

BEFORE THE THRONE

an interview with Ern Baxter

Ern Baxter, a member of New Wine's Editorial Board, recently celebrated his fiftieth year as a pastor and teacher. During those years his ministry has been characterized by a deep insight into worship and an ability to lead others into the presence of God. In this interview we asked Ern to share with us an overview of the nature, the purposes and the priority of worship.

New Wine: How would you define worship?

Ern Baxter: The strictly literal meaning of the Hebrew word for worship in the Old Testament indicates "the act of bowing down or doing obeisance." Prostration is the physical expression of worship in the Old Testament.

The New Testament Greek word means "to bow prostrate on the ground, to kiss the hand or ground toward the object to be worshiped." The whole idea here, at least physically, is one of prostration before the object of worship. I think that physical aspect is very important, because prostration means com-

plete abandonment and respect. If it's not done hypocritically or only externally without real meaning, the physical *act* is a genuine expression of the heart *attitude* of worship.

Worship is really the occupation of our hearts with God Himself. It does not include prayer for needs and thanksgiving for blessings. In prayer I'm taken up with my needs, in praise I'm taken up with my thanksgiving, but in worship I'm taken up with *Him*. Worship offers; prayer asks.

I wouldn't want people to compartmentalize legalistically their communion with God, but I think that the difference does need to be pointed out. At times, it may be helpful to look objectively at our own life of communion with God and ask ourselves some questions. How much of our approach to God is asking for something, how much of it is expressing thanks for answered prayer, and how much of our time is actually spent prostrate before Him, just extolling His virtues?

For a broader definition of the *whole* concept of worship, we need to encompass all that the Scripture has to say about worship. That, of course, is too large a job to undertake here, but I would put it simply this way: "Worship is the ideally normal attitude of a rational creature properly related to the Creator."

NW: What kind of priority does the Bible give to worship?

EB: For the person who claims to be submitted to the Word of God, worship is not optional; worship is a command, or a demand. Some Christians are a little sensitive about the word "demand." They don't think God has a right to make demands, and that is one of the first indications of a humanist approach. But those who submit to the God of the Bible recognize His sovereign right to do what He likes with His creation; and whatever His reason for commanding worship, the fact is that He *does* command His creatures to worship.

Now that comes across to some people as the demand of a tremendous ego. They think God must have an infinite ego that must be constantly fed by adulation. But I don't think that's the case at all. In requiring worship from His creation, He has another purpose.

NW: What do you think that purpose is?

EB: I see worship as a means of *restoration*. In 2 Corinthians 3:18 we read (I quote J. B. Phillips here, because his translation is simple and enlightening): "But all of us who are Christians have no veils on our faces, but reflect like mirrors the glory of the Lord. We are transfigured in ever-increasing splendor into His own image, and the transformation comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." As a

person beholds God in worship with the enlightened enablement that comes from letting the Word dwell richly in him, as he extolls God's virtues, His attributes, His excellence, and His holiness as seen in the records of history and in the face of Jesus Christ, then that person is changed into God's image. This is true for the individual and it's also true for the Church and for a nation.

I think this is one of the major reasons for worship. It's not that God has a gigantic ego; God is restoring His creation, undoing the effects of sin and bringing men to the original design. Christian worship is always directed toward the sanctification of life. All worship has a creative aim, for it is a movement of the creature in the direction of ultimate reality. The creative aim of worship is the total transfiguration of the created order, a process in which the incarnation of the Word finds its goal. I think that's the infinitely practical value of worship.

NW: *Ideally, what should our response be to God's commands to us concerning worship?*

EB: To answer that, we can examine our Lord's classic pronouncement to the woman at the well in John 4:23: "The true worshipers are the ones who in this new hour will worship the Father in spirit and in truth."

Jesus told the woman that the time is coming when "neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem" will God be worshipped, but *wherever* people worship Him in spirit and in truth. So the first aspect of the ideal is that it's open to anyone and is no longer confined to a national group; it's universal.

Next He said, "Not in this or that specific place," so not just *anyone* can worship, but he can worship *anywhere*. There are no racial or geographical boundaries; every tongue, tribe and nation now is involved in the great universal act of worship. "Wherever two or three are gathered together"—the "wherever" there is important—He is present. This is a very delicate point, because many people are still quite taken with the idea of sacred places. But God can be worshiped wherever two or three are gathered together in His name.

The third thing that Jesus taught about ideal worship was that it was to be "in spirit." The word "spirit" here could mean ours or His. Most of the translations retain a lower case "s" here, which indicates He's talking about worship emerging from *our* spirit, that part of us which is capable of being conscious of God. But it could also be a capital "S," because you can only worship as your spirit and the Holy Spirit become one through re-creation. Ephesians 2:18 makes this very clear: "Through Christ Jesus we both, Jew and Gentile, have our access by one Spirit unto the Father." So all of our worship must be "spiritual"; we must have spiritual enable-



ment because we can't come into God's presence apart from the enablement of the Holy Spirit. No amount of external liturgy or religiosity is a substitute for the initiative, enablement and direction of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus said not only "in spirit," but also "in truth." Some of the translators say "in reality." I think that "in spirit" speaks of spiritual enablement, and "in truth" speaks of spiritual enlightenment. Worship is necessarily limited by our idea of the one who is worshiped. A true idea of God is essential to a right service of Him, and what we know of God will determine what our worship is. When we come to worship God, we have a revelation of Him through the Scriptures as august and majestic, and we must apprehend that revelation. Spiritual enlightenment is necessary to worship.

The enlightened mind and enlightened behavior are inseparable, for truth is not totally functional until it is obeyed. So reality also means sincerity and genuineness. We cannot worship by externalities alone while the internal realm is out of tune with God.

Finally, there must be a *totality* of worship; this is a demand. Our Lord Jesus, gathering up the significance of all the commandments in Matthew 22:37-38, said: "You shall love the Lord your God with *all* your heart and with *all* your soul and with *all* your mind; this is the greatest and foremost commandment." The constant attitude of a redeemed

man should be one of worship, never losing sight of the august majesty, the sovereign oversight, the creatorial and proprietary rights of God. A healthy, wholesome, humble attitude toward God—a worshipful attitude—is really demanded of us at all times.

NW: What adjustments do we need to make to fulfill what God wants from us in our worship?

EB: First of all, I think we need to have a good balance between the Word and the Spirit. We all have a tendency to be partial to one or the other. But the Word and the Spirit are really inseparable. They both took part in the original creation and in our regeneration, and they both are essential in worship. We can talk about worship in terms that are probably accurate, but if we don't enter into it in real, spiritual practice, then we're all Word and no Spirit, and our worship is unbalanced.

On the other hand, we can have the Spirit in our worship and go through all kinds of spiritual exercises, but it would not be intelligent worship because it's not directed by the Word. In the Old Testament, God gave a detailed prescription for the ingredients of the incense to be used at the golden altar. Incense is a symbol of worship, and I think that just as God was concerned about the specific content of the incense, He also is concerned about the specific content of our worship. We can have the Spirit and yet be burning the wrong incense.

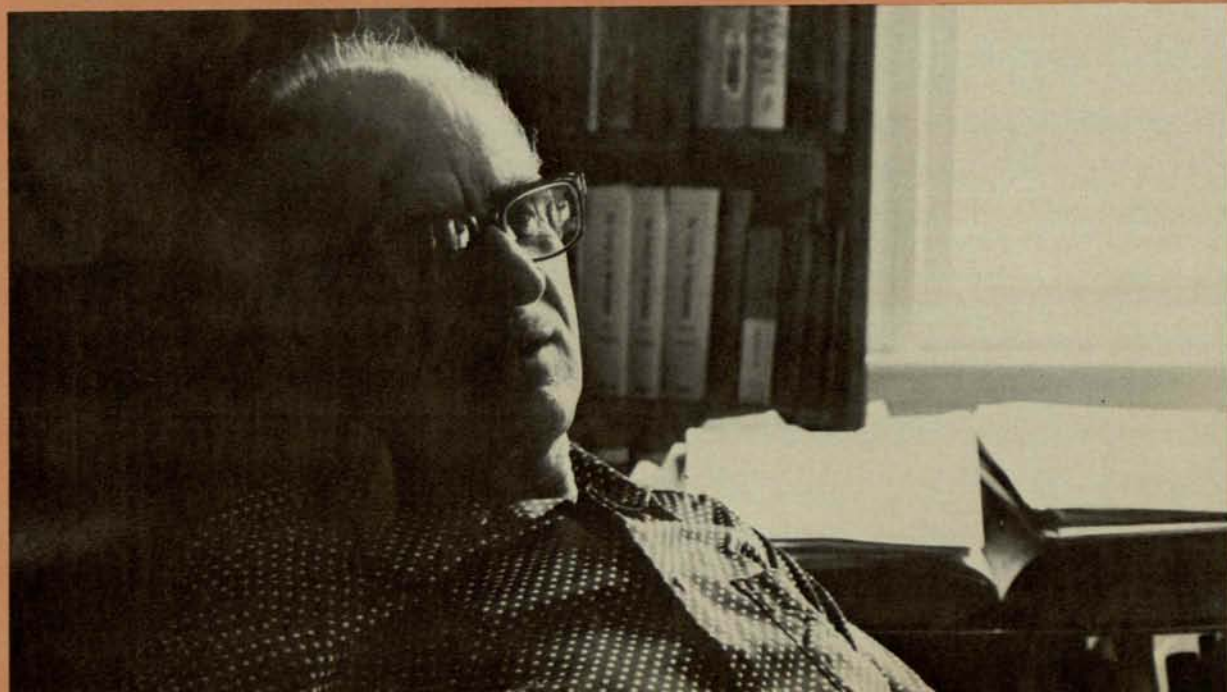
I don't wish to be hypercritical, but I find myself drawing back from the language of some people who I feel should know better in times when they come into the presence of God. Often many Christians' language is loose, flippant and too familiar—sometimes I feel it even borders on being disrespectful. I may be charged with being old-fashioned, but my understanding from the Scriptures is that despite all the provisions of grace to draw near

the throne boldly, we are not to draw near disrespectfully. God continues to be the God of majesty, might and glory, and my understanding of God requires that when I approach Him I address Him with the spontaneity that the Spirit provides, but with the restraints that the Word prescribes.

This brings us to the whole question of order and spontaneity in worship. The danger for the person who overemphasizes order or liturgy is that his worship may become completely a matter of external ritual which doesn't necessarily require inner preparation. On the other hand, the danger for the one who wants only to have an inner spiritual response is that his worship may have no orderly external expression. But when Paul speaks to the issue of disorder, he doesn't say to kill it; he says to redirect it in the right order, and he specifies that order. The point is that liturgy must not suppress spontaneity, and spontaneity must not violate what Paul calls divine decorum and order.

I think this is an important area where we need adjustment because there are places where there is order without charismatic spontaneity, and there are places where there is charismatic spontaneity without order. Adjustment, as I see it, is bringing something back into balance, something that has become eccentric, or off center, in one direction or the other. For example, Paul had to adjust the Corinthians because of their charismatic disorder, and he had to adjust the Thessalonians because of their over-correction in despising prophecy and forbidding to speak with tongues. To the Corinthians he said, "Look, handle your gifts of prophecy and tongues properly; don't stop using them." And to the Thessalonians he said, "You'd better permit prophecy and tongues; don't wipe it out, but handle the disorder."

Another thing we must do in worship is to withstand the temptation to substitute unscriptural



tradition for the commandments of God. Tradition grows quickly and crystalizes rapidly. Before we are critical of the Saducees and Pharisees, we need to look at our own situation. Have we stopped at some point in the progression of our walk with God and crystalized something into a tradition? I think that historically Christianity has been plagued with traditions which, when they began, were expressions of life. But because there wasn't a continuing concern for going on with God, the expression turned into a monument to the blessing that had been. People remained at the monument while God moved on.

NW: *If we make worship a priority in our lives, what do you think will be God's response?*

EB: The finest insights with which God has blessed me and to some degree blessed others have come when I was worshiping. I believe that spiritual gifts, insights, revelations and illumination all are His response to a heart that maintains an attitude of worship. My experience has been that all worthwhile activity derives from worship.

In this respect, we see the application of the Mary and Martha story in the lives of men of God all over the world. I'm sure that most of us in reading this story find ourselves somehow sympathetic to Martha, who was being the perfect hostess, courteous and considerate, making preparation in the kitchen for Jesus. Mary, on the other hand, was sitting at Jesus' feet in a worshipful posture, and the Bible said she was hearing His word.

The difference here is to me very significant. Martha had not taken her direction from the Lord; she was self-directing. She assumed that they should have a meal. But Mary was sitting at His feet listening to His word, and all of Mary's direction came from Him. Had Martha sat with Mary at Jesus' feet, Jesus could have told her if and when He needed some refreshment. Then Martha would have had a direct word to go get lunch, and she wouldn't have reaped frustration and the Lord's loving reproof.

As you look at both of the women in Scripture, you see that again and again Mary is at Jesus' feet doing beautiful things. For example, she spilled the ointment on Jesus' feet to prepare Him for burial. Now how could she have known about His burial? All the rest of the Jews thought He was going to put on a coat of arms and ride a white horse, but somehow she knew what would really happen. My guess is that Jesus could share deeply with Mary, and in those intimate times of her worship she saw things that even the apostles and other disciples didn't see.

That is a lesson to us of the importance of being at Jesus' feet in worship. I can remember times years ago when I would feverishly study to get a

word from God; and haphazardly I sometimes managed to get one. But finally, I realized that *He* was the author of the Word, and the author of the *specific* word I needed for myself and for those under my ministry. So as I learned to wait and worship, to seek the Author Himself, I would hear His word. From there on it was just a matter of developing into a message what He told me as I "sat at His feet" in worship.

In beholding God through worship, we are attracted to Him, and we desire to emulate Him and to move toward Him. I see in worship an encounter with God that is absolutely essential to finding His purposes for us and for experiencing the restoration that God intends for His people. ▼

