

What Really Matters in Worship

Bob Kauflin¹

In Spirit and Truth

The fourth chapter of John's Gospel includes one of the clearest statements in the Bible concerning worship. In this passage, Jesus is gently exposing a Samaritan woman's sinful heart. Suddenly, in what she probably considered to be a shrewd diversionary tactic, she expresses an interest in theology. "Where should we worship God?" she asks. "On Mt. Gerazim or in Jerusalem?" In a remarkable demonstration of grace, Jesus answers her question while remaining focused on her heart: "The true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks" (Jn 4:23). Jesus' point is that, in our familiarity with what we understand to be "worship," we might miss the point of true worship altogether.

A number of years ago, I attended a Bible conference in England. One seminar began with group worship, led by a lone guitar player. He was an average singer, and had trouble flowing from song to song. His verbal contributions wandered aimlessly across the spiritual landscape. As the singing ended, I thought, "Oh well, maybe I'll get something out of the teaching." Then, in another remarkable demonstration of grace, God spoke to me through the older gentleman on my right. He leaned over, looked at me with a radiant face, and said reverently, "That was simply lovely, wasn't it?"

Simply lovely? (Pause.) "Uh, yeah."

I'd like to say that his innocent comment convicted me of pride, arrogance, and a critical spirit. But most likely, I simply felt pity for this elderly fellow who obviously didn't know as much about "true worship" as I did. I've since become convinced that, of the two of us, only one had been worshiping God in spirit and truth during that meeting. And it wasn't me. Can you say "blind spot?"

So what is "worship in spirit and truth"? At the simplest level, worship "in spirit" describes an internal activity of our spirits, enabled and guided by the Holy Spirit resident within each Christian. Worship "in truth" means our focus is on objective truths about God, and our responses to those truths are guided by the Word of God. In the next several

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columns, I hope to spell out what I believe are some biblical essentials that should guide our understanding and experience of worship “in spirit and truth,” regardless of setting, heritage, or culture.

Worship is focused on God

The first non-negotiable of true spiritual worship is this—it is *focused on God*.

This is worship. It is to revel in the unique wonder of who God is and has revealed himself to be. In true worship we turn the searchlight of our mind and heart upon God and temporarily forget about our troublesome and usually intrusive selves. We marvel at the beauties and intricacies of God’s creation. We “survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died.” We are taken up with God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Jesus taught us to do this in the Lord’s Prayer, whose first three sentences focus not on our needs but on his glory, on the honoring of his name, the spread of his kingdom, and the doing of his will. Because we are normally so turned in on ourselves, we will not find this easy. But we have to persevere, since nothing is more right or more important.²

Worship in which God takes pleasure is all about *him*: *his* greatness, *his* nature, *his* actions, *his* desires, and *his* presence. The goal of worship is not to be consumed with what *we* like and feel (a mood, a song, an atmosphere?), but with God *himself*. This is the consistent example of Scripture, and the first essential element of true spiritual worship.

Worship must be clearly focused on God because we are so prone to worship ourselves. This self-adulation can easily lead us to think that in a worship service we must somehow “work our way into” God’s presence. What a hopeless task! And how vastly different from the biblical perspective.

Worship: A Gift from God

Leadership magazine once quoted Jack Hayford as saying, “Worship is God’s gift to us, intended for our blessing and benefit. He doesn’t need it—we do.”

Do we view worship as *God’s* gift to *us*? Or do we see worship as a process, even a task, in which we must work our way into God’s presence? According to the “process” approach to worship, either God doesn’t care that we’re worshipping, doesn’t know that we’re worshipping, or is resisting our attempts to worship. Of course, each of these perceptions is untrue. In fact, Scripture teaches that God is always the Divine Initiator of worship!

² John Stott, *Basic Christianity*

The Giver and the gift

Mankind was created to worship God. But in the Garden, at the Fall, we lost that right. In that first act of disobedience, we rejected his rule in our lives, and were justly shut out from his holy presence. But when there was no way of approaching God, he showed himself merciful by approaching Adam. “Where are you?” he asked. With that haunting question, we find the Almighty Seeker pursuing his creation to receive the worship he alone deserves.

Over time, God prescribed an elaborate sacrificial system involving the tabernacle, priests, sacrifices, and the Most Holy Place. All these elements reminded God’s people that he had graciously provided a way for them to relate to him and make payment for their sins. Still, these earthly sacrifices were unable to satisfy God’s just wrath finally or to secure eternal forgiveness for sins.

But now, Jesus has become our eternal high priest and, simultaneously, the perfect sacrifice for our sins. The shadow of the old covenant has been replaced by the substance of the new. The temporary has been taken over by the timeless. God has removed the hindrances to worshipping him, and invites us to be his worshipers forever. One of the most specific references to God’s invitation to us to draw near is found in Hebrews 10:19–22:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

After centuries of God warning his people not to draw close without proper sacrifices, he now cries out through the blood of his Son, “Come near!” As we gather to exalt God and encounter his Spirit at work in our midst, we come at God’s invitation. We come to marvel at his grace, stand in awe of his holiness, and be undone by his mercy. We come to gaze upon his beauty, drink in his promises, and embrace his will for our lives.

Through Jesus and Jesus alone, we now have free access into the Father’s presence. And remember this: Jesus’ work is just as complete at the beginning of our congregational worship as it is at the end. There’s no need for “warming up”!

True spiritual worship is focused on God because it is *from* God—divinely initiated and motivated, taking place in response to God’s revelation of himself. This means we can

come at any time to worship God boldly and freely, with the awareness that he sees and hears us, and that we are actually in his presence. What a privilege! What a joy! What a God!

Worship Fueled by Faith

We discussed how true spiritual worship is focused on the God who has revealed himself in Scripture. But is that all there is to it? Are we truly worshiping God every time we sing to him or about him? Not necessarily. There is another vital characteristic of the worship God seeks: it must be fueled by faith.

The necessity of faith

Marcia's twelve-year-old-daughter, Charity, had been taken to the hospital with appendicitis. Marcia roomed with her, expecting the hospital stay to be brief. But complications developed, requiring a second surgery on the seventh day. After four more sleepless nights, Charity showed no improvement.

Emotionally drained and tempted toward hopelessness, Marcia retreated home to worship God. In an email she later described to me how she encountered God that day while playing through the song "A Debtor to Mercy." For about 45 minutes, she allowed the truth of the lyrics to penetrate her heart and affect her perspective. Each line spoke to her of God's faithfulness and sufficiency.

Marcia returned to the hospital that night in total peace, even cheerful. Not surprisingly, while Marcia had been expressing trust in her faithful, sovereign Lord, Charity had turned the corner. Marcia was thankful for her daughter's improvement, but even more so for the peace and strength she'd gained from the Lord to face whatever might come.

What made Marcia's time of worship effective? Was it the music? the atmosphere? Why was her experience different from that of many others who sing worship songs in times of trial? I believe it was Spirit-inspired faith, borne out of a desperate need for God.

Playing beautiful music, singing and lifting hands, closing our eyes, or being part of a church that teaches on worship—none of these ensure that we are worshiping God. We must actively believe the words we are singing and saying so that they affect our minds and hearts. We must consciously meditate on the lyrics, rather than, say, on what's for lunch. Exercising faith in this way can be difficult, for we are easily distracted. But God, the author and perfecter of our faith, is ready to give us grace to overcome.

Hebrews 11:6 makes the necessity of faith clear: “Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” Let’s be sure we’re clear on this: “it is *impossible*.” We approach God in faith, or we do not approach him at all.

“Faith is the hand of the soul, and without it we cannot grasp eternal things. It is only by faith that we can recognize God, approach Him, speak to Him, hear Him, feel His presence, and be delighted with His perfections. Where there is no faith, there has been no quickening of the Holy Spirit, for faith is of the very essence of spiritual life.”³

We must understand the distinction between the role of music and the role of faith in drawing near to God. Music has many benefits. It moves us emotionally. It helps us to reflect on, remember, and be affected by the truth. However, apart from faith resonating in our hearts, we are no closer to God when we sing than when we wash dishes or do homework.

Ultimately, this means that as I seek to exalt God, I place no value in my own efforts, enthusiasm, talents, intelligence, background, repentance, or desire, no matter how strong or weak I may be in any of these areas. Rather, my confidence lies in the faithful character of God, the perfect sacrifice of Jesus on my behalf, and the trustworthiness of God’s promises. This is worship fueled by faith.

Worship Fulfilled in Life

Previously, I asked this question: “When you say the word *worship*, what comes to your mind?”

If you’ve been following our discussion, I hope your answer would be different now than it was then. But old habits die hard (at least mine do), so for you the word *worship* may still evoke images of Christians singing songs, possibly in a very specific style.

But if you asked Christians in, say, the first-century church in Rome or Ephesus what the word *worship* evoked, our twenty-first-century associations would probably never cross their minds. In part, this is because there are several Greek words in the New Testament that we translate “worship.” Most of these words suggest humble submission or service, not singing. In fact, *nowhere in the New Testament is a gathering of Christians referred to as a worship service*—an assembly, a gathering, and a time of edification, but never “worship.”

³ Charles Spurgeon, *The Triumph of Faith in the Believer’s Life* p 43

Living temples

Let's recall that during Jesus' earthly ministry, all Jews, even the Lord's disciples, saw the temple in Jerusalem as *the* place where their sins were acknowledged and dealt with, and where they could experience a special fellowship with God. How shocking, therefore, must have been Jesus' declaration, "I tell you that one greater than the temple is here" (Mt 12:6).

After the resurrection, the early Christians came to understand that Jesus' death on the cross had been the perfect and eternal sacrifice of which the temple sacrifices were a mere foreshadow. Then, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul describes the Church as rising "to become a holy temple in the Lord" (Eph 2:21). In addressing individual believers, he says "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?" (1Co 6:19)

In other words, God's meeting place is no longer confined to any building, including one in Jerusalem called the temple. Our meeting place with God—the "place" we now worship—is the exalted Lord Jesus Christ. *We* have become the temple of God, the place where he meets with us. Incredible grace!

This means that *all of life* can now be experienced as "worship in spirit and truth." Indeed, Paul and the other New Testament writers consistently use "sacrifice," as well as other Old Testament words for worship and temple events, to describe *life in general*:

- "God, whom I serve [or: worship] with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness..." (Ro 1:9) Evangelism is worship!
- "And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased" (Heb 13:16). Serving others is worship!
- "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship" (Ro 12:1). When focused on God and done in faith, *everything we do* can be worship!

How about this passage? "...sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God" (Col 3:16). Doesn't this speak of a meeting of believers? Actually, there is nothing in this section of Scripture to suggest that Paul is providing direction on meetings. It may well apply to meetings (and it's clear God intends for believers to meet together regularly: Heb 10:25) but here Paul is providing direction on *daily life*! Paul is calling for a radical, inward authenticity of worship and an all-encompassing pervasiveness of worship in life that leads to the continual giving of thanks.

Under the new covenant, the focus is completely taken off of ceremony, seasons, places, and forms and is shifted to what happens in the heart—not just on Sunday, but every day, all the time, in all of life.

Conclusion

The ultimate challenge of worship in spirit and truth—worship that pleases God—is not “How do I make a church meeting God-centered?” but “How do I make my life God-centered?” I’d like to share a few more thoughts on that thoroughly biblical and gloriously radical perspective.

The Godward life

I have led worship in churches for more than 20 years. Like all worship leaders, I’ve had my share of equipment problems, off-key vocalists (including myself), unresponsive congregations, and small surprises (like when the operator of the overhead projector doesn’t seem to have *any* of the songs). I’ve also had moments of incredible intimacy with God, when I was completely undone by his glory and mercy.

But that does not make me a worshiper. My most difficult task in regard to worship is not deciding on songs or leading them, but seeking to honor God in my daily decisions and thoughts. Giving God glory in front of a crowd is *so* much easier than being grateful when I don’t get credit for something I’ve done, or when someone else is promoted instead of me. That’s when I find out if I am truly interested in worshiping God—or myself.

When I think of worship, I want to think not only about special experiences or what happens on Sunday mornings. I want to consider how I drive my car, how I speak to my children, how I dress (and why), how I spend my money...that I might “do it all for the glory of God” (1Co 10:31).

D.A. Carson has written, “Worship, embracing both adoration and action, is nothing but the outworking of God-centredness in the individual and corporate experience of the people of God.” That is, regardless of location, form, style, time of day, circumstance, or challenges, *a worshiper worships God*.

In my second *Worship Matters* column I noted how only one thing really matters at a wedding: two people getting married. How sad it would be for someone to sit in wedding after wedding, critiquing the form, the style, and the appearance of the couples, yet never rejoicing in, never celebrating the mystery of a man and woman becoming husband and wife through the miracle of marriage.

How much sadder that we endlessly debate the secondary points of worship, and miss what really matters: The Almighty Creator, God of the universe, has called us to enjoy an intimate relationship with himself. Through the perfect sacrifice of his Son, we are now able to proclaim his greatness and his glory both as individuals and together, through our words and our lives, and not only in meetings, but in every moment of life.

Have you ever imagined heaven being one worship meeting after another for all eternity? I have. But the Bible suggests that the essence of heaven will be life lived at a new level, where every thought, emotion, word, and action is an ongoing response of gratitude, praise, and worship to the true God, our Creator-Redeemer, the one from whom, through whom, and to whom are all things. Lord, make us aware of how we can live that way *this* side of eternity!