

Worship: Drawing Near to God Through Christ in Faith
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Hebrews 10:19-25

I want to address what I believe is really at the center of the whole debate about music in worship. There are many issues that could be addressed, of course, such as worldliness or the morality of music. But when it comes down to differences of conviction regarding the purpose of music in worship that lead to differences over what kind of music is appropriate for worship, I am convinced that at its essence, such differences are different understandings of the nature of worship itself.

Clearly differences over what worship is and the function of various worship elements would lead to significant differences over what kind of music we might use in a worship service, and so I believe that a fundamental step toward resolving these debates is to seek to understand how the Bible itself defines worship.

There are a number of places we could go in Scripture to discover the essence of worship, but there is perhaps a no more thorough discussion of New Testament Christian worship in all of Scripture than in the book of Hebrews. In fact, I would suggest to you that a major theme, if not *the* major theme of the book of Hebrews, is worship. It is, in a sense, the worship “textbook” of the New Testament, just as the books of The Chronicles are the worship “textbook” of the Old Testament.

And so it is to this book that I would like to draw our attention as we seek to understand the nature and essence of Christian worship.

Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; ²¹And having an high priest over the house of God; ²²Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;) ²⁴ And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: ²⁵ Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.

The Call to Draw Near in Worship

The end of Hebrews 10 contains three admonitions introduced by the phrase, “Let us”: “Let us draw near,” “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope,” and “Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.” It is the first of these commands to which I’d like to draw our attention this morning.

This idea of drawing near is an important focus of the book of Hebrews. This is evident by its presence in the major literary climaxes of the book. Scholars tell us that Hebrews has 3 primary literary climaxes. Here in chapter 10:22 we find the second of these climaxes. The first is found in 4:16, which says, “Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.” That verb “come” is the same Greek term translated “draw near” in chapter 10. And the final climax of the book is 12:22, which says, “But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels,” and again that phrase “you have come” is a translation of the same Greek term translated “draw near” in our text.

Not only does this concept of drawing near appear in the book’s main literary climaxes, but it also appears in several other places in the book as well. 7:25, 10:1, and 11:6 all focus our attention on the call to draw near to God, the basis for drawing near, and the means for drawing near. The concept of drawing near is critical in this book.

Drawing Near to God in Worship

So what is the importance of this command? What does “drawing near” mean? This idea of coming or drawing near is a translation of a term that means more than just a casual coming toward something; Rather, it “is used exclusively of an approach to God,”¹ and we can see this by how it is used in the book; we find commands to draw near to God, draw near to the throne of grace, and here in our text, verse 19 implies that we are to draw near to the holy place. So it is clear that this drawing near is coming to God, and throughout the book of Hebrews the author compares this idea of drawing near to the Hebrew worship practices—they are in our text as well; the term translated “holiest,” that to which we are to draw near, refers to the “holy place” in the Temple. We also find Temple terms like “the veil,” “high priest,” “sprinkling” and “washing”; these each connote Old Testament worship terminology. In other words, drawing near to God is what the author defines as the essence of worship.

¹ William Lane, *Hebrews* (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), 460.

This idea of drawing near to God in worship permeates the storyline of Scripture. It is what Adam and Eve enjoyed as they walked with God in the cool the day (Gen. 2:8). It is described in Exodus 19:17 when Moses “brought the people out of the camp to *meet God*” at the foot of Mt. Sinai. He had told Pharaoh to let the people go so that they might worship their God in the wilderness, and this is exactly what they intended to do at Sinai. It is what Psalm 100 commands of the Hebrews in Temple worship when it says, “Come into his presence with singing and into his courts with praise.” It is what Isaiah experienced as he entered the heavenly throne room of God and saw him high and lifted up. To draw near to God is to enter his very presence, to bask in his glory, to have perfect communion fellowship with him.

And it is God who calls us to do this. We do not come in worship to draw near to God of our own initiative; God has invited us to draw near to him.

We Cannot Draw Near Because of Sin

But any reader of this invitation to draw near would have immediately recognized its inherent problem—this God to whom we are supposed to draw near is holy; he cannot tolerate sin. Yet we are sinful.

The fall of mankind into sin destroyed the possibility of drawing near to him. After Adam and Even sinned they no longer enjoyed the privilege of walking with God in the garden; instead they hid from him in fear and desperately tried to cover their guilt with leaves. And ever since that time, any attempt to draw near to God results in a profound recognition of guilt and unworthiness. The Israelites experienced this when they drew near to Mt. Sinai; when they witnessed the majesty and greatness and white-hot holiness of God, they trembled in fear and begged Moses to go in their behalf. This is the reason that although God inhabited the holy place in the tabernacle and later the Temple, no person could enter his presence except the high priest once a year on the Day of Atonement. This is what Isaiah experienced when he saw the Lord high and lifted up in all of his glory and holiness and cried out with, “Woe is me! For I am undone; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

The problem with the command in our text is that we have no right to draw near to God; we do not have access to him because of our sin. The only way God enabled people to partially draw near to him is through temporary sacrifices, and even then there are barriers keeping us from the very presence of God himself; there is a veil hiding the holy place, only the high priest can enter there and only once a year, and we know what happens if you even touch the symbol of God’s presence, the ark—Remember Uzzah? Even Psalm

100 calls people to come only into the outer courts of the Temple, not into the actual presence of God. The people had no direct access.

In fact, we have in our Old Testament an account of a man who dared enter the presence of the Lord even though he had no right. 2 Chronicles 26 records the reign of King Uzziah. For the most part, Uzziah was a noble king who did what was right in the sight of the Lord, and God rewarded him by giving him many military victories. But the text tells us that “when he was strong, he grew proud, to his destruction. For he was unfaithful to the Lord his God and entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense on the altar of incense.” Here was a great man, a righteous man, the leader of God’s people whom God had blessed, but he had no right to enter the temple; he had to legitimate access.

Yet he entered anyway. In fact, he entered the holy place itself and offered up incense on the altar. And the priests ran in after him and begged him to leave; they confronted him and told him that he had no right to enter the temple. They said, “It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the Lord, but for the priests, the sons of Aaron, who are consecrated to burn incense. Go out of the sanctuary, for you have done wrong, and it will bring you no honor from the Lord God.” But he was angry and continued what he was doing.

And we're told that while he stood in the sanctuary and before the altar of incense, and while he still had the censer of incense in his hand, and while he was expressing his anger at the priests, leprosy suddenly began to break out on his forehead! The priests saw it; and they hauled him bodily out of the sanctuary as quickly as they could. It was clear that the Lord had struck him for having dared to draw near to the Holy place in such a presumptuous way; and the Bible tells us "King Uzziah was a leper until the day of his death. He dwelt in an isolated house, because he was a leper; for he was cut off from the house of the LORD" (2 Chron. 26:21). It was an act of mercy from God that the king didn't die on the spot! Others in Bible history HAVE died for such boldness before God!

The point is that we cannot obey this command. God commands us to draw near, but this entering into the presence of God to worship him is not possible.

The Basis for Drawing Near in Worship

We Have Access Into the Holy Place

However, our text provides for us the solution to the problem through two “since” clauses. The first is found in verse 19: The text literally reads, “since we have boldness to enter the holy place ... draw near.”

Now the term translated “boldness” or “confidence” in most English translations has the idea of free expression that is only possible when one has open access to someone. It could perhaps be rendered, “open access” in our text. “Since we have *access* to enter the holy place . . .” So this verse is specifically addressing our problem. God commands us to draw near to him, but because of our sin we do not have access to him. But this verse tells us that such access *is* possible; it *is* possible to have access to the holy place.

Here is the first term in our text that is meant to conjure up images of Old Testament worship. The holy place was that most sacred of places in the Tabernacle and Temple. As you know, there were several boundaries to access God in the Old Testament. The first was the wall that enclosed the outer court of the temple, then was the wall of the Temple itself, and finally the veil that hid the holy place where the Ark of God dwelt. In each successive stage, fewer and fewer people had access. No Jew would ever even consider entering the Holy Place; they knew what happened when Uzziah did that.

In fact, if you go to Jerusalem today, you'll find out that there's a certain area of the Temple ground where it is forbidden to Jews to ever walk there, because it may be the area where the Holy of Holies once stood, and no Jew would ever put his foot on the Holy of Holies. So that's why there are big signs outside the gates of the Temple that say, "Orthodox Jews have been forbidden by the rabbi to enter in this place lest they step on the Holy of Holies." Orthodox Jews have a fear still today of ever going into the presence of God.

But this verse tells us that we have access, not just to the outer court, not just into the entrance of the Temple, but beyond the veil into the very presence of God. How can this be? Keep reading: “by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh.”

Access to God is possible through a sacrifice, and this is no ordinary sacrifice; this is the vicarious, substitutionary atonement of the Son of God. At the beginning of Hebrews 10, the author revealed the insufficiency of animal sacrifices to purify those who come to God in worship: It literally reads, “For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who *draw near*.”

But *this* sacrifice *can* perfect those who draw near. This Jesus is fully man, and thus he can stand as our substitute, and he is fully God, and thus he can pay an eternal punishment to an eternal, holy God that no normal man could. And because of the perfection and eternity of this sacrifice, it need not be offered day after day after day to atone for sin; it is offered *one time* and the complete wrath of God is fully appeased.

This is what God pictured when he slew the animal in the garden and covered Adam and Eve's guilt. This is what was pictured when Moses offered a sacrifice at the foot of Mt. Sinai so that the elders of the people could approach God. This is what was pictured each year in Israel on the Day of Atonement when an animal was sacrificed and the high priest entered the holy place to sprinkle blood on the mercy seat. This is what was pictured when the seraph took a burning coal from the altar and placed it on Isaiah's lips, saying, "your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

And this is pictured no more beautifully than with what happened at the moment of Christ's death. The gospel accounts of the crucifixion tell us that Jesus cried out with a loud voice and gave up his spirit, and at that exact moment, the veil of the temple was torn in two, as if that veil was the body of the Son of God himself prohibiting entrance into the presence of a holy God, and that access that had been lost by the fall of man is now restored! There is now a new and living way to draw near to God, and that way is his Son.

This phrase, "new and living way," paints a beautiful picture as well. The word translated "new" here is not the typical word that would have been used. It is a word that literally means, "freshly slaughtered." He was freshly slaughtered and yet he is living! He rose from the dead having defeated sin and death. And now we have access to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus by a freshly slaughtered yet living way—Jesus Christ. Therefore, draw near.

We Have a Great High Priest

But there is another "since" clause that explains to us how we have access to God, and that is found in verse 21: It literally reads "and since we have a great priest over the house of God . . . draw near." In the Old Testament economy, the only person on earth allowed to actually enter the presence of God, and that only once a year, was the high priest. But this verse tells us that not only is Jesus the perfect sacrifice that gains us access to God, but he is also the high priest who offers the sacrifice; he is priest *and* victim; and now because of our relationship to this Great High Priest, we can draw near to God in worship.

Hebrews 7:25 emphasizes the fact that Christ's High Priestly ministry of intercession makes such an approach possible: "Wherefore, he is able to save to the uttermost those who *draw near* to God through him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them."

So God commands us to draw near to him in worship, but because of our sinful condition, this is only possible through the shed blood of Christ on our behalf and through Christ's high priestly ministry. Jesus Christ is the only basis for drawing near to God in worship.

Now allow me to move from principle to application here for a moment. This recognition that Christian worship is possible only by gaining access to God through Jesus Christ may seem to you to be an important idea, but one that has little real application to our worship practice. On the contrary, I believe this should have profound impact on how we conduct our worship. This should at very least have implication for how we plan and order our worship services. Unfortunately due to many different factors, most worship services today are patterned more after services designed for unbelievers than for corporate worship, and while every service certainly should have an evangelistic appeal, in many ways we have lost the kind of drawing near to God through Christ that we find in our text. Instead, many church services week after week are evangelistic services or revival meetings instead of gatherings of God's people to draw near to God through Christ, and this has significantly affected the kind of music and other elements that are chosen.

In his book *Christ-centered Worship*, Bryan Chapel shows how almost every recorded worship order throughout the history of the church, from the early church to the medieval church to the Reformers to the Westminster Assembly to Baptists and Presbyterians in early America was structured in such a way that it beautifully pictured this kind of worship; it pictured a believer drawing near to God through access gained by faith in Jesus Christ. This is true, New Testament Christian worship!

They began the service with words of invitation from God's Word to draw near to him; this moved to a time of entering his presence with adoration, which led to a recognition of the people's unworthiness to draw near. Their response was to confess their sins to him and be assured of his pardon through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. They then praised him and heard from him as he spoke through his Word. This all climaxed with observance of the Lord's Table, the most beautiful picture of God welcoming his people to his fellowship table, something that was only possible because of the sacrifice of Christ. This is truly what it means to draw near to God in faith. No pizzazz, no emotional manipulation, no slick program; only drawing near to God by faith in Christ through the gospel.

The Means of Drawing Near in Worship

But our text does not only explain to us the basis for drawing near to God in worship, it also tells us the means of drawing near. The text commands us in verse 22 to "draw near with a

true heart in full assurance of faith.” The basis for drawing near to God is the sacrifice of Christ, but the means of drawing near is sincerity and faith in Christ.

“True” in the text literally means “real” or “sincere.” God does not want worshipers who draw near out of duty or habit. He desires those who will draw near with sincerity out of a deep longing for communion with him.

But not only are we to draw near with a sincere heart, we are also to draw near in full assurance of faith.

I believe that this issue—drawing near to God *through faith*—is at the heart of problems with worship today, and in order to explain what I mean, we need to consider further what it means to draw near to God in faith. Of course, we need look no further than the book of Hebrews for the clearest definition of what faith is. Faith, according to Hebrews 11:1, is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Hebrews 11:6 emphasizes the need for faith in coming to God in worship: “But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh [draws near] to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.” This is the essence of faith: belief in what we cannot see. You see, the God to whom we are drawing near in worship is one whom we cannot see. We cannot see him, we cannot touch him, we cannot feel him; we do not experience God with any of our physical senses, and so the only means to approach him in worship is with faith—with full assurance that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him; with full assurance he will keep his promise that if we draw near to him, he will draw near to us. One commentator notes that “there are realities for which we have no material evidence though they are not the less real for that. Faith enables us to know that they exist and, while we have no certainty apart from faith, faith does give us genuine certainty. . . . Faith is the basis . . . of all that the Christian life means, all that the Christian hopes for,”² including drawing near in worship.

Drawing near to God through Christ in faith means that we do not depend upon any physical evidence to give us assurance that we are truly worshiping. To worship in faith means that we do not define worship by a physical experience, feeling, or any other tangible proof. To worship in faith means that we follow biblical instructions for how to draw near to God and then simply trust that we are truly worshiping regardless of any physical factors. Worship is not tied to any physical location, ritual, ceremony, element, or

² Frank Leon Morris, “Hebrews,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Hebrews-Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 113, logosres:ebc12;ref=Bible.Heb12.18-24.

feeling. Worship is simply a spiritual drawing near to God through Jesus Christ, and in order to do this, we must have a full assurance of faith.

This has not always been so. Yes, worship has always been at its essence a heart response toward God, but in the Old dispensation, when the veil of separation between men and the presence of God was still intact, worship was tied to specific locations and rituals and other physical experiences. But once Christ came, once God in flesh drew near to his people, once Jesus Christ himself became the sacrifice and the veil was torn in two, worship became no longer tied to a physical expression. Christ said so himself in John 4 when he said, "The hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit [that is something inward and immaterial] and in truth."

Something similar is expressed in the final climax of the book of Hebrews at the end of chapter 12. The author says in verse 18,

For ye are not come [that's the same word translated "draw near" in our text] unto the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest, 19 And the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words;

The author uses Mt. Sinai as a representative example of the essence of Old Testament worship. Notice how the author describes Old Testament worship: it is physical — it can be touched; there are visual sensations — burning fire and darkness and gloom and storm; it has aural sensations — the sound of a trumpet blast and actual words spoken from God Himself. In other words, Old Testament worship was very sensory. This is what we naturally think of when we consider Old Testament worship. There was a beautiful tabernacle that you could see and then a Temple that shone brightly in Jerusalem. There was incense and burnt offerings — you could smell this worship. There was elaborate priestly adornments and gold and fine linens — you could see this worship. You actually had to lay your hand on the animal as it was being slaughtered, and then you'd be given meat from that animal to eat — you could feel this worship; you could taste this worship. It was all very physical and sensory. It created an experience of the senses that permeated the whole being. This was a frightening experience according to the text, but in some ways it perhaps made worship seem more "real."

I can resonate with this. In October of 2008 I spoke at a few churches in Florida. When I was in the Orlando area, a pastor took me to The Holy Land Experience. It was an amusement park kind of place, but it was all themed around Bible subjects. We saw a huge model of Israel, and walked through museum of Bible manuscripts, and one of the attractions was a life size replica of the tabernacle. We went into a building where they had this tabernacle built, and we got so see what it would have looked like, and then after they

taught us a bit about what would have occurred in tabernacle worship, they did a live recreation of what the Day of Atonement would have been like, complete with thunder and lightning and all kinds of sounds and visual effects. It was very exciting; I got goosebumps. It felt “religious.” I can understand how something like that would have been very attractive for these Hebrew Christians. Even the elements that weren't so spectacular — the lighting of the incense and the candles and all the rituals — were very stimulating. You could almost feel the presence of God in that kind of worship.

But the author says, now because of Christ, you have not drawn near to that mountain; rather, in verse 22, “But you have drawn near unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.” Worship is no longer tied to an earthly, physical location; now, because Jesus Christ is our great high priest, we can actually worship through him in the heavenly Temple itself—not yet physically, but spiritually.

This is why we need faith to draw near to God in worship. The text tells us that we can actually worship in heaven with Christ, but we can't see that and we can't smell that and we can't feel that. We must simply trust that it is so.

But the problem is we are physical beings and so naturally we want physical proof. We naturally want to be able to point to something, whether it is a location or a ceremony or a tradition or a ritual or a feeling, and say, “That's worship.” And so when we attempt to obey this command to draw near to God in worship and nothing physical happens, we begin to doubt. Have I really drawn near? Am I in the presence of God? Am I really worshipping?

And then we end up needing other things to give us confidence that we're really worshipping, whether it be a certain kind of stimulating music or an atmosphere that creates a certain aura, or a particular place; and if we don't have those things, then we don't “feel” like we're worshipping. But the author in chapter 10 commands us to draw near to God with a true heart in full assurance of *faith* in things we do not experience with the physical senses—that's the definition of faith.

This does not mean feelings or physical expressions are bad—we are physical beings and God has made us to feel and to express ourselves physically. And this does not mean that there will be no feelings that accompany worship—there very likely will be to some degree or another.

But we must be willing to make a distinction between the religious affections that are produced by the Holy Spirit of God as we draw near to God through Christ and physical feelings that are produced by physical stimuli. We must distinguish between the religious affections that arise from spiritual response to truth and the visceral passions that are

artificially created by clever oratory or energetic music or manipulative means. We must distinguish between the religious affections that are signs of true worship and physical passions that are, in the words of Jonathan Edwards, signs of nothing.

The New Testament authors made this kind of distinction, using Greek anatomical terms as metaphors. They called the spiritual affections the “chest” and the visceral passions the “belly.” For instance, Paul says in Philippians 3 that enemies of Christ worship their “belly,” their passions. In Colossians 3 Paul tells Christians to put on the “chest (“bowels” in the KJV),” affections — of mercy, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, and longsuffering. They did not believe that the passions were evil, but only unbelievers feed their passions and allow themselves to be controlled by them, while God-pleasing Christians nurture noble, spiritual, religious affections.

This distinction has been lost in our day, but it was maintained for thousands of years. In more recent times, Jonathan Edwards best articulated this distinction in *The Religious Affections*. Edwards defined affection as the “inclination of the will.” It is what moves us to do what we know is right. Edwards defined the affections as part of the mind, the immaterial part of man. On the other hand, he defined passion as the agent which immediately affected the “animal spirits,” the physical feelings and impulses we share with animals in terms of physical composition.

The affections and passions are frequently spoken of as the same, and yet in the more common use of speech, there is in some respect a difference. Affection is a word that in the ordinary signification, seems to be something more extensive than passion, being used for all vigorous lively actings of the will or inclination, but passion for those that are more sudden, and whose effects on the animal spirits are more violent, and the mind more over powered, and less in its own command.³

The difference between feelings that are merely chemical responses to a stimulus and affections that result in feelings is like the difference between laughing because you’ve been tickled and laughing because you get a joke. When I tickle my son and he has certain feelings that result in laughing, nothing is going on in his mind intellectually. He is merely responding to a stimulus. However, if I were to tell you a joke, you would have the same physical response of laughing, but it would be because you have intellectually comprehended the punch line.

Let me give you another example. One night when I was in college, a friend of mine snuck into my bunk bed while I was out of the room just before “lights out” in the residence hall. I

³Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2001), 26-27.

came into the room, turned off the lights, and got into my bed without ever noticing that he was there. After a few moments of silence, my friend shouted, “Boo!” and I dove out of the bed. I certainly experienced a feeling of exhilaration! But that feeling had nothing to do with an internal, spiritual response of my affections. It was merely a chemical response to an external stimulus.

Because of a lack of this kind of biblical distinction, throughout the history of the Church, Christians have always been tempted to follow after more physical, more sensory forms of worship. For instance, one of the factors that lead to the problems with Roman Catholic worship was that they began to introduce the physical accouterments of Old Testament worship into their services. They introduced an altar, and they established priests with beautiful robes and trappings. And they began to light candles and incense and have all sorts of ceremonies and rituals. And the sacrificial system became the Mass, and circumcision became infant baptism. Their problem was theological, but in essence it was the natural human desire for tangible, physical, sensory worship—worship you could touch, worship that created an experience of the senses.

Well, the Reformers came along and said, “No, worship is not supposed to be physical; worship is spiritual.” And so they got rid of all the pomp and rituals and candles and incense and priests and spectacle. Now, the reformation happened gradually. The Lutherans and Anglicans made the fewest changes; they kept a lot of the physical aspects. The Presbyterians and Puritans removed even more. And then when the Baptists developed as English Separatists, they removed even more. This was all in effort to get back to purely spiritual, non-physical worship like we find here in Hebrews.

During Jonathan Edwards' lifetime we find the beginning of another shift to define Christian worship as physical. The Awakening that occurred under his preaching was purely spiritual—he says that it was a surprising work of God. But when people saw what was happening, many people began to define what was going on by some of the physical excesses. So by the time of Charles Finney, many Christians defined Christian experience by external, physical, sensory kinds of experiences. Finney said that “there must be excitement sufficient to wake up the dormant moral powers.”⁴ But now, instead of using rituals and incense and ceremonies to create physical, sensory experiences, Finney and others began to use certain kinds of music, and emotionalistic preaching, and other exciting methods to create this kind of experience.

⁴Charles Finney, *Revival Lectures*, (reprint, Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, n.d.), 4.

The Charismatic Movement is another example of desiring physical experience in worship instead of simple, spiritual, immaterial worship. Charismatic theology teaches that external, physical signs accompany true, spiritual experiences. Charismatics inexorably link physical feelings and responses with spirituality. As John MacArthur notes, since charismatics believe that baptism of the Spirit is an experiential event occurring after conversion, they believe that

those who get this baptism also experience various phenomena, such as speaking in tongues, feelings of euphoria, visions, and emotional outbursts of various kinds. Those who have not experienced the baptism and its accompanying phenomena are not considered Spirit-filled; that is, they are immature, carnal, disobedient, and otherwise incomplete Christians.⁵

If worship is proven by physical feeling, then it is only natural to use means to create such experiences in worship, and this had a significant impact upon worship music. As Godfrey notes,

If there is a somewhat dramatic shift that took place in music leading to contemporary Christian music, that shift probably took place with the rise of Pentecostalism. The Pentecostal movement in its drive for religious experience and religious energy and religious excitement did indeed think in new ways about music and sought to take the revivalist tradition of hymnody and make it even more exciting, even more engaging.⁶

My point is this: Over and over again throughout the history of the Church we see the same kind of temptation—a desire for worship that we can feel, worship we can experience, worship we can touch. This is only natural—we are physical beings, and we can't see God, so we really want to experience Him physically.

And I really believe that this is the same kind of problem going on in many churches today. When people worship, they really want to *feel* something. They want to experience something. They want to “encounter” God. We hear discussions of how worship needs to be “passionate” or “fervent” or “engaging.” They want something physical. And so instead of rituals or incense or ceremonies, they use pop music and drama and humor and video and lights and smoke to create a physical experience of the senses. This really is the nature of what pop music is—it is music designed to create visceral experiences. I think we need to be careful not to define pop music as necessarily sexual—much of it is, especially today—

⁵John MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1993), 29-30.

⁶Godfrey, “Psalms,” 104.

but what is at the essence of pop music are elements that artificially stimulate visceral, physical responses, and so that kind of music is perfect for those who think that worship necessities a physical experience.

And we need to be careful not to just point “out there” to “those charismatics” or “those evangelicals.” Many Fundamental Baptists have similar problems. Many of “us” want an experience in worship. But instead of using pop music and drama, we might use an old song that we have a sentimental attachment to, or we might really depend on a big choir and orchestra that will create an exciting atmosphere. I mean, have you ever thought in your heart, “I just don't feel like I'm worshipping,” or “I need that song or that ceremony or that element in a service in order to feel like I'm really worshipping”? Do you ever feel that way? I have.

Folks, when we desire some kind of physical experience in worship, we are desiring Law, not Grace. Law is physical; grace is spiritual. We are desiring the kind of worship that existed before people could actually approach God themselves through Christ by faith.

Even some evangelical authors have begun to recognize this. For example, Don Hustad notes the reality that contemporary worshipers “welcome the new, lively, repetitious, and sometimes ‘warm, fuzzy’ expressions, saying that their music meets their emotional needs.”⁷ Harold Best suggests that many Christians today believe that

music and the arts have a kind of power in themselves that can be falsely related to or equated with the Spirit's power, so much so that the presence of God seems all the more guaranteed and the worshiper sees this union of artistic power and Spirit power as normal, even anticipated.⁸

The problem today is what James Torrance calls a “preoccupation with individual religious experience, subjectively interpreted.”⁹ Peter Masters warns against this problem in contemporary worship:

Ecstatic worship is completely different [than true, biblical worship]. This aims at stirring the emotions to produce a simulated, exalted emotional state. Ecstatic worship takes place when the object of the exercise is to achieve a warm, happy feeling, perhaps

⁷Don Hustad, *True Worship: Reclaiming the Wonder and Majesty* (Wheaton, IL: Hope, 1998), 43.

⁸Harold Best, *Unceasing Worship: Biblical Perspectives on Worship and the Arts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 119.

⁹Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace*, 28.

great excitement, and even a sense of God's presence *through the earthly, physical aspects of worship* such as music and movement. Among charismatics this is eagerly pursued, the programme [sic] being carefully engineered to bring worshippers to a high emotional pitch, and often to a mildly hypnotic state. In non-charismatic circles the objective is a little more modest, but essentially the same—to make an emotional impact. Worship leaders want to bypass rationality and get the feelings going by other means. They want to stir up “sensations” in order to produce euphoria.¹⁰

The point is this: If we cannot draw near to God in worship simply with nothing more than faith in Jesus Christ, then perhaps we are not worshipping at all. Certainly when we worship there will be physical feelings to one degree or another—we are physical beings and there is nothing wrong with feeling. But feelings do not define the essence of worship; feelings are not the aim and goal of worship; and therefore we must not define worship by some kind of physical passion or feeling, and we must be wary of elements in our worship that were created simply for the purpose of stimulating the visceral passions.

As Christians, we worship by faith and not by sight. We worship by faith and not by feeling.

Conclusion

True Christian worship takes place when believers draw near to God through Christ by faith. This means that we are not looking for simply an effect; we are looking for true communion with God through a deeper knowledge of him as revealed in his Word. This means that even good biblical truth mixed with music that simply creates a physical experience of the passions is a failure to worship by faith. It may be good biblical truth, but that truth is cheapened when it is set to manipulative music.

Let's make it our ambition to structure our services so that the service itself proclaims that we are worshipping through Christ. And let's conduct our services, from the preaching to the Scripture reading to the music, in such a way that we grow to know God more deeply rather than simply creating a passionate atmosphere.

¹⁰ Peter Masters, *Worship in the Melting Pot* (Wakeman Trust, 2002), 23-24.