

What Worship Is

There is an extremely popular subject being discussed amongst Christians these days--Worship. Worship is the buzzword! Worship music, worship seminars, worship leaders and worship books. ***In fact, never before in church History has the topic of worship been discussed more frequently or vigorously.*** While this is admirable and even worthy of commendation, the predominating theme in most of these discussions reveal more concern with styles and techniques than with worship. Many argue in favor of sticking with traditional worship, while others insist on new and innovative methods of worship. It is unfortunate that most of the focus is almost exclusively on “the old” versus “the new”, or “new techniques” or “new songs”. While these subjects are important and valid they do little to help people understand or engage in true worship. ***The emphasis of this article will be to draw the reader’s attention towards defining in simple practical terms what worship is, and how to be an active participant.***

When you hear the word “worship”, what is the first thing that immediately comes to your mind? For some it’s “going to church”, “singing hymns”, “taking communion”, “saying prayers”, or “listening to the preacher”. Others go further with statements such as, “showing reverence to God”, or “gathering with God’s people to give the Lord honor”. And all of these comments have a measure of truth contained within. But none of these examples really give us a concise idea of what it means to worship. To begin with I want to share with you what I believe are very simple (yet profound) ingredients of what constitutes true Biblical worship.

- **1) Worship begins by simply focusing your mind upon God.**

“Set your mind on things above...” (Colossians 3:2)

I once heard a statement that caught my attention and has stuck with me ever since. It goes something like this; “your mind is like fertile soil.” It is a fact that what you sow (or cultivate) into that soil (or mind) is what you will ultimately become. You are what you think! And what you think about all the time is of the highest value and of utmost importance to you. This is most significant because worship cannot begin until we first set our minds on God. ***It means we must turn away from our self pre-occupation and instead turn our thoughts towards God. Instead of centering in on ourselves, our personal desires and goals, we choose to center our thoughts on God.*** This sounds so simple yet in practice it can be so difficult to do. Why? Let’s look further.

Our culture has been accurately described as, “The culture of narcissism”. This is a very precise portrayal as our society has increasingly become more

individualistic. We live in a “me” culture, where people have become more self-absorbed than ever before! It is not a mere coincidence that self-help books have flooded the market and are topping the bestseller charts.

To illustrate this further let me quote just one of the many examples from the self-help authors. In a book entitled, *Playing The Game The New Way*, Carl Frederick shares his outlook with us,

” You are the Supreme being. Reality is a reflection of your notions. Totally. Perfectly. The sole purpose of life is to acknowledge that you’re the source, then choose to BE what you know you are. It’ll all flow from there!”

He is, in fact, sharing with us the gospel according to secular humanism! Self-fulfillment and instant gratification are the foundational principles of this outlook and self is positioned firmly at the center!

This factor is one of the main reasons it has become even more difficult for our culture to focus on God. ***For most people thinking about God for even five minutes a day is impossible.*** If you find this incredulous, just try attempting to spend 5 minutes in total silence. Further, try to think only about God, pushing all other thoughts aside. You will be amazed at how difficult it can be! Many people attend church on Sundays; this at least forces them to be confronted with words or songs about God! Yet even in church, they find their minds drifting off to their own personal and private world of self pre-occupation. Not only that, once they are away from the church building, most people return to their normal thought processes and to the things they find themselves most interested in.

To pursue this further from the Bible’s perspective the 8th chapter of Romans gives us this to consider. Verse 6 states, “to set the mind on flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace”. And in the preceding 7th chapter Paul depicts the struggle in his mind as being the primary battlefield where this tug o’ war takes place. ***What we habitually set our minds on will ultimately determine our spirituality and what we will worship!***

A close examination of what dominates our thoughts is most revealing! Several questions come to the surface. How can we worship what we seldom think about? How much time do we really spend thinking about God? And when we do what is the content of our thoughts about God? If we want to understand what worship is we must now look specifically at how we think about God.

- **2.) Worship is saying thank you to God for the gift of life and all creation.**

When you begin to think about God what are your very first thoughts? Do you want to ask him to do something for you or make a quick request to help you out? Regrettably, many people only think of God when they are in need of something or want to procure His favor. This is a clear indication that they are only thinking about themselves.

We have all been guilty of thinking selfishly about God. It is sick and unhealthy to only think about yourself all the time. The Apostle Paul says in Romans Chapter 1 that,

" Though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened" (Romans 1:21)

The Bible says that this is the logical result of what happens when we fail to think about God.

But worship is not thinking about you! Worship starts by thinking about God. You start by making a conscious decision to "set your mind on Him". Your very first thoughts, therefore, are very crucial to the process. More than that, it is thinking about the creator and giver of all that is good! Your very first thoughts about God should be ones of gratitude. ***Accordingly, worship begins by saying thank you! It begins by thanking God for the very precious gift of life. The well known Rabbi Heschel once said, "Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is Holy!"***

And when you look around at the wonder of everything God has made thanksgiving and gratitude should be the proper response. Wrapped up in creation is God's love and grace! Every day, each breath we breathe is a gift from a loving God! ***Creation is blessing!!*** Listen to these words,

"All creation flows from a loving source and blessing flows from atom to atom, molecule to molecule, organism to organism, land to plants, plants to animals, and finally from people to people God's gracious gifts and blessings flow!"

This is where worship starts; by sending thank--you notes to God! To be aware of and count your blessings! There is so much to be thankful for! Remember, God doesn't owe us anything! It's all a handout, an act of grace from the source of all blessings. Out of His love and grace God created man and gave him the breath of life. And certainly the song, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow", is certainly appropriate here! All you have to do is think about the goodness of God, express your thanks and worship begins!!

- **3.) Worship is loving God back...responding to Him and returning our love.**

Probably one of the expressions you have heard most frequently about God throughout your life is, "God Is Love ". Maybe you have heard it so much that sometimes the words don't seem to register anymore. But from the previous paragraph we have established that all creation is a marvelous display of God's love and grace! God's love motivated Him to share the gift of existence with us. Once again there should be a proper response—to love Him back!

I find it intriguing and beneficial to look at the children of Israel as an example of God's love and His chosen people's response. To begin with, God did choose

Israel as his special people. He blessed them abundantly, and performed great miracles right before their eyes. Yet two days after God delivered them mightily out of Egypt and Pharaoh's powerful grip, we find the children of Israel grumbling at Moses and God. They were ready to go back to Egypt! More than this, they constantly turned their backs on Him and failed constantly to return their love and gratitude. In Jeremiah 3:19 God speaks through the prophet Jeremiah,

"I thought how I would set you among my children, and give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful heritage of all the nations. And I thought you would call me, My Father, and would not turn from following me. Instead, as a faithless wife leaves her husband, so you have been faithless to me, O house of Israel, says the Lord" (Jeremiah 3:19)

There is a very intimate and profound fact that God is revealing here in this passage—God is hurt and disappointed because his people have rejected His love! God is hurt when we don't love him back. And we are failing today in the same way as the children of Israel. By not thinking about Him, being thankful, or loving Him back we are ignoring and rejecting Him!

To worship God you must respond to His love—you must love Him back. How is it that we take God's love and all His gifts for granted? Yet this is what most of us do the majority of the time. We float through life, totally obsessed with our selfish agendas, failing to respond to our loving creator, until something happens, (a major health problem or death in the family) that forces us to see that we have been taking so much for granted. And then we finally go to Him and find that He has been waiting to hear from us—waiting patiently for our loving response!

How do you love God back? By thinking about Him, saying thank-you to Him, and by responding to His love. In particular, I want to emphasize the fact that you respond to Him out of love—**not out of duty!** If you think, "I have to love and worship God! If it is something, "I must do out of duty", you will be robbed of the exhilarating, spontaneous joy that flows from responding to Him freely of your own will! As a parent have you ever tried to force your children to love you? Do you wake up every morning, angrily demanding and expecting their love and affection? But when they come up to you unexpectedly and sincerely tell you they love you that is truly priceless!

- **4.) Worship is a Verb...Worship is active. We become participants in worship-not spectators.**

There is a great book on Worship entitled, "Worship Is A Verb". I really love that title! It suggests that we can't worship God without being personally engaged in active worship. Dr. Robert Lloyd Webber, an authority on worship comments,

"Current evangelical worship tends to be passive—the believer sits in the pew waiting for something to be done for him and to him".

Another factor that influences today's worship services is that we live in an "audience society". We sit passively while being entertained by television and movies. You might have even heard pastors or worship leaders use the phrase, "you must be a participant in worship—not a spectator".

Early in our learning English at school we learn what a verb is. It implies or expresses an "action". Webster's dictionary has several definitions:

- 1) *Lively, marked by vigorous activity.*
- 2) *Energetic, engaged in action.*
- 3) *Capable of acting or reacting.*

I want you to keep these definitions in mind as we look again to the Bible. In particular, I want to demonstrate how utterly foolish it is for us to go through life lethargic and unreceptive to the profound fact of our existence—the fact that we are here to observe and enjoy the Creator's tremendous display of artistic design! From Psalm 19 we read,

"The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the skies proclaim the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge."(Psalm 19:1-2)

This text implies that the whole universe is telling us something very important—there is a Master designer behind it all! Anne Dillard offers these astonishing words,

"The extravagant gesture is the very stuff of creation. After the one extravagant gesture of creation in the first place, the universe has continued to deal exclusively in extravagances, flinging intricacies and colossi down aeons of emptiness...the whole show has been on fire from the word go!"

How can we respond with so much enthusiasm for sports, music, or entertainment and then fail to react to the Creator's greatest show of all Eternity? We have plenty of enthusiasm for so many things in our culture. How is it that we can't be actively excited about God and his greatness? Consider the marvel of the human body, the animals, the planets and the solar system. The Psalmist exclaims

"When I consider the heavens, the work of your hands, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him?" (Psalm 8)

Let's consider the heavens and the work of God's hands for a moment. The brilliant scientist Carl Sagan wrote,

"The Universe is mostly empty. The only typical place is space. If we (human beings) were randomly inserted into the cosmos the chance that we would find ourselves on or near a planet would be less than one in a billion trillion trillion!"

Yet we find ourselves on a planet spinning around in space full to the brim with life! The earth's weight has been estimated at six sex-trillion tons--that's a six with 21 zero's!

Yet it is perfectly balanced as it revolves at the rate of more than 1,000 miles an hr. or 25,000 miles each day. Surely God deserves applause and praise when we consider all the incredible things He has done. More than that, it should be the topic of our conversation at least some of the time!

On the other hand I don't think God wants us to spend every minute of our existence praising Him. I know that sounds real spiritual but I don't believe God is asking us to do that. That was the mistake Christians made in the Middle Ages. They thought by retreating into a monastery and by praying, fasting, and singing praise to God continuously, they somehow would be pleasing to Him.

The Westminster Catechism says it so well, "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever"! Which means, therefore, that we actively give Him honor and praise, enjoy Him right in the middle of our personal lives, and to be energetically engaged in reacting and responding to His gracious love. Not just as spectators, but as active participants in worshipping Him!

- **5.) Worship is Celebration! If we are God's people we have even more reason to celebrate.**

Christians call themselves "the people of God". They believe they are His chosen people, called to love, serve, and worship Him. And this very fact should make God's people want to respond with joy and celebration. The people of God should of all people be celebrating! I love Tony Campolo's book, "The Kingdom Of God Is A Party". The main point of the book is that God's people should be celebrating life and creation itself. There's no question that Jesus was accused of being, "a party person" by his critics. Moreover, several of His parables have been classified as "The Party Parables". In the Parable of the Lost Coin, the Parable of the Lost Sheep, and the Prodigal son, Jesus ends the stories with the main characters celebrating and having a great time! The only one that refused to celebrate or party was the "elder son" in the Prodigal Son story.

I picture many Christians today as having too much in common with the "elder son"! To put it bluntly—they are party poopers!! I find it intriguing to observe many so called "celebrations". Many worship services today more closely resemble a 'funeral service' than a celebration! More than that, many Christians fail to exhibit a 'celebrative' lifestyle to an observing and watching world. Have you ever attended a birthday party or other special event where most people attending felt awkward and clearly not enjoying themselves? What do people who aren't Christians think when they come to visit our worship celebrations as well as our lifestyles?

One thing we know for certain is that the Hebrew people were energetic and lively in their celebrations. They danced and shouted, played musical instruments, and feasted on food and drink. Just a quick glance at the book of Psalms gives us an idea of their worship. It was truly celebrative!

“Make a joyful noise to the Lord all the earth! Serve the Lord with gladness”

“Bless the Lord O my soul, and all that is within me bless His holy name!”

“You turned my mourning into dancing!”

These are just a few of the many celebrative expressions from the Psalms. My question is this; where did we get the idea that we should hold back our emotions, our expressions of gladness, and our energy and vitality in many of today's worship gatherings? Where did restricted body movement come from-- or forbidding people to clap their hands or dance with joy? One thing for sure, it didn't come from the Bible! Of course there must be some semblance of order in the worship service but to repress your emotions and exclude celebrative expressions entirely in the worship service is awkward and indeed questionable.

On the other hand, I am not implying nor suggesting that a worship service should resemble the actions of a crowd at a football game! But there is something we could learn from the energy and vitality that people devote to their favorite team!

Especially in light of the teachings of the Bible and Jesus on this subject, there aren't any valid reasons why we shouldn't be celebrating God, celebrating life and creation, and the mystery and wonder of God Incarnate! ***I have a question for you...when you go Sunday morning worship what are you bringing to the celebration? What kind of attitude, mood, or gift do you bring to celebrate the goodness of God?***

There are of course many traditions and rituals within today's church. We as Christians should respect our fellow believers and their rituals, even if we don't agree or understand them. The reason we should do this is because many of these rituals can help 'open the door' to the presence of God for some people. Furthermore, I am not advocating that if you find yourselves restricted in the present church that you are serving that you suddenly begin to change the present style of worship at your church! Especially without consulting with the pastor and leadership at your church!! But I do encourage you to study the Psalms, the worship of the Hebrew people, and the teachings of Jesus concerning celebration. Teach a class or invite discussions on the subject of worship. Ask intelligent questions about why you or others have adopted certain styles of worship. If the rituals or worship practices at your church don't seem to be opening the door to deeper worship for you and others maybe it is time to prayerfully seek to bring about change.

- **6.) Worship is pleasurable...“In Thy presence is fullness of joy and at thy right hand are pleasure forevermore”.**

How many people would be more motivated to worship God if they knew it was going to give them pleasure? Of course, you can say that is very selfish but it is an unquestionable fact that experiencing the presence of God is pleasurable.

Whether you experience feelings of joy, peace, whatever it is you feel it is pleasant! Being embraced by the source of all being can be an awesome experience!

It is soothing and comforting to know that God loves you enough to share his own Spirit. (Ruach is the Hebrew word for Spirit and one meaning derived from this word could be interpreted as “divine energy”! Countless multitudes down through History have experienced strength, energy, and courage from worshipping and having an encounter with God. Jesus said” out of your innermost being will flow rivers of living water”. Water is refreshing, isn’t it? The tangible benefits are the fruits of the Spirit—Joy, peace, and love, to name a few. The Creator God is the source of joy and delight! Once again I will quote from the psalmist,” Taste and see the goodness of the Lord”! If you are thirsty, God says “come and get a drink”.

However, if you come to God only looking for a “spiritual high“ you are not worshipping God. Many people are caught up with this thinking. If it’s a mere emotional fix your seeking you might find yourself caught up in promoting an escapist mentality! Simply demanding that you feel something emotionally is not worship! When you do this maybe you are trying to use God to gain selfish satisfaction. But by spending time thinking about His goodness, and returning His love by expressing thanks, you can eliminate this mentality. This harks back to the first point in our study that we must set our minds upon God and not ourselves. Listen for His voice to speak to you!

In any case, don’t demand from God or expect Him to provide intense emotional experiences every time you decide to worship Him. His presence is precious, and if we had intense emotional encounters every time we worshipped God they would become commonplace and no longer special.

- **7.) Worship is ascribing worth...Summing up the greatness of God**

The Psalmist penned these words,” O Lord Our Lord, how excellent is Your name in all the earth!...When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them? (Psalm 19: 1-2)

What was the Psalmist saying in this passage? He was summing up the greatness of God! Throughout the book of Psalms you will find that the underlying theme of ascribing worth and summing up the greatness of God weaves its wonderful way. “Ascribe to the Lord the glory of His name; worship the Lord in holy splendor”. (Psalms 29: 2) Donald McCullough writes,

”A piece of art may be great whether you recognize it or not, but when you ascribe worth to it by entering the gallery and giving it your attention, you submit to it, allowing it to work its powers over you. In the same way, God is God whether I acknowledge Him or not, but when I enter the gallery, as it

were, through private prayer or by joining with God's people in the sanctuary of praise, I let God be God for me!"

Many musicians and music lovers have no problem whatsoever giving credit and singing the praises of a great piece of music (and the composer who wrote it!) Sports fans brag about their favorite teams and players and automobile lovers go wild talking about their favorite cars. ***What about summing up the wondrous works of God and bragging about the Creator for a while?*** Indeed, it will take "a while" to start adding up all the great things God has created and take time to praise Him for it! One of the greatest loved hymns of all time contains these words,

"O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder, consider all the worlds thy hands have made "!

This is true worship then, considering and summing up the incredible greatness of God. Begin your individual and corporate times of worship by summing up and ascribing worth to the Lord. Consider all of His wonderful works! You will be caught up in awe and your heart will bow in worship before the awesome Creator!! ***I personally believe that in every worship service that at least one song or scripture should be sung or read that specifically brags and boasts about the Lord.*** Let the content and focus be upon giving him the honor and credit that is due Him!

- **8.) Worship is a lifestyle...you worship God with your whole life.**

I have shared before in other articles a quote from the former Beatle John Lennon. He said (when asked specifically about Christians), " Christians got all caught up with Jesus and forgot to do what he said! That is a very insightful statement. Or perhaps you have seen the bumper sticker, "God, please save me from your followers!" ***A missionary asked a group of native rain forest dwellers what the biggest mistake the missionaries made in reaching out to them. The natives took several days to respond and when they did here is what they said; "You Christians put God in a little white house. And the rest of your lives you do what ever you want!" Ouch!*** Locking God, (and our worship) up in a little white house is what many outsiders think about how we live out our lives as Christians.

These are of course very hard words but the world is watching us Christians very closely. And we need to listen and learn from their criticisms. Many of us involved in worship music ministry plan and work all week to provide music that will touch the hearts and lives of our congregations. We do this every week because this is our calling and our means of employment. But it is easy to focus so much on worship within the church building that we fail to worship God on days other than Sunday! When it gets close to Sunday morning Prime Time we suddenly find ourselves praying and having a real "spiritual" outlook. As we ask God to bless

our musical ministry efforts each Sunday ***I picture God saying back to us," The only time you talk to me is when you want me to bless your musical efforts"***!

Then Monday rolls around and we unconsciously begin to shut God out of our lives and settle back into our weekly routines. This applies of course not just to worship leaders, musicians, and pastors, but to Christians in general.

Somehow the worship we do on Sunday has to spill over into Monday! We need to break out of the habit of boxing God out of our lives when we are not inside the Sanctuary. With all the emphasis on worshipping corporately we have lost the "one on one", day by day, moment by moment communication and worship of our God. In our daily lives, our attitudes, priorities, and how we live our lives it should reflect that we are following Jesus by doing what he said to do. Whether we feel like it or not...whether the music is playing or not. It's real easy to worship God when you are in a sanctuary where the worship music is great and the audience is responding. Maybe a proper response in the midst of all the wonderful worship times in the sanctuary should be this—"Lord help me to apply and transfer this into my daily life". Our lives must worship and honor God by our actions. Remember the old saying, "actions speak louder than words"?

How about turning off the music for a little while and instead trying a sunrise or sunset with just you and God as the special guest speaker? Or a beautiful place where you can quiet yourself and be still before the Creator God. Maybe spend a few moments in your home with the television and CD player turned off with your whole family gathered for a time of prayer and worship. Or go and visit the elderly and sick and reach out to them in love. Anything that God's love prompts you to do will be a wonderful act of worship! When you do turn your attentions back on the worship music I guarantee you that you will experience God's presence and worship music in a new and exciting way!!

When you are in close communication with God during the week it will also serve to spill out into your corporate worship. It can spill out both ways—from corporate worship into everyday life, and from private worship back into corporate worship! I am not implying for a moment that you should raise your hands in the grocery store and begin singing and praising God! (They might throw you out of the place!) God isn't asking you to do that. Just do the things he has instructed you to do. His presence and Spirit will be with you as you love and serve others. God is just as real in the ordinary course of events as he is in the sanctuary. Start by looking for Him in the every day things. The earth is full of his glory. His sanctuary is the whole universe!

True worship of the living God is doing what he said to do, not just singing about it. In Romans 12:1 Paul begs his readers to present their bodies, (their whole lives), a living sacrifice which is real and true spiritual worship. I love the words to the worship song from a few years back that said, "let my life O Lord praise You".

This should be our constant prayer as we seek to live out our lives as worshippers of the awesome Creator God and followers of Jesus Christ. Amen!

Written By David Arivett Copyright 2002

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