

What Constitutes Worship?

There are many answers to the above question. Some are correct, some have elements of truth to them, and other answers one would receive are simply in error. Of course, it is this way with every subject from Scripture one might bring up. However, we would expect the answer from the head of a theological school to be more exact, and accurate than the average person. We certainly would expect their answer to be more centered around service to God than politics. Unfortunately, this is not the case, and it is certainly not restricted to the individual that came to my attention late last week. Now, to be fair, the subject at hand was not worship, but the addressing of the subject intruded into the arena of what constitutes worship, and the individual drew no distinctions.

Before getting going on this, it is only fair to give a brief background of the individual so their qualifications can be duly noted and kept in mind. The following is extracted from the brief bio posted with her column at the Newsweek/Washington Post website, Faith section:

Rev. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite is president of Chicago Theological Seminary and senior fellow at the Center for American Progress. She has been a professor of theology at the seminary for 20 years and director of its graduate degree center for five years. Her area of expertise is contextual theologies of liberation, specializing in issues of violence and violation. An ordained minister of the United Church of Christ since 1974, the "On Faith" panelist is the author or editor of thirteen books and has been a translator for two translations of the Bible.

((http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/susan_brooks_thistlethwaite/2008/03/is_nothing_sacred.html))

I won't even get into all that is in error in the writeup. Not that it is not her history. It is. It is that her endeavors run so counter to the express commandments of God. Perhaps that is why it never impinged upon her conscience to address the issue of "note takers" during the time of the sermon somewhat differently. Some quotes of what she wrote follow:

"A member of Trinity United Church of Christ, the church once led by Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright and where Senator Obama is a member, told me there are "spies" among them in the pews, strangers who take notes during the service and try to record the message.

Check it out for yourself. Go to the Trinity UCC website, select "Why The Black Church Won't Shut Up!", and listen to Rev. Otis Moss politely ask that there be "no recording equipment." He repeats over and over, "We are in worship. We are in worship." When visitors are asked to stand, you can see those with paper and pencil in hand. Are these folks members of the press or political operatives? Impossible to know if they don't, as Rev. Moss requests, sign in.

This is what happens when politics intrudes into the sanctuary of the church, a sacred space."

"Challenging your pastor's freedom in the pulpit is bad. Spying on people at prayer is reprehensible.

Is this what the assaults of the past decades on the wall of separation between church and state has led us to? Is there no such thing as sacred space anymore?"

"A church is sacred space and to violate that space by engaging in "Swift-boat" type distortions and even spying is un-American. This is not us, this is not the bedrock principle of our founders and those leaders we have most respected. Our churches and our faith commitments are out of bounds in the tumult of political contests."

“Let us pull back from this disastrous course of mixing religion and politics before we destroy something so unique and precious it has been the envy of the whole world.”
(([ibid](#)))

Notice something odd about her response to the issue at hand? In reading all the comments about her column, I noticed something missing there as well. What is it? It is the acknowledgement of a major component of worship – learning. Now, it is not necessary to take notes to learn, but it sure helps retain what was spoken. Moreover, we have the express invitation of the Lord Jesus Christ to learn of Him.

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.
(Matthew 11:28-30)

You know, when you don't care about someone or something, you don't bother learning about them, or it – at all. To me, it is telling that Hannah of ancient Israel knew far more of what the LORD God is about than the head of a theological school.

Talk no more so exceeding proudly; let not arrogancy come out of your mouth: for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. *(I Samuel 2:3)*

Somehow I don't think the Lord Jesus Christ would have been at all upset if someone had sat in front of Him taking notes while he preached and taught. What mattered to the LORD was the heart of the person, and their desire to learn of God. After all, since He was preaching the truth, He had no concerns about what they wanted to do with His words, as He knew the effect the words would have upon them.

The Pharisees heard that the people murmured such things concerning him; and the Pharisees and the chief priests sent

officers to take him. (*John 7:32*)

So there was a division among the people because of him. And some of them would have taken him; but no man laid hands on him. Then came the officers to the chief priests and Pharisees; and they said unto them, Why have ye not brought him? The officers answered, Never man spake like this man. (*John 7:43-45*)

No, the Lord Jesus Christ spoke openly because He knew the time was not yet, and He knew that it was necessary that the word be preached openly. Moreover, since the LORD God is a God of knowledge, it is essential that people learn. I don't see the Lord being displeased with this at all.

Knowing this, we can come forward to our day and time and understand that if people have to take notes, or record the message to recall what was said later, then there ought be no problem with that. If one preaches expressly from the Scripture, then all that need be done in defense of what was said is point to chapter and verse, and show that the Bible does indeed say that.

The problem here is that worship, and what constitutes worship is not at all understood. When someone is a "fan" of an actor, or performer, they try to learn everything they can about that person. If someone is a fanatic about golf, fishing or guns, we find that they always take notes, record, or otherwise preserve a record of the things said about the subject they worship. We also find they are devoted to their particular interest, almost to the exclusion of everything else. It is like some popular television shows – there are some who can never get enough information about a particular show (*Star Trek and M.A.S.H. come to mind*), and they record or otherwise obtain every scrap of information they can about the series.

Funny how that is not the case when people come into the house of God. Instead, they are discouraged from taking notes and

recording the preaching, and are told they need to have a “worshipful” attitude. It makes one really wonder why doesn't it?

You know, we needn't worry what man will do with the words spoken from the pulpit. No, we need to be concerned about what God has determined about the words spoken from the pulpit.

Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (*Matthew 5:19*)

O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things. But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned. (*Matthew 12:34-37*)

Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite misses the point.
