

12. Worship and Assembly

“Ascribe to the Lord the glory due to His name; worship the Lord in holy array” (Psalm 29:2).

God has always been in charge of what pleases Him in worship. Is any and all worship acceptable to God? If all worship is acceptable, what is the biblical basis for thinking so? If all worship is not acceptable, then on what basis should we proceed in worship? God was not just against worshipping other gods (Deut. 5:9). He was also concerned with how worship was conducted (e.g., Neh. 12:45); reverence was always expected (cf. Psalm 2:11). If we are going to be God’s people, then we need to pay attention to these concerns.

Should our concern not be to offer up spiritual sacrifices that God accepts? Peter wrote, “you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5). There are spiritual sacrifices through Jesus that God accepts. Does it imply that there might be some forms of worship and sacrifice that are not acceptable?

Basic Meaning of Worship

Some seem to view worship as confined to a place and time: “Where do you worship?” “What time is worship?” Worship is much more. It is action coupled with attitude. However, worship is not dependent on a place now, but upon the proper application of “truth and spirit” (John 4:21-24). God has always wanted worship from the heart, so if our hearts are not right, then no worship has occurred regardless of the motions we go through (Matt. 15:8). We might say the right words yet our hearts be far from God, rendering our worship vain.

Terms in Scripture indicating worship involve revering, honoring, and fearing God. The word *Proskuneo* means to prostrate oneself before something (or someone) as an act of reverence, fear, or supplication (Louw and Nida 218). This is used in John 4:24. To worship God means that we revere and honor Him, bowing ourselves before Him in service and attitude. This implies that we must worship God as He directs, for we cannot honor Him without listening to His will (Matt. 7:21-23). We must not subjectively do whatever we want then call it “worship.” Revering and honoring God means that we do what He says (Luke 6:46; Eccl. 12:13).

God is in charge of worship. There were specified “regulations of divine worship and the earthly sanctuary” (Heb. 9:1), and the people were not to deviate from them. He was clear that they were not to worship other gods (Deut. 4:19; 5:9; 6:13; 8:19). He had the tabernacle built according to a strict pattern (Exod. 25:40 ; 1 Chron. 28:11ff). This included the priesthood, sacrifices, instruments, and anything else connected to the tabernacle (or temple) worship (see Neh. 12:45).

When individuals bowed in reverence and honored God, this was also called worship (Judges 7:15). The worshiper reveres and honors God, does what God says, and avoids worshiping anything else.

Collective Activities in Assembly and Worship

There are activities that God desires for us to do collectively when assembled (this is not saying that every action must be done in every single assembly; for example, we might assemble for prayer or song). These activities are forms of service and honor to Him because we find them revealed in His will. When we do them as He has directed, and with a proper heart, then we are worshiping. (Please note that this is not dealing with an individual worshiping at home, though the individual still needs to be careful to honor and revere God appropriately outside the assembly).

There are some areas of collective activities as worship to God. Some refer to “five acts of worship,” but we need to be careful that we are not turning the idea into some kind of cold ritual or checklist. Everything we do in our collective actions that are meant to glorify and honor God would fall under the umbrella of worship or offering up acceptable sacrifices through Jesus Christ. Here, then, in no particular order, are activities that we find the Christians doing when gathered together “as a church”:

They partook of the the Lord’s Supper on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7). The Lord put this in the assembly as a joint participation with other saints (1 Cor. 11:18ff). When we take the Lord’s Supper, we are honoring and revering God for what He has done on our behalf. In this action, we are: remembering and proclaiming the death of Christ (1 Cor. 11:24, 26); looking forward to His return (1 Cor. 11:26); examining ourselves (1 Cor. 11:28); judging the body of Christ (1 Cor. 11:29); and communing with Jesus and each other (1 Cor. 10:16).

They prayed together. We are to pray individually, but God also wants us to pray collectively (Acts 2:42; 4:23-24, 31; 12:5; see 1 Cor. 14:15-17 where public prayer ought to be edifying for others). In prayer, we give thanks and praise to God, as well as pray for needs. In doing this properly, we are worshiping and honoring God.

They sang spiritual songs. We sing individually (Acts 16:25; Jas. 5:13), but there is great edification and strength in collective singing (Eph. 5:19-20; Col. 3:16-17). In singing, we edify each other, but we also “offer up a sacrifice of praise to God” (Heb. 13:15). The stress is on the individual’s heart (“making melody with your heart”). If the heart is not right, then we “draw near” with our mouths, but our hearts are far from Him resulting in vain worship (Matt. 15:7-9). Stress is never put on the entertainment value of music in worship. Though we encourage one another, God is ultimately our audience, and our hearts are His instruments of praise.

They taught God’s message. The disciples taught and edified one another by studying God’s will in the assembly (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 14). Letters written to churches were to be read to the group (Col.

4:16; 1 Tim. 4:13; Rev. 2-3). Does this constitute “worship”? Praise is included in much of what is read and taught from Scripture. While teaching others is not technically the same as direct praise to God, teaching truth does glorify and honor God because it is “good and acceptable in the sight of God” (1 Tim. 2:3). Whether some technically consider this worship or not, teaching is an assembly activity that glorifies God, and in that sense may be considered a form of worship.

They contributed funds to the work and encouraged carrying out the work. Some deny that giving is “worship,” but consider the fact that, in our giving, we are honoring God and making it possible for the church to carry out its God-given task. Giving is one aspect of sharing, and sharing is offering up a sacrifice to God with which He is pleased (Heb. 13:16). 1 Corinthians 16:1-3 shows a collection being taken up for needy saints on the first day of the week, strengthening the point that the first day of the week was a regular time that Christians met.

How may we sum up guiding principles in our worship? 1) Since Jesus is King, we ought to be concerned with doing His will, according to His truth (John 8:31-32). 2) Each person should be concerned with worshiping God from the heart (cf. 1 Cor. 11:28; Matt. 15:7-9). 3) Worship should be edifying (1 Cor. 14). Though in a context of spiritual gifts, 1 Corinthians 14 shows principles of collective worship. Paul argues that whatever is done needs to be for the edification of the church (vv. 3, 12). If something did not edify the group, then it should not have been done in a group context. This principle applies to our activities. 4) Worship should be done decently and orderly. The Corinthians had a problem with people speaking out of order, with too many speaking, and with general confusion in the assembly. This violated God’s will. “But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner” (1 Cor. 14:40). While there is no specified chronological order for the activities, we must proceed in an orderly manner.

What about Incidental Matters?

There is a difference between something that is purposed and an incidental occurrence. “Incidental,” means that something occurs as a casual accompaniment to something else that is purposed and planned. Our purpose is to come together to worship and praise God, as well as to edify and strengthen one another. In this context, incidentals happen. For example, while our purpose is not to be a social club or come together for mere social reasons, people do socialize when together. This is incidental to the purpose, but that doesn’t mean it is unimportant. However, if we take this and turn it into our main purpose, then we have missed the point of our gathering. The greeting with a kiss (Rom. 16:16) was not the purpose for gathering, but was an incidental matter of custom that was to be guided by holiness.

What about announcements? In the context of a family meeting in order to encourage and edify, it is expedient to learn of the needs of others and to greet people in an orderly fashion. As members of the body trying to rejoice, weep, and care for each other, we need an expedient way of communicating these things (1 Cor. 12:26; Rom. 12:15). Public announcements are one way of

doing this.

How does the building fit in? There is nothing inherently holy about a building. However, if the building was purchased with funds set aside for the work of God, then we need to be careful not to abuse that. There is a difference between allowing Boy Scout meetings and having Bible studies. What would limit the proposed use of the building is the authority by which it was built (an expedient meeting place in order to carry out the command to assemble and perform God's work). While it is generally authorized, it certainly can be abused.

Conclusion

Collective worship to God is a significant part of our lives as Christians. We need to make sure it is done properly, according to God's will and with proper hearts. We should avail ourselves of these opportunities.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is worship not confined only to a time or place?
2. What is true worship dependent upon and why?
3. Define worship. What does this tell us about how we should be approaching God?
4. How does Hebrews 9:1 inform us about worship under the Law?
5. Of what should we be careful in speaking about "acts of worship"?
6. Consider each of the areas discussed in which the assembly is engaged. What are the biblical reasons for doing these things? How do they honor and glorify God?
7. What overarching principles guide our activities in the assembly?
8. Why distinguish between a purpose and an incidental?