

heart of worship

JULY 13, 2022

"Worship is our response to the overtures of love from the heart of the Father."

-Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*.

Worship: Where to Begin?

I have to admit that I suffered from some *analysis paralysis* this week as I prepared for our class on worship. "Worship" is such a wide-ranging, pervasive topic in the Bible and among Christian media (books, sermons, podcasts, blog posts) that it's hard to know where to begin, and even *harder* to choose the right aspect of worship to focus on when we're limited to 30 minutes of class time.

No matter what we discuss today, there will be much left unsaid about the beauty and significance of worship. With that caveat in mind, our focus today will be on **worship as a spiritual discipline that God uses to transform his people** into a better reflection of Jesus Christ (**Galatians 4:19**).

Richard Foster hones in on worship as a transformative experience:

"One reason worship should be considered a Spiritual Discipline is because it is an ordered way of acting and living that sets us before God so he can transform us."

Just like all the other spiritual disciplines, worship is both something we *do* and a time when *God does something* in us.

- As we pray, God softens our hearts.
- As we read, God illuminates our minds.
- As we sing, God heals our wounded souls.
- As we eat, God fills us with strength.
- And as we fall before God in humility, God's amazing grace falls upon us in abundance.

Worship is Our Response to God's Grace, Glory, and Goodness.

*"We forget, as Henry Emerson Fosdick pointed out, that **the indicative of the Gospel always precedes the imperative of human response**. That is, the first word is about what God has done, is doing, and will do; the second word is about what we must do in response."*

-Robinson and Wall, *Called to Be Church*, 160.

I first read that quote as a Religion / Bible major at Pepperdine University. The quote has stayed fresh in my mind over the last fifteen-plus years. Do you know what Henry Emerson Fosdick is trying to tell us?

The "**indicative**" refers to the things God has already done in our world: Creating the universe, calling Abraham, rescuing Israel, giving them the Promised Land, residing in the Temple, entering our world in the person of Jesus, dying on the cross for the sins of the world, and empowering his church with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

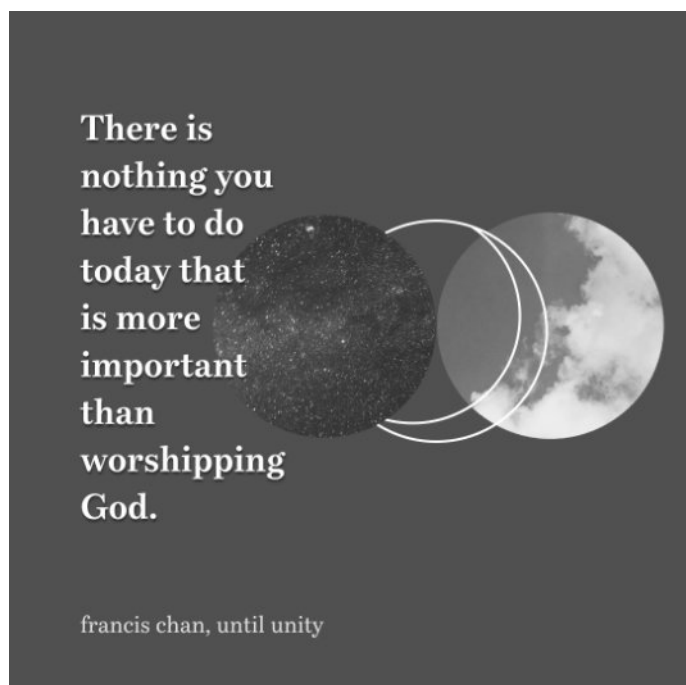
The "**imperative**" refers to what God expects from us in response to what he has already done. We are called upon to profess our faith in Jesus, follow him as disciples, and live out his ethical teachings in our daily lives.

In most religions, worshippers do good deeds in order to earn some kind of blessing from their deity. *If I do enough good things, my god will bless me in return.* In this way of thinking, people take the first step towards a god in order to bend that god to their will. Worship becomes a human initiative that calls for a divine response.

But this is not the case with Christian worship. Instead, Richard Foster says “*worship is the human response to the divine initiative. We worship the Lord not only because of who he is, but also because of what he has done.*”

We are not told to offer prayers, read Scripture, or sing songs in order to earn a blessing from God; rather we are taught to worship God with joy and thanksgiving in our hearts *because he has already blessed us beyond all measure through Jesus Christ.*

In that way, the indicative of God’s grace precedes the imperative of our human response. God has already taken the first step words us, which means worship is “*the appropriate human response to the magnificent glory of God*” (*Eerdman’s Dictionary of the Bible*).



Exploring The Basic Questions about Worship

Who? At the risk of stating the obvious, the Bible teaches us to worship God and God alone (Matthew 4:10). Spirit-filled worship has God as its object, with a special emphasis on the saving work of Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection.

What? Worship is a broad term that is sometimes used in specific ways. Broadly speaking, worship in the New Testament meant offering praise and thanks to God for (1) what he has *already done*

through Jesus and (2) what he has *promised to do* when Christ returns.

In a more specific context, worship can mean a **worship service** (the time when the congregation assembles together, typically on a Sunday morning) or perhaps the **singing portion** of a worship service specifically. So you might hear someone say “*I won’t be able to make it to worship this week,*” or “*I sure love it when Won by One leads worship!*”

When? In the New Testament, worshipping together as a family of believers was one of the highest priorities for the church. Although they met daily for worship (see Acts 2:42-46), there was a strong emphasis on meeting during the evening on the first day of the week (i.e. the day of Jesus’ resurrection – see Acts 20:7 and 1 Corinthians 16:2).

Where? Worship took place in the synagogues (at least until that was no longer an option for the early Christians) and in the homes of wealthy church members who were able to afford large enough homes to accommodate everyone. It would be several more centuries before Christians would gather together in church buildings.

How? When Christians gathered together for worship, they borrowed certain elements of Jewish and Greek worship experiences but adapted them heavily to fit a Christian context.

The more Jewish elements included prayer, singing, teaching, preaching, taking up an offering and reading Scripture. The Greek influence is seen primarily in the presence of a meal. The Lord’s Supper was somewhat similar to the Greco-Roman symposium (a social meal followed by discussion and entertainment), but with some obvious differences.

These New Testament also references hymns, doxologies, statements of faith (creeds or confessionals), baptisms, sermons, prophecies, miraculous healings and other demonstrations of the Spirit, laying of hands, anointing with oil, washing of feet, and the kiss of peace. It’s important to note that not every service included all of these elements and it’s very likely that practices were somewhat varied from church-to-church.

Although there are some references to what these worship services were like, the New Testament does not contain an official script to follow, either in terms of the order of the elements (three songs and a prayer) or the exact words to say during service. Later Christian writings (like the 1st century *Didache*) offer a more formalized teaching on what worship should look like, but the New Testament itself seems to give a considerable amount of freedom in this regard.



“Work becomes worship when you dedicate it to God and perform it with an awareness of his presence.”

—Rick Warren

What Can We Do to Experience Transformational Worship?

*“Just as worship begins in holy expectancy, it ends in holy obedience. If worship does not propel us into greater obedience, it has not been worship. **To stand before the Holy One of eternity is to change.**”*

-Richard Foster

God uses times of worship to transform our hearts from the inside out. Here are a few ways we can place ourselves in his presence and open our hearts to his transforming work.

1. Make it a Priority—*“If the Lord is to be Lord, worship must have priority in our lives.”* - Richard Foster.

2. Cultivate an attitude of “Holy Expectancy” — When Moses approached the Temple of God to worship and offer sacrifices, he fully expected to come into the presence of God. When Christians gathered for worship, they experienced the power of God expressed through earthquakes, judgment, and miracles. They fully expected that worship would be a divine encounter. We need to cultivate that same sense of holy expectancy—the idea that we are entering the presence of the Almighty every time we gather together for worship.

Richard Foster says the best way to do that is to learn to be aware of God’s presence in the ordinary tasks of our daily lives. If we learn to feel God’s presence clearly and intimately at work, at the grocery store, or when we’re in line at the gas station, it’ll be even easier to feel God’s presence when we’re gathered together at church.

“Live throughout the week as an heir of the kingdom, listening for his voice, obeying his word. Since you have heard his voice throughout the week, you know that you will hear his voice as you gather for public worship.”

-Richard Foster

3. Worship from the Heart — Jesus knows the difference between Christians who worship him from the heart and Christians who simply go through the motions of the Christian religion. Saying the right words without the right heart will not create a lasting change in us.

4. Worship God with Everything You Have — Richard Foster says *“God calls for worship that involves our whole being. The body, mind, spirit and emotions should all be laid on the altar of worship.”* Several of the words for worship in the Bible originally described physical acts like bowing down, extending hands, and kneeling. And throughout the Bible we see various physical postures associated with worship. We shouldn’t neglect the impact our physical bodies have on our experience in worship.



Final Words: Encountering God Leads to Lasting Change.

"If worship does nothing else for us, it helps us discover the things that are important. Real worship will transform your life."

-Warren Wiersbe

When we experience God in worship, when we pour out our hearts in praise and thanksgiving, we open up space in our lives for God's presence to enter us and transform us.

In **Romans 12:1-2**, Paul ties together all the themes we've discussed so far:

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. 2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

Let's take a closer look at a few of those key phrases:

1. **In View of God's Mercy** — Worship is a response to the grace and mercy of God.
2. **Living Sacrifice** — Worship is more than what we say when we're at church; it's a lifestyle of thanksgiving and praise.
3. **Holy and Pleasing** — Worship that does not lead to holiness is not actually worship at all.
4. **Do Not Conform** — We are called to be different than the world around us. God is transforming us so that we become a better reflection of Jesus.
5. **Be Transformed** — We cannot transform ourselves, but we can worship God in a way that allows him to transform our hearts.
6. **God's Will** — Through worship we experience an intimacy with God that allows us to hear his voice, know his will, and discern his plan for our lives.

5. Remember It's Not About Us — Francis Chan likes to tell a story about a person who came up to the minister at the end of church and complained that they really didn't care for that day's worship service. The quick-thinking minister immediately shot back, **"That's ok. We weren't worshipping you."** Insensitive? Maybe a little. But the point is true. You can search all day long, but you'll never find a song in the hymnal called "Lord I Lift My Name on High" or "All To Me You Must Surrender." Worship is a blessing to us, but it's not all about us.

6. Expand Your Worship Horizons — The more types of worship we offer, the more opportunities we create for God to transform us. Worship happens inside the church buildings, but worship can happen anywhere we are.

7. Prepare for Worship Services — Be in prayer about it, read the sermon text ahead of time, and pray for everyone who will be involved in leading our services. pPro-tip: Bryan almost always publishes his sermon notes in the app by Saturday, so you can read up on the passages and pray about the big points ahead of time.

8. Cultivate an Attitude of Holy Dependency — Remember that there's nothing of significance that we can do without God's strength, wisdom, and blessing. We can take small steps to make positive changes in our lives, but God is the one who transforms us in an enduring way.

9. Roll with the Distractions — Whenever a cute baby or a rowdy red-headed five year old does something distracting during a worship service, praise God for the blessing behind the distraction. *"Thank you that our church is full of children who are hearing about your love."*

10. Learn to Push Through — We won't always "feel" like making worship a priority. We need to push through and be there anyway. Sometimes the most honest prayer is "Lord, help me to *want* to want you."