

Defining Worship

Bob Kauflin¹

Worship is one of those words that tends to mean less as we use it more. We all *think* we know what others mean when they speak of worship, but the truth is we can't be quite sure. *Worship* might be the word someone chooses when trying to describe a particular sound or style of music. Depending on the speaker it can be anything from guitar-driven pop songs to boomer light rock to classic hymns. Many churches call a Sunday morning service, or perhaps a portion of that meeting, *worship*. Another way we use the word *worship* is in describing someone who is unusually expressive when singing praise to God. We might say, "She's a real worshiper." In that instance, *worship* refers to degrees of bodily movement. With the "worship explosion" of the past decade, marketers have realized that including *worship* in the title of a project is an effective marketing tool that translates into a greater number of sales. Others recoil at that thought, believing that *worship* really means intimacy with God.

Obviously, we need to take time to sort through these very different views of what worship really is. After all, worship is God's idea, and what he created us to do. Theologian David Peterson comments, "We have enough how-to-do-it books and not enough reflection on worship as a total biblical idea. Worship is a subject that should dominate our lives seven days a week."²

In my study of Scripture, I've found at least five distinct concepts that Scripture attaches to worship: *exaltation*, *expression*, *encounter*, *event*, and *everyday*. Each one reflects in a unique way how God intends for us to use and understand this word. While not exhaustive, this list gives us a basic foundation for how we should view worship. I should point out that not every passage I'll mention contains the actual word *worship*. However, whereas we might use the word without knowing its meaning, the Bible often describes worship without using the actual word.

Worship is first and foremost *exaltation*. The Hebrew and Greek words in the Bible that we translate as "worship" most often communicate an attitude of reverence, submission, and homage. In the act of worship, we are by definition acknowledging that someone or something else is above us and worthy of our affection, attention, and adoration.

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¹ Bob Kauflin is director of worship development for Sovereign Grace Ministries. Bob also writes on worship at his blog, *Worship Matters* (www.WorshipMatters.com).

² David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship*, p 21

Biblical worship, then, involves exalting God above all other objects. This can be done directly, as in Exodus 15:2, where the Israelites declared, “The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him.” We see here, as in many other passages, that worship is about proclaiming the greatness of God’s attributes, the splendor of his works, and his absolute claim on our lives.

Other times, our non-verbal actions and responses exalt God and reflect the essence of worship. We’re told that Job fell to the ground and worshiped God when he heard that his home, possession, and family had been destroyed (Job 1:21). By his actions he was exalting God’s sovereignty and wisdom above his own understanding. When Mary anointed Jesus’ feet with costly perfume in John 12 she modeled worship by exalting her love for the Savior above the world’s monetary value system.

At its heart, worship involves the exaltation of all that God is and does.

Worship as Expression

The Bible makes it clear that worship involves more than acknowledging facts about who God is. We must respond to what he has shown us.

Therefore, another aspect of worship is *expression*. In his book *Reflections on the Psalms*, C.S. Lewis explains how he came to see that we naturally respond to what we value:

The most obvious fact about praise—whether of God or anything—strangely escaped me. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise...lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside....My whole, more general, difficulty about the praise of God depended on my absurdly denying to us as regard to the supremely Valuable what we delight to do, what indeed we cannot help doing, about everything else we value. I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment.³

In other words, to truly enjoy God, to truly worship him, we must express what is in our hearts towards him. Psalm 62:8 commands us, “Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us.” Expression in worship is an act of faith that God hears us and that he delights in our response to his self-revelation.

Expression can be both physical and verbal. Physical responses include singing, clapping, kneeling, bowing, shouting, and lifting hands. (We took a more detailed look at these

³ C.S. Lewis quoted in John Piper, *The Dangerous Duty of Delight*, pp 23–24

in my previous series on physical expressiveness in worship.) Along with exaltation, verbal expression involves communicating to God our love and desire for him, our need of his grace, our gratefulness for his mercy, or our fear of his holiness. Sitting quietly in God’s presence is also an appropriate way to express true worship before God.

Corporate worship is not unlike a conversation in which God speaks to us and we respond. Of course, God can speak to us at any time, and we can walk into a meeting overflowing with a desire to express our love for God. But many times, God will give us a fresh view or impression of his character while we are singing to him, and the most natural thing for us to do is communicate our response in that moment. That’s why the best songs and services allow room for both objective truth and subjective response—exaltation and expression. Psalm 95 is one example of that kind of progression.

The forms expression takes in worship vary from culture to culture, denomination to denomination, church to church, and even from person to person. How do we know that what we’re doing is pleasing God? Here are some important questions to ask: Is the focus of my expression God as he has revealed himself in Scripture? Does my expression have biblical precedent and support? Am I offering this expression through faith in the finished work of Christ? Answering “yes” to these three questions assures us that our expression is bringing glory to God.

When God is truly exalted, when hearts are fully engaged in expressing devotion to him, it typically leads to a third characteristic of biblical worship, *encounter*.

Worship as Encounter

What do we anticipate as we walk through the doors of our meeting place on Sunday morning? Are we thinking about friends we need to catch up with, responsibilities we’ve been given, or how we can’t wait to watch the game that afternoon? Maybe in our flurry of activity we’re forgetting one of the most important reasons for coming together—to encounter the living God.

The writer of Hebrews gives us a striking picture of what is taking place as the church of Jesus Christ gathers to worship him:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a

better word than the blood of Abel. See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. (Heb 12:22–25a)

What a picture! While this passage can refer to our continual state before God, it is also informing us that when we start to sing on Sunday morning, we're not alone. In fact, we're simply one of the countless throngs throughout history that have joined in on the song of adoration rising up before God's throne in heaven. We are experiencing a foretaste of worship in God's presence.

But what does it look like to encounter God in worship? We might think of the dedication of Solomon's temple in 2 Chronicles 5:14 where we're told "the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of God." Or we might associate it with the prayer meeting of the early Christians in Acts 4:31. "And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken."

Such experiences demonstrate the power and kindness of God and are still possible today. However, we shouldn't assume that the only time God is around is when the room is shaking and we can't stand up.

Looking again at the passage from Hebrews, we read, "See that you do not refuse him who is speaking." Encountering God is a result of hearing God's Word with faith through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. Scripture is not just "divine data" for our observation, nor is it "moldy truth." It is the living and active word of God that "is at work" in those who believe (Heb 4:12; 1 Th 2:13).

We hear and proclaim God's Word as we sing. As our pastor expounds God's Word, God himself is addressing our hearts. We are engaging with God as we share the bread and cup during communion. And certainly God is speaking to us through the gospel, the means by which we have come to know him.

Let's not limit encountering God to the singing time or a physical sensation. If we look for experiences and goose bumps when we worship God, we'll end up frustrated, unfulfilled, and eventually disappointed. But if we faithfully and eagerly listen for his voice in his unchanging Word, we'll encounter him again and again.

Worship as Event

Another way Scripture describes worship is an *event*. While God's Word clearly views worship as a way of life before God, we are also commanded to meet together in specific contexts to proclaim his glory and exalt his name.

In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve experienced unbroken communion with their Creator. Life was one continual succession of “worship events.” After the fall, however, our relationship with God was broken. We were unable to approach him because of our sin. Therefore, God established sacrifice as the means by which he was to be approached and worshiped. The spontaneous sacrifices of Cain, Abel, and the patriarchs led to a more developed pattern of worship at the tabernacle, and finally the temple. Although God made it clear he expected daily devotion to his name and holiness, he provided for yearly, monthly, even daily reminders that he was Israel’s Creator and Redeemer.

In the New Testament, less emphasis is given to worship as an event. Much of the terminology used for acts of worship in the Old Testament (sacrifice, temple, priest, altar, etc.) are reapplied to our daily lives as Christians. Romans 12 says we are to offer up our bodies as living sacrifices. That’s an ongoing activity, not something we can do once a week (see also Heb 13:15–16). However, Hebrews 10:25 tells us we are not to neglect meeting together, but are to encourage one another, all the more as we “see the Day drawing near.” This passage, along with the book of Revelation, reminds us that our worship gatherings on earth are a foretaste of the heavenly assembly where we will worship God forever.

The early Christians continued to meet together on the first day of the week primarily to pray, hear God’s Word, share the Lord’s supper, and to fellowship. If they followed the synagogue pattern of that time, there were likely songs of adoration as well. Despite the changes in meaning assigned to worship vocabulary, worship continued to be an event for God’s people.

For the early Christians, however, worship was more than the music. In fact, the singing portion of meetings in the early church probably took up much less of the service than many of us today are used to. If we are going to view worship as an event, it’s important that we understand what is actually taking place. We are no longer seeking to work our way into the holy of holies through our songs and sincere intentions. Jesus secured our entrance already (Heb 10:19–22). We gather to remind ourselves of what he has already accomplished, and respond with worship. David Peterson says it well:

At the heart of Christian gatherings there should be a concern to proclaim and apply the truths of the gospel, to keep the focus on God’s gracious initiative, to stimulate and maintain saving faith and *to elicit appropriate expressions of that faith in the assembly and in everyday life*. Prayer and praise are clearly worship when they are faith responses to the gospel.⁴

⁴ *Worship: Adoration and Action*, D.A. Carson, ed., p 83

In other words, our songs of praise and adoration are “worship” as they focus us on the gospel and strengthen us in our walk of faith. When we view worship this way, we are edified, God is glorified, and the church of Jesus Christ is built up.

Worship as Everyday Life

In 1997, after being a pastor for twelve years, I had the opportunity to take a position where my main role involved equipping and training worship leaders and musicians both in my local church and the fifty-plus churches related through Sovereign Grace Ministries. Soon after my arrival, I realized that much of what I had been teaching about worship was drawn primarily from my own experience and the experiences of others. When I did use verses from the Bible, it was usually to support what I was already doing.

As I dug into Scripture, I began to see that my view of worship was focused almost entirely on the singing portion of Sunday mornings. Books like *Engaging with God* by David Peterson and *Systematic Theology* by Wayne Grudem helped me understand that our worship of God not only extends beyond singing, but involves every day of our lives.

We’ve seen how the Bible speaks of worship as exaltation, expression, encounter, and event. All of these are contained, however, in worship as everyday life.

There are many scriptural references to worship as a lifestyle, but the most well known may be Romans 12:1–2: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Paul is taking Old Testament language here and applying it in a new way. The sacrifices that please God are no longer bulls, rams, and sheep, but our very lives. Of course, animal sacrifices were never meant to replace humble devotion to God, but were to serve as an expression of it. Psalm 51:17 reminds us that “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

We typically think of giving our hearts to the Lord in worship. Here God has Paul intentionally use the word “bodies.” In his commentary on Romans, John Stott explains, “Paul is clear that the presentation of our *bodies* is our *spiritual* act of worship. It is a significant Christian paradox. No worship is pleasing to God which is purely inward, abstract and mystical; it must express itself in concrete acts of service performed by our bodies.”

In other words, worship isn’t something we simply feel. Worship isn’t the name we give some experience that we seek while singing, lifting our hands, or closing our eyes. It’s

something we *do* with our bodies in all of life. We can worship God through our eating, drinking, typing, speaking, cooking, driving, and countless other ways. We worship God whenever we perform an act out of a desire to draw attention to his greatness, especially revealed in sending his Son as a substitutionary sacrifice for our sins.

I've often heard someone who is an expressive singer described as "a real worshiper." Whether or not we are a real worshiper is better determined by how quickly we forgive those who have offended us, how we handle our finances, and what we do when no one is looking.

When we become Christians, we automatically become worshipers of God. The rest of our lives is simply a brief preparation for what will be an eternal occupation: giving God grateful, wholehearted worship that will never be exhausted, even in eternity.

May God give us the grace to get a good head start in giving him constant, complete, and passionate worship.