

What is worship?

by Denver Cheddie

All religion is a mixture of truth and tradition with differing shades of gray. There is no area where this is more evident than in worship. Worship means different things to different people. From Catholicism to Protestantism, all denominations define worship in terms of their traditional thinking and cultural conditioning. For some it is nothing more than a pitiful excuse for a pathetic display of painstaking spirituality. For others it is a means of attaining eccentric esoteric experiences – a spiritual state supposedly superior to others.

Some Definitions

There are primarily two words which are translated *worship* in the Bible: Hebrew, ***shachah*** (OT) and its Greek equivalent ***proskuneo*** (NT). They both mean to show respect to a superior with the idea of bowing down or falling prostrate. However, it is well known that dictionary definitions are insufficient to fully determine the meaning of a word or idea. That meaning is best found in the contexts in which it is used.

Worship in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament worship is portrayed as an act of homage and devotion to God. It always took place at certain times and places. Jerusalem was the center of Jewish worship (John 4:20). Daniel when praying, even though he was far from his homeland, faced the direction of the Holy City (Daniel 6:10). When in existence, the Temple was also a fundamental component of Old Testament worship (Psalm 138:2). Elsewhere acts of worship are associated with altars (2 Kings 18:22; Isaiah 36:7) and gates (Jeremiah 7:2). For the Jews, Jerusalem was the

place of worship. Their feast days and holy days were the occasions of worship as seen even in the time of Jesus and the apostles.

The obvious problem with this type of worship is that it naturally tended to legalism. Time and time again people were so sidetracked by the rituals of worship that they missed the true essence of humility before God, love for one another and a holy life (Micah 6:8). This was most evident with the Pharisees. Their worship was a matter of lip service with their hearts far from God (Matthew 15:8,9; Isaiah 29:13). It became the ritualistic teaching of men and was not sincere. They had exchanged truth for tradition. It could even be said that they worshiped their worship more than God. So far were the Jews from God that they wanted to kill Paul because in their minds, he was worshiping contrary to the Law. Yet Paul, being an expert in the Law, insisted that he was well in line with the spirit of the Law – to have a good conscience before God and man (Acts 18:13 cf. 24:14-21).

Worship in the New Testament

There are many New Testament scriptures that speak of worship. Most of those in the synoptic gospels and Acts tend to describe worship from the perspective of old covenant Jewish practices rather than set a pattern for believers today. However, clearly the most important scripture in dealing with worship for our time is John 4:7-26. An examination of this passage would reveal cuts, bruises and severe hemorrhaging after the decades of abuse it has suffered at the hands of preachers.

John 4

²¹ Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father.

²² You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews.

²³ But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him.

²⁴ God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

Here Jesus reveals a dispensational change in the mode of worship. “The time is coming and is even now when the true worshipers worship in [their human] spirit and in truth.” Some have suggested that to worship in spirit and truth is simply to have the right attitude before God. This hardly does justice to the context of the passage and the choice of words. It means much more than that. Jesus indicated that the time had come when there would no longer be any special place or time for worship. Since God is a Spirit and is omnipresent (and He was about to pour His Spirit upon all believers), He can be worshiped anywhere and anytime.

Secondly worship is not a matter of outward action but a spirit-to-spirit devotion to God. We worship from our spirits. In this regard it is similar to speaking in tongues, where our spirits pray while our mouths speak. We worship from our spirits, but there is always an outward response.

Thirdly, to worship in truth can refer to sincerity or doctrinal truth. Both are acceptable. The Pharisees had replaced God’s truth with tradition and at the same time were insincere in their worship. One commentator has suggested that Jesus’ statement “to worship in spirit and in truth” was a rebuke to both Jews and Samaritans. Jesus emphasized the spirit to the Jews whose worship was outward, and He stressed the truth to the Samaritans who did not know whom or what they worshiped. To worship in spirit and in truth means to sincerely worship the true God through Jesus Christ from our inner beings.

State of Worship

There is one idea however which has been generally missed in this passage. Jesus started off speaking on eternal life, attempting to expose the woman's special case of spiritual death. The woman in discomfort tried to change the topic. Jesus, however, was not the type to be sidetracked. He always turned the conversation back around to eternal issues. When He spoke of worship, He was not speaking of congregational worship, but rather of eternal life as a state of worship. The "true worshipers" are those who have eternal life. The believer in Christ who is born of the Spirit, recognizing Jesus as the Truth and the true way to the true God is in a state of worship before God.

This does not however eliminate worship as an act. But the point is that New Covenant worship is much more than an act. Just as prayer can be both a state and an act (1 Thessalonians 5:17), so too worship. This is why Paul, in response to Judaists who taught that the proper way to worship God was through circumcision and the works of the Law, stated that we (all believers) are the circumcision, who worship God by the Spirit (Philippians 3:3). All believers are in a perpetual state of spirit-to-spirit worship of God.

Attitude of Worship

Humans comprise of spirit, soul and body. Their spirits are in a state of perpetual worship. However true worship also involves having the right attitude in one's mind, and practicing the right acts in one's body.

It has been rightly said that worship is not for the purpose of obtaining anything from God, but giving to God. "Worship is the occupation of the

heart, not with its needs, or even its blessings, but God himself.” True worship is a life of respect and adoration for God because of who He is. A survey of the book of Revelation reveals five aspects of worship: “adoration of God’s being, declaration of the Lamb’s worthiness, a celebration of God’s presence, submission to His authority, and fearing and serving Him.” The right attitude in worship begins with recognizing God as the sole object of worship. A true worshiper will remain faithful to God even if God does not bless him (e.g. Daniel and the Hebrew boys).

Some worship God in order to attain some super spiritual state where they “feel” the presence of God. Totally absent from the Bible is any indication that believers in their mortal bodies can physically feel God’s presence. What some people feel is their response to an increased awareness of God’s ever indwelling presence, oftentimes in the form of “goose bumps”. Surely one does not need to be a spiritual giant to experience that. Others perform acts of worship as a religious duty once a week. True worshipers worship God with their life and seek to glorify Him in all they do.

Practice of Worship

In the Old Testament worship involved bringing a sacrifice unto God. Although the manner of sacrifice has changed, that fundamental principle remains. The Jews were required to bring physical sacrifices. Yet David indicated that the sacrifice God really wanted was a broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51:17). Paul told believers to present their bodies as living sacrifices, and this was their reasonable service. In practice worship is a lifestyle of brokenness before God. Just as He presented Himself a dying sacrifice for us, we are to present ourselves as

living sacrifices for Him (Romans 12:1,2). Worship cannot be separated from service. Everything we do ought to be for God's glory, and that is true worship. This can be done in our service, devotion, giving (Philippians 4:18), acts of concern for others' well being (Romans 14:8), and everyday lives.

Congregational Worship

Most people inadvertently limit worship to its congregational form. Praise and thanksgiving are aspects of worship. Some writers try to distinguish between praise and worship by seeing worship as a deeper level of thanksgiving and praise [1]. They appeal to the alleged typology of the tabernacle. Hebrews 9 does present the Old Testament tabernacle as a type of Christ and His atonement, however not as a type of our worship [2]. Christ and His redemptive plan are the sole fulfillments of Old Testament types (Colossians 2:17) [3]. Much teaching on worship is merely an extrapolation [4] of scripture based on a postmillennial interpretation of the Old Testament [5]. No one in the Bible ever claimed to have "passed the level of thanksgiving and praise and into the realm of worship". As godly as Paul was, he saw nothing spiritually inferior about thanksgiving (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Such esoteric teachings would have run contrary to the humility Paul sought to demonstrate. Thanksgiving and praise are better seen as right attitudes of the worshiper, rather than prerequisites to worship.

Thanksgiving and praise are aspects of worship. This aspect is most prominent in David's life. Worship always has an outward manifestation. In Biblical times the customs of showing respect for superiors were different from ours. Equals greeted each other with a kiss on the lips,

whereas a kiss on the cheeks was employed for someone slightly superior. Someone who was vastly superior was greeted by bowing down with heads touching the floor and motioning the hands as if blowing kisses in their direction[5]. Today a shake of the hands would suffice for all three situations. Customs change with culture, but principles remain.

David and his men praised God with dancing, singing and musical instruments. The basic principle is that God is to be praised with whatever means we have. There are no rules that say praise must follow the Davidic pattern. It may. But culture does affect one's style of giving praise. For a simple thing as a Cricket match [sporting event], West Indians have a different manner of celebrating than do the British. God is to be praised in and with whatever means available to us. God is more interested in our attitude in praising Him than our methods. No one in the Bible was ever chastised for using the wrong method in praising God, but they were severely rebuked for having wrong motives, wrong attitudes and worshipping wrong gods.

My Definition

Worship is basically the practical outliving of eternal life. It is a life of brokenness before God that seeks to glorify Him in all it does, and makes Him the center of its existence. Although it is true that devout Jews, proselytes and other good (unsaved) men were called God-fearers (Acts 10:2,22; 13:16,26; 16:14), true worship really begins with eternal life, which is a state of spirit-to-spirit communion with God. The proper attitude in worship is recognizing that God is the sole object of our worship, and thus can be practiced by exercising that attitude in all we do.

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