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REVIEW ARTICLE

THE BAPTIST UNDERSTANDING OF WORSHIP: DECIPHERING THEOLOGY FROM PRAXIS

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a theological reflection and narrative on the understanding and practice of worship among Baptists. It identifies doctrines and practices that accentuate the Baptist theology of worship. Its aim is to demonstrate that Baptist Christians have a theology of worship that is concurrently biblical and realistic to the situations-in-life of the people. The discourse employs the theological-analytical method in exploring the theology of worship harvested from the Statements of Faith and practices of the congregational Christians called Baptist. Baptists currently lack what may be described as academic or deliberate theology of worship. What they have may be described as folk or ordinary theology. The latter provides agenda for constructing the former. Baptist statements of faith and polity supply an assortment of substance for harvest and employ for constructing a Baptist Theology of worship.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is designed as a theological reflection on the understanding and practice of worship among Baptists. It identifies doctrines and practices that accentuate the Baptist theology of worship. Its aim is to demonstrate that Baptist Christians have a theology of worship that is concurrently biblical and realistic to the situations-in-life of the people. The discourse employs the theological-analytical method in exploring the theology of worship harvested from the Statements of Faith and practices of the congregational Christians called Baptist. Baptists are a people with a rich body of doctrines, traditions and heritages that have served to guide their faith, life and practices over the ages. Also that worship is one of the essential components of religion is an established fact. Warren (2002) in *The Purpose-Driven Life* asserts that one of the five purposes for which a man exists is the worship of his Creator. The Executive Committee of the Nigerian Baptist Convention, at the 69th Session of her annual gathering at Abeokuta in 1982 had observed that "... Baptists have a distinctive mode of worship that is in consonance with the Free Church traditions, and we recommend that all our Baptists

churches do continue to identify themselves with our traditional way of worship...." (Nigerian Baptist Convention, 1983: 232). This affirmation suggests that the Nigerian Baptist recognizes her "distinctive" mode of worship, its historical source and its significance to them as a people.

Defining theology and worship

The term 'theology' is derived from two ancient Greek words that may be transliterated into English as 'theos' ("god") and 'logos' ("word"). Thus, theology, in a very basic sense, may mean "god words" or "words about god." However, 'logos' had a more intricate nuance in its ancient use, which is evident in John chapter 1. There, Jesus is the 'Logos' and this approximately means "the organizing principle of the cosmos." In today's English, the suffix '-ology' is used to mean "the study of." Thus, theology means "the study of God." In view of both the etymological and linguistic considerations, theology may be described as an academic discipline with a specific subject matter: God. Moreover, a given theology may be understood as a particular theologian's idea of God and related topics. Thus, one may talk about the theology of Paul, of Augustine, or of Martin Luther (Martin, 1992). Underhill (1936:15) defines worship as "the response of the creature to the Eternal." Underhill (1936) pictured Christian worship as an act and a collective response of the 'mortal and limited' humans' to the

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presence and acts of the infinite, everlasting God. In worship Christians jointly aggregate feelings of awe and cast them into praise of God. According to White (1980:81), the German word for worship, *Gottesdienst*, means "God's service to humans and humans' service to God". This view pictures worship as a conversation between God and mankind.

Wiersbe (1986) asserts that the English word *worship* means worth-ship and went on to say that what a person worships is a good indication of what is really valuable to him. MacArthur (1982) defines worship as honour paid to a superior being. The common OT word for worship is *shachah* which literally means "to bow down, to do homage." In the NT, the most commonly used word is *proskuneo* and it literally means "to kiss toward." This conveys the idea of showing reverence and paying obeisance to someone. Another NT word is *latreuo* which basically means "to serve, minister." Wiersbe (1986) asserts that the terms used in both Testaments imply that worship involves both attitudes (awe, reverence, respect) and actions (bowing, praising, and serving). Citing Underhill 1936 in Wiersbe (1986:21) defines worship as "the total adoring response of man to the one Eternal God self-revealed in time".

Biblical-theological understanding of worship

From the biblical perspective, worship is both a subjective and objective activity which involves the intelligent coordination of the mind, emotion and will. It is motivated by love, reaches deep within and must lead to obedient actions that glorify God. Furthermore, biblical worship is connected to godliness as exemplified in the Puritan perspective which states that:

Worship comprehends all that respect which man oweth and giveth to his Maker... It is the tribute which we pay to the King of kings, whereby we acknowledge his sovereignty over us, and our dependence on him... All that inward reverence and respect, and all that outward obedience and service to God, which the word [viz. 'godliness'] enjoineth, is included in this one word worship (Carson, 1993:13).

Likening worship to the fragrance of the incense in Exodus 30:34-38, MacArthur (1982:9) states that "worship is to be a unique, separated, sanctified, holy act that rises out of a person's heart to the very nostrils of God". Christians, Baptists inclusive, declare that God is worthy of total dedication by the way they live daily (Rom. 14:8) and that the diverse ways to demonstrate love for God include service to others through evangelism, missions, ministry and efforts to develop a more just and humane world. Baptists accentuate these assorted aspects of worship. Invariably, Baptists have underscored the value of private, family and corporate worship. Each of these must be characterized by freedom.

The following are identifiable essential elements of biblical worship:

Sacrifice: MacArthur (1982:48) establishes that "God established an altar, and the sacrifices that were placed upon it, as the basis of worship. Sacrifice made communion possible".

Attitude of Gratitude: Biblical worship does not necessarily require a church building or the right kind of music for it to be acceptable. MacArthur (1982:40) reiterates that "worship must be a way of life".

Relationship with God: Worship is a relationship between God as the receiver of worship and man as the giver of the worship. Until relationship is established, worship is unacceptable. Crichton (1993) asserts that Christian worship is best discussed in terms of response. He states further that people respond to God in various ways in worship: whether it be praise, song, tithe and offering, thanksgiving, supplication, repentance, Lord's Supper, baptism, and prayer. Thus, Christian worship, in the words of Davidson (2002:2), is "a dramatic, dynamic, dialogical encounter between the triune God of the Bible and His people in which God speaks and /or acts to reveal Himself and His will and God's people respond to Him in appropriate Biblical ways". This definition involves both God's revelation and man's appropriate response that is biblically based.

Baptist statements of faith and theology of worship

Baptist understanding of worship is closely related to Baptist doctrines and polity. For example, the belief in the lordship of Christ undergirds the Baptist belief that in worship churches is to focus on Jesus and seek to find and follow his will. Primacy of Holy Scripture: Baptists hold that the scripture is the final authority in all matters of faith and practice. As touching worship, this implies that Baptists uphold whatever the scripture upholds as the pattern for worship. Baptists confess that the Holy Scripture is the written record of God's revelation, to mankind. It is the word of God as interpreted or translated by those whom God inspired. By this we mean that the Bible is not an ordinary textbook of religion. It is "The Book", not "a book" - the only one containing God's spoken words to humanity. There is none besides it. It is the book that contains the record of what God has said about Himself, about the world in general, and about the nature of man's response to Him as the only God. It is the book that forms the faith and life of all believers from Christian point of view.

The Baptist teaching that the Bible is the authority for faith and practice is manifest in worship by the centrality of the Bible. Since the Bible is a book from and about God, it deserves a vital place in His worship. The Bible is the basis for prayers, sermons and music.

Soul Competency: This doctrine presupposes that upon accepting Jesus as Lord and Saviour, every believer has the Holy Spirit and is able to be directed by him. In this wise, every believer can worship the Lord as directed by the Holy Spirit without any limitation placed on them. Thus worship is not confined to the four walls of the church building but takes place as the individual believer senses the prompting of the Holy Spirit for such. Liberty of Conscience and of Religion: According to Hobbs (1971:139), Baptists believe and teach that "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and He has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are contrary to His Word or not contained in it". This statement contains some clear implications for religious freedom, the centrality of God in faith and worship, the critical position of the scripture and the responsibility of the individual to God both immediately and ultimately. The foundation of our liberty is God Himself and in the nature of Man. In the account of creation, especially as accepted by the Christian faith in general, we are told that man was created in the image of God. This is the

starting point of man's freedom, for by that act of creation, God has given to man the ability to know what is right and what is wrong. It carries with it the freedom to choose any of the options. Religious freedom (Gal. 5:1) glows dazzlingly in the Baptist concept of worship. For worship to be authentic, it must be free and never pressurized. Every congregation is free to determine the day, time, place and order of worship. In view of the profound devotion of Baptists to the leadership of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:18), such freedom may not bring chaos, but rather ensure that things are done "decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40).

Separation of Church and State: The Baptist doctrine of separation of church and state flows from the doctrine of liberty of religion and holds that church government should not be intertwined with political administration and vice versa. The church caters for the spiritual needs of man while the state caters for his social, political and welfare concerns. The implication of this for worship is that the church is free to conduct her worship in any way it feels appropriate without any undue interference from the state. Baptists believe that the church has one particular purpose, which is to worship God and to enjoy Him forever. However, this worship is not simply coming together as an assembly of people every Sunday. It is far more than that, for it is the experience in which the church, the community of the redeemed people, offers its life as a living sacrifice daily unto God. This includes, first, participation in the love and peace of God and second the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ. While the church exists for the worship of God, within that given purpose, the church carries out the responsibility of reconciliation. This ministry is not just service or works of redemption, but an expression of the church's worship of God. Evangelism therefore cannot be separated from the total worship experience of the church.

The biblical teachings about the priesthood of believers (1 Pet. 2:5; Rev. 1:6; 5:10), soul competency, congregational governance and local church autonomy (Acts 6:1-6; 13:1-3; 2 Cor. 8:1-8) undergird the Baptist belief that any believer is qualified to lead worship and that each church under the lordship of Christ is free to decide the place, elements and leaders for worship. **Believers' Priesthood:** Grounded on the competency of individual soul, every believer is a priest and has unrestricted access to God without going through an intermediary. This implies that each believer can worship God in a manner he deems fit without having to consult with a priest or any other such spiritual medium. The "Priest" is a servant of God and of the people. He is one who mediates between God and man. He is a person called and set apart by God to be an example for others. He is one through whom other persons would see the character of God, i.e. the love of God is revealed through him. We see here that the meaning of "Priest" is far more than having access to God. It has to do with one who mediates God's presence and character. Priesthood presupposes a relationship with God.

For, it is impossible to be a priest of God if one does not have a definite relationship with the Lord of life.

The Perseverance of the Christian: According to Baptist doctrinal profession,

Those, whom God has accepted in the beloved and sanctified by His spirit, will never totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace but shall certainly persevere to the end. And though they may fall through neglect by temptation into sin, whereby they grieve the Spirit, impair their graces and comforts, bring reproach on the church and temporal judgment on themselves; yet, they shall be renewed again, unto repentance and be kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation (McMahon, 2013). It appears that the meaning of the statement is found in God's faithfulness to keep his promise. That is, those who have accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and Lord have become new creatures in him and therefore possess eternal life. Such persons are kept by the power of God, as long as they remain conscious of God's presence, as the Guardian of their salvation experience. These ones persevere and struggle under the guide of the Holy Spirit to retain the salvation that God has offered them. That struggle would involve repentance at any point of sin.

The Baptist teaching that Jesus gave only two ordinances for churches to observe, baptism and the Lord's Supper (Mat. 28:18-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-29), instructs the structural design of a worship building as well as the presence of baptism and Lord's Supper in worship. The biblical teaching that salvation is only by grace through faith in Christ (Eph. 2:8-10) underscores Baptist worship in that nothing is part of the service which could be construed as a means of salvation other than such faith.

Baptist practices and relevance to theology of worship

The Purpose: Nihinlola (1995) indicates that the two primary purposes of worship are to give glory to God and to build up the believer. Hence, the Baptist doctrine of worship implies that every act and attitude of worship must glorify God and edify the church. No other person takes the glory in worship but God. **The Pivot of Worship (Jesus & The Word of God):** The Baptist faith is both theocentric (God-centred) and Christocentric (Christ-centred). Hence, the Baptist understanding of worship implies that worship revolves around Jesus and His word is the final authority for worship.

The centre of worship in the Baptist church is the Lord Jesus and not the pastor or any other personality, group, creed or object. As reiterated by White (1989:81), "If God's word is clear to anyone who reads, each Christian community can discern what is God's will by itself and must be free to act accordingly". **The Plan and Patterns of Worship:** The Baptist faith is a pragmatic and personal faith. It is not practiced by proxy. By implication, worship in the Baptist church requires proper planning. The hymn singing, prayer time, scripture sharing time and other parts of the worship experience require adequate planning to reflect the pragmatic, dynamic and dramatic nature of worship. However, White (1989:80) notes that in a typical Baptist congregation, "the ordering of worship is determined locally by each worshipping community".

In planning a Baptist worship, the day and time vary. Most Baptists hold their worship services on Sunday (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2). The number of services and the time of day also may differ from one congregation to another, even in the same community. As earlier indicated, the Bible is central in Baptist

worship (2 Tim. 3:15-17). The denomination does not direct how the Bible is to be used. Churches are free to choose which translations to use, what passages to read and at what point in the service the Bible is read. Reading the Bible by individuals and the congregation responsively are both practiced. Furthermore, prayer is basic to all Baptist worship services, both private and public prayer (Mark 11:17; Philip. 4:6). There are no denominationally prescribed prayers. Any member of the congregation may lead in prayer. Often the pastor leads in a "pastoral prayer."

A sermon is a key part of a Baptist worship service (Acts 20:7-9; 2 Tim. 4:2). The preacher is free to choose the topic, theme, type and text. The denomination dictates none of these. The style of preaching is also up to the preacher; some read from a manuscript while most preach from notes or extemporaneously. Also music plays a significant role in Baptist worship services (Ps. 100:2; Eph. 5:19). Here again, freedom is apparent. Although in practically all churches the congregation participates in singing, the type of music that is sung varies greatly. In addition to the congregation, singing by choirs, praise teams, soloists and vocal groups can be heard in Baptist worship. The musical instruments used in worship services also vary, including pianos and organs as well as various other instruments.

An offering is usually received in the services (1 Cor. 16:1-2). Baptist churches are supported by tithes and gifts that are freely given.

All of the components in the plan of worship in a Baptist congregation point to the fact that God is the centre of focus in worship and that every act of worship must be done freely, without coercion and with appropriate consideration for the awesome presence of the God who is worthy of 'worship.' Patterns of worship may be classified into three: the Traditional Service, the Contemporary Service and the Blended Service. Each of these is determined and influenced by the majority of the membership of the congregation and the location of the church. The Personnel in Worship: Two primary personnel are involved in worship, the leader(s) and the led. In Baptist worship, there is no distinction between the laity and the clergy in conformity with doctrine of believers' priesthood. Every born again member of the church can both lead and participate in worship

The persons leading in worship usually vary. In a typical Baptist service, the pastor presides and preaches, a song leader directs the singing, and designated members of the congregation and/or church staff lead in public prayer, give testimonies and take up the offering. Worship personnel are also free to dress in whatever way a congregation considers appropriate. Places of Worship: Church architecture and furnishings can be informative embodiments of the beliefs and practices of Christian traditions. The place for organised or corporate Baptist worship is the church building. A worship service can take place in almost any setting. However, weekly worship services usually take place in a building designed especially for this purpose. The design of buildings for worship varies depending on the desires and resources of the congregation.

The Baptist understanding and theology of worship can be deduced from her building design, pulpit positioning, baptistery location, and Lord's Supper table placement. A common arrangement is for the congregation to be seated in view of the Lord's Supper table located in front of the pulpit, sometimes with a Bible on it, with a baptistery located behind the pulpit. This arrangement highlights the centrality of the proclamation (preaching and teaching) of the Word of God in worship and the importance of the two ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism and the Lord's Supper may be part of a worship service. Each congregation is equally free to decide when and how to observe these two ordinances.

Baptists are also passionately involved in evangelism and mission as way of expressing their worship to God. It would underscore the fact that service is a vital element of worship. Also, Baptists operate congregational polity, which implies that every member is free under God to contribute to the decision making process of their congregation and to personally access God through worship and service.

Do baptists have a theology of worship?

McClendon (1986) a Baptist theologian, asserts that the Baptists have produced little academic theology. For McClendon (1986:23), theology is "the discovery, understanding, and transformation of the convictions of a convictional community, including the discovery and critical revision of their relation to one another and to whatever else there is". He argues that Baptists have not done much in this regard because in much of their history they have been involved in a struggle for survival. Even when they were secure, they have allowed the agenda for their theology to be set by other groups. These groups included the eighteenth-century Reformed theologians whose main concerns were expressed in the Calvinist and Arminian controversies, and the twentieth-century Fundamentalists whose foremost concerns were expressed in controversies with modernists about the Bible. According to McClendon (1986), the issues in those controversies did not arise naturally from Baptists' identity with its origins in the radical wing of the Reformation but were borrowed from outside their own life.

Humphreys (2000) notes that McClendon is correct to say that many of the issues on the Baptist theological agenda have been set by groups and movements outside of Baptist life, and many Baptist theologians have felt obliged to address issues raised outside of Baptist life as well as to address issues that have arisen within Baptist life. Since it is not essentially wrong to deal with issues originating from outside one's own group, perhaps McClendon's (1986) primary scrutiny may be rearticulated to indicate that Baptist life has generated only a small percentage of the issues her theologians have considered appropriate to address. Humphreys (2000) submits that much Baptist theology has been folk rather than academic. He uses folk theology to refer to the theology of a Christian community, as the Baptists, which they hold and live by. On the other hand, is what Humphreys calls academic theology. This is a theology held by persons who combine their significance in the intellectual space with that within their faith community, in this case the Baptist community. Usually, folk theology is vastly

internalized but not essentially articulated, and academic theology is extremely articulated but not of necessity internalized.

Academic theology was transformed dramatically by the Enlightenment and the modernity that it generated. Its principal new component is described by Hebblethwaite (1980:17-18) in these words: "Criticism is the chief mark of modern Christian theology". Even before methodologically critical thinking became dominant, academic theology was at variance with folk theology in a variety of ways. For instance, *focus on method* is habitual in academic theology but unusual in folk theology. The endeavor to *construct a system* is routine in academic theology but rare in folk theology. Whereas, the *language* of folk theology is usually first-order language akin to that of prayer, worship, witness, and exhortation, that of academic theology is usually second-order language, a specialized scrutiny of the first-order language.

Most Baptist theology has been folk theology, and most of the story of Baptist theology is a story of understandings of God and his relations to the world, expressed in first-order language with a negligible attention given to method and system. It is the language of confessions and sermons, and its books are written mostly by pastors. That does not mean that folk theology is carefree or shallow. It simply means that Baptist theology has been done by persons whose center of gravity was located in the life of the churches rather than in the life of academic institutions.

From the foregoing, one may fruitfully answer the question "Do Baptists have a theology of Worship?" White (1980:81) asserts that "just as God had revealed how humans were to act in other spheres of life such as the ethical, God also prescribed rules for worship". This implies that as a people relying on scripture for all matters of faith and practice, the Baptists hold dearly to the sole authority of scripture in matters of worship. Drawing from the matters earlier highlighted, it can be inferred that although the Baptists do not have explicitly written theology of worship, their practices of worship and all their distinctive doctrines earlier considered communicate and regulate Baptist understanding of worship.

Conclusion

The Baptist understanding and expression of worship have been dynamic and influenced by the historical realities of the times since the beginning of the denomination. Although Baptists do not have academic or deliberate theology of worship, expressions of their statements of faith and practices reflect their understanding of worship, in relation to God, his creation and the interrelationships that should exist among them.

These two, doctrines and practices, present a harvest of materials to develop a Baptist theology of worship that is faithful to the scripture and relevant to the situations-in-life of the people. This discourse therefore concludes as follow: No: Baptists do not have a written, academic or deliberate theology of worship. Yes: Baptists have a theology of worship which is intrinsic to, implicit in and expressed through their statements of faith and practices.

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