

# Worship

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[ 0 : 00 ] There are few issues more controversial in the Christian church today than that of worship. In one church, Christians raise their hands while they sing. In another church, Christians don't really sing at all, but their worship consists in the musical quality of a band or a choir. I'm not here to critique any position. We may suppose that worship style isn't really that important, but in the thought world of the Bible, it is really very important indeed. What's of primary importance, of course, is the state of our hearts before God and worship.

There's no denying that at all. But how we worship God is also important. In a very real sense, if we get worship wrong, we get everything wrong.

Our primary purpose as Christians is to worship God, so we must do everything we can to ensure that what we do in our worship services is focused on God. One mistake we often make is to assume that worship only consists in what we sing and how we sing it, but worship really covers everything in the Christian life, our thoughts, our words, our works. But in particular, it covers everything we do when we gather together as a church with the express purpose of worshipping God. It covers our readings.

It covers our prayers. It covers our songs, our sermons. It even covers the aesthetics of where we worship God. Now, God has not left us in the dark as to how we may worship Him. He's given us instruction in His Word, the Bible, as to the elements we are to include in our services of worship. But overarching them all are general principles. For example, in John chapter 4, what Jesus said, those who worship God are to worship Him in spirit and in truth. In Psalm 96 verse 9, we read another such principle, O worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness. What does it look like to apply this principle into our worship? Now, of course, different Christian churches will apply these principles in different ways, but as we see it here, it means at least three things. Worship, first of all, is selfless satisfaction. Secondly, worship is salvation-shaped. And thirdly, worship is self-abasing service.

[ 3 : 06 ] O worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness. This is what we are to expect when we come to church, to worship God in the splendor of holiness. First of all, then, worship is selfless satisfaction.

Worship is selfless satisfaction. The writer of this psalm, especially in verse 9, calls us to focus on the worship not of ourselves, but on the worship of God. O worship the Lord.

Now, this seems like such a basic thing to say, does it not? But it really does make all the difference in the world because it tells us our worship is not for our benefit. It is for God's.

In the 1980s, people started talking about the consumer-driven economy. It's what the consumer wants that drives the economy. How much the consumer is willing to pay for a product, and what kind of product the consumer wants to buy. Customer satisfaction became a high priority in the delivery of services. Unfortunately, this consumer-driven attitude has crept into our churches, especially in this area of worship. The big questions Christian now asks of any church is, is its worship good? Is its worship good? In other words, does its worship make me feel good?

Now, from one perspective, the idea of consumer-driven worship is worth exploring, but only if the ultimate consumer of our worship is not ourselves, but God.

[ 5 : 02 ] So, our primary consideration in worship is not what makes us feel good, or what excites us, or what satisfies us, but what pleases the Lord. And so, we must ask ourselves the question, is our worship pleasing to God? Is it according to the rules He set down in the Bible when He tells us how we are to worship Him? Worship is not about us, it's about the Lord. Worship's not me time, but God time, when our thoughts turn away from ourselves, and we consciously devote them to God.

And in that sense, therefore, worship is to be utterly selfless. We need to keep reminding ourselves when something grinds in a worship service against our sensitivities, or when something in a worship service is not according to our preferences. We need to remind ourselves, since when was worship about me anyway? Now, none of us would like to be accused of being idolaters, of breaking the commandment and having other gods before the Lord. However, could it be that when it comes to worship, we do engage in a kind of idolatry? Now, we're not talking about having statues in church and things like that, but something more fundamental, namely, putting ourselves first before God, thereby breaking the first commandment, making a God out of what makes us feel good and excites us.

But then, we're all asking the question, aren't we, does this mean to say that God isn't really interested in how we feel, just as long as He's getting the glory? Not at all, because the Lord who made us knows that our deepest satisfaction consists not in putting ourselves first in life, but Him. Think of it this way. Sunday morning, Catherine and I walked to church, and this morning at Scottson Stadium, there was a football game on, on the pitch. And parents were gathered around the side of the pitch, watching their kids playing football. And sometimes you could hear a dad getting really angry when his team was losing, when his kid's team was losing. And sometimes you can even hear a dad shout at the referee when he thinks the referee's made a decision wrong. Oh, dads and moms there are really happy if their children's team is winning, especially if their children should play well or score a goal. And the question is this, we've all been there, right? Why are we so passionate about our children's football? It's because, as parents, we derive more satisfaction from seeing those we love most, enjoying themselves. When we love someone, our deepest satisfaction is found in the pleasure of that person. By contrast, the deepest pain we have as parents is when our children are unhappy.

In the same way, our greatest satisfaction in worship isn't found in gratifying ourselves but in the pleasure of the God we love and are devoted to in our praise, prayer, preaching, and readings. So we have to be really careful about that kind of attitude which unconsciously says, I don't really care how God feels about my worship, just as long as I'm getting off on it.

[ 8 : 49 ] Rather, if we follow in the footsteps of the psalmist and in the footsteps of Christians over the whole world today, we're going to go to church, we're going to say as we come in the doors here, my greatest satisfaction is found in the pleasure of the Lord I love.

The Christian's greatest satisfaction in worship is when that worship is entirely selfless, focused not on the self, but on the Lord.

Now, let's apply this to a solid situation in our church. Why do we sing psalms? Wouldn't it be more attractive to sing pieces of funky music designed to communicate better to this age?

We sing psalms because we believe that God takes pleasure in His own words being sung back to Him by His grateful people. Ultimately, it's not just because most of us grew up with the psalms and were comfortable with them, but because we believe they focus our attention away from ourselves and toward God.

That doesn't mean to say that we should sing them badly. Far from it. We should do everything in our power to ensure that they're sung with understanding and with skill. But ultimately, we sing them not for our own benefit, but for God's.

[ 10 : 09 ] And in doing so, in focusing on what's important to God, we find deep personal satisfaction and what's called in the Bible, blessedness.

Can we at least agree about this? Worship's not about us, but about God. Worship, secondly, is salvation-shaped.

It's salvation-shaped. If the focus of our worship is on God and not ourselves, the next question concerns the content of our worship. What should drive our prayers and our sermons, our praise and our liturgy, our aesthetics, the way in which we baptize, and the way in which we dispense the Lord's Supper?

All of these elements should be characterized by what the psalmist calls the splendor of holiness. The splendor of holiness.

They should impress upon us every element the majesty, greatness, and glory of God. Worship, it's not about our holiness, what we bring to God and who we are.

[ 11 : 22 ] It's about who He is and what He gives us. It's not an opportunity to strut our new clothes. It's an opportunity to boast in Christ and His clothes of righteousness.

Now, the holiness of God is literally His set-apartness. His set-apartness. He's not the same as us. He's other than us.

In Isaiah 55, verse 9, God says, As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts higher than yours. God is set-apart from us.

And His holiness is the sum of His mysteriously infinite essence and all His glorious attributes. We are not worshiping God in the splendor of His holiness if we conceive Him to be on the same level as us.

God is so very holy that even the sinless angels must hide their faces from His resplendent glory as they sing to one another in heaven even today.

[ 12 : 32 ] Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty. The holiness of God is His set-apartness, and so we worship Him with reverence and with awe.

The holiness of God, as I've said a moment ago, sorry kids for using such complicated words, but I couldn't think of easier words really. The holiness of God is the sum of His mysteriously infinite essence and His glorious attributes.

And when our fathers in the faith, 400 years ago nearly, asked the question, what is God? With great reverence, these great saints of God answered, God is a spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

The splendor of God is His infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

When we worship God, we do so with hearts and minds not filled with our own wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth, but God's.

[ 13 : 48 ] The great and often underestimated American theologian, James Henry Thornwell, who one or two of you might have read or heard of, he once said these words.

He said, The brightest display of the divine character is found in the face of the Lord Jesus Christ. And the clearest illustration of the divine attributes is revealed from Mount Calvary.

Now, we might suppose that the clearest exhibition of the holiness of God is seen in the flashing lightning and the thunderous trumpets on top of Mount Sinai.

We might even think to ourselves that the supreme way we learn of the splendor of holiness is by reading dusty tomes in the ivory towers of the theological faculties of our universities.

But listen again to Thornwell, he says, The brightest exhibition, the brightest display of the divine character is found in the face of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the clearest illustration of the divine attributes is revealed from Mount Calvary.

[ 15 : 05 ] Not from Mount Sinai, where the law was given with sights and sounds, but from Mount Calvary in suffering and salvation. If we want to know what it means for God to be infinitely wise, powerful, holy, righteous, good, and true, do not look to Sinai and Moses, but look to Jesus, where God the Son, veiled in the likeness of sinful flesh, loved us and gave Himself for us.

Let's take one example. What does it mean for God to be infinitely, eternally, and unchangeably wise? No man could have devised a system of salvation such as God did by giving His own beloved Son to death on a cross.

The problem He solved is this. How can a holy God make a sinful humanity right with Himself? How can a holy God justify a sinful humanity? How can light have fellowship with the darkness? How can life and death coexist? Human wisdom proposes that the only way a holy God can justify or make right a sinful humanity with Himself is for that sinful humanity to clean up its act, to get all religious, and by its religious devotion and moral righteousness, become holy enough for God. That's human wisdom. Humanity reaches up to God, but divine wisdom takes the opposite route.

[ 17 : 01 ] Knowing that it is impossible for a sinful humanity to clean up its act, get all religious, and reach up to God, God sent His one and only beloved Son to bear the punishment human sin deserved by dying for them on the cross.

He sent Jesus to become sin for us so that we, through faith in Him, might become the righteousness of God. human religious wisdom tries to reach up to God and fails.

God's infinite, eternal, and unchangeable wisdom reaches down to us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and succeeds. Now, we could repeat that exercise in wisdom for all of God's divine attributes, His wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth, and still, they'd all point back to a cross on which the Son of God died to take away our sin.

It would all point to the gospel. So, to worship God in the splendor of His holiness is to shape every element of our worship service according to the gospel.

Everything must point to Mount Calvary on which Jesus died to set us free from our sin, death, and condemnation. Everything points not to Sinai, but to Calvary, because it's there we have the clearest illustration of the splendor of God's holiness.

[ 18 : 38 ] Okay, let's bring us down from the heights. Let's apply this in our own situation. Let's apply it in the context of liturgy from the form according to which our worship is conducted.

Does everything in our service, even the progression of our service, point to the cross? From our call to worship to the benediction, from our prayers to our readings, from our confessions to our catechisms, does our liturgy, the way we do church, the way we do our service, does it tell the story of the gospel?

One example of this is the use of creeds in the historic Reformed church. John Knox's Reformation church in Scotland recited the Apostles' Creed at every service of worship.

And it did so intentionally to declare to its members and visitors the substance of what we believe as Christians.

I believe in God the Father, maker of heaven and earth, and in His own Son, Jesus Christ, and so on. The Apostles' Creed and other creeds and catechisms of the historic church tell the story of the gospel.

[ 20 : 03 ] For example, our last hymn today is Christ, our hope in life and death, which is the first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism. Why are we making more use, as our Reformation fathers did, of creeds and catechism, as tools to declare the splendor of God's holiness as demonstrated on Mount Calvary?

Third and last, worship is self-abasing service. Worship is self-abasing service.

Worship is selfless satisfaction. Lastly, worship is self-abasing service. If worship's all about God, if it's designed in such a way as to declare the splendor of God's holiness and it being salvation-shaped, how are we to approach these services?

And the psalm writer, he declares, worship. Worship. The word worship is taken from an old English word, meaning to acknowledge worthiness, to acknowledge worthiness.

Worship. The Lord in the splendor of His holiness is worthy. That's what we declare when we worship Him. But the original language in which the psalm was written was not Old English, but ancient Hebrew.

[ 21 : 32 ] And in that language, the word we translate as worship actually means to bow down. Probably still does. We could ask Ian Brown afterwards. To bow down.

It was originally used in the context of how someone would approach a king. He would bow down before that king. It was a declaration of His humility before royalty.

And so, in this context, it means, in view of the splendor of the Lord, to bow down before Him. Kirk van der Swag recently told me of how one preacher defined worship.

He called it, this is a great definition, the bowing down of the soul before God. Worship is the bowing down of the soul before God.

Worship is not drawing attention to ourselves and our achievements, but in humility, drawing attention to God and His achievements in the cross of Jesus.

[ 22 : 36 ] Worship's not about self-announcement, but self-abasement. Now, when we talk of bowing down, of course, we're not talking about physically bending our knees.

We're talking, just as Kirk's definition reminds us, of bowing down our souls before God. Don't worry, we have no intention of introducing kneeling stools, lest we should have another Jenny Geddes throwing it at the preacher.

What we want to reinforce is that whatever our physical posture in worship, our spiritual posture is one of bowing down before the splendor of God's holiness in the cross.

In other words, we're going to take worship very seriously indeed. Careful thought is put into every element of our worship services, the aesthetics of our worship space, the prayers of our lips and mouths, and so on.

We dare not treat God as existing to make me happy. Rather, we approach worship as the bowing down of our souls before God so that we may declare the glory of His cross.

[ 23 : 54 ] The writer of Hebrews calls upon us to worship God with reverence and fear, that fear not being craven terror, but healthy respect, self-abasing service. Let's take one final example of this.

Traditionally, in our culture, the service of worship has been divided into two sections, the so-called preliminaries and the sermon. Now, the preliminaries included our singing, our prayers, and our reading.

Not only is this division unbiblical, it isn't good for us, nor is it glorifying to God. Don't know where it came from, preliminaries and sermon. Consider the public reading of God's Word.

For the Apostle Paul, the public reading of the Word of God was a big deal. In 1 Timothy 4, 13, he writes these words, Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture.

This is the Word of God, wholly inspired by Him. It is through faith, through this Word, by faith, that God gives life to the spiritually dead.

[ 25 : 04 ] I was at an OMF conference many years ago, nearly 30 years ago now, where a professional actress publicly read a portion from the book of Revelation.

She brought out every nuance of the text, and she read it with feeling and pathos. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. It made me realize just how powerful the public reading of Scripture can be.

By contrast, we so often publicly read Scripture with no more feeling than we would a list of ingredients on the back of a packet of chinos. In view of the priority Paul sets upon the public reading of Scripture, reinforced by Jesus' own public reading of Scripture in the synagogue, should we not put more emphasis on how we read Scripture in our public services of worship?

Is this not one way in which we can encourage the bowing down of our souls before God? Now, this is what I differ from many of my, I guess, brethren in the Reformed Church.

Different Christians worship God in different ways, and we must celebrate the diversity of the church in this. It is fool-headed and wrong to expect worship services in Africa or Latin America to sound like or look the same as worship services in Scotland.

[ 26 : 36 ] Culture always plays a part, but they must all be based on the principles of worship God has laid down in His Word. Worship is selfless satisfaction, it is salvation-shaped, and it's self-abasing service.

Ultimately, you know, for all of us here, we worship God in the splendor of His holiness because He first, in His love and grace, as we read and sung in Psalm 40, reached down into the deep pit of our mighty sinfulness and guilt and rescued us.

for us, He sent His Son to die upon the cross. We worship Him because we have been personally experiencing the grace of Christ through the cross of Christ in faith.

I close with the words of the gospel hymn, I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene and wonder how He could love me a sinner condemned unclean.

How wonderful, how marvelous, and my song shall ever be. How wonderful, how marvelous, is my Savior's love for me.

[ 27 : 57 ] Thank you.