

NOTHING AT ALL TO WORSHIP

The bigger the word, the less precise the definition, until we get to the word “god,” which defies all definition. The word “worship” implies veneration, adoration, obedience, subservience. To “bow down and worship” is a familiar phrase that reveals the distance – the inequality – between the worshipper and the object of worship. To worship something is to count it great and ourselves small, inadequate, unimportant, and unworthy in comparison.

Traditionally, down through the ages, humans have had two problems with worship. Either we jump to conclusions, get overeager, get hasty, and worship that which is not worthy of worship. Or we get too proud, get to feeling powerful or self-sufficient or maybe just rebellious, and end up determined not to worship anything as greater than or more important than ourselves.

To worship implies veneration – the acknowledgment of superior worth, wisdom, power, intelligence. It may also include the awareness of superior “goodness” or love. Without getting lost in the tangent, the most familiar form of worship is the worship of superior power. Every form of worship includes the recognition of or belief in the power of the object of worship. With decreasing frequency, other attributes are found – intelligence, purposefulness, beauty, truth, wisdom – until rare forms of worship include goodness, benevolence: more than just a payoff for services rendered or a reward for obedience, which is common to most worship. Finally, the rarest form of worship is the recognition of all the other attributes *plus* the recognition of love. Love, of course, is a gift, and giving that gift is the choice of a free being who has other alternatives available. God does not *have* to give us the gift of love. That’s what makes it so special when the gift of love comes.

In war years, “triage” (sorting out) referred to the policy by which medical assistance was given. It was up to the doctors to “color-tag” the wounded, placing them in one of three categories according to their condition. One color meant hopeless – nothing we can do will save them. Another color meant they will make it whether we help them or not. The third color indicated a doubtful prognosis – a chance to live only if medical assistance is given. Since there were severely limited medical supplies and personnel, assistance was given only to this last group.

Lou was severely wounded, including one leg blown apart. The doctor who examined him made the decision that Lou was a hopeless case and tagged him as such. A nurse later noticed that Lou was conscious and began to talk with him. They discovered they were both from Ohio. Getting to know each other, even a little, made a huge difference. The nurse just could not let him die. She broke all the rules and changed his tag. For Lou, there followed a two-day trip in the back of a truck and months in a hospital, but he made it. He met a girl in the hospital who later became his wife. Minus one leg, he nevertheless led a full and happy life – all because a nurse broke the rules of triage and changed his tag.

That is what Christ does for us, in God’s power and love: He changes our tags. And when we finally figure that out, know it, and believe it – and not just for ourselves – then we begin to worship.

We seem to live in a time, however, when all forms of worship are increasingly suspect. It seems to be the suspicion, if not the conviction, of our age that “to worship” is primitive. It is spiritually immature at best and depraved at worst. Notions of worship, especially the subservience part of it – concepts of our being subjects of some actual superior Being – are mere leftover superstitions from a dark and animistic past. At least that is a common sentiment.

So the “new trend” (well, new in the West, but ancient and primitive in the East) is that “god” is *in* us all – that there is not *actually* any god out there as a separate entity or intelligence. There may be a “Life Force” and perhaps, in some sense, a vast collective intelligence or pattern, but we as individuals do not actually “meet” a Creator Being apart from ourselves and relate as two different beings. Rather, we grow into consciousness or awareness of our *own* divinity – become aware of “the Christ-self within” – and finally come to realize that we are part of a Oneness that is before, after, and always existing around and beyond the illusion of our separateness and individuality.

In contrast, the normal Christian perspective sees each of us as separate individuals distinct from each other, and not only distinct from but inferior to God. And not only inferior to God, but in great need of mercy and salvation. In the traditional Christian view, worship is appropriate, indeed necessary, in fact imperative. Humility before the omnipotent God is not only sensible, it is the only wisdom there is. Prayer is stressed as dialogue between creature and Creator, and the major function of this prayer, though far from the only function, is the communication of orders. God tells us what to do; inasmuch as we are

capable of grasping what we are told and receive guidance, we do it. The core of worship is obedience. We worship insofar as we carry out the instructions and live by the guidance we receive from God – what we observe and learn from Jesus, and what we “hear” (perceive) from prayer (contact with the Holy Spirit). Whether we like or agree with the instructions, guidance, or commandments we are given is of minor importance. To worship is to obey. To cease to obey is the end of worship.

The “new trend” has little or no use for prayer. There is no “god” to talk with. Meditation is the thing. By various means, each person must train to bring their body, mind, and spirit into focus – into awareness – until consciousness itself begins to ascend through the various levels of being and eventually unto the attainment of the unity (bliss) of the godhead (or Christness).

Worship is neither necessary nor appropriate to this “new way.” If we watch the serious (sincere) devotees of either way, certain disciplines and the cultivation of certain attitudes and actions are frequently similar. But worship is the heart and core of one way, while attainment (awareness, realization) is the heart and core of the other way. Which is your own spiritual path or way? The two can learn and share with each other to some degree, but essentially they diverge. We worship, adore, pay homage, obey – and we know we are inferior and need saving. Or we attain, work, learn, grow, refine, discipline – and eventually we develop unto the level of the godness and unity of all things. Which is your own path?

The WAY of worship is my own path and my own way. Not that I walk it as well as I want to, and hope to still. Nevertheless, I do love it and believe in it, and all else that is important to me is important in the light of and in reference to the Christian WAY of worship. There is a tendency, then, to want to put down the way of attainment. In part, that cannot be helped; I feel less passion and no trust for these other concepts even as I try to describe them well. But there is also the honest bias: I wish all of us here were fully and happily devoted to the spiritual Path of Christian worship.

The thing I never know for sure is how much these two different-sounding approaches are a matter of personality or semantics, and how much they are actually two separate experiences and conceptions of reality of what the spiritual or religious life is all about. So we go to Scripture. Today’s passage recounts a strange incident, to our ears.

Jesus is asked a stock question, and He gives the stock answer. The scribe repeats His answer back almost verbatim. The account is told as if something very profound has taken place. Jesus and the scribe seem to be admiring each other's wisdom. It feels like a high compliment when Jesus acknowledges that the scribe is not far from the Kingdom, although we may wonder how far "not far" is. It feels like a high compliment that the scribe goes away satisfied with Jesus' response, when he obviously set out to show Jesus up. But what happened? Mostly we were yawning and getting ready to nod off. Why is this "nothing" encounter even reported?

We have known and recited the "*Hear, O Israel ... love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength*" since Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (621 B.C.). Jesus adds "mind": love God with all your mind. That is a terrific addition. Is that what was causing the drama and excitement in this scene? It is not believable that Jesus would change the Shema without realizing it. It was recited twice a day, morning and evening, as well as by the dying or their friends at the close of life. So this passage alone is enough to put great emphasis on continued study and mental development for every Christian.

We have known about "*love your neighbor as yourself*" for even longer – Leviticus 19:18. Supposedly that harks back to the time of Moses (1300 B.C. or so). Jesus does not change that at all. It is the folk wisdom of every tribe and clan since the dawn of time. "If we are to survive, we must band together and make our common interests at least equal to our individual interests." Nothing new here.

Maybe that's the point: Jesus could not think of any improvement on the ancient precepts; essentially, He could not improve on the fundamental principles. Sometimes it's important to remember that just because a thing is familiar, this does not mean it is not valuable. Old truths, like old wives and old friends, are more dependable. We run too much after the new and unusual. Like dessert, it should only be a spoonful or two, and after the important part is taken care of. Otherwise we get spiritually puffy and out of condition.

Yet the scribe replies: "*You are right in saying that God is one and beside him there is no other.*" And then he leaves out "soul" as something we love God with. Is this a careless copier? Or is *this* the drama of the conversation? I trust neither Jesus nor a scribe of His time to be careless with words on issues and passages as central

as these. This is clearly described and set up to be a match between two very learned and astute teachers. Jesus throws the first grenade. To the learned scribe, He says (and puts it so it stands out in flashing neon lights ten feet high): “You are proud of your intellect, and you use your knowledge as if it were something you own and control. That is the part of you that you have kept for yourself – kept from God. Love God with all your *mind*. Do not keep that part back! Do not try to stand back like some objective observer – some dispassionate intellect with the right to judge from afar. Worship the Lord your God with all of your *mind* too!”

Score one. The scribe hears, and it registers. Then it’s his turn. So he fires back, repeating Jesus’ own answer, but putting heavier emphasis on the “oneness” by adding “*beside him there is no other.*” And then he goes down the list of what we love God with, leaving out “soul” – the distinctly individual spiritual entity within each of us. And that is *his* salvo (in flashing neon lights ten feet high): “You are putting too much stress on individuality. You are playing the separate, great-leader role too strong, and you are teaching your followers the same kind of foolish individuality.”

And here, unless I misread (which is quite possible, of course), we have the very same dichotomy we were just talking about. The scribe is interpreting the Shema to mean there is no reality outside of God: our individual souls are an illusion; there is God and only God, and we must lose our distinctness and come back to the oneness in God. And Jesus, though I can only interpret Him on the other side of this issue, ends up essentially respectful and appreciative of the man’s level of awareness: “*You are not far from the kingdom of God*” – that is, “It’s okay. Keep going as you are and you will be fine.”

So this scribe is a Sadducee, rather than a Pharisee, and this is one of the rare accounts of a confrontation between Jesus and a Sadducee. Sadducees did not believe in the individual resurrection of the dead. They were more what we would think of as “Eastern,” and they considered a uniting with God as more of a graduation from the lower levels of individual awareness and separation. So we have the same “split” back then that we are encountering again today. Jesus and this scribe end up on a surprisingly amiable note with each other.

Nevertheless, Jesus is the most strikingly individualistic of all the great spiritual leaders of earth history. Christendom is about a personal God who is our Creator but who is distinct and different from us – not only vast and beyond us at this moment of our development

but also different and distinct. God communicates within but is not “us.” And our response – our only appropriate response, ever! – is WORSHIP.

My own belief is that we are created with both the capacity and the need to worship. Life does not go well for us when we have nothing to worship. When we serve ourselves, obey our own whims, and see no purpose or plan beyond our own imaginings or dreams, we do not exemplify humanity at its best. Something in us also rebels at worship, and that is good too. So much of human misery is connected to inappropriate worship – that is, the worship of that which is less than God. Many of the dependency roles we fall into come from misplaced worship. The biblical word for that is “idolatry” – one of the biggest issues in all Scripture. Idolatry is worship of that which is not God: money, power, fame, popularity, education, other people. Probably the greatest of all idols is the image of love that we set up. Naturally, the really dangerous idols are things of great value which nonetheless are not great enough – they are not God.

For instance, consider the dependency roles of women in the past. For a time, it was standard for a woman to trade life under God for life in submission to her husband. She tried to please him and serve him, and she expected to be cared for, honored, and supported in return. In short, she *idolized* her husband. Intriguingly enough, that was even the word we often used. So we used the word and we knew that idolatry was the greatest sin in the Bible, yet the message still did not register. That is, it was not the church’s influence that brought the awakening, for the most part. In most places, the church even fought it.

So we try to wend our way between the need to worship, rebelliousness at having to worship anything, and the pitfalls of worshipping anything less than the living God. But sometimes I still wonder: What would it be like to have nothing to worship – to have no ONE to serve who is any higher, wiser, greater than myself? Some people claim that we create God because we have the need to worship something. I guess that’s like the way we create food because we have the need to eat, and air because we have the need to breathe. But let’s not get sidetracked.

I can think of nothing more pitiful, nothing so empty, nothing so desolate and bereft as to find myself with nothing to worship – the bereftness of the abyss. Cancer, famine, war, persecution,

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utter failure – none of them hold as much terror or as much despair as simply finding ourselves with no God to worship. “O Lord, do not hide Thy face. Do not withdraw Thy presence from us!”

Is it not strange that the one thing we need most and need above all other things is the opportunity to truly worship the living God, yet that is the very thing we put off most, avoid longest, and complain about almost every step of the way?! Every Sunday the bulletin says “Call To Worship.” In other ways and in many languages, the same call comes every day of every week. Why is it strange or hard to answer that call?