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# Worship in Spirit and in Truth

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*Neil Richards*

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*'They that worship God must worship him in spirit and in truth'* John 4:24

The whole subject of worship is something of a minefield at the present time. Yet that must not be allowed to obscure the glory and preciousness of the subject. For many of us it has been a part of the richness of growing older in the faith to have found increasing joy and refreshment in lifting our eyes from ourselves and this vain world to God and his glory. That has been the experience of Christians through the ages.

## What is worship?

In the broadest sense worship is that whole revenue of glory which we owe to God as our Maker and Redeemer. But it is its more restricted sense that concerns us here, that is, our communion with God in praise and adoration; in prayer and meditation; and in the whole range of responses which we owe to God when we approach him in private or in public. Worship is an eminent fruit of our reconciliation to God by the blood of Christ,<sup>1</sup> and a high privilege revealed to us and required of us in the gospel.

Controversy has often surrounded the matter of Christian worship. The form that church worship should take was a matter of great concern for the Reformers and the Puritans, and has continued to be a live issue in the Anglican church even up to the present day. However, the non-conformist churches settled to the simple form of service with hymns and prayer, Scripture reading and sermon; a form which was to remain almost universal amongst them for 300 years. Today, all that has changed, and changed radically. New forms of worship have come in and with this has come a new approach to worship. We live in **an era of change**, to which there have been two opposite and extreme reactions, both of which are dangerous:

- a) A reaction against all that is old and traditional ('Trad is bad') and an assumption that all these changes are the leading of the Holy Spirit. The old wine-skins are breaking and God's people are being 'released' to worship him. Anyone who expresses reservations or misgivings is grieving the Spirit.
- b) The opposite reaction has been suspicion of everything new and a tenacious clinging to all that is old. A fear of change.

Neither of these attitudes is commendable. Those who are the heirs of the Reformers ought to be open to God giving further light from his Word and to the Spirit leading us forward and enabling us to break new ground. Yet both Scripture and history would make us cautious. Our danger is that we jump into the controversy about *forms* of worship without first thinking through our basic *approach*.

## Principles to Guide Our Approach

### 1 Only Christians can worship God acceptably

Our Lord reminds us of this in John 4:22, 'You worship what you do not know; for

salvation is from the Jews.' There can be no true worship without salvation. We must come to God through the Mediator Jesus Christ. His blood alone can cleanse us. Only the regenerate can worship God acceptably. It follows from this that where the gospel is not preached or believed there is no true worship. The outward forms may be there, but if the gospel is not, then there is no acceptable worship. No matter what is done to brighten up the service, it is dead service. Only the Holy Spirit can enable men to worship God acceptably. To put this truth positively, the gospel produces true worshippers as nothing else in the world can. Worship with adoring praise is the first response of a redeemed heart.

## 2 The coming of Christ transformed worship

'Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth' (John 4:23). A new era was breaking upon the church. The whole spirit and form of worship was wonderfully enriched and transformed by the coming of the Messiah and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. By these two events the church took a great leap forward and in a moment the whole life and worship of God's people for thousands of years was transcended and beggared. John Owen has two sermons on Ephesians 2:18, 'For through Him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit', in which he shows the greater glory of New Covenant worship. It would be difficult to find anything remotely comparable in the recent spate of books on worship. He speaks of Christ taking worshippers by the hand and leading them into the presence of God, and saying to the Father, 'Behold I and the children which God has given Me' (Heb 2:13).<sup>2</sup> The glory of Christian worship lies here, in the access we have into the immediate presence of God in heaven itself. Old Testament saints had access to God but the ground of that access and its full glory was not revealed to them, they saw it only in type and shadow, nor could that be otherwise until Christ should come and by his death rend the veil.

Only as we appreciate these things shall we be kept from the persistent error of hankering after elements of Old Testament worship. **The New Testament, not the Old, must regulate our worship.** As J C Ryle puts it in an Anglican context, 'To bring into the Christian church holy places, sanctuaries, altars, sacrifices, priests, gorgeous vestments, and the like, is to dig up what has been long buried; and to turn to candles from the light of the noon-day sun.' The present tendency is to go back into the Old Testament and take from it whatever suits us, whether it is dancing or the place of music in worship. Our use of the Old Testament must be controlled by an appreciation of the great changes brought about by the coming of Christ and the inauguration of the New Covenant.

## 3 True worship is in spirit and in truth

'God is a spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth' (John 4:24). I take 'in spirit' here, not as a direct reference to the Holy Spirit, but rather to **the spirituality of worship**; to its inward reality and power. True worship is heart work. The Father looks for the love and devotion of redeemed hearts, and has no pleasure in the mere outward forms of worship. 'The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, you will not despise' (Psalm 51:17). God has always required the worship of men's hearts, in every age and

dispensation; but under the Old Covenant there was a strong external element to the worship. It was given by God as a help and a scaffold until the Messiah would come, the Spirit be poured out and the church come of age. Hence under the New Covenant there is a richer spirituality and a greater glory. But the glory and beauty of gospel worship do not lie in external things. Christians themselves are the temple and dwelling place of God, who manifests his presence in them as they seek him by faith and long for him with loving hearts. The idea that robes and rituals, or a worship band and dance group in our services, are enriching to the worship is tragically misguided. 'What poor low thoughts have men of God and his ways who think there lies an acceptable glory and beauty in a little paint and varnish', wrote Owen. Here, I suspect, lies the greatest weakness of the new approach to worship that has swept through the church in the last few decades — failure to appreciate the spiritual nature and glory of Christian worship. Some of the changes that have come are not spiritual, but cultural. The culture of the pop concert has invaded the church's worship. 'The climate of change has made room for much more than new music. Dance, movement, drama, banners and flags, mime, children's orchestras, adult orchestras, worship bands and public praise processions...'<sup>3</sup> Whatever happened to spiritual worship?

'If', as Dr Packer says, 'simplicity is the safeguard of inwardness, then Scripture is the fountain-head of truth.'<sup>4</sup> **Worship is the response of the heart to the God who has revealed himself to us in Christ.** 'In worship we must seek to reflect back to God by our response the knowledge that we have received of him through his revelation.' For this reason the reading and preaching of God's Word is central to Christian worship. We are to listen with awe (for God, not the preacher), with attention and expectancy. Congregations are not passive during the sermon, as is often suggested, but have a spiritual work to do in hearing, digesting and applying the Word. It is a high part of our worship that our hearts are responding to all that God is saying to us — responding in joy or in sorrow, and with all those holy resolves which God's Word and Spirit call forth from our hearts. Any tendency to reduce the place given to the preaching of the Word in worship must be detrimental to worship. But all this does rather beg the question as to *what kind of preaching* is most conducive to worship. Dull, lifeless, unattractive preaching stifles worship; what is needed is lively preaching which is full of faith and conviction and fire, so that congregations are stirred and animated to worship and to adoring praise. I offer no justification for failure here, only contrition and repentance.

#### **4 Christian worship is God-centred**

Our whole desire must be to offer to him acceptable praise and worship, and to have our hearts full of his inexpressible glory and ineffable love. The question which must concern us is not 'What is pleasing to us?', but '*What is pleasing to God?*' Nor must we easily assume that what does please us will please him, lest the Lord should say to us what he said to Israel through the prophet Malachi, ' "Oh that you would shut the Temple doors so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you", says the Lord Almighty' (Malachi 1:10). A spirit of hedonism has crept into our worship in which the chief concern seems to be the pleasure we have in it. True worship is pre-occupied with God. When our worship

becomes dull and dry the remedy is not to brighten it up with a 'worship band' etc, but to repent of our unbelief and dullness of heart and to seek more of God's presence and glory.

## **5 Christian worship is Spirit-empowered**

Spiritual worship can only be performed by the Holy Spirit's gracious help. Paul could say, 'For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God...' (Phil 3:3). Here is a distinguishing characteristic of Christian worship — it is guided and directed and permeated by the Spirit of God. It is surely significant that the exhortation to be 'filled with the Spirit' is followed by instructions concerning worship: 'Speak to one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your hearts to the Lord' (Eph 5:18-20). The Spirit aids our worship in so many different ways; as the Spirit of Adoption he enables us to approach God as his dear children; as the Spirit of Prayer he helps us to pray; and as the Spirit of Joy he fills our hearts with gladness and praise to our God. His activity is explicitly connected with prayer in Ephesians 6:8: 'Pray in the Spirit' and in Romans 8:26, 'We do not know what we ought to pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express'. The Spirit's intercession is conducted through us and is expressed at times in inarticulate cries. Without the Spirit's aid, prayer is a barren, lifeless affair. But when he is present and at work then the situation is transformed. Prayer becomes a mighty force, accomplishing God's glorious purposes. What is true of our dependence upon him in prayer is true of the whole of our worship. He concentrates our hearts and minds upon God and His glory. He 'takes of the things of Christ and shows them to us' (John 15:26; 16:14). 'The Holy Spirit's distinctive New Covenant role, then, is to fulfil what we may call a flood-lighting ministry... shining upon Christ.'<sup>5</sup> What are we to look to the Spirit to do for us when we gather together, a fellowship of blood-bought sons, to worship God? Not to make much of himself, but to make much of Jesus Christ. To enable us to appreciate more and more the matchless love and glory of our Saviour, so that our hearts are drawn out to him in adoring praise.

## **Principles to Guide our Worship**

We have already made the point that the New Testament is our primary guide, not the Old. For example, no one would wish to deny that on occasions dancing of a certain kind took place in the Old Testament, though such references are few. But when we turn to the New Testament there is no hint that dancing had any place in worship. The dancing we read of in the New Testament is that of Luke 7:32, and of Salome, and in this case the result was the death of John the Baptist. Similarly there is no hint that drama and mime formed any part of the worship of God, either in the Old Testament or the New. Though the Greeks were very fond of drama and would have found it appealing to their cultural tastes, no concession whatever is made to them. But we cannot touch on every modern innovation here, nor is it necessary to do so, if **the regulative authority of the New Testament** is accepted. New Testament worship is Scriptural, spiritual and simple. Its main elements are the reading and preaching of God's Word, prayer, and the singing of God's praise, and the two ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Precisely *how* these are to be fitted together in our services we are not told, and so we have freedom here

to order our meetings in the light of *general principles* and what seems wise and helpful to us. Such principles would include:

## 1 Edification

When Paul is dealing with the rather chaotic services of the Corinthian church (1 Cor 14) he appeals for two things, edification and order. 'He who speaks in tongues edifies himself, but he who preaches edifies the church' (v 4). That is Paul's great concern, that in all their services and worship 'the church may be edified' (v 5). 'What shall we then say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.' So we must ask ourselves, 'Is our worship producing strong, mature, all-round Christians?' That is a severe test for us all.

## 2 Order

'Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way' (v 40). Order is quite compatible with freedom and even with a measure of informality, but it does imply control and direction.

The church must believe in these twin principles and the pastoral over-sight must apply them. It is not sufficient that a man feels himself divinely prompted to contribute publicly in the services — it must be done in accord with order and edification.

## Congregational Involvement

One of the great changes that took place at the Reformation was the restoration of **congregational worship**. In the pre-Reformation church the worship was conducted at the front of the church around the altar, and members of the congregation were largely spectators. The liberating, restoring power of the Word changed all that. Some of the English Reformers even brought the table down into the body of the church, near to the people. Corporate worship involves **the whole church** during the whole of the service. When one man is praying all the congregation are praying with him, he is leading in prayer. Even if ten men pray in the course of the service, the whole congregation is engaged in prayer on each occasion. When the Word is preached, the whole church is actively involved, as we have seen. Our tradition in worship, however, allows very few to make any public contribution, perhaps just one man. The Charismatic Movement has rightly challenged that, and *it would be a shame if our response consisted only of digging our heels in*.

Perhaps it needs also to be added that true worship involves not only the whole church, but **the whole man**. We are to worship and honour God with every part of our being; with heart and soul and strength; with 'all our ransomed powers'. The mind is engaged, and the understanding — true worship is intellectually satisfying. The emotions are stirred — how can we come before such a Being as our God and not be profoundly affected in our feelings? For many of us our trouble is not too much emotion but too little. We are shallow. We have over-reacted against a wrong emotionalism, and become cold and unmoved. Even our appreciation of beauty is

involved; not of the building or music, of course they should not jar or distract, but of Christ and the gospel. All this worship is expressed through the vehicle of our bodies. We stand, or sit, to sing God's praise; we kneel, or bow our heads, in prayer; with our ears we hear others praise, exhort, encourage and teach; and with our eyes we see the congregation of God's people at praise and God's servant proclaim his Word.

## **Finding words of praise**

What shall we sing? Shall we stay with our traditional hymns or shall we go over to modern worship songs? Is it simply a matter of taste? Of course worship songs are part of a **whole new pattern of worship** that is more relaxed, leisurely and informal; to the accompaniment of a 'worship band' rather than an organ, and under the control of the 'worship leader'. The whole style is more modern and culturally acceptable. What is sung is generally very simple, brief and repetitive — full of expressions of praise and joy. There is no doubt that a large number of Christians have found this refreshing and uplifting. However, without being unduly dismissive, we do need to evaluate these changes. Every movement in the church has tended to produce its own songs of praise. The 18th century revival is perhaps the best example, think of the hymns of Watts and Wesley, and William Williams in Wales. In the 19th century the Moody and Sankey era produced 'Sacred Songs and Solos'. Something of the character of each movement, its strengths and weaknesses, is reflected in its praise. So it is with the Charismatic Movement — its theological weakness; its neglect of self-examination and godly sorrow over sin, and its subsequently superficial view of Christian joy; and positively its openness and childlike confidence towards God, these are all reflected in its songs of praise.

But how should we formulate our praise? **Is there guidance in Scripture?** Even if we agree that under the New Covenant we are not bound to sing *only* the Psalms in God's praise and that the coming of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit call for a new song of praise, yet still the Psalms may provide a **pattern for our praise**. Several features are significant for us:

- 1 In the Psalms God is worshipped for all the wondrous facets of his being and character and all his works and ways. He is praised as the God of Creation, Providence and Redemption. Our praise must reflect that wideness.
- 2 The Psalms cover the whole range of the believer's experience. In Psalm 51 he is deeply penitent; in Psalm 43 he is weary and downcast; in Psalm 23 he is trusting even in the face of death; in Psalm 32 he is humbled and pardoned; and so we could go on. These riches of experience need to be reflected in our praise.
- 3 There is within each Psalm a development of thought. Very often we are able to see how the Psalmist moves from defeat and despair to faith and triumph. This progression is satisfying and often emotionally powerful. We are carried along. We are uplifted. Our best hymns and songs have always possessed these features.
- 4 The Psalms are theologically rich. The great Old Testament themes and truths are there. The nature and character of God are set forth; the doctrine of man and of sin; God's covenant purposes towards his people; his redeeming mercy and grace; the Messianic hope and the judgement to come. The Psalms teach,

but do the modern worship songs?

- 5 There is repetition in the Psalms but it is never tedious or wearying. There is a place for repetition in our hymns, but it takes skill to introduce it wisely and helpfully.
- 6 Some of the Psalms are themselves still highly suitable and appropriate to Christian praise, so let us by all means sing them. It seems a pity that the present interest in singing verses of Scripture in song form has not extended to singing several verses of a Psalm in metrical form.

One response to all this may be to say that if we set such standards for ourselves few Christians will be able to write hymns and songs. Precisely so. The Lord gives *gifts* to his children, and whereas most of us can write doggerel, few of us can compose fine hymns — or even helpful short songs. We have a heritage of rich hymns which we ought to value and use, and to which some men in our days are able to contribute. Does that mean there is no place for modern worship songs? No, it does not. The best of them have a place and make a valuable contribution. It can be helpful, at times, to sing a short, simple, but well written, song of joyous praise to our God and Saviour. Indeed, the church has always recognised that — think of the great doxologies, brief but wonderfully rich and powerful.

In conclusion I return to **the greater glory of worship under the New Covenant**. One of the most disturbing things about current literature on Charismatic worship is its Old Testament orientation. Great occasions of celebration and praise, such as when David brought the Ark up to Jerusalem (1 Chr 15) are viewed as giving a pattern for our worship today. So just as David appointed singers and musicians to lead the worship, so we are urged to appoint worship leaders, orchestras and singers, and train and rehearse them for our services. But that use of the Old Testament must be challenged. Certainly these passages rebuke our dullness of heart and lack of a spirit of joyous praise, but they do not provide the *form* of Christian worship. The richness and glory of New Covenant worship lies in its spirituality — in the Spirit's presence and our access to God through Christ.

We are none of us where we ought to be in this matter of worship. But the way forward lies in a revival of faith and love, and a new sense of God's presence amongst us.

## References

- 1 John Owen, WORKS, vol 9, p 55
- 2 John Owen, WORKS, vol 9, p 58
- 3 TEN WORSHIPPING CHURCHES, from the Introduction by Graham Kendrick, p 12
- 4 PURITAN PAPERS 1963. J I Packer, 'The Puritan Approach to Worship', p 7
- 5 KEEP IN STEP WITH THE SPIRIT, J I Packer, p 65

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## **Professor G N M Collins**

Sadness and gratitude were strangely mingled at the news of the homecall of the Revd Dr George N M Collins, Edinburgh, on the 20th October 1989. There was sadness because his going seems to spell the end of an era. There was gratitude because his lifetime of work in the service of Christ has been rounded out in such full measure of years and grace.

Born in London in 1901, George Norman MacLeod Collins was brought up from the age of eight by his maternal grandmother in the Highland village of Elphin in Sutherlandshire. This placed him in the ambit of a godly home and a uniquely discerning circle of spiritually exercised believers who always related the importance of sound doctrine to practical Christianity and godly living.

He was ordained to his first pastorate in the Free Gaelic Congregation, Greenock, in 1928 and his sixty-one years of ministry were to prove as exceptional in their influence as their length. It was in the pulpit of Free St Columba's, Edinburgh — made famous by the redoubtable Thomas Guthrie — that from 1938 his reputation was secured as a gifted, lucid, preacher and from it he exercised an expository biblical ministry for twenty-five years. His influence as a minister was enhanced beyond the frontiers of his own denomination through his work as Editor of the Church's magazines, the INSTRUCTOR from 1937 to 1958, and the MONTHLY RECORD, from 1958 to 1973.

From 1963 until 1983 Dr Collins served with distinction as Professor of Church History at the Free Church College. His appreciation of his subject prompted him to write for the youth of today and his best known book, THE HERITAGE OF OUR FATHERS (1976) is particularly valuable in its discerning account of the events which produced the present Free Church of Scotland. His knowledge of 17th century Scotland was probably unrivalled in the present day and so historians of note in Britain and from overseas frequently sought his counsel and advice.

He gave valuable service to many worthy causes outside his own denomination. Not least of these was his part in the beginnings of the British Evangelical Council. He and one of his fellow Free Church ministers, the Revd Murdoch MacRae, met with three representatives of the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches and instituted the Council in 1952. Dr Collins was to serve the Executive of the BEC for many years, retaining an interest in its work until the end. His long-standing friendship with Dr Martyn Lloyd Jones — whom he frequently brought to Scotland — meant that the pulpit of Westminster Chapel was one from which he preached at regular intervals.

Having become a father figure on the British church scene he will be missed by many. It is our prayer that God would now touch many of Britain's sons with the same constraining love that motivated our brother and that all of us who came under his influence might emulate the simplicity and humility which adorned his profession and commended his faith.

*Professor J D MacMillan*

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