

Worship is a Verb

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Date: 26 September 1993

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I again submit to you that as the Church of Jesus Christ, we are first and foremost a worshipping community. That's not all we are. As the redeemed people of God, as disciples of the crucified and risen Jesus, we are also an evangelizing community. We're an educating community. We're an equipping for ministry community. We're a praying and healing and reconciling and peacemaking and fun-loving community. But first and foremost, we are a worshipping community. Everything else we are and do flows out of and is nurtured by what we do when we worship. What happens when a congregation gathers together to worship in Christ's name is both a thermometer and a thermostat of the spiritual health of the congregation. What we do here registers and regulates the spiritual health of the Church. We are first and foremost a worshipping community. I invite you, therefore, to take yet another look then at this event we call the service of worship and to do so again through Psalm 95. Psalm 95 has been used throughout the ages as a call to worship on the Lord's Day. It is a stirring summons for people to come and do this thing we call worship.

It has a very particular picture. It's the picture of people coming into the temple, going up the steps, and as they do, they are exhorting one another to rise to the occasion. Psalm 95, hear the word of the Lord.

O come, let us sing for joy to the Lord. Let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving. Let us shout joyfully to Him with songs. For the Lord is a great God and a great King above all gods, in whose hand are the depths of the earth. The peaks of the mountains are His also. The sea is His, for it was He who made it, and His hands formed the dry land.

Come, let us worship and bow down. Let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker, for He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand. Today, if you would hearken to His voice, do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as in the day of Massa in the wilderness, when your fathers tested me. They tried me, though they had seen my work. For forty years I loathed that generation and said that they are a people who err in their heart. They do not know my ways. Therefore, I swore in my anger, truly, they shall not enter my rest. Let us pray.

Spirit of the living God, long ago you inspired Psalm 95. And now I pray that you would, by your mercy and grace, take these very familiar words, take them off the page, make them come alive in our hearts and our minds as never before. For we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

[2 : 5 7] Well, as I said last Sunday, in this psalm we discover four dynamics of authentic worship. Imagine, if you will, four big banners hanging up here, all right? And each of them represents a different dynamic of worship that we get from this psalm. The first is that worship is God-in-Christ oriented. The second is worship is a reflex. The third is worship is a verb. And the fourth is worship is a decision. Worship is God-in-Christ oriented. Worship is reflex. Worship is a verb. And worship is a decision. Last Sunday we worked through the first two dynamics. And let me just remind us of them before we go into dynamics three and four. Dynamic one, worship is God-in-Christ oriented. Now, that's very obvious. It shouldn't need to be said. But like most things obvious, it gets lost in the shuffle.

This event is to be focused on, centered in, the one who comes to us in and as Jesus Christ. Sing to the Lord, to Yahweh. Shout to the rock. Bow down before the Lord. Listen to the voice of Yahweh.

If corporate worship is to be vibrant and relevant, we must resist the tendency toward human centeredness. We must not let the Sunday service become need-centered or issue-centered or experience-centered.

Yes, in worship, the living God meets our needs. And the living God speaks to human issues. And the living God lifts us into an experience of the divine presence. But the service must not be structured simply to meet needs or simply to address issues or simply to have an experience.

We were helped last Sunday by Soren Kierkegaard, the 19th century Danish philosopher-theologian. Kierkegaard contrasted the dynamics of Christian worship with those of going to the theater.

[5 : 05] And he argued that worship in the Denmark of his day lost its vibrancy and its depth because when people said, let us go to worship, they were thinking in terms of let us go to the theater.

The great error, said Kierkegaard, was that the Danish Christians came to worship thinking of themselves as the audience, thinking of the pastor and choir and organist as the performers, and thinking of God as the prompter or director behind the scenes.

No, says Kierkegaard, in Christian worship, we're to come thinking of ourselves as the performers, thinking of the pastors and choir and organist as the prompters, and thinking of God as the audience.

The whole event is done in front of, to, and for God in Christ. Which means, then, that the real stage of this event is not up here in the chancel.

The real stage is in the pew. The real action takes place in the pew. Dynamic one, worship is God in Christ oriented.

[6 : 11] Dynamic two, worship is reflex. Worship is but the natural, logical response to the presence and self-revealing of the Holy God.

Yes, we are to do something as an act of our will, which I'll develop in just a moment. But fundamentally, worship is the automatic reflex when we become aware of the presence of the Holy One.

No one needs to tell me to delight in the laughter of little children in the backyard. It's an automatic thing. No one needs to tell me to feel awe when the wind howls through the canyons.

It's an automatic thing. No one needs to tell me to stand to my feet when the philharmonic orchestra plays the first chords of the Hallelujah Chorus. It's an automatic thing. Delight and awe expressed verbally and bodily are the natural responses to those phenomena.

When the living God is present and when we know it, there will be some sort of reflex. As C.S. Lewis observed, Jesus Christ produced three major effects on the people who met him.

[7 : 17] They were terror, hostility, and adoration. There's no place in the record of anyone ever expressing mild approval toward Jesus.

No one can just sit there in his presence. Now, since there are so many different aspects of the character of God, the tone and the specific reflex that is worship is going to vary according to that aspect of God being held before us at any particular time.

There is going to be a time for exuberant joy, and there's going to be a time for grieving. There's going to be a time to dance, and there's going to be a time to stand still.

It all depends on that aspect of the divine character which the Holy Spirit is holding before us at that particular time. Which brings us, then, to dynamics three and four of authentic worship.

Dynamic three, worship is a verb. Worship is a verb. Come, says the psalmist, come let us sing. Come let us shout.

[8 : 24] Come let us worship and bow down. Come let us kneel. Come let us listen and obey. Come, do not harden your hearts. Worship is a verb. I get that from the title of a book by a man named Robert Weber.

And Weber's major concern is to help congregations move from a passive kind of worship to an active kind of worship. Worship, says Weber, is not something done to us or for us, but something done by us.

Worship is not done to us or for us. It's something done by us. Or as one of my friends says, worship is not a spectator sport. Come let us worship means come, let us go and do something.

And let us do it in front of and for and in relationship to the living God. And this third dynamic of worship is captured in one of the words which we have used for worship throughout the centuries.

And it's the word liturgy. The word liturgy comes from the Greek word liturge. And this is the important thing to know about that word. Liturge means both worship and work.

[9 : 35] It can be translated either way. Which is a way of reminding us that worship is work. It takes work. And it reminds us that our work is to be our worship. Worship is a verb.

When we think of worship as a noun, we come to be entertained. But for the psalmist, worship consisted in concrete actions, in acts of love and adoration.

If he had a high spiritual experience, so much the better. But it was still worship if he simply acted. Now, consider the verbs of Psalm 95.

They are sing, shout, worship, bow down, kneel, listen and obey, do not harden your hearts.

That list tells us that worship as a verb involves the whole self. The whole self. I fear that for too many of us Protestants, steeped as we are in the rationalist tradition of Western civilization, worship is merely a cerebral act.

[10 : 42] It's merely a mental exercise. Which is why we just as soon sit there. The psalmist comes to the event with his whole self. He worships the living God with his mind.

He worships the living God with his heart. But he also worships the living God with his body. Let me just briefly comment on the verbs in Psalm 95. There are a whole lot more verbs than other places in the Psalms.

But just look at the ones in Psalm 95. The first one is sing. Nearly every psalm begins with sing. That's because singing is the distinctive mark of Christian worship.

The Apostle Paul says in Ephesians 5, verses 18 and 19, that when the Spirit of God fills the disciples of Jesus Christ, they simply have to sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, as he puts it.

Sing. It's the verb of worship which engages most of the self. In order to sing, you have to use your mind, you have to use your lungs, you have to use your diaphragm, the throat, the mouth.

[11 : 41] You have to use a lot of your body to sing. N.W. Clough, who was a missionary early in the 20th century, notes that a Buddhist temple never resounds with songs of praise.

He also notes that Muslim worshipers never really sing. Their prayers at highest are prayers of submission and of request. They seldom reach the gladder notes of thanksgiving.

They are never jubilant with the songs of the forgiven. Sing. What? More specifically, what kind of songs are we to sing?

Old songs and new songs. New songs and old songs. As you well know, people can get real hot under the collar when we get to this discussion about whether or not we ought to have traditional hymns or contemporary choruses.

Be encouraged. Every congregation I know of that is seeking to be alive in worship is wrestling with this tension. Everywhere across the country, they're all wrestling with the tension. Some churches solve this problem by going to two very different kinds of worship services.

[12 : 51] One when only traditional hymns are sung. I do not favor that approach. For I believe that we are to blend the old and the new.

We need to sing old songs and new songs, new songs and old songs. Not simply because older believers want the traditional and not simply because younger believers want the contemporary, but because both groups of believers need both kinds of songs.

We long-time believers need to learn the great theologically sound songs that have stood the test of time.

Long-time believers can be guilty of wanting to protect the status quo, failing to realize that the Holy Spirit is always creating new things. New-time believers can be guilty of thinking that they're the first generation that really knows how to worship, failing to recognize that we are stepping into a stream of the Spirit that began long before we were born.

Sing old songs and new songs, new songs and old songs. The old songs were once new, and the new songs will be old. The Spirit of God is ever-inspiring new music and always renewing the old music.

[14 : 22] I could use an amen about now to see if I'm on target. It didn't seem to be unanimous, however.

Now, the critical criterion for selecting music in the worship service is not whether the song is traditional or contemporary.

The critical criteria is, does it help me focus on God and help me connect to God? That's the criterion. Does the song help my mind apprehend the truth of God?

And does it enable my emotions to celebrate that truth that I discover? Please note the actual way the psalmist puts it in Psalm 95. It's not just sing, but sing to the Lord.

Not all the hymns and choruses we sing are sung to the Lord, are they? Most of them are sung about the Lord. In fact, a lot of the songs and choruses are sung about us and to us.

[15 : 25] So in planning this event, I will always make sure that at least two of the hymns or choruses are sung to the Lord intentionally. And I invite you to feel free to change the pronoun from the third person to the second person.

He is Lord, he is Lord, he is risen from the dead, he is in the Lord. Sing it, you are Lord, you are Lord, you are Lord. Crown him with many crowns. You can sing, I crown you with many crowns. Sing to the Lord.

Second verb, shout. Shout joyfully. Now, most versions of the Bible mute this command by rendering it as, make a joyful noise.

But it misses the point. The psalmist is calling his friends to a hearty, full diaphragm, shout. Shout in worship?

In a Presbyterian sanctuary? Why not? We do it all the time in sporting events when we like what we see. Why not in worship? Why not shout joyfully?

[16 : 29] Shout what? Well, a good amen once in a while will help. A good hallelujah will help. A good God is good will help. A good God's love goes on forever will help.

The festival shout of the psalms will really help. Our God reigns. Will you do that? Our God reigns. Again. Our God reigns.

Isn't the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ worthy of robust enthusiasm? By the way, do you know why we Presbyterians are going to be first to go to heaven?

We're first to go to heaven because the Apostle Paul says, the dead in Christ shall rise first. Shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation who has come to make us whole.

But notice in Psalm 95 that the joyful celebration gives way to something else. The psalmist goes on to use three interrelated verbs without which worship still doesn't happen.

[17 : 39] Without these verbs, and they are worship, bow down, and kneel. They're interrelated. Without those, singing and celebrating can become mere emotionalism.

Worship. Worship. Like all other Hebrew words that are translated worship, this verb involves the use of the body.

And the term used here literally means to lay prostrate on the ground. Lay prostrate on the ground. Bow down.

The word means to bend over so that your head touches the floor, like the wise men did before the infant Jesus. Kneel, obviously, to get down on your knees.

The psalmist here knows that we speak with our bodies as well as with our tongues. Indeed, body language often says a whole lot more than our tongues.

[18 : 38] And these three interrelated verbs, worship, bow down, and kneel, are expressions of awe and humility and longing. As we joyfully celebrate the living God, the divine presence becomes more and more real.

And as we become aware of God's awesome beauty and holiness and raw strength, a quieting spirit comes upon us, and we want to be still in the presence.

Worship. Bow down and kneel. What do our bodily postures tell us about our sense of God's presence in the sanctuary?

I'll let you know an agenda I have, and that is I wish we had kneeling rails. There are times when I simply have to kneel. I know that I can kneel in my heart, but I'm not just a heart.

I'm a body. I'm a body. And there are times when my body wants to tell the living God what I'm thinking and feeling. You know, in the Old Testament, we read of a number of occasions when the presence of God became so palpable that people had no choice but to kneel.

[19 : 55] The priest had to fall on their face under the weight of the glory of God. I have a witness in my heart that before I die, I'm going to be worshiping with a congregation somewhere where the presence will be so heavy and real that we cannot but go to our knees.

Worship. Prostrate yourself. Bow down so that the head hits the ground. And kneel. They're all verbs that involve the body. Perhaps this is the place where I could comment on a verb not used in Psalm 95, but used with those other verbs in other psalms.

And the verb is yada, Y-A-D-A-H. It's the second most frequent word in the biblical worship vocabulary. It's used over 90 times, and it's usually translated to give thanks.

But it literally means to throw out the hands. Yada comes from the root yad, which means hand. The verb conveys the idea of to give thanks with extended hands.

The psalmist declares in 63.4, I will lift up my hands to your name. Paul says to Timothy, I want people to pray everywhere lifting holy hands. Psalm 47.11, clap your hands, all you people.

[21 : 17] What are we to make of this verb in worship? Well, think for a moment of all the ways in which we use our hands in everyday communication.

One author summarizes it this way. Our hands give us away. As no other part of our bodies, they are extensions of our personalities. When we feel embarrassment, we don't know what to do with our hands.

When we're angry, we clench our fists. When we feel guilty, we try to hide our hands. When we're worried, we wring our hands. When we're in desperation, we throw up our hands in resignation.

When we're puzzled, the puzzle expression on the brow is met with the palms up in resignation and despair. We use our hands to welcome other people and encourage them to clasp them.

We use our hands to point an accusing finger. We communicate all the time with our hands, don't we? Why not let our hands extend our hearts to the living God?

[22 : 19] Now, I know, I know that the use of hands in worship is abused in a lot of circles. I know that. But why throw the baby out with the bathwater? Why not bring that in in a more appropriate way?

Lifting up of hands is a profound gesture of submission. I'm yours. It's also a sign of desire. A little girl runs to her mother and throws out her hands to her mother.

And without a word, the little girl is saying, Oh, mommy, I want to come to you. And I want you to come to me. And I want you to hold me. I need you. And I love you. You know, there are times when I just can't put into words what I feel.

And lifting hands is a simple way of saying, Oh, Father, I need you to put your arms around me again and tell me that you love me.

Worship is a verb involving the whole self. Sing, shout, lift your hands, worship, bow down, and kneel. Notice for a moment the order in which those three interrelated verbs come.

[23 : 28] Worship, prostrate yourself, bow down so your head hits the floor, kneel. They're in the reverse order of the natural bodily functions. The more natural movement is to first kneel, then bow down, then lay prostrate on the floor.

Why the reverse order? Because as we humble ourselves before God, God lifts us up off the ground, off our faces, onto our knees, so that he can speak to us face to face.

Which brings us to the last verb of Psalm 95. Oh, that today you would hearken to the voice of Yahweh. Hearken. It's a hard word to translate into any one single English word.

That's why earlier on I used to. Listen and obey. Oh, that today you would listen to and obey the voice of Yahweh.

The fact is, to the Hebrew mind, those are not two different actions. In the Hebrew mind, one cannot listen to the voice of Yahweh without obeying.

[24 : 37] To the Hebrew mind, it's impossible to have heard the voice of God and not obey. Which is why Hebrew does not have a word for obey. It just has the word listen.

The opposite of listen is not plug your ears. The opposite of listen is harden your heart. Today, if you hear Yahweh's voice, do not harden your heart.

Listen and obey. This, then, is the highest act of worship. Taking God at his word and doing what he tells us to do. We can sing all we want.

We can shout all we want. We can kneel all we want. But we have not honored the audience until we do what he tells us to do. Jesus asks, why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not do the things that I say?

Worship, therefore, does not end with the benediction. Worship continues as we go to do what God has told us to do in those secular realms where we are called.

[25 : 37] The liturgy continues in the marketplace. Worship is a verb for us performers and for the audience. For as we do something in front of and to and for the living God, God does something to and for us.

God speaks to us. A word of encouragement. A word of comfort. A word of exhortation. A word of healing. A word of hope. The prophet Zephaniah dares to suggest that God even sings a word over us as we worship.

And we pay our Lord the highest honor when we listen and obey. Today, says the psalmist. Do it today.

As someone has said, you cannot act too soon because you do not know how soon it will be too late. Today. Now I think we know why there are times when we leave the worship service feeling empty.

May I suggest it's because we didn't listen. It's because we weren't willing to obey. It's because we weren't willing to have our presuppositions challenged.

[26 : 46] It's because we were not willing to change so we could follow Christ's narrow way. We hardened our hearts to the voice. I know how to do it.

The rest promised in this psalm. The rest that God promises is for those who will listen and obey while it's still today.

Worship's a verb. Therefore, the question to ask when you leave this morning is not, what did I get out of this? The question is to ask, what did I put into it?

You get to the degree that you put. Which leads us then to the fourth dynamic. Worship is a decision. If worship were a feeling or a mood, we could just sit here and wait for the feeling and mood to come upon us before we act it.

But because worship's a verb, I can choose to exercise that verb whenever I want and wherever I want. Yes, worship is a reflex, but it's also an act of the will.

[27 : 55] Many Sundays I come to the worship event exhausted, too tired, too stressed from everything else that's been going on. I don't need to do one more thing.

Anybody echo that? It's on those days that I have to literally take myself in hand and tell myself to do the verbs anyway, to do them anyway.

And the wonderful thing is, when I choose to open my mouth and sing, when I choose to use my body in worship, I find I'm refreshed and gain perspective for the battle.

May I suggest two decisions we need to make to enrich this worship time together? There are many more, but two basic ones. The first is to decide to prepare for this event.

A little bit will go a long way. Many of us, I think, miss out on what God is doing in a worship service because we come unprepared. There's so many other activities in the weekend that we have to drag ourselves into the worship service.

[29 : 04] Anybody know about dragging yourself into the worship service? I think that one of the major discipleship issues of our time is to think about the weekend theologically.

That is, I think we need to reflect very seriously on the gift of the Sabbath. I know how difficult that is in our post-Christian society.

Boy, I know how that is. But be that as it may, the weekend, contrary to popular opinion, was not made for Michelob. The weekend was made for the living God.

It was made to change the routine so that we could recenter and reroute our lives in the eternal. George Malone argues that we need to take more seriously the rhythm of the Sabbath.

The Sabbath begins at sundown on Saturday, not sunrise on Sunday. We need to protect some time on Saturday evening, sometime, somewhere, to prepare ourselves for this event.

[30 : 16] Thankfully, God will take whatever we give. Oh, thank God in His mercy He'll take whatever we give. But wouldn't it be nice if we could give more than leftovers? Which leads me to the second decision we need to make.

And it is to follow the exhortation of Romans 12, 1. By the mercies of God, I exhort you to present your bodies a living sacrifice to God. This is your spiritual service of worship.

Present your body, your soma, your real self as you really are. May I encourage you as the first act when you walk through the doors to say, Here I am, Lord.

I'm yours. Maybe that means saying something like, Oh, Lord, my mind is on everything else but you, but I give you my mind.

Or maybe it says, My emotions are so frayed, I don't know what I can feel, but Lord, I give you my emotions. Or maybe it means saying, I'm in such pain, but I give you the pain.

[31 : 17] Or I'm afraid, and I give you the fear. Or I am tempted not to listen to your voice. I'd rather disobey. I give you the disobedience. Here I am. Take me as I am.

As the Church of Jesus Christ, we are first and foremost a worshiping community. It's not all we are, but it's what we are fundamentally. Worship is God in Christ oriented.

Worship is reflex. Worship is a verb. Worship is a decision. May the Spirit of Jesus Christ so free us to worship that all who come to this place will say, as the Apostle Paul says they should say, God certainly lives among you people.

Amen. Amen.