

Understanding Christian Worship

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Spiritual Growth: How A Christian G.R.O.W.S. Series

Romans 16:25-27

One of the great challenges for someone unfamiliar with church is to overcome the initial shock of what they discover when they go to church. To some degree, the same thing is true of a person who is looking for a new church. There are so many hurdles to overcome regarding the reality of what we discover in the church.

I remember the first church service I ever attended at a little church in Cleveland when I was 18 years old. Many of you know that I come from a Jewish background, and through a woman I met at college in Cleveland at Case Western Reserve, I was led to embrace Jesus as the Jewish Messiah and as my Savior. Then this woman, who is now my wife, named Marlene took me to church. It was 1974. I had a big curly Afro. I was used to dressing in flannel shirts, jeans and work boots. I was coming out of the whole drug and rock-and-roll culture. And I was going to church.

Now, there was nothing about church that I understood. I didn't know when you were supposed to stand or sit. I didn't know what the books were that were in the backs of the pews. I didn't know any of the songs. I didn't understand why everyone in the church was really old. And to complicate matters further, there was an elderly woman, who was probably about my age now (50 or so, but I took her to be elderly), a very sweet woman. She asked the church if there was anyone new there. Marlene said, "Richie, you have to stand. They want you to stand now. You are new here."

So I stood. I was the only one new in the church that Sunday. This woman invited me forward to the church and in front of everyone, she put her arm around me, pinned a little button that had a little cross on it to my lapel, and while her arm was around me, she sang me a song, "There's Welcome Here." The congregation joined in and I was introduced to the church. Some people would have been put off by all of this. But even coming from a totally different background, I found the whole experience rather sweet. And I thought this woman was really sweet.

You see I had met Jesus. And so Marlene could probably have told me, "Hey, you know what we do here at church is dancing in a circle around the building while we sing worship songs to Jesus," and I would have said, "Fine." I knew absolutely nothing about church.

It is so easy though to struggle in worship because of what you see as you look around you in church.

- Why is that baby crying?
- What does that banner mean?

- I'm not sure that I like the colors in this room.
- I wish those people four rows away from me would stop talking.
- Isn't it annoying when people come in late and push their way into your row?
- Why do they sing so much?
- Why don't they sing any hymns?
- I'm not sure I like that female singer's voice.
- Why are people in this church raising their hands?
- Why did that woman start crying during that one song? Her mascara began to run and she looked like a little raccoon. I mean religion is fine in its place, but she seemed to be getting carried away.

C.S. Lewis, the great Christian writer and English professor from Oxford University, once wrote a book that I've quoted on a number of occasions, called *The Screwtape Letters*. It is written in the form of a satire in which a senior devil named Screwtape instructs his nephew, a junior devil, in the art of temptation. In one of the early letters from Screwtape, this senior devil instructs the junior devil about how to tempt people when they go to church. Let me read to you from *The Screwtape Letters*:

One of our great allies at present is the Church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the Church as we see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That, I confess, is a spectacle that makes our boldest tempters uneasy. But fortunately it is quite invisible to these humans. All your patient sees is the local grocer with rather an oily expression on his face bustling up to offer him one shiny book containing a liturgy, which neither of them understands, and one shabby little book containing corrupt texts of a number of religious lyrics, mostly bad, and in very small print.

When he gets to his pew and looks around him, he sees just that selection of his neighbors whom he has hitherto avoided. You want to lean pretty heavily on those neighbors. Make his mind flit to and fro between an expression like, "The body of Christ," and the actual faces in the next pew. It matters very little, of course, what kind of people that next pew really contains. You may know one of them to be a great warrior on the Enemy's side. No matter. Your patient, thanks to Our Father Below, is a fool. Provided that any of those neighbors sing out of tune, or have boots that squeak, or double chins, or odd clothes, the patient will quite easily believe that their religion must therefore be somehow ridiculous. All you have to do is keep out of his mind the question: "If I being what I am, can consider that I am in some sense a Christian, why should the different vices of those people in the next pew prove that their religion is mere hypocrisy?"

And what I would add, if I were tempting people, is to make sure that people entirely focus their attention on what's going on in the room around them rather than on God. Keep people's thoughts at the most superficial level possible – on their neighbor, on the comfort of the chair, on the loudness of the music, the heat in the room. At all costs, keep them from focusing their attention on God.

I've been doing a series that I've titled *How A Christian G.R.O.W.S.* and I've said that it is God's desire that on January 1, 2009 you wake up and say, "The year 2008 was a great year for me!" It might not be a great year for some of you circumstantially. It might not be a great year for you financially, or health-wise. But every one of us could wake up on January 1, 2009 and say, "2008 was a great year for me spiritually. I feel closer to God than I've ever felt in my life. I feel like my life is changing in a positive direction, in the direction that God has for me. I'm obeying God in a way that I never have before. I'm kinder than I was a year ago. I'm more forgiving. I'm less judgmental. I'm less angry. I'm less anxious. I'm less fearful."

But these qualities that God wants to put into our lives and that we would like to have in our lives are not automatic. I've repeatedly said throughout this series that you don't get closer to God, or become the kind of person that you want to become, simply by marking time. You don't get closer to God and become a more loving, more gracious, less judgmental person by spending all your free time vegging out in front of the TV or by playing computer games. There are certain practices, certain disciplines that need to be put into our lives in order for us to grow. I've used the acronym G.R.O.W.S. to form the structure of the kinds of things that we need to do to spiritually grow as a Christian.

G.R.O.W.S.

G=Giving

R=Relationships

O=Outreach

W=Worship

S=Spiritual Disciplines

Today we're going to talk about worship. I've called today's talk *Understanding Christian Worship*. Let's pray.

Romans 16:25-27

Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, 26 but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to faith and obedience—27 to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

The place we begin in understanding Christian worship is where Paul begins. It is found in the first phrase, "now to him."

Worship is directed to him.

The way we always get into trouble regarding our understanding of worship is we forget that worship is focused on God. It is directed to God. It is not primarily about us.

Now, this is a revolutionary thought for us as Americans because we approach everything as consumers. We have 350 brands of cough medicine; 200 brands of running shoes; 25 kinds of white bread in the supermarket. Just try these days to find a pack of normal chewing gum. Go to the gas station little grocery mart and look for Wrigley's Spearmint Gum. I don't know if they even make it anymore. You can buy a gum called "Ouch!" which is sold in a package that looks like a bandage box. Can you imagine the marketing person who came up with this one? What's next – gum sold in a package that looks like a hypodermic needle? We could advertise it, "This will feel like a small pinch!" There are literally a thousand types of silly gum names.

We approach everything as consumers. We think that church is primarily for us, and its not. We think that the church should meet our needs, but it is not primarily for us. That's why the Vineyard's vision statement reads:

We seek to be a R.E.L.E.V.A.N.T. church that exists not for ourselves but for Christ and for the world.

We Christians even think that worship is for us. And worship is not primarily about how your or my emotions are touched, or our feelings about the music – whether it was too loud or too soft, or if we liked the song selection, or we didn't like the song selection. I love what Marva Dawn, the spiritual writer, said in one of her books. She said to someone who was criticizing the worship program at a certain church:

Have you ever considered that we weren't worshipping you?

I heard the theologian, Simon Ponsonby, confess that one day he was standing in the back of a church service critiquing the worship. He was thinking to himself that a particular song's lyrics were a bit thin. He was sitting in the back reading the song lyrics and shaking his head thinking, "I don't like this song." The Holy Spirit arrested his attention and God said to him, "I like it."

Christian worship is directed to God. And you and I can't even get to first base in understanding Christian worship unless we are willing to regularly repent of our consumer mindset regarding what we like and don't like, what's going on with us and our emotions, what's going on with our neighbors. We can't even get to first base unless we begin with the idea that we come to church to worship God, to focus our attention on God.

What distinguishes the people in the Bible in terms of their worship is that their worship is entirely focused upon God. Down through the centuries, what set the saints apart was this ability to focus their thoughts on God. Bernard of Clairvaux wrote this back in the Middle Ages:

*Jesus the very thought of thee
With sweetness fills the breast.
But sweeter far thy face to see*

And in thy presence rest.

Many of you know that famous hymn, *Be Thou My Vision*. It is all about seeing God. It is all about focusing on God.

*Be thou my Vision
O Lord of my heart;
Naught be all else to me,
Save that Thou art –
Thou my best thought,
By day or by not,
Waking or sleeping,
Thy presence my light.*

Or the simple chorus that we sing here at Vineyard:

*Open the eyes of my heart, Lord.
Open the eyes of my heart.
I want to see You.
I want to see You.
High and lifted up
Shining in the light of Your glory.*

To worship God we've got to repent of our consumer mindset and our focus on our surroundings, and deliberately focus our hearts upon God.

Who is this God that we are directing our attention to? To whom is Christian worship directed? The apostle Paul says:

Romans 16:25

Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel...

Worship is directed to the God who is able.

Able to do what? Paul says: Able to establish us, to strengthen us, to keep us from giving up or giving in. You need a reason to worship God? Consider what is arrayed against you every day.

You know, we American Christians view the Christian life as being essentially like a Caribbean Cruise. I don't know if you've ever been on a Caribbean Cruise. I went on my first and only cruise a few years ago. I woke up in the morning and wandered to breakfast. I had about 1500 calories at breakfast because you need to carb up for the morning's lounge in a deck chair by the side of the pool. I laid around all morning reading. The only decision to make was should I roll over or should I continue to lie on my stomach. Maybe I would get up and dip in the pool. All morning long, the wait staff walked by with food lest I starved between breakfast and lunch.

Then we waddled into the dining room to carb up for the afternoon's events by the side of the pool. All afternoon they cooked burgers and chicken. They were coming by with drink offerings.

We American Christians think that's normal living. And we think that if we're followers of Christ, life should be easy, life should be like a Caribbean Cruise, or like lying in a hammock in your backyard – no struggles, no storms. But you read through the Bible and you discover that for God's people, life is typically described as warfare. It is never described as a Caribbean cruise. Life is hard, life is a struggle, and life is a fight. That there isn't something abnormal going on when you have problems or when your family has problems, this catches most of us Christians totally off guard. We constantly say, "I don't know why this is happening to me. I can't figure out why things are so difficult. Something must be really wrong. God must not exist. Or if he does exist, he must not love me. Life should be easier than this."

To which the apostle Peter responds in 1 Peter 4:12:

1 Peter 4:12

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.

Nothing is more important than that you recognize how normal it is for trial and difficulty to come into your life. It is normal for things to break down. It is normal for your car to have problems. It is normal for your appliances to have problems. It is normal for your sink to be stopped up. It is normal to not have all the money you want. Relational difficulties are normal. Feeling lonely at times is normal. Family stress is normal. Cancer and heart disease is normal. Having a bad boss is normal. Technology that fails is normal.

God is able to establish us.

Why do I worship God? It is because God alone is able to strengthen me, to establish me. When I am tempted to self-pity, God alone is able to establish me. When I'm tempted to throw in the towel and believe that there is no God or that God doesn't care, or that God's promises are false, I worship God because only God could have given me the endurance to continue following after him for the past 34 years. I could not have done it on my own.

See, I understand that I am in a war and that I've got a spiritual enemy way too powerful for me. This enemy attacks me through other people. Do you know this one, friend? Have you had someone say something to you recently that was so hateful, so disturbing, that it had a particular power to wound you? Have you ever had someone say or do something to you that seemed demonically energized, that was able to find its way under your defenses like a dart that knew just where to hit you and hurt you? Do you understand that you have a spiritual enemy who can attack you through other

people, who can energize words and actions so as to wound you, demoralize you, seduce you? You are not just dealing with flesh and blood. You are in a war. Satan comes along to demoralize you.

We have a powerful enemy who can assault our minds with self-destructive thoughts. Some of you struggle with despair and discouragement. Some of you have come to the place where you've seriously contemplated taking your own lives.

Satan can exaggerate your problems. He can make you fearful and tempt you to anxiety or to anger. He can stir up our pride and our lusts. How do you deal with an enemy stronger than you? How do you deal with someone who has so many weapons at his disposal? Only by the strength that God provides.

And when we get in touch with our own weaknesses, there's even more reason to worship. This is why we worship, friends. Because we discover there is one who is able to establish us.

In the face of enemy assault, God is able to establish us. Why do we worship? We discover that there is one who is able to establish us in the face of our own weakness.

The apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 13:5:

2 Corinthians 13:5

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?

When we examine ourselves, friends, we frequently find particular weaknesses that we have. We have tendencies and access points that we need to particularly guard. When you examine yourself, you will see in your life there are frequently open doors to the enemy. There are dark veins that run down in your life just as there are dark veins in my life because of our past, because of things that have happened, because of our family backgrounds, because of our temperaments, because of bad, sinful, habitual choices that we've made. There are hooks that the enemy is able to set in us.

Are you aware of that? Do you see that in your life? Are you enough in touch with yourself to say, "Yes, I see what my weak places are, what my vulnerabilities are. I've done enough reflection, enough looking in the mirror that I know the places that the enemy has access to my life and I know that my will is not enough to do battle with the enemy."

Some of you might say, "I'm a sitting duck in forming emotional attachments with the opposite sex. I regularly fall into unhealthy relationships at work, or in college. Or there is someone who just seems to be drawing me in and I know this is not what God has." And you realize that you don't have the strength in yourself to resist this emotional attachment that might lead to a physical affair.

Are you in touch with your own weaknesses? If you are, that is a cause for you to worship God even more. To say, "Lord, apart from you, you who are able to establish me, I would never be doing life successfully. It's only your strength and your grace that has gotten me through this far."

God is able to establish others.

I worship God not only because he is able to establish me. I worship God because he is able to meet the need of every person that I've talked with. You know, as a pastor, I get together with folks and they tell me the most dreadful stories. I've shared some of them with you. Someone comes up to you and describes this really horrible problem. Their daughter is addicted to heroin. Their marriage has been shattered into a thousand pieces because of unfaithfulness. The person describes a brutal divorce they are going through. Someone they love and care about has a terrible health problem. They are suffering from MS or they have cancer that is ticking away in their bodies like a time bomb. You listen to people and you ask, "What have I got to offer them? They've got this Goliath-sized problem and here I am, like David, with five little stones. What do I have that is going to help them with their great problem?"

I don't have anything except to point that person to God who can establish them, who can strengthen them, who can give them everything they need, even with their overwhelming problems. It is not our smarts that we Christians bring to others. It is not our phenomenal counsel. People don't ultimately need me, and difficult as it may be to believe, people ultimately don't need you. What suffering people ultimately need is the strength to keep going that only our omnipotent God can provide. People don't need to be pointed to our rather superficial solutions to their problems. People need to be pointed to God who can do anything, for whom nothing is too hard and no problem is too great.

You come to a worship service and you are involved in Christian worship, what should be going on in your mind? You should be saying: I am right now directing worship to a God who is absolutely enough to handle any problem that I have. And not only that, but God is enough to handle any problem of anyone who I care about and love.

Who are we worshipping?

Worship is directed to Christ

Romans 16:25

Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past,

When we come to God, we meet him in Jesus Christ. Christian worship is always Christ-centered worship. See, the gospel message that Paul preached wasn't simply that Jesus is the means by which salvation comes into the world. Jesus is the salvation.

He is our salvation

This is what the old man, Simeon, said when the baby Jesus was just 8 days old and brought to the temple to be presented to the Lord and to be circumcised. Simeon said in Luke 2.25-32:

Luke 2:25-32

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. 27 Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: 29 "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. 30 For my eyes have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."

And in your Bible, I want you to focus on these words:

Luke 2:30

For my eyes have seen your salvation,

Jesus is not merely seen as the bringer of salvation. We don't simply worship someone who accomplished salvation. When we worship, we are worshipping Christ who is our salvation.

Friends, do you know that the New Testament constantly personalizes what we make impersonal? Christianity is not a religion. It is a relationship with Jesus, who makes God known to us. See, Christianity is not about concepts or theories, or clever ideas. So often we Christians are confronted in the university setting, or in the workplace, or in the online chat room, with the argument that says: What makes you Christians think your ideas, your concepts about reality, your philosophy of life is better than the thousands of other ideas, concepts, and religions that everyone else believes and follows? We Christians often engage in debating our ideas and our philosophies of life trying to show how our ideas and our philosophies are superior to other ideas and philosophies.

But listen, what we Christians offer to people, what we invite people to embrace is not a superior philosophy of life. What we offer is Jesus. Simply Jesus. Bishop Stephen Neill, who was a scholarly missionary, said, "Our task is to go on saying to the Muslim with infinite patience – 'Sir, consider Jesus.' We have no other message."

Christian worship is directed to a person named Jesus Christ. Christian worship is not about ideas. It is not about theories. It is not about a philosophy, or a system of beliefs. Our worship is directed to a person – Jesus Christ.

You know, impersonal ideas have very little power to change anyone's life. But the New Testament constantly presents us not with an impersonal, abstract idea, but with an all-loving, all-glorious, all powerful person – Jesus Christ.

The proclamation is of Jesus Christ. And this Jesus Christ is the key to unlocking the whole of scripture.

He is the key to understanding scripture

The apostle Paul says in verses 25-26:

Romans 16:25-26

Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, 26 but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to faith and obedience.

Jesus is the key that unlocks the prophetic writings. When you encounter Jesus, you suddenly have the key to understanding the whole Old Testament.

A lot of people read the Bible as if it were two separate books, almost entirely unrelated. They say, "Well, that was the Old Testament and we don't need to bother with that. We are a New Testament people." Or you hear folks say, "Well, that was the God of the Old Testament, but we worship the God of the New Testament Old Testament."

Do you know one of the earliest heresies in the church's history was one that tried to separate the Old Testament and the New Testament, to make Christianity a religion simply based on the New Testament and not the entire Bible, including the Old Testament? Do you know you can't understand the New Testament unless you see how the entire message and ministry of Jesus is rooted in the story of Israel and the Old Testament? Jesus is the fulfiller, the culmination of everything that Israel, and indeed, what the entire Old Testament pointed to. The apostle Paul, in 2 Corinthians 1:20, says, "*No matter how many promises God has made, they are yes in Christ.*" In other words, all the promises of the Old Testament have found their fulfillment in Christ.

Jesus said the same thing in John 5:39 in talking with the Pharisees. He challenges them saying, "You diligently study the scriptures because you think by them you possess eternal life. These are the scriptures that testify about me." These Old Testament scriptures talk about me. After Jesus' resurrection, he talked with two disciples on the road to Emmaus and we read in Luke 24, "How foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken. Did not the Christ have to

suffer these things and then enter into his glory? And beginning with Moses and the Prophets he explained them and what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself.”

Why do we worship Jesus? Jesus is the message of the Bible. Whether you are reading in the Old Testament or the New Testament, the Bible is a book about Jesus. Jesus is the Temple that the Old Testament points to. So many people are excited about some new archeological dig at the Temple site in Jerusalem and the possible building of the Old Testament Temple. Jesus is the Temple. We don't need a new Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus is the place where we meet with God. As the glory of God dwelt in the Holy of Holies in the Old Testament Temple, John tells that the glory of God dwelt and remained in Jesus. Jesus is our Holy of Holies.

Why do we worship Jesus? Jesus is the great high priest who intercedes for us before the throne of God. We don't need a priest today to confess our sins to. Jesus is our priest. He is our mediator. Only his priesthood is eternal. His priesthood is perfect. Jesus is the final sacrifice that the Old Testament sin offerings and guilt offerings and burnt offerings pointed to. Only his sacrifice doesn't need to be repeated every day. It is a once for all final sacrifice. God is not looking for another sacrifice from you to pay for your sins. We have our only needed sacrifice in Jesus.

Why do we worship Jesus? Jesus is the fulfillment of God's purpose for Israel. But unlike unfaithful Israel, Jesus is the faithful Son who chooses to love and obey God. Jesus fulfills Israel's national destiny to be light to the world and to bring all the nations in the world to God. Jesus is Noah's Ark. If we are in him, we are saved from God's judgment. Jesus is the ram caught in the thicket that God supplied in place of Isaac. Jesus is the patriarch Joseph, loved by his father, rejected by his brothers, sold to the Gentiles, unfairly punished, but eventually becoming the right hand man of the king, who accomplishes the salvation of many.

Why do we worship Jesus? Jesus is Jonah in the depths for three days, but raised. He is Amos warning us about a coming judgment. He is Jeremiah weeping over the nation as he sees judgment coming. He is Ezekiel prophesying the Temple's destruction. He is Isaiah preaching comfort and good news to those in captivity. Jesus is the wisdom of the book of Proverbs. He is David's Lord in the Psalms. He is the Passover Lamb, the Day of Atonement, and the Sabbath Rest. He is the exodus from Egypt, the end of the Babylonian exile, the Kinsmen Redeemer. He is the servant of Isaiah 53, and the mighty God of Isaiah 9.

Do you get it? Everything – every prophet, every prophesy, every sacrifice, every bit of the law, every promise, every symbol – everything Israel was or ever hoped to be was fulfilled in Jesus, who we worship. It all points to Jesus. Jesus is the center. Jesus is the meaning. Jesus is the climax. Jesus is the culmination. That is why Christian worship is worship directed to Jesus.

Who is worship directed to?

Worship is directed to the only wise God

Romans 16:26-27

But now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to faith and obedience — 27 to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

The Greek for “only” is “mono.” The Greek for God is “theo.”

only = mono
God = theo

Mono-theo, it is where we get the word “monotheist” which describes religions who believe in only one God. Now, the claim that you should worship only the one true God, the Christian God, is perhaps the most objectionable feature of Christianity for 21st century Americans.

The challenge of God’s uniqueness

How in the world can you Christians claim that there is only one God, your God? That strikes people today as being so narrow, so arrogant, so intolerant. If the claim of uniqueness for the Christian God is something that has been a hindrance for your faith, let me try to offer a few thoughts for your consideration. First of all, Christians do not, or at least should not, believe that they’re necessarily better than people of other faiths. In other words, Christians should not, if they understand their own Christian faith, believe that they are necessarily more moral than other people, or necessarily nicer than other people. See, our faith tells us that there are lots of people who are part of other religions, or no religion, who will live lives morally superior to Christians. How could that be?

Let me put it this way, a lot of Americans think that the way that you make it to heaven is if you live a good life. So they have a view that God weighs up, at the end of your life, your good deeds and your bad deeds. If your good deeds outweigh your bad deeds, you will make it to heaven.

But the Bible doesn’t speak to us of a God who gives us heaven as a reward for our moral achievements. The gospel that we read is not God’s pep talk urging us to try harder, be better, be nicer. The message of the gospel that we Christians have received is, to quote Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer’s Church in New York,

God’s grace does not come to people who morally outperform others, but to those who admit their failures to perform and who acknowledge their need for a Savior. Christians, then, should expect to find non-believers who are much nicer, kinder, wiser, and better than they are. Why? Christian believers are not

accepted by God because of their moral performance, wisdom, or virtue, but because of Christ's work on their behalf.

The claims of uniqueness for the Christian God are not claims of our moral superiority. We Christians are not claiming that we are unique, or we are special. We are claiming that the God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ is special.

And here is the second thing. It is really important that we understand that Christianity is not identified with any particular culture, or ethnicity, or political perspective. And this really does make Christianity unique among the world's religions because to this day, though Islam has spread across the world, it is still dominated by Arab culture, and the Koran is properly read only in Arabic. And Muslims do speak of a Muslim culture. The lands that have been the center of Hinduism remain the center of Hinduism. And likewise, China, that's been the center of Confucianism, remains the center of Confucianism. Christianity is the only religion of which it can truly be said that it cannot be identified with any particular culture, or ideology, or political persuasion, or ethnicity in the world.

I know that there have been many attempts, even in America in recent years, to connect Christianity with a particular political ideology. There are some around the world that think that Christianity is connected with the West or with America. This is empirically false. Christianity began by being a Jewish religion dominated by Jews in Jerusalem and then it moved to Europe and North Africa, and was dominated by Greek speakers, and later Latin speakers. It then became primarily a religion of Western Europe and North America. And today, the vast majority of Christians in the world live in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. In fact, at the current rate of growth, within 30 years, Christians will constitute 30%, or nearly 500 million, of China's 1 ½ billion people.

Yes, we Christians claim that there is only one true God that we should worship, but that one true God is available to everyone in the world. A relationship with Jesus is not a Caucasian deal, or a Gentile deal, or an American deal. A relationship with Jesus is not just a deal for winners and it is not just for losers. It is for everyone. It is not only for adults, but for children. Not just for children, but for adults. Not just for Gentiles, but for Jews. This thought that the God we find in Jesus Christ is for everyone makes me want to fall to my knees and worship.

Back in college, I was friends with a young man who got involved in Eastern religions, especially some esoteric philosophies and meditation techniques. He left college for six months and went to California to be a part of a Trappist Monastery where they were practicing some form of Zen Buddhism. The guy was into all of it. He was really intelligent, very bright. I used to talk with him about Jesus and what Jesus accomplished for us at the cross. He would try to convince me of the profundity of his meditation techniques and how much better and more satisfying his view of the world was than my simple Jesus.

Well, this young guy was a really kind and compassionate person. He worked in a nursing home as an aide. One day he met a woman who was elderly. She was hooked up to machines and in a deep depression. Nobody was visiting her. Eventually, all she wanted to do was die. And my friend decided that he was going to talk with her. He began to try to explain to her this really involved philosophy he was in and what he had discovered at his monastery. He said after a few paragraphs, she looked blankly at him. He realized, as he left the room, that the only people that his particular philosophy worked for were wealthy, academically advanced people like himself; that his philosophy of life had absolutely no application to people in the nursing home. And he was so embarrassed about how inadequate his message was that he had given his life to, to meet the needs of this dying old woman, that he said he left the room that day and decided to become a follower of Jesus. He said to me, "Rich, I need to believe in something or someone who can make a difference in the life of any person I ever meet."

That's the one we worship! Not only the God who is unique, but the God who is available to anyone and everyone.

And he is God only wise.

The challenge of God's wisdom

What an extraordinarily wise God we worship. He is wise in his great plan of salvation. He is wise in the ways that he has decided to save this world - not through our wisdom, not through our moral achievement, or anything that we have done, but through his own mercy and grace revealed through his Son Jesus, and his sacrificial death for our sins on the cross. God displays his incredible wisdom in the cross of Jesus Christ.

And it is by people from around the world coming into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ that God's wisdom is particularly revealed in the phrase of Paul in Romans 16:26:

Romans 16:26

But now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to faith and obedience.

God's wisdom is revealed in his incredible plan to build a multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-billion person church that loves and serves Jesus Christ. When you begin to explore the wisdom of God's plan of saving this world not by our own work, but his mercy and grace, you will worship God along with the apostle Paul, who said in Romans 11:31-36:

Romans 11:31-36

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! 34 "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" 35 "Who has ever

given to God, that God should repay them?" 36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.

Understanding Christian Worship

Rich Nathan

March 1-2, 2008

Spiritual Growth: How A Christian G.R.O.W.S. Series

Romans 16:25-27

I. Worship is directed to Him

II. Worship is directed to the God who is able

A. Able to establish us

1. In the face of enemy assault
2. In the face of our own weakness

B. Able to establish others

III. Worship is directed to Christ

A. He is our salvation

B. He is the key to understanding scripture

IV. Worship is directed to the only wise God

A. The challenge of God's uniqueness

B. The challenge of God's wisdom