

PRAISE POINTS

This short article looks at some ‘Praise points’.
Points both *about* Praise, and about the direction *of* Praise.

Praise is a **response**.

“Don’t forget your thank-you’s!” is something that most of us have had drummed into us with a greater or lesser degree of success. One of the reasons for the difficulty we find in saying ‘thank-you’ is because we can become so happily involved with the gift that the *giver* is temporarily eclipsed. (In fact thank-you’s are sometimes easier when the gift has not been given but just promised, and there’s nothing to detract from the giver.)

Praise is very close to thanks, and they have much in common. We do not *thank* people *in order to get something else from them!* If our gratitude is laid on thick in the hope of manipulating the giver in some way, then what sounds like thanks is merely thanks-noises – used as a kind of verbal crowbar! (If we ever do that we know well enough that we are engaged in a shady business which is nearer cheating than thanking.)

Expressions of thanks – or praise – are *not* like coins in a slot machine; they are not dispensed in order to *get* something, or if the machine lets us down, at the very least to get them back again! Thanks and praise are not a means of achieving some end; they are not a tool or trick to get or guarantee what we want.

Thanks, like congratulations or encouragement, is a **response**. Thanks is an end in itself; so too is praise, which exists for no other reason than to be given away appropriately. None of these things ‘work’ directly for us. Just as thanks doesn’t get anything for us, so neither does praise. To say, or imply, that ‘praise works’ is as topsy-turvy as saying that ‘thanks works’.

Any teaching about praise that seems to promise that we will get more if we do it more is as deceitful as encouraging us to thank people in order to get more out of them!

Praise and **praise-sounds**

Just as words of thanks can be used genuinely or selfishly – yet sound much the same – so too with praise. We need to distinguish between genuine **praise** and **praise-sounds**.

An analogy may be helpful. If you go to a concert, or watch one on television, the appreciation and praise of the audience is expressed at the end by clapping. The sole object of this is to give glory to the performers. After a while, however, an important change takes place. The audience continues to clap, not to *give*, but to *get*. The clapping is kept up by the audience in order to put pressure on the performers to give them some more. What begins as *appreciation* ends up as *demand* – with little or no audible difference!

Praise is essentially *selfless*; when used selfishly it becomes merely praise-sounds.

Rightly understood we'll find that praise just *doesn't work* for **us** because it has no more 'work' to accomplish *for us* than a 'thank you' or a clapped appreciation.

Praise points to God, and its only goal is that God should know of it – not necessarily 'hear' it, since most praise is silent. Praise does not ensure our health, blessing, forgiveness, prosperity, happiness or anything else. It **points to God**, it does not engage in any U-turn and point back to us. It ceases to be real praise the moment we treat God as a slot machine.

Since praise is a response, it must respond **to something**.

I have attended a number of meetings and services when the well-meaning leader has said 'Let's begin with praise!' and started everyone off singing appropriately. It usually does not work very well because such a leader is expecting people to respond without giving them anything to respond *to*!

Of course every Christian gathers at the start of a meeting/service in the knowledge of all that God has done for them, but for most of us this knowledge is, at that time, overlaid with other thoughts and concerns: about whether we've told the babysitter we'd be late, whether we left the fire on, whether there is a loo on the premises, anxiety about possibly being parked on a double-yellow line, or swamped by the physical relief of getting the weight off our aching feet! Such distraction is not always our fault – we may start a service reeling from the account by the person next to us of their recent terrible stomach operation!

'Let's praise the Lord!' is an invitation which is much easier immediately to accept when we have just been shown or told something praiseworthy, i.e. have been reminded of some aspect of God's love and goodness to which we can respond positively. Preparatory notices concluding with the latest tragic results of church vandalism do not naturally lead into praise - and good liturgy is based on what is natural.

If praise is a response to an awareness of what God has done; an awareness of what God has done should *precede* praise.

ACTS – Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication is a widely-recognised structure for prayer. Someone has wisely modified it to PACTS by the addition of **Pause**. In practical terms, the majority of us need some sort of pause if our adoration – of which praise is a central part – is to be at its fullest and deepest.

Songs and hymns of praise exist to praise God **for** something, they are not musical warm-ups to help meetings. Praise points to God, not to our meeting, nor even to its success.

An emphasis on praise which does not distinguish between true praise and praise-noises can lead to an endless belting-out of repeated praise-choruses on the assumption that an increase in

praise-noise is the same as an increase of true praise. This is not so. ‘Abide with me’ sung at a football match contains great volume of dedication-*noise*, but little if any dedication.

A hi-fi system can produce praise-noises, but it cannot produce *praise* because it has no heart and knows not God.

Praise indicates our **position**.

Colin Urquhart once asked a parishioner how he was.

‘All right under the circumstances’, came the reply.

‘And what’, asked Colin shrewdly, ‘are you doing *under* the circumstances?’

This speaks right to the heart of what we mean by praise. Praise is possible when we begin to share God’s view. As we draw nearer to him we are, in Christ, incorporated not only into Christ’s Death, but into his Resurrection *and Ascension*. Although we are thoroughly *within* the circumstances in which God has placed us, it is only as aliens and strangers that we are here - our real home is ‘in the heavenlies’. This is a favourite teaching of Pentecostalist churches, but while mainstream churches might sing ‘See the Conqueror mounts in triumph’, the lines –

‘There we sit in heavenly places,

There with him in glory stand...’

tend to be glossed over, and the Ascension celebrated only as Christ’s experience, not ours.

Our position in Christ is to be freed from being *under the circumstances*. This means that we can pray for, and expect to enjoy, not just the ‘lips of praise alone, or e’ven a praising heart... but for a life made up of praise in every part.’

Praise points to **facts** not feelings.

Some of us have times when we are feeling bubbly and joyful and on top of the world – times in which it is easy to praise God because we **feel** like it. That’s fine! But most of our praise most of the time is not the result of some sort of spiritual ‘higi’, or emotional bubbling-over. It is not a response to our feeling God, but to our *knowing* God.

To praise God in all circumstances is not to smile joyfully through gritted teeth in a vain attempt to produce a plastic smile to convince people how real our faith is!

Such an activity is not the leading of the Spirit into all truth, but the worst sort of spiritual deception – and we all know who fathers lies...

Praising God always is based on a deep knowledge that under, over and above whatever suffering we are enduring, God remains loving, faithful, merciful and worthy of praise.

‘Praise God!’ is a short credal statement. It is affirming something we *know* about God, it is not necessarily expressing what we *feel* about God at that precise moment.

Amid the ‘changes and chances of this fleeting world’ our feelings and experiences will range from the holy to the horrific. Holding us and loving us amid all those changes is a God who is worthy of praise.

‘I feel dreadful. Praise God!’ is not some Christianised version of the power-of-positive-thinking which we engage in as a mental trick to make reality less painful.

‘I feel dreadful. Praise God!’ is a double affirmation of Truth, firstly about ourselves, and secondly about God. The truth about God is the setting in which we live and move and have our being, and which contains the truth about ourselves.

Praising God should not be a flight of religious fancy to escape the harsh realities of this world.

Praising God is bringing the truth and reality of God alongside the truth and reality of ourselves.

Praise therefore points to the Truth.

It does not spring from some filleted faith, from which pain, paradox and suffering have been removed, nor does it come from shutting-off the darker sides of our natures and our emotions and pretending they are not there. Praise is not some group dynamic by which we hope to create a ‘warm’ atmosphere. Christian praise arises not from avoiding reality and truth, but by entering fully into them.

When Jesus came to the disciples in the Upper Room it is interesting to note that their praise erupted not when they saw Jesus, but when they were made to contemplate the Cross –

‘Jesus showed them his hands and his side.

Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord!’ [John 20:20]

Praise is a **result**.

It is not a cause. If we overhear laughter at a children’s party we can be sure that things are going well. We would not advise our children to laugh when they go there to make sure they enjoy it, that would be putting the cart before the horse.

If certain good things often appear to accompany praise it is probably not because praise *caused* them. It is far more likely that praise is itself one of the good things resulting from an experience of God’s goodness.

There is only one conclusion –

*Praise God, from whom all blessings flow,
Praise him, all creatures here below,
Praise him above, angelic host,
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.*