

Riverside Reflections – Week 6 – True Worship

Christian Worship is the response of born again believers to the revelation of God. It is based upon the work, the worth, and the word of God. It is achieved through the activity of God. It is directed to God. True worship is to ascribe worth to the one true God, to reflect upon the value, beauty, and character of God, who is truly there and who is truly worthy. It is expressed by the heart in humility, by the mind in captivity, by the lips in praise, and by the life in service. The thing we have to be careful about when “doing” theology or worship is that we can love thinking about God more than we actually love God, or that we can love loving God more than we actually do love God. True worship is concerned with doctrine, devotion, and demonstration. It is worshipping the right God, in the right way, and with the right heart. It is a lifetime pursuit and an eternal destiny.

False worship is to attribute worth to something which is not real, or to something which is not worthy, be they false gods or things not necessarily associated with god, but are idolatry nonetheless, such as worship of self, or money, and on and on we could go. Aberrant or deviant worship is to worship the right God but in the wrong way, or to worship the right God in the right way but with the wrong heart. Sincerity in worship is not necessarily the same thing as worship in spirit and truth, which God is looking for (John 4:23-24).

We should search the Scriptures on the subject of worship because worship is important to God, and because of the consequences of false worship. Cain’s sacrifice was rejected by God because it was false worship (Genesis 4:3-5). 3000 people died in one day because of the false worship of the golden calf fashioned by Aaron (Exodus 32). Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, were destroyed because any worship God doesn’t prescribe is detestable in His sight (Leviticus 10:1-3). The kingdom of Israel was divided because of the idolatry of the nation (1 Kings 11:31-33, 12:26-33). Israel made an idol out of something that God himself had instituted for their deliverance (Numbers 21:4-9 / 2 Kings 18:4). The fall of Jerusalem was directly attributable to apostasy and false worship (Jeremiah 16:11-13). Paul wrote that God was justified in condemning man because he worshiped in error (Romans 1:25). Satan fell from heaven because he sought worship for himself, and seeks those who will worship him (cf. Matthew 4:9).

The Attitudes of Worship – Three main sets of Greek and Hebrew words that are rendered as the word “worship” in the Bible give us a picture of the attitudes of worship.

Humility – The most frequent pair of words used for worship in the Old and New Testaments represent the act of bowing oneself in submission. The outward posture reflected an inner attitude of humility and respect, a high view of God and a humbling opinion of self. Thus, true worship views God in His perfection and man in his imperfection.

Reverence – Another pair of words used in both the Greek and the Hebrew is that of fearing God. It is not so much terror as it is wonder and awe at the greatness of God. Humility focuses inward on our finiteness and sinfulness in the light of His infinity and perfection. Reverence focuses outwardly upon the awesome majesty of God. Irreverence is contrary to worship.

Service – The third pair of words employed for worship in the Bible emphasize the idea of labor. In the Old Testament this service was most often priestly service. In the New Testament we are all priests (1 Peter 2:5, 9), and service involves the entire congregation of believers. Worship and service must be integrated, if it is to be true worship (Luke 4:8).

The Actions of Worship – The contexts in which these words for worship are used give us an understanding about the actions of worship.

Response – biblically speaking, we do not worship to get God to act, we worship because God has acted. Yet the worshiper is not merely an observer of redemptive history, but he has been included in this story, and has been personally impacted by the act of redemption in his own life. Romans 11:36 – Worship is from God (Romans 3:21-24 / 1 John 4:19), through God (Philippians 3:3), and unto God (John 4:23). Apart from God’s revelation of Himself and of how man can approach Him in worship, man could never worship God in a way pleasing to Him.

Adoration – since worship is fundamentally a response, what is the nature of this response? It is that of adoration and praise which God rightfully expects of His creatures. When most people think of “worship” this is what they are thinking of, and indeed, the ascribing of worth to God, the enjoyment of giving glory to His holy being, and all the things surrounding this are a crucial part of what worship is. We thank Him for His acts and praise Him for His attributes. Perhaps the best way to see this is in book of Psalms, which gives us the patterns for adoration. Even those who reject Jesus in this life will wind up worshipping Him (Philippians 2:9-11).

Sacrifice – Central in the worship of the Tabernacle and in the Temple was the practice of sacrifice. When Abraham worshiped God in Genesis 22, the offering was termed worship. The presentation of the first-fruits was also regarded as an act of worship (Deuteronomy 26:10). When the wise men came to worship the baby Jesus, they came with gifts to give. David spoke of worship that costs something (1 Chronicles 21:24). In the New Testament the idea of sacrifice is still prominent in worship, but since Jesus is our sacrifice, and no bulls or goats are needed, it is the sacrifice of self which is essential (Romans 12:1). The book of Hebrews adds to this the sacrifice of praise, of doing good things, and of sharing (Hebrews 13:15, 16).

Proclamation – proclamation is a vital part of worship. Israel was not to worship God in secret, but was supposed to be a “light to the Gentiles.” When Abraham worshiped, he built an altar and “called upon the name of the Lord” (Genesis 12:8, 21:33). In the New Testament, the church has been created by God as a display of the wisdom of God to all the true and false systems of religion and the powers that are behind them (Ephesians 3:10). In the Lord’s Supper all believers proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes again (1 Corinthians 11:26). We are not just spectators watching what God has done and is doing, we are participants in the divine drama, being observed by both those in heaven and those on the earth (Ephesians 3:8-10 / 1 Peter 1:12).

The Application of Worship – Let’s apply our definition of worship and understanding of our attitudes and actions of worship to certain activities we think of as worship.

Prayer – Prayer should have elements of supplication and petition, but in the context of prayer as worship, we must also include grateful expressions about who God is, His eternal attributes

and actions of the past (Philippians 4:6). The Psalms provide wonderful models in this regard. We should set aside time to make prayers focused fundamentally on praise to God, and less on laundry lists for God, because although He does want us to ask Him for our needs (James 4:2), He already knows what we need (Matthew 6:8, 32-33 / cf. our sermon *This is How to Pray*).

Testimony – many of the Psalms are based upon the experience of the writer. This experience becomes a vehicle which turns the attention to the greatness of his God. God is merciful and kind not only because the Bible tells us so, but because God has been at work in our life. To testify is not to simply revel in our good blessings, but to reveal His character, that is our cause. Yes we should be excited to hear of great stories of God’s hand of help, if not such Psalms and stories wouldn’t be in the Bible at all, but in doing that we must remember the bottom line is about God. It is not, “look what I did” or “look what I can do for God”, and not simply “look what God can do through me” (I was delivered, I am ministering, etc.), but it is “look at God through me” (Matthew 5:16 / cf. our sermon *This is How to Testify*). Then it becomes worship.

Music / Singing – while the primary dwelling of worship is the heart, the expression of worship is physical. The expression of worship allows us to portray outwardly what is felt inwardly, and the regular mode of this expression is music and singing. The Psalms teach us that the praises of the people were set to music and sung. Music can be used to quiet our hearts and minds and focus them upon God. Yet, in the Pastoral Epistles, we notice that Paul doesn’t tell Timothy or Titus to make sure they have a great praise band! By concentrating on doctrine Paul doesn’t say don’t do music he is saying that all our music should be doctrinal leading to devotional. The content of our songs of worship must be doctrinally rich if they are to be biblically sound. Paul isn’t teaching that music is unimportant, but that focusing on the Bible will help us to focus correctly in worship with music and singing. Colossians 3:16 – Some teach that our music should only be exclusive psalmody, but this is incorrect because that leaves out hymns and spiritual songs and a host of NT truths. We see saints in the book of Revelation singing a new song that has clear references to redemption and NT truth. There is a difference between public and private devotion and music, which we will cover in a few moments.

Preaching / Listening – Preaching which is focused on God and directs our attention and affection to Him may prompt true worship. Listening with our minds and hearts is a vitally important part of the process. Preaching that inspires us to live a godly life, and preaching that transforms us by the renewing of our minds leads to worship, although it may not be worship in the immediate moment. A shallow approach to preaching makes it less possible for true worship to take place, because we only rise as high in worship to the same proportion which we have been taken deep into the profound truths of the Word. There is no way we can have lofty thoughts of God unless we have plunged them into the depths of God's self-revelation. Too often preaching merely aims to entertain. Too often we fail to worshipfully listen.

Study – Theology is the study of God; doxology is the worship of God. This is where all theology should end up, in praise to God. Study without praise is pride. Praise without study is shallow. Knowledge without a heart surrendered to God is empty of God’s life. All true worship is a response to the revelation of God in Christ and Scripture, and arises from our reflection on who He is and what He has done. Worship without theology is bound to degenerate into idolatry. That is why Scripture is so important in both public and private devotion. On the other hand,

worship is not about a purely academic interest in God. No, the true knowledge of God will always lead us to worship. Good theology should sound like doxology (Ephesians 1:3-14). Doxology is fueled by theology and theology is made more potent by diving into the depths of revealed truth. Certainly by the end of his life the Apostle Paul had come to a higher place, he didn't stay on that Damascus road.

The Bible paints a picture of theology and doxology together, deep roots in the soil of the scriptures matched with the fervent fruit of fired up worship. We need to see both, not one to the exclusion of the other, and unfortunately, some who have deep roots in theology don't express the outgrowth of that enough in their corporate worship or lifestyle. Also, some Christians think going deep means exploring the depths of their own feelings, and therefore "God" becomes a projection of their best thoughts, and they practice idolatry without realizing it. The problem is when we don't progress beyond those feelings and then we go searching for that feeling as the tell tale sign if we are worshipping correctly or deeply or not. We fail to dig deeper into things we may at first have a hard time understanding because they don't give us a feeling yet. We become satisfied with feeling what we think is "fullness", but the better we understand God from the scripture the better we are able to worship. It doesn't mean the better we *will* worship but the deeper our thoughts of God become, the higher our worship of God can become. We stand in awe of God, and then our affections are stirred, not vice versa.

Worship Before the Law – the emphasis was upon an individual relationship to God (Genesis 8:20). The father acted as the priest for his household (Job 1:5). There was no central place of worship prescribed, with the worshipers offering sacrifices on altars which they built (Genesis 12:7-8). Besides the offering of sacrifices, worship in this period was characterized by the expression of thanks to God (Genesis 24:26, 48, 52). There were no fixed times of worship.

Worship Under the Law – everything about worship is laid out in minute detail. Nothing is left to the imagination. The Levitical priesthood was instituted (Exodus 28:1). The place of worship was centralized, first in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple (Exodus 20:24 / Deuteronomy 12:5, 11). The high priest could enter the holiest place once a year (Leviticus 16). In addition to the daily sacrifices (Exodus 29:38-42), there were five specified offerings: the burnt, meal, peace, sin, and trespass offerings (Leviticus 1-7). Israel was given a calendar of seven special feasts: Passover, unleavened bread, first fruits, Pentecost, trumpets, Day of Atonement, and tabernacles. Anything God didn't prescribe was considered strange fire, detestable in God's sight. When the Jewish Temple was destroyed in 586 BC, the Jewish people were no longer able to carry out Old Testament worship as it was explicitly laid out in Scripture. They no longer had a temple, or the ability to offer blood sacrifice. So they devised a method for instruction and fellowship called the synagogue. The word "synagogue" is not a Hebrew word, it is from a Greek word which means a gathering together.

Worship in New Testament Times – the exact prescription and prohibition was for the OT, but the NT reveals a different pattern of worship. The OT types pointed to Christ, and now we do NOT do those, they have been fulfilled, and so now we worship Christ but in varied forms, no Tabernacle or Temple, no sacrifices, etc., no exact prescription. The NT prescribes liberty (Galatians 5:1), not forms or formulas (Philippians 3:3), but it does give parameters for practice (1 Corinthians 12-14). Every believer in Christ is a priest (1 Peter 2:5, 9). Jesus Christ is the

great High Priest (Hebrews 10:21). There is no central earthly place of worship, nor is there an appointed calendar of sacred feasts or religious observances. The sacrifices are “spiritual sacrifices” (Romans 12:1, 15:26 / 2 Corinthians 8:4, 9:13 / Philippians 4:18 / Hebrews 13:15-16). Worship in the present age most closely resembles that which will occur in heaven, and sharply differs from that prescribed by the Law.

New Testament church worship is about freedom of communication, with some measure of spontaneity, and yet there is a structure: the reading and interpretation of the Word, the sharing of words of exhortation and encouragement, praying and singing together, and sharing money to help poor folks and to advance God’s kingdom. Jesus takes the Jewish Passover and transforms it into the central ordinance of the New Testament, the Lord’s Supper which, whenever it is observed, takes us back to Calvary and points us to the finished work of Christ.

New Testament worship leaves us with no New Testament book of Leviticus. Some believers today try and impose the OT regulations of worship on NT believers. We would agree in essence that anything that God doesn’t explicitly prescribe or implicitly command is prohibited. However, all of the New Testament proof texts that some try and use in order to limit worship are not really about formal worship at all, they are about life, because a fundamental thing about worship in the New Testament is that all of life is worship (1 Corinthians 10:31). The emphasis is not on binding the conscience of someone. While it is certainly true that God alone has the right to determine true worship and that He has done so in the Scripture, the NT focus is on the liberty and freedom we have in worship. That is what God has prescribed; worship in spirit and in truth. We do ourselves a great disservice when we think of worship only in stereotyped terms. However, we also would be in error in assuming that spontaneity is spirituality. Having said that, let’s now look at some further principles of NT worship.

Principles of New Testament Worship – The encounter Jesus had with the woman at the well (John 4) gives us clear principles for worship. The Lord led her to the true worship of Himself (vs.19-26). We come to understand that not all worship is acceptable to God (cf. Acts 17:16-31). God is the One who initiates true worship through the person, work, and word of Christ; there are none who naturally seek God from their hearts (cf. Romans 3:10-18). As we discussed earlier, God enables true worship (cf. Romans 8:26, 11:36). God is the appropriate object of worship. Worship must be in **spirit**; internally real and not outwardly by ritual alone (cf. Philippians 3:3). Worship must be in **truth**; not just a projection of our sincerity, or a reflection of culture, but firmly based on the truth of God revealed in the Bible (cf. 1 John 4:5-6).

Corporate Worship – this is important to God (Ephesians 5:19 / 1 Corinthians 12-14). Revelation 4-5 gives us a taste of heaven, and several marks of a God-centered service.

- A high view of God
- A constant focus upon God
- A distinction between God and man
- A deep fear of God
- A people separated unto God
- Repentance toward God
- Prayers to God
- The exaltation of Christ, as worthy, as the only way, as the glory of God

Corporate worship is obviously about more than music, as we have discussed, but part of corporate worship is that it allows us to proclaim truth to each other in song (Colossians 3:16). Personal worship is performed privately, and is a vital component of the Christian life. It reflects the “me and God” component which the Christian enjoys through the cross of Christ. However, it is not quite so with corporate worship. If you view corporate worship as only a “me and God” experience, you will not only lack the joy which comes from corporate worship, but you will be failing to accomplish one of the purposes of our meeting together, which is to edify one another (Hebrews 10:24-25 / cf. our Mission Statement). Since corporate worship allows us to proclaim truth to each other it also allows us to learn truth from one another, with the words and the expressions we give, and the gifts we use. The church is not only taught by the lyrics of the songs, but by the church’s response to these lyrics, it is taught what it looks like to be impacted by truth. If the church fails to utilize such expressions, it has, to some degree, failed to feed its sheep with the teaching that corporate worship should offer.

While private worship is a vital component in the lives of God’s children which allows us to personally express devotion to God, corporate worship is God’s design to give us but a glimpse of what it will be like to be glorified in heaven. One of these things is that the redeemed will be joining together in song (Revelation 4:8, 5:9-12). To see the church congregated together to worship God in song gives us a glimpse of this. It increases in us the hope for future glorification which God has placed in the hearts of his people (Romans 8:24-25). When we envision worshipping God and the only thing which comes into our minds is ourselves, we fail to recognize what we are a part of (1 Peter 2:9).

The purpose of our corporate worship service is for our congregation to worship God. Every church has a liturgy, which refers to the form our public worship takes. That form may involve creeds, organs, bulletins, prayers, electric guitars, videos, and the list goes on and on. The question is not whether or not we have a liturgy, but whether we have a biblical one that includes scriptural elements, rehearses the gospel, builds up the church, and glorifies God. In worship today, there is a tendency toward casualness. The emphasis on feeling God’s closeness in worship may short-circuit our being transformed by a glimpse of the Transcendent One.

Idolatry is alive and well. We must not bow down at the altars of coolness, fame, material success, cutting edge technology, and emotional experience. We can appear to be worshipping God while serving our idols (2 Kings 17:32-41). We err greatly if our focus is on “hitting the right sound/style/song” in our services, rather than consistently and clearly leading our people to worship God in light of the Cross and Resurrection, God’s glory and our gain. Of course, the answer to slick, overproduced, overemotional worship is not shoddy, emotionless worship. Glorifying God by our worship must be our goal, our highest priority (1 Corinthians 10:31), and excellence is part of that. Worship is our highest calling, and it is more than a Saturday night or a Sunday morning or any specific time. Worship is more life than event (Romans 12:1-2).

Psalms 100 is a summary of instructions on how to worship the Lord. Who should worship the Lord? Everyone should (vs.1). How should we worship the Lord? We do it by serving (vs.2a), singing (vs.2b), submitting (vs.3), and sacrificing (vs.4a), both individually (vs.4b), and corporately (vs.4c). Why should we worship the Lord? He is good, loving, and faithful (vs.5).