

"TAKE OFF YOUR SANDALS"

Moses was curious when he saw a bush burning but not being consumed. His curiosity drew him cautiously closer to this spectacle. As he approached, God spoke from the bush: "Do not come any closer. Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground" (Exodus 3:5; NIV). This same request was repeated to Joshua (Joshua 5:15). The ground that God occupies is holy ground. Nothing unholy is suited for that ground.

Shoes have trod in the filth and mire of the earthly pathway. This is the reason for the Eastern practice of taking them off before entering a temple or a palace. In Eastern nations even today, shoes are left at the door of private homes. The meeting room is not sacred. The assembly of worshipers coming into the presence of God is holy, no matter where that assembly gathers. Even under the shade of a tree or a brush arbor, if God is there, the assembly is holy.

An assembly of worshipers is no place for the filth and stench of the world. When worshipers enter the assembly of God, thoughts of the world should be left behind.

If one cannot *love* God and the world at the same time (1 John 2:15), neither can one worship God and the world at the same time. Worship calls us out of the world, into the power and presence of the One who desires to fill us with Himself. If our sufficiency is so inseparably tied to the world that we cannot leave worldly matters behind to draw into His presence, then we may never know what it means to find our sufficiency in Him.

BY LEAVING THE WORLD BEHIND

Paul, quoting from Isaiah 52:11, urged the Christians in Corinth, "Come out from their midst and be separate" (2 Corinthians 6:17). His urging was in the context of maintaining holi-

ness in their walk with God. They were tempted by idolatry in a city famous for its worship of Aphrodite. God had called them out of the world to be a holy people because He is holy. His holy nature cannot accept that which is unholy in His presence. The Corinthians, like all people, were having difficulty separating themselves from the world out of which God had called them.

God separated Abraham from the land of his fathers and brought him to a new land in order to raise up from him a nation of people for Himself (Genesis 12:2-4). He urged these people, the Israelites, to remain pure and separate to His calling. They were not to marry people of idolatrous nations or enter into alliances with them. God's concern was not their relationship with foreign people; His concern was their relationship with foreign gods.

Israel was called out of Egypt to worship and serve God. Moses was to tell Pharaoh, "Israel is My son, My firstborn. . . . Let My son go that he may serve Me" (Exodus 4:22, 23a). Repeatedly, Moses called on Pharaoh to let God's people go so that they might serve Him. When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, He assured him, "When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain" (Exodus 3:12b). God wanted His people to Himself. He did not want them to blend their worship of Him with worship of the gods of the Egyptians. God is not to be combined with anything or anyone else.

When the Israelites were preparing to cross the Jordan River to begin their conquest of Canaan, Joshua said to them, "Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you" (Joshua 3:5). "Sanctified," "holy," "consecrated," "cleansed": These words describe those who are different, set apart from the world for the worship and service of God.

Solomon was a great king who began his reign with humility and trust in God. He was used by God to accomplish one of the greatest tasks in the history of God's people; he was responsible for the building of the temple, the place where God established His name and maintained His presence among His people. In spite of this great achievement, Solomon displeased God, because he "loved many foreign women" from the nations of whom the Lord had said not to intermarry, lest they "turn your heart away after their gods" (1 Kings 11:1, 2). Solomon became more connected to the pagan world than to God.

When Judah returned from the Babylonian Captivity to rebuild the temple and the city of Jerusalem and to restore the worship of God, Ezra and Nehemiah repeatedly had to insist on separation from the pagan world that surrounded them. They had to be holy, separate from the world, before they could approach God in worship (Ezra 9; 10; Nehemiah 13).

The wise men of Matthew 2 were led from their homeland in the East by a star. They left their homes and families and traveled over miles of wasteland in a strange country, to find the One they desired to worship. At least temporarily, they turned their backs on the comforts and security of home for the greater joy and more lasting rewards of worshipping the Lord of heaven and earth.¹

When Jesus wanted to be with the Father, He went away by Himself (Matthew 14:23; Mark 6:46; Luke 6:12). He was furious with those who brought their business into the temple (Matthew 21:12). He rebuked those who gave their alms or prayed in such a way as to look good to the people on the street. He commanded them to do their giving and praying in secret (Matthew 6:1-6). Does "go into your inner room, close the door and pray to your Father" indicate separation from the world? Since we are to "come out" from the world, we should put aside worldly

concerns when we draw into the presence of God.

Of course, we must live in the world: God wants us to "shine like stars in the universe" (Philippians 2:15; NIV). Our Christian mission is in the world (Mark 16:15). We cannot fulfill that mission without building relationships with people of the world (1 Corinthians 5:10). To escape being "in the world," we would have to go out of the world; then our lights could not shine before others. However, when we come into the presence of God for worship, we must leave the world behind. Worship is retreat from the world.

In the world we may be opposed because of our faith or scoffed at because we are different. We may be ostracized from our families. Relationships may be strained. We may be thought of as fools. For a Christian, the world is a battle zone. I am convinced that this is the primary reason God wants His people to assemble (Hebrews 10:25). The worship assembly should be a safe haven from the world—a respite from the storm, a resting place, a time to gather strength

and to feed the hungry spirit. Worship is a time of comforting, an opportunity for the healing of wounds and the drying of tears. It is a time to listen to God, to hear again His promises and

His commands. It is a time of both confession of our frailties and profession of our faith. The assembly provides a time for encouragement that the world cannot give, a time of "refreshing . . . from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19).

When worldliness invades the church, one of the first places the effects are likely to become visible is in worship. Worship may come to resemble a concert or a political rally. In an effort to be relevant and find common ground with the world, church planters often allow polls taken among the "unchurched" people in the community to determine the agenda for the worship assembly. I doubt that those who rely on such polls deliberately intend to ignore instruction from God, but I wonder whose criteria have the greatest influence on worship in the final analysis. David Wells correctly observed, "Christian faith made relevant to the 'world' . . . will be



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¹Alfred P. Gibbs, *Worship: The Christian's Highest Occupation*, 2d ed. (Kansas City, Kans.: Walterick Publishers, n.d.), 21, 41.

Christian faith no longer relevant to God, to his Christ, to his truth.”²

For the sake of relevance, many are trying to blend Christian faith with the landscape of the world. They are trying to make faith more popular and palatable, but too much of God’s will is lost in this blending process. We may think that the best evangelistic strategy is to meet people where they are so that we can lead them to where God wants them to be. That seems to be what Paul meant by becoming “all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22b). However, Paul surely did not mean that worship should come to look more like the world in order to attract those in the world. Attempting to approach God in a worldly context may leave us feeling good and having enjoyed ourselves, but this focus may cause us to miss the purpose of worship. If worship is to make a statement to the world, that statement must be that we are faithful to our God. We do not want to be either insensitive or irrelevant to a world that so desperately needs God, but our primary desire must be to obey the voice of God.

BY ENTERING TO HONOR GOD, NOT TO BE ENTERTAINED

A growing tendency is to view worshipers as consumers. Businessmen have two approaches to increasing their business. One is to convince consumers that they need the product the manufacturer has to offer; the other is to find out what consumers want and produce it for them. In the last two decades, business has emphasized the latter of these. Manufacturers who produce what the public wants are sure to attract their share of clients. Religion has adopted this principle from the business world. If religion is viewed as a product to be consumed, then a reasonable approach—at least from a business standpoint—is to find out what the public wants in religion and provide it for them. The most immediately consumable “product” that religion has to offer is worship. Does the consuming public really want worship? What they do want is something that they find interesting, not bor-

ing. They want the worship assemblies to be exciting, enjoyable, and entertaining. Bluntly put, the public demands that worship be a fun time. To those who are attuned to God and desire to be in His presence, worship is exciting, enjoyable, and beneficial without any special arrangements to make the assemblies entertaining. Enjoyment is not contrary to the purposes of worship. However, does that mean we are justified in staging an entertaining performance every Sunday to satisfy the appetite of the consumer who is not attuned to God?

The rationale for having entertainment in worship is that we must do whatever is necessary to bring people into the worship assemblies, then attempt to draw them into the presence of God once they are there. Of course, the hope is that once they have developed an appetite for God’s presence, they will no longer need entertainment to lead them into worship. The fact is that this approach seldom works the way it is intended. The idea that entertainment can whet one’s appetite for true worship is questionable. Don Chambers concluded that entertainment “tends to diminish the sense of awe and reverence that should be present in an encounter with God.” He continued, “An encounter with God is serious business, and those who choose to come into His presence must do so with great reverence and awe.”³

In 1992 I was part of a group that went into a large Ukrainian city. We gained permission to hold a campaign in an outdoor theater in the heart of town. Many of the first people to come expressed disappointment that we only gave them Bibles. A few days before, another group from the U.S. had been there, giving away TVs and bicycles. They had rented a large sports arena and filled it by offering a ticket to everyone who entered the door. Each one who attended was instructed to fill out a ticket and drop it into a box. At the end of every service there was a drawing for the prizes. The more family members who attended, the greater the chance that someone in the family would win a prize. We heard people talking about the prizes for several days after the group had left town. They wondered why we did not do something similar. My

²David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 56.

³Don Chambers, *Showtime! Worship in the Age of Show Business* (Nashville: 21st Century Christian, 1997), 45–46.

impression was that this group had been drawing people only to giveaways, and not to God. Some of the local people considered us “second rate”; what we were offering did not appeal to them as much as what the previous group had offered. Without a doubt, that group had connected with the people, but had they connected any of the people with God?

Of course, in the business world, “the customer is always right.” The voice of the people replaces the voice of God. Personal opinion becomes the primary factor in determining what goes into public worship. David Wells noted that “the only acknowledged authority is that of private preference.”⁴ The consumer is accustomed to getting what he wants; otherwise, he will not buy the product.

CONCLUSION

In answering God’s call to worship, we must consider whether our worship is merely a reflection of our pagan culture or a bridge to connect our pagan culture with God. God has always been concerned that His people will be overly influenced by a pagan culture. At the same time, He wants us to build bridges to help people cross from pagan cultures into the Christian culture. Leonard Allen made this observation about modern religion:

[It prospers in a] deeply secularized environment. But, as we see most crassly in the New Age Movement, it becomes narcissistic, eclectic, and trendy. People value religion to the extent that it enhances and fulfills the self. They dabble in this, that, and the other, judging all of it by how well it works and how it makes them feel.⁵

Worship designed for the public may be a wonderfully therapeutic activity that enhances the self and makes us feel good, while not being an activity that invites God into our lives to transform us into His nature. The real danger of such worship is that rather than approaching God as He is, we tend to invent a god that is more “user friendly,” a god that we feel more comfortable with, one that is more like us and fits our secular lifestyle better. In other words, there is a

⁴Wells, 148.

⁵C. Leonard Allen, *The Cruciform Church* (Abilene, Tex.: Abilene Christian University Press, 2d ed., 1990), 36–37.

danger that we will create a god in our own image rather than worship the God who created us in His image. People may come away from this kind of worship feeling full, but they may be filled with more of self and less of God. The world deceives. The appeal of the world is able to twist our thinking and confuse our emotions. We may think and feel that we are worshipping when we are not.

If there is any place and time for God’s people to proclaim clearly that we are “not of this world” (John 17:14, 16), surely it is in the worship assembly. The assembly is holy ground. Symbolically, we must take off our shoes when we step out of the world into the assembly. We must leave the filth and strife of the world behind when we step into the presence of God. The world may not understand and may actually be offended at that proclamation, but Jesus Himself said, “. . . I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you” (John 15:19). Jesus did not always connect with His culture, and neither will we. His desire was to be connected with His Father. That should be our desire as well.

When we leave this world behind for good and enter the portals of heaven, we will be privileged to praise and glorify God around His throne forever. There, we will be part of an assembly which never ceases to say, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come” (Revelation 4:8). The holiness of God demands that our worship be holy, unaffected by the world.

A Psalm of Praise

When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,
The moon and the stars, which You have ordained;
What is man that You take thought of him,
And the son of man that You care for him?
Yet You have made him a little lower than God,
And You crown him with glory and majesty!
You make him to rule over the works of Your hands;
You have put all things under his feet,
All sheep and oxen,
And also the beasts of the field,
The birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea,
Whatever passes through the paths of the seas.

O Lord, our Lord,
How majestic is Your name in all the earth!
(Psalm 8:3–9).