

WORSHIP Redux

"I don't need to go to any church to worship God." I've heard people say this many, many times. If you've done any street evangelism or personal witnessing, you've heard it too. Are they right, or are they self-deceived (and trying to deceive me)?

Let's think about this. Does worship take place only at organized meetings in a church building on Sunday mornings? Is listening to a praise band hammer out chords while lyrics are projected on a screen for an audience to read, and there's a 30-minute sermon to sit through . . . Is that worshipping God? Is passively sitting in an auditorium while certain singers and the preacher perform on-stage worship? In 2020, when churches were all shut down, did the worship of God cease? Did Israelite people in the O.T. era worship God only on Sabbath, while what they did in their homes and the work they did in their fields all the rest of the week was pursuing their own lives? Did they worship only at the Temple on designated holidays bringing a sacrifice, and the rest of the year they lived on their own? In the Gospel accounts (from what we read there), can we say that the Pharisees worshiped God? Was synagogue attendance worship of God? Do Jews all over the world worship God when, every year, they gather their families at Passover to remember that Exodus event? Is that worship?

What is worship? I am greatly exercised that we Christians in America today don't know what worship is. Neither those in the pews nor those in the pulpits understand biblical worship. The word "worship" is thrown around loosely in churches, especially on Sundays. We've created a whole new meaning for the word. I suspect that we deceive ourselves in supposing that God is pleased with us because we "worship" Him by attending church. We need to think clearly, and we need to think biblically.

In Deuteronomy 6:5, the Lord commanded Israelites to love Him with all their heart, soul and might. The word for "love," *ahav*, conveys commitment, loyalty, and obedience. (See John 14:15,21.) It's more than sentiment, tho' it may include that. The word "heart" refers to our lives, our minds, our affections, our very being. So to love God with all our heart means the totality of our lives is to be oriented toward Him. Rabbis interpreted "soul" to mean our biological lives; in other words, we love God so much that we're willing to die for Him. And the rabbis interpreted "might" to mean all our resources, our possessions, our assets; in other words, we're willing to put everything we have to use for God's will and purposes, we're willing to sacrifice everything we have out of love for Him. We believers in Christ are commanded to love God the same way. That love that God commanded, that kind of love, is worship.

Notice that loving God involves personal loss; we sacrifice something. In Deuteronomy, the rest of Chapter 6 explicates what loving God involves. Read it! It involves obedience to what He's commanded. It involves fearing Him. And it involves serving Him. We sacrifice our will for His. We sacrifice our values and desires for His. The totality of our being is defined by our relationship to God and submission to Him, to His will, and to His purposes for us. As Creator, He has the right to make this demand of us. And as His creatures, we have the obligation to submit to Him. In Deuteronomy 30, it's a good or evil, life or death issue (see vv. 15ff). Love of God isn't just a warm feeling, a sentiment, as we ordinarily suppose. It's vastly more than that. It's right at the meaning and essence of life, of human existence, of all reality. All thru Deuteronomy, God warns Israel (and us!) that He means it when He commands us to love Him as He's defined love. We love Him – or else. Israel was given responsibilities, and their fulfilling those responsibilities was how they were to serve God. (Same with us, by the way.) Serving God was loving Him, and it was worshipping Him.

In Hebrew, the word *abad* is ambiguous in its meaning. It can be translated as "to serve" or "to worship." That ambiguity is deliberate. To serve is to worship, and to worship is to serve. Adam was placed in the Garden to *abad*. He was to worship God; he was to serve God. He was also to obey God (*shamar*). Both *abad* and *shamar* go together as a couplet (Genesis 2:15). To worship is to serve is to obey. The Serpent tested Adam's obedience. Adam's love for God also was being tested. At Jesus' wilderness temptations, the Serpent tested Him. The first test had to do with life itself (Matthew 4:4). The second test had to do with presuming on God (v. 7), alluding to Deuteronomy chapter 6. The third had to do with worship, and Jesus' response was, "Worship the Lord your God and serve Him only" (v. 10), again referring to Deuteronomy 6. Notice how worship and serving God go together in Jesus mind! Quoting Deuteronomy 6 means that Jesus loved God with all His heart, soul and might. From this we conclude: Love of God is worship, love of God is serving, love of God is obedience. Or, to say it differently: We worship God by serving Him as He's revealed He's to be served, and by obeying Him as He's revealed His will for us. And that is what loving Him is. When Jesus in His humanity said, "Not my will but Thine" (Matthew 26:39), that was His love for God, His worship of God, His obedience to God, His way of serving God on full display. He was fulfilling Deuteronomy 6:5.

Paul understood this. Notice how Romans opens and closes with “obedience” (1:4 and 16:19), suggesting that’s the theme of his letter. Notice too that in Chapter 1 Paul conflates worship with serve (v. 25) because *abad* can mean both. And in Chapter 12, Paul argues (vv.1 and 6) that worship involves personal sacrifice and “sincere” love, i.e., the Deuteronomy kind of love. And he concludes that transcendent chapter on worship (v.21) by again referring to Deuteronomy, “overcome evil with good.”

So, did Israelites worship God only on Sabbath? Only at the Temple? 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. Let’s be honest. Worship and love can be superficial. Probably the Pharisees were like that. Participation in ritualistic, formal “worship” isn’t biblical worship nor is it love of God. It’s self-serving love.

It’s probable that some (or maybe many) Christians 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, and not serving Him or obeying Him – that is not worship. And it is not love. One of the most scary passages in the N.T. is Matthew 7:21-23. The self-promoting people Jesus referred to knew that Jesus was Lord, but they didn’t submit to God’s will and they had no personal relationship with Christ. Regardless their deeds, without that relationship they were lost. Obeying God out of love for Him is more important than information about Christ, about the Bible, about theology, about the Christian life. “Worship” without loving obedience and without loving service is not worship. We’ve transformed biblical Christianity so that mental assent to the Gospel, being in agreement with who Jesus is and what He did, and attending church meetings, is all one needs to be saved and on the way to heaven.

In Jeremiah 2:20, God accused Israel of saying, “We will not serve You,” and they went off to worship other gods. Wow, is this serious! Here worship and serving go together tightly: Not serving God as He demands means not worshiping God but some other god instead. Israel didn’t love their God, they forsook Him (vv.13, 17, 19), they disobeyed Him. God threw them into Exile where they remain even today. God hasn’t changed just because we’re in the N.T. era. Let’s be careful about this matter of “worship” because we might unwittingly be worshiping other gods, wicked gods.

What I’m arguing here is, there’s no difference between the worship of God and the love of God. Both are the same thing. The one who loves God has God and His will often if not continually in mind, obeys Him and serves Him, and that person is worshiping Him. Biblical worship necessarily involves sacrificing oneself in some way. So for example, we sacrifice our will and our values and desires, and instead live according to God’s will and values. His priorities and His standards are also ours. That’s called in scripture walking with God. And biblical worship involves serving God as He has revealed He’s to be served. So, for example, we love others generously according to their need. We participate in Gospel outreach. We fulfill all righteousness. Love is as love does. To love God with all our heart, soul and might, that is, with all our being, is to worship Him.

In John Chapter 4, the issue the Samaritan woman raised was where worship occurs. Jesus emphatically taught that worship is not a ritual or formal event in time and space. It’s not something that occurs in a place, but is done “in spirit and in truth” (vv. 19-24). Worship in the O.T. era was at a designated time and place, but not now that Christ has come. Now worship is spontaneous and continual in the life of all who understand who it is that is worthy of worship and all that genuine worship involves. In heaven, as revealed in John’s vision (the Book of Revelation), worship is universal, spontaneous and continual. It isn’t organized or planned; in full awareness of the superlative majesty of the Lamb and the Father, that worship is a natural outpouring of love and adoration.

From a misreading of Acts Chapter 2, church leaders allege that the early church gathered to worship. No, they are reading into the text what’s not there. To the extent that the Apostles were serving Christ, the Apostles were worshiping. But the meetings were for fellowship, prayer and instruction. To the extent that those assembled were obedient to Christ’s teachings regarding unity and love—in that sense they were worshiping. In Romans Chapter 12, the early church gathered for mutual edification, encouragement, giving to those in need, and fellowship. The interaction was horizontal, not vertical. But that kind of worship continued all thru the week by transformed serving, obedient, loving believers who every day offered their bodies a living sacrifice to God.

Our Sunday morning services offer artificial worship. They’re carefully designed and organized, with music that appeals and teaching that’s proper. The planning may be well-intentioned, and believers attending may spontaneously erupt in worshipful praise and thanksgiving, but worship has to be “in spirit and in truth” to be genuine.