

WORSHIP: RESPONDING TO REVELATION

The fact that only some worship God in the Old Testament was regarded as unacceptable to God. It is a reminder that what is impressive or seems appropriate to us may be offensive to him. In fact, it is so unacceptable that the reason that missions exist is that there are those who do not worship him. So, when it comes to unbelievers, God's aim and goal for their life is to render due honor and worship to him. When it comes to the church, worship is a supreme and indispensable activity. Worship will endure into heaven when all other activities of the church will have passed away. When you think about it, missions exist because worship doesn't. But when Christ comes back, missions will cease. Worship will continue into eternity. Worship must therefore, even more strictly, come under the criticism and control of the Scriptures.

What is Worship?

A traditional starting point for discussions about Christian worship has been the observation that the English word 'worship' means by derivation 'to attribute worth', suggesting that to worship God is to ascribe to him supreme worth. This definition draws attention to the notion that we are to render to God the glory or praise that is due to him, but does it provide an adequate basis for exposing the totality of scriptural teaching on the subject? Worship defined in this way need not have anything at all to do with the particularity of biblical revelation. Even more problematic with this thinking is that it leaves open the possibility of people making their own assessment of God's worth and the response which they consider to be adequate. Is there a better and more complete way to think about worship?

Spiritual self-gratification? One of the issues with contemporary worship is a yearning for more self-expression and personal fulfilment in church services. People want to be stirred and challenged, or comforted and consoled, at an individual level. They want church services to be a source of encouragement for them in their everyday discipleship. Although this may to some extent reflect the preoccupation of our age with self-development and self-realization, it is a reminder that genuine worship will have both a private and a public dimension.

Experience or feeling? Is worship to be identified with a special sense of the presence of God, or with some kind of religious ecstasy or with expressions of deep humiliation before God? Are there special moments in a Christian meeting when we are truly 'worshipping' God? Are church services to be measured by the extent to which they enable the participants to enter such experiences?

Such a subjective approach is often reflected in the comments people make about Christian gatherings, but it has little to do with biblical teaching on the matter. Furthermore, it creates significant problems for relationships amongst Christians, since not all will share in the same experience and some will inevitably be made to feel that their worship is inferior. Worship must involve certain identifiable attitudes, but something is seriously wrong when people equate spiritual self-gratification with worship!

Definition of worship. Throughout the Bible, acceptable worship means approaching or engaging with God on the terms that he proposes and in the manner that he makes possible. In other words, *worship is the right response to the revelation of God*. This is why the biblical understanding of worship is broader than a Sunday morning, a family devotion in the evening, or singing to God when you're driving to work. It is a life encompassing definition that speaks to the entire being of a person. So, the Christian doesn't go to worship God, the Christian lives a life of worship. Let's unpack this a little more.

The Biblical Scope of Worship

In everyday speech, Christian worship is usually identified with certain public religious activities, such as going to church or more particularly singing hymns, saying prayers, listening to sermons or participating in the Lord's Supper. Contemporary Christians obscure the breadth and depth of the Bible's teaching on this subject when they persist in using the word 'worship' in the usual, limited fashion, applying it mainly to what goes on in Sunday services. Worship in the New Testament is a comprehensive category describing the Christian's total existence. It is coextensive with the faith-response wherever and whenever that response is elicited. Consequently, 'our traditional understanding of worship as restricted to the gathering of the congregation at a designated time and place for rite and proclamation is insufficient. This is not what the Bible means by worship.

Worship as a life orientation. When biblical writers talk about acceptable worship, they similarly imply that there are *attitudes* and *activities* that are pleasing and definitely not pleasing to God.¹

Worship as an attitude. In today's popular church culture there is a thinking that God needs our worship. The logic tends to follow a simple line: First, that there is a need in God; secondly that to fill or fulfill that need God needs man; and thirdly that worship being thus man's response to God's need therefore makes man very important to God. This is an entirely unbiblical attitude and thinking.

Quite the opposite, the biblical attitude for worshipping God is an awareness of our own unworthiness, which in turn, leads to a humility when we approach him. When Isaiah came into the presence of the Lord, he said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Isa 6:5). When Peter saw Jesus' divine

¹ Gen 4:3–7; Exod 32; Isa 1; Rom 12:1–2; 14:17–18; Heb 12:28–29; 13:16.

catching of the fish and came to realize that Jesus is God, he said, “Depart from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!” (Lk 5:8). When the Lord descended in a cloud before Moses and declared his name, the response of Moses is telling:

The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there and proclaimed the name of the LORD. The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.” And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. (Exod 34:5-8)

Therefore, we are in desperate need of the proper attitude when God reveals himself to us. The right response to the revelation of God is an attitude of humility and unworthiness. When we grasp this – we then are thankful for the message of the gospel.

Worship as an activity. Biblical worship is not only a heart posture, or attitude, but God is also concerned with the content of our worship. In other words, God cares about what we do when we worship him. Content is at the heart of worship.

The principles for what the content of worship should be is called *the regulative principle of worship*.² Simply put, the regulative principle states that “the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited to his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.”³ In other words, God tells us how he wants to be worshipped.

1. The reading of Scripture (Acts 15:21, 1 Tim 4:13; Rev. 1:3)

² In contrast, the alternative is the *normative principle of worship*, which states that any practice that is not forbidden in the Bible is allowed in a church service, if it helps the church.

³ The Westminster Confession of Faith, 21.1.

2. Preaching the Scriptures (2 Tim 4:2)
3. Singing (Col 3:16; Eph 5:19; Jas 5:13)
4. Prayer (Acts 2:42; 1 Tim 2:1)
5. The ordinances (Matt 29:19; 1 Cor 11:23; Acts 2:42)
6. Giving (Gal 2:10; 1 Cor 9:3-12)

This means that the content of worship when we gather does not include things such as “special music,” or “interpretive dance,” or “drama” or watching movies and seeing where the gospel is hidden in those movies, ect.

Summary and Conclusion

In summary, the concept of worship is a life-encompassing concept. It is our response when the God in the Bible is made known to us. So, when we read the Bible in the morning, how then do we respond? Do we respond with apathy, indifference, or outright rejection of his statutes and commandments? Or do we respond in humility, submission, awe, reverence, and obedience to him? Do we sing? Do we pray? Do we give to the kingdom of God?

In other words, worship then is the right response to the revelation of God. This definition account for so much more than the songs we sing on Sunday morning. It is an attitude of humility, dependence, and unworthiness that we approach God with each time we worship him, no matter where we are. Additionally, God is not only commands the proper attitude of our worship, but he also has given a clear pattern for *how* we worship him.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. **What is worship?** When you think of worshipping God, what comes to your mind? Is there anything that your definition lacks?
2. **Worship as attitude.** What does it mean that we are to have a proper attitude of worship? How can you prepare yourself to have a proper attitude of worship when you come to God?
3. **Worship as content.** What does it mean that God is concerned with the content of our worship? What are the two approaches to
4. **Regularity in worship.** Do you regularly worship, or is that something that only happens on Sunday morning? In other words, do you sing to the Lord on days other than Sunday morning? Do you have personal worship on days other than Sunday mornings? Do you lead your family in devotions, or is that something that only happens on Sunday morning?
5. **Modeling worship.** Fathers, do you take the lead to model worship in your own home? Have you established a pattern in your home of worship? What does it look like?