

# A Biblical Philosophy of Worship

The textbook definition of worship is “to ascribe worth to God,” declaring Who He Is, and What He Has Done. In the narrowest sense, it refers to the specific communication between the worshiper and God in a willful, humble act of obeisance and homage. In a broader sense, it incorporates the concept of “glorifying God,” which is a direct result of worship, and should be part of the Christian’s everyday life (1 Corinthians 10:31). This paper is not intended to be a comprehensive treatise on the doctrine of worship in the strictest sense, but rather a guide for the Church in developing a biblical perspective on the *practice* of worship, especially in the corporate setting of our *worship services*. With that consideration, the purpose of this paper is to elaborate on the broader sense of worship, that is, how we *glorify God*.

## 1. Object of our Worship (whom do we worship?)

- 1.1. God is the object of our worship, and we worship Him in recognizing all three persons of the Trinity.
- 1.2. We will worship God alone (Exodus 20:3-6)
- 1.3. Although our “services” may include elements to build up the body of Christ (including issues of fellowship, discipline, godly living, missions, etc.), the focus of *worship* is to exalt and proclaim Almighty God. Testimony and fellowship are valid expressions in the context of a *worship service*, but they are not truly *worship*, because they tend to focus on the Christian and his relationships, not the person of God, His character and deeds.
- 1.4. Although it is biblical to honor and respect our country, parents and other individuals and institutions of authority, our *worship services* will focus on God. It is appropriate, however, to give thanks to God on occasion for His blessings manifested in those things.

## 2. Call to Worship (why do we worship?)

- 2.1. God is worthy of our worship (Psalm 145; Revelation 4:11)
- 2.2. In personal response to the nature and beauty of God and His love and work towards us (1 John 4:19)
- 2.3. Out of love for God
- 2.4. Man was created to glorify God
- 2.5. The Scripture commands it (1 Chronicles. 16:23-29; Luke 4:8)
- 2.6. That others will know we serve the one true God (1 Corinthians 14; the Psalms “Praise Him among the Nations”)

## 3. Nature of Worship (what is worship?)

- 3.1. Worship is an intellectual, emotional and volitional response:
  - to the truth of the Word of God (agreement with His truth, and obedience to His truth (1 Sam. 15:22))
  - to the understanding of God’s nature (His character and attributes)
  - to the work of God in our lives
  - to the understanding of our position before God
  - to the understanding of our relationship with God

### 3.2. Worship is Communication:

- 3.2.1. directed to God
  - a declaration of His nature
  - a declaration of thanksgiving to God for His deeds on our behalf
  - a declaration of our submission to God
  - a declaration of our love of God
  - a declaration of our commitment to God
- 3.2.2. directed to man (because others will worship God with us as they respond to the declared work of God in our lives)
  - a proclamation of our submission to God
  - a proclamation of our love of God
  - a proclamation of our commitment to God
  - a proclamation of thanksgiving to God for His deeds on our behalf
  - a proclamation of His nature
  - a demonstration of His character shown in the believer's life and actions
- 3.2.3. received from God (because it initiates a response, see 2.1)
  - the Spirit witnesses with our spirit as we sense His presence
  - the Word of God proclaimed through the reading and teaching of Scripture
  - His "still small voice" heard in the quietness of meditation

Worship begins in the mind and flows to the heart to affect the will. The emotional response we feel when we "sense God's presence" is not worship in itself, but is evidence that we are not just "going through the motions" or reciting someone else's words or thoughts. We should never manipulate emotions in an attempt to simulate worship or provide an "experience" for the worshiper. But at the same time, we should be passionate in our expressions toward God, and passion is naturally demonstrated through our emotions. It could even be said that it is impossible to come to a place of recognizing the true nature of God and our position in Christ without an emotional response!

#### **4. The Place of Worship (where do we worship?)**

Jesus' answer to the woman at the well dispelled the idea that the place of worship was restricted to a single location or building. Instead, He described a condition of the heart ("in spirit and truth") that is the hallmark of the personal relationship He desires with the New Testament Believer. Nevertheless, because we are physical beings, our surroundings and the presence of others will impact the character of our worship. Healthy Christians will worship in three distinct "places:"

- 4.1. In the Human Heart (private worship) – a place of personal communion with God. It can be in quietness and intimacy or joyful celebration and thanksgiving. True worship occurs in the context of the condition of the heart, not the location of the worshiper. This personal form of communication with God is foundational to our ability to worship in the corporate setting. Poor private worship cannot be replaced with corporate worship, and will result in a sense of failure to "connect with God" in the corporate setting.
- 4.2. With the Family of God (corporate worship) – gathering with other believers in unity.
  - Effective corporate worship is an "overflow" of the heart condition that characterizes private worship.
  - It does not require uniformity of the worshipers, but can exist and even flourish in the unifying presence of the One True God.

- True corporate worship occurs when worshipers bring themselves to God, not expecting others to create an “experience” of worship, but allowing the enthusiasm and passion of other worshipers in the presence of the Holy Spirit to heighten their own ability to express their hearts to God. It is like the effect of bringing campfire embers close together to encourage the ignition of a new flame... the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.
  - Can be effective in modeling principles for private and family worship.
  - Can occur wherever “two or three are gathered in [His] name” (Matt. 18:20), but is a primary function of the local Church. Can also be effective in the home.
- 4.3. Before Men (public worship/testimony) - Romans 12:1,2 calls us to be living sacrifices, Matthew 5:16 calls us to let our “light shine before men that they may see [our] good deeds and know [our] Father in heaven.” 1 Corinthians 10:31 urges to do everything “to the glory of God.”

## 5. The Participants in Worship (who can worship?)

### 5.1. Believers in Christ (The Redeemed)

- Only the believer has a true understanding of who God is and what He has done.
- True worship involves humility, and only the believer understands his position before God.
- Only the believer has the relationship with God necessary to communicate with Him. (the Advocacy of Christ)
- Only the believer has the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, necessary to worship “in Spirit and in truth.”
- Only the believer can have “clean hands and a pure heart.” (Ps. 24:4)
- As brothers and sisters in Christ, visiting believers are welcomed and encouraged to attend and participate in our expressions of corporate worship.

### 5.2. “Worship Leaders” for corporate worship

- Worship Leaders must first be worshipers
- Worship leaders do not “create” worship for worshipers.
- Although the *internal* environment for worship is the condition of the heart (see 4.1), worship leaders, in the power of the Holy Spirit, may help to create an *external* environment conducive to corporate worship. This involves both edification (instruction in doctrine) and modeling (leading by example).
- Worship Leaders are facilitators to remind the “congregation” of worshipers of reasons to worship God.
- Worship Leaders provide focus and tools for corporate worship so that the individuals that make up the Body may be unified in their presentation to God.

### 5.3. Observers

- Non-believers can neither be true worshipers nor worship leaders. Although they may participate in the methods of worship, they will only be “going through the actions.”
- Non-believers can witness the power of God as they observe believers in worship. The enthusiasm of Spirit-filled worshipers can be contagious, and the unbeliever’s response to God gives Him glory as the Spirit works in their hearts to draw them to Christ (John 12:32).
- Although not worship in the strictest sense, the occasion of any soul coming to Christ gives God glory, and the act of evangelism can be viewed as an act of worship.
- The Psalms frequently call worshipers to jubilantly proclaim God so that the “nations” may know of Him.
- Paul urged the Church to conduct their gatherings in a way that unbelievers would understand, so they would recognize God’s presence (1 Corinthians 14)

- Although they are not truly able to worship God because of their lack of relationship with Him, unbelievers are welcomed and encouraged to attend our corporate gatherings for worship.

## **6. The Practice of Worship (how do we worship?)**

### **6.1. Content**

- Declaration of who He is (His nature and character)
- Declaration of what He has done and is doing.
- Offerings of Creativity
- Offerings of service to others and to God (time)
- Offerings of substance (finances or goods)
- Position of Humility
- Personal sacrifice
- Surrender of will
- Expressions of love and gratitude to God

### **6.2. Methods**

- Music (personal, congregational, presentational)
- Reading Scripture (private and public)
- Preaching
- Prayer (private and public)
- Christian Meditation
- Evangelism and Missions
- Service to God and Man (in God's name)
- The Collection
- The Ordinances (Baptism and Communion)
- Confession of sins to God (private and public)
- Confession of faith before others (Creeds)
- Use of Spiritual Gifts

## **7. The Composition of Corporate Worship (what does our worship look like?)**

### **7.1. Relevance**

- It flows from the experience and relationship of the individual to God
- It is authentic, not thoughtless repetition (Matt. 6:7)
- It is relevant and meaningful (an expression of the worshipers heart and relationship to God)
- It is scriptural (based on truth, not conjecture or tradition)
- It contains familiar aspects (the Psalms urge us to "recount" the works of God; the worship services in Revelation quote previous worship services; Ephesians and Colossians urge us to recount the Psalms as well as "hymns and spiritual songs.")
- It contains new or fresh expressions from our hearts (the Psalms and Revelation both admonish worshipers to "sing a new song")
- It uses language and methods of expression that are understood by the participants (1 Corinthians 14)
- Our desire is to draw non-Christians to the faith as they observe our sincere, passionate worship that is accessible and meaningful to every generation.

## 7.2. Participation

- It is joyful at times. (Phil. 4)
- It is quiet and reflective at times. (Ps. 46:10)
- It reflects the condition of the heart of the worshiper. Although emotions are not the only indication of the moving of the Spirit, but since worship is a response to God and His truth, authentic worship will usually produce evidence of that response. Emotions are a very real part of man's authentic communication with man, they are also a part of his authentic communication with God. True worshipers are responsive mentally, emotionally and volitionally, not passive observers.

## 7.3. Style, quality and performance

- Since God is our audience, we must prepare (study, rehearse, etc.) to offer Him our very best. The sacrifice of time in preparing and rehearsing, as well as the act of presentation can be acts of worship. Our gift is meaningless if it costs us nothing (2 Samuel 24:18-25).
- A musician's or other worship leader's presentation in the context of worship points people to God, and not to himself. A truly humble, God-centered presentation draws the congregation to God facilitating corporate worship. Presenters and "congregation" become co-offerers of worship to God.
- Musical styles exist only to facilitate worshipers in expressing their hearts to God. Style is not the focus for worship, because that leads the worshiper to focus on his own needs rather than a desire to communicate with God. Nevertheless, styles are chosen that allow the body to best express its affection towards God; God understands all "languages," but leaders will use the "language" of music that is best understood by the worshipers they are leading.
- Although our worship services are designed primarily for believers to worship God, we will not ignore the potential for reaching non-Christians in our midst. Elements of worship, those things chosen to assist us in worship, such as music, drama, public readings etc., will be presented in a way that is understandable by those present.
- We continue to be sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit as He directs us in understanding what worship "languages" to use, evaluating the efficacy of our history, current practice and innovation so that we are neither blindly traditional nor trendy.
- To the best of our ability, everything is done in a way that recognizes the transcendent character of God, presented in reverence and humility (1 Corinthians 14:40, 33).
- We will try not to unnecessarily alienate unbelievers, while maintaining a commitment to the Word of God.

## 8. Hindrances to Worship (what prevents worship?)

- Unconfessed sin (1 John 1:6-10)
- Unreconciled relationship with another believer (Matthew 5:22-24)
- Practicing sin, including pride, selfishness, and absence of brotherly love.
- Idolatry (allowing anything to gain more importance in our lives than God)
- Poor private worship (see 4.1)
- Sole dependence on external influences (i.e. worship leaders, surroundings, programs, facilities) to create a worship "experience."
- Focus on man's needs instead of God
- Anything that takes the focus off God (including negative external influences)