

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 3

Responding to God with worship

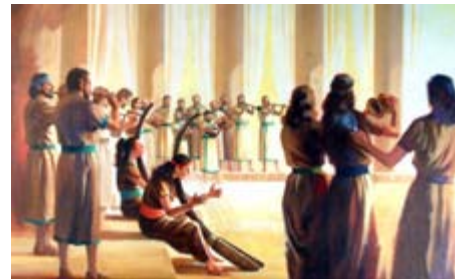
We respond to God with worship, because worship is simply giving God what is fitting. He is praiseworthy, not only for his power but also for his gentleness.

Most people praise power, but gentleness is also praiseworthy. Let's think about it. Raw power is neither good nor bad, neither to be praised in itself or condemned in itself. Dictators have power, volcanoes have power and bacteria have power, but we do not praise such power. Power is praiseworthy only when it is used in a good way, in a way that helps others.

God is love, and all that he does is done in love. This is praiseworthy. We praise love even on a human level, don't we? We praise people who give their lives to help others. They did not have enough power to save their own lives, but what power they had, they used to help others—and that is praiseworthy. In contrast, we criticize people who had the power to help but refused to do it. Goodness is more praiseworthy than greatness is, and God is both good and great.

Praise deepens the bond of love between us and God. God's love for us is never diminished, but ours for him often grows weak. In praise, we rehearse his love for us and, in effect, fan the fire of love for him that the Spirit has started within us. It is good for us to remember and rehearse how wonderful God is, for that strengthens us in Christ and increases our motivation to be like him in his goodness, which increases our joy.

We were made for the purpose of praising God (1 Peter 2:9), of giving him glory and honor, and the better we are in harmony with God's purpose for life, the greater joy will be ours. Life is simply more satisfying when we do what we were made to do: to



Worship, as depicted by Ken Tunell

honor God. We do that not only in worship, but also in the way we live every day.

We honor God when we serve other people using the gifts God has given us. We honor God when we forgive instead of seeking revenge. We honor God and show that he is great when we shape our lives around him, when we value his loving word to us more than the ways of the world. We honor God when we look to Scripture instead of society, when we meet our obligations and responsibilities to others instead of shirking them.

A way of life

Worship is a way of life. We offer our bodies and minds as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1-2). We worship God when we share the gospel of his Son (Romans 15:16). We worship God when we give financial offerings (Philippians 4:18). We worship God when we help other people (Hebrews 13:16). We say that he is worthy, worth our time and attention and allegiance. We praise his power and his patience. We praise his glory, and his humility in becoming one of us for our sakes. We praise his righteousness and his mercy. We praise him for the way he really is.

This is what we were made for, to declare his praises. Life works best if we live the way God intended us to. And this is our reasonable service. It is simply right that we praise the One who created us, the One who died and rose to save us and give us life eternal, the One who works even now to help us become more like him. We owe him our allegiance, and we owe him our love.

We were made to praise God, and this is what we will do eternally. John was given a vision of our future: “I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!’” (Revelation 5:13). This is the right response: awe at the awesome, honor for the honorable, praise for the praiseworthy, and allegiance to the trustworthy.

Five basic principles

Psalm 33:1-3 tells us, “Sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him. Praise the Lord with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre. Sing to him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy.” Scripture tells us to sing a new song to the Lord, to shout for joy, to use harps, flutes, tambourines, trumpets, cymbals — even to worship with dancing (Psalms 149-150). The picture is one of exuberance, of unrestrained joy, of happiness that is expressed without inhibitions.

The Bible gives us examples of spontaneous worship. It also gives us examples of very formal approaches to worship, with stereotyped routines that stay the same for centuries. Both approaches to worship can be legitimate, and neither one can claim to be the only authentic way to praise God. Let me review some of the broader principles involved in worship.

1. We are called to worship

First, God does want us to worship him. This is a constant we see from one end of Scripture to another (Genesis 4:4; John 4:23; Revelation 22:9). Worship is one of the reasons we are called: to declare his praises (1 Peter 2:9). God’s people not only love and obey him, but they also do specific acts of worship. They make sacrifices, they sing praises, they pray.

In Scripture, we see a wide variety in the way that worship can be done. In the law of Moses, many details were specified. Specific people were assigned

Five facts about worship

1. God wants us to worship, to respond to him with praise and thanks.
2. Only God is worthy of our worship and total allegiance.
3. Worship should be sincere, not a performance.
4. If we really respect and love God, we will do what he says.
5. Worship is not just something we do at church — it involves everything we do.

to do specific actions at specific times in specific places. The who, what, when, where and how were spelled out. In contrast to that, we see in Genesis very few rules about how the patriarchs worshipped. They did not have a designated priesthood, were not restricted to a certain place, and were told little about what to offer or when to offer it.

In the New Testament, we again see very little about the how and the when of worship. Worship activities are not restricted to a certain group of people or a certain place. Christ did away with Mosaic requirements and restrictions. All believers are priests and continually offer themselves as living sacrifices.

2. Worship only God

Despite the great variety in worship styles, we see a simple constant throughout Scripture: Only God should be worshipped. Worship, to be acceptable, must be exclusive. God requires all our love — all our allegiance. We cannot serve two Gods. Although we may worship him in different styles, our unity is based on the fact that it is him we worship.

In ancient Israel, the rival God was often Baal, a Canaanite deity. In Jesus’ day, it was religious tradition, self-righteousness and hypocrisy. Actually, anything that comes between us and God — anything that might cause us to disobey him — is a false god, an idol. For some today, it is money. For others, it is sex. Some have a bigger problem with pride, or with concerns about what other people may think of us. John mentions some common false gods when he writes,

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world — the cravings of

sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does — comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever. (1 John 2:15-17)

No matter what our weakness is, we need to crucify it, to kill it, to put all false gods away. If something distracts us from obeying God, we need to get rid of it. God wants people who worship only him.

3. Sincerity

The third constant about worship that we see in the Scriptures is that worship must be sincere. It does no good to go through the right motions, sing the right songs, meet on the right days and say the right words, if we don't really love God in our hearts. Jesus criticized those who honored God with their lips, but who worshipped in vain, because their hearts were not close to God. Their traditions (originally designed to express their love and worship) had become obstacles to real love and worship.

Jesus also stresses the need for sincerity when he says that worship must be in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). If we say that we love God when we actually resent his commands, we are hypocrites. If we value our freedom more than we do his authority, we cannot worship him in truth. We cannot take his covenant upon our lips and cast his words behind (Psalm 50:16-17). We cannot call him Lord and ignore what he says.

4. Obedience

Throughout Scripture, we see that true worship must include obedience. This obedience must include God's words concerning the way we treat one another.

We cannot honor God when we dishonor his children. "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20-21). It reminds me of Isaiah's scathing criticism of people who perform worship rituals while indulging in social injustices:

When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations — I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if

you offer many prayers, I will not listen. (Isaiah 1:11-15)

As far as we can tell, there was nothing wrong with the days that these people were keeping, or the kind of incense and animals they were bringing. The problem was the way they were living the rest of the time. "Your hands are full of blood," he said — and yet I am sure that the problem was not just with those who had actually committed murder.

He called for a comprehensive solution: "Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow" (verses 16-17). They needed to get their interpersonal relationships in order. They needed to eliminate racial prejudice, social class stereotypes, and unfair economic practices.

5. In all of life

Worship, if it is to be genuine, must make a difference in the way we treat one another seven days a week. This is another principle we see throughout Scripture.

How should we worship? Micah asks the question and gives the answer:

With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:6-8)

Hosea also stressed that interpersonal relationships are more important than the mechanics of worship: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6). We are called not only to praise, but also to do good works (Ephesians 2:10).

Our concept of worship must go far beyond music, days, and rituals. Those details are not nearly as important as the way we treat our neighbors. It is hypocritical to call Jesus Lord if we do not also seek his sense of justice, mercy, and compassion.

True worship is much more than outward actions — it involves a total change of behavior, rooted in a total change of heart, a change produced in us by the Holy Spirit. Instrumental in this change is our

willingness to spend time with God in prayer, study and other spiritual disciplines. The transformation does not happen with magic words or magic water — it happens through time spent in fellowship with God. Worship involves all of life. We see this especially in the words of Paul.

Paul's expansive view of worship

Paul used the terminology of sacrifice and worship in this way: “I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship” (Romans 12:1). All of life is to be worship, not just a few hours each week. Of course, if all of our lives are devoted to worship, this will most definitely include a few hours each week with other Christians!

Paul uses more words for sacrifice and worship in Romans 15:16 when he speaks of the grace God had given him “to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.” Here we see that preaching the gospel is a form of worship.

Since we are all priests, we all have the priestly duty of proclaiming the praises of the One who called us (1 Peter 2:9) — a worship any member can do, or at least participate in by helping others preach the gospel.

When Paul thanked the Philippians for sending him financial support, he used words for worship: “I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God” (Philippians 4:18).

Financial help given to other Christians can be a form of worship. Hebrews 13 describes worship given both in words and in works: “Let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise — the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased” (verses 15-16).

Friends, we are called to worship, celebrate and glorify God. It is our joy to be able to declare his praises, to share the good news of what he has done for us in and through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

By Joseph Tkach

Questions for Discussion

- What characteristic of God do you feel most thankful for?
- Some Old Testament sacrifices were completely burned up — nothing left but smoke and ashes. Have you ever felt that any of your sacrifices were like that?
- Spectators cheer when their team scores a goal or wins a game. Do we respond to God with equal enthusiasm?
- For many people, God is not very important in day-to-day life. What is most important for people you know?
- Why does God care about the way we treat other people?