



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Articles

Worship and Edification

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Singing praises is a feature of community worship that is especially valuable for building us up in faith. The “new song” in Revelation 5, sung by saints later revealed to have been under great duress because of their faith (Rev 13.7, 10; 14.12; 16.6; 17.8; 18.24), indicates that this is best done when singing’s focus remains on the Lamb.

“Worthy are *you* to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for *you* were slain, and by *your* blood *you* ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
and *you* have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth” (Rev 5.9-10; cf. vv. 11-14; emphasis added).

The obvious joy expressed and encouragement received by these worshipers derived from their comprehension of God’s glory. See God this way—as he wants us to see him—and it’s hard to be anything but joyful in worship.

Unfortunately, it is possible to frustrate God’s intention in this regard by making edification the *goal* instead of experiencing it as a *benefit*. This frustration intensifies when the words of the songs we sing are exclusively about us instead of God. In this regard, Wendell Willis’s analysis is worth digesting.

While most of our singing is done by the entire congregation, it is true that many songs are basically individualistic. In many cases these songs focus on the *singer* (his hopes, joys, fears, etc.). In opening a hymnal at random, this author found that the first song read used the first person singular (I, me, my, mine) fourteen times and referred to God and Christ only seven times. In the adjacent hymn, these first person singular pronouns occurred a dozen times, compared with the same seven times for deity. This raises a question of focus. Do such individualistic, “testimonial” hymns center on the worship of God or on the worshiper? (Wendell Willis, *Worship* [Austin, TX: Sweet Publishing Company, 1973], 59).

This can be taken to an extreme. Some songs that are more focused on one-another teaching and admonishment (Col 3.16) also include, or at least imply, praise to God. Still, we are wise to think seriously about Willis’s point. Anytime *we* become the focus of “worship”—

whether by participating in assembly activities that are directed more to ourselves than to God, or by imagining that we are the audience who must be pleased with what happens in the gathering—worship’s power to transform is diminished. To try to “pep up” each other apart from an explicit focus on God is to look *at* ourselves rather than *beyond* ourselves. Or, to say it another way, when we confuse edification with worship, both worship and edification come up short.

“To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen” (1 Tim 1.17).

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