

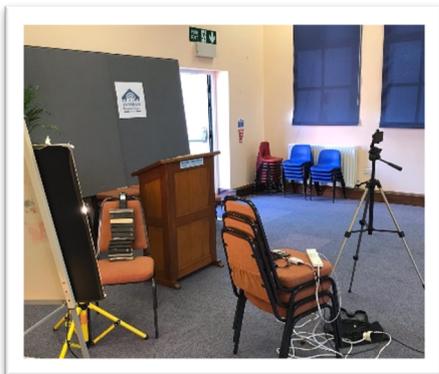
The Essence of Divine Worship in a Post Lockdown World

Forgive me for a personal reflection. At this present time I am in the rather unusual position of having been a Pastor for more days during Lockdown than before. As Lockdown now unwinds it is good to reflect on how these past months have affected our lives and particularly our Worship.

Lockdown Commences

At the Induction service on 7th March we knew the Covid-19 Pandemic was rapidly taking hold, and just days later a gathering of over 500 would have been unlawful. Restrictions to normal life were imminent with Lockdown commencing on 23rd March. Quickly we had to adapt the way we Worship, Witness and Fellowship as a Church.

At the time we did not know that the restrictions would mean 105 days would pass before a form of corporate public Worship would be physically possible again (5th July 2020), and then only for some, and with ongoing restrictions.



The first few weeks of Lockdown were very challenging for everyone. So many decisions had to be taken, and in such a short period of time, with few precedents to draw on. Decisions such as whether to live stream or pre-record services, record at home or in a make-shift studio, whether to hold a virtual Lord's Table or not; and how many prayer meetings to hold, just to name but a few.

More importantly, could we provide Pastoral care remotely, especially to the elderly, vulnerable, and socially isolated, who would surely need more spiritual support and encouragement, not less.

With responsibilities shared, tasks taken up by many not by one, including young believers, the burdens lifted and we had the opportunity to "one-another".

As we look back over these months, the Lord went before us, just as He did when children of Israel entered the unknowns of Canaan under Joshua's leadership. Problems sleep deprived nights could not solve, were addressed with faith and prayer strengthened, and we saw the Lord provide.



Alongside the challenges there were also new opportunities and encouragements. New technologies have been embraced. New people have been contacted as 600 free bibles have been given out. Local care homes have been supported with bibles for the residents' rooms and day room and staff and residents encouraged to access our live stream services. Sunday School was moved online in just a week and many new and existing worshippers have been able to join us on our You Tube Channel. "This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes." Mark 12:11

Lockdown Lessons for Life

We have learned so much and re-learned old lessons. Members have given testimony to the Lord dealing with them in new ways, resulting in spiritual growth in a few months, that might have taken years without Lockdown.

We have been reminded that God is Sovereign and in supreme control. He rules the nations of the world. Many have been caused to think of their 'never dying souls' perhaps as never before. John Ryland puts it this way:

*Sovereign Ruler of the skies,
Ever gracious, ever wise!
All my times are in Thy hand,
All events at Thy command.*

But perhaps most beneficial lesson of all, is the least obvious one. We have re-learned a 'back-to-basics' approach for life with many unhelpful things swept away. We have had more time to read, pray, appreciate, and give thanks to God and others.

Many though have been shaken. No doubt in time we shall discover, even more have been traumatised as a result of Covid-19 and the loss of loved ones. Some have turned to worship who were non-worshippers. Others seem to have decided to make the NHS their sole focus for praise or channelled their energies into new campaigns for justice.

However, it is remarkable that at a time when UK churches have been emptied, many more have heard the Word of God than perhaps since the 1950's.

We have also seen, and are not surprised, that with more time, the sin of the human heart has erupted. Domestic abuse has risen by 50%. There has been even less respect for Government, law and Civil Society. God's Word told us these things would be so, especially in a country that has turned its back on God and His high and holy laws. That has rejected His totally consistent, timeless, and unchanging truth.

Worship in Lockdown and beyond

As Christians, one of the major impacts for us has been the sudden stripping back of our Worship. Not being able to meet together physically, and then unable to sing in public Worship, has made us think deeply about what true Worship is and is not. Every believer has a desire to Worship the great Creator, adoring Him and extolling His sublime attributes with praise, and to do this together.

After all, God has made us to be worshipping creatures, and if we do not Worship a transcendent Almighty God, we will worship something or someone else. The Psalmist says *"Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory, for thy mercy, and for thy truth's sake."* Psalm 115:1

The essence of true Worship is to draw near to God. To come into His holy presence with thanksgiving and with joy. The way His people are to draw near is prescribed by God Himself. Drawing near is not a right, but a tremendous privilege, the highest a human being can have.

Checklist of Questions for True Worship

Our forms of Worship have been challenged. This has been a good thing. Public prayer meetings have been replaced with Zoom prayer meetings, sung worship with read worship. So it is right that we ask some vital questions:

- ✓ *What is the true Essence of Divine Worship?*
- ✓ *Is our Worship mostly Vertical (for God) or Horizontal (for us)?*
- ✓ *Does our Worship take us into the presence of a Holy God?*
- ✓ *Is the true test of acceptable Worship God or me?*
- ✓ *Does it lift up the flesh or give all glory to God?*
- ✓ *Is it built on music or deep bible truth?*
- ✓ *Does it primarily engage the mind or senses?*

There has been such a fundamental shift in the Worship practices of Evangelical Churches in the UK and beyond in the last 40-50 years, it could make us think that one of the reasons the Lord has allowed Covid-19 is to be a challenge to the way we Worship. We remember He says: *"I am the LORD: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images."* Isaiah 42:8

Often, we hear friends comment on the Worship of a particular church. Or we hear how the choice of which church to attend, is based solely on personal preference, as though God's instructions and what His Word says is an after-thought. Yet God's Word is clear, we are to be God centred in our Worship.

Biblical worship is never to be crafted or based on human artistry. It can never be a performance requiring a paid-for ticket.



The children of Israel were warned in the strongest terms that when they made a new altar for Worship, not even a tool was permitted to be used to craft the



stones. They were to be natural stones, never the result of man's effort or craft. *"And if thou wilt make me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone: for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it."* Exodus 20:25

As we return to some form of public Worship, without singing for the time being, may our Worship be examined by God. May He show us if it is honouring to Him, conforming to the instructions of His Word which should rightly regulate all our Worship. Then and only then will it be pleasing to Him and a blessing to each will follow.

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