

# What is true worship?

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*The hour cometh, and now is when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for the Father seeketh such to worship Him.*

*God is a spirit, and they that worship him must worship Him in spirit and in truth. (John 4: 23-24)*

## Introduction

Many years ago, William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury, defined worship in the follow manner:

"To worship is to quicken the conscience of the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God and to devote the will to the purpose of God."

It might be said that worship is: all that *we are* responding to all that *He is*.

A.W. Tozer, in his book *What Ever Happened to Worship?* wrote (pg 40-42):

There are many kinds of worship that God cannot accept. Cain's worship in the Old Testament was not accepted because he did not acknowledge the necessity of an atonement for sin in the relationship between God and fallen man.

Cain hoped to please God in worship, but he brought no blood sacrifice. He came instead with an offering of the fruit of the ground, probably beautiful flowers and a basket of fruit.

When God frowned upon his gift, ...God's rejection of his offering and his acceptance of Abel's "firstlings of his flock" made Cain so angry that he went out and killed his brother.

The kind of worship Cain offered to God has three basic and serious shortcomings.

1. First is the mistaken idea that God is a different kind of God than He really is. This has to do with the person and character of the sovereign and holy God. How can anyone ever worship God acceptably without knowing what kind of God He is? Cain surely did not know the true character of God. Cain did not believe that the matter of man's sin was eternally important to God.

2. Second is the mistake of thinking that man holds a relationship to God that in fact he does not. Cain casually assumed that he was deserving of acceptance by the Lord without any intermediary. He refused to accept the judgement of God that man had been alienated from his God by sin

3. Third, Cain in the Old Testament record, and with him an unnumbered multitude of men and women since, have mistakenly assumed that sin is far less serious than it really is. The record is plain, if men and women would only look at it and consider it. God hates sin because He is a holy God. He knows that sin has filled the world with pain and sorrow, robbing us of our principle purpose and joy in life, the joy of worshiping our God.

There is much rhetoric concerning praise and worship in the contemporary church world. There is a need—a necessity—to discover again what worship is, what constitutes true and proper worship, and then apply our hearts to such worship.

Sadly church congregations are much like American society today, in that they are often comprised of special interest groups. Each group has its own idea as to what constitutes worship. Each group demands worship to follow their style. We miss the point when we confine worship—by definition and activity—to a few moments in a church service.

True worship is an expression of what has already been accomplished in the heart. Corporate worship is an expression of the heart, attitude and mind of the congregation to God.

When the church of Christ discovers what worship really is—when the church discovers that all we do and say should be done in worship to God (i.e., our lives being an expression of worship unto God)—then and only then will the church regain its power, relevancy and effectiveness to make a difference in the community.

Today, there is much emphasis on modes of praise and worship. Many churches and individuals claim to have found the secret of true worship. Confidently they declare they have found the proper definition and method of praise and worship.

But, wherein lies the answer? For that we must go to the Word of God

### **The definition of true worship**

*The hour cometh, and now is when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for the Father seeketh such to worship Him. God is a spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth. (John 4:23-24)*

“Worship in spirit and in truth.” Here Jesus sets forth principles of true worship. Worship begins with a sense longing. John, in chapter 4, relates an encounter Jesus had with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. This woman had a heart- longing which she did not know how to satisfy. She had looked for contentment and fulfillment through relationships with men. She had been married 5 times and was now living with a man. Still, she was not satisfied. Her life demonstrated that she was searching for something to satisfy the emptiness and longing that had been her constant companion. She did not know that her spirit could only be satisfied by a living communion with God.

Deep within the heart of every person is a longing for God, a desire to know Him. People misinterpret this yearning and look for substitutes to fill the void—with everything and anything.

*“Only Jesus can satisfy your soul,  
Only He can take your life and make you whole,  
He'll give you peace you never knew,*

*Sweet love and joy and comfort, too.  
For only Jesus can satisfy your soul,  
You'll never find true satisfaction until you've found the Lord,  
For only Jesus can satisfy your soul."*

Man was made for fellowship with God. We were made to worship Him, and nothing else can satisfy that need. The woman at the well was searching, she had a longing heart. Jesus understood, indeed Jesus knew her far better than she knew herself.

As Jesus began to speak with the woman at the well, the conversation soon turned to the topic of worship. The woman's basic misunderstanding of worship centered around associating worship with a formal location. Her concept of worship focused upon the importance of its location. By stating that her fathers worshiped God on the mountain there in Samaria, the woman was challenging the Jewish belief that Jerusalem was the ideal place to worship. Jesus replied that there would come a time when men would not worship on the mountain nor in Jerusalem, but that they would find the presence of God in their spirits and would worship Him there.

Herein lies one of the great misconceptions concerning worship. It is much more than time, place and style.

### **Worship defined: and applied**

Defined: What is worship? The Hebrew word for worship is *shaha*. It means to bow low or to prostrate oneself. Worship involves our bowing low before the Lord, bowing our hearts. It involves a referential fear of God. This aspect of worship is lost on much of contemporary Christianity.

True worship requires a right understanding of God. Quoting Tozer in *Knowledge of the Holy*:

The church has surrendered her once lofty concept of God and has substituted for it one so low so ignoble as to be utterly unworthy of thinking, worshipping men. This she has done not deliberately but little by little, and without her knowledge and her very unawareness makes her situation more tragic. The low view of God entertained almost universally among Christians is the cause of a hundred lesser evils everywhere among us. A whole new philosophy of the Christian life has resulted from this one basic error in our way of thinking with our loss of the sense of religious awe and sense of the divine presence. We have lost our spirit of worship and our ability to withdraw inwardly to meet God in adoring silence.

Modern Christianity is simply not producing the kind of Christian who can appreciate or experience the life in the Spirit. The words "be still and know that I am God" mean nothing to the self-confident bustling worshiper in the middle period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion and man's spiritual history will positively demonstrate that on religion has ever been greater than its idea of God. Worship is pure or base as the worshiper entertains high or low thoughts of God.

### **Kiss the Son... pay homage**

Psalms 2 says:

*10: Be wise now therefore, o ye kings: be instructed, ye judges of the earth.*

11 *serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling.*

12 *kiss the Son, (Hebrew 05401 nashaq {naw-shak'})*

*Lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little.*

*Blessed are all they that put their trust in him.*

“Kiss the feet of the son,” i.e., stoop, bow low in homage indicates reverence, submission and loyalty. The definition of “homage” is: “formal acknowledgment by a vassal that he owed loyalty and service to his lord.”

Homage, fealty. Homage was originally the act of a feudal tenant by which he declared himself, on his knees, to be the bondman of the lord; hence the term is used to denote reverential submission or respect. Fealty was originally the fidelity of such a tenant to his lord, and hence the term denotes a faithful and solemn adherence to the obligations we owe to superior power or authority. We pay our homage to men of pre[e]minent usefulness and virtue, and profess our fealty to the principles by which they have been guided.

*Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary, © 1996, 1998 Micra, Inc.*

In Gen 24:48 when Abraham's servant was awed by the power of the Lord in leading him to find Isaac's wife, he bowed low and worshiped the Lord. The Greek word for worship is *proskyneo*. It literally means to kiss the hand of one who is revered, or to pay homage. It is used 59 times in the New Testament. The English word worship comes from the Anglo-Saxon *weorthscipe* which denotes one who is worthy of honor and reverence.

When we worship God we are declaring to Him His worth. We are confessing to Him that He is worthy. In Revelation 4 the twenty-four elders worshiped the Lord by confessing that He is worthy to receive glory, honor and power.

### **To worship God is to seek Him**

In seeking Him, you declare Him worthy to fill that longing within. That which you pursue, is that which you deem worth obtaining (Matt 5:6). Jeremiah 29:13 declares: “And ye shall seek me, and find [me], when ye shall search for me with all your heart.” Worship is not understood by a study but by seeking after God. There is a danger of seeking to establish a pattern and formula for worship but that is futile. To worship Him, we must seek after Him, and we will find Him.

A prostration of the heart must accompany all that we do. A heart that is filled with worship toward God, will cry out, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, Oh Lord. my strength and my redeemer” As we apply ourselves to moment by moment worship, we will then be ready to worship when we go into the sanctuary. When the heart is continually prostrated before God, worship will permeate all that we are and all that we do. Then we are truly ready to engage in corporate worship as we enter the sanctuary.

G. Campbell Morgan once stated concerning worship: the worship of the sanctuary is meaningless unless it is preceded by six days of worship as a way of life.

### **In spirit and in truth**

The two pillars upon which the edifice of our worship rests are worshiping in spirit, and worshiping in truth. We must consider these two statements as they form the basis of God centered worship. In John

4:23a Jesus says, "But the hour cometh and now is when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth." In verse 24b he says, "They that worship him must worship Him in spirit and in truth."

Worshiping in spirit refers to the human spirit. When Christ was speaking to the woman at the well of Samaria, she revealed her misunderstanding of the nature of true worship. She associated worship of God with a place. We also associate worship with a place. We think of worship as the activity that takes place on Sunday morning.

We have missed the real essence of worship. Christ teaches in John 4: 23-24 that the worship of His Spirit must take place in our spirits regardless of our surroundings.

*Clarke's Comminatory* states:

All creatures were made by Him, so all owe Him obedience and reverence, but to be acceptable to this infinite spirit, the worship must be of a spiritual nature—must spring from the heart, through the influence of the Holy Spirit.

God is a spirit. He is not limited, by time and space. He will abide and commune within the regenerated spirit that seeks him. The spirit of man is the one place where he can meet God. 1 Thess. 5:23 tells us we are tripartite in nature. "The very God of peace sanctify you wholly and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ."

### **Entering His presence**

The body which is the temple of the Holy Spirit, provides awareness of the physical realm through the five senses.

The soul involves consciousness of self and others; it consists of three parts: the will or volition, which is the instrument of decision making (Job 6:7,7:15); the mind or intellect, which is the instrument of thought, reason and memory; and the emotions, which consist of feelings, affections and desires. (1 Sam.18:1, Deut. 14:26, Ps 84:2, 86:4).

The spirit, which involves consciousness of God and the supernatural world, consists of conscience and discernment of right and wrong (2 Cor 2:13); intuition which perceives knowledge without the use of the soul or the five senses (John 11:33, 13:21, Mark 2:8, Acts 20:22); and the capacity for communion, worship and communication with God (John 4:23, Rom. 8:16, 1 Cor 14:15).

Adam was created with body, soul and spirit. "God formed man of dust from the ground (body), and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life (spirit) and man became a living being (soul)" (Gen 2:7). Before we are born again, our spirit is inactive in its relationship to God. It takes the redeeming work of Christ to regenerate that spirit, and make it responsive to God. That is why it is impossible for an unbeliever to understand the things of God or to converse with God or to worship Him.

Only as the Spirit of Christ transforms our spirit can we come into fellowship with God. We are told in 1 Cor 2:10-16 that there can be no communication between different natures. True worship is *with* our spirit and *in* our spirit. Untrue worship would be to worship God with the external (ritual, physical movements, even the ordinance of the communion) without the participation of our spirit, or the response of the Spirit. (See 1 Corinthians 2:11-16.)

Some may say, I love to go to church and sit quietly I feel at peace. The emotions are stilled, even thrilled but worship does not take place. Others may say, when I go to church, I feel good, there is excitement in the air, the music moves me, the people are enthusiastic. If that is all there is, then it has been fleshly, appealing to the senses, but nothing takes place within the human spirit and therefore worship has not occurred. Worship cannot be forced by the flesh, worship cannot be aroused by the emotions. Worship can only occur when the spirit of man is submitted to and breathed upon by the energizing power of the Spirit of God. God cannot be worshiped without His Spirit energizing that worship.

We have been saved to worship God. Once one is saved, the Holy Spirit comes to live within the heart to point it God-ward, to prod it toward Him. The Spirit instructs and purges, so that one can worship. That is His ministry. It all begins with the resident Holy Spirit. We worship God in our human spirit because we are prompted by the Holy Spirit to do so. So you see there is no glorying in our flesh whatsoever.

In 1 Corinthians 12b we read, "No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Spirit." That means a person cannot affirm the lordship of Christ or worship Him as the Lord most high. No man can proclaim Jesus Lord unless the Holy Spirit reveals that truth to him and stirs the heart, i.e the spirit, to worship Him.

Ps 51:15-17 says: "O Lord open thou my lips and my mouth shall show forth thy praise. For Thou desirest not sacrifice else I would give it. Thou delightest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit a broken and contrite heart O God thou wilt not despise." Worshiping in spirit is born out of the sacrifices that God finds acceptable. The psalmist speaks of them as the sacrifices of God. They are a broken spirit and a contrite heart. We offer those sacrifices to Him and then, God, by His Spirit, opens our mouths and from within our spirits flow out acceptable and God honoring praise worship and adoration.

### **Worship in truth**

We now come to the second principle connected with worship. All worship of God is in response to truth about God. Or at least it should be. It is not an emotional exercise, filled with spiritual sounding words and induced feelings. It is a response that is built upon truth.

Pilate asked Jesus, "What is truth?" Mankind still asks that question—what is true, who or what can I put my trust in, who or what can I believe in? Some say truth is relative, based upon circumstance. Or that truth is ever changing.

In John 17:17b we find the answer. Jesus says to the Father in His high priestly prayer. "Thy word is truth". In Psalm 119 142b we read "Thy law is truth." In verse 160 of Psalm 119 we read, "Thy word is truth."

The Word of God is truth, constant and unchanging: "Heaven and earth may pass away, but My words shall not pass away" (Matt 24:35). "Forever, O Lord, Thy word is settled in heaven" (Psalm 119:89).

Since the Word of God is truth, and acceptable worship is according to or in truth, we must worship God based upon a proper understanding of the Word of God. If we are to worship God, we must understand who God is and the only place we can find out who God is in the Scriptures. Only there has God been revealed to us. God has revealed himself in his Word.

True worship can only be based upon the truth of the revelation of Jesus Christ. That is why the heart's cry of the Apostle Paul was, "That I may know him" (Phil. 3:10). The truth worshiper cries, "O that I may know him, that I may have an intimate relationship with God." Man was created to fellowship with his God. That fellowship was broken in Eden and ever since man has longed for God—longed to fellowship with Him. But without the knowledge and the revelation of the truth of God, worship is impossible, indeed fellowship is impossible.

### **Worship with understanding**

Worship in truth, must be worship with understanding. Psalm 47:7 says: "Sing ye praises with understanding." Worship is not simply holding up hands and swaying back and forth and forth. It is not having ecstatic experiences that have no meaning or content to them. It is not an emotional fix. It is not simply finding that good feeling. Worship is an expression of praise from the depth of our spirit toward a God that is understood through His Word.

There is no benefit in worshipping God if you do not understand who He is or what you are doing. This is a major problem with worship today. Many do not know the God whom they worship. What was once transcendent in the doctrine of God has faded. God has been reinterpreted to accommodate modern needs.

### **True worship is in accordance with the Word.**

That is why expository preaching is so important. And why one must feed upon the Word themselves. Acts 2:42a notes that when the early church met together, they continued steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine. The doctrine they declared was the revelations of God about Himself that were manifested through the Apostles writings and teachings. The doctrine of the person and work of Christ was the truth on which the worship of the early church was based.

In 1 Tim 4:14 Paul told Timothy: "Till I come give attendance to reading to exhortation, to doctrine"—in other words, read the text, explain the text and apply the text. Timothy was to stay in the text and teach sound doctrine --the truth about God.

In Colossians 3:16-17 we learn that when the early church worshiped they used psalms, and hymns and spiritual songs. And they had times of praise and thanksgiving. Notice before all these things are listed in verses 16-17, it says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly (abundantly)." When the Word of God dwells within us, our praise is regulated, and our worship is conformed to God's Word.

When we drift away from worshipping in spirit and in truth the church will either become cold and lifeless and or it will become overly emotional, fanatical and feelings-oriented.