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# Worship

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*James C. Baker*



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# WORSHIP

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BY  
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## Worship

I am to speak to you of worship, its place in the religious life, and the difficulties which confront us when we try to realize its highest ideal.

It is a subject to which we do not ordinarily give much time or thought. For most of us, I suspect, worship suggests church services and prayer meetings and other gatherings where we sing hymns and pray. We realize that these things are important and necessary, but they do not bulk large in our estimate of the Christian life. Worship, we feel, is a part of religion, not the whole, and just now it is the part about which we hear and think the least. If I were to say that to worship is the most important thing a Christian can do, and the most difficult, I am sure there would be many to disagree with me, and yet this is the thesis which I propose to maintain today.

For what is worship? In its simplest and most fundamental meaning it is the practice of the presence of God. That seems an obvious thing to say; but unless we realize what it means and all that it means, we shall make

little progress in dealing with the practical difficulties which confront us.

What does it mean to practice the presence of God? It means by deliberate and intelligent effort to make explicit to consciousness the supreme fact of religion, namely, the reality and the nearness of God, to the end that God may be able to do for us, in us, and through us, and so for the world at large, what He desires.

I say, the practice of the presence of God. There is a sense, of course, in which we do not need to practice this presence. God is here, whether we know it or not. His reality and His nearness do not depend upon our knowing Him. He is the fact of facts, the reality of realities, but it will make all the difference in the world to us whether we realize this fact, and it will make a very real difference to the world whether we do.

We have all been reading "Mr. Britling Sees It Through." You remember that dramatic passage in the latter part of the book in which Mr. Britling discovers God. It is all the more instructive because written by one who has definitely broken with the Christian tradition, and is at pains to point out how

little sympathy he has for much that is contained in the historic creeds. It is the passage in which Mr. Britling writes to the parents of Herr Heinrich, the German tutor who had been killed in the war, and who had left with Mr. Britling the request that in case he should fall, his violin be sent to his parents at home.

Mr. Britling sits down to write the conventional letter of condolence, but as he writes, his thought passes from the immediate matter in hand to the wider significance of the experience through which these old people have been passing. He thinks of his own son, whom he, too, dearly loved and has lost, and he feels the impulse to speak some word that shall cross the barrier which distance has put between him and them and bring comfort to their wounded spirits. But as he writes, he realizes all too keenly the inadequacy of his own words. "He was distressed," so Mr. Wells goes on, "by a fancy of an old German couple spectacled and peering, puzzled by his letter. Perhaps they would be obscurely hurt by his perplexing generalisations. Why, they would ask, should this Englishman preach to them?"

“He sat back in his chair wearily, with his chin sunk upon his chest. For a time he did not think, and then, he read again the sentence in front of his eyes.

“*‘These boys, these hopes, this war has killed.’*

“The words hung for a time in his mind.

“‘No!’ said Mr. Britling stoutly. ‘They live!’

“And suddenly it was borne in upon his mind that he was not alone. There were thousands and tens of thousands of men and women like himself, desiring with all their hearts to say, as he desired to say, the reconciling word. It was not only his hand that thrust against the obstacles. . . . Frenchmen and Russians sat in the same stillness, facing the same perplexities; there were Germans seeking a way through to him. Even as he sat and wrote. And for the first time clearly he felt a Presence of which he had thought very many times in the last few weeks, a Presence so close to him that it was behind his eyes and in his brain and hands. It was no trick of his vision; it was a feeling of immediate reality. And it was Hugh, Hugh that he had thought was dead, it was young Heinrich living also, it was

himself, it was those others that sought, it was all these and it was more, it was the Master, the Captain of Mankind, it was God, there present with him, and he knew that it was God. It was as if he had been groping all this time in the darkness, thinking himself alone amidst rocks and pitfalls and pitiless things, and suddenly a hand, a firm strong hand, had touched his own. And a voice within him bade him be of good courage. There was no magic trickery in that moment, he was still weak and weary, a discouraged rhetorician, a good intention ill-equipped; but he was no longer lonely and wretched, no longer in the same world with despair. God was beside him and within him and about him. . . . It was the crucial moment of Mr. Britling's life. It was a thing as light as the passing of a cloud on an April morning; it was a thing as great as the first day of creation. For some moments he still sat back with his chin upon his chest and his hands dropping from the arms of his chair. Then he sat up and drew a deep breath. . . .

“This had come almost as a matter of course.

“For weeks his mind had been playing about

this idea. . . . But hitherto God had been for him a thing of the intelligence, a theory, a report, something told about but not realized. . . . Mr. Britling's thinking about God hitherto had been like some one who has found an empty house, very beautiful and pleasant, full of the promise of a fine personality. And then as the discoverer makes his lonely, curious explorations, he hears downstairs, dear and friendly, the voice of the Master coming in. . .

"There was no need to despair because he himself was one of the feeble folk. God was with him indeed, and he was with God. The King was coming to his own. Amidst the darknesses and confusions, the nightmare cruelties and the hideous stupidities of the great war, God, the Captain of the World Republic, fought his way to empire. So long as one did one's best and utmost in a cause so mighty, did it matter though the thing one did was little or poor?

"'I have thought too much of myself,' said Mr. Britling, 'and of what I would do by myself. I have forgotten *that which was with me. . . .*'" (pp. 438, 439).

"Hitherto God had been for him a thing of

the intelligence." Now he realized that God "was with him." This transition from thought to experience, from theory to appreciation, is where worship begins.

That is why worship is the greatest thing in the world. It brings us into touch with the greatest fact in the greatest way.

It brings us into touch with the greatest fact. That greatest fact is God. God is the ultimate reality, the Being on whom we all depend, to whom we all look up, in whom we find the final satisfaction of our heart's desire.

And it brings us into touch with God in the greatest way, which is the way of personal appropriation, the way that makes us feel that God is not only real, but that He is real for us; that He is not only near, but that He is near to our spirit.

It is the greatest thing that can happen in the life of the individual. Professor Dewey has been telling us a great deal that is interesting about the significance of our thought life. He tells us that thought is instrumental; it deals with definite situations; it helps us to meet specific problems; it is forward-looking, constructive, creative. By it we surmount ob-

stacles and achieve ends. But what is the end which thought serves, the goal toward which it strives? Surely it must be something which has inherent value, something which can satisfy the deepest needs of the spirit, something of which we can feel that when we attain it it will not wear out. This satisfying goal of effort, this permanent home of the soul is God. When we have found Him we have found our true selves. But we find God in worship. When we have learned to worship we have achieved the supreme experience.

It is the greatest thing that can happen for our life as members of society, for it gives us the supreme motive for service. We are living in a social age, an age in which it is becoming increasingly clear that no man can live for himself alone. We are reminded on every hand of the duties that we owe one another, the responsibilities laid upon us—by the very fact that we are human beings—for the lives of the neighbors upon whom our own lives depend. We are trying to deal as best we can with the specific evils which hamper and thwart our common life, evils like poverty, disease, tyranny, ignorance, vice. There is

not one of all the many ills to which flesh is heir but you will find some group of people banding themselves together to wage war against it. But the question still recurs—what is the reason for this ceaseless activity? What is it, after all, that we hope to attain? When we have won our battle against the particular enemy that we seek to overcome, wherein shall we be better off than we were before? What is the great gift that we can give to men that will bring them the satisfaction they crave? Here again, it is religion that must give answer. The one permanently satisfying gift is God Himself. He is the inspiring spring of all our activity, the one satisfying goal of all our effort. When one has come to realize this, social service needs no argument to justify it. It becomes the natural and inevitable expression of the life of religion, and this discovery, this appreciation, comes through worship.

In all this, of course, there is nothing new; it is a familiar truth that I am repeating, the commonplace of all the great religious teachers of the past. But it is necessary, if our life is to be consistent and effective, that we correlate this truth with the familiar things that

we do when, as we say, we worship. For failure to see the real connection between these two aspects of the one great enterprise—the spirit which I have tried to describe, and the art or technique by which it is practiced—is the root of all our difficulties.

These difficulties are of two kinds: one of the mind, and one of the will. The first is lack of intelligence. We have not really visualized our problem. We do not see clearly what we need to do. The second is lack of discipline. We have not realized the effort which is required in order to overcome the obstacles in the way. We have not made earnest with our task.

I say the first difficulty is lack of intelligence. We are to practice the presence of God, but who and what is this God whose presence with us we are to realize? That it is the business of the studies that deal with religion to teach us. When we study the Bible it is to find out what God is like, when we study theology it is to formulate for ourselves in clear and simple language the content of our discovery. When our thought reaches out beyond the confines of our own religion to those

wider regions that we touch only at intervals, through the reports that come back to us from the pioneers whom we have sent out to represent us there, it is still the same great problem which concerns us—to know wherein our thought of God differs from the thought of the men of other faiths to whom we go. For faith in God, we need constantly to remind ourselves, is not confined to any one religion. Worship is no monopoly of Christians. Even those whose conception of God seems to us most inadequate feel the impulse to pray, and often surprise us by the intensity of their devotions. I have heard Dr. Post, the veteran missionary of Beirût, speak with respect of the prayer life of Mohammedans whose confidence he had come to enjoy, and I have myself seen worshipers in Buddhist temples in Japan, surrounded by every evidence of superstition, show a reverence of manner which would compare favorably with the behavior of many a Christian congregation. Here we have men realizing their relation to an unseen being, worshiping with a sincerity which it is impossible to question, and yet the God with whom they feel in communion lacks the

qualities which are central in our faith. What has Christianity to tell us about God that is new? What is *Christian* worship?

There are some things at least that are clear. The God whom Jesus has taught us to call Father is akin to us. He has a social purpose, which takes in others besides ourselves, who have as good a right to His fellowship and help as we. He is righteous, yet at the same time loving. He is in control. Above all, we know what He is like, for He has revealed His character and purpose so clearly in Jesus Christ that he that trusts and follows Jesus has fellowship with God. To develop at length all that these words imply would carry me beyond my present purpose and make this a lecture on theology, instead of a conference on worship. It would lead us into doctrines like the Trinity and the Incarnation, the Deity of Christ and the Atonement. It is enough to say here that the great fact, of which all are alike different forms of expression, is that God is like Christ and that He was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself. To worship God in the Christian sense is to realize all that this great confession means.

But when we contemplate our actual practice of worship we find that it does not in fact produce this consciousness in those who take part in it as fully as it should, and when we ask why this is so, we find to our surprise that, in part at least, it is because it is not designed to do so.

I may illustrate what I mean in the case of each of the two great types of worship with which we are most familiar—those of the liturgical and of the non-liturgical churches. Each has its peculiar difficulties, and each difficulty is traceable to the same cause.

The difficulty in the case of liturgical worship is in part that of monotony; in part that of rigidity. The constant repetition of the same form tends for many people to produce a certain sense of unreality. The words lose their meaning just because they are familiar, and the mere repetition of the ritual comes to be thought of as worship apart from its effect upon the consciousness of those who take part in it.

Again, the liturgical service lacks flexibility. Unlike free worship, which responds in new ways to the new and ever changing situations

of the day's experience, it must express itself through the forms which have been prescribed. When a great crisis comes in the life of the nation, or of the individual, when some new problem is to be faced, some deeper depths of experience to be plumbed, the soul craves new words, or at least a new combination of the old to fit the new situation. But for this the liturgical service makes no provision.

✓ The difficulty with the worship of our non-liturgical churches is just the opposite. Its besetting sin is slovenliness. Unrestrained by any prescription from without, the minister follows the mood of the moment, with the result that great reaches of the Christian experience are passed over without expression, and heights to which the spirit might climb are never attained. And with this arbitrariness there goes a certain carelessness and lack of dignity. One gets the impression that worship is an easy thing, for which no special preparation is needed, that a prayer can be thrown off in one's odd moments, as one might write a note to a friend. The sense of standing in an august presence, the mood of reverence which befits one who is confronted by the

ultimate mystery is not characteristic of the worship of our non-liturgical churches.

One might describe the situation in some such way as this. When one worships in the liturgical churches it is as if one were to go into some gallery filled with the pictures of the old masters placed side by side without reference to their subjects or significance, and were asked at once to appreciate them all; whereas, the effect produced upon one who attends worship in many of our non-liturgical churches might be compared to the experience of one who visits a cubist or futurist exhibition, where each artist outdoes the other in trying to express his own individuality without any reference to the attainments and experience of the past.

Now, both these difficulties spring from a common root, namely, the failure to apply to this matter of worship the same intelligence that we apply to the other parts of our life as Christians. When we are trying to win a man to Christ we try to make him realize in thought what Christ is like. When we take up some form of practical Christian service we regulate our activity by the end that we

seek to attain. But worship, we think, is something that goes of itself, something that we can take for granted. We need to remember that just in proportion to the dignity of worship is its difficulty, and just in proportion to its difficulty is the need of bringing to bear upon all its parts the rigorous criticism, upon which success in every enterprise that is worth while depends.

There is a lesson here that we of the non-liturgical churches can learn from our brothers of the liturgical tradition. They, in theory at least, realize the truth of what I have just been saying. They believe that worship is a business, a task, an ideal, an achievement, as we, I fear, have not yet learned to do.

And this brings me to the second difficulty in the case, the difficulty of lack of discipline. If one feels as many ministers in our day seem to do, that worship is a thing that any one can do, it will not seem worth while to take the time or expend the effort which is required to learn to do it well. But the commonest experience shows that this is not the case. It is hard enough to worship in the spirit, when you have the helps which the great

liturgies give. It is harder still to do so without them.

To come back for a moment to my example of the picture gallery—if you want to cultivate the artistic impulse in a man, you bring him into contact with the great masters, in order that he may learn by firsthand experience what beauty is like. So, if you want to cultivate in a man the spirit of worship, you must bring him into contact with those who have worshiped greatly.

This does not mean, of course, that a man becomes an artist simply by looking at pictures, even though those pictures be the work of the greatest masters. Unless the contemplation of the things that these great men have seen open his eyes to see for himself the common beauty that is all about him, so that he can go out and paint his own pictures, he will never be an artist. So, one may repeat the great liturgies from youth to old age, but if one does not learn from them how to find God for oneself and speak to Him directly, in words that rise out of the depths of one's own heart, with the same simplicity and directness that informed the prayers of the

great masters, one has not learned to worship. But discipline there must be in either case; practice and again practice, if we are to realize the presence we desire.

Our task then, as those who would help men to worship, must be twofold: first, to create the spirit of worship, and second, to provide the forms in which it may find fitting expression.

Of the second I will speak briefly, not because it is not important, but because it is so difficult. It is not a task that can be accomplished by any one man alone, or by any group of men, but by us all working together.

But if the details are difficult, the principle is clear. Everything that we do must be related to our main purpose, which is to make vivid to the consciousness of the worshiper the reality and the nearness of God as Christ has taught us to see Him, to the end that it may become easy for God to do for us, in us and through us, and so for the world, what He desires.

Your own thought will develop at its leisure the corollaries which follow from this principle. It bears, for example, upon the significance

of the parts of the service; it bears upon the order and relative importance of the different elements in prayer; it bears upon the place and limitation of the use of set forms in worship.

It has its bearing upon the significance of the parts of the service. Why is it that we pray in church, and sing hymns and read the Scripture, and repeat the creed and listen to sermons? It must be, if we are justified in doing any one of these, because it contributes in some definite and specific way to making vivid to the consciousness of the worshiper the reality and nearness of the Christlike God. 

What for example, determines the different elements that we shall take up into our prayer, the relative importance which we shall give to each, and the manner and proportions in which we shall relate them? Again, it must be the extent to which they help us to realize in all its length and breadth and depth and height, and in all the many-sidedness of its practical application to our daily needs, what it means that God is real, that He is near, that He is like Christ; what it means for our comfort, what it means for our moral discipline, what it means for our inspiration to service,

what it means for our consciousness of communion with one another.

Again, what is to determine the extent to which forms may rightly be used in worship? Once more it is the extent to which they minister to this great common need, the realization of the presence of God. Just in the measure that this realization is promoted by the use of forms, we must use them. Just in so far as it is hampered by the use of forms, we must dispense with them.

Two special points need to be emphasized in this connection before I pass to my concluding thought. First, the importance of adapting our practice to the condition of the varying audiences with which we have to do; second, the need of training in the use of more adequate forms than those which at the time are natural to us.

It may seem a commonplace to say that we ought to adapt our practice to the condition of the special audience with which we have to do, and yet I do not think that this point can be too strongly emphasized. I am sure that much of our worship suffers because it is too high pitched. We ask men of lim-

ited experience to take upon their lips phrases that have meaning only in the light of a very deep and profound experience, and we are surprised that they find an unreality in their use of them. In worship, as everywhere else in life, honesty is the first of all the virtues, the foundation on which the rest must be built. Better worship sincerely within a narrow range, praying only for that which you are conscious of really desiring, than to use all the phrases of the saints of old and have them only words to which no deep experience of the soul answers.

But when we have said this, we need to go on and say further that, side by side with this obligation to honesty, there is the further obligation to progress. Many a man who would be ashamed to make his present thought the standard for his future belief feels no scruple at all in treating his feeling of the moment as if it were the final arbiter in worship. The fact that forms seem strange to the man who has never used them is no reason why they should always continue to seem so. Rather should their strangeness prove a challenge to his interest, that, by an intelligent study of

what they have meant to the inner life of the great spirits who have used them in the past, he may acquire that sympathy which will make it natural for him to use them for himself.

This is an attitude, I am sure, that we of the non-liturgical churches need most to cultivate. We are too content to make our own present liking the measure of our ideals, and because we do not fancy a form of worship or find its presence congenial, think we can dismiss it altogether from our consideration as something with which we have no concern. We do not realize that in doing this we not only impoverish our own spirits and rob ourselves of the means of our own future growth, but that we sin against the fundamental law of brotherhood, which is sympathy. Nothing that is precious in the life of his brother can be alien to the Christian, and the fact that men in all the ages have found the great liturgies and the historic creeds of the Church a means through which their spirits have mounted up to communion with God lays upon every one who would enjoy the communion of saints the obligation to seek for himself the understanding of their deeper meaning.

As those who desire a vital religion then, it must be our effort to provide the forms in which the spirit of worship may find natural expression, and to train men in the use of the forms we already have; but our success in this will depend upon a matter more fundamental still, namely, our ability to cultivate in ourselves and in others the *spirit* of worship. For until we create the desire for the experience we wish to bring to pass, we cannot expect men to make the effort or submit to the discipline which successful worship requires. ✓

Our prime business then must be to quicken in all whom we can touch, and first of all in ourselves, the *desire* for true worship. But when we try to do this we meet certain special difficulties which grow out of the environment in which we are placed. In part these difficulties are intellectual. They result from the presence in creed or hymn of particular phrases which raise difficulties in the mind, and so impede the free flow of spirit in which worship consists. Of these I do not propose to speak here, for they are a part of that general problem of intellectual reconstruction which meets us all along the line. They meet us as wor-

shippers because they meet us as Christians. They are not specific difficulties which belong to the practice of worship as such.

But there are certain other difficulties of a more permanent and fundamental kind, of which I must say a word. First of all, there is the difficulty of retaining the sense of reality in worship when its practice is conceived as a duty. Second, there is the temptation natural to any company of students whose daily concern is with the things of the mind, to conceive the realities of religion in purely intellectual terms. And finally, there is the belief fostered by the social spirit of our age, that the service of man is itself the true worship.

Of the first of these difficulties I need say little, for we have already had occasion to touch upon it in another connection. It is the difficulty of retaining the sense of reality in worship when its practice is conceived as a duty. The most familiar example of this attitude is, of course, ritualism. The ritualist regards attendance upon the services of the church as a duty, the practice of which is prescribed by God, with the consequence that, for many, church-going acquires the association

of formalism and remoteness from reality to which we have already referred. But this association is by no means confined to the liturgical churches. In the non-liturgical churches it meets us in the emphasis upon prayer meetings and other gatherings for social worship, as if they had in themselves some merit and men were to be judged as Christian or the reverse by their attendance or non-attendance. Now, certainly it is important to pray and to pray in common, but we shall succeed in praying, in the full Christian meaning of that term, just in the measure that we forget all about our prayer as such—whether we think of it as duty or as privilege—and concentrate our attention on the great object with whom prayer brings us into communion, who is God.

If then we are to pray successfully we must somehow succeed in making God real to our consciousness. But here again we meet the difficulty that as students we are constantly making God an object of reflection, arguing about Him, analyzing Him, dissecting Him, comparing different concepts of Him, until at last we come to feel as if somehow God were

an idea, or a set of ideas, and not a great fact with which we come into contact by other organs than by the mind. So our very pre-occupation with the object of worship tends to make worship difficult.

There is only one remedy for this, and that is larger experience. We must leave the classroom and go out into the world of men, and meet the things we talk about, sin and sorrow and suffering and sacrifice, the old man and the new life, the joy of service and the peace that passes understanding—not as they meet us in the classroom, as words, or even as thoughts that words suggest, but as vital experiences, kindling the emotion and constraining the will. As we thus learn to appreciate the realities of religion in all their many-sidedness, through all the avenues of approach which are open to us as living personalities, we shall come to understand that God is greater than our thought of Him, and to apprehend Him with our whole nature as the supreme reality.

For it is with God, as with those more familiar human friends whose fellowship and sympathy mean so much to us. We do not have to go after them, for they are seeking us,

and the thing they most desire of us is that we should receive what they are ready and anxious to give. So God, the great Friend, is ever intent upon our good, and touches us in a thousand ways in helpful ministry, which only our haste and thoughtlessness prevent us from perceiving. That is why it is so important for us to stop from time to time, and live over in quiet the new revelation which each new experience holds afresh for us from God. This habitual stopping to realize life's enlarging meanings is worship. 

But in the meantime, while we are acquiring this experience, there is help to be gained from philosophy itself. In the person of many of its contemporary teachers it is reminding us that thought is only one of our ways of contact with reality, and making easier that attitude of mind of which prayer, in the sense in which we have been trying to describe it, is the natural expression. What we need to do is to correlate what we are taught in the classroom with our practice in the chapel and prayer meeting, so that each will make its fullest contribution to enrichment of character and inspiration to service.

And finally (and for many earnest men and women in our own day this is the most serious difficulty of all), there is the feeling that after all the true worship that God requires is service, and that when we go out among our fellowmen in simple helpfulness we are doing the thing that God most desires. If it be true that *laborare est orare* what need, we may well ask, is there of any other prayer? I believe that this feeling is a very real obstacle in the way of the prayer life of many an earnest student today, and that to meet it successfully we must do full justice to the insight from which it springs. It is true that the God we worship, the Father of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, is not confined to churches and creeds, but makes His presence felt in the world of common life and takes up His abode in the hearts of simple people. It is most true that when we leave our churches and go out into the highways of life to meet our fellowmen in brotherly contact and mutual helpfulness we are going where God is.

Only let us be sure that we find Him. It is a great thing to lift all life to the high level of devotion which the great creeds express

and the great rituals seek to foster. It would be of all things most sad, if, in our quest of specific things to do for our fellowmen in need, we were to lose out of our life the consciousness of the unseen Friend and Helper, whose sufficiency can supply all our lack and in communion with whom alone the soul of man finds its ultimate satisfaction and rest.

It would be sad for us, but it would be even sadder for those whom we would serve, for it would rob them of the best gift we have to give. There is a ministry to the body which is content to meet the elemental needs of the physical nature—needs like food and shelter and warmth and health; and there is a ministry to the spirit which concerns itself with aspirations for which the economist has no place in his catalogue, aspirations after justice and self respect, after knowledge and beauty, after sympathy and loyalty. There is a service that is directed to the satisfaction of needs already in existence, and there is a service that is itself the creator of new needs which enlarge the capacity of the man to whom it would minister. To this larger service religion is committed, and the measure of a man's

fitness to render it is his capacity for worship. No one can give more than he has, and the gift of gifts, because the possession of possessions, is God.

Will you pardon me if I go back for just a moment to Mr. Britling? We do not appreciate the full significance of the experience which I have described until we realize that it came to Mr. Britling in the midst of his effort to substitute service for worship. He was trying to help those poor German parents to some comfort in their specific loneliness and need. God was the last thing in the world that he was thinking about, or that he ever expected to think about in that connection, and he found to his surprise that if he were to help them at all it could only be by sharing with them the thing that had come to mean most to him, and that was God. "I have thought too much of myself," said Mr. Britling, when he tried to explain to himself why the letter that he had written was so ineffective and unsatisfying. "I have thought too much of myself. . . . I have forgotten that which was with me." That which is with us is God. To realize God for oneself is worship; to impart that consciousness to others is service.

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