

The Purpose of Worship

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Introduction

The worship of God is at once an exalted privilege and an awesome responsibility. A failure to grasp this has cost many much. Cain substituted his way for God's way, leading to rejection of his offering, jealousy, murder, and banishment (Gen. 4:3-15). Nadab and Abihu pleased themselves rather than God and He destroyed them by fire from Heaven (Lev. 10:1-2). King Saul presumptuously offered a sacrifice that only a priest could offer and was dethroned for it (1 Sam. 13:8-15). The Lord chastised his contemporaries for their vain worship, rendered so because they followed human, rather than Divine commands (Mat. 15:9). Jesus summarized the importance of our worship of God in John 4:24: "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and truth." We will do well to notice that this matter is made imperative by use of the word *must*.

What a wonderful privilege it is to worship God! The faithful, dedicated servants of God count the worship assemblies of the church as joyful, anticipated occasions. Such are cherished experiences and will not be missed except for true circumstances we cannot control. With David, we say, "I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go unto the house of Jehovah" (Psa. 122:1). To those who truly love God, the best day of the week is not pay day or one's day off, but the Lord's day. Those who view "going to church" as a boring duty to be grudgingly fulfilled at least once a week are in a grave spiritual condition.

Since worship is so important, it is necessary that we understand its purpose. Likely some do not enjoy it because they mistake its purpose. Some have evidently forgotten its purpose and others never did learn it. It is time for us to consider some basic concepts.

Worship Is to Please God, Not Ourselves

God's Word so frequently confirms this fact that even the casual reader should not miss it. The cases mentioned above involving Cain, Nadab and Abihu, and Saul demonstrate the abomination of self-pleasing, God-forgetting worship. As also previously noted, the Jews of Jesus' day respected the commands of men more than those of God and in so doing made their worship activities worthless.

Through the centuries men have continued in this same sad pursuit. In few areas of life have men been such inventors and innovators as in religion—especially in worship practices.

The innovations range from the counting of beads, the worship of Mary, the adoption of musical instruments, and the failure to break bread each Lord's Day, to introducing a go-go dancer performing a striptease. The excuse for these and hundreds of other departures is the same: "We like it, and we will have what we like." This attitude utterly ignores the fundamental principle of true, acceptable worship: it must be to please God rather than ourselves. Those in our own ranks who would have us extend fellowship to those who do not respect the Lord's New Testament plan of worship stand condemned by this principle. When Saul tried to excuse his disobedience of God in the sparing of the Amalekites, Samuel told him, "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams" (1 Sam. 15:22). The Holy Spirit warns that we must only offer worship and render service authorized by the Lord Jesus: "And whatsoever ye do, in word or in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col. 23:17). God does not accept whatever men may desire to do or to offer.

Worship Is to Express, Not Arouse, Our Spirituality

We glean the meaning of *worship* from several Biblical words. The Old Testament words for worship mean "to bow down," "to do obeisance," "to serve." The New Testament words mean "to esteem," "to evince a reverential attitude," "to serve," "to venerate," "to pay reverence," "to do homage." All of these words relate to expressions of our love for and devotion to God and to our willingness to serve and glorify Him. Somehow, many have become confused at this point. The clamor and expectation of many when they come to a worship assembly is for something exciting and entertaining to occur. If there is not some kind of emotional "kick" every time, then worship is considered dull and boring. These are the same folk who want something different every week (whether Scriptural or not is often not even considered), and the more sensational the contrast with simple Scriptural worship activities, the better. I once worked with a congregation in which I had to deal with those who wanted to employ "responsive readings," singing during the serving of the Lord's Supper, substituting panel discussions or 15-minute "talks" for Gospel preaching, dispensing with the invitation, and serving the Lord's Supper in Bible classes instead of in the assembly (the latter idea was from one of the elders!). All these gimmicks were supposed to make worship more "exciting" and "spiritual" and keep it from being so "lifeless" and "traditional."

I charge that all such innovations are carnally, rather than spiritually motivated and are man-centered instead of God-centered. Some are wanting us to adopt some of the old worn-out

worship practices of the denominations. I hardly see how the Lord's people can learn anything about true worship from the denominations. I can appreciate an occasional change in the **order** of Scriptural worship avenues, but some are openly wanting to alter the items. It is surpassingly ironic to hope for greater spirituality from Scripturally unauthorized practices. When one truly loves God and expresses that love and adoration in Scriptural worship with the saints, his spirit will be stimulated and his love for God and his brethren intensified. He will come away from the assembly with joy and gladness, but these will still remain the happy byproducts of true worship, rather than its purpose.

In Worship, God, Not Men, Is the Audience

There is a sense in which those who listen to preachers and teachers are an “audience,” but in essence, God is the only actual audience when we gather for worship. This fact is implied by the very definitions already noted. What we do, we do to please, glorify, and honor Him. Failure to grasp this necessary principle contributes to the *spectator-performer* concept, in which all of those who occupy a leadership role in worship become the “performers” and everyone else is a “spectator.” This mistake explains why people in the pew so often behave like mere spectators, refusing to become participants in singing, giving, or even listening. This misconception is also why some “boo” the preacher or song leader (some families might have to go hungry for the noon meal on Sunday were it not for “roast preacher” and “fried song-leader” for their main course).

Perhaps this *spectator-performer* syndrome is one reason why there is so much movement during worship assemblies. After visiting a congregation one Sunday morning a non-member visitor once remarked, “Church of Christ kids must have more kidney problems than anyone else in the world.” This *spectator-performer* outlook may also explain why some come only for the Lord's Supper and others leave during the invitation song (no wonder more poor sinners don't respond to the invitation; it would almost be like swimming against the tide in some assemblies). Understanding that everyone who has assembled for worship is “performing” before God, the only real “audience,” will surely correct such careless behavior.

In Worship We Are to Give, Not Receive

We should come together to “offer up a sacrifice of praise to God” (Heb. 13:15). It is our privilege to “offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God” (1 Pet. 2:5). Through the avenues ordained by God we should come to **give** our praise, devotion, and money because we love Him. The “I-don't-get-anything-out-of-worship” plaintiff advertises at least two things about

himself: First, he is missing the point of worship, and second, he fails to bring an adequate “bucket” when he comes to worship. I have never known any devout soul who joyfully anticipated worship and who sincerely and unselfishly participated in worship, but that he came away filled with the blessings of God and with renewed spiritual vigor. The Lord's dictum, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35), applies to more than merely giving our money. In worship we have the exalted privilege of selflessly giving praise and thanksgiving to Him who did not hold back even the gift of His only begotten Son from us. What a pity it is that some must approach every circumstance of life, even the worship of Almighty God, seeking to be served and never to serve.

Conclusion

It is tragic that many are so spiritually shallow that they no longer thrill to the simple, God-given acts of worship for His church. Beware of those who cast aspersions upon these holy acts by calling them “traditional,” “unexciting,” “worn out,” and “boring.” Our worship, as with every area of our lives as Christians, must ever be measured by the New Testament. We **must** worship God in spirit and truth. Employing this measurement is the only means of doing so.

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