

What Worship Is

by the Rt. Rev. Brian W. Keith

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God.

(Exodus 20:8-10)

We are gathered together to worship the Lord. We have taken the trouble to get out of bed, to put off other activities which we could be doing, to enter this church and remember the Sabbath.

Why do we do this? Why do we set aside one day each week to worship? It could be because of habit, the expectations of others, or a hope that others will think better of us if we come. These and other natural reasons may play a part in why we attend church on some occasions. But if they were the only reasons, we would not be seen here regularly, if at all.

The fundamental reason why we worship is that deep within us we have an urging, a dictate, which says that there is a God and that we have an ongoing relationship with Him (see *Arcana Coelestia* 1308). As the Psalmist said: “When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained, what is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him?... O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is Your name in all the earth!” (Psalm 8). Seeing the Lord and His relation to us, stirs within us an awe-inspiring recognition that virtually demands some response from us. Worship is that response.

What, then, is worship? The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church answers the question very simply. It says that a person “is in worship when [the Lord] is loved” (*Arcana Coelestia* 3690:5). The affections we feel for the Lord, for His good and truth, for His providence, are in themselves worship! They radiate from us—filled with reverence, awe, thankfulness, and joy. They praise the Lord.

So, a vital aspect of worship is our state of mind. As we sense the Lord’s infinity—and what we would be without Him—a true humility permeates our minds (*Arcana Coelestia* 7550, 8271). We then approach Him, willing to receive everything from Him. “Oh, send out Your light and Your truth! Let them lead me; let them bring me to Your holy hill and to Your tabernacle. Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy; and on the harp I will praise You, O God, my God” (Psalm 43:3, 4). Where there is love in our spirits, that love comes forth in worship. Worship is the activity of love (*Arcana Coelestia* 1561e).

This definition of worship is extremely broad and has wide ranging implications. If whatever comes forth from love is worship, then we are at worship whenever we are trying to follow the Lord’s commands (*Arcana Coelestia* 10645:2). Each time we decide not to steal, each time we are truthful, we are at worship. For when we love the Lord, we show it by obeying His Word. Also, simply by doing our jobs as well as we can—being useful—we are helping our neighbors, and thereby we are at worship (*Arcana Coelestia* 7038). Walking on the path established by the Lord is a life of worship.

The longing expressed frequently throughout the Psalms to enter into the Lord’s courts (leading some to think that heaven is round-after-round of prayers, sermons, and slowly sung hymns) is

really the desire to have good rule in one's life. Such good in our lives is not just positive feelings, or emotionally uplifted states, but practiced commitments to doing what is right—in our jobs, at home, and with whomever we meet. This worship is perpetual. As the Heavenly Doctrines note, “a person is worshipping all the time if love and charity abide in him” (*Arcana Coelestia* 1618). This is the heavenly Sabbath which may be ever with us.

This is also why, when the Lord was on earth, He seemed to care so little for the laws of the Sabbath. He was trying to expand people's idea of keeping the Sabbath holy. But some people's reactions to the Lord's teachings and actions illustrated their hatred for Him. One reason for this is that He condemned those who made ritual—both the minute laws of daily life and the inflexible rules of the Sabbath—the main focus of life. In their over-emphasis on the externals of worship, they neglected the weightier matters of the law. In other words, they put on a show of being religious by observing the Sabbath, but they were ignoring it in their hearts by their lack of reception of good. They were hypocrites, using formal religion to mask the evil within them.

A second reason for their hatred of the Lord was *how* He showed what the Sabbath was meant to be. Rather than sit and do nothing during the Sabbath, as was the custom, the Lord taught, healed and ate. By His example, He showed how empty their external rituals were, and demonstrated the essential link between love within one's heart and various forms of external worship.

This does not mean that the Lord neglected or abused the Sabbath. He regularly entered the synagogues and participated in traditional rituals. Indeed, the example of His life is one of using ritual as a way to confirm and support what is good. While the essential of worship is loving the Lord, such affection is meant to be seen in a tangible way. “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” The Heavenly Doctrine also teaches that this commandment is meant to be observed in the literal sense. Even as love compels us to worship the Lord, so a necessary way to do this is through regular worship services.

External worship—prayers, sermons, hymns, rituals, and all the rest—have tremendous value for us. When we participate in formal worship the Lord is very near. The concrete expression of our love for Him enables the Lord to be present. And this presence stirs deep within us all that we have learned or felt about our Creator (*Arcana Coelestia* 1618). This is why we can be sitting in church and feel a peace or a special sphere not otherwise experienced. The Lord's presence is arousing within us our spiritual roots, renewing a sense of what is eternally worthwhile.

Regular worship also has the power to remind us of the order that our lives ought to be in (*Arcana Coelestia* 1618, 1083:3). After all, it is relatively easy to neglect our spiritual life. The demands of living in this world can become all consuming. We can spend an unlimited amount of time and energy in earning a living, recreating, and attending to family responsibilities. All of these are good and necessary things. But if we are not careful, we can neglect our relationship with the Lord. Worship services can bring our minds back to considering our priorities in life. Just being in a church building can raise questions such as, “What role does the Lord play in my life, my decisions, my values? Am I just trying to get by in life, or am I trying to improve? or, What will I be doing in fifty or a hundred years?” Through these types of questions the Lord leads our minds, our lives, to be more receptive to heavenly influences.

For, if we are at all willing, special things happen every time we are in formal worship (*Arcana Coelestia* 1618, 4311:2, 10022e). For one, we almost invariably learn something. Either in the

lessons, sermon, or psalter we hear something we did not know before, or see something we thought we knew in a new and different light. We do not even have to be paying much attention! It is as if the Lord tries to awaken our minds so that we might be touched by His truth.

In addition to learning, we are deeply affected by the atmosphere that exists in worship. Singing familiar hymns, hearing parts of the Word we love, or simply being present with other people who are all using the same ritual, creates something new in our lives that did not exist before. Never seen, never consciously felt, these precious states remain, and are a means the Lord uses to influence us throughout the week, throughout our lives.

Remembering the Sabbath has this much power because it is a foretaste of heaven. In the sphere of worship the Lord flows into whatever we have of good, raising it and us closer to Himself (*Arcana Coelestia* 10299:2). We are transported out of ourselves in worship, for we are glimpsing what we can be, what the Lord wants us to become. As we leave behind the worries of the week, the chaos or the loneliness, we can be reminded of the spirit within—the spirit which will live forever, the spirit which can receive the Lord’s love and wisdom.

The peace we can sense in a worship service stems from this. For the Sabbath literally means rest. Yes, we are to make the Sabbath a different kind of day. But spiritually, to remember the Sabbath is to recall that heavenly states will be ours (*True Christian Religion* 301). The eternal Sabbath is a rest from the temptations of hell, the doubts and conflicts of natural life. When we celebrate the Sabbath, we are experiencing the heaven the Lord wills us to inhabit forever—a heaven without hurt or worry about ourselves, a heaven where love rules.

This is why the *details* of a worship service are not terribly important. Certainly, if the organ is untuned, if there is confusion in the ritual, or if the sermon is not very clear, we can be distracted from the sphere of worship. But we do not come to hear beautiful music or to experience a well organized service. We do not even come to hear a powerful sermon. We come to worship the Lord. We come because we need to renew our relationship with Him. Other factors can support and enhance the service, but the essential worship is what flows from our hearts as we approach our God and Lord.

The attitude we bring to worship—a sense of humility, adoration, and joy—is expressed in the many aspects of our ritual. As we infill the hymns, prayers, responses, lessons, and sermon with a spirit of love, we are entering into His gates with thanksgiving and into His courts with praise. Then regular worship services support and encourage the life of charity. They express our thoughts and feelings to the Lord, and, at the same time, and are a way of receiving ever more from our Savior.

The Lord has created the Sabbath for us. So let us keep the Sabbath day holy—making it special with formal worship—so that it may reflect and promote the uplifting of our spirits. This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Amen.

Lessons: Psalm 100; Mark 2:23-28, 3:1-6; *Arcana Coelestia* 1618