



What Does It Mean To "Worship"?

*"Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Your name?
For You alone are holy;
For ALL THE NATIONS WILL COME AND WORSHIP BEFORE YOU,
FOR YOUR RIGHTEOUS ACTS HAVE BEEN REVEALED."
Revelation 15:4*

Then it will come about that any who are left of all the nations that went against Jerusalem will go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to celebrate the Feast of Booths. And it will be that whichever of the families of the earth does not go up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, there will be no rain on them.

Zechariah 14:16-17

It's evident throughout Scripture that one of the answers to the question, "Why are we here?" is "To worship God". It's an activity that is recorded not just from the beginning of time and documented to exist throughout history, but a specific activity planned for our future. It's one of the things we can begin doing here and now in this life on earth that carries over and continues into the next. But what exactly is "worship"? As with every word in our vocabulary, what does it mean in the context of God's Word?

As I've often railed in other places, "worship" in the modern, Western church has become synonymous with "music". "Worship time" is most often that part of the service devoted to singing. While music sometimes accompanies worship, if you pick up your Bible concordance and look up each occurrence of "worship" you will find that it very rarely references music. It's very rare to find a biblical

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instance when someone falls down to worship that they break into song. Not zero mind you, but very rare. My question is simply, "How does the Bible define 'worship'?"

"But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

John 4:23-24

I'm going to begin with the assertion that worship has to be grounded and founded in the truth of God's Word. And this is actually what disturbs me most when it comes to the fact that "music" has been largely redefined to mean "worship" these days. I don't have a personal bias about what **KIND** of music is acceptable or not; that's just not one of my hang-ups. But I'm extremely concerned whenever we sing something I can't find support for in Scripture. I'm not saying it has to be a word-for-word quote from Scripture, I just have to be able to find the supporting principle.

For instance, at a very large church recently everyone was singing over and over, "I surrender to Your love". Sounds great, but I'm unclear as to the biblical connection. If it's "I surrender to Your will", or "I surrender my sinful ways", or even "I surrender all", I get it. But "I surrender to Your love" is something lyrical that sounds nice but isn't precisely on point Scripturally. The fact is that biblical love is defined by biblical truth. I believe it's precisely the fact that truth is such an important, central component of biblical worship that it's defined by things which involve quite a few activities other than music alone.

*"You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you:
'THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS,
BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME.
'BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME,
TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.' "*
Matthew 15:7-9

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It's worth noting that Jesus Himself identifies false and futile worship as that which is attempted without properly being defined by God's truth. This is what is dangerous about "poetic license" where worship songs are concerned, that we're careful not to introduce "precepts of men" as having equal authority with biblical doctrine. Worship that is not grounded in the Truth is the very definition of "hypocrisy", an act whereby God is honored with lips but not the heart.

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 12:1-2

Now here's where I think it begins to get interesting. The vast majority of biblical references to "worship" have nothing to do with church gatherings – they reference one's daily, spiritual walk.

Is Paul saying to "*present your bodies*" only when we get together each Sunday morning? No, he's talking about "*spiritual service of worship*" undertaken in every minute of our life. We don't just come together occasionally to "*be transformed by the renewing of your mind*", it's something the normal course of our new life in Christ is to be continually engaged in. The word "worship" in Greek and Hebrew is most closely associated with physically bowing to our knees. So Paul describes it in terms of bowing our whole being continually to Christ that we might become like Him.

"You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

Exodus 20:4-6

It's amazing how many times the word "worship" appears in Scripture where it is closely followed by "serve" or "service". This reflects the second aspect of the biblical definition of worship depicted as a servant in the presence and service of one's Master. What God expressed here through Moses is reiterated in Paul's admonition to the Romans that it's "*your spiritual service of worship*". We're supposed to see ourselves as His servants, entrusted with carrying about our Father's business, living not for ourselves but for Him. An important part of the biblical definition of "worship" is our daily conduct, our personal witness, the nature of our behavior and personal relationships. We're properly worshiping Him when we're living according to His Word and ways. In fact, I'd argue that if we aren't "worshiping" the rest of the week by living a godly, Christian life, we can't possibly be properly "worshiping" when we come together for a few minutes each week to sing together.

Perhaps the definition is made clearer by examining all the instances of false worship in the Bible such as when Israel worshiped the golden calf (Ex. 32), or when Nebuchadnezzar demands everyone worship his image (Dan. 3), or the references to those who fall down and worship the Antichrist. (Rev.13, 14) All the instances of false worship in the Bible are examples of people in service and dedication to something other than the One True God and, again, rarely involves music. It's another way of confirming that "worship" has a lot more to do with the spiritual condition of your heart each and every moment of each and every day than anything else.

What is most important to you? What do you spend more time on than anything else? How do the priorities of your life actually reflect what you serve, what you actually worship? I would submit that one of the main differences between those of us who struggle and the great role models of Scripture is that the role models didn't cease serving God but lived every minute in submission and service to Him. The reason why "music" may have come to be substituted for "worship" is that it reflects the truth we no longer serve Him every day.

In His Love,

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