

The extensive commodification of worship in America has marginalized far too many churches as orienting centers for how to live a more effective life for God. What the secular culture has done to love by romanticizing it into fornication and the practice of adultery, the ecclesial culture has done by promoting ways of worship calculated to appeal to consumer tastes in which love is redefined as “Oh, I like that,” or “I have to have that,” or negatively as “I don’t get anything out of that.”

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Some think that it is a scandal that love and worship, the two most important things that Christians do, are done so badly by so many of us. No wonder the church has such a murky reputation among its cultured despisers. If banks were as inept at handling money as the church is in handling love and worship, they would be out of business within a week. If hospitals were as amateurish in caring for the sick, treating emergencies, administering anesthesia, and overseeing childbirth as the church is in love and worship, they would be bankrupt in short order. If professional baseball teams made as many errors in fielding, batting, and pitching as the church does in love and worship, they would be playing to empty stadiums.

But there is another way to look at this. It is true that love and worship demand our very best, our created and redeemed best. But this created and redeemed best cannot be achieved by determined individual effort. There is God in all the operations of the Trinity; accordingly there is church in all the particularities of its members. Every detail involved in love and worship requires personal relationship with others, with family and friends and neighbors — responding, receiving, giving — and with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — also responding, receiving, giving. No part of love and worship can be isolated, removed from the complexities of relationships to a laboratory, studied, mastered, and then, having been clarified with all the contaminants and ambiguities removed, returned to daily life and put to use. I am never in charge of love and worship, but always participating in many-dimensional relationships.

It takes a lot of growing up to become even moderately at home in these practices. To achieve anything like competence is out of the question. They are not practices in which we can specialize and by training and discipline become experts, some of us maybe even achieving world-class status. There are no Olympic events in love and worship.

There is also this. The church has men, women, and children in its community at all levels of immaturity and maturity. It is as if a symphony orchestra had beginners and masters playing alongside one another; the first violinist seated next to a ten-year-old who hasn’t yet learned how to tune her strings. Church is not a performing arts center for love and worship.

And then there is this. Every detail in the practice of love and worship is susceptible to perversion and sacrilege. There are no flu shots against sin. There are many more ways to sin against love than by going to bed with Bathsheba. There are many more ways to sin against worship than by dancing around a golden calf.

In writing all this I have no intention of putting an imprimatur on mediocrity or shrugging my shoulders at sloppiness. All I am insisting on is that if we want to embrace a truly Spirit-formed church, we must embrace the messy conditions — the complexity of relationships both interpersonal and Trinitarian, the many levels of maturity and immaturity, the ever-present vulnerability of everyone to sin — out of which it is being formed. These are the conditions in which the Holy Spirit is working. If we are serious about church and want to participate in what the Holy Spirit is doing, these are the conditions. Get used to it.

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The usual place where we are called to worship is in a church sanctuary — a place consecrated for the worship of God and designed to immerse us in the world of God’s revelation by what we hear and what we see in word and sacrament. The usual time set aside is Sunday, the day that fuses the Hebrew seventh creation day of Sabbath rest with the Christian first day of Jesus’ resurrection. The usual frequency is week by week.

Christian worship orients us in a comprehensive reality given form by God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. It is an all-inclusive reality comprising all that has taken place in the previous six days and all that will take place in the next six days. All that we see and all that we don't see. All the operations of God that make us who we are, that day by day form an eternal salvation life in us, that place our workweek in the larger context of God's workweek, that make it possible for us to participate in a life of holiness and love at the same time that we are doing the laundry, repairing machines, selling groceries, teaching quantum physics, and planting wheat. It is a big order. No congregation does it perfectly. Some don't even try. But for all the failures and semi-failures, I am convinced that anyone who pays attention and discerns the work of the Spirit in the congregation — dare I say *any* congregation? — will get at least a glimpse of worship that gives witness to “the praise of his glory.”

The call to worship wakes us up to what is going on in and all around us: “Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you!” The world is alive with God: Look! Listen! Lift up your hearts! Come and eat!

In acts of worship, the Holy Spirit internalizes himself in us and makes us “insider” participants in the Father's work of creation and the Son's work of salvation. In the act of worship, we deliberately remove ourselves from our workaday world of assignments and responsibilities and relationships, we assume a posture of not-doing — sitting, kneeling, folding our hands in prayer, lifting our arms in praise — and we invite the Holy Spirit to form in us the life of love and holiness that makes us one with the Father and the Son, which, we are assured, the Spirit is more than ready to do. We don't have to do anything, at least not in the way we are accustomed to doing things. But we do need to be present, attentive, receptive. We want to be in on what God is doing. We want God to be in on what we are doing: “Come, Holy Spirit.” We want to walk out of the place of worship with a lighter step — still present, attentive, receptive — with a blessing on our heads and obedience in our steps.

Christian maturity is not a matter of doing more for God; it is

God doing more in and through us. Immaturity is noisy with anxiety-fueled self-importance. Maturity is quietly content to pursue a life of obedient humility. Christian worship is an intentional act of redressing the proportions, the priorities — from me working for God to God working in me, which is the Holy Spirit.

Evelyn Underhill was a deeply learned and deeply devout English layperson who, as so many of us do, had difficulty with church. But after long pondering and reflection she wrote this: “The Church is ‘essential service’ like the Post Office but there will always be some narrow, irritating and inadequate officials behind the counter and you will always be tempted to exasperation by them.” But she eventually got over the “irritating” officials and arrived at this: “I feel the regular, steady, docile practice of corporate worship is of the utmost importance for building-up of your spiritual life. . . . no amount of solitary reading or prayer makes up for humble immersion in the life and worship of the church.”<sup>5</sup>

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Paul uses a pair of strikingly contrasting imperatives to focus our attention on just what is and what is not involved in worship: “Do not get drunk with wine . . . but be filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18). Wine and Spirit are set in contrast as ways of worship. In the Asiatic world of Ephesus one of the most prevalent forms of worship centered around the god Dionysius. Dionysiac worship employed dances and exciting music to produce ecstatic rapture. Dionysius was the god of wine. Intoxication with wine combined with dancing and music was the method of choice for getting to the desired state of enthusiasm (literally, “the god within”). Paul points to these riotous, drunken orgies on display all around the people of Ephesus and contrasts them with what takes place in worship as Christians come to be “filled with the Spirit.” Not the “mere anarchy” of drunken dances, but rather the sweet harmony of “singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts” (5:19).

5. Quoted in Douglas V. Steere, *Dimensions of Prayer* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 115.

The manic debauchery associated with Dionysiac worship sets a sharp and unforgettable contrast to the beauty of the singing, the melodic harmonies, that it is the work of the Spirit to bring to expression in each worshiping congregation. This is the church at worship as we drink our fill of God's Spirit. We listen to God's Word read and preached, and once again get our story straight; we receive the life of salvation eating and drinking the Lord's Supper, his "fragrant offering and sacrifice to God," and recover our Jesus focus; we find ourselves in the singing and giving thanks, in the greetings and the prayers, freshly renewed by the Spirit to practice resurrection in the company of the Trinity.

We are not adequate to live a life of love out of our own will or resources. Trying harder doesn't do it. Enter the Spirit. God provides his Spirit to live the life of God in us, and we are reoriented around the center that holds. When we leave church, dismissed by the benediction, we are far less likely to be intimidated by the "rough beast slouching towards Bethlehem to be born."

CHAPTER 12

*Household and Workplace: Ephesians 5:21–6:9*

*Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

EPHESIANS 5:21

*Heaven in ordinary. . . .*

GEORGE HERBERT, "PRAYER," IN *The Temple*

Now Paul moves us onto home ground, the most immediate places where we practice resurrection. First, the place where we live together intimately in our homes as husbands and wives, as parents and children — our kitchens where we cook food and eat our meals, our bedrooms where we sleep and make love, our living quarters where we receive guests and enjoy one another's company (Eph. 5:21–6:4). He then moves on to the places where we rub shoulders day after day working together as masters and servants, employers and employed, owners and workers — our farms and markets, schools and quarries, building roads and laying bricks (6:5–9).

He has already laid an extensive groundwork for understanding the thoroughness with which the Holy Spirit penetrates our being with the very life and presence of God, into every detail of our lives. There is