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Case Study

Should the worship of the true God be based on one own culture?

A case study on the impact of culture on Divine Worship for a local church in South Florida, in USA.

by

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**Introduction**

***Statement of the Fact***

The Worship of the true God governs salvation history from the garden of Eden to the isle of Patmos and remains as the dominant subject in the great controversy between Christ and Satan, as well as the number one urgency in the life of the believer. God is seeking men and women to worship Him with their hearts, engaging in heart worship as can be seen in Psalm 111:1 and Matthew 15:7-9. God also desires that his people worship Him together in unity, just as Jesus prayed in John 17:20-23. Whaley and Wheeler (2011) write about worship state that, it is when we copiously see and recognize Jesus as Lord of lords, King of kings, our righteous and sovereign God that we fall down and worship. We plainly cannot help it. Worship is the accepted answer to God’s revelation.

Worship theologian Marva Dawn (1995) explains that God is both the subject and the object of worship. God is the subject of worship, which means God is the content of our worship. For Christians, specifically, God, as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ and interceded to us today by the Spirt, is the content of worship. Thus, for Marva, the content of worship does not change.

 In addition, God is also the object of our worship, which means that God is the primary focus and purpose of our worship. Even the meaning of the word worship points toward this. Duck (2013) attests to this when he asserts that the word worship comes from the old English roots worth, meaning honor and worthiness. Thus, in its most basic construction, worship may be defined as respect and reverence offered to a divine being or supernatural power. When we worship, we are honoring and praising God. As Psalm 113:3 says, “From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the LORD is praised.” Therefore, worship is primarily about God. Worship, one can say, identifies the inherent worthiness of God apart from all other beings. Worship, primarily, does not focus on the human condition but on the di­vine reality. The emphasis of worship should not be chiefly on one’s own needs, culture, or one’s emotional or intellectual expression. The focal point of worship is God Himself: God’s qualities and excellences, God’s glory and majesty, God’s wisdom and will, God’s words and deeds past, present, and future, toward all of us. We ought to realize that before He does anything that we can eval­uate or even perceive, God is worthy of our highest devotion simply because He is God. After He has spoken and intervened and His actions are recognized by us as gracious, awesome, merciful, punitive, or even mysterious, He is still worthy of our highest devotion because He is God! The starting point of worship begins, not with the human condition, but the divine reality.

Christians should never forget that Worship stays as the central issue over which the great controversy began in heaven and will conclude here on earth. The prophet Isaiah clearly shows that it was Lucifer’s determination to receive worship that causes the war in Heaven. Isaiah 14:13, 14 points out, “ **Isaiah 14:13-14**  13 For you have said in your heart: 'I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation On the farthest sides of the north; 14 I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High” (NKJ). And because of the enemy’s covetousness to usurp what is rightfully belong to God, he lost his position in heaven. Then we all know that Abel lost his life over the issue of worship. Thus, the enemy now on earth is pursuing the same thing: Worship. And he is active in making sure worship is distorted and deviate toward him. And the result is always devastative. Cain killed his brother because Abel’s offering was suitable to God, while his own offering was not. And in the final hour, soon to erupt upon the church, the issue will again be worship with a choice between the mark of the beast and the seal of God. Worship shows what our lives are truly based on. As leader, we need to recognize and valorize the importance of worship. But should be base on one’s own culture?

***Statement of the problem***

This case study encompasses the impact of culture on Divine Worship for a local church in South Florida, in USA. There is an unending conflict between the members of a local church in South Florida, USA regarding what constitutes appropriate and meaningful worship. The church is a comprised mostly from people from the Caribbean, a very specific island nation, where they used to worship in certain way. Now in America, the conflict raises between this group and the young people who were born in this country, USA. They young people have clearly point out that they have found the worship services to be boring. And they want to bring some elements of their own culture to move from a tradition worship styles to a contemporary one. The conflict brings a lack of unity between the two groups, which hinders both nurture and outreach efforts on behalf of the church and is a constant source of member frustration.

Preliminary observations suggest that the problem is perceptible, at least in part, to the lack of a clear understanding as to what should be the foundation for determining corporate worship practice. The young people are requesting, apparently, a worship experience that would be relevant to their needs. They want a different style of worship. Every 4th Sabbath, it’s youth day at that church. Consequently, because the service on that sabbath is conducted by the young people, many adults don’t attend church on that day. They go somewhere else. Realizing this, they young people now are staying away from this church and show up only on the 4th sabbath, their youth day.

The state of the matter raises a contemporary topic in Adventist ecclesiology: worship made to the penchant of the worshiper. Is it authentic to structure worship to suit the sensitivities and perceptions of a particular interest group? Should worship be based on culture? Should we let worship become performance? I believe that we all have a responsibility to be involved and active in worship as we ascribe our value to Him. Worship is not a time for the congregation to become audiences waiting for something to happen to spark their interest, instead worship incorporates the entire congregation to wholeheartedly admire God in all His majesty and glory.

***Real Consequences and Outcomes***

The establishment and devel­opment of healthy corporate worship lie greatly on the spiritual leadership of the local pastor and as leader we must not shrink from our responsibility in this matter. Ellen White gives important warning in this regard: “Unless correct ideas of true worship and true reverence are im­pressed upon the people, there will be a growing tendency to place the sacred and eternal on a level with common things, and those professing the truth will be an offense to God and a disgrace to religion.” She adds this, “When a church has been raised up and left uninstructed on these points, the minister has neglected his duty and will have to give an ac­count to God for the impressions he allowed to prevail.”

The pastor cannot truly be a worship leader and cannot really function well unless he or she understands what is at the center of true worship. Among others, strong arguments have been made for worship as a form of self-expression based on culture, emotion, intellect, ritual, or personal therapy needs. Whatever the justification and however distinct one form of expression may be from another, our human opinions share the common basis of being anthropocentric, worship that originates from the human perspective, from the worshiper’s perception of his own need. This may be compatible with the viewpoint of the world, but it does not align with the ethics of Scripture. This local Church has experienced a rupture in its shared life based on the conflict over proper worship practice. The disunion has revealed itself in opposing worship values, statements of distrust, and contention over positions of authority within the church. There have even been public eruptions of anger over variances of opinion concerning worship. Somewhere in the miasma of political and popular values, this local church has lost much of the spiritual priority of worship and the duty of the pastor as worship leader includes helping the church get it back.

***Validation, Correction or Criticism***

We are living in world dominated by culture. Culture affects everything we do. Culture, I believe, is the atmosphere in which an organization operates, the predominant attitude, the collection of vehiculated messages, verbal and nonverbal.

Swidler (1986) describes culture as a figurative vehicle of meaning, including beliefs, ritual practices, art forms and ceremonies, as well as informal cultural practices such as language, gossip, stories and rituals of daily life. Correspondingly, Bolman and Deal (1991) point out that establishments are cultures that are driven more by rituals, ceremonies, stories, heroes and myths than by rules, policies and managerial authority. The symbolic frame seeks to understand and irradiate the basic issues of meaning and faith that make symbol so controlling in every aspect of the human experience, including life in organizations and religious orders.

Culture matters! It consists of all of the acquired lenses through which we learn to interpret our environment. It includes our beliefs, our values, our customs, our folkways, our language(s), and the expected behav­iors from others around us. Culture represents a way of perceiving, behaving, and evaluating one’s world. No wonder the young people who were born in this country see worship differently from the ones who were born in the Caribbean. They are from two opposites worlds. Consequently, every leader ought to work hard to bring diversity work that will free the members from creating an atmosphere of identity and relativism of their own culturalness. Every culture is a fallen culture. One has to recognize and realize the strengths and limitations of its cultural of origin. Tastes in music, dress, concepts of modesty, preferences in attire, and a host of other personal behaviors and outlooks may reflect one’s cultural origins. But, we ought to admit that God is the center of true worship. If we do not put God first in our worship, we are not worshipping in spirit and in truth. God must be the center of worship, the beginning and the end. True worship will focus on God and not on self. This basic tenet of worship is transcultural, not dependent on geographical or denominational identity. Thus, we can say that the differences between the traditional worship of those in this church that were born in the Caribbean and those were born in this country is more a difference of cultural expression rather than theological substance.

***Conclusion and establishment of principles***

When it comes to worship, churches often have a set routine for worship, and changing worship can create conflict.

I would propose the following three suggested actions to be taken in order to change the culture of our institution, the local church, which can help create a positive diversity climate for the worship of the true God.

1. **Create an educative atmosphere**. I believe that most of the time people act indifferently, uncaringly, and unresponsively because of lack of knowledge. Education helps followers understand each other in new way that they would have never thought. But most importantly, as Christians, we have to emulate our savior in everything. We have to constantly ask ourselves: What would Jesus do? What would He say? How would he react? I believe a comprehensive educative program of training would change the culture of our institution. Everyone ought to remember that the kingdom of God promotes very specific values, such as loyalty to God over every human regulation (Acts 5:29), denial of self (Matthew 16:24, 25), self-abnegation (Galatians 2:20), sacrificial service to others (Matthew 20:26–28), collective good over individual expression (1 Cor­inthians 14:1–5), mutual cooperation over competition (1 Corinthians 3:1–9), preference for others over self-elevation (Philippians 2:3), esteem for the socially marginalized (Matthew 25:40, 45), and a host of other val­ues.

The servant of the Lord, Sr White (1966) uttered these words, “The walls of sectarianism and caste and race will fall down when the true missionary spirit enters the hearts of men. Prejudice is melted away by the love of God.”

1. In addition to creating an educative atmosphere, **a mentoringprogram across gender, racial, and cultural lines** would be established. As leaders, the gift of our mentoring can be a great assess in changing the mentality that pervades our institution. Sometimes, changes can be costly. But we train to what we value. We value evangelism; thus, we put time, money, and personnel resources in this area. We value stewardship; thus we pay persons to promote stewardship. In short, what we value we pay for; what we pay for, we value. If we value diversity and if we are to change the culture of our institution, investment in personnel and monetary resources should be set aside to this end.

White (1886) has this to say “There is no person, no nation that is perfect in every habit and thought. One must learn of another. Therefore, God wants the different nationalities to mingle together, to be one in judgment, one in purpose. Then the union that there is in Christ will be exempli­fied.”

1. And finally, in order for one to effectively change the culture of the institution, **diversify leadership committees are called for**. When we have people that just look like us and talk like us and behave just like us in leadership, and the remining is varied, productivity is hindered. Homogenous committees are not broad, rich, or deep enough to maximize our service effectiveness. Progress can not occur without change. Change is the price we pay for progress.

Ellen White reminds us of the advantage God offers to His community of faith. She says, “Christ tears away the wall of partition, the self-love, the dividing prejudice of nationality, and teaches a love for all the human family. He lifts men from the narrow circle that their selfish­ness prescribes; He abolishes all territorial lines and artificial distinctions of society. He makes no difference between neighbors and strangers, friends and enemies. He teaches us to look upon every needy soul as our neigh­bor and the world as our field.”

We can afford to let culture to break us apart. Both groups ought to realize that worship cannot be based on one own’s culture. According to Krabill (2013), there are four ways that worship relates to culture. Worship is transcultural, contextual, counter-cultural, and cross-cultural. In other words, Worship is beyond culture and at the same time relates to culture.

We should avoid viewing Worship as performance. It is not performance. Performance is used as a way of articulating or exalting the person in the spotlight. Many who call themselves worship leaders put themselves on display and ignore their true responsibility of bringing worshipers in closer relationship with God, thus worship transforms into entertainment. When the focus is on the gathered people, the aim of worship, then, is to satisfy the people’s needs and expectations. When worship is passed as a performance it is a falsification, a distortion. Besides, when the focus of worship in on human, it becomes a therapy. Worship cannot be based on culture nor that it is cultural expression. The worship experience is to enable us to seek God with passion and to guide us in our daily life.

True worship cannot be based on culture; worship is based on God. If worship were to be based on culture, the reasonable culture to use would be the Hebrew culture. Thus, we conclude by saying that worship ought to be biblically based. This is to say that worship and all of its elements must be based on divine revelation.

Worship is meant to result in the edification of God’s people, the building up of the church into the fullness of the stature of Christ. Through appropriate worship the church is to mature in the grace of Christ and develop the fruit of the Spirit. Self-seeking of any kind is inappropriate to the true worship of God. Worship is the manner in which the human approaches, encounters, and communes with God. It is through the worship experience that the believer receives the mind of Christ (I Cor 2:16), discerns His purpose, glories in His presence, learns His ways, and offers praise, thanksgiving, and obedience.

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