

## Worship and Theology

*Response to Revd Dr Simon Chan's Paper  
By Revd Dr Soh Guan Chin*

### **Broad Agreement**

#### *Main Concerns*

I thank Dr. Chan for a thoughtful paper. It is my privilege to write a response to it from a pastoral and theological perspective. My hope is that what I share would stimulate the reader to a deeper reflection and appreciation to what he has raised. In this way, both papers may serve the leaders and churches that are looking at the matter of theology and worship.

Let me begin by noting that I agree with the main concerns that Dr. Chan has presented:

1. There is often a lack of correlation between worship and theology in the life and practice of churches.  
I like to add that it leads to the impoverishment of both in Christian life.
2. There is a strong tendency for experientialism and pragmatism to overshadow true worship.  
This comes from the secular ethos of today's world.

#### *Definitions*

The opening 3 definitions of worship are helpful. Worship may be the part of a Sunday service that consists of singing and prayers. Worship may be understood as the whole service. Worship may be all that we do in honour of God. In my view, the latter two meanings are integral to the meaning of Christian worship. The third is indisputable. The second calls for attention but is not controversial. It is the first meaning that is more problematic in the sense that it is the area that most obviously reflects the lack of correlation between theology and practice.

#### *My Perspective*

In order to make my comments clearer and more meaningful, I would like to lay forth some key factors of my own perspective. A key passage on worship is John 4:19-26 – especially v. 24. God is spirit and we are to worship Him in spirit and in truth. Based on this as the main thrust, I like to set out a number of key features:

1. Worship is essentially our response to God in our relating with Him as our Lord, God and saviour.
2. Worship is essentially what happens in our heart that brings us to God to meet Him and honour Him in that meeting
3. Worship is both corporate and personal
4. Sound theology is needed to guide us to know and practice worship
5. Sound theology comes from true and genuine relationship and encounter with God and in so doing

- receive true revelation (insights) of who He is, what He is like and what He teaches us
- and in being transformed in the process.

### **Point-by-Point Comment**

Based on the above as my prime perspective, I shall comment on the paper heading by heading:

#### *Worship as Beholding the Glory of God*

We are in agreement. But perhaps I am less critical than he is in terms of modern worship songs. They are not a problem if they are sung from the heart with sound understanding. In most instances, it is how they are used rather than the songs themselves that is the problem.

#### *Worship as Doing Theology*

I do agree that worship is doing theology. It may be fair to say that worship is theology expressed in honouring God. It is acting out the concepts in real life through our motives, attitudes, songs, prayers, words and action in the context of a worship service, or in the context of life as a whole.

#### *Worship as Transmission of Faith or Tradition*

It is true that worship is a core channel for the transmission of faith and tradition. I would emphasize for this and the previous point that teaching and explaining why we do what we do is crucial and on the whole weak or absent in the life of churches. This implies, of course, that in the first place we have a sound grasp of what is good and proper worship and how to do it. It is my view that if such teachings have been strong and consistent there would be, first of all, a deeper appreciation and more widespread genuine worship in the churches. Secondly, new movements that affect worship, like the charismatic renewal, would have brought about more gradual rather than drastic changes. This is because a major reason behind such changes is the sense of dryness and deadness of the forms of worship the people knew.

I agree that there are opposite dangers of traditionalism and novelty. Again, the answer lies in teaching and practising the correlation of theology and worship and to understand that worship is normal to the life of the body of believers. It should interact with what is happening in their lives as well as express sound theology. This would mean that the way we worship is itself a living process in the life of the church that would change from time to time to be expressive and meaningful to those who worship. Demographic factors, such as a drop or a rise in the average age of the worshippers, cultural factors, and many other social and human factors would affect the way a particular church worships. Of course, all change needs to be guided by sound theology.

#### *Worship is telling the Gospel Story (Bible Centred Worship)*

Here I strongly agree. In this sense worship is always evangelistic as well as pastoral. What is of note is that it is not simply the usage of the Bible but its sound use that is crucial. It is entirely possible to keep referring to the Bible in error!

### *The Problem of Worship*

This heading is perhaps better phrased as “The Problem in Practising True Worship”, as I am sure Dr Chan will agree. I am in broad agreement with the problems raised – but I have some differing observations:

1. Lack of Discipline.

I accept that this is a problem. It calls for teaching and encouragement.

2. Confusion between the aim of worship with the benefit of worship – with the tendency to look at benefits only.

While I agree that there is such confusion we need to note that

- We may need to begin from where people are to move them to what is right. People may begin by coming for the benefits but be transformed and motivated to true worship.
- True worship is an encounter with God. While it is true that the aim of worship is to honour God it will never happen entirely without experience. This is because it is in a genuine interpersonal encounter that the worshipper has truly met God in worship. Such an encounter is always an experience. What we do not want is for people to come for the experience only or to work themselves into a state and see these as worship.

3. Confusion between Worship and Evangelism

While we should not confuse worship with evangelism, true worship is genuinely evangelistic and is compatible with evangelism.

- True worship draws people into the worship of Christ. In this way it is evangelistic.
- As long as a service that is planned as a worship service is conducted as worship, it is not incompatible to also gear it to be evangelistic as well.

I close my response by highlighting a few applicational issues which are not directly addressed in the paper: It requires sound understanding, genuine commitment and a degree of maturity on the part of the worshipper to worship right. In our churches, those who gather to worship would be always a mix of all grades and degrees of people in these respects. Therefore what is sound has to be practised and taught by those who lead and teach worship to the people. In our society, which is already so consumer-driven, even those who come to worship are frequently guided by consumer values. Our Challenge is to be able to stand true and firm ourselves and be prepared to do and teach what is right to those who would listen. It may mean losing many. But we would eventually be able to build a body of true worshippers who can lead others to do likewise if we persist.