

Prepare the way

"The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts. But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? for he is like a refiner's fire... and he shall purify the sons of Levi... that they may offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness."

Malachi 3:1-3

Some of you will recognize the words of the text as coming from Handel's *Messiah*, that great oratorio which celebrates God's sending of the Messiah, the Christ, for the salvation of humankind. Handel took the words of this traditional Advent lesson from the third chapter of Malachi, the short book with which the OT finishes.

We know almost nothing about the person who wrote Malachi- 'Malachi' is simply the Hebrew word for 'messenger'- but he apparently lived in Jerusalem around the middle of the fifth century BC. This was years after the return of the people from the Babylonian exile celebrated in Psalm 126. But things hadn't turned out the way the people had hoped. Many of

them experienced disappointment and frustration. After the initial excitement and enthusiasm of the return, the morale of the people began to sag badly. Because of crop failures there were serious food shortages. Moral decay in society, and corruption in public life was taken for granted. The temple priests brought maimed and blemished animals to sacrifice and did not enter whole-heartedly into the worship of the Lord. The people neglected their religious duties and withheld support for the temple. The mood in Jerusalem was one of disillusionment and despondency.

As a result God looked unfavorably on the offerings the priests and people presented to him. Our OT lesson, therefore, is oriented toward the ritual of public worship. Malachi looks ahead to a time when a proper worship of God will be central in Jerusalem. Today I want to talk to you on the concern which is pre-eminent in our scripture lesson; that need to make an offering of righteousness unto the Lord that is pleasing in his

sight. The main point I want to get across, my one and only point, is that *we aren't suppose to get anything out of the worship service! The worship service isn't for our benefit. The worship service is for God's benefit. The purpose of worship is to present right offerings to the Lord; that is, worship that is centered on God.*

Robert Webber, a professor at Wheaton College, has written several books on worship for evangelical churches. He points out that there's growing concern among evangelicals about the tawdriness of our corporate worship services. Like the people of Malachi's day, Webber says, we're not offering our best to God in worship. Webber shares his story of growing up in evangelical churches which essentially had no worship services. He makes a distinction between worship that's man-centered and worship that's an offering to the Lord. ~~In man-centered worship the paramount~~ question is "What am I getting out of this service?" In God centered worship the paramount question is, "What can I render unto the Lord, for all his benefits?" Webber lists five ways evangelical churches have replaced corporate worship with other things.

First, Christian worship is replaced by evangelistic services. The altar call replaces the service of Holy Communion as the central event in the service. The sermon, the hymns, the special music all are concentrated towards the climactic altar call. Evangelism is of prime importance for Christians. Nothing could be more important than that a person get right with God and turned from hell to heaven. But evangelistic services can't be a substitute for Christian worship. The fact is that there is nothing so evangelistic as a worship service centered on God. The unbeliever senses that these worshippers really believe in the power and presence and reality of God and of his Son Jesus Christ and that's a

powerful testimony leading them to Christ.

Second, worship is replaced by instruction, Webber says. In some churches the purpose of the worship service is *instruction*. It's to teach God's people the Bible. The emphasis is on the mind and correct doctrine. The sermon is central. It's often a 45 minute exposition of Scripture. The congregation is encouraged to take notes and follow along in their Bibles. People come to hear the preacher and they want to get through the preliminaries quickly. Now the preaching of God's word is also of prime importance for Christians. We need to hear and understand God's word. But instruction is not a substitute for worship.

Third, worship is replaced by a corporate psychological therapy. Some of the most popular evangelical churches have as their ~~purpose the filling of the felt needs in the lives of the congregation.~~ The purpose of the worship service is to encourage us to think positively. It's meant to make us feel better and see problems as possibilities. The service is meant to recharge our spiritual batteries. The gospel songs, the music and the message are oriented towards the congregation's emotional and psychological needs. God does meet our psychological needs in a worship service. Our greatest need is to recognise the reality of God in our lives. But positive thinking is not a substitute for God-centered worship.

Fourth, Webber says that the emphasis in many evangelical churches is on the fellowship that's enjoyed on Sunday mornings. Fellowship is central. People leave one church and go to another saying, "I enjoy the fellowship so much better. The people are warm and friendly. They make me feel at home and I find it easy to share my spiritual concerns with brothers and sisters in Christ." Fellowship is essential for

Christian growth and every church needs times when fellowship is strengthened, but fellowship can't replace God-centered worship without deteriorating into man-centered humanism.

Fifth, Webber points out that evangelicals have replaced worship with entertainment. The congregation becomes the audience. The liturgist becomes the master of ceremonies. The congregation becomes the audience who's there to listen and enjoy. The congregation is passive. The worship leader does everything. He or she even has to say their own "Amen's" after their prayers. Now, some of the greatest music ever written has been written for Christian worship but when worship is replaced by entertainment we are not presenting right offerings to the Lord.

~~But Webber asserts that the purpose of Christian worship is none of~~ these. All of this is man-centered worship. It's all focused on our wants and needs. *The main purpose of worship is to make an offering in righteousness unto the Lord. Worship is not primarily for our benefit. It's performed for the benefit of God. It's not something primarily the minister does. The whole congregation is to join in the praise of God.* A newspaper reporter once attended a New England worship service in order to write an article on a famous preacher. In his article he said that the preacher prayed one of the finest prayers ever offered up to a Boston congregation. So much of what passes for worship in evangelical churches is like that prayer; offered up to the congregation rather than to God.

God wants to purify and refine us so that we might present right offerings to Him. The worship service is kind of like a dress rehearsal for when Christ comes again and we spend all eternity in the worship and

praise of God. "Prepare the way of the Lord", John the Baptist cries. There are many ways to prepare the way of the Lord but if Christians don't practice God centered worship now heaven will be hell for a lot of people.

Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher and theologian of about a hundred years ago, spoke of worship as a performance in which the worship leader is the prompter, the congregation and the choir are the actors and God is the audience. God is the audience. We're here to please him. The worship service isn't suppose to do *anything* for us. When we come to the worship service in order to get something out of it we've turned things upside down. It's like going to a birthday party in order to get something out of it. It's like celebrating the birthday of Christ with only the thought of how many Christmas presents we're going to get.

~~There's a beautiful passage in 2 Corinthians 3:18 where the apostle~~

Paul writes, "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord." When we come to worship, whether privately or publicly, we come, not in order to get anything, but in order to see the Lord, to gaze on him, to offer to him our praise and adoration; to lose ourselves in the contemplation of an infinite majesty.

But in Christian worship God is here to gaze on us. Malachi speaks of God as a refiner of silver in our OT lesson. The refiner, I've read, sits and concentrates all his attention on the metal in the crucible. He looks into the the crucible, and knows that the process of purifying is complete, and the dross all burnt away, when he can see his image plainly reflected in the molten metal. This reflects something of the concern of the Lord for the holiness of his people. When we come to worship God we come to gaze upon him. But he's also here to gaze upon us. In the crucible of all of our

hurts and pain and afflictions God is at work purifying us and burning off the dross, preparing us for the day of the Lord, so that when he appears we'll be perfectly transformed into the image of Christ. He begins at his sanctuary with the sons of Levi to purify them till they present right offerings. Only when the God appointed leaders are purified will the rest of the people undergo the purifying process and be able to offer what is pleasing to the Lord.

We come to worship, then, not in order to get something out of it, but to offer God our hearts and souls and minds and wills and money. We're here this morning to give something to God. We come to bring offerings in righteousness. Offerings of money. Offerings of ourselves. Acceptable worship can take place only when we forget ourselves, forget trying to get ~~something out of worship, and come longing and desiring to see Christ.~~

And if we come seeking and desiring the Lord, the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.

Let us pray: Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.