

A RADICAL PERSPECTIVE

■ Not long ago I was in a certain church for the beginning of a worship service. With exuberance and uplifted hands, the choir called us to “celebrative” worship by singing, “I feel good.” I was profoundly disturbed because it seemed to me that such a call to worship is saying that we do not really need to come to God and that he should appreciate it when we take time from our busy schedules to recognize his existence. By contrast, the validity of true religious faith and the reason for gathering corporately is to celebrate the glories of God while confessing his grace toward us in the adoration of his person.

Many churches have fallen prey to cultural assimilation. They have degenerated into self-serving enterprises whose primary celebration is to exalt God as giver and to validate a message of cultural narcissism and personal advantages. Such churches have accommodated themselves to things that are not eternal. Genuine worship is not like that. It realizes the worth of God and our dependence on him. It is not a celebration of a favored socioeconomic status within a decadent capitalistic state.

Any sane person might tip his allegorical hat to a God who is merely a cosmic provider, but Christian communities

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do not exist to wonder at their physical abundance. They exist to adore the God who is abundant in mercy and forgiveness.

The Erosion of God-Centeredness

Forces set in place since the seventeenth century have created a downward spiral of life and values in Western culture. A focus on God and his Word has a liberating effect on people, but a departure from the Word with an emphasis on self leads to bondage. With roots in the Enlightenment, which emphasized the supremacy of reason or natural revelation, the Modern Age (1750–1900) stressed human perfectibility through education and advances in science while denying the biblical doctrine of human insufficiency. The rationality of mankind became the hope of what was thought to be an ever-improving, increasingly benevolent world. This view of the world and life collapsed under the weight of contrary evidence. Two world wars and mass genocides have told us that while advances in science can improve life in many wonderful ways, secular education cannot and does not improve the dark side of the human species. In fact, increasing knowledge can make it even darker and more dangerous.

The Modern Age has ended. However, what replaced it was not a return to the biblical world of the first century or the Reformation of the sixteenth century but human despair. The Modern Age embraced the possibility of corporate cohesiveness through a common moral perspective, but that proved to be a myth, and what replaced it was an emphasis on the self, personal rights, and private morals. Thus was born the Post-modern Age with its call to radical self-centeredness.

The fruit of postmodernity has been a re-visioning of society. Social commentators have warned of this, from the

secularist Christopher Lasch (*The Culture of Narcissism*, 1969) and the Christian apologist Francis Schaeffer to a litany of recent writers such as George Barna, Michael Horton, and David Wells. Among its many manifestations are these:

1. *A trivialization of values.* This flows from our consumerism, the gathering of wealth, and a preoccupation with sports and leisure. Americans live for the passing tantalization of mere pleasures, while public virtues crumble into the abyss of private, individual values.

2. *Self-absorption and self-centered living.* As monitored by our social conversations, we seem to value athleticism (the virtue of strength), physical beauty (the art of temporal attractiveness), and money (portfolios and retirement packages) above everything, not concern or sacrifice for others.

3. *A loss of thankfulness.* Preoccupied with ourselves, we have lost the grace of being thankful. It is sad to live in a world where there is no one to thank because we ourselves have become the cause and source of all good things.

In light of these trends, it is little wonder that many of our churches lack a serious call to the worship of God. What is lacking is not structure in worship. All churches have that. Rather, it is heartfelt contriteness and humility in worship. God's perspective on worship has been left out, and that cannot be restored without renewing our focus on God.

The Reformation Model

There is no better model for the church today than that based on the biblical principles seen in the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther, John Calvin, and a host

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of other Reformers called for radical God-centeredness as the essence of genuine Christian profession and life. Their view of the faith was so radically different from that of much contemporary Christendom, and so thoroughly biblical, that a return from the emptiness of a Christianity shaped by postmodern values to a Reformation faith based on the Scriptures would go a long way toward the renewal of our churches today.

The Reformation was a call for authentic Christianity, an attempt to escape the medieval corruption of the faith through renewal and reform. Its teaching, which swirled around a fivefold repetition of the word *sola* ("alone"), was a radical message for that day (and should be for ours) because it called for a commitment to an entirely God-centered view of faith and life.

1. *Scripture alone.* The Reformers insisted, as the foundation of everything else, that the Scriptures alone are 1) the authority in all matters of faith and practice; 2) the content of God's revelation to mankind; and 3) from the One who is incapable of deception or being deceived. God alone is true, and his Word is a product of the perfections of his character. Therefore, it alone is entirely true and trustworthy.

2. *Christ alone.* The Reformers insisted that Christ alone is the Redeemer. They understood by this that 1) Christ alone is the means of salvation; 2) the ground of redemption is nothing other than the work of Christ at Calvary, making a penal satisfaction by offering himself to God for sinners; and 3) to do this Christ must be God's unique Son or equal, since God's character demands a payment that meets the demands of his own being, and no mere creature could ever supply that.

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3. *Grace alone.* The Reformers insisted that the inability of the creature to cause God to reveal himself in anything but just wrath meant that salvation must be by grace alone, without any human merit to effect it. Such a radical, though quite biblical, understanding of the Bible meant that God alone provides salvation. It cannot be won by human merit.

4. *Faith alone.* The Reformers insisted that salvation was through faith alone. Faith is not the cause of God's grace. It is our response to the revelation of God's grace to the soul. This means that 1) faith is not meritorious, being only the means of appropriating God's provision of mercy in Christ; 2) faith is our embracing of what Christ has already done for us, not the cause of it; and 3) faith is itself a gift from God.

5. *Glory to God alone.* The fifth point is the focus of this booklet—the glory of God alone. It is the logical implication of the other four points, a call to a radical vision of God-centered living in all of life's many facets. The glory of God alone implies the right purpose for all of life—a God-centered purpose. All who share this radical view of Christianity make God's glory the ultimate purpose of life, not their own self-fulfillment or self-realization.

To Be God-Centered

There is no better summary of "the glory of God alone" than Paul's statement in Romans 11:36: "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen." This is Paul's justification for a profoundly God-centered approach to life. The fourfold repetition of "him" within the compass of these few words illumines the central

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and exclusive focus for the Christian—God and his glory. Furthermore, the reason for this radical vision of life is expressed in three prepositions—“from,” “through,” and “to.”

The first of these words, “from,” indicates that God is the *source* of all things. All things have their origin or cause in God. This is in harmony with the statement of John the evangelist: “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:3). All things come from God. The uncreated made everything created.

The second of these words, “through” (or “by”), indicates that God is the *sustainer* of all he created. That is, the existence of creation depends upon the every-moment benevolence of God. Paul wrote of Jesus, “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Col. 1:17). The uncreated not only made all things. He sustains them even now by the word of his power.

The third of these words, “to” (or “for”), indicates the *goal* of all that God created. All things were made by God, and all things exist for him. He who created all things is the end for which all things were made. In these expressions Romans 11:36 presents an orientation to life that is radically opposed to the values and pleas of modern culture. It is this God-centered view of life that I want to define and explain in this booklet.

THE GLORY OF GOD: ITS MEANING

The chief Old Testament word for glory is *kavod*, and the main New Testament word is *doxa*. There are several significant nuances as these words are applied to God in the Bible. For example, glory is used to express God’s internal qualities