

“Worship,”  
Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church

[7 August 1955]  
[Montgomery, Ala.]

*King notes in this handwritten, dated sermon that effective worship should “cause us to serve our fellow man in every day life”<sup>1</sup> After pointing out the possibility of worshiping God on one’s own, King highlights the value of public worship “Here the employer and the employee, the rich and the poor, the white collar worker and the common laborer all come [together] in a vast unity Here we come to see that*

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1 King wrote “Preached at Dexter, Aug 7 1955” on the file folder containing this sermon He delivered a version of this sermon at Dexter on 28 April 1957 (King, *The Rewards of Worship*, pp 293–302 in this volume) For another sermon on worship, see King, “Worship at Its Best,” Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 14 December 1958, pp 350–351 in this volume

*although we have different callings in life we are all the children of a common father,  
who is the father of both the rich and the poor"*

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Dr [William Ernest] Hocking of Harvard Uni has said that "all life can be reduced to work and worship—what we do ourselves, and what we let the higher than ourselves do"<sup>2</sup> Worship is as natural to the human family as the rising of the sun is to the cosmic order. Men always have worshipped and always will worship. In some form or other, worship is found everywhere, in all ages and among all peoples. Buddhism, a religion ~~without~~ theoretically without a God, would impress us as a religion that excludes worship, yet in every country where Buddhism is dominant, worship is present. Confucius urged his followers not to have much to do with the gods, yet immediately after his death his followers deified him and today millions worship him. If today one crosses the borders of Christianity into the plain of Mohammedanism he will find formal prayer five times daily. This tendency to worship is one of the elemental functions of human life.

Not only do we find worship in religious realms, but we find it in other realms of life. Even the man who theoretically denies the existence of God worships something. Wherever one gives his total personality unreservedly to something else he worships that something, and convinces himself that that something is higher than himself. In this sense one can worship any material thing, from a diamond ring to a human demagogue.

This morning I would like to speak of worship in the Christian religion and to the Christian God, notwithstanding the fact that worship cannot be confined to the Christian religion, neither to the Christian God.

First, we may ask, what is worship? I can give a partial answer to this question by saying what worship is not. Worship is not entertainment. Of course many of our churches would leave us with the impression that worship is entertainment. How often do we find ministers who are mere showmen giving the people what they want rather than what they need. How often do we find the minister going in the pulpit depending on the volume of his voice rather than the content of his message. How often do we find our prayers uttered for the entertainment of the listeners rather than for the sincere communication with God. How often do we select songs in our worship periods which appeal to the feet & hands rather than to the heart and mind. This tendency to reduce our worship periods to mere entertaining periods has sapped the very vitality of spiritual fervor from the root of the church. The living water of the Holy Spirit fails to flow through the stream of our churches. Of course the irony of the whole matter is that the very people who make worship an entertaining center are the people who are convinced that their actions reveal the Holy Spirit. They have confused overt emotionalism with the true Holy Spirit. This misinterpretation of the Holy Spirit has caused many to fail to see value of a sensible sermon. Moreover, it has caused many to lose appreciation for real music. We have

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<sup>2</sup> Fosdick, *Successful Christian Living*, pp. 173-174. "Professor Hocking is right in saying that all man's life can be reduced to two aspects, work and worship—what we do ourselves, and what we let the higher than ourselves do to us."

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strayed away from those songs that were written out of the souls of men, and jumped to those songs which are written merely for commercial purposes. At this point there is a great deal that we can learn from Catholicism. No one can doubt the fact that the Catholics have mastered the art of worship. On many occasions I have been in Catholic churches and it felt as if the very atmosphere blew the wind of the holy spirit. There was something in the very atmosphere that motivated one to worship.

Not only is worship not entertainment but it is not to be confused with service. When one worships God he is not necessarily serving God. Worship only prepares one for service. We must not think that after worship we have totally fulfilled our Christian duty. If worship does not cause us to serve our fellow man in every day life and see the worth of human personality then the whole process is as "sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal."<sup>3</sup>

What then is worship from a positive angle? Worship is a silent communication with God. It is the awareness of the creator on the part of the creature. This definition of worship makes it very clear that worship is not totally a public affair, but it may also be private. The sound of great music might cause us to worship in our bedrooms. The reading of profound and lasting literature might cause us to worship at our studies. The observation of the beauties of nature might cause us to worship in the midnight hours. Have you ever been in an airplane that somehow seeped above the clouds? As you looked up you could see nothing but the dark deep blue of the skies and as you looked below you could see nothing but the shining silvery sheets of the clouds and somehow you cried in amazement—O God, how beautiful nature. This is worship. Have you ever been out late at night when somehow you could look above the man-made lights of the city into the lofty blue with all its majestic grandeur and there you saw the stars as they appeared to shining silver pins sticking in the magnificent blue pin cushion. Somehow you begin to ask, "do these stars shine from their cold, serene, and passionless height totally indifferent to the joys and sorrows of men?" Finally you could answer, "O no, for behind those swinging lanterns of eternity," is a purpose that embraces all mankind. This, my friends was worship. Have you ever the singing of the birds early in the morning? They somehow filled our ears with melodious music that out-sounded the wrestling of the jostling winds. This was a worshipful experience. Whenever we are carried out of ourselves by something greater than ourselves and give ourselves to that something then we are worshipping.

Although private worship is significant and uplifting it must not be a stopping point. A worship period on the radio cannot be a substitute for a worship period in

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. 1 Corinthians 13:1. In the same folder as this sermon, King filed an outline also titled "Worship" which further emphasized the point that worship is not entertainment (King, "Worship," Sermon outline, 7 August 1955). He added at this point in the outline that worship is also "not passive superficial dignity. There are many people who have caught the contagious disease of 'spectatoritis.' Such persons are only spectators or onlookers but not participants. Such persons watch the minister and choir indulge in prayer and praise. They come to see what is going on rather than to help create, give direction and enrichment to what is going on. The mood of the true worshiper is not passive, but active. He comes not just to get but to give, not to observe, but to participate, not just to see what is going on, but to contribute to what is going on. Many receive nothing from their formal devotion because they suffer from spectatoritis."

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a church Worship at its best is a social experience where people of all leavels of life come together and communicate with a common father Here the employer and the employee, the rich and the poor, the white collar worker and the common laborer all come to-gether in a vast unity Here we come to see that although we have different callings in life we are all the children of a common father, who is the father of both the rich and the poor This fellowship and sense of oneness that we get in public worship cannot be surpassed

What does worship do for us? Worship helps us to transcend the hurly-burly of everyday life and dwell in a transcendent realm Worship is the type of escape that is both heathy and normal

2 Through worship ones worse self comes face to face with his better self, and the better self comes face to face with something still better still No man can be at his best unless he stands over and over again in the presence that which superior to his best<sup>4</sup>

{3 Howard Thurmond}<sup>5</sup>

AD CSKC Sermon file, folder 4, "Worship "

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4 In the sermon outline, King concluded with these words "So in a real sense worship is the highest of all acutvates It must therefore be taken seriously, following a definite pattern Worship is not only the mother of the arts, but is also an art itself "

5 King may refer to observations on worship made by Howard Thurman in a 1949 sermon titled "The Commitment" "The center of our undertaking, the heart of our commitment, summarizes itself in terms of the worship of God I mean [*by*] the worship of God, the immediate awareness of the pushing out of the barriers of self, the moment when we flow together into one, when I am not male or female, yellow or green or black or white or brown, educated or illiterate, rich or poor, sick or well, righteous or unrighteous—but a naked human spirit that spills over into other human spirits as they spill over into me Together, we become one under the transcending glory and power of the spirit of the living God" (Thurman, "The Commitment," *The Growing Edge*, March 1949)