

Honor

Our Western world is heavily based on truth versus error, or truth versus a lie, or true versus false, in contrast to societies in other parts of the world or in the remote past, which were based more on honor versus shame. So we in America today know little about honoring others – and what we once did know is rapidly vanishing in our present society of alienated and alienating people. Honor plays a major if scarcely understood role in the Bible's many narratives and in its macro-narrative.

Atheists mock Christianity by alleging that God must be an egomaniac requiring those who believe in Him to engage in sycophantic worship. That's simply rebellion against God oozing out of their depraved minds. As created beings, all humans have a creational obligation or responsibility to honor our Creator. We were made with the "image of God" to enable us to be like God's beautiful Person, so that God's inherent glory would be reflected to the world and back to Him as we imitate Him. Our obligation to obey God would be so that we are God-like, thereby reflecting His glory. Our creational obligation to serve God also was an aspect of honoring God. To serve is to worship is to honor. And to honor God is to love Him. Had Adam obeyed God in the Garden when tempted, he would have brought great honor to God, and God would have rewarded him, probably with the right to eat of the tree of life. As it turns out, by his disobedience he brought shame to God, with the dreadful consequences we all experience.

Noah's son Ham brought shame to his father by squealing on his father's nakedness. The other two siblings, in contrast, honored their father. The mob assembled at Shinar, refusing to obey God's command to disperse and fill the earth, brought shame to God. In contrast, Abraham honored God by obeying His Word to go to a distant land.

A new dimension of honor entered the progress of revelation when Abraham was instructed to offer up his son Isaac: sacrifice. When we read Genesis 22, we immediately think of how that episode at Mount Moriah was a type of Christ's sacrifice at Calvary. And it is that. But we thereby miss something that's of the greatest significance. Abraham was expected to make a sacrifice to God of that which was most important to him, his beloved son and (only) heir. His son was more important to Abraham than even Abraham's own life. And by his willingness to do that sacrifice, Abraham honored God in the most precious way possible. We honor God by being God-like (ie, by being righteous), by obeying Him, by serving Him, and now also by self-sacrifice for God's sake.

The sacrifice of the Passover lamb was not a sin offering. It was a sacrifice that made possible a rescue or deliverance, and it enabled a relationship. God required it because sacrifice for His sake evidently brought Him honor. When the Levitical offerings were introduced in the Law, some were indeed for sin, but not all of them. The "fellowship" offering, for example, was to celebrate a relationship that was made or that was restored. It was not to make a relationship possible, as some wrongly suppose. The Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) sacrifice indeed was a sacrifice for sin.

The Ten Commandments are based on honor. To worship and serve other gods or idols would bring shame to Israel's great God who brought into existence, delivered, protected and blessed His beloved people. Setting aside one day to enjoy their relationship with God, the Sabbath, would honor God. Israelites were to honor their parents just as they honored their God. Doing the opposite of stealing, lying, killing, etc, would be living righteously, as God Himself would live, and that honors Him too.

In the Bible, worship and serving go together. They are translations of the same word in Hebrew, *ebed*. What is God worth to us? Worship is worth-ship. We tell God how much He's worth by the sacrifices we make to serve Him as He wants to be served. And so we honor God. We call our Sunday morning services "Worship." But that's almost comical, because there's no serving God involved – except on the part of those preaching or teaching. Do we suppose we honor God by passively sitting thru a homily? See in Matthew 15:8 how words, beautiful words even, don't honor God.

In Romans chapter 1, Paul doesn't merely classify all religions in the world as either biblical theism or pantheism (although he does that). He makes it clear that worshipping and serving our creator God honors Him. But worshipping and serving gods that are *within* the created world (or the created world itself), the only alternative, denies God the honor that is due Him as Creator and as the infinitely glorious Person that He is. And interestingly, the consequences of dishonoring God in Romans 1 reprises what resulted in Genesis 9, namely, sexual degradation. The lesson seems to be this: if we refuse to honor God, which is our creational duty as humans, that not only alienates us from God, it dehumanizes us. If we obey Satan, if we imitate him with lies and stealing and killing, that honors him – which seems to be what Satan lusts after.

Let's think now about the sacrifice Christ made on the cross. As Paul states repeatedly in his letters, it was a sacrifice for sin. The author of Hebrews repeatedly says it was a sin sacrifice as, he makes explicit, the Yom Kippur sacrifice was. John does the same. So does Peter. Yet . . . it was more. The cross has more significance than we realize.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5 that it was a Passover type sacrifice. In other words, it was a sacrifice that established a new relationship, one that entails responsibilities. As a Passover-type sacrifice, it defeated Satan (Hebrews 2:14) and delivered us from the power of Satan (see also 1 John 3:8c). By His sacrifice of himself, voluntarily offered, Christ honored God as God's infinite glory deserved. Satan had rebelled against God and refused to honor God, refused to worship God as all creatures owe Him. But representing humanity and on behalf of humanity, the Incarnate Son honored God by offering the deserved worship of self-sacrifice, showing Satan's rebellion for what it was. Christ's motive was also a concern for others, his fellow humans, that they might be blessed. Satan's motive was himself; he *used* humans for his own advancement and power-lust. There's no benefiting others, there's no helping others in need, without some form of self-sacrifice (see the parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10). There's no worship of God without self-sacrifice; that's why the Messiah-King of Israel is called God's Servant (repeatedly in Isaiah chapters 40-55). Christ's death on the cross was also an act of obedience, the climax of a life of righteousness, something that *someone* had to do, but that none of us could do or would do. Christ's death, because He was deity, was of infinite value. His death was sufficient to substitute for the eternal death of every human being.

Christ did all this for us by the sacrifice of Himself: He made it possible for God to forgive us our sins. He made possible reconciliation with an alienated God so that a fellowship relationship is possible. He defeated Satan and delivered us from his grip and from our innate sin nature. And by His obedience, servanthood and righteousness, He honored God as none of us could do or would do but that an infinitely glorious God infinitely deserved (John 8:49). By our union with Christ, all that He accomplished on the cross is ours.

Sacrifice in ancient times and in some places today is mainly to get something from God (or from the gods). Yet God commands us to sacrifice ourselves for Him! (Romans 12:1-2 is a text we probably all know but assiduously ignore.) This sacrifice we're to make isn't to get anything, however; it's to transform us. It's to draw us closer to God. It's to help us trust Him more. It's to know Him better. It's also our way of thanking Him for all He's done for us. And it's how we honor Him. If we've identified with Christ, then during this unique era between Advents, empowered by the gift of the Spirit, we are to continue His life and mission. We're His hands and feet on earth, the Body of Christ. As He served God by serving others, so do we. As He suffered in weakness, so do we. As He sacrificed Himself to honor God, so do we.

The problem most Christians in America have is, we don't know God. We don't reflect on His Person much if at all. How can we honor someone we barely know? We have at most a superficial knowledge of God. The British theologian, N.T. Wright, thinks most American believers are really deists. Or Epicureans. God isn't in our thoughts and He isn't real in our lives – except maybe for 2 hours on Sunday mornings.

Here are just a few thoughts we could have about the exalted God of the Scriptures: Although the natural world surrounds us, we fail to see God as the brilliant Designer and Creator that He is. He invented life. Although we live in time and space, we don't reflect on the fact that a transcendent God out of nothing brought time and space into existence. And that, in some way mysterious to us, He is above it all. He invented matter, yet He's immaterial. Everything in His creation is transparent to Him, He sees *everything*; He even knows our thoughts and motives. All His acts, everything He does, is executed with split-second timing and with exhaustive knowledge of its consequences. His penchant for justice makes Him dangerous in a cosmos filled with evil, but He is good. And out of His goodness flows mercy and forgiveness (although in perfect wisdom, He has conditioned forgiveness on repentance). Rarely do we realize that our sense of morality derives from an infinitely holy God. The most trivial sin is not just an offense, it's like a slap in the face of a beautiful God. God's immensity escapes us, but the universe – as vast as it may be – is simply His handiwork, something He fashioned with His hands. In sovereignty, He maintains this entire world and all the life that's in it. Our next heartbeat and breath is only by His will. And His love is so deep and so profound that He's willing to adopt as His sons those who despised Him, who rebelled against Him, who refused to honor Him for who He is. He's willing to have us in His presence, experiencing the joy of the Godhead for an eternity. Such is our great God. Psalm 95:6-7.

Believing in Christ, that is, in His Person, His words and work, honors God (John 5:23). And God in return lavishes His love on us, love that eventuates in eternal blessing. Note 1 Samuel 2:30b. A Spirit-empowered, transformed life spent serving Christ also honors God (John 12:26). We glorify God as He sees in us, repentant and sanctified clones of the Incarnate Son, a reflection of His own ineffable glory. That is how we fulfill the purpose for which we were created.