

Casual Worship?

In these days of *dress down, informal & casual*, can the worship of God ever be "*casual worship*"?

Examining Biblical features of corporate worship
in Nehemiah Chapters 8 & 9



"Worship is adoration, reverence & praise offered to God as the blessed and Holy Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) who is worthy of all honour & glory. It is offered in response to the glorious excellence of the very being & acts of God - what He is & what He does. The highest activity of which man is capable is ascribing to God the glory due to His name... The Christian worshipper is dependent on the mediation of the Lord Jesus Christ & the aid of the Holy Spirit so that God may be worshiped in Spirit & in Truth..."

Quoted from Part 1 of "A Guide for Church Fellowship"

Introduction

These chapters in Nehemiah **do not tell us everything** about worship. The picture on the front of these notes represents worship as it was in 444BC when almost 50,000 people met to worship God following the completion of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem (Neh 6v15 + 8v1). Our church worship today is not to follow the detailed practice of that time but these events help in our understanding of some of the **key principles** of true worship. These principles are displayed progressively through the scriptures & culminate in the worship of heaven (which we see in the Book of Revelation).

Worship begins with our state of heart - not our outward appearance! (1 Sam 16v7). Our worship can never be right if our heart is wrong! We might "be there" but if our hearts are far from God, we cannot truly worship Him. (Isaiah 29v13). **Preparation of heart is key.** In Neh 8v6 Ezra begins by "blessing" the Lord God - the same word is used in Psalm 95v6 where it is translated as "kneel". Worship begins with God exalting / man humbling prayer.

Our Puritan forefathers knew the reality of such "heart preparation":

"O Lord, no day of my life has passed that has not proved me guilty in your sight. Prayers have been uttered from a prayerless heart; praise has often been a praiseless sound; my best services are filthy rags. Blessed Jesus, let me find a hiding place in your appeasing wounds. Though my sins rise to heaven, your merits soar above them; though unrighteousness weighs me down to hell, your righteousness exalts me to your throne. All things in me call for my rejection; all things in you plead my acceptance. I appeal from the throne of perfect justice to thy throne of boundless grace, grant me to hear your voice assuring me that by your stripes I am healed..."

Taken from "The Valley of Vision" published by Banner of Truth

Six Key Principles for Corporate Worship

1. UNITY 8v1

Worship is to be part of our private life, family life & at other times but is **essential** as a corporate act of the people of God. The "*together as one man*" aspect of worship in the OT was focussed on the Temple at Jerusalem. In heaven it will be a gathering of the complete church around the Throne but in the days in which we live it is the activity of every "local church" of Christian believers. It is the privilege & duty of every member to be present - there are great promises to those who gather (Matt 18v20) and strong counsel for those who refuse to meet in unity with the rest of the body (Heb 10v23-25). In Psalm 95, which is a call to worship, there is constant reference to "*us*" & "*we*" - we are not to *harden our hearts* (Ps 95v8) by staying away from corporate worship.

2. TRUTH 8v1/5/8

In John 4v21-24 Jesus told the woman at the well that a key element of worship from that time would be "*truth*" - but it has always been so! Ezra opens the '*Book of the Law*' - we can open the completed Canon of Scripture! The Truth is to be our guide in all things - including **how** we worship! Worship in chaps 8&9 revolves around what the Book tells the people about God (His character & His acts) and about them, in relation to God. Our worship is to be directed in the same way. The "*Regulative Principle*" of worship is all about the Bible alone deciding the content & the practice in our worship.

Our hymns, prayers, readings, & sermons (literally or in their expressions & application) are to be full of "truth" - full of Scripture. Good ideas, interesting features, musical interludes, crafts and a whole host of things that are popular additions to services in some churches today do not have a place in Biblical corporate worship.

3. REVERENCE 8v6

This is wonderfully displayed throughout but clearly so in 8v5/6. "*Reverence is the realisation of the greatness & glory of God in contrast to the nature of the smallness and sin of me!*" It can be seen clearly in the reaction of Isaiah (ch6), Ezekiel (ch1), Daniel (ch8), John (Rev 1). It is something that all men should realise (Habb 2v20) but sin has blinded our minds to it. Spurgeon rightly said that "*Communion with God bows a man to the dust*". We note, however, that in all the examples listed above, God in His great grace lifts up the believer from the dust and has dealings with him. *It is in worship, we are lifted up and blest as we worship in reverence & humility.*

Reverence also brings order and decorum (1 Cor 14v33/40). There is nothing casual or careless in these chapters. There is coherence, direction and focus resulting from godly leadership. In contrast, "casual worship" is often marked by erratic content, unconnected hymns, readings & other items. The people were "attentive" (8v3) & had a great desire to listen & to learn (8v8).

4. UNDERSTANDING 8v8

Worship involves understanding **who** we are worshipping - *The Lord, the great God* (8 v2/3/6/7/8). It requires understanding of **what** is being read and **how** it applies to our lives. Worship is not only a matter of the heart but of the mind. "*Truth reaches the heart through the mind*". Hearing the truth of God read and applied is worship just as much as singing & praying!

We take our practice of the communication of God's Word today from the NT. (Passages such as Mark 6v15 / 1 Cor1 v18-25 / 2 Tim4v1 & many others). Preaching is God's primary method that we are to use. However the principle of 'understanding' applies to **every** part of our services of worship - we should be able to understand it all. ("*The test for a Christian hymn, is not its age or its style but its ability to focus the understanding on the Word of truth & evoke affection in the heart*" Gary Williams). This requires care & preparation on the part of the preacher. There is no room for a casual approach to any part of the service.

5. PRAISE 9v5ff

Chap 9 shows us clearly two dominant features:

- a. **Confession** (of sin before God) Eg v2
- b. **Adoration** (of the person, attributes & acts of God) Eg v3/5

Such emphasis ensures that we do not appear 'too big' & God does not appear 'too small'. "*Worship is not about me & my needs, it is about God & His glory*" P Mallard.

As we read through chap 9 we see a God who is **mighty in power, majestic in holiness & magnificent in mercy**. Our worship in every part must be full of these things. Never should our worship be a random collection of songs and other items that we simply 'like' or are currently popular. Worship is a glorious circle of God speaking to us (reading & preaching the Word) & of us speaking to God (prayer and singing). It is to be led with care and focussed on the things that please God, not us! " *Worship is an engagement with God on the terms that He proposes, which He makes possible & results in His glory.*" John Piper

We must always remember that our entrance before God in all our worship is through Christ who is the only Mediator between man & God. (1 Tim 2v5). The principle of praise is worked out in the NT (& in the Church today) through Christ centered content in every part of our worship.

6. APPLICATION 8v10

Worship does not end at the end of the service! It brings application to every part of our lives - life is to be to the praise & worship of God! The effects of worship in these chapters reflect application that is required today:

Emotion - weeping & joy. Never cold or without true feeling (8v9/10).

Action - obedience and commitment (8v12-18 / 9v38)

You can easily walk away from casual worship back into the world but true worship always calls for a serious & lasting response!

David Fielding - Pastor Castlefields Church Derby