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Trembling Before the Holy: Sacred Space, Reverence, and Christian Worship from Biblical Sanctuary to African Shrine and Contemporary Congregation. A Historical-Grammatical and Missiological Study

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the biblical theology of holiness and sacred space and asks how that theology should shape Christian worship in contemporary African contexts. It argues that reverence is not ecclesiastical taste, inherited decorum, or nostalgia for older worship forms, but a theological response to the holiness and gracious presence of God. Using historical-grammatical exegesis of Psalm 96:9, Leviticus 10:1–11, and sanctuary terminology, the study traces the movement from tabernacle and temple to Christ and the gathered church. It places biblical sacred approach in conversation with African conceptions of sacred space, especially the Njelele shrine in Zimbabwe, as a missiological point of contact rather than theological equivalence. It also considers contemporary challenges to attentive worship, including smartphone distraction, consumerist expectations, and children's formation. The article proposes a theology of reverent participation in which grace and awe, access and holiness, joy and disciplined attention are held together. Christian reverence must be christological rather than legalistic, contextual rather than imitative, and formative rather than merely regulatory.

KEYWORDS: holiness, sacred space, worship, historical-grammatical exegesis, African Traditional Religions, reverence, digital distraction, missiology

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1. Introduction

Christian worship makes a remarkable claim: ordinary human beings may draw near to the living God. That claim is grounded not in human worthiness but in divine initiative. The God who calls, redeems, sanctifies, and gathers a people also makes communion possible. Yet the biblical invitation to approach God never dissolves the distinction between Creator and creature. Scripture joins access with awe, intimacy with holiness, and confidence with reverence. The same letter to the Hebrews that urges believers to approach the throne of grace with confidence also describes God as "a consuming fire" and calls for acceptable worship marked by reverence and awe (Heb 4:16; 12:28–29). Christian confidence, therefore, is covenantal

confidence, not casual familiarity.

This tension is important in contemporary worship. In many congregations, especially those shaped by digital culture and consumer expectations, worship can become fragmented by constant movement, device use, conversation, performance, or the assumption that the congregation is primarily an audience. The problem is not that all new technologies or informal worship forms are inherently irreverent. Nor is reverence identical with silence, a particular dress code, architectural grandeur, or a single liturgical tradition. The theological issue is whether Christian practice adequately communicates that worship is an encounter with the Holy One and a corporate response to God's self-revelation.

The question becomes especially significant in African missiology. African Christian communities inhabit cultural worlds in which sacred places, sacred persons, ritual boundaries, purification, communal memory, and disciplined approach have often carried deep meaning. African Traditional Religions are highly diverse, and no single description can represent the continent. Nevertheless, numerous African societies distinguish ordinary space from places associated with ancestors, spirits, rainmaking, royal authority, burial, healing, covenant, or divine encounter (Mbiti, 1969; Olupona, 2014). In some contexts, people who have learned to approach a traditional shrine with seriousness may encounter Christian worship settings that appear to require less bodily and communal discipline. That contrast raises a missiological question: can the church receive culturally intelligible forms of reverence while subjecting them to biblical and christological discernment?

This article argues that the answer is yes, provided that comparison does not become syncretism and that biblical holiness remains the controlling theological norm. The study develops its argument in five movements. First, it explains the historical-grammatical method and the biblical vocabulary of holiness. Second, it examines Psalm 96:9 and Leviticus 10 as representative texts concerning worship, sacred approach, and priestly discernment. Third, it traces the movement from sanctuary and temple to Christ and the church, guarding against a simplistic transfer of Old Testament cultic regulations to Christian buildings. Fourth, it brings biblical theology into conversation with comparative and African understandings of sacred space. Fifth, it considers contemporary congregational practices, including digital distraction and the formation of children, and proposes a constructive theology of reverent participation.

2. Method and Scope

The primary method is historical-grammatical exegesis: an interpretive approach that seeks the communicative force of a biblical text through its lexical, grammatical, literary, historical, and canonical contexts. This method governs the article's exegetical claims. It does not reduce meaning to word studies; lexical semantics must be controlled by syntax and context, and historical claims must distinguish what the text states from later interpretive traditions (Meyer, 2013; Moyo, 2026). A canonical reading then extends this exegesis by locating Israel's sanctuary theology within the whole of Scripture, especially the New Testament's christological, pneumatological, and ecclesial fulfillment. Missiological application asks how this canonical theology is heard and embodied in particular cultural worlds. In cases of tension, the historical-grammatical and canonical senses of Scripture govern missiological contextualization; cultural practices are affirmed only insofar as they cohere with biblical holiness and Christ-centered worship.

Contextualization is therefore not the uncritical adoption of local religious meanings. It is a process of translation, discernment, affirmation, correction, and transformation in which the gospel judges every culture while also finding within cultures conceptual resources that can help communicate biblical truth. Comparative material is used heuristically rather than as evidence that all religions share the same theology of sacred space. Practices such as removing shoes, ritual washing, lowering the voice, pilgrimage, bodily prostration, or restricting access may look similar across traditions while arising from very different understandings of God, purity, embodiment, mediation, or salvation. The comparison in this article concerns the social grammar of reverent approach, not theological equivalence. Such a distinction allows Christian theology to learn from the seriousness with which other communities mark sacred encounter without surrendering the confession that Christian worship is oriented to the triune God and mediated through Jesus Christ.

3. Holiness and Sacred Approach in the Hebrew Bible

3.1 The semantic field of holiness

Biblical theology of sacred space begins with God rather than with architecture. Hebrew terminology

associated with holiness derives from the root *qdš*. The noun קֹדֶשׁ (*qōdeš*) refers to holiness or that which is holy; the adjective קָדוֹשׁ (*qādôš*) describes what is holy; and the noun מִקְדָּשׁ (*miqdāš*) designates a sanctuary or holy place. The semantic field concerns what belongs to the sphere of the holy and is therefore distinguished from common use (Brown et al., 1907; Koehler et al., 1994–2000). In priestly texts, holiness involves both status and conduct. Persons, times, objects, and places may be consecrated because they are assigned to God, while Israel is simultaneously called to ethical holiness because Yahweh is holy (Lev 19:2). Holiness cannot therefore be reduced either to ritual separation or to moral virtue; the biblical conception holds cultic, relational, and ethical dimensions together (Klawans, 2006; Milgrom, 1991).

The tabernacle is called a sanctuary because it is the divinely appointed place of God's dwelling among Israel: "Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst" (Exod 25:8). The significance of the structure derives from divine presence. Exodus repeatedly emphasizes pattern, consecration, priestly service, boundaries, and the glory that fills the dwelling. The sacred is not created by aesthetic beauty alone. It is constituted by God's claim and presence and by the ordered response that such presence requires (Haran, 1978).

This principle guards against two errors. The first is magical sacralization, as though a building possessed holiness independently of God. The second is desacralizing functionalism, as though a place set apart for corporate worship were no different in meaning from any other social venue. Christian theology need not identify a church building with Israel's tabernacle to affirm that communities may set apart places, times, objects, and practices for the worship of God. The question is not whether the material world can participate in worship, but how material practices direct attention toward God rather than toward themselves.

3.2 Psalm 96:9: worship, holy splendor, and trembling

Psalm 96 summons the nations to acknowledge Yahweh's kingship. Verse 9 is central to the present study because its imperative language combines worship, holiness, and bodily response. The Masoretic wording may be represented as follows:

הִשְׁתַּחֲווּ לַיהוָה בְּהַדְרַת־קֹדֶשׁ חִילוּ מִפָּנָיו כָּל־הָאָרֶץ

hištaḥăvû la-YHWH bəhadrat-qōdeš ḥîlû mippānāw kol-hāʾāreṣ.

A close grammatical reading clarifies several points. First, *hištaḥăvû* is a plural imperative from the verb commonly used for bowing down or prostrating oneself. Worship in the psalm is not merely an interior feeling; it is expressed in embodied submission. Second, the phrase *bəhadrat-qōdeš* is traditionally rendered "in the splendor of holiness," though interpreters have debated whether it may carry the sense of "holy attire" or "sacred adornment." The construct relationship places holiness at the center of the beauty or majesty in which worship occurs. What is grammatically important is that the phrase in Psalm 96:9 is not a plural form *hadrē* but *bəhadrat-qōdeš*, corresponding closely to Psalm 29:2 and 1 Chronicles 16:29. The wording therefore should not be made to support claims that depend on a nonexistent plural form.

Third, *ḥîlû* is a plural imperative related to the Hebrew root חיל (*ḥyl*), whose semantic range includes writhing, trembling, or being in travail, depending on context. In Psalm 96:9, the context of Yahweh's universal kingship supports the sense "tremble" or "quake before him." The command addresses "all the earth," extending the summons beyond Israel. The verse therefore joins adoration and trembling: the nations are summoned to bow before Yahweh in holy splendor and to respond bodily to the majesty of his presence.

A historical-grammatical reading should resist two opposite reductions. One would turn "trembling" into psychological terror detached from covenant grace; the other would spiritualize the command until bodily reverence disappears. The psalm's rhetoric is doxological and royal. Yahweh's presence is good news because he comes to judge the world in righteousness (Ps 96:10–13), yet divine kingship also relativizes human self-importance. Reverence is thus not servile fear but creaturely truthfulness: human beings worship rightly when they acknowledge who God is and who they are before God.

3.3 Leviticus 10: strange fire and priestly discernment

Leviticus 10 provides a more severe account of sacred approach. Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron, offer

אֵשׁ זָרָה (*ʾēš zārāh*), commonly translated “unauthorized,” “strange,” or “foreign fire,” “which [Yahweh] had not commanded them” (Lev 10:1). Fire then goes out from before Yahweh and consumes them. Moses interprets the event through the divine saying, “Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified” (Lev 10:3).

The narrative’s syntax locates the explicit offense in cultic action not authorized by divine command. The adjective *zārāh* marks the fire as alien to the prescribed service. Interpretive traditions have proposed additional explanations: intoxication, entering the holy place improperly, acting without consultation, or using the wrong source of fire (Meyer, 2013). The immediate placement of the prohibition against priestly consumption of wine and strong drink in verses 8–11 makes sobriety a significant literary concern. Nevertheless, the text does not explicitly state that Nadab and Abihu were intoxicated. A responsible historical-grammatical reading should therefore treat the relationship between 10:1–3 and 10:8–11 as a plausible literary and theological inference about the kind of priestly discernment required, not as a near-determinative explanation of the death of Nadab and Abihu. The juxtaposition may invite a connection between their failure and impaired priestly discernment, but intoxication is not proven as the cause (Milgrom, 1991; Moyo, 2026; Wenham, 1979).

The purpose of the wine prohibition is itself illuminating. Priests must distinguish “between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean,” and they must teach Israel God’s statutes (Lev 10:10–11). Priestly sobriety is thus epistemic and vocational. The priest must perceive distinctions accurately. Sacred service requires discernment, because the holy is not whatever the worshiper sincerely chooses to offer. Moyo (2026) argues that the prohibition of Leviticus 10:8–11 is best read as protecting precisely this priestly capacity to differentiate the holy from the common and the clean from the unclean, and that the priest’s embodied conduct carried representational and pedagogical weight for the whole community. Sobriety, on this reading, is not incidental decorum but a constitutive condition of exemplary holiness. The incident therefore exposes the danger of self-authorizing worship: good intention cannot erase the theological significance of divine instruction. At the same time, this theological inference should not be presented as if the narrative itself specifies intoxication; it remains a canonical and literary reflection on the conditions of faithful priestly service.

Christian appropriation of this text requires care. The church is not governed by the Levitical sacrificial system, and Christian ministers are not Aaronic priests in the cultic sense. Yet the canonical principle remains significant. God is not a projection of religious creativity, and worship cannot be reduced to whatever produces emotional intensity. The death of Nadab and Abihu belongs to a particular covenantal and cultic moment, but the narrative contributes to Scripture’s larger insistence that those who draw near to God should do so with discernment, obedience, and humility.

4. From Sanctuary to Christ and the Gathered Church

The New Testament both fulfills and transforms Israel’s sacred-space theology (Levenson, 1985; Peterson, 1992). Jesus identifies his body with the temple in John 2:19–21, and the Gospel presents him as the locus of divine presence. Temple imagery then extends to the community united to Christ. Believers are “living stones” being built into a spiritual house (1 Pet 2:5), and Paul can describe the church corporately as God’s temple because the Spirit dwells among the community (1 Cor 3:16–17). Elsewhere he applies temple imagery to the believer’s body in an ethical argument concerning sexual holiness (1 Cor 6:19–20). The imagery is therefore christological, pneumatological, ecclesial, and ethical rather than merely architectural (Beale, 2004).

This development means that Christian reverence cannot be confined to the treatment of a church building. A congregation may behave quietly inside a sanctuary while living unjustly outside it, yet biblical holiness rejects such compartmentalization. Worship includes bodily obedience, reconciliation, generosity, sexual integrity, justice, truthfulness, and love. The “holy place” of Christian existence expands because the Spirit indwells God’s people.

At the same time, the spiritualization of temple imagery should not be turned into hostility toward material practices. Christian worship remains embodied. People gather in actual places, at actual times, to hear Scripture, pray, sing, receive baptism and the Lord’s Supper, give, confess, and encourage one another. Buildings are not temples in the Levitical sense with gradations of holiness, but they can be consecrated to particular communal purposes. The church therefore may speak meaningfully of a sanctuary as a space

set apart for worship, so long as this language does not obscure the deeper New Testament claim that the people themselves are God's dwelling by the Spirit.

Hebrews brings grace and awe together with particular clarity. Through Christ's priestly work believers receive access to God, yet the appropriate response to the unshakable kingdom is "acceptable worship, with reverence and awe" (Heb 12:28). The Greek term *eulabeia* carries the sense of reverent caution or godly fear. The logic of Hebrews is not that grace abolishes reverence but that grace makes true reverence possible. Christian awe is no longer the anxiety of people trying to secure access to God by their own ritual performance. It is the grateful seriousness of those who know that access has been opened at immeasurable cost.

This theological balance is crucial for churches seeking to recover reverence. Regulations alone cannot produce holy worship. A congregation can ban phones, enforce silence, prescribe clothing, and still remain spiritually proud or inattentive. Conversely, a congregation can celebrate grace in language while forming habits of distraction that contradict the attentiveness implied by worship. The task is to cultivate embodied practices that correspond to the gospel: freedom from self-justification together with disciplined attention to God and neighbor.

5. Sacred Space in Comparative and African Perspective

5.1 Comparative religious grammars of approach

Religious communities across the world mark sacred approach through space, posture, purification, sound, clothing, movement, and restriction. Comparative scholarship on sacred space has shown that religious places do more than house activities; they organize memory, identity, orientation, social hierarchy, pilgrimage, and relationships to transcendence (Eliade, 1959; Kedar & Werblowsky, 1998; Knott, 2005). Similar outward actions, however, must not be assumed to mean the same thing.

In Islamic practice, ritual washing and bodily orientation toward the *qibla* locate prayer within a disciplined pattern of purity and direction (Katz, 2013). In Jewish tradition, temple memory, synagogue practice, and the language of holiness sustain distinctions of sacred time and communal identity. In Hindu traditions, removing footwear, circumambulation, offerings, and *darśan* may express relationships between devotee, image, and divine presence that differ sharply from biblical monotheism (Eck, 1998). Buddhist monastic and temple settings may employ silence, bodily posture, and ordered movement for aims not reducible to Christian worship. Comparative observation is therefore most useful when it makes Christians ask what their own practices communicate about the God they confess.

The point is not that Christians should imitate other religions. It is that human communities understand theology partly through bodies. A religion that teaches transcendence but forms no bodily habits of attention may communicate less than it intends. Christian worship has always had an embodied grammar: standing, kneeling, lifting hands, eating and drinking, washing in baptism, gathering, listening, singing, silence, and blessing (White, 2000). The contemporary church's question is not whether it will have ritual, but whether its repeated practices will form people toward attentive love of God and neighbor.

5.2 African sacred space and the Njelele conversation

African Traditional Religions offer a particularly important conversation for African Christian missiology. The diversity of African religious worlds requires caution. Concepts of deity, ancestors, spirits, sacred specialists, shrines, land, kingship, and ritual authority vary widely. The following discussion is deliberately limited: Njelele is treated as a specific shrine in the Matobo cultural landscape of Zimbabwe; broader southern African patterns are invoked only as comparative context; no continent-wide generalization is intended. Many African societies have historically understood certain places as religiously charged because of their association with lineage, burial, rain, covenant, territorial spirits, healing, or communal memory (Mbiti, 1969; Olupona, 2014).

The Matobo Hills of Zimbabwe illustrate how sacred geography can be inseparable from political history and communal identity. Njelele, associated with the Mwari cult and rainmaking traditions, has functioned within a larger landscape of shrines, caves, rocks, and ritual memory (Bhebhe, 2019). Ranger's historical study of the Matopos demonstrates that such places cannot be understood simply as isolated "primitive" shrines; they have been contested sites of authority, resistance, identity, ecology, and religious meaning

(Ranger, 1999). A Christian account must therefore avoid caricature. The significance of Njelele lies not only in fear of supernatural sanction but also in a disciplined understanding that place, community, history, and moral order can be interconnected. These claims are specific to Njelele and its regional context; they should not be expanded into a single description of African Traditional Religions.

For Christian mission, such cultural knowledge may function as a point of contact rather than a theological destination. The concept sometimes called *praeparatio evangelica*—preparation for the gospel—can be used carefully to describe cultural patterns that create intelligibility for biblical claims without suggesting that the gospel merely completes an already adequate religious system. African reverence for sacred places may help communicate that encounter with God is not trivial. Yet biblical revelation also critiques any system in which mediation, sacrifice, fear, or spiritual power displaces the unique mediatorship of Christ. Again, this is an analogical and missiological proposal, not a claim that Njelele theology and biblical holiness are equivalent.

The missiological task is therefore double. The church should resist a colonial assumption that African cultural expressions of reverence are automatically superstitious while imported casualness is automatically Christian freedom. At the same time, it should resist romanticizing ancestral religion as if every sacred practice were compatible with the gospel. Contextualization requires discernment. Cultural gestures such as orderly approach, respectful silence, removal of distracting behavior, communal preparation, or recognition of sacred time may be capable of Christian resignification. Practices involving invocation of other spiritual powers, divination, sacrificial mediation incompatible with Christ, or fear-based coercion require theological rejection or transformation.

This approach allows the African church to become genuinely local without becoming syncretistic. Reverence need not be imported from European ecclesiastical etiquette. It can be articulated through African categories of communal dignity, disciplined approach, respect for elders, sacred time, and embodied attentiveness, while being explicitly redirected toward the triune God revealed in Christ (Sibisi, 2016).

6. Contemporary Worship, Digital Attention, and Congregational Formation

6.1 The smartphone as an attention problem

One of the most visible changes in contemporary worship is the presence of the smartphone. Phones can serve legitimate liturgical and educational functions: displaying biblical texts, enabling accessibility, recording announcements, facilitating giving, or connecting online participants (Campbell, 2013). The theological problem is therefore not the device itself but the economy of attention in which the device operates.

Experimental research outside specifically religious settings shows that mobile devices can impose cognitive costs even when users are trying not to engage them. Ward et al. (2017) found that the mere presence of one's own smartphone can reduce available cognitive capacity under certain conditions. Stothart et al. (2015) found that phone notifications can disrupt performance on attention-demanding tasks even when users do not directly interact with the device. These findings do not prove that every phone in a sanctuary destroys worship. They also do not directly measure worship disruption or spiritual attention. They support a prudential pastoral concern about limited attention, not a deterministic empirical claim about every congregational setting. They do, however, support a modest and relevant conclusion: attention is limited, cues compete for it, and disciplined environments can help people sustain focus.

Worship is more than concentration, but it is not less. Listening to Scripture, interceding for others, singing with understanding, examining oneself, and receiving the Lord's Supper all require forms of attention. A congregation in which alerts, scrolling, messaging, photography, and social media continuously interrupt these acts may unintentionally teach that worship must compete on equal terms with every other demand (Naidoo, 2023). The issue becomes theological because attention expresses value. What repeatedly receives the congregation's attention becomes, in practical terms, what the congregation treats as urgent.

A constructive response should avoid moral panic. Churches can establish clear, gracious norms: devices on silent mode; notifications disabled; designated use for Bible reading or accessibility; photography restricted at moments where it disrupts corporate participation; and pastoral teaching that explains why attention matters. The aim is not surveillance. It is formation in the virtue of presence.

6.2 Children, movement, and the formation of reverence

Questions about children require similar balance. A theology of reverence must never turn the congregation into a space where children are treated as unwelcome interruptions. Scripture repeatedly includes children within the worshiping and covenant community, and Jesus' reception of children rebukes adult attempts to push them to the margins. Churches should therefore expect that children will move, whisper, need assistance, and learn gradually.

Yet inclusion is not the same as the absence of formation. Children learn worship by participating in worship. Parents, caregivers, and congregations teach them how to listen, sing, pray, sit, stand, give, respond, and respect other worshipers. A child who is gently taught that some moments call for quiet is not being trained in empty etiquette; the child is learning that love of neighbor sometimes requires self-restraint. Likewise, a congregation that provides age-sensitive resources, safe spaces, and patient mentoring communicates that reverence is learned within belonging rather than imposed as the price of belonging.

The same principle applies to adults. Reverence is not a temperament possessed by quiet people. It is a communal discipline. Some traditions express reverence through exuberant singing, clapping, movement, and call-and-response; others through extended silence and restrained gesture. Either can be reverent or irreverent depending on whether the practice directs the community toward God, edifies the body, respects others, and coheres with the content of worship. The theological criterion is not volume but orientation.

7. Discussion: Toward a Theology of Reverent Participation

The preceding analysis suggests that Christian reverence can be described through four interrelated dimensions: theological recognition, christological access, embodied attention, and communal formation.

First, reverence begins with theological recognition. The imperative "tremble before him" is grounded in the identity and kingship of God. Reverence is therefore not primarily a technique for creating a solemn atmosphere. A congregation may dim lights, lower voices, or adopt formal language and still fail to recognize God's holiness. Conversely, lively worship may embody profound awe. The decisive question is whether the community's practices truthfully respond to God's character.

Second, Christian reverence is christological. The church does not approach God by reproducing the tabernacle system. Access is mediated through Christ, whose priestly work grounds confidence. This protects reverence from legalism. Legalism treats human performance as the basis of acceptance; Christian reverence is the grateful response of people already welcomed by grace. The difference is pastoral as well as doctrinal. Rules that are detached from the gospel often produce fear, pride, or hypocrisy, whereas practices explained in relation to Christ can become forms of joyful discipline.

Third, reverence is embodied attention. Psalm 96 uses bodily verbs of prostration and trembling. Biblical worship is not disembodied cognition. Bodies kneel, stand, sing, eat, drink, listen, give, embrace, and keep silence. Contemporary distractions therefore matter because they shape bodies and habits. The church should not imagine that interior sincerity makes external practices irrelevant. Repeated bodily actions educate desire. This coheres with the priestly logic of Leviticus 10: as Moyo (2026) observes, the priest's sobriety was not merely an inward disposition but a bodily discipline that enacted the holiness he was charged to discern, represent, and teach. Embodied practice and theological perception belong together.

Fourth, reverence is communal formation. Worship is not a private mystical event occurring next to other private mystical events. The congregation is a body. One person's behavior can aid or hinder another's participation. Paul's concern that worship be conducted for edification (1 Cor 14) places limits on an individualistic understanding of freedom. Christian freedom is ordered toward love. A worshiper may be technically free to check a message, photograph a moment, or hold a conversation, yet still ask whether doing so serves the neighbor and the purpose of the assembly.

These dimensions also clarify the contribution of African contextual reflection. African cultural patterns of respectful approach can serve the gospel when they are translated through Christ rather than merely preserved. The church need not choose between "African reverence" and "Christian freedom." The more constructive question is how culturally meaningful bodily practices can witness to the holiness, hospitality, and lordship of God. This may include how congregations enter worship, how leaders carry themselves,

how sacred time is announced, how children are mentored, how funerals and memorials are handled, how music functions, and how digital devices are used.

The result is not a universal etiquette manual. Different communities will embody reverence differently. What is universal is the theological task: worship should form a people who know that God is holy, that Christ has opened the way, that the Spirit dwells among them, and that their bodies and attention belong to the worship of God and the service of one another.

8. Practical Recommendations

Several practices follow from this theology. First, churches should teach the biblical meaning of holiness rather than relying only on announcements about behavior. Congregational expectations are more sustainable when worshipers understand why attention, order, preparation, and mutual consideration matter.

Second, leaders should model the habits they teach. Pastors, elders, musicians, ushers, and other visible ministers communicate theology through posture, punctuality, device use, speech, and attentiveness. A congregation will rarely develop a deeper culture of reverence than its leaders consistently embody.

Third, congregations should treat children as apprentices in worship. Parents need support rather than shame, and children need age-appropriate instruction rather than either exclusion or neglect. Worship practices can be explained and rehearsed so that children gradually understand not only what the community does but why it does it.

Fourth, churches should develop locally appropriate digital-worship norms. These may include silent mode, disabled notifications, guidance about photography and recording, and explicit encouragement to use digital Bibles in ways that minimize distraction (Naidoo, 2023). The objective should be hospitality and attention, not policing.

Fifth, African churches should examine local cultural resources for reverence through critical contextualization. Concepts of sacred time, communal dignity, respectful approach, and responsibility before elders or ancestors may provide analogies that help explain biblical holiness (Sibisi, 2016). Every analogy must then be purified by the gospel, especially where fear, mediation, or spiritual allegiance conflicts with the lordship of Christ.

Finally, the recovery of reverence should be evaluated by its ethical fruits. If a congregation becomes quieter but not kinder, more formal but not more just, or more disciplined but not more hospitable, its reform is incomplete. Biblical holiness joins worship to life. The God who is sanctified among those who draw near is also the God who commands truth, mercy, justice, purity, and love.

9. Conclusion

Psalm 96:9 summons the whole earth to worship Yahweh in holy splendor and to tremble before him. The Masoretic grammar refuses a merely casual account of worship: the nations are commanded to bow and to respond bodily before the divine King. Leviticus 10 intensifies the point by showing that sacred approach requires discernment and cannot be self-authorized. Yet the New Testament prevents these texts from being turned into a Christian system of fear. Through Jesus Christ, access to God is opened, believers become God's dwelling by the Spirit, and reverence becomes the grateful response of the redeemed.

This theology has missiological force in Africa. Traditional understandings of sacred space, including the disciplined seriousness associated with places such as Njelele (Bhebhe, 2019), can expose the weakness of a Christianity that mistakes casualness for freedom. They can also provide cultural points of contact for teaching holiness, provided that comparison remains christologically governed and does not collapse Christian confession into religious equivalence. The gospel both affirms the human intuition that encounter with the divine matters and transforms that intuition through the revelation of God in Christ.

Contemporary churches therefore need neither a return to Levitical ritual nor a retreat into nostalgic formalism. They need a renewed theology of reverent participation. Such worship is joyful without being trivial, confident without being presumptuous, contextual without being syncretistic, and disciplined without

becoming legalistic. It gathers children and adults, embodied persons and digital citizens, into a community whose practices say what its confession already declares: God is holy, Christ has opened the way, and the worshiping people of God are called to offer themselves with reverence, attention, gratitude, and awe.

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