

# IN RESPONSE - CELEBRATION AND WORSHIP, DEFINING TERMS

by Dennis Prutow  
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I had the privilege of speaking on worship at the Reformed Presbyterian Family conference at White Lake, New York. During that conference, I presented a lesson drawing a distinction between Old Testament celebration and worship. The lesson was quite well received. Since that time I have mentioned this distinction several times. In response to the request to say more, I am doing so in four lessons. Because I am treading around in an area where misunderstandings can and will arise, I take time in this lesson to define some terms.

The verb *celebrate* is either transitive or intransitive. Used in the former sense, we celebrate communion. That is, we perform the rite and observe the ordinance. In the latter sense, the connotation I use in these studies, the verb means: 1. to observe a holiday, anniversary, etc., with festivities. 2. to perform a religious ceremony. 3. [colloq.], to have a convivial good time.<sup>1</sup> I use definitions 1 and 3 when I employ the terms celebrate and celebration. As I see it, the accent is on the festivities, on merrymaking, gaiety, and mirth. In the vernacular, the *emphasis* is on the good company, the social, and the jovial. I have a convivial good time.

The *emphasis* in worship is different. Worship is defined as, 1. a prayer, church service, or other rite showing reverence or devotion for a deity; religious homage or veneration. 2. extreme devotion; intense love or admiration of any kind.<sup>2</sup> Here the accent is on reverence, awe, veneration, and homage. In celebration, the air is filled with gaiety. In worship the atmosphere is one of reverence. We will see this is the case when we examine the Old Testament texts in the following lessons.

A problem immediately surfaces. What about worship in celebration? What about celebration in worship? Beyond doubt there can be and often are worshipful aspects to celebration. We will also see this in our examination of Old Testament celebration. Even though this is

the case, the *accent* in celebration is upon the convivial good time with elements of worship possibly but not necessarily being present.

On the other hand, there are definite celebratory aspects to worship. The psalms indicate this as does the Old Testament worship. I intend to speak to this matter in another phase of the discussion. For now, let me state as emphatically as possible, when I contrast celebration and worship in the following lessons, I do not mean we remove all delight, joy, and gladness from worship. This is absolutely not the case as indicated in two previous lessons. The first is "Worship is the Response of Delight" based on Psalm 37:4, "Delight yourself in the Lord." The second is "Worship is the Response of Joy and Gladness" based on Psalm 92:4, "For Thou, O Lord, hast made me glad by what Thou hast done, I will sing for joy at the work of Thy hands." I therefore maintain the *accent* in worship is on reverence with elements of celebration being essential to our worship. Again, I will draw this out in another phase of this study.

Another term you will meet in the following pages is the *world*. "In the New Testament, the term *world* (Gk. *kosmos*) has three basic meanings: (1) the earth, the created order; (2) the nations, the human community; (3) the ways of fallen humanity, alienated from God and his truth."<sup>3</sup> I generally use the term world in the second sense and sometimes in the third sense. When I speak of celebration borrowing from the world, I mean celebration borrows from the human community. It is the way of men and women to celebrate. Celebration in and of itself is not sinful. It becomes sinful when utilized for the gratification of self in radical self-centered, self congratulatory, self glorifying festivals. But as we will see from our examination of Old Testament texts, celebration in and of itself is not sinful or evil.

In contrast to the world, I will speak of heaven. By heaven I mean the throne

room of God. This is the place around which the whole of creation revolves. God gives His directions for living and worship from His position in heaven. When I say worship borrows from heaven, I mean worship follows the design and pattern set forth by God. In this sense, worship is heavenly, it is fit for heaven.

A profound problem arises when we rebel against God's directions and insist upon using forms common within the human community to express our worship to God. This gets at the heart of the contrast between celebration and worship about which I am anxious. For example, rock and roll is a form of music common within our world. Many argue that as a musical form it is not innately evil. Musical notes placed on a page and then played with an instrument are not evil. It is common to take the same form and bring it into the church. We then call it Christian rock because the form is used with songs having words associated with the Christian faith. As I see it, when a Christian rock band performs, there is an air of celebration. The desire is to have a convivial good time. There is nothing wrong with Christian young people gathering for this type of celebration.

As I will attempt to show, this celebration differs from worship. I will make the point that celebration borrows from the world, uses forms common to the human community, and worship borrows from heaven, uses forms directed by God. Two problems emerge. First, it is possible to have the form directed by God without the Spirit given by God. I will discuss this under the heading of worship in Spirit and truth at a later time. I am very cognizant of this danger. Second, it is possible to be quite spirited but refuse to use the forms designed for good purpose by God. While the former is hypocrisy, the latter is rebellion. Both are unacceptable. With these introductory remarks, I proceed to the study of Celebration versus Worship.

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<sup>1</sup> College Edition, Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, 1957.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 37.

# IN RESPONSE - CELEBRATION VERSUS WORSHIP, PART ONE

by Dennis Prutow

The Church Growth Movement epitomized in the drive toward the mega-church recommends the use of small groups within growing congregations. These small groups should come together in large congregational settings for celebration. As Carl George, director of the Charles E. Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth puts it, "Cell groups will seem to lack significance if they're not joined (or alternated with) a praise celebration of worship."<sup>1</sup> Celebrations, in contrast to home cell or small groups are large gatherings of the church. "Because of the solid relationships built in the home-cell groups, worship celebration demands no size limitations."<sup>2</sup>

Notice the conjunction of worship and celebration. They are brought together as one. They are equated. Because this is true, Church growth advocates tend to promote a particular style of worship called celebration. They justify this stance from Scripture.

This cell-celebration model resembles in some ways the pattern of worship for the nation of Israel.... According to tradition, a synagogue could be started with as few as ten Jewish men.

The Israelites also gathered in huge numbers, at regular intervals during the year, for the festivals, feasts, and sacrifices associated with their holy days (Exodus 23:14-17; Deuteronomy 16:16, 17). The Psalmist depicts what a high point these great assemblies were: "I will fulfill my vows to the lord in the presence of all His people, in the courts of the house of the Lord-in your midst, O Jerusalem. Praise the Lord" (Psalm 116:18, 19).<sup>3</sup> George quotes Elmer Towns to make the same point from the New Testament.

The large group in the Jerusalem church met for celebration, preaching, motivation and testimony (See Acts 3:11); and in small cells for fellowship, accountability, instruction and identity (see Acts 5:42). From these observations, I conclude that the norm for the New Testament church

included both small cell groups and larger celebration groups.<sup>4</sup>

My interest is not to critique the small-group/large-group construction. As mentioned, my interest is in the identification of celebration and worship. I think this identification is fallacious. It is leading the church away from the formal regulated worship of the Almighty. My previous lessons work at displaying that the worship of God is regulated closely by Him. This is reflected in the words used for worship and service in the New Testament. A celebration, on the other hand, is spontaneous. In the Old Testament, it has the character of secular and national observance. My effort will therefore be to display the difference between celebration and worship and show that the one borrows from the world and the other borrows from heaven. This being the case, the introduction of celebration in the worship of the church is bringing the world into the center and core of the church.

We begin our study by looking at various celebrations in the Old Testament. Exodus 15:20-21 is a classic example.

And Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took the timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out with her with timbrels and dancing. And Miriam answered them, "Sing to the Lord, for He is highly exalted; the horse and his rider He has hurled into the sea."

Surely this is a celebration of the overthrow of Egypt and the redemption of Israel. Although worship is involved in this celebration, it has the character of a secular and national observance similar to a Fourth of July party.

We see the desire for a similar type of celebration in Genesis 31:26-28.

Then Laban said to Jacob, 'What have you done by deceiving me and carrying away my daughters like captives of the sword? Why did you flee secretly and deceive me, and did not tell me, so that I might have sent you

away with joy and with songs, with timbrel and with lyre; and did not allow me to kiss my sons and my daughters? Now you have done foolishly.

Here Laban upbraids Jacob for sneaking out without giving his father-in-law opportunity to properly celebrate the wedding of his daughter. You can hardly blame a father for this. The celebration here is more of a secular party than worship, however, and it has the same character as the celebration in Exodus 15.

We confirm this by looking at obvious irreligious celebration found in Job 21:7-16. Job is speaking. Italics added.

Why do the wicked still live, continue on, also become very powerful? Their descendants are established with them in their sight, and their offspring before their eyes, their houses are safe from fear, neither is the rod of God on them. His ox mates without fail; his cow calves and does not abort. They send forth their little ones like the flock, and their children skip about. *They sing to the timbrel and harp and rejoice at the sound of the flute.* They spend their days in prosperity, and suddenly they go down to Sheol. And they say to God, "Depart from us! We do not even desire the knowledge of Thy ways. Who is the Almighty, that we should serve Him, and what would we gain if we entreat Him?" Behold, their prosperity is not in their hand; the counsel of the wicked is far from me.

The wicked readily throw a party. At the drop of a hat, they break out the band and have a celebration. They need little reason. This was typical in the days of Job, Laban, and Miriam. It is typical in our day too. However, dare we confuse celebration and worship? Dare we bring worldly standards of celebration into the worship of the Almighty? Dare we equate worship of Almighty God and secular celebration this way?

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<sup>1</sup> Carl F. George, *Prepare your Church for the Future* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1992), p. 60.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>4</sup> Carl F. George, *How to Break Growth Barriers* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1993), p. 136. Quoted from Elmer Towns, *Ten of Today's Most Innovative Churches* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1990), p. 243.

## IN RESPONSE - CELEBRATION VERSUS WORSHIP, PART TWO

by Dennis Prutow

We continue our discussion of celebration and worship. The point I am making is simple. We ought not to equate celebration and worship the way many evangelicals are doing. The reason is simple. Celebration smacks of the world. It takes the standards of the world and incorporates them in the heart and core of the church, her worship. Another text showing the national and secular character of celebration in the Old Testament is Isaiah 5:8-12. Italics added.

Woe to those who add house to house and join field to field, Until there is no more room, So that you have to live alone in the midst of the land! In my ears the Lord of hosts has sworn, "Surely, many houses shall become desolate, even great and fine ones, without occupants. For ten acres of vineyard will yield only one bath of wine, And a homer of seed will yield but an ephah of grain." Woe to those who rise early in the morning that they may pursue strong drink; Who stay up late in the evening that wine may inflame them! *And their banquets are accompanied by lyre and harp, by tambourine and flute, and by wine;* but they do not pay attention to the deeds of the Lord, nor do they consider the work of His hands.

God upbraids Israel for her worldliness. This worldliness includes her celebrations which are nothing more than heathen feasts. Israel ignores God as much as the pagans ignore Him.

Interestingly enough, judgment silences this partying and the "gaiety of the tambourines" (Isaiah 24:8). The worldly reveling comes to an end. On the other hand, when God judges Assyria, Israel will throw a party. "Every blow of the rod of punishment, which the Lord will lay upon Him, will be with the music of tambourines and lyres" (Isaiah 30:32).

In the latter case, Israel engages in national celebration. In the former case, all such celebrating is removed. In both cases the celebrating once again resembles our Fourth of July. It may have religious overtones but secular and worldly means are employed to celebrate. In like manner, the promise was when Israel was restored from exile, there would be reason to celebrate. "You will again take up

your tambourines, and go forth to the dances of the merrymakers" (Jeremiah 31:4). As already emphasized, this was the common way to celebrate in the culture of that day. There is nothing innately wrong with this type of celebration. It is occasional, spontaneous, and national in character. We too celebrate with music and dancing. Our celebrations are also occasional, often spontaneous, and frequently national in character.

Note how this type of celebration also borrows from the world. We see the same thing today. Young people take up their guitars and drums and they sing and dance to celebrate. Is this wrong? No. God does not condemn celebration. God condemns those who forget and forsake Him.

Similar circumstances are seen in Judges 11:34 where Jephthah's daughter celebrates his victory over Ammon and in 1 Samuel 18:6-7 where there is celebration after David's defeat of the Philistines. In the former case we read,

When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, behold, his daughter was coming out to meet him with tambourines and with dancing. Now she was his one and only child; besides her he had neither son nor daughter.

Jephthah's daughter came out to meet her father with an air of celebration. There was a great victory. In the latter case there is also a celebration of victory over the giant Goliath.

And it happened as they were coming, when David returned from killing the Philistine, that the women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with joy and with musical instruments. And the women sang as they played, and said, "Saul has slain his thousands, And David his ten thousands."

Again, standard forms from the world are used by God's people to celebrate God's deliverance and there is nothing wrong with such celebration.

If we argue these are worship settings, we must admit they are certainly *not formal* times of worship. They are quite different from the tabernacle worship and the later temple worship established by God. The tabernacle worship

was closely regulated by God and was the *formal* worship of the people of God. The temple worship was also closely regulated by God. This worship included the carefully directed sacrifices performed by the priests in the service of God. I am simply pointing out the obvious. Spontaneous celebrations observed on various occasions differed dramatically from the formal organized worship of God directed and prescribed by Him. Worship and celebration in the Old Testament are not synonymous.

Two other important occasions of celebration are worthy of mention. The first is in 1 Samuel 10:5-6 where Saul is met by a band of prophets.

Afterward you will come to the hill of God where the Philistine garrison is; and it shall be as soon as you have come there to the city, that you will meet a group of prophets coming down from the high place with harp, tambourine, flute, and a lyre before them, and they will be prophesying. Then the Spirit of the Lord will come upon you mightily, and you shall prophesy with them and be changed into another man.

Again, this is an *informal* worship scene, a celebration. It differs from the formal worship of Israel.

Finally, we have 1 Chronicles 13:6-8. There is no doubt this is a celebration.

And David and all Israel went up to Baalah, that is, to Kiriath-jearim, which belongs to Judah, to bring up from there the ark of God, the Lord who is enthroned above the cherubim, where His name is called. And they carried the ark of God on a new cart from the house of Abinadab, and Uzza and Ahio drove the cart. And David and all Israel were celebrating before God with all their might, even with songs and with lyres, harps, tambourines, cymbals, and with trumpets.

This confirms my point. Celebration before God on this special occasion is not the same as Israel's formal worship.

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# IN RESPONSE - CELEBRATION VERSUS WORSHIP, PART THREE

by Dennis Prutow

In the previous two lessons, I tried to show there is a distinction between celebration in the Old Testament and formal worship. They are not synonymous. I labored this point because many evangelicals and many Reformed people equate the two. They therefore argue for the priority of celebration in church services during traditional times of worship.

I also tried to show celebration borrows forms from the world and brings them into the *informal* worship of God. Failing to grasp the distinction between celebration and *formal* worship, many evangelicals are taking the forms of the world and incorporating them in their worship. I now want to take the distinction I am drawing a step further and show two things. First, while celebration borrows from the world, worship borrows from heaven. Second, God is weaning us from celebration and training us in worship as we draw ever closer to the throne of grace. This means, although we may frequently engage in celebration, we should begin to leave it behind and learn to engage more fully in worship.

First, while celebration borrows from the world, worship borrows from heaven. How does worship borrow from heaven? In the lessons called "Worship as Service to God" I attempted to show worship is God directed. We examined the Greek word *latreia*, worship or service, and found this is the case. We then looked at a second Greek word, *leitourgo*, also translated worship and service, under the heading "Liturgy for Life and Worship." We found God sets the liturgy in worship. The writer to the Hebrews confirms this for us when he discusses the Old Testament tabernacle. Speaking of Jesus Christ and then of Moses, Hebrews 8:1-5 says,

Now the main point in what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary, and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man. For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary that this high priest also have something to offer. Now if He were on earth, He would not be a priest at all, since there are those who

offer the gifts according to the Law; who serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things, just as Moses was warned by God when he was about to erect the tabernacle; for, "See," He says, "that you make all things according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain."

Jesus Christ now resides in the "true tabernacle" in heaven. It is a tabernacle "which the Lord pitched, not man." Moses was given explicit instructions regarding the earthly tabernacle. It was patterned after the one in heaven. Moses was also warned not to deviate from the pattern given by God. In other words, the pattern for worship among the people of Israel came from heaven. The model for worship is heavenly. Worship of God on earth borrows from heaven and copies the exemplar of heaven. Borrowing from the world is forbidden. Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron,

took their respective firepans, and after putting fire in them, placed incense on it and offered strange fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them. And fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord (Leviticus 10:1-2).

The point we often miss is that worship of the Almighty is to be carried out as directed by Him. Worship follows the standards of heaven. Borrowing from the world to worship the Almighty is condemned by Him.

We understand this when we grasp the significance of the exhortation, "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (Leviticus 11:44, 1 Peter 1:16). We are obliged to pursue holiness (Hebrews 12:14). Holy living is the hallmark of the Christian life. Holiness in worship is also essential. That is, we Christians are to be separated people in life and worship. We are in the world but not of the world. This applies to worship as well as to our lives in general. Worship which borrows from the world does not enhance or increase holiness, separation from the world. Worship which borrows from heaven does. Celebration does the former. Divine worship instituted by God does the latter.

Because God is weaning us from the world, we are to learn the principles of heaven and put them into practice in our

daily lives. This is especially true in worship. Hebrews 4:16 exhorts, "Let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need." As we draw closer to the throne of grace, we leave more of the world behind. The implication is we are to leave behind celebration, with all its worldly accouterments, as we draw near to God's holy throne in worship.

When we come to worship on the Lord's Day, we practice setting aside worldly care and coming before the face of God. The Lord's Day is the Christian Sabbath. Each week, on the first day of the week, we have a foretaste of God's eternal rest. God established this Sabbath rest for our benefit. In it we rest from our regular work. We do this in anticipation of heaven. "There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God" (Hebrews 4:9). Our worship is a part of our entering into Sabbath rest. We set aside the cares and frustrations of the world; we focus attention on God through Jesus Christ. We come before the throne of grace in worship and adoration.

Following the Old Testament pattern, we do not drag along with us all the worldly elements of celebration. The object is not to further stimulate our adrenaline addicted systems and to chemically induce a sense of well-being and euphoria.<sup>1</sup> This is the way of the world. It does not bring rest.<sup>2</sup> Our objective is to leave the world behind; we will do this in the end anyway. Our worship is designed by God to wean us from the world and prepare us for His heaven.

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<sup>1</sup> See my, "Adrenaline Addiction and Worship." I argue this addiction leads to more celebration and less worship.

<sup>2</sup> See my messages, "Excitement Seeking Worship," and "Will There be Adrenaline in Heaven?"