

Lecture #3 – Biblical Worship

I. Introduction

There is nothing in modern Christianity so fundamental yet so misunderstood as the subject of worship.

The idea and imagery of worship has been rewritten over the past century. The primary scale for Protestant and Evangelical churches from the Reformation into the early 20th century was between “high church” and “low church” traditions. The website GotQuestions.org summarizes:

“The terms have to do with worship procedures, specifically, the use of ritual, liturgy, and accoutrements in worship. Leaders of a High Church congregation place a ‘high’ emphasis on ceremony, vestments, and sacraments. Leaders of a Low Church congregation place a ‘low’ emphasis on such things and follow a freer worship style.

“Anglican, Episcopal, Catholic, Orthodox, most Methodist and Lutheran, and some Presbyterian churches are considered High Church. Their worship services are characterized by liturgical readings and rituals, their clergy wear special clothing, and they follow a calendar of annual religious observances.

“Baptist, Independent, Pentecostal, Quaker, Amish, some Methodist and Lutheran, and many Presbyterian churches are considered Low Church. Their worship services are characterized by congregational involvement, a relatively unstructured program, and an evangelical approach.”¹

Much of this status quo was shaken by the “Worship Wars” of the last part of the 20th and first part of the 21st centuries. The influx of Charismatic influence along with a move toward “contemporary” styles of music and services divided the churches and denominations. Sadly, the contemporary and praise & worship styles prevailed in most areas and is still gaining ground among conservative and independent movements.

It is therefore vital that we understand *what* and *why* we are doing what we do in church services. We must defend against false theologies of worship while defending and defining our own.

We need to know what true worship is.

¹ <https://www.gotquestions.org/high-church-low-church.html> - accessed 8-29-22

II. Etymology of Worship²

Our English word³ *worship* traces back to Anglo-Saxon origins around A.D. 1300 meaning “condition of being worthy”; *worth* (“value, honor”) + *ship* (“quality, condition”), or worthiness.⁴

The primary Hebrew word for worship is *shachab* (Strong’s H7812), meaning “to bow down, to prostrate oneself, to worship, to perform obeisance.” It appears 193 times, about half meaning to worship God and half meaning to bow in honor before something/someone.

The primary Greek word for worship is *proskeneo* (Strong’s G4352) meaning “to kneel or prostrate in homage or obeisance”. It is believed that the origin of this word could involve kissing the hand (or a dog licking a hand); *pros* (“towards”) + *kuneo* (“to kiss”)⁵ It appears 60 times, usually in a religious sense but it can also be used in a secular fashion as saluting or respecting someone of greater rank or power.

From these origins, we can safely say that the idea of worship is humbling oneself in reverence to a God that is worthy of such regard.

In the Biblical languages there are certain key elements to be observed. These involve the three key components in an act of worship: the worshipper, the act of worship, and the object of worship.

First, the worshipper has an object for their worship. Worship is about that object and not about the worshipper.

Second, the worshipper expresses humility. Note how the Greek and Hebrew words speak of bowing, prostration, or obeisance. The worshipper literally bows out of the picture so that the object of their worship receives full attention.

Third, the object is honored. Worship is not about honoring the worshipper; it is about directing the honor to an object. If the object of worship is not honored, then worship has not truly occurred.

Fourth, the worshipper submits to the authority of the object of worship. These words for worship can also be used in a secular sense to bow before kings. To worship is to do more than honor, it is also to obey.

Fifth, there is a sense of decorum. To bow before a king is not to riotously dance about. Worship is a serious business.

² A common defense of Charismatic worship practices involves word studies of the Hebrew words used for worship, praise, etc. I will deal with this in more depth in a future lesson, but if you would like more information I have an in-depth study of thirty-nine Hebrew words illustrating the errors in their presentation on my website: <https://www.baptistbasics.org/2022/05/28/hebrew-words-for-praise/>

³ There is a slight difference between the English and Greek/Hebrew etymologies and definitions, mostly the lack of humiliation in the English heritage.

⁴ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/worship> - accessed 8-29-22

⁵ See Strong’s definition.

III. Defining Worship

The following are sound definitions of *worship*:

“The substance of true worship is this: that our dear Lord speaks with us through His holy Word, and we in return speak with Him through prayer and song of praise.” – Martin Luther⁶

“What is worship? Worship is to feel in your heart and express in some appropriate manner a humbling but delightful sense of admiring awe and astonished wonder and overpowering love in the presence of that most ancient Mystery, that Majesty which philosophers call the First Cause, but which we call Our Father Which Art in Heaven.” – A.W. Tozer⁷

“Worship is our innermost being responding with praise for all that God is, through our attitudes, action, thoughts, and words, based on the truth of God as He has revealed Himself.” – John MacArthur⁸

“Worship is the work of acknowledging the greatness of our covenant Lord.” – John Frame⁹

“Worship is the believers’ response of all that they are – mind, emotions, will, and body – to what God is and says and does.” – Warren Wiersbe¹⁰

“The worship of the church, then, consists of individual, corporate, public, and private service for the Lord which is generated by a reverence for a submission to Him who is totally worthy.” – Charles Ryrie¹¹

“Worship is a spiritual response to God as a result of understanding biblical truth about God.” – Scott Aniol¹²

Here is my definition:

“Worship is man’s proper reaction to God’s revelation of Himself, whereby we exalt God through the expression of honoring God and humbling of self.”

⁶ As quoted in *Church Music for the Glory of God* by Gunnar Urang. p. 1.

⁷ As quoted in *Putting an End to Worship Wars* by Elmer Towns.

⁸ *Worship: The Ultimate Priority* by John MacArthur. p. 165.

⁹ As quoted in *Worship in Song* by Scott Aniol. p. 23-24

¹⁰ As quoted in *Worship in Song* by Scott Aniol. p. 23-24

¹¹ As quoted in *Worship in Song* by Scott Aniol. p. 23-24

¹² As quoted in *Worship in Song* by Scott Aniol. p. 30

IV. Elements of Worship

To understand worship, let us examine its key components found in Scripture.

Revelation

Worship begins with God. How do we know God? Because He has revealed Himself to us. Henry Thiessen defines revelation:

“By revelation we mean the act of God whereby He discloses Himself or communicates truth to the mind; whereby He makes manifest to His creatures that which could not be known in any other way”¹³

We worship God because of the *general revelation* of Himself in nature (Psalm 19:1), history (Job 12:23), and human conscience (Romans 2:14-15). We worship God because of the *special revelation* of Himself in miracles (Exodus 15:2-5), prophecy (II Chronicles 6:4-6), Christ (Philippians 2:5-11) and Scripture (Psalm 33:1-6). We worship God only because of His divine revelation to men.

Note also how worship is the natural reaction from men when they encounter God (Exodus 33:9-11, Joshua 5:14, Isaiah 6)

Understanding

Just because God has revealed Himself to man does not mean that man has immediate and perfect understanding. Take Nebuchadnezzar for example. He was a pagan king that saw (I believe) a preincarnate appearance of Christ in the flames with Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.¹⁴ He describes the figure he saw as “the Son of God” (Daniel 3:25) and God’s “angel” (Daniel 3:28), both terms for Christ. But did he have full knowledge of Who he saw? It is clear that he had limited understanding and is using pagan language to describe what he sees.

Understanding is vital. God can reveal Himself to us and yet we will not comprehend it. That is the case of Samuel in I Samuel 3. He heard the voice of God three times before understanding it was the Lord with Eli’s guidance.

Scott Aniol writes:

“For worship to be directed to God, the worshiper must understand the truth about God. That is why the preaching of God’s Word should be central in a worship service. It is why a believer must be studying the Word of God if he is to worship God with all of his life. Without understanding God, a person cannot worship Him.”

¹³ *Lectures in Systematic Theology* by Henry Thiessen. p. 31.

¹⁴ I make it a point to use their Hebrew names as much as possible instead of their Babylonian names.

Response

Biblical worship is clearly a response to the revelation of God. We cannot worship that which we do not know (Romans 10:14). Scott Aniol observes:

“...it is clear that no matter what form worship took, in the Old Testament it consisted of primarily two elements: *a presentation of truth about God and a fitting response to that truth*. No matter if the worship was expressed actively through ritual and ceremony or if it was a spontaneous reaction, the essence of the worship was the same – response to truth about God.”¹⁵ [emphasis original]

Not to get ahead of ourselves, but Charismatic theology practices the opposite. It is taught that if people will worship God *then* He will show up.

“Together the two passages [Psalm 22:3, 100:4] established a strong sense that God’s presence could be experienced in a special way through corporate praising and that sequencing acts of worship in a certain way could facilitate the experiencing of divine presence and power.”¹⁶

This subverts the divine order of worship. It makes it so God responds to man’s actions. This is completely backwards and places the actions of man at the center of worship and not God. Man should respond to God, His character and His actions, in worship.

Purpose

Worship is not an accident. We can accidentally do many things, such as insult someone, share a secret, or say something that rhymes. But we cannot accidentally worship. You can accidentally say, “Praise God”, but words and phrases do not equal worship. Worship must consciously come from the heart, or it is not worship.

A great example of the next three actions of worship is found in Job 1:20-21. The context is that Job has just found out he has lost his possession and his children. He turns his mourning to worship. It is clearly a purposeful act:

“Then Job arose [a purposeful act], and rent his mantle [a purposeful act], and shaved his head [a purposeful act] and fell down upon the ground [a purposeful act], and worshipped [a purposeful act],” (Job 1:20)

Abasement

The act of worship begins with bowing. This does not have to be physically prostrating ourselves before God, but it does have to be in the mind and heart of the believer. We must humble ourselves before God. Note the actions of Job:

¹⁵ *Worship in Song: A Biblical Approach to Music and Worship* by Scott Aniol. p.27

¹⁶ *Lovin’ on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship* by Limm See Hong and Lest Ruth. p. 134.

“Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head and fell down upon the ground [worship], and worshipped [worship, Hebrew *shachab*],” (Job 1:20)

The act of falling to the ground in prostration or bowing the head is common in Old Testament worship. The physical act was born of an inward humbling. Abraham’s servant “worshipped the LORD, bowing himself to the earth”. The children of Israel “bowed their heads and worshipped” (Exodus 4:31). Joshua “fell on his face to the earth, and did worship” (Joshua 5:14). Jehoshaphat “bowed his head with his face to the ground: and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem fell before the LORD, worshipping the LORD.” (II Chronicles 20:18). An unknown Psalmist proclaims “O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the LORD our maker.” (Psalm 95:6).

Worship must include the abasement of the worshipper. If we do not humble ourselves as we worship, then we are stealing the glory from God that is rightfully his.

Honor

Worship must have an object. When we worship, we are honoring or glorifying God. We are magnifying Him and not ourselves. Note that Job, who humbled himself and worshipped, had a definite object he directed his worship to:

“And said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD [object of worship].” (Job 1:21)

There is a *progression* to our actions: we purposefully worship, we purposefully humble ourselves, and we purposefully honor our God.

There is an *order* to our actions: we purpose, we minimize ourselves, we maximize God.

It cannot be underemphasized that there is a definite link between humbling ourselves and honoring God. We are giving Him all the glory and honor will rejecting any glory and honor for ourselves. We cannot lift ourselves up in worship.

Propriety

To worship God is the proper response to Who He is and what He does. It is proper that we humble ourselves before Him and exalt His glorious name. To not worship Him is a sin as it denies Him the glory that is due Him.

Let us examine Psalm 100 for example. We are to “make a joyful noise” (vs.1), “serve the Lord” (vs. 2), “come before His presence” (vs. 2), “enter into His gates with thanksgiving” (vs. 4), enter “into his courts with praise” (vs. 4), “be thankful unto Him” (vs. 4), and “bless His name” (vs. 4). These are fitting and appropriate expressions of our worship of God. That worship is based on the revelation of the fact “He is God” (vs. 3), He “hath made us” (vs. 3), “we are His people” (vs. 3), we are “the sheep of His pasture” (vs. 3), He “is good” (vs. 5), “His mercy is everlasting” (vs. 5), and “His truth endureth to all generations” (vs. 5).

Versatility

One of the primary fallacies of modern American Christianity is the equating of music and worship. It is not that music cannot be used to worship, but so many today in practice make music the only true form of worship.

Just as we saw above in Psalm 100, there are many ways to express worship to God. In our corporate church services worship goes far beyond the music. We worship through preaching of the Word, giving offerings, praying, testifying, and confessing sin.

Two key verses on this topic are: I Corinthians 10:31 (“Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.”) and Romans 12:1 (“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.”). If we a “living sacrifice” that is doing “all to the glory of God”, we are living a life of worship, which goes far beyond just singing and music. Anioli writes:

“All of a believer's life should be for God's glory. That is the essence of worship. As we continually present our lives to God, we are worshipping Him. Progressively becoming like Christ is one of the best ways of magnifying His unique excellence. In this sense, all of life is designed to be worship. When we understand those attributes unique to God and seek to magnify them through our actions, we are worshipping God with our response to truth. We were created to worship God in that way. We should also note that the ‘therefore’ in Romans 12:1 indicates this response of worship flows from the truth about God expressed in the first eleven chapters of Romans. So even in ‘lifestyle worship,’ both truth about God and the believer's response must be present.”¹⁷

V. The Duty of Worship

Mankind is to worship God. I like the very first question of the Westminster Short Catechism (1649) and how it clearly states this:

Q. 1. What is the chief end of man?

A. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.

Paul put it this way in I Corinthians 10:31: “Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.”

¹⁷ *Worship in Song* by Scott Anioli. p. 150