

My Thoughts on "A Christian Affirmation 2005" #3

To be critical of the art of the masters may reveal more about the critic than about the art. For me to pick flaws with the "Affirmation" signed by respected men among us does not reflect on me too favorably. I am convinced, however, that some of their points miss the point so pointedly that someone needs to point them out. So please be patient with me.

In our heritage, my generation has tended to take prooftexts, mulch them together with the glue of many assumptions, and pour them over the mold or template of modern evangelical Christianity while claiming to be modeling after the first century teaching and practice of the church. Our first misguided step was in using the church as the model as though it were the creative power. The gospel produced the church by producing saved people rather than the church producing the gospel. Though later inspired writers gave us the teachings, those doctrines did not produce the church nor were they the gospel.

First, I will mention some minor points which I think their scholarship should have avoided. They assume that the first day of the week is "the Lord's day," a day devoted to special worship. The Lord's day, or day of the Lord, was not a day of the week but it was more an epoch -- the impending coming of the Lord, an evident Presence in activity, at the end of their age when redemptive history would be completed. There are no special Christian holy days in spite of our efforts to designate fifty-two Sundays each year while decrying Easter and Christmas. Each day is dedicated to the Lord in full-life worship and service. (See Free To Accept, Ch. 17, "*Thursday Is the Lord's Day Too!*")

There is no indication in the Scriptures that the first day of the week was set aside for special worship. Only two passages serve as prooftexts. In Acts 20:7 it is recorded, "*On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the morrow.*" This was a one-time experience as they were on a journey. It does not indicate that anyone had been doing that before or continued to do so afterward. It is purely an assumption to conclude that the breaking of bread was the Lord's Supper rather than a pot-luck meal in celebration of the visit by the great apostle. And they did not break the bread until after midnight which would be Monday morning. Any conclusion based on an unproven premise is invalid. Yet we are still trying to bind as dogma the partaking of the Lord's Supper every Sunday and only on Sunday from that text! Fat chance of uniting the religious world on such illogic.

God could have revealed in plain words as to when and how often the Supper was to be observed to please him, but he left that to our discretion, not to obey a law but to gain renewal of faith through it. If it serves your need, you may participate each Sunday and or any other day of the week, but you cannot make unity based upon that agreement.

The other passage mentioning the first day of the week is 1 Corinthians 16:2 where Paul asked the disciples to make a special collection for the needy in Judea by putting something aside and storing it up on the first day of the week. It does not mention

assemblies but indicates that the saving up of money was to be done individually for readiness for collection later. It requires much assumption to make that into a proof-text for making Sunday the Lord's day for special required assemblies and functions. Surely, we can find more vital things to forge into uniting dogma, if unity is to be on dogma.

Further, the "table of the Lord" is not the communion as the Affirmation implies. Some privileged people were honored to be fed "at the king's table" in OT history, meaning that they were fully supported by the king. So we are honored to eat at the table of the Lord, that is, to enjoy "all things that pertain to life and godliness" which the Lord has so richly provided us. (For more, read Chapter 18 of *Free To Speak*.)

This is no effort to minimize the value of the Lord's Supper. The Affirmation makes it the center of worship but, in doing so, it segments worship to assemblies and makes them a vertical upreach in an effort to please God rather than a horizontal outreach for the upbuilding of the believers. The writers of new covenant Scriptures do not use the terms "go to worship," "begin our worship," or "when our worship is finished." Those and other such expressions are terms we have invented betraying our concept that our lives are divided into the secular and the spiritual. Reading 1 Corinthians 14 should convince you that our assemblies are for mutual edification.

My friend in Billings, Montana, Wallace Bradberry <w_bradberry@yahoo.com> makes a forceful point in this email note to me: "The basic flaw in the theology of the Christian Affirmation has to do with Worship. But the CoC is not the only denomination which is guilty of that either. The vast majority of Christendom misses the point of what Jesus did. He came to Reconcile mankind to God. He came to be Emmanuel – God with us. In the OT, the Temple symbolized the presence of God to the Israelites. God didn't really dwell there, but it was a physical reminder that they were His Chosen People and it was the center of their worship. People today, who call themselves Christians, practice the OT concept of House of Worship. For some reason (perhaps it is lack of self-esteem) people do not manifest in their daily lives that they believe THEY are the House of Worship. Do I need to cite all the verses to you? (Some of them are: 1 Cor 3:16; 6:19; 1 Tim 3:15; 1 Pet 2:5. There are others.) Believers don't go to a House of Worship to do certain ecclesiastical hoop-jumping routines that they think God accepts as worship! **THEY ARE THE HOUSE OF WORSHIP!** God **DOES** dwell in the believers because that is **NOW** His Temple! Their lives offer "spiritual sacrifices" (1 Pet 2:5; Rom 12:1-2). And worship is **Not** on a certain day, with only certain other people, in a certain place, with a particular name on the sign on that place. And worship does not begin with an opening prayer as if that is somehow a signal for God to appear, and then He leaves after the closing prayer, and all that has transpired in between is called Worship! Give me a break! How can people read their Bibles and get that concept?"

I will add some more thoughts of my own, copied from Chapter 14 of *Free In Christ*, "*Pie-Shaped Religion*." What sized slice of the pie do we give God?

Paul would have us to give the whole pie to God. "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to

God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom 12:1). Paul alludes to worship under the Law of Moses. Under that system, the worshipper selected - set apart, dedicated, made holy, consecrated, sanctified - the animal to be offered. At the specified time, the animal was taken to the tabernacle/temple where the Presence of God dwelt. There it was presented to the priest to be offered by him through the high priest in a specified, ritualistic manner. The priest inspected the animal to see that it was acceptable; then he took its life as an offering. An offering is a sacrifice. To sacrifice is to offer. This procedure was considered acceptable worship.

Our sacrifice is the offering of the whole self -- the body and all that relates to it. It is set apart, committed, dedicated, made holy, sanctified in daily life rather than in a single dying act. This continuous offering is not taken to a priest or place at a certain time to fulfill ritualistic details. The sanctified one does not go to a priest, for he is a priest himself, offering himself through his High Priest. Worship and service does not take him to a temple, for *he is a temple* of the Presence of the Spirit. His service is not at set times with detailed rituals, for all of his life is an offering to God, totally sanctified.

This becomes acceptable sacrifice, a continuous offering. Worship and service is all that goes on in the temple! All the activity in the Jewish temple was not ritual, but the work of the Levites in caring for the vessels, mopping the floor, or repairing was a necessary part. The whole of the temple operation was a continuous offering even as, in a ritualistic way, the showbread and candles were continuous, living sacrifices.

Although there are different shades of meaning in the different words used for worship, there is no clear distinction between worship and service. Some actions and thoughts are directed specifically to God (we have ritualized these into a *worship service*); some are directed to other people, and some are rendered toward self in the maintaining of the temple. When one's life is dedicated to God, whatever he does is worship/service. It is not a matter of "Take time to be holy," for he is holy. It is not a matter of "Lord, we come before Thee now," for we are in Him and his Spirit is in us constantly. Through our commitment as a disciple, we "continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name" in action, speech, and song (Heb. 13:15).

As long as one is living with Christ as Lord in his life, he is a whole-life offering in worship. This will include all the mundane, more physical things that relate to life. Although he may be working at a job, mowing his lawn, vacationing with his family, or taking medicine, these are not selfish, earthly, materialistic goals. They are a part of the upkeep of the temple which is continually devoted to God in all of its purposes.

The concept of segmented worship/service makes some questions difficult to answer. If one hour of formal religion per week is not enough, will two, three, fifteen, or thirty be sufficient? Similar questions may be asked about the percentage of giving. If the size of the slice of the pie is determined, whose is the remainder? Is the rest holy? How could this picture whole-life, continuous offering?

Usually the wedge of the pie is made to relate to what has been defined as *the five items of worship* - singing, praying, teaching, giving, and communing (or "taking communion," as many say, as though communion is something you can eat or drink!). For many years, I accepted, taught, and defended this *five-items-of-worship* concept. After all, anyone who "searched the scriptures" here and there could find pieces of this puzzling pattern to put together. And surely no one would be so simple as to include fasting, the love feast, foot washing, lifting up holy hands, elders anointing the sick and praying for them, distributing to the needs of the saints, or the holy kiss as acts of worship!

We have defined and specified all the fine points of these five acts of worship feeling assured that the "All-Seeing Eye" watches intently to see that we tithe all the mint, dill, and rue. We have made God a God of quibbles. The awesome wrath of the God of the universe may be so aroused by our singing while passing the cup, for instance, that He may damn the whole assembly to eternal hell! How did we ever develop such theology?

Is a housewife worshipping God more acceptably while singing in an assembly than when expressing the same feeling while cooking dinner or while singing along with recorded spiritual songs? Is it worship to "lay by in store" to help the needy, but less so to help the poor yourself, or to work on the job so you will have resources to help the poor? Are adoring thoughts inspired by singing "How Great Thou Art" in assembly more worshipful than adoring thoughts inspired by viewing nature on a picnic? Are appreciative reflections on the atonement less worship when they come while lying awake in bed than those that come while participating in the Lord's Supper? The value is not in keeping details of a ritual precisely, but in what we think and express.

According to the system of sacraments, a sacrament is a visible rite or ceremony through which God's grace is supposed to be bestowed upon the worshipper. We have inherited too much of that concept, assuming that special grace is dispensed through our acts of worship, if we keep all the specified details of the rituals. Actions of worship do not draw down God's grace or achieve justification. We don't worship to be justified but because we have been made righteous by His gift. What we do in our assemblies, as well as in the daily consecrated life, is to gain strength and to impart strength to others.

Since we are the temple in which God dwells and our whole life is offered in incessant worship, the debates over what we can do in corporate worship begin to lose their relevance. Rituals of worship must not be made into a divisive issue. You are not compelled to worship with others who violate your convictions. For the sake of brevity, we will stop here intending to continue next week. []

(Cecil Hook: June 2005)

Talkin' Texas: Dalhart, in the Panhandle, is so named because it straddles the line between Dallam and Hartley Counties.

"I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24)