

Holy, Holy, Holy

An incident during a recent performance of the New York Philharmonic made me wonder whether the world has a higher standard than the church. The “incident” at Avery Fisher Hall, as reported by the New York Times, was someone’s cell phone alarm, a loud “marimba ring,” going off. It was during the “soft and spiritual final measures of Mahler’s Symphony No. 9. The conductor, Alan Gilbert, did something unheard-of in a concert hall: He stopped the performance.” He would later comment, “It shows how important people still feel live performance is. This is something people either consciously or implicitly recognize as sacred.” Has the concert hall become the last bastion of the sacred? Will we continue on, despite this somber indictment: “For the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light,” as Jesus states in Luke 16:8 (KJV)? Or will the church once again fulfill its call to teach the difference between the holy and the profane in regard to worship?

When Isaiah saw the Lord enthroned on high, his eyes and ears were opened to the worship that surrounds the throne. The person and purpose of God were made known to him as he heard the cry of the seraphim. We must ask ourselves; has the Holy Spirit seen fit to record this life-changing encounter of Isaiah’s so that it might impact our lives in a similar way? What are we to understand concerning our own worship as we compare it to Isaiah’s experience? Jesus taught us to pray, “Hallowed be Thy Name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:9–10, KJV). It surely seems safe to gather from His teaching that even our worship should be a reflection of that which takes place in heaven. Isaiah’s vision begins with the Lord seated upon a throne, followed by an expression of worship of which He alone is worthy.

I am convinced that the church today has a wrong starting point for our worship. We have “majored on the minors” in our generation and have forgotten the truth that worship must begin with a true knowledge of the holy God. We have tried to disguise our lack of the knowledge of Him by creating “worship experiences.” A.W. Tozer said, “A church that can’t worship must be entertained, and men who can’t lead a church to worship must provide entertainment.” Because of our conformity to the world and its ways, we have chosen to soothe our consciences by labeling this behavior as “relevant.” This need for relevance is nothing more than the fear of man’s rejection, which has made us irrelevant in relation to things eternal. This robs not only God of the kind of worship He deserves, but also His people of the transforming power that comes while standing in His presence.

Our pulpits have been transformed into stages filled with lights and smoke in an attempt to replace the glory and smoke that filled the temple in Isaiah’s vision. Massive amounts of money are spent on sound systems, professional musicians, lighting and props in a feeble ploy to pacify the people. This activity should alert us, like that marimba ringtone, that something is terribly wrong in our midst. Our times of worship have been turned upside down, putting man and his needs first. Music genre now defines worship and our participation in it, instead of the leading of the Holy Spirit. Our current condition is that of the woman at the well that Jesus describes in John 4:22, “You know whom to worship, but you don’t know Him” (Westcott). We must understand that our worship is to flow from a revelation of the One who is seated upon the throne.

There are a few vital lessons that we not only should learn from Isaiah 6, but also allow the Holy Spirit to make a reality. We must move from a self-centered time of praise to an atmosphere of true worship in which revelation, humiliation, transformation and availability are restored. A fresh revelation of the thrice holy God is extremely necessary in our day. His holiness was and is revealed in the Son, who has become our faithful and merciful High Priest as described by the writer in Hebrews 7:26.

The simple, yet profound truth of God's person from the lips of the seraphim was a revelation that caused deep and true humiliation in the heart of the prophet. Humiliation, or mortification (simply put: the death of our pride), is always the fruit of a true revelation of the One upon the throne. When was the last time you were taught at a worship seminar that one of the worship leader's goals was to bring a deep sense of humiliation within the congregation? In this self-esteem addicted culture, such a thought would be considered heresy; yet that is exactly what was produced by heaven's "worship team" upon the prophet's heart.

Into such a broken heart is heaven's transforming provision released, even as it was in Isaiah's. The transformation produced such an agreement with the will of the throne that he became compelled to make himself available to that will and purpose. The lasting fruit to be produced in an atmosphere of worship is not a feeling of euphoria, but a heart that is humbled and available to willingly obey Him. This is what a life of worship is meant to produce: a life like the Son, whose testimony was that He delighted to do the will of the Father who sent Him. Romans 12:1–2 states, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed ..." (NIV, emphasis added).

Will we, as leaders, have the courage of conductor Alan Gilbert to lay down our batons and put an end to the current distractions? Will we work to smash the idol of "the great god of entertainment" so aptly described by A.W. Tozer? Will the church stand for true worship until we as believers are transformed? Will we once again humbly make ourselves available as Paul admonished in Romans 12:1?

Oh Holy Spirit, heaven's great Teacher, come into our midst and bring a fresh and true revelation of the throne and the Lamb who sits upon it into our hearts. Make us the kind of worshipers the Father is seeking and of which He is forever worthy. Amen