

LET US DRAW NEAR - Biblical Worship and the Warming of the Soul - Part twelve

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Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

NEW TESTAMENT WORSHIP AND THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CHURCH (Part three)

We have already seen in earlier messages of this series that God is not only interested in the **priority** of worship in our lives, but also the way in which we **practice** worship in His presence. In other words, not only is it important **that** we worship, it's also important **how** we worship. Remember **Uzzah**, who, contrary to the instruction of the LORD, perished as he reached out to touch the ark of the covenant. Our actions in God's presence must be according to **instruction**, not just according to **sincerity**.

Now, many people hold the idea that, because we are now under the new covenant, and because we are now on the **post-side** of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, worship is no longer practiced according to any specific pattern. They take the idea that God is seeking worshipers who will **"worship Him in Spirit and in truth,"** to mean worship is now totally a matter of inward understanding and personal inclinations and promptings.

And certainly there is an **element** of precious truth to be defended in that view. It is very easy for worship to become mechanized and formal. Man has a terrible propensity to create ritual - a religious routine - out of almost anything spiritual and life-giving. That much, at least, is true.

But we also need to remember that the Holy Spirit who comes among us to lead us into worship - to stimulate our awareness of the presence of Jesus - is also the **same** Holy Spirit who gave us the record of the early, Spirit-filled, New Testament church. He is the **same** Holy Spirit who preserved the pattern of **how** the New Testament church made its approach to the Father's throne in worship.

All of this creates the issue of today's teaching on worship. There is so **much** in the Bible relating to worship. Some of the things we still do, and some of the things we no longer do. How is the Church to sort out what sticks as valid worship instruction for today and what doesn't? Is it all just **up for grabs**? Are we free, each one of us, simply to do his or her own thing? Does God really care **how** the church worships Him? Isn't it enough **that** we're genuinely sincere and love Him? Isn't that enough to have in our minds when we come to worship?

Well, think of Uzzah, struck dead by the hand of God as he reached out to steady the ark of the Lord to keep it from falling off the cart into the mud. He was sincere. He loved God. But he disobeyed the worship instructions. And, because of that, he perished at God's hand.

"But that's **Old** Testament, Pastor Don!"

Yes, it is. And right in the making of that observation, we become aware there are some **differences** between the practice of worship in the Old Testament and the New. We recognize that, while **God** doesn't change, some aspects of worship **do**. We don't butcher lambs. We don't bring two goats - kill one and release the other into the parking lot behind the church. We don't burn incense. We don't apply the blood of a lamb to our right ear-lobe when we enter the sanctuary. Yes. There are a lot of changes in the way we approach the Lord in worship.

So **what** changes and **what** remains constant? How is the church to **know** which instructions and commands about worship apply **today** and which ones **don't**? That's what this message is all about. And I'm spending time with this issue today because it doesn't get covered enough in churches. It isn't the kind of material that leaves people feeling blessed in their seats. And you wouldn't teach this all the time. But it has such practical relevance for a host of other issues that **do** keep our lives blessed and spiritually sharp and informed.

If you don't understand today's teaching concept you will be vulnerable to a host of hot-headed teachers who rip isolated verses from the Old Testament and try to make you feel less than spiritual because you don't apply it to your worship the way they insist. This is especially true in areas of worship techniques and special diets and waving banners and dancing and a host of other things.

The key issue here is what instructions and patterns are **binding** and which ones are not. It's not that any of these things is **bad**. But still, we know we don't carry over **everything** from the Bible text into our modern worship practice. So the worship issue forces **questions** to the surface. Is **everything** a matter of taste? Or is absolutely everything still **required**? Do we still have to ceremonially wash our hands when we enter the sanctuary? Must we still abstain from lobster and crab? What about styles of dress? Can we now wear garments woven of blended fabrics, or are they still off the list?

To most of us these questions have a ridiculous ring. We **know** - we would say almost instinctively - that these specific teachings - these **Bible** teachings - aren't applicable to the church today. And that's right. They aren't. But that doesn't even scratch the surface of the real question. The real question is **why** are these things no longer compulsory for the church at worship? We all know they aren't **bad** commands. I mean, you can still keep them if you so desire. There's nothing **wrong** with them. But they aren't **necessary**.

So let's back up the boat and lay the foundation to deal with **why** some of these Old Testament injunctions are no longer compulsory for the church. That will give us a footing to deal with **other** issues as well. Before we nail down concepts of worship let's examine some simple rules for gleaning **instruction** for worship (and everything else) from God's Word:

1) **ALWAYS START WITH THE NEW TESTAMENT AND INTERPRET THE OLD TESTAMENT IN THE LIGHT OF IT**

Let me give you an example of this from a subject that has nothing to do with congregational worship. Let's consider the subject of the **creation of Adam and Eve and the beginning of history as we know it**.

As you know, there are plenty of questions about the early chapters of Genesis. A lot of people wonder just how literally those chapters are to be read. Were Adam and Eve **two actual individuals**, made on that specific day of creation? Or are they a picture of the whole human race? Were they two historic people? Or are they something symbolic and mystical?

To my mind, the way to approach those chapters of Genesis is to go somewhere **else** in your Bible **first**. You don't find the key to **interpreting** those creation chapters by reading those chapters **alone**. You also have to search somewhere **else**. There are New Testament passages that shine light on the early chapters of Genesis. Let me show you where you might begin:

Matthew 19:3-6 - "And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" [4] He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, [5] and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh'? [6] So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

Now, this is not a sermon about divorce. But this passage **does** teach the principle of interpreting the Old Testament in the light of the New. What **is** very relevant for our study today is the fact that Jesus based all of His instruction about marriage and divorce on the **literal account of the original creation of one man and one woman**. In other words, what we have here is Jesus' view - Jesus, the omniscient (all knowing) Son of God - **His** view on how we should interpret Genesis one through three.

I cite this example simply to illustrate the principle of interpreting the Old Testament in the light of the New. Here's another example:

Romans 5:14-15 - "Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come. [15] But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many."

Again, one of the reasons I believe **Adam** was an actual, literal, distinct person is I believe **Jesus Christ** was a real person. Paul talks about Adam and Jesus in the very same sentence. Adam's life had real, solid, historic consequences for the human race. And then Paul says Jesus' life had stunning consequences for the human race as well. Adam and Jesus stand or fall **together** as real people. If Adam can be explained away, so can Jesus Christ. The Fall and Redemption stand or collapse together.

The point of this example is **the best way to come to a complete understanding of the Old Testament is always to read and understand it in the light of the New**. Always let the New Testament illumine and control and regulate your interpretation of the Old Testament.

That doesn't mean we think the Old Testament is somehow **less inspired** than the New Testament. It is **all** God's Word. It is all **equally** inspired. Theologians speak of the **confluency** of the inspiration of Scripture. By that they mean all of the Bible is **equally** inspired. You may or may not think of it all as equally **relevant**. But it is equally **inspired** none the less.

But remember, the revelation of the Bible is an **unfolding** revelation. It finds its climax and fulfillment in the incarnation and life and death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

After Jesus Ascended into heaven He poured out His Spirit on His church. The church today is the Body of Christ, awaiting the return of her Lord. While we wait and while we evangelize, we worship. And for direction in our worship we have the writings of the Apostles - the first inspired leaders of the church - to give us guidance and direction in how we **approach God's throne**.

All of the other Old Testament Scriptures lead up to their fulfillment in the New Testament. But the final picture - the complete story - is **contained** in the pages of the New Testament. In fact - and this is a very important statement - **the Old Testament can only make sense in the light of the New Testament**.

Here's an example of this fact. This is why many Jews are **still waiting** for the coming of the Messiah. They read much of the same Old Testament you and I do. But they've **rejected** the completion of the story in the New Testament. Because of that, the Apostle Paul says they are totally blind (that's the very word Paul uses) to so many of the passages, even in the Old Testament, where the coming of Jesus was specifically explained.

Now, I've taken far more time than perhaps I should have on this first point because it is **foundational** to everything else I want to say about worship in the next few weeks. Let me go over some other points, gleaning truth from God's Word on worship:

2) **MAJOR ON WORSHIP EXPRESSIONS THAT ARE SEEN TO BE PERMANENTLY BINDING, EITHER BY BEING CARRIED OVER FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT TO THE NEW, OR ARE CLEARLY INTRODUCED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT AND PRESENTED AS PERMANENT ADDITIONS TO THE WORSHIP OF THE CHURCH**

This is the point where we are really just taking the previous principle - always interpreting the Old Testament in the light of the completed revelation of the new - and **applying** it specifically to the issue of worship practice in the church. We will spend two weeks doing this.

I know there's a lot in this point, but the concept is too important to leave unpacked. Most churches - even those fairly vital in their worship life - can't tell you **why** they worship the way they do, except that they've come to have certain **denominational** standards and expectations - either **conservative** or **liberal** or more **charismatic**.

People go to these different churches and settle in with varying degrees of comfort based - usually - on nothing more than the fact that the church's worship style fits their temperament. But **Biblically** they haven't a clue why one **style** might be better than any other. In fact, they would actually feel it almost **narrow minded** to even **admit** that one pursuit of worship might actually be spiritually **better** than another. So far have we gone down the road of linking congregational worship with personal taste and inward sincerity.

So we're going to spend two weeks looking at the second principle of this teaching. We're going to look at this principle, remembering the foundation already laid down that Old Testament interpretation must be regulated by the New. Now we'll move on from that foundation to apply it to the subject of worship, starting with this second point. We'll just begin today.

Read that whole second point over again carefully: **we must major on worship expressions that are seen to be permanently binding, either by being carried over from the Old Testament to the New, or are clearly introduced in the New Testament and presented as permanent additions to the worship of the church**.

Let's just take the **second** part of that statement for consideration in the rest of this teaching:

a) **Consider some of the new patterns and instructions of worship introduced in the New Testament and emphasized as ongoing in importance for the Church:**

This should be the easiest part of the worship issue. Aside from a few cultural nuances, we **are** the New Testament church. We live by the words of Jesus and the teaching of the original apostles. We are still the body of Christ, called out, not just from Jews, but from all races and nationalities. And we all gather, as the early church did, with certain goals and disciplines in common: **Acts 2:42** - **"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."**

Here's a simple picture of the building-blocks of church worship in the New Testament. And there are **other** practices that became habitual in New Testament worship as well. These aren't things they did **once** or **occasionally**, but **repeatedly**, some of them at our **Lord's own command**.

Believer's baptism, included by our Lord in the Great Commission, and the **Lord's Supper**, which we are to do **"until He comes,"** form obvious cornerstones of New Testament worship and would be good examples of this principle. There is simply no questioning the ongoing place of these expressions of contemporary church life. Their ongoing place in our worship is **mandated**.

Other pieces of the picture are formed, not by direct **command**, but by the obvious abiding place they had in the **practice** of the New Testament church. This would include everything from the brand new concept of gathering for worship on the **Lord's Day**, proclaiming Christ's **resurrection from the dead**. The Resurrection has never been undone. There is no theological reason for changing from worship on the Lord's Day.

Tied in with this is the regular **giving of financial offerings** on the first day of the week. This too has good textual support as an ongoing part of the New Testament Church's worship practice (**1 Corinthians 16:2**). Then there is the Scripturally ordered exercise of the **gifts of the Spirit** (**1 Corinthians 12-14**) and **prayer for the sick** (**James 5:15-19**). Also included here could be the **public reading and teaching of the Scriptures written by the Apostles**, which Paul encourages young pastor Timothy to develop and not neglect (**1 Timothy 4:13**).

All of these practices find their root in the direct instruction of the Holy Spirit through the original Apostles for the church age. How important are these things? Why are they commanded and demonstrated repeatedly in the New Testament? Because they generate **life** and they generate **freedom**. Freedom isn't found by **cutting loose**. Freedom is found by **digging in**. It's found in the forms and footings of Biblical worship.

Think of the Israelites, putting the ark of the Lord on a cart just because that's the way it came to them. It was **easy**. It was **convenient**. That's the way the cart had come to them. This is what everyone seemed to be doing. But they hurt themselves by not paying attention to the instructions.

Revival is never the top blowing off. It's the roots going deep. So I close with the question: **are you taking these New Testament forms of worship seriously enough?** Are you thinking you will find more rest for you soul on your own terms than under the yoke of Christ? Don't just look for what is easy or less time consuming. Don't judge worship by momentary emotional thrill. Anchor it all in the Word of His grace.

More on this next week.