

Worship

A church near where I live advertises, “Worship, Sunday 10 AM.” Most churches have similar signs. In American Christianity, “worship” is what occurs for 2 hours on Sunday mornings. It’s typically a routine but carefully planned program extended to any who are interested. And those who attend such services believe that they’ve “worshipped” God. But is that *biblical* worship? What exactly *is* worship? Is worship what we suppose the early church did in their meetings as adduced from a very few texts in the New Testament? Or is it what Paul devotes almost an entire chapter to in his Letter to the Romans? We should look into this matter. But first, let’s think a bit about worship in the Bible.

The immediate consequence of the Fall in Genesis 3 was loss of direct, intimate access to God. The Creator/creature relationship was ruptured, replaced by alienation. Yet in grace, God extended the promise that at some point in the future He would decisively reverse the effects of the Fall so that a relationship could be restored. But before that first couple was expelled from the Garden and thrown into exile, God did something surprising: He slew an animal, one He had just lovingly made, to make garments to cover that first couple’s nakedness. The text doesn’t explain the meaning of that act, but we can surmise from later Scripture that God was indicating that sacrifice of a life was necessary for access to Him. Their nakedness represented alienation, and the blood of the slain, innocent animal covered it. Thus life could go on in God’s providence. That slain animal was proleptic of all the animals that would have to be slain to enable worship in the OT era, and it anticipated the death of the Son, a death that would deal ultimately with sin.

In the very next chapter worship occurs. The brothers Cain and Abel each make “an offering” to God. Abel offered the sacrifice of an animal; Cain offered the fruit of his work in the fields. And as everyone knows, God didn’t accept Cain’s offering. Why? Two possible explanations include either the kind of offering or the attitude of the heart in making the offering. Or probably, both. It’s highly likely in my view that Abel understood from what God did at the end of Chapter 3 the significance and necessity of blood to cover sin, thereby allowing access to God. But Cain either didn’t understand it or repudiated it. So Abel approached God on God’s own terms, whereas Cain attempted to approach God on his own terms. Cain’s attempt at “worship” was unacceptable.

After the Flood, Noah gave thanks to God for saving him and his family. Giving thanks was a way of worshipping God. So he made an animal sacrifice. He knew that that was how he could approach God. And God was pleased with what Noah did. So pleased, in fact, that God made a new covenant with humanity to not wipe out all life from earth again. Possibly He was intimating that a program of redemption was underway. Later (Genesis 12, for example), Abraham responded to God’s great promise of the Land by giving thanks, and Abraham knew that an animal had to be sacrificed. That was worship. Abraham believed God’s promises, and responded to them the way godly Abel and Noah did.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, in Genesis 22, God called upon Abraham to make another sacrifice, only this time, the sacrifice was *himself*. We normally think that Isaac was the intended sacrifice in that event, and it was. But let’s not miss that the sacrifice *was also Abraham*. That’s because for decades Abraham was promised a son, and now that he had his son, he had to obey God and offer the boy up to God as worship. All his hopes and all the fulfillment of God’s many promises were in that boy, Isaac, and now Abraham had to sacrifice it all, everything. Abraham wasn’t merely being tested, he was asked to make a sacrifice of himself. And full of faith, Abraham was willing to give it all away, everything that mattered in his life, give it all to God in worship. And he did, not, as it turned out, in reality, but figuratively.

Later in time, God instructed the Israelites how to carry out public worship at the Tabernacle, then at the Temple. Theirs was an exceedingly complex system involving a priesthood and, at the core, there were animal sacrifices. God graciously permitted the death of a substitute instead of the life of the sinner. The annual Yom Kippur worship – essential for the continued existence of the nation – similarly involved animal sacrifices as substitute for the life of the Israelites. Access to a holy God dwelling in their midst for worship was made possible by the offering of a sacrifice. But something else was added, the necessity of obedience to God.

During the Exile, something of extreme significance occurred. Worship changed. God had abandoned the nation, and the Babylonians had destroyed the Temple. So the rabbis developed the synagogue system. At the synagogue buildings on every Sabbath there was instruction from the Scriptures and there was recitation of prayer (the prayers were all formal, ritualistic, pre-written by the rabbis). The synagogues served the purpose of maintaining Jewish identity during the Exile in spite of intense pressure to assimilate into the surrounding pagan culture. But that synagogue system was not instituted by God. And it did not involve sacrifices. It was man-made worship (if one could even call it worship; it instead fomented self-righteousness).

When Christ came, He obediently offered Himself as our substitute for sin. All those animal sacrifices in the Old Testament were types that had their fulfillment in the person and work of Christ. His sacrifice took away forever all the sins of humanity along with sin's associated guilt, made forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God possible, and made it possible to have a new and unique relationship with God. Believers in Christ now, in this new era, have total and free access to God because of the atoning sacrifice and resurrection of the Son. So Christians don't need animal sacrifices to have access to God, as saints in Old Testament times did. The torn Temple veil symbolized the free access now available because of the cross. It's as if we're already with God in His presence in heaven (Ephesians 2:6,13,18). Christ committed the ultimate act of worship by sacrificing Himself for the eternal benefit of all humanity.

The early believers assembled regularly for mutual edification and encouragement, and for instruction in the Scriptures and in their new faith. At first they met in individual's houses, and the Lord's Supper was a real meal they ate together. But as the church grew, they had to meet in larger buildings. What format would their meetings take? Hey, what else? That of the synagogue! The Apostles, and many of the earliest believers (Jews and Gentile God-fearers) all knew well the synagogues as the locus of worship, so that seemed appropriate. So the church's meetings followed the synagogue's pattern: reading and instruction from the Scriptures, singing hymns, and prayer. There is no revelation instructing the Church to imitate synagogue worship. It spontaneously developed that way.

What exactly is worship? The word derives from "worth-ship," meaning we attribute worth to God. How much is God worth to me? My "worship" answers that. The Hebrew word for worship, *ebed*, can also be translated "serve," as in what the priests did ministering at the Temple. So to worship is to serve God, and to serve God is to worship. The meanings overlap. Paul understood this, which is why he used both words, "worship" and "serve," in Romans 1: 25, for how people could relate to God. Jesus also conflates the two words, worship and serve, in Matthew 4:10. Serving God in some way involves sacrificing our time and energy, perhaps some of our treasure, and we do that because we believe that God is worth it. Serving God is worship, and worship is serving God.

To be sure, giving thanks to God, or praising Him for some act on our behalf, or for some blessing, is also worship. It can be private or public. By doing that, we humble ourselves and acknowledge our dependence on Him. So we sacrifice something of ourselves, of our egos, when we offer thanksgiving or praise to God. Paul however goes much further with this idea of self-sacrifice in worship. Let's look now at Romans 12.

This chapter is based on, or the way we respond to, the overwhelming glory of God with which Paul finished Chapter 11. Verse 1 states the subject of this chapter, worship, and that worship necessitates self-sacrifice. Our minds need to be transformed to understand this (v. 2) because we can't worship if our thinking isn't right. And we need to have humility in this, because it's all about God, not about me (v.3). A few foundational issues are in vv. 4,5. The main clause of the key sentence starts in v. 6a, and v. 9 completes that clause. (In the Greek text, verses 6 to 13 is all one sentence!) Verses 6b to 8 is a list of examples of how we use gifts within the church when our thinking is transformed, what's holy and acceptable to God (referring back to vv.1-2). We worship by teaching, giving, serving, contributing to others, etc. Verse 9 ends the main clause of the sentence, "love must be genuine," which means we do it all in love, that is, love for God and for others. Verses 9b to 13 is another list providing several examples how we may worship God all thru the week in everyday life. In other words, worship doesn't occur only in a church context. Rather it's how we present our bodies a living sacrifice (referring back to v.1). Worship is how we live our lives: we practice godliness. To say it differently, we imitate God. In the OT era, believers brought a sacrifice; in the Church Age, believers *are* the sacrifice!

Let's think deeper about worship. Worship is imitating God. God is infinitely glorious and He is only glorified when He sees Himself reflected in us. We were created in His image so that we can reflect His glory in our persons and by how we live. God serves others. So we serve others. And God sacrifices Himself in love to bless others. Humble, self-sacrifice for the sake of others differentiates God from proud, self-serving Satan. In fact, the key attribute of God with reference to us sinful and justly condemned creatures is His act of self-sacrifice. So we do the same. We sacrifice ourselves in order to reach out to others so that they can be saved from hell. If we're living a godly life, all or our life is the worship of God.

If we don't demonstrate by our lives that God is worth much to us, whatever we do can't be true worship. True worship is repeating what Abraham did: he sacrificed himself for God's glory. This is what Jesus expects of each of His followers (see Matthew 10:38-39). Abraham did it in obedience to God's command and with trust in God's promises regarding the future. It must be the same with us. Or look at this way: as we're *in Christ*, we sacrifice ourselves for the benefit of others as our worship, as He did. As we live daily obediently serving God in the power of the Spirit, bringing love and blessing to others regardless what it costs or what risks are involved, we're worshipping God. He is worthy of no less.

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Did people in the O.T. era worship God only on Sabbath, living and working autonomously the rest of the week? Did they worship only at the Temple on designated holidays bringing a sacrifice, and the rest of the year they lived on their own? No, absolutely not. They had the Mosaic Law to guide them in the totality of their lives, which they obeyed as best they could, and by that obedience they worshiped God with their lives, every day.

Does worship take place only at organized meetings in a church building? “I don’t need to go to any church to worship God,” I’ve heard many people say. Are they right, or are they self-deceived (and trying to deceive me)?

What the Serpent in the Garden essentially said was, “Never mind what God said. You just do as you please.” The Serpent wasn’t really suggesting they could become like God. The implication of his temptation was perfectly clear: they should ignore God, ignore His will, ignore His word, and be autonomous. They were free to do whatever they wanted to do. God has given us Scriptures to obey, and Jesus gave commandments, so it’s as if we were back in the Garden. Do we do as that 1st couple did and live as we please? Or are we different? Do we exercise trust in God by obeying His Word?

The Passover event involved the death of an innocent animal. It wasn’t a sacrifice for sin, but it was necessary as a substitute for the death of Israel’s firstborn. The lamb provided redemption or deliverance and it offered protection from God’s judgment upon Egypt. But most importantly, it made it possible for Israel to have a new covenant relationship with God, one that had responsibilities. It was proleptic of the death of the Son on the cross (1 Corinthians 5), which makes it possible for us to have a new relationship with God, one with responsibilities. The Jews’ annual worship of God at Passover time all thru history involved remembrance of that substitutionary death.

What’s the difference between worship of God and love of God? Both seem to be the same thing. Both can be superficial. Participation in a ritualistic, formal worship service without love for God is not worship. It’s probable that some (or many) Christians even know a lot about God and all that He’s done for us, yet they have no love for Him. How can such people worship Him? Professing to love God yet spending no or scant time reflecting on Him, praising and thanking Him, ie, without worship, is not love. I suspect many professing Christians dwell in these areas. Contrariwise, the one who loves God deeply, has God often if not continually in mind, worships Him spontaneously. And the one who truly worships, does so out of deep love. They both seem to be tightly related. Worship – biblical worship, that is – necessarily involves sacrificing oneself in some way, and involves the imitation of God, serving others generously and in humility. Likewise, love is as love does. To love God is to worship Him. And we worship Him because we love Him. Functionally, the two seem to be the same thing even if they are defined differently.