

WORSHIP BY DEMAND

His children are torn between love and hate for their father. The father provides for his children well and, when they make additional requests, he listens and often gives what they ask for. He assures the children that he loves them. In response to this, they are grateful, obedient, and expressive of their love for him.

There is, however, something that tends to spoil this beautiful relationship. The father makes some unusual demands of the children. He requires that each week each child must say some complimentary things about him like “You are the greatest father in the world,” “You really look handsome, Dad,” or “You are very generous to us.” Also, the father commands that on each Saturday night each child must give him a gift. He requires that the gift be boxed and wrapped in green paper and tied with a yellow ribbon. All gifts must be given on Saturday night.

If a child fails to meet all of these demands, he or she is scolded and warned never to be so indifferent to his demands again. If there is a repeated offense, the offending child is punished. One spring day his six year old girl was playing in the vacant lot next door where there were many wild flowers. She picked a bouquet of those flowers and, in her childish excitement, brought them to her father without thinking of restrictions. In extreme disgust the father threw the bouquet into the garbage and demanded an apology from the girl for being so presumptuous.

The art class of his nine year old son made posters which read, “Dad, I love you,” to give to their fathers. Without thinking of his father’s restrictions, he ran eagerly to his father and gave him the poster along with a big hug. The father shoved the child to the floor and tore the poster into bits while raving at the awe-stricken child about allowing other people to influence him to give unspecified gifts. An apology was demanded of the contrite child with the stern warning that, if he continued to let teachers and other kids lead him into such violations, he would be driven out of the home.

Once when the father’s birthday fell on Tuesday, the twelve-year-old daughter made him a surprise birthday cake, wrapped it properly and presented it to him. He rejected the cake and rebuked her sternly, informing her that it was her own self-will rather than love that had caused her to do such a thing.

Now you can understand why the children are torn between love and hate for their father. They all secretly long for the day when they become sixteen so that they, like their sixteen-year-old brother, may run away from home. The father has a terribly selfish and egocentric personality problem, and he is only using his children to build it up.

An Egocentric God

By now you surely recognize that I am not writing about family relationships. I have depicted the concept that many of our people have held about God and our worship and service as His children. Have we not portrayed our Father as having a colossal ego problem which would cause Him to demand our flattery to satisfy His vanity, to require our gifts to feed His pride, and to bind arbitrary whims to build up His sense of power? It is more a picture of a child abuser than of a child lover. It puts praise, adoration, and devotion on a demand basis. This is one of the cruelest aspects of legalism. This concept was born of the legal ritualistic specifics of the Law of Moses, was developed by the medieval church, and was inherited by the reformers and restorers.

This philosophy has turned our assemblies into vertical services in our efforts to obey God's commands to worship Him. We have turned what should be edification into a system of rituals. Our successful achievement is in dotting each *i* and crossing each *t* so as to perform the ritual "well-pleasing in thy sight." But pleasing God through proper performance of rituals is not the purpose of our meetings together. Yet we have defined, refined, alienated, and divided over the ritualistic details in such practices as teaching and communion.

God has not instructed us to assemble for the purpose of vertical communication. In the meetings, "Let all things be done for edification" (1 Cor. 14:26). Assemblies were never referred to as worship services in the New Testament writings. The disciples did not use our popular terminology such as *worship service*, *meet to worship*, or *begin our worship*. Paul does speak of our whole-life offering as our worship/service. "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). This refers not to assemblies and rituals but to whole life commitment with Jesus as Lord of our entire life.

What is the purpose of our meetings? Their purpose is not to fulfill arbitrary commands, to get our score cards checked, or to merit approval by keeping holy details. Neither are they attended that we may receive imparted grace. In the sacramental system it is thought that when specified rituals are performed exactly as prescribed by law, grace is imparted into the heart of the worshipper. That erroneous concept still holds too many of us.

We do not attend meetings that we may carry on a vertical communion, a sort of mystical seance with God like when persons participate in the Mass. Such persons enter the building quietly without noticing others, go to the end of the pew and genuflect to the presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist, enter their pew, kneel, and begin their prayers. Then they leave in silence also. They neither understand nor seek to fulfill any purpose of communication with other worshippers.

In our gatherings we are to encourage one another, pray for one another, teach and admonish one another in song, teach one another, give to help one another, and proclaim the atonement to one another. Yet these are no more activities of worship when done in the assembly than out of it. In these we fulfill the purpose of meetings which is to sustain the whole-life offering. In gatherings of disciples we may praise God, thank Him, and express reverential adoration. Such expressions are appropriate at any and all times whether in an assembly or not. But they are not the primary purpose of our fellowship gatherings.

God has no self-esteem problem that must be bolstered by man's praise. God is concerned with saving man, not adding to His self-image. That which edifies man fulfills God's purpose. When God described Himself as a jealous God and pled that we should have no other gods before Him, He was not speaking out of a character defect in Himself. He was expressing His love for us and His desire for our full fellowship so He can save us. He wants no alienation of our affections lest we suffer the effects of sin eternally. God wants us to glorify Him - to hold Him in high opinion and to present Him in favorable aspect - not for His selfish satisfaction, but to cause others to come to Him. Thus Jesus urged, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). It is for the good of man. His purpose has been to restore man to fellowship with Himself. It is accomplished now in Christ. Edification helps us to sustain that fellowship.

Because of their very nature praise, adoration, and devotion cannot be demanded. "You praise me and give me gifts, or I will consign you to eternal hell!" – is that the threat of our loving Father? Can threats bring forth praise? If God had demanded the last penny of the poor widow (Luke 21:1-4), we would see her appeasing a demanding God rather than offering an expression of devotion and love. If Mary had anointed Jesus with expensive nard to keep a law which demanded it, the beautiful example of undemanded and extravagant love and praise would have been lost (John 12:1-11). The sinful woman (Luke 7:36-50) might kiss Jesus' feet to keep a command, but tears do not come by command. Our praise, adoration, devotion, and worship is most appropriate when it is overflowing, spontaneous, and extravagant like that of those three women.

A father is pleased when his children thank him, compliment him, and give him gifts. But they demonstrate this love because of the father's favor, not to gain his favor. A rebellious child may give gifts to appease his father, but that becomes disgusting. We do not worship God to gain His favor but because He has shown His favor.

Many people are torn between love and hate for the Father because they have considered him as selfish and tyrannical, demanding praise and sacrifice. How different it is, however, when we can interpret our relation with him as a free interaction of love!

(Cecil Hook; Chapter 15 of *Free In Christ*, written in 1984.)

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