

Whatever Happened To God?

James M. Boice

In any discussion of reformation in doctrine one must come to the realization that the real problem of our time is that there is hardly any doctrine at all to reform. So when we talk about reformation we must focus on a recovery of theology, period. Certainly in the liberal churches there is a lack of exposition of Scripture and sound doctrine, and unfortunately, this is rapidly becoming the case in evangelical circles as well.

Now you might ask which doctrines are missing? I argue that primarily what we need is a recovery of the doctrine of God. You have to have some kind of starting point and that's the point where I think we should begin. People have lost any real sense of the fact that when we come to church we come to worship and learn about God. Years ago I spoke at a conference and my topic was on a number of the attributes of God. Later I got some feedback from a gentleman who was listening to my presentation. He had been in the church for thirty years, and in fact was now an elder, and that was the first time that he ever heard a series of messages on the attributes of God. And after hearing this his friend asked him, "Well, whom did you think you were worshiping all that time?" But he hadn't really thought about those things and I'm convinced that we have literally thousands of people in our churches today who really seldom, if ever, think about who it is they are worshiping, if they think about God at all.

Now, I think there are some reasons for this. One reason is the terrible impact of television on our culture which has produced a virtually mindless age. Television is not a medium which shares information well, it is primarily an entertainment medium. It puts pictures on the screen onto which people project their own aspirations and desires, and because it works so powerfully and is so pervasive it has the tendency to transform anything it touches into entertainment, and it does it very quickly. One of the most significant books I've read in the last few years in terms of what is actually happening to the mind is Neil Postman's, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show-Business*. It's not that entertainment itself is bad. But television is most damaging when it tries to be serious. So when you put news on TV, you get brief little soundbites encased in slick images, and this is not really information, it is entertainment.

This happens to politics, it happens to education, and according to Postman, it happens to religion. Postman even raises the question of what one loses when one puts religion on television. It is obvious what there is to gain: a mass audience, money. But what do you lose? He argues you lose everything that is important: tradition, creeds, theology, etc. And he says above all, you lose a sense of the transcendent. And what he means is that you lose a sense of the presence of God. When Christians meet together to worship God, whether it is in a cathedral or a simple chapel, typically there will be prayers and open Bibles for the study of God's Word. There is a sense that God is present in these activities. And you lose that when religion is put on TV. All you have on television is the picture of the star of the show who is the "entertainer." Postman says God necessarily, in that kind of medium, comes out second banana. And when the preacher becomes the star of the

show he begins to think and act as if he is a Hollywood star then you have the kind of tragedies that we've seen in the industry. Postman has a very serious comment at this point. He says, "Now, I'm not a theologian and maybe I don't have the right word for it, but I think the word for it is 'blasphemy.'"

All of this would be irrelevant if it were not for the fact that all this has a significant impact on our churches. So just as God is absent from televised religion, there is tremendous pressure to push him out of our church services in favor of a more upbeat entertainment-oriented Sunday morning visit. We do all kinds of things to fill in that vacuum, but as Augustine said, we are made for God and our hearts are restless until they rest in him. In my judgment, we have a hollow core at the heart of evangelicalism, and that is the cause of all the restlessness.

The Sovereignty of God

If we want to recover the doctrine of God we have to recover the attributes of God, and one attribute that is sorely missing in our time is the attribute of God's sovereignty. What happens in the Christian world if you don't give attention to the sovereign God? Human sovereignty comes in to take the true God's place. Idols always replace the true if the true is not kept there. So you have human beings becoming sovereign in their own estimation in a variety of ways. Theologically: we are the ones who elect God rather than God electing us. Programmatically: we are the ones who determine what should be done in our worship rather than following the statements of Scripture. In this sort of business God gets relegated to the sidelines, we really don't need him. But really, when you think about it, this is secularism.

I think the best illustration of this in the Bible is the story of Nebuchadnezzar when he stood on the roof of his palace in Babylon and he looked over that magnificent city with its famous hanging gardens and he said, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?" That is probably the best statement in all of literature of what we call secular humanism, because he is claiming that the world he observed was of him, by him and for his own glory. But the sad thing is that it is not just secular humanism, but is becoming "evangelical" humanism as well. If we're the ones who conceive of what should be done and we're the ones who accomplish it by our skills, whatever they may be, often without prayer (because we are not a prayerful people), then I guess the glory should go to ourselves. So we find ourselves right back where Nebuchadnezzar was, right around the time God judged him with insanity. And as I look at the evangelical world I'd say a lot of it is insane. In addition, Nebuchadnezzar was driven out to live with the animals to behave in a bestial way. And when I read the polls that tell me that evangelicals behave virtually no different than their secular counter-parts, and I recognize the bestial manner that the world around us is behaving, I think that maybe the judgment of Nebuchadnezzar has come home to us as well.

Fortunately, Nebuchadnezzar got the message. For his final testimony reads:

At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?" ...Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble. (Dan 4:34-35, 37)

God is not only able to humble them. He does humble them, and perhaps that ought to be a good starting point for renewal in our churches. We evangelicals need it especially.

The Holiness of God

If there is any doctrine that rivals God's sovereignty in importance it is the holiness of God. But do we have any sense or appreciation of the holiness of God in our churches today? David Wells writes that God's holiness weighs "lightly upon us." Why? Holiness involves God's transcendence. It involves majesty, the authority of sovereign power, stateliness or grandeur. It embraces the idea of God's sovereign majestic will, a will that is set upon proclaiming himself to be who he truly is: God alone, who will not allow his glory to be diminished by another. Yet we live in an age when everything is exposed, where there are no mysteries and no surprises, where even the most intimate personal secrets of our lives are blurted out over television to entertain the masses. We are contributing to this frivolity when we treat God as our celestial buddy who indulges us in the banalities of our day-to-day lives.

Perhaps the greatest problem of all in regard to our neglect of God's holiness is that holiness is a standard against which human sin is exposed, which is why in Scripture exposure to God always produces feelings of shame, guilt, embarrassment and terror in the worshiper. These are all painful emotions, and we are doing everything possible in our culture to avoid them. One evidence of this is the way we have eliminated sin as a serious category for describing human actions. Karl Menninger asked the question years ago with his classic book, *Whatever Became of Sin?* He answered his own question by arguing that when we banished God from our cultural landscape we changed sin into crime (because it is now no longer an offense against God but rather an offense against the state) and then we changed crimes into symptoms. Sin is now something that is someone else's fault. It is caused by my environment, my parents or my genes.

But once again, this is not simply a problem outside the church. We too have bought into today's therapeutic approach so that we no longer call our many and manifold transgressions sin or confront sin directly, calling for repentance before God. Instead we send our people to counselors to work through why they are acting in an "unhealthy" manner, to find "healing."

David Wells claims that "holiness fundamentally defines the character of God." But "robbed of such a God, worship loses its awe, the truth of his Word loses its ability to

compel, obedience loses its virtue, and the church loses its moral authority." It is time for the evangelical churches to recover the Bible's insistence that God is holy above all things and explore what that must mean for our individual and corporate lives. To begin with we need to preach from those great passages of the Bible in which people were exposed to God's awe-inspiring majesty and holiness. If nothing else, we need to preach the Law without which preaching the Gospel loses its power and eventually even its meaning.

Reformation in Worship

John R. W. Stott has written a book on some essentials of evangelical religion in which he affirms "that true worship is the highest and noblest activity of which man, by the grace of God, is capable." But that highlights our weakness, namely, that for large segments of the evangelical church, perhaps the majority, true worship is almost non-existent.

A. W. Tozer, a wise pastor and perceptive Bible student, saw the problem nearly fifty years ago. He wrote in 1948,

Thanks to our splendid Bible societies and to other effective agencies for the dissemination of the Word, there are today many millions of people who hold 'right opinions,' probably more than ever before in the history of the church. Yet I wonder if there was ever a time when true spiritual worship was at a lower ebb. To great sections of the church the art of worship has been lost entirely, and in its place has come that strange and foreign thing called the 'program.' This word has been borrowed from the stage and applied with sad wisdom to the type of public service which now passes for worship among us.

It is not unusual to read in books dealing with worship that worship is hard to define, but I do not find that actually to be the case. I think it is very easy to define. The problems- and there are many of them-are in different areas.

To worship God is to ascribe to him supreme worth, for he alone is supremely worthy. Therefore, the first thing to be said about worship is that it is to honor God. Worship also has bearing on the worshiper. It changes him or her, which is the second important thing to be said about it. William Temple defined worship very well: "To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God." In defining worship, William Temple also gives us a good description of the true godliness throughout the Christian life.

John H. Armstrong is editor of a journal called Reformation and Revival, and he devoted the 1993 winter issue to worship. In the introduction Armstrong calls what passes for the worship of God today "Mc-Worship," meaning that worship has been made common, cheap or trivial. What is the problem? Why is so little of that strong worship that characterized past ages seen among us? There are several reasons.

First, ours is a trivial age, and the church has been deeply affected by this pervasive triviality. Ours is not an age for great thoughts or even great actions. Our age has no heroes. It is a technological age, and the ultimate objective of our popular technological culture is entertainment.

I argue that the chief cause of today's mindlessness is television, as I discussed earlier. Because it is so pervasive-the average American household has the television on more than seven hours a day-it is programming us to think that the chief end of man is to be entertained. How can people whose minds are filled with the brainless babble of the evening sitcoms have anything but trivial thoughts when they come to God's house on Sundays morning if, in fact, they have thoughts of God at all? How can they appreciate his holiness if their heads are full of the moral muck of the afternoon talk shows? All they can look for in church, if they look for anything, is something to make them feel good for a short while before they go back to the television culture.

Second, ours is a self-absorbed, man-centered age, and the church has become sadly, even treasonously, self-centered. We have seen something like a Copernican revolution. In the past true worship may not have taken place all the time or even often. It may have been crowded out by the "program," as Tozer maintained it was in his day. But worship was at least understood to be the praise of God and to be something worth aiming at. Today we do not even aim at it, at least not much or in many places.

Pastor R. Kent Hughes, Senior Pastor of the College Church in Wheaton, is on target when he says,

The unspoken but increasingly common assumption of today's Christendom is that worship is primarily for us-to meet our needs. Such worship services are entertainment focused, and the worshipers are uncommitted spectators who are silently grading the performance. From this perspective preaching becomes a homiletics of consensus-preaching to felt needs-man's conscious agenda instead of God's. Such preaching is always topical and never textual. Biblical information is minimized, and the sermons are short and full of stories. Anything and everything that is suspected of making the marginal attender uncomfortable is removed from the service, whether it be a registration card or a 'mere' creed. Taken to the nth degree, this philosophy instills a tragic self-centeredness. That is, everything is judged by how it affects man. This terribly corrupts one's theology.

As I have been arguing all along, we are oblivious to God. In recent years, as I have traveled around the country speaking in various churches, I have noticed the decreasing presence and in some cases the total absence of service elements that have always been associated with the worship of God. These desperately need to be recovered.

Whatever Happened to Prayer?

It is almost inconceivable to me that something that is called a worship service can be

held without any significant prayer, but that is precisely what is happening. I mean really, what do you go to a church service for if it is not to pray? And yet, you can go to evangelical services filled with thousands of people and hear virtually no prayers at all. There is usually a very short prayer at the beginning of the service and another prayer at the time the offering is received. But longer prayers-pastoral prayers-have all but vanished. Whatever happened to the ACTS acrostic in which "A" stands for adoration, "C" for confession of sin, "T" for thanksgiving, and "S" for supplication? Now and then a few supplications are tacked onto the offering prayer, but most all other prayers have been thrown out. How can we say we are worshipping when we do not even pray?

The Reading of the Word

The reading of any substantial portion of the Bible is also vanishing. In the Puritan age ministers regularly read one long chapter of the Old Testament and one chapter of the New Testament in every service. In some services I've attended there are no Scripture readings at all, other times it is a reading of only one or two verses. Sometimes it just precedes the sermon and very often it is only a pretext because the sermon has nothing whatsoever to do with the passage. I'm not talking about liberal churches, mind you. I'm talking about the lack of Scripture readings in our evangelical churches. We must again recover the apostle's command to "devote [ourselves] to the public reading of Scripture" (1Tim. 4:13).

The Exposition of the Word

In this television age of ours, preachers are expected to be charming and entertaining. And so your sermons have to be shortened because people have short attention spans, they are funny if they can be, and you have to eliminate any theological material that would cause people to think, and you most certainly do not bring up negative theological material like sin because that makes people feel uncomfortable. Preachers want to be liked, and in order to be liked today you have to be entertaining. I am reminded of Jesus' harsh words to the Pharisees about wanting to be popular, seeing the smiles from the folks in the market place. As our Lord said, "They have their reward." But for pastors who are looking for more than smiles, and parishioners who are looking for more than to have their ears tickled, our Lord gave a very simple explanation of what the exposition of the Word is really all about. "You search the Scriptures thinking that in them you have eternal life: yet these are they which testify of me" (John 5:39). The preaching of God's Word is about Christ, and him crucified. This central message is food for our souls. But we are settling for junk food.

Confession of Sin

Who confesses sin today-anywhere, not to mention in church as God's humble, repentant people? It is not happening, because there is so little awareness of both God and sin. Instead of coming to church to admit our transgressions and seek forgiveness, we come to church to be told that we are really all right, we want to be affirmed.

Hymns

One of the saddest features of contemporary worship is that the great hymns of the church are on the way out. They are not gone entirely, but they are going. And in their place have come trite jingles that have more in common with contemporary advertising ditties than the psalms. Now, not all of them are bad and I would even argue that there is a place for some of them, like when you're having a fun night with the Jr. High. But what place do they have in serious worship? The problem here is not so much the style of the music, though trite words fit best with trite tunes and harmonies. Rather it is with the content of the songs. The old hymns expressed the theology of the church in profound and perceptive ways and with winsome memorable language. Today's songs reflect only our shallow or non-existent theology and do almost nothing to elevate one's thoughts about God.

Worst of all are songs that merely repeat a trite idea, word or phrase over and over again. Songs like this are not worship, though they may give the churchgoer a religious feeling. They are mantras, which belong more in a gathering of New Agers than among the worshipping people of the triune God.

Reformation in The Church

The disaster that has overtaken the church in our day in regard to worship is not going to be cured overnight. But we ought to make a beginning, and one way to begin is to study what Jesus said about worship. He had been traveling with his disciples and had stopped at the well of Sychar while the disciples went into the city to buy food. A woman came to draw water and Jesus got into a discussion with her. As the discussion progressed he touched on her loose moral life, revealing his insight into her way of living, and she tried to change the topic by asking him a religious question. "Sir," she said, "I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem" (John 4:20).

Jesus' answer is the classic biblical statement of what worship is all about: "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (vv. 21-24). There are several important things about this.

First, there is but one true God, and true worship must be of this true God and none other. This is the point of Jesus saying that the Samaritans did not know whom they were worshipping but that the Jews did, that "salvation is from the Jews." He meant that the true God is the God who had revealed himself to Israel at Mount Sinai and who established the only acceptable way of worshipping him, which is what much of the Old Testament is about. Other worship is invalid, because it is worship of an imaginary god.

We need to think about this carefully because we live in an age in which everyone's opinion about anything, especially his or her opinion about God, is thought to be as valid as any other. That is patently impossible. If there is a God, which is basic to any discussion about worship, then God is what he is. That is, he is one thing and not another. So the question is not whether any or all opinions are valid but rather what this one true existing God is like. Who is he? What is his name? What kind of a God is he?

Christianity teaches that this one true God has made himself known through creation, at Mount Sinai, through the subsequent history of the Jewish people, and in the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ. In addition, he has given us a definitive revelation of what he is like and what he requires of us in the Bible. So that is the point at which we start. There is one God, and he has revealed himself to us. That is why there can be no true worship of God without a faithful teaching of the Bible.

Second, the only way this one true God can be truly worshipped is "in spirit and in truth." Jesus was indicating a change in worship when he said this. Before this time worship was centered in the temple at Jerusalem. Every Jew had to make his way there three times annually for the festivals. What took place in the local synagogues was more like a Bible school class than a worship service. But this has been changed. Jesus has come. He has fulfilled all that the temple worship symbolized. Therefore, until the end of the age worship is not to be by location, either in Jerusalem or Samaria, but in spirit and according to the truth of God.

Worship should not be confused with feelings. It is true that the worship of God will affect us, and one thing it will frequently affect is our emotions. At times tears will fill our eyes as we become aware of God's great love and grace toward us. Yet it is possible for our eyes to fill with tears and for there still to be no real worship simply because we have not come to a genuine awareness of God and a fuller praise of God's nature and ways.

True worship occurs only when we actually meet with God and find ourselves praising him for his love, wisdom, beauty, truth, holiness, compassion, mercy, grace, power, and all his other attributes.

Reformation in Life

Surveys of contemporary Christian conduct tell us that most Christians do not act significantly different from non-Christian people. This is not surprising since little contemporary preaching teaches anything that might actually make a difference. But we obviously should be different, at least if we take the Bible seriously. Christians are to be the new humanity, a community of those who "love...God, even to the contempt of self" as opposed to those who "love...self, even to the contempt of God" (Augustine).

Where should we start? The scope of this subject is analogous to that of the reformation of the church in doctrine with which this article began. I asked what doctrines needed to be recovered, and I answered "all the major doctrines of all the creeds." Here I ask, what areas of Christian life and conduct need to be recovered, and the answer is: all areas of

life both for ourselves as individuals and the church. We need the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount and the ethical teaching of the epistles. It is all needed. In short, we need to recover what it means to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" and to "love your neighbor as yourself" since "all the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matt. 22:37-40). We need to live out our faith, not to obtain grace, but because we have obtained God's grace in Christ.

To God Alone Be Glory

This article began with God, and it is appropriate that it end with God, too, for a recovery of the sense of the reality, presence, will and glory of God is what it is about. It is significant that Paul's conclusion to the great doctrinal section of the book of Romans ends with a doxology. The last words are: "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen" (Rom. 11:36).

Moreover, after the closing application section of the letter, the entire epistle ends similarly: "To the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen" (Rom. 16:27). I would argue that the reason the evangelical church is so weak today and why we do not experience renewal, though we talk about our need for it, is that the glory of God has been largely forgotten by the church. We are not likely to see revival again until the truths that exalt and glorify God in salvation are recovered. How can we expect God to move among us until we can again truthfully say, "To God alone be the glory"?

The world cannot say this. It is concerned for its own glory instead. Like Nebuchadnezzar, it says, "Look at this great Babylon I have built by my power and for my glory." Arminians cannot say it. They can say, "to God be glory," but they cannot say, "to God alone be glory," since Arminian theology takes some of the glory of God in salvation and gives it to man. Even those in the Reformed camp cannot say it if what they are chiefly trying to do in their ministries is build their own kingdoms and become important people on the religious scene. We will never experience renewal in doctrine, worship and life until we are honestly able to say, "to God alone be glory" in all that we do.

To those who do not know God that is perhaps the most foolish of all statements. But to those who do know God, to those who are being saved, it is not only a right statement, it is a happy, true, inescapable, necessary and highly desirable confession.

Author

Dr. James Montgomery Boice was the president of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, and is senior minister at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He is the author of over 50 books. He has now passed away and is with His Lord.