



What Is Biblical ‘Worship’?

by

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What Is It?

The Greek words for ‘worship’ define it as a *prostration before God*, a bowing down in lowliness, reverence, fear and awe. The Puritan Stephen Charnock, described worship as ‘*an act of the understanding applying itself to the knowledge of the excellency of God...It is also an act of the will, whereby the soul adores and reverences His majesty, is ravished with His amiableness, embraces His goodness...and pitcheth all its affections upon Him*’ (Works, 1.298).

‘Worship’ today is often thought of as a time of *singing* to the Lord with music and song. But the definition of worship surely includes prayer, Bible study and indeed the Christian ‘life’ itself.

The ultimate aim of ‘worship’ is to glorify God in *everything* we do. ‘**Whether therefore you eat, or drink, or whatsoever you do, do all to the glory of God**’ (1Corinthians 10:31). I testify that some of the most memorable times of ‘worship’ have been when on breaks from ministry and in the solitude of quiet places, rather than in church ‘worship’ services. What we *do* in any one church services is a *result* of our heart worship with God; it is not worship itself, rather it is an expression of it. For example, good works are not salvation, but good works come from a changed heart (salvation). So too, praise and singing is not worship, but the praise and singing *come from a worshipful heart*. As soon as ‘worship’ is said to be occurring in a physical place, arguably it loses its real meaning. Many today also see preaching as separate to the ‘worship’. I personally prefer the reading and the preaching/teaching of the Word to be more of the focus of ‘worship’ than even singing songs in a church service. ‘**Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine**’ (1Tim.4:13).

The Object and Purpose

The purpose of worship is to glorify God. God’s request is to be glorified (1Pet.4:11). We glorify God when we worship Him and his Son as the object of worship. This is not just in any activity in ‘church’ but everything in life should glorify God. We *see God in everything and then worship Him in everything*. We must be careful of the dualistic error of dividing the ‘secular’ from the ‘sacred’. Again, today we too often ‘compartmentalise’ worship into singing at church (hence ‘worship services’). But ‘**whatsoever you do, do all to the glory of God**’ (1Cor.10:31). Whether we are working, enjoying recreations or ‘**whatsoever**’ we do - ‘**do all to the glory of God**’.

Our praise of Him is an expression of our worship. Many of the great Divines pursued this and sought after a closer intimacy with God. Jonathan Edwards was famous for his finding secluded places in the forest to seek after and meditate on things of God. This worship took many forms - sometimes in silent meditations, other times in loud verbal expressions and tears. ‘**But the hour comes, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeks such to worship him**’ (Jn.4:23).

The ultimate aim of ‘worship’ is to glorify God. We were created to worship him because that is what glorifies him.

The Fruit of

As Christians we are most fulfilled when we are *satisfied* in, and have *joy* in, the Lord. **‘...in your presence is fullness of joy; at your right hand there are pleasures forevermore’** (Ps.16:11). *Satisfaction and Joy will be a part of worship...but in this is where the selfish carnal counterfeits come.*

The problem with much of contemporary ‘worship’ is that it is often a manifested *external* joy. We cannot consciously ‘switch on’ joy in worship. The longing and desire to worship must come from *within* and be fuelled by such things as fellowship, studying the Word of God and ultimately from the Holy Spirit, who manifests the fruit of joy *within* us (Gal.5:22). Nevertheless, joy and gladness is a fruit of worship. **‘...Sing praises to His name; for it is pleasant’** (Ps.135:3). Charles Spurgeon once challenged his local church: *‘Sing up!...Out with such mumbling and murdering of the praises of God; if men’s hearts were joyous and strong, they would scorn such miserable worship. In this house we all try to sing, but might we not have more praise services? We have had a praise meeting every now and then. Ought we not to hold a praise meeting every week? Should not the prayer meeting be more than ever cheered by praise. The singing of God’s people should be, and if they were more full of divine strength would be, more constant and universal. How sinners chant the praise of Baechus in the streets! You can hardly rest in the middle of the night, but what unseemly sounds of revelry startle you. Shall [those singing with] wine sing so lustily, and shall we be silent? We are not often guilty of disturbing the world with our music; the days in which Christian zeal interferes with the wicked seem to have gone by; we have settled down into more orderliness, and I am afraid also into more lukewarmness. Oh for the old Methodistic shout. Brethren, wake up your singing again. May the Lord give us again a singing-time, and make us all praise him with heart, and with voice, till even the adversaries shall say, ‘The Lord hath done great things for them’ and we shall reply, ‘Ay, ye speak the truth; he hath done great things for us, whereof we are glad’.*

The Psalmist, David, yearned for this ‘satisfaction’ when he wrote **‘Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me...Restore unto me the joy of your salvation; and uphold me with your free spirit’** (Ps.51:10,12).

In some circles today it is not popular to seek to be joyous or to have pleasure in worship. Perhaps some would want to shy away from the Charismatic/Pentecostal excesses and the ecstatic worship that is rampant in modern Christianity. But regardless, true worship should be pleasurable and joyous. **‘Delight yourself also in the Lord; and he shall give you the desires of your heart’** (Ps.37:4).

However, in seeking pleasure or joy in worship, the danger is that we would praise God *to bring joy*. But the pleasure or joy is not the chief end; but rather the

glorification of God. We do not praise to bring joy; we praise God for who He is, and that brings joy.

The fruit of worshipping ‘in spirit and truth’ is that we understand more of the Spirit and more of the truth. True worship will bring us more a desire to be controlled by the Spirit (Eph.5:18) and more a desire to study and to know His revealed word of truth as in scripture. According to statistics and the apostasy of the modern church, modern methods of worship arguably are not doing this? This is so because the ‘truth’ has been cut out of the ‘spirit and truth’ in worship. Even worse, arguably much ecstatic type worship cuts out the real Spirit and replaces it with a human emotionalism. (This is dealt with further in this article).

True Worship is in Words and Thoughts

There is a double sided dilemma with this ‘head and heart’ in worship. ‘Conservatives’ might swing to all ‘head’ and little or no ‘heart’? Some may believe it is sinful to enjoy oneself in praise. But this may cut the ‘heart’ out of worship and be legalistic. *Worship, if it engages head and heart, will have emotions.* There is nothing wrong with emotions. They are God given and to be sanctified. But there is a difference between emotions and emotionalism.

Intellectual knowledge without ‘affections’ can well be head without heart. The great revivalist, Jonathan Edwards, spoke of ‘affections’ as being a vital part of worship. Worship can be ‘dead’ without feelings.

But the essence of worship is *thoughts* and thoughts put into *words*. An understanding of, and a high view of, the sovereignty of God is of great benefit here. It could be said that the foundation of all worship hinges on, and in knowing, who God is and what He has done for us. This doctrine gives great comfort, assurance and a *desire* to uplift Him in praise. The apostle Paul highlights this in Ephesians when he spells out the doctrine of God’s election and predestination of us ‘*before the foundation of the world*’ - ‘*to the praise of the glory...That we should be to the praise of his glory...*’ (Eph.1:1-14)..

The motivation to ‘worship’ him is in the *words* the scriptures show of the plan of Salvation. The *thoughts* that come from this are expressed in many of the Psalms: ‘*He brought me up also out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings. And he has put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God...*’ (Ps.40:2,3); ‘*...I will sing unto the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously: the horse and his rider has he thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and song, and he is become my salvation: he is my God, and I will prepare him a habitation; my father’s God, and I will exalt him*’ (Ex.15:1,2); ‘*O come, let us sing unto the Lord: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms. For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods*’ (Ps.95:1-3).

Studying the Word of God and being a ‘workman’ (2Tim.2:15) should motivate us to worship the One who first breathed out these truths. Words and thoughts are important in worship. When the early Jewish church met after Pentecost, what was their form of worship? - **‘they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers’** (Acts 2:44).

One of the classic cases of ‘worship’ in the Bible is seen in Heaven where we know that the worship is fully *‘in spirit and in truth’*. **‘And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto him that sits upon the throne, and unto the Lamb forever and ever. And the four beasts said, Amen. And the four and twenty elders fell down and worshipped him that lives forever and ever’** (Rev.5:13,14). Note here that beings are *‘saying’* something that comes from informed *thoughts* about the *object* which is Jesus Christ Himself. John continues: **‘...all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; And cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sits upon the throne, and unto the Lamb. And all the angels...the elders and the four beasts, and fell before the throne on their faces, and worshiped God, Saying, Amen: Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God forever and ever Amen’** (Rev.7:9). Note again the *words* and *thoughts* directed to the object - Jesus Christ. The beings here are *saying* and *singing*. Worship is much about *words* coming from a rational mind.

The Music

Worship is not words *and* music. Music assists, but is not worship in and of itself. Music is at best only a tool. It can never show us more of Christ nor teach His salvation doctrines. Yet music is a powerful medium for affecting the emotions and thoughts. Martin Luther realised the power of music: *‘Next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world. It controls our thoughts, minds, hearts and spirits.’* (‘Symphoniae iucundae’, 1538)

Music can never do what the Word of God does to *‘transform by the renewing of the mind’* (Rom.12:2). The more we emphasise music in worship the likely less the emphasis on *words* and *thoughts* might be? Today in the minds of many Christians ‘worship’ is synonymous with music. But music is not in itself words and thoughts directed to God but at best an activity chosen to assist in worship.

The Counterfeits

The Charismatic/Pentecostal excesses in worship have no doubt shown many examples of heart with little head, a **‘zeal without knowledge’** (Rom.10:2). This worship with heart and no head lacks truth, is shallow and often disorderly, lacking discipline. We are in danger of ‘worshipping the worship’! ‘Contemporary Christian music’ today has made an idol out of ‘worship’. I have met people who openly say

they go to a particular church ‘for the music’. Many churches, if they took away their ‘contemporary’ style of music, would be emptied.

Much of the modern ‘contemporary’ style gauges God’s ‘presence’ by the emotions felt at the time. Our fleshly beings would have us searching for pleasure, satisfaction or joy. And if we can baptise that in something that feels spiritual then we assume it is true worship and pleasing to God. A.W. Tozer once said *‘The church that can’t worship ‘in spirit and truth’ must be entertained. And men who can’t lead a church to worship must provide the entertainment’*.

The biggest hindrance to true worship is *self*. An example of this is *ecstatic* worship which produces an exalted emotional state and a warm contented feeling, a sense of the ‘presence’ of God. But this can *easily* be produced by music, sights, sounds and movement. The fact that it is often seen closely associated with certain styles of music should cause people to question it. John Wesley in his advice to hymn singers written in 1781 wrote: *‘Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing Him more than yourself or any other creature. Attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve of here, and reward when He cometh in the clouds of Heaven’*.

Today this philosophy is far from much of modern church music. *Secular media commentators* often describe various churches and their music as *‘like a rock concert’*. In particular the popular *Hillsong* music has often been described in this way by the media. It is clear they see modern church services as little different to what they know in the world.

Until the late 1960’s most evangelical churches believed the standards of the church and the world were opposed to each other and thus music was to be different, distinct and not couched with a sense of entertainment. But today the world has come into the church to make the church palatable to the world. Clearly the idea of being separate and distinct from the world, as God had called the Israelites to be, is gone in much of modern church worship. ***‘And you shall not walk in the manners of the nation...I am the Lord your God, which have separated you from other people...you shall be holy unto me: for I the Lord am holy, and have severed you from other people, that you should be mine’*** (Lev.20:23-26). Israel was punished severely for not distinguishing the holy from the profane: ***‘Her priests have violated my law, and have profaned mine holy things: they have put no difference between the holy and profane...’*** (Ezek.22:26). The system of the world is in darkness and friendship with it is to be an ‘enemy’ of God (Gal.1:4; James 1:27; 4:4; 1Jn.2:15).

The ‘Song Leader’

Churches now send people away to be trained at colleges to be ‘worship leaders’. One can understand perhaps having a ‘song leader’, but does a ‘worship leader’ arguably take the place that the Holy Spirit should have? To worship ‘in spirit’ means that we are connected with the Spirit’s motives and thoughts as He illuminates our minds, guides, comforts and reveals Christ and his work.

Arguably a ‘song leader’ should simply announce the songs and perhaps direct the people in singing the tune. The intent could also be to encourage the people to enter into a corporate singing of praises to God. To do this, scriptures can be read and people exhorted to pay attention to the *words* and *thoughts* of the song. ‘Song leaders’ also do not lead us into the ‘presence of God’ as is commonly implied and taught today. The ‘presence of God’ is already there in each person because of the indwelling Spirit. Again, the danger in contemporary ‘worship leading’ is the impression that the presence of God is increased *through music*.

The Songs

Some people quote Luther as using secular ‘pub’ music with Christian lyrics. He once said *‘Why should the devil have all the good tunes?’*. But that reference was not to secular music but Roman Catholic music! Luther was not interested in the world’s music. His doctrine clearly separated the sacred from the profane. On rare occasions when he may have taken a secular tune, he radically changed its content and style. He stated: *‘Take special care to shun perverted minds who prostitute this lovely gift of nature and of art with their erotic rantings. And be quite assured that none but the devil goads them on to defy their very nature...They purloin the gift of God and use it to worship the foe of God’*.

I venture to say that most new ‘contemporary’ songs today show clearly the lack of Biblical knowledge of many song writers. Many new songs are devoid of sound doctrine. Some are little better than the world’s love songs that one could sing to a girlfriend or boyfriend? Others are shallow and difficult to match with scripture. Hymns, choruses and any songs should be related to scripture and sound doctrine. Even meanings and lyrics that are ambiguous should be avoided.

Reverence

If we instil a reverence in our worship and in church services we instil the need to glorify God and this will further our own sanctification. ‘Reverence’ has the idea of humility and fear before a holy and righteous God. *‘Who shall not fear you, O Lord, and glorify your name?’* (Rev.15.4); *‘Praise our God, all you his servants, and you that fear him, both small and great’* (Rev.19.5).

Conclusion

Worship is a bowing of the mind and the heart before a holy and righteous king to give Him glory. The fruit of worship is understanding and obedience to His Word. Worship is much about thoughts and words from a rational mind. Music is a medium of assistance at best, never worship in itself.

What motivates you to worship? Is it salvation, the Scriptures, the sovereignty of God...? See God in everything and then worship Him in everything! Pursue Him in reverent worship! *‘Whether therefore you eat, or drink, or whatsoever you do, do all to the glory of God’* (1Cor.10:31).

About the Author and the Ministry

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Terry is the author of several books and is involved in a full time ministry of *teaching, informing* and *equipping* the church. He is also editor of a growing worldwide publication '*Diakrisis (Australia)*'.

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TA Ministries is a non-denominational and non-profit faith ministry founded in 1989 when the book '*To Catholics Whom I Love*' was written by Terry Arnold. This book went through several re-prints and served as a fruitful outreach to Roman Catholics.

In 1996 the ministry became a full-time operation with the introduction of a free newsletter, later named '*Diakrisis (Australia)*'.

Diakrisis is published bi-monthly to *teach, inform* and *equip* the church of Biblical truths and to warn of false teaching. It has also been a valuable reference aid to hundreds of pastors/elders.