

How Do We Worship?

by John Whittle

There is a strange phrase sometimes heard in prayer meetings after the preliminaries are over: "*Let us go to prayer.*" Of course, we understand it can only mean, "*Let us make audible for each other what is already going on in our hearts.*" Prayer does not begin when we engage in speech, but it is then concretized, or expressed in form.

Similarly, we say, "*Let us go to worship.*" We get the family together, we get out the car, and off we go. We leave one place and make for another. There we engage in what we call worship.

This outlook is entirely debunked in the beautiful discourse of Jesus to a lone woman at the well. He knocked out entirely the idea of place, and put worship in its true perspective — as being in the spirit.

As we live in the spirit, our life is suffused by, lit up by, and lived out in a spirit of worship. This might be described as being in reverence of and in love with the Eternal. This does not start with going to a place, but it is expressing itself in all places — or in none!

Worship is the whole attitude and atmosphere of the inner life of one who is consciously indwelt. This preserves the constant background consciousness of true duality which prevents one from feeling he is a unitary being. It is a sort of love-relationship with the Eternal. One can go to worship services by the score and still not be in that frame of mind. Or one can stay away and yet be in it "constantly."

Our meetings are in reality the means of *blessing each other*, rather than we performing together an act of worship to God. The latter is much more the Old Testament idea, that of God being located in a certain place. This is completely changed in the New Testament, which teaches that God does not live in temples made with hands. He is seen as living in each of us, resulting in a constant act of worship because we truly live in the spirit.

This is a day of many fast-developing and unstructured home fellowships. This is because "churches" tend to be more Judaistic in form than Christian, the structure being contradictory to the theology. Special buildings of a certain architectural design, give the impression that God is in this place and we must face Him and meet Him in a special way. It is even labeled as "the house of God."

There is an instinctive rejection of such a label by an increasing number of spiritually sensitive people. The established system is slow to change, but the Spirit of life and revelation is in the process of breaking down the barriers, so that many meet in homes even though they may still support the more public and formalized witness of the "worship service."

The organized church, though deeply suspicious of this development at first, is becoming more accepting as it has the chance to see the reality of life and the outreach in witness that frequently results from the less formal style of meeting. It is also accepting the experience as a healthy extension of the church, because it finds that those engaged in home fellowships are not merely reactionary, nor are they trying to destroy the organized church — or even neglecting it.

If good relations can be maintained between the organized church and the lay movement that functions largely without clergy leadership, there is hope that the former may be transformed. The one-man ministry, with that one man employed by a governing board of businessmen, and backed by a number of sincere hard workers, is a system that dies hard. There is hope for change where the one man in leadership has a deep sense of calling to bring into being a team with whom he can work, without the crippling professionalism that so often prevails in organized church life.

The New Testament has little to do with organized religion, even if that religion be Christianity. It has mostly to do with what one might call "*the contagion of life*." Its depiction of life (which was what Jesus said He had come to give) is extremely varied and unstructured. It is *fire*, it is *wind*, it is *water*. God as consuming fire, tongues of fire at Pentecost; wind blowing where it listed in undirected freedom, emblem of the mystery of the new birth; water, the upspringing well in the human heart, and the outflowing river from the inner man of those who believe. Perhaps the measure of the structure we use in our churches is the measure of our fear of them; though they all contain dangerous elements, they still depict the nature of God. So we conclude that we must turn our fear into faith and have more regard for them than for man's attempt to organize them. We need, of course, to be able to distinguish things that differ, not throwing away the baby with the bathwater.

In George MacDonald's novel, *Robert Falconer*, an admirer of Falconer is discussing with him his work and that of his friends among the poor of London. He says to Falconer:

"Do you belong to the Church of England?"

"Yes, some of us do. Why should we not? Inasmuch as she has faithfully preserved the holy records and traditions, our obligations to her are infinite ..."

"Then you count the Church of England THE church?"

"Of England, yes; of the universe, no: that is constituted just like ours, with the living, working Lord for the heart of it."

"Will you take me for a member?" "No!"

"Will you not if - ?"

"You make yourself one if you will. I will not speak a word to gain you. I have shown you work. Do something, and you are of Christ's church."

So the idea of "going to church" or "going to worship" is quite wrong and misleading, unless one wishes to live under the old order of Judaism. The Spirit of Christ is disturbing all this. There are many groups which evidence a change of attitude toward church and worship. Many groups have sprung up which minimize organization and professionalism, allow room for lay leadership, and encourage the full range of the gifts of the Spirit — including our own Union Life Ministries. So we go on quietly witnessing to the freedom in Christ and the spirit of worship which spontaneously flows from those who have come to an awareness of their union with the Father and with each other.