), 543

We don't always realise the transition that has already occurred for us who believe because of our new life in the Beloved Son. However, the writer forcefully shifts our dim gaze to the City of the Living God. "You have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel" [HEBREWS 12:22-24].

Through faith in Christ the Master, we Christians already have access to the presence of God Himself. This is the testimony of Paul when he writes, "To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him" [EPHESIANS 3:8-12].

The writer provides a rich revelation that is often ignored by those of us who hold out the Word of Life. He says we have come not only to Mount Zion, the City of God, but he writes that we have come "to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect" [HEBREWS 12:23].

Church goers often speak of "the church" as a great, unseen entity. When we read the New Testament, almost always the Greek term *ekklesiá* is translated into English by the word "church." The word, occurring one hundred fourteen times in the New Testament, originally spoke of a regularly summoned political body. This was the term used of an assembly of freedmen gathered to care for community business. Hold in mind that the word denoted an assembly gathered for a particular purpose.

The earliest believers adopted this word to speak of their gathering as the community of faith. Consequently, of the one hundred fourteen times that the word occurs in the New Testament, it is translated "church" one hundred four times. In every instance, the most natural understanding is that the writer was referring to an assembly gathered in a particular place or assemblies of believers in a particular region. The concept of a universal church would have appeared to be odd, at best, to those first readers of the New Testament letters. Twice, the word is translated "congregation."⁴ Four times, the word is translated "assembly." Three of the times when the word is translated "assembly" are referring to the riot in Ephesus when Paul had been so mightily used to deliver many from bondage to pagan gods.⁵

One final time *ekklesiá* is translated "assembly," (some translations read "church"), and that is in the verse that is now before us. The writer points to a gathering that is yet future, an assembly that includes all the redeemed of God who are met in the presence of the Risen Son of God. Hence, the name of this prospective congregation is "The Church of the Firstborn." We do not now witness this gathering; but we shall see it at the return of the Saviour.

⁴ Once referring to Israel during the wilderness wanderings [ACTS 7:38] and once when referring to Christ while quoting from the Psalms [HEBREWS 2:12].

⁵ ACTS 9:32, 39, 41

The only time that the word *ekklēsia* is used of the assembly of all the redeemed is when the writer speaks of the church prospective when all the redeemed are gathered before the Son of God. That day awaits the saints. These redeemed souls are gathered to the City of God where God Himself, the Judge of all, will receive “the spirits of the righteous made perfect.” There, we who are redeemed, will see with our eyes and not another, the Risen Son of God—“Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.” This glorious gathering awaits the people of God.

The people of God are destined to receive all this. What impact does this make on your view of the congregation where God has placed you? How do you see your fellow saints? Those who share this holy Faith receive the same grace and mercy you receive. The God who accepts you in Christ the Lord has accepted your fellow believers in the same Risen Saviour. This is that to which you have come. You are vindicated by God, declared righteous and seen as holy in the Beloved Son. When you imagine yourself defeated, remember what God has done for you. When you dare think of yourself as superior to another believer, remember what God has done for you and for her. When you see those who appear to struggle unsuccessfully against sin, remember what God has done for that one. When you despair of your own besetting sin, remember what God has done for you. Remember that when you have come to Christ, you have come to “the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” The blood of our Saviour speaks of grace and not of condemnation. Thus, we are called to come into His presence with thanksgiving.

OUR MOTIVATION — “Let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken” [HEBREWS 12:28a]. Don’t imagine that because you have found grace and peace that obedience is no longer important! The writer of this letter cautions those who read by stating, “See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain” [HEBREWS 12:25-27].

That is a stern word and a stark reminder of Him with whom we have to do. This is the True and Living God who speaks. We are not hearing the muffled voice of a mere demigod. The Word must be either received or rejected; there is no middle ground. Those who reject the Word, which is tantamount to rejecting the grace God offers, must know that they now stand condemned and under divine wrath. Ultimately, an individual either stands as a citizen of God’s unshaken and unshakable Kingdom, or an individual shall perish with the remainder of the universe. The same Jesus who now ministers so tenderly to His own people shall return to bring judgement to all who have rejected the offer of grace. Thus, we read the Words of the Master, “The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” [JOHN 5:22-24].

We are called to respond to Christ in obedience. It does appear that many have concluded that Jesus is a really nice fellow, tolerant of our sinful proclivities and understanding of our desire to make our daily lives all about ourselves. We are truly convinced that He is very God and that power and might reside in Him and that He is due majesty and honour and glory from all mankind.

Pilate made this very mistake, assuming that real power belonged to Rome. Like politicians today, Pilate imagined that he could use religion for his own purposes. “Carpe Diem,” he must have thought, believing that the day he would seize was defined by mortal power and majesty that is always dying, always being replaced by another new power. Jesus had been delivered over to Pilate for judgement. Pilate was dismissive of the claim that the Jewish leaders made concerning Jesus. We can almost hear the sarcasm dripping in Pilate’s voice when he asks incredulously, “So you are the king of the Jews?”⁶ Jesus’ Kingdom is a spiritual Kingdom. Don’t conclude that because this is so we must respect and fear earthly rulers, though we can afford to ignore Jesus’ authority. Because Jesus’ rule is spiritual, people who choose to be irreligious imagine that He means nothing to them. For those who are lost, Jesus is at best a distant memory of childhood stories.

Dr. James Boice has addressed this precise truth when he wrote, “When Jesus says, ‘My kingdom is not of this world,’ many utter a sigh of relief and say, ‘Well, thank God that Jesus’ kingdom has nothing to do with us. It is a spiritual kingdom. Hallelujah! We can keep on as we have been and do as we please.’ Nothing is farther from the truth, for when we say that Christ’s kingdom is not of this world, what we are really saying is that Christ’s kingdom is of heaven and therefore has an even greater claim over us than do the earthly kingdoms we know so well. There is real sovereignty in an earthly kingdom. There is genuine authority which we may not flout. But over these is Christ, and we flout his kingship not merely at the peril of our fortune and lives but at the peril of our eternal souls.”⁷

I have often meditated on the dark words Paul employed as he began the Letter to Roman Christians. “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things” [ROMANS 1:18-23].

You know very well that the Apostle continues by marking a steady downward march toward degradation and destruction. It all began with a lack of gratitude toward God. I’ve often wondered how an atheist celebrates Thanksgiving. Whom does the atheist thank? What a pathetic day they must have if there is no gratitude toward Him who gives us all things richly! Undoubtedly, the Christian roots of Thanksgiving are obvious. How does the Muslim celebrate the day? What does the Buddhist do on Thanksgiving? Yet, I fear that many who bear the name “Christian” are becoming practical atheists on this day, failing to register gratitude toward God. They make this a family day, a typical holiday in which they are splayed before the television, a day to do almost anything except remember God’s goodness. I pray that is not the case for us.

When we are thankful to God, we draw near to God. Drawing near to God, we receive a Kingdom—a Kingdom that is not of this world. It is a better Kingdom where peace and love reign and which is occupied solely by the spirits of the righteous made perfect. That should motivate us to worship acceptably.

⁶ See JOHN 18:33-36

⁷ James Montgomery Boice, **The Gospel of John: An Expository Commentary** (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI 2005) 1436

RESPONSE TO GOD’S GIFT — “Let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe” [HEBREWS 12:28b]. The Kingdom we are receiving is quite real, though we do not always see with clear eyes. We are often caught up in the battles of this dying world. I confess that I am a news junkie. I am constantly abreast of world events, as if somehow knowing what is being reported now will somehow change things. I find it necessary on an ongoing basis to get back to basics, reminding myself that this is not the world for which I have been fitted. Remembering who I am in Christ, I am led to worship.

Too many of us called by the Name of Christ the Lord have no concept of what it is to worship. We surrender an hour of time one day a week, tolerating what is done because we are told that we are worshipping. Tragically, few professing Christians worship. Worship is spontaneous if we actually meet the Risen Lord of Glory. Recall the response of John when his Sunday worship was interrupted during his banishment to Patmos. “I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet” [REVELATION 1:9, 10]. Hearing the voice, the Revelator turned to see who was speaking. The august personage stunned the aged saint. Listen to John’s testimony. “When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as though dead” [REVELATION 1:17]. This is the normal reaction of people when meeting the Living Son of God!

Manoah was a rather nondescript Israelite going through the routine of a pedestrian life when an august personage visited his wife, announcing that she was to have a baby. It was not any baby, but the child was to be received as a gift divinely given. When she informed Manoah of the visit, he prayed to the LORD, asking, “O LORD, please let the man of God whom You sent come again to us and teach us what we are to do with the child who will be born” [JUDGES 13:8]. God responded by again sending “the angel of God” [JUDGES 13:9], earlier identified as “the angel of the LORD” [JUDGES 13:3] and identified as such later [JUDGES 13:15].

What is fascinating is that so far as they are concerned this is simply a man—until he reveals His Person. This is the account provided in the Word of God. “Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, ‘Please let us detain you and prepare a young goat for you.’ And the angel of the LORD said to Manoah, ‘If you detain me, I will not eat of your food. But if you prepare a burnt offering, then offer it to the LORD.’ (For Manoah did not know that he was the angel of the LORD.) And Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, ‘What is your name, so that, when your words come true, we may honor you?’ And the angel of the LORD said to him, ‘Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?’ So Manoah took the young goat with the grain offering, and offered it on the rock to the LORD, to the one who works wonders, and Manoah and his wife were watching. And when the flame went up toward heaven from the altar, the angel of the LORD went up in the flame of the altar. Now Manoah and his wife were watching, and they fell on their faces to the ground” [JUDGES 13:15-20].

We define worship by what we do; the Word presents worship by Who we meet! Few of us prepare to worship. Consequently, few Christians worship. We sing songs, attempting to create an atmosphere that allows us to feel a bit zoned out. Perhaps we close our eyes, even lifting our hands and swaying to the rhythm of the music that is being presented, all the while seeking a particular feeling that we call “worship.” In light of the Word of God, we know this is not worship. Intuitively, we know that we have not met the Risen Christ because we have not found ourselves awed into exclaiming as did Thomas, “My Lord and my God” [JOHN 20:28]! Whatever it is that have done, we know we have not worshipped.

When we meet the Living God, we are changed and we will serve Him. Isaiah saw the Living God and he was transformed. He saw the LORD seated on His throne. He saw the seraphim in attendance. He witnessed the majesty of the LORD God. He heard the voice of the LORD shaking the foundations of heaven itself as the LORD asked, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Isaiah immediate and unqualified response was to volunteer, “Here I am! Send me” [ISAIAH 6:1-8]. One sure evidence that we have not seen the Lord God is that we are not obedient to His command. Worship transforms the life of the one who meets the Lord God.

We do not hold God in awe. We come to the house of God, chatting amiably with dear friends. We sing the songs of Zion in a perfunctory manner, dutifully listen to the Word as it is delivered and enjoy some refreshments as we chat with friends and again plan our busy week. Whatever we have done, we cannot say that we have actually met the Lord of Glory. We are not awed by Him, by His majestic presence.

You may recall the children’s stories penned by C. S. Lewis. Really, they are more than children’s stories—they speak to each of us. Lewis, in his Narnia series, uses the figure of Aslan, the giant and majestic lion, to depict the Lord Jesus. At one point, one of his heroines, the adventurous girl Jill, comes upon a stream of water. She has been lost and is dying of thirst. But as she comes forward, she spies the lion sitting calmly before the water. Terrified, she stops in her tracks. The lion invites her, “If you are thirsty, come and drink.” Dying of thirst, and drawn by the rippling gurgle of the stream, the girl steps a bit forward. “Will you promise not to—do anything to me, if I do come?” she meekly asks. “I make no promise,” said the lion. Drawn closer by the refreshing sounds of water, she wonders aloud, “Do you eat girls?” “I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms,” he replies. Jill recoils at this, concluding, “I daren’t come and drink.” “Then you will die of thirst,” said the lion. “O dear!” cries Jill, drawn yet a step closer by her need of refreshment, “I suppose I must go and look for another stream, then.” But the lion responds, “There is no other stream.”⁸

The One before whom we come is awesome—there is no other word to describe our God. He is not a tame beast whom we control. We do not keep our God in a box, carefully taking Him out at convenient times so we can use Him according to our desires before again placing Him in our convenient little box so we can get back to going about our dull routines. The writer makes certain that we understand that our God is not as we often imagine.

WHOM WE WORSHIP — “Our God is a consuming fire” [HEBREWS 12:29]. This is the writer’s statement concerning the LORD our God. Christ Jesus is God; His presence leaves us in stunned silence, awestruck, lost in fascination and wonder as we marvel in His grace. Without seeing a single demonstration, we realise His power and might. He speaks, and we are immediately attentive—we are prepared to obey, to do whatever He bids. This is the God whom we worship.

One writer challenges when he writes of our faux worship. “I was at a traditional church several years ago when God opened my eyes... I was sitting there during the music and thinking about how I would do the song differently. Then God basically slapped me in the face. I felt Him say to me, ‘Gary, worship me. If you can’t worship me with this kind of music, then your idea of worship is shallow.’ I walked away from that a changed person and a changed worship leader. Over the years, I have seen and heard testimonies of people who have worshipped and connected with God for the first time, even though they didn’t prefer the music style that I was bringing. That is what it is all about. It’s not about the methods or styles in which we worship. It’s about bringing worship that the Father is seeking, which is in Spirit and in truth.

⁸ C. S. Lewis, **The Silver Chair** (New York: HarperCollins, 1953), 21–23

“That being said, I’m concerned that there is a danger we need to watch out for in our churches. The danger is **CONDITIONAL WORSHIP**. It’s when God’s people convince themselves that certain conditions ... need to exist in order for corporate worship to happen. For some, it may call for a killer band, and for others, it may call for a choir. For some, it may be lights and multimedia, and for others, it may be stained glass and candles. These things are not bad ideas at all. When used properly, there are so many things that can enhance the experience and touch the senses, but we need **BALANCE**. We need to learn to worship God no matter what the circumstances. Paul said in Colossians 2:16, ‘So don’t put up with anyone pressuring you in details of diet, worship services or holy days. All those things are mere shadows cast before what was to come; the substance is Christ’ (**The Message**).”

Then, the writer asks, “What is the substance of your worship? If it’s not Christ alone, then you are probably suffering from **CONDITIONAL WORSHIP**.”⁹

What Durbin calls “conditional worship” prevails when we know what should happen and we take charge, imposing our puerile efforts in a vain attempt to make worship happen. We know we should meet the Living God, the Risen Lord of Glory. We know that we should be awestruck and stunned by His glorious presence; and yet, worship never seems to happen—we somehow never meet the Risen Lord of Glory. So, we take charge as though we can create an ambience that will cause us to worship, a condition that will duplicate what we know we should experience. We will make our buildings beautiful with stained glass windows, imposing sanctuaries and comfortable pews as though the beauty of the surroundings will bring God to man. Some Christians impose stifling liturgies—they light candles, recite prayers and chant ancient hymns. Others lower the lights, introduce a hypnotic rhythm and softly repeat the words of a song—all in an attempt to create the lost sense of worship. There is little difference between what is too often done in modern church life and the effort by Rehoboam to recapture the grandeur of David’s throne by crafting bronze shields to replace the gold shields that were seized by the king of Egypt [see **1 KINGS 14:25-28**]. Our pitiful efforts to create the conditions for worship differ little from the disastrous efforts of Jeroboam to maintain what he saw as a tenuous hold on power by crafting golden calves before which Israel could worship [see **1 KINGS 12:25-33**].

As gently as I know how and as forcefully as I dare, I remind each Christian of the truth that “Our God is a consuming fire” [**HEBREWS 12:29**]. If we know God, and if we now realise what He has provided, we will be filled with gratitude. Approaching Him with grateful hearts, we will worship. If our hearts are not suffused with gratitude, we cannot worship. We will continue our futile attempts to generate a feeling, all the while consoling ourselves that we are worshipping while inwardly grieving at the loss of intimacy and the thrill of true worship.

I suggest that as God’s voice shook the earth at Sinai, even now His voice is shaking earth and heaven. It is a reminder to those who are aware of what He is doing that He is removing the things that are shaken “in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain” [**HEBREWS 12:27**]. The wise Christian will focus on Him—the True and Living God. The wise believer will prepare her heart before coming into the House of God, seeking His face and longing to meet Him that she may worship in spirit and in truth. The child of God, who understands Who it is that we worship, will invest in that which is eternal, that which cannot be shaken. He will cease living for that which shall soon be removed and live for eternity.

⁹ Gary Durbin, “How to Stop This Dangerous (and Surprising!) Worship Tendency,” Church Leaders, http://www.churchleaders.com/worship/worship-articles/261143-stop-dangerous-surprising-worship-tendency.html?mkt_tok=3RkMMJWWfF9wsRokvKjZKXonjHpfsX56e8qWaaxh4kz2EFye%2BLIHETpodcMTsBiNa%2BTFAwTG5toziV8R7DEJM1u2dkQXhXh, accessed October 4, 2015

Christ is coming again, and His return may be very near. If the shadow of prophecy is cast on the world so that the wise may know what shall shortly take place, then it may be that we are even now witnessing the final generation before His return. Long years ago at Sinai, Moses warned Israel, “Take care, lest you forget the covenant of the LORD your God, which He made with you, and make a carved image, the form of anything that the LORD your God has forbidden you. For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God” [DEUTERONOMY 4:23, 24]. We must not imagine that worship of the Lord our God is an inconsequential matter. God is a jealous God and He will not tolerate divided affections in His people. He is a consuming fire who purifies all who come into contact with Him.

Would you worship? Would you truly know the might and majesty of the Lord our God? Two elements must mark your approach to Him—awe and gratitude. Awe will be immediately evident when He reveals Himself as we come into His presence—we will not need to work it up or create the proper atmosphere. Gratitude grows as we remember His grace and reflect on His mercy to us. When we turn our gaze from this dying world to that spiritual Kingdom which He is giving up, we will find our hearts are filled with thanksgiving.

I’ve spoken to Christians, for the message can only be appropriate by those who know the Lord Christ. Certainly, I pray that followers of the Christ will take to heart the admonition to worship in spirit and in truth. However, if as I have spoken you realise that you are not twice-born, I plead with you to think carefully of your need. At His return, Christ the Lord shall judge the wicked, turning them away from His glorious presence and delivering them to their own place. They shall be cast away into darkness, into a loveless and hopeless eternity. I would not that any who hear my voice would be among those who are turned away from eternal joy.

Tragically, many who suppose themselves to be Christian will be turned into hell. Jesus warned, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and cast out demons in your name and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness’” [MATTHEW 7:21-23].

This need not be your situation, for even now this God offers life. Jesus took upon Himself the sin of all mankind. He has provided atonement, a covering for sin that allows any who have received that atonement to enter into the presence of the Living God. However, you must receive the offer of life that is provided in Him. The Word of God speaks to you when it says, if you openly agree with God that Jesus is Master over your life, believing that though He died the Father has raised Him from the dead, you shall be set free. It is with the heart that one believes and is made right before the Father, and with the mouth that one openly agrees with God and is set free.¹⁰ Repeatedly does God offer life when the Word speaks, “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved” [ROMANS 10:13]. Our sincere prayer is that you have this life. Amen.¹¹

¹⁰ Loose rendering of ROMANS 10:9, 10.

¹¹ In the preparation of this message, I gratefully acknowledge appropriating in full or in part many of ideas provided by Richard D. Phillips, **Hebrews**, Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani (ed.), **Reformed Expository Commentary** (P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ 2006)