

Acts 7:23-50

Words About Worship

Ryan Perz – January 26, 2020

Intro: If you've been around church long enough you've probably heard stories about worship wars. Perhaps a church moves from traditional to contemporary and it splits the church. Some within the Reformed tradition have divided over whether to sing Psalms exclusively or not—they will never get to a conversation about a fog machine. Worship wars are not unique to the 20th or 21st century.

Context:

Really, what Stephen is charged with in Acts 7 is starting a worship war.

Some of his teaching struck at the heart of what the Jews held most dearly, the temple and law. This sermon is Stephen's attempt and argument that he is not starting a worship war, but desires for people understand the nature of true worship. If there is such a thing as true worship, it also means there is the threat of false worship.

We will look at both this morning. There are warnings against false worship and the way of true worship.

Warnings against false worship

- In both OT and NT there are warnings.

(Lev 10:1-3) Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them. ² And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. ³ Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord has said: 'Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.'

(Mt 15:8)

⁷ You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said:

- ⁸ "This people honors me with their lips,
but their heart is far from me;

⁹ in vain do they worship me,”

(Eccl 5:1) Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil.

- From Stephen’s sermon, several elements of false worship come out.

1. Lack of understanding (v25)

- Moses had spent the first 40 years of his life under the roof and protection of Pharaoh. Hebrews 11:24-26 describes a point when Moses broke with Egypt “choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin”.
- His first act is standing up to a bully Egyptian.
- You would think this would go well, but it backfires.

Picture a young Martin Luther King Jr. attempting to help the African American community helping organize for the cause of civil rights, and his own community telling him, “get out, we don’t need you.”

The reason (v25) - they did not understand—they *failed to understand what God was doing*.

Lack of understanding is the first major roadblock in true worship.

—That is why Jesus has to open the understanding of the men in Lk 24:45 so they see him in the Scripture.

—We will also see in Acts 8:30 Phillip asks the million dollar question: “Do you understand what you are reading?”

2. Rebellious hearts (v39)

- Note how Moses is treated; they “refused to obey.”
- The way Israel responded to Moses mirrors the way many respond to Jesus - “refusing to obey; thrusting him aside.”

- The other side of rebellion; we will call it replacement; “in their hearts, they turned back to Egypt”.

This describes how our souls work. There is no vacuum, it will always be filled with something. The second major roadblock to true worship is rebellion in our heart. The way we know if it is there, is when we ask ourselves “what are we tempted to ‘go back to’.” Egypt obviously represents slavery and bondage. It’s amazing how we can think that something Christ has set us free from will somehow satisfy us again.

Brothers and sisters, beware of the whisper that says going back to Egypt will be good.

3. Idolatrous hands (v41)

- There is a progression building here.
- When the heart is rebellious it finds a replacement for God.

Israel at the time of Moses wanted some type of experience, something that could be seen, touched; they did not want to wait on God and hear his word.

I don’t know if we are all that far removed from the temptation. When I was working with youth in the late 90’s, there was a parent who was really concerned that the world was so attractive that we needed to step up our game if we were going to keep them in the church. Go big for Jesus! So our team did. We invited the powerlifting evangelist guy who could rip phone books, bend rebar and tell kids how important Jesus is. We rented the “Hunker Dunker” and all the youth leaders took a turn. The parent even pushed to get a permit so we could do pyrotechnics inside the church.

That mentality is whispering that Christ is really not enough for your soul. Something needs to be added. Is waiting on God, and hearing his word enough? Is learning more gospel truth and the glory of Christ satisfying to the soul? I’m glad that Andrew leads our youth in what is most important, the Word and gospel.

4. Rejecting the mediator (27, 35)

- Moses is a leader, prophet—but at his heart he is a mediator.
- That is clear by his intervention in v26 as he tries to reconcile the two men at odds.

- Yet Moses is a mediator who is rejected instead of received (v35); Moses as the mediator foreshadows Jesus Christ as mediator.

(I Timothy 2:5)

⁵“For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”

Worship either stands or falls on this! Do you have Jesus as your Mediator? If you don't, then let me say frankly, all your worship will be false. It will all be misdirected. Worship has to come through Jesus Christ and him alone!!

This is the turning point. Jesus leads us in the way of true worship.

The way of true worship

1. God's Word (31, 37)

- No pyrotechnics needed; no special permit required. God sets the bush on fire to grab Moses's attention.
- Even with this spectacular sign, the point is not for Moses to keep staring at the bush, but rather *hear God speak*.

“there came the voice of the Lord” (v31)

“The Lord said to him” (v33)

The first thing we need to get right is this: Worship is hearing the word. Worship is not just the music.

Nehemiah 8:5-6

⁵And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. ⁶And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. *And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.*

- Finally, worship is hearing the Word from the right source.
- Moses is clearly a forerunner to Jesus. Moses was never to be the final voice.
- Vs 37 is a reference to Dt 18:15; Jesus is that final voice!

At the heart of true worship is listening to God Word that comes through the voice of his Son! That's what Stephen defends and is willing to die for.

2. Holiness (33b)

- (33b) Moses is told to approach God as holy and in reverence.
- We need to remember that Moses was in exile—Gentile territory. It proves the point that God’s holiness is not just restricted to a temple in Jerusalem. God’s holy presence is not limited to only one place, it’s wherever he chooses to dwell.

Ps 96:9—proper worship is tied to God’s holiness.

“Worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness; tremble before him, all the earth”

This may be the area of most concern in American culture. We’ve become a very casual culture. People really like hearing that God is loving, kind, and compassionate. But talk about his holiness, and you get a different reaction.

3. Humility (34, 49-50)

- First, there is a humility from God (34)

Anytime the Holy God of eternity stoops down to notice his fallen creation, it’s an act of humility. This is why Jesus is described as humble; not only did he notice his creation but he came to live and die among them.

It reminds me of a few years back. I was at a Pittsburgh Pirates baseball game. We had really good seats; so close you could smell the players deodorant. Before the game started the team was out on the field to warm up. A few little boys were standing by the dugout as the players approached, holding baseballs with a sharpie marker, begging for autographs. And the players just coldly walked.

I know I’m not in a MLB player’s shoes. But seriously they get paid millions of dollars to chase around a ball. Is it too much to take 2 minutes to sign some autographs for little dudes who look up to them?

Compare that to back in the 1980’s. In a baseball catalogue I had, there was the addresses of all the team. So I took a step out and sent cards out to have them signed. One of my favorite players, Andy Van Slyke, actually signed the card and mailed it back to me. 30 years later I remember that. In an earthy sense, Van Slyke humbled himself to care about a grade school kid and his happiness.

How much more does the Lord God who takes notice of his creation in humility, care for our happiness! True worship sees God for who he truly is: a humble God who takes notice and cares for people who don't deserve it.

Finally, it calls for a humble response from us.

- (v49). The final point is a quote from Is 66:1-2. This verse has so much to teach us about true worship.

66 Thus says the Lord:

“Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool;
what is the house that you would build for me,
and what is the place of my rest?

- ² All these things my hand has made,
and so all these things came to be,
declares the Lord.

But this is the one to whom I will look:

he who is humble and contrite in spirit
and trembles at my word.

Conclusion,

- 1) How do we know if our worship is true or false?

Is. 66 helps. It doesn't mention how well we sing, how emotional we feel, where our building is located.

It simply searches our heart: Are we humble? Does God's holiness lead to our humility? Are we contrite? Does our sin prick our hearts? Do we prepare for worship by confessing? When was the last time we laid ourselves bare before God in confession? Do we tremble at God's Word?

Humility is exclusively tied to how we view Jesus: Jesus was in the middle of a worship war (Jn 4)—Jews vs Samaritans.

He tells the Samaritan woman that the worship that God seeks is in Spirit and Truth, which means it's centered on him. Worship is about a person, not a place.

Paul Washer: "If you come to church for any reason other than Jesus Christ, you are coming for the wrong reason".

—If you come primarily because you really like the people or preacher or teacher, wrong reason.

—If you primarily come because of the programs for kids and youth, again wrong reason.

—If you primarily come because the music is just your taste and style, wrong reason.

But if you come because you want everything to be centered on Christ and know that nothing else will ever satisfy your soul, then you know the way of true worship.