

Worship: The Worthship of God

What is the church for? Ask 20 different Christians and you'll get about that many answers. For some the church is all about fellowship. The church is supposed to be a tool that allows individual Christians to find companionship, friendship, encouragement. For them, the church is doing its job when it provides a spiritual community.

For some the church is all about evangelism. The church is simply home base, HQ, before we go on missions to win the lost and win souls for Christ. For them, the church is doing its job when the main thrust is evangelism.

For some the church is all about preaching and teaching. The church is the place where believers come to get equipped and taught and trained so that they can go out and live the Christian life at home, at school and at the workplace. For them the church is doing its job when it is providing a steady diet of steady biblical preaching and teaching.

Others might say the church is about biblical counselling; others say it is about discipleship; others want it to be all about worldwide missions. Whatever you think is most important, that is what you are going to aim everything towards. If you're all about evangelism, that's going to show up in what you preach, how you worship, how you organise. If you're all about preaching, then it will show up in that way. Whatever a church prioritises comes to characterise it.

I want to suggest to you that the following passage in Peter teaches us that the goal of the church is not fellowship. Fellowship is part of what we do, but it is not the priority, the core of what we do. Evangelism and missions are crucial. They are essential to what we are and do, but they are not all we are to do. What does this passage say we have been saved to do?

1 Peter 2:9-10 *you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; ¹⁰ who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.*

The church has been called out from the world to be a people that proclaim God's praises. In other words, the priority of the church is worship.

1 Peter 2:4-5 ⁴ *Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious,* ⁵ *you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*

This is the goal of the church. Everything else we do - fellowship, discipleship, preaching, training, evangelism, missions – is all part of the main goal, which is worship. Evangelism is a form of worship. Fellowship is a form of worship. Discipleship is a form of worship. Worship is the big, ultimate category, from which everything flows, and into which everything flows. To the degree that we worship well, is the degree to which we will fellowship well. To the degree that we worship well, we will evangelise well. To the degree that we worship well, we will disciple one another well.

We are in the middle of the worship wars, a prolonged and ongoing battle about what worship is, and how we ought to do it. When a battle like this goes on and continues, some weariness begins to enter both sides. Pretty soon, there are voices calling for a truce. And sometimes, those well-meaning peacemakers recast the whole battle as insignificant, or a quibble over details, or a big misunderstanding.

On one level, I'd like to agree. We ought not to unnecessarily divide over certain applications of worship. All things being equal, we should aim for maximum fellowship amongst Christians. On the other hand, I disagree. I think we definitely need to contend for a biblical philosophy of worship. A philosophy of worship has to do with what worship is, what our basis for it is, why we do it. We might come to different conclusions as to how to apply that philosophy, and that is understandable, and given our human frame, somewhat inevitable. But if we do not agree on what the nature of worship actually is, our motives for it, and the doctrinal basis for it, we are at odds at the very heart of our religion.

Many today tell us that we if agree on the gospel, we need not make anything else an issue worth dividing over. The gospel is certainly the basis of Christianity, but the gospel is not all there is to Christianity. The gospel is the boundary of Christianity. But Christianity is more than a boundary, it also has a heart, and that heart is worship. The gospel gives entrance into Christianity. Once inside, Christianity is about knowing and responding to God. And if we find ourselves completely at odds with one another on the question of who our God is and how we respond to him, we have pretty severe, if not fundamental differences. Which is why worship is a hill to die on.

In fact, the conflict is not all bad. It is in the conflict that we actually grow and refine our views. The worship wars can benefit us, if we'll let them. In fact, conflict over doctrine has only strengthened the church doctrinally. Christian doctrine has been refined to the depth it has thanks to the heretics. From the first century onwards, it was when a heretic came along and questioned something that the church had simply taken for granted, that Christians rose to the challenge to defend that truth that was now under fire. Heretics are fond of saying that the doctrine of the Trinity was invented in the fourth century; the truth is that the doctrine of the Trinity was assumed until that time, and defended in the form of creeds once people like the Arians and Sabellians arose. Once a threat to the faith came, Christians now had to work hard to search the Scriptures and teach what had been taken for granted as part of orthodoxy. Our statements of faith are really a time-line of conflicts.

Along with those statements of doctrine, has been the church's sense or appreciation of what it ought to feel towards God because of those statements. The church has had what you might call an orthopiety – a sense of what is right in worship. And at some point, some worship innovation has arisen, and the church has responded. It has said, "God is like this, therefore we worship Him like this, not like that. God is not like that, therefore we do not worship Him in that way, but in this way." Sometimes it has overreacted. Sometimes it under-reacted, and a worship innovation took root in the church and became a tradition. Once again, the history of worship, and its controversies is something of a time line of the combat. The worship wars have helped the church refine its tradition of worshipping God.

Our era is part of that. Frighteningly, our era faces the most devastating cultural changes in the shortest amount of time. Our era is an era riding the wave of pragmatism and populism. Our era is one in which the battle is very, very messy, and very, very difficult to see who is friend and who is foe. But that confusion does not call for passive spectators, but for thinking, acting, valiant, vigilant Christians. If we lose a right view of God, we lose everything. As Tozer said, "Before the Christian Church goes into eclipse anywhere there must first be a corrupting of her simple basic theology. She simply gets a wrong answer to the question, "What is God like?" and goes on from there. Though she may continue to cling to a sound nominal creed, her practical working creed has become false. The masses of her adherents come to believe that God is different from what He actually is; and that is heresy of the most insidious and deadly kind."

Worship is a hill to die on.

This short series is an attempt to define worship, and explain how Christians need to judge what is fitting and biblical worship of our God and what is not. We'll begin with an overview of what worship is. We'll then consider how God orders His own worship. We'll consider how we are to judge some of the elements of worship, and how that judgement is formed.

Today, I want to do two things. First, I want us to attempt a definition of worship. Once we find a Scriptural basis for defining worship, I want to take that definition and see two implications, which ought to guide us in our whole approach to this matter.

Let's begin with the definition.

What is worship? It's popular to invent definitions that describe our experience. But what if our experience is not worship? In that case we are actually deepening our error. To understand what worship is, we need to find the definition from Scripture itself. But the problem we run into is that Scripture does not have a glossary section. There is no section at the back of your Bible where terms like worship, salvation, justification, regeneration are listed, and an inspired definition is given. You might go to the Hebrew and Greek, and look up the meaning of the words translated worship, and what you will find is that they typically mean something close to *the act of bowing*. And that doesn't really get you any further. What that tells us is that when Scripture uses its terms for worship, it expects us to already know what it is talking about. The Bible expects us to come to its pages with a rough and ready idea of what worship is, so that when we see the term, we know what it is talking about.

In other words, we are not going to understand what worship is by merely examining word meanings; we are going to learn what worship is by reading its descriptions of worship. One of the clearest descriptions of worship is found in Psalm 29.

Psalm 29:1-2 A Psalm of David. Give unto the LORD, O you mighty ones, Give unto the LORD glory and strength. ² Give unto the LORD the glory due to His name; Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.

David here calls for an action from the mighty ones. The mighty ones could refer to angels, but David's point probably isn't to describe angelic worship as much as it is to call the more elevated beings of all to worship the Most Elevated Being of all. And what action does he call them to? He calls them to give the Lord something. Three times he says – give to the Lord, give to the Lord, give to the Lord. And then we find in verse two that parallel to this action of giving something to the Lord, is the act of worshipping the Lord. Hebrew poetry so often puts thoughts that are equivalent, or synonymous, or overlapping, parallel to each other to develop and draw out what is being spoken about. So here we have a kind of Rosetta stone to understand what worship is. We know David is talking about worship, he says so. And we know he considers worship to be the same thing, or nearly the same thing as this act of giving something to the Lord.

What is it that worshippers are to give to the Lord?

We are to give the Lord glory and strength. Specifically, we are to give the Lord the glory **due His name**. If something is due, what does that mean? If we say your yearly fees are due, what do we mean? We mean you owe something. There is a debt, and that debt must be met. If we say that we speak with all due respect, we mean that someone deserves a kind of respect, and we are granting that. We even use it to mean something is payable – your rent is due.

Glory speaks of the sum total of God's worth. It is the outshining value of what makes God God. It

is all God is, displayed for admiration. In other words, to say God has glory due His name is to say His character has a certain value and calls for an appropriate response. God, because of who He is, deserves a certain kind of treasuring or honouring or valuing, and such a response is payable by all His creatures.

Worship is ascribing true value to God. The old English word tried to capture this idea, because it literally means 'worth-ship'. The worth of God, the value of God. Worship is evaluating God, and expressing what you believe God is worth. In fact, when you think about it, human beings are always in the business of evaluating and expressing value. Whether it's natural scenery, or foods, or activities, or people, they are always, in conversation and through action and emotion expressing their positive or negative evaluation of things and people. "That place was amazing!" "This food is incredible!" "This town is a bit dingy!" "He is such a back-stabber." "She is so gracious." "This ring is so beautiful!" Human beings have been made to value beauty, whether it is a natural or a moral kind of beauty. When we're confronted with beauty, we admire and praise and love it. We ascribe value to it.

So what Scripture calls us to do is not something we know nothing about. To worship God is to take the faculties God has given you for evaluating and ascribing value, and turn their focus onto God Himself. Evaluate who God is, and once you've found that out, once you have learned what he is worth, then express that: give Him due, or the appropriate glory.

That brings us to our two implications about worship. **First, worship is based on revelation. Second, worship is an appropriate response.**

1) Worship is Based on Revelation

David tells us to give God the glory due His name. That implies that before we express what we think God is worth, we shall have understood what He is worth. To say to a group of people who have never heard Bach's Brandenburg Concerto – give the appropriate praise to Bach's Brandenburg Concerto, would be fruitless. They have to know it, before they can praise it. For human beings to give God the glory due His name means they must know who He is. Who is behind that name? What is He like? What does He love? What does He hate? What has He done? What is He doing? What shall He do? Who has He dealt with in the past?

We could never give God the glory due Him, if we never found out what He is actually like. Our worship would be like people who write Hallmark cards for a living – writing flowery, generic words of kindness, adoration and praise to no one in particular. In order for us to worship in the biblical sense, God must disclose Himself to us. And apart from that self-disclosure, no one would know Him.

Isaiah 45:15 ¹⁵ Truly You are God, who hide Yourself, O God of Israel, the Savior!

Exodus 20:21 ²¹ ¶ So the people stood afar off, but Moses drew near the thick darkness where God was.

God reveals Himself to us. This is foundational to Christian worship. Christian worship is not attributing to God what we would like Him to be. Christian worship is a response to what God reveals about Himself. Christian worship is always a response.

Therefore our major concern must be, how does this revelation of God come to us? We know several things about God's self-revelation. *Firstly*, it is **sovereign**. God reveals Himself. No one discovers God without His consent. God is not the kind of Being or Person that an intrepid explorer could stumble upon. God is not like some insect who is unexpectedly exposed to the light because someone turns a stone over. God is never unwillingly exposed. If God is ever known, it is because

He has chosen to show Himself.

This is true both of coming to know Him initially at regeneration, and of coming to know Him increasingly through sanctification. God does the revealing. We cannot discover anything of God He does not reveal.

When the psalmist cries out, 'Open my eyes, that I might behold wondrous things out of your law', when Paul writes, "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened" they are revealing their belief that God reveals Himself. Or as the Lord Jesus Himself put it:

Matthew 11:25-27 At that time Jesus answered and said, "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes. ²⁶ "Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight. ²⁷ "All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him."

Second, God's self-revelation is **Trinitarian**. God has chosen to reveal Himself through a particular order related to each of the Persons of the Triune God. God the Father, is revealed through God the Son:

John 1:18 No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.

Hebrews 1:1-3 God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, ² has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; ³ who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person,

God the Son revealed God in His incarnation, and above all, in His atonement. The cross is the ultimate self-revelation of the person and character of God. Now that Christ is ascended, the work of revealing the Person of Jesus Christ is the work of the Spirit.

John 15:26 But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me.

John 16:14-15 "He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵ "All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you.

God the Spirit is now devoted to testifying of Jesus Christ. His work is one of uniting a believer to Christ permanently through His works of regeneration, baptism and sealing, and then revealing Christ to the Christian through His works of illumination and progressive sanctification.

The way the Spirit reveals the Son leads us to the third thing about God's self-revelation.

Third, God's self-revelation is **Scriptural**. God has chosen to reveal Himself using the potential and the limitations of human language. He has inspired and preserved fixed number of writings about Himself. When these writings are properly understood, they reveal everything about God He wants us to know.

According to Peter, the prophecy of Scripture (1 Pet 1:16-21) is more sure than even visible experiences of God on a mountain, like he'd experienced.

Although there are other media God uses to communicate Himself, such as creation, and although God reveals Himself to us in our lives through acts of providence and answered prayer and His sanctifying work in our hearts, those things never reveal something new about God. They confirm

and illustrate and exemplify what God has said of Himself in the Scriptures. God's revelation of Himself continues only in the sense that He keeps on saying what He has already said, showing us what He has already shown us, teaching us what He has already taught us.

This is the basis for worship. All our acts of ascribing value to God come because God sovereignly reveals Himself to us. The Spirit of God takes the Word of God, and reveals the Son of God, who reveals the Father. When we see the beauty of God in the face of Jesus Christ through the work of the Spirit, we will respond with worship. It is as we, corporately and individually, understand with the mind the nature of God, that our hearts will be able to respond with affections due His name.

Once we have some Spirit-revealed truth about the name of God, we can now respond. That brings us to the second part of David's statement: *Give unto the LORD the glory due to His name*

Once you know what is behind the name through revelation, you are able to give the response that is due.

2) Worship Is An Appropriate Response to God's Revelation

Worship is not an act of flattery. Worship is not an act of creativity, coming up with new and colourful thoughts about God. Worship is a response. Worship is a reflex. Worship first receives, then reflects. First revelation is given, then man is enabled to understand it, and then he responds with the glory due to God.

This idea that worship is giving God the glory due His name teaches us three things about biblical worship. This response, to be biblical worship is made up of three things.

First, it is a required response.

If the Bible says, give Him what is due, it is clear that this is what He deserves. To deny Him this worship would make such praise overdue. Such worship would be outstanding, an unpaid debt, an unmet obligation. Worship is our ultimate obligation.

There is a weight of God's glory that presses upon us. The more we know God, the more we ought to feel the intensity of the need to respond in worship.

Psalms 113:3 From the rising of the sun to its going down The LORD's name is to be praised.

Psalms 145:3 Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; And His greatness is unsearchable

Every time Scripture says "He is worthy" it is saying, He is worth your worship. You owe Him your praise. Do what is fitting, give what is called for.

We know from experience that the more impressive, the more magnificent, the more beautiful the thing is that we observe or experience, the more our hearts urge us to announce the glory due to it. So it is with God. God is not sitting in heaven, hungry for compliments, and trying to stir up an army of insincere flatterers. God is more beautiful than the sum total of all His works. To know Him – to know the beauty of His holiness, is to sense in your heart the urgency, the reflex response of worship. The happy news is that our ultimate obligation, and our ultimate satisfaction are not two ends but one. "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever".

There is a word we have for people who do not recognise the value of something they ought to. We call them unjust. A just person is fair in his judgement. So when confronted with the weight of

God's glory, he responds with the glory due His name.

Indeed Romans 1 reports what happened to people who did the opposite of this:

Romans 1:21-25 because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man -- and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. ²⁴ ¶ Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

People who did not give the fitting, required response became increasingly foolish, blinded, and warped in their affections. They ended up in idolatry. Their worship had become false. That leads us to the second thing about worship as a response to revelation.

Second, it is a truthful response.

If worship is a response to revelation, that response itself can be more or less true. That is, the response can correspond to what has been revealed, or fail to correspond to what has been revealed.

We tend today to think that truth is something contained in the pages of Scripture, and our goal is to expound that truth. That's true as far as it goes, but once we have that truth in our hands, we can still respond in ways that do not correspond with that truth.

If Scripture reveals that God is a God of justice and wrath, it would not be appropriate to burst out laughing. That would be a response, but it would be a response that fails to properly respond to the truth. To put it another way, it would be an untrue response.

If Scripture says God is a consuming fire, it is appropriate to respond to that revelation with reverence and awe. That would be a true response, because the response agrees with the revelation. There is correspondence. A truth about God has provoked a true and fitting response.

You can end up with idolatry in two ways. You can misinterpret Scripture, and see something about God that is not there. You end up inserting a god in the text which isn't there, or distorting the view of God which is there. The god you get out of Scripture isn't the god of Scripture, and you end up with an idol.

You can also end up in idolatry if you respond completely inappropriately to revealed truth. You can take a partial truth about God, and insert your own version of joy or happiness or fear or awe as the response. But all you're doing is pleasing yourself. And the longer you do that, the more you end up shaping your own view of God. Your affections end up squeezing the text of Scripture into their mould. Before long, you've got a god in your own image.

We need both propositional truth and affective truth. Propositional truth is truth about who God is – found in the Scriptures. Affective truth is truth about what God deserves – expressed in our worship. Only when we have truth in both areas are we giving God the worship due His name.

The Father seeks worshippers that will worship Him in Spirit and in truth. Empowered and taught by the Spirit who reveals Christ, and responding truthfully and sincerely to what He reveals. Worship is a response to revelation. It's a required response. It's a truthful response.

Third, it is an human response.

It might sound too obvious to say that we are to worship God as humans, but in fact, we sometimes have a problem with that. We find ourselves wanting to worship God as if He is our equal, or even worse, as if we are His benefactors. God dealt with some of this mindset in Psalm 50:

Psalm 50:7-15 "Hear, O My people, and I will speak, O Israel, and I will testify against you; I am God, your God! ⁸ I will not rebuke you for your sacrifices Or your burnt offerings, Which are continually before Me. ⁹ I will not take a bull from your house, Nor goats out of your folds. ¹⁰ For every beast of the forest is Mine, And the cattle on a thousand hills. ¹¹ I know all the birds of the mountains, And the wild beasts of the field are Mine. ¹² "If I were hungry, I would not tell you; For the world is Mine, and all its fullness. ¹³ Will I eat the flesh of bulls, Or drink the blood of goats? ¹⁴ Offer to God thanksgiving, And pay your vows to the Most High. ¹⁵ Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me."

Here were some people who believed that their gifts to God were benefiting Him, meeting His needs, shoring up some deficiency in Him. To approach worship like this is to insult God. Worship does not meet a need in God. Worship is what God deserves, while meeting a need in us. God says to them, I already own what you give me. I don't have needs, and if I did, do you think I would need you to meet them. I made the world, I don't need you to cook for me. Instead, what does God want? Thanksgiving, devotion, dependence.

Think of that key verse: Romans 11:36

Romans 11:36 ³⁶ ¶ For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen.

If all things are of Him, then He is Sovereign. He is the source. I worship Him in acts of dependency like trusting, waiting, asking, looking, yielding and submitting. If all things are through Him, then He is All_Sufficient. I worship Him in acts of desire like seeking Him, hungering and thirsting for Him, learning of Him, desiring Him, searching for Him. If all things are to Him, then He is Supreme. I worship Him in acts of delight like adoration, praise, gladness, thanksgiving, contentment, peace, joy.

There is another word for this dependence, desire and delight: love. When a human being loves God, he depends on Him, desires Him and delights in Him. Love is really ascribing and expressing value. So it's no surprise that the first and greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your might. The kind of dependence, desire and delight we give God is ultimate and total, because God is of ultimate value.

Worship is ascribing true value to God. We can only give God the value, the glory due His name when God reveals Himself to us. He sovereignly does so through His Spirit showing us the Son in the Scriptures. When He does, when we see the beauty of God in the face of Jesus, we respond. It's a required response, in the sense that God is so beautiful, it is only right and fitting to respond that way. It needs to be a truthful response, a response that corresponds with what He has revealed. And then it must be a human response – showing the worth of God by our great dependence, desire and delight in Him.