

Worship Defined



Worship is often one of the most misunderstood principles or acts of religious (or even spiritual) practice. The world broadly defines worship as the singing of songs or attendance at a religious gathering we call "church." While worship inspires these acts, the acts themselves do not define worship. Worship is not the sweet lyrics of a beautiful song about God, but worship can and does inspire the hand of the composer who pens the song. Worship is not the melodious noise that emanates from the voice of a gifted singer, but it inspires the heart-felt rendering of the song. The song itself is not worship. The act of singing the song is not worship. In fact, the assembling together in a facility to talk or sing about God is not worship. Worship is that which inspires these activities whether they be assembling, writing, singing, testifying or simply living according to God's statutes. Unfortunately, the true

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meaning of worship has been so badly misconstrued that in some churches worship is used to reference the slow songs we sing when we're exhausted from shouting and dancing in praise. It has become simply a moment to catch our breath and recuperate in preparation for the next "praise session." Such misperceptions and misunderstandings of worship render our experiences with God unmemorable and impotent.

In the Old Testament, an encounter with God always produced visible results. It engaged the attention and awe of all those who witnessed it. When Moses would enter the tent to worship, it would garner the attention and engagement of all the people who were around.

"... And it came about, whenever Moses went out to the tent, that all the people would arise and stand, each at the entrance of his tent, and gaze after Moses until he entered the tent. Whenever Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent; and the LORD would speak with Moses. When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would arise and worship, each at the entrance of his tent..." (Exod. 39:8-10).

Worship that moves God, moves people. If our worship fails to inspire people to worship God

themselves, then our worship is deficient. Some might propose that because Moses was the leader of his people, they were compelled to follow suit and worship whenever they saw him worship. Others might surmise that Moses was an exception and that because of the favor he had with God, he was endowed with a special anointing that allowed his worship to compel others to worship. While these arguments might have some truth, the reality is that the sacrifice of Christ has enabled each of us to have the same relationship with God that Moses had. While this was not possible in the Old Testament, we now have the privilege to establish such relationship directly with God, without needing a priest to be the intermediary. But still, we rely on others to cajole us to worship.

What is it then that made Moses' worship unique and special? The distinguishing feature of Moses' worship was relationship. A former pastor of mine, John W. Stevenson, defined a worshiper as "one who is intimately acquainted with and has a daily relationship with God." While I believe this partially defines a worshiper, further study of the Bible allows us to expand this definition to incorporate the key prerequisite of obedience. Better defined, a worshiper would be "one who regularly communes with God through the daily practice of obedience and submission." In fact, obedience can be used synonymously with worship. Moses could not commune with God without obedience. He could not

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obey God without relationship – knowing who God is and surrendering to his sovereignty. While there have been hundreds, maybe thousands of books written on this subject – including this one – people still find it difficult to define and understand worship. Some of the other publications provide valuable details on the rituals of worship (both modern and historic). Others might outline the mechanisms and various expressions of worship. In all the discourse, we have complicated worship and made it difficult to understand. People are left now to wonder, what am I supposed to do to worship in a way that pleases God? Do I have to sacrifice bulls and goats as they did in the Old Testament? Do I need to raise my hands or sing a song? Should I close my eyes, speak in tongues, cry or remain silent? Worship is quite simple, which I hope to reveal in this publication. Worship is simply the mechanism by which we commune with God. Defined, worship is obedience and submission to the sovereignty of God which permits communion with God.

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Communion itself is not worship, rather, it is the product or outcome of worship. God desires communion with man, and worship allows communion to occur. God

doesn't desire worship because he is arrogant and narcissistic, needing man to inflate and nurture his ego. Rather, he seeks true worshipers because he desires to have communion with us (Exod. 24:1-22). One translation of the word communion, is "to speak." God desires to speak to man, much like he spoke with Adam, Moses and Abraham.

When God created man, he gave him dominion and freedom to access anything in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were only forbidden to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17). In Genesis 3, we see that as long as Adam remained obedient, God manifested himself to Adam in a way which He had never manifested himself to man before or since. The scripture suggests that God literally walked with Adam. When God spoke, Adam immediately heard. There were no obstacles standing between their relationship until Adam and Eve ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It was at that point that the relationship between God and man would forever be changed. Rather than commune with God uninhibited as he normally had, Adam now recognized his humanity and became ashamed. Prior to then, "*...the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed*" (Gen. 2:25). After eating the fruit, Adam didn't miraculously become more human than he previously was. However, his disobedience produced a knowledge of his humanness that was not previously present. This in turn produced

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shame that separated him from continuous communion with God. In essence, disobedience produces separation between God and man.

Disobedience caused man to lose fellowship with God, but obedience (e.g., worship) allows the fellowship and communion with God to be restored. It was the disobedience of Adam and Eve that caused the separation. Because of that sin, God determined that in their human state, man should not live forever. He put man out of the Garden of Eden *"lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever"* (Gen. 2:22). He went further to state that His *"Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh..."* (Gen. 6:3). Man was made of flesh before he sinned. Because he became obedient to flesh after the sin, he could no longer have communion with God. Nonetheless, God still desired a mechanism whereby he could commune with man. He created worship to be that vehicle (Exod. 24:1-22).

Six hundred years after the fall of Adam, relationship with God was temporarily restored through the act of a single man, Noah. When the Earth dried after the flood, Noah's first action was to build an altar of burnt sacrifice. An offering of burnt sacrifice was presented as payment for sin. The aroma of this sacrifice rose unto the nostrils of God, who found it pleasing. This sacrifice compelled God to initiate a covenant again with man,

specifically with Noah. The offering of sacrifice then became the mechanism by which man was restored to relationship with God. The sacrifice was a form of Old Testament worship that allowed God to again COMMUNE with man (Exod. 24:122). The process of sacrifice as a mechanism of worship was quite complicated. The practice was generally carried out by priests on behalf of people who, because of sin (or disobedience), had been separated from God. Because the ritual was so elaborate, it only occurred at certain times of the year. Though it was effective for the moment, communion with God was discontinuous. Between offerings, separation would occur again. Moreover, despite the sacrifice offered, God did not have communion with all men, only those chosen priests who would communicate what God would speak during times of communion. It was for this reason that God sent Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, to be the ultimate sacrifice for sins. Through Jesus' sacrifice, the relationship with God could be restored on a continual basis and with any man who received Jesus' sacrifice as penance for his sin. *"For as by the one man's [Adam's] disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience [Jesus'] the many will be made righteous"* (Rom. 5:19).

Until Jesus, people had to rely on an intermediary, a priest, to speak to or hear from God (e.g., communion). It still required that the priest be made holy and that the people obeyed. For example, God would give

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instructions to Moses who would in turn convey them to the people. The response of the people was “*All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do*” (Exod. 19:3, 8). The prerequisite was obedience. Without obedience, there would be no worship and consequently no communion with God. There were only a few people in the Bible with whom God would have such intimate communion. Moses was clearly one, but another was Abraham.

Abraham had such special relationship with God, that God spoke with him as a man would speak with another man. This occurred because he embodied the essence of worship – obedience. When Abraham was instructed by God to sacrifice the thing that Abraham desired most, his son Isaac, he immediately obeyed without reservation or question. I consider this the ultimate act of obedience for several reasons. First, among his people, it was unheard of to offer your own child as a sacrifice. Further, this was the son of promise. God promised Abraham that he'd be the father of many nations. Isaac was the unexpected and miraculous conception of Abraham and his wife, Sarah, in their old age. Yet, when he received the command to make this great sacrifice, “*Abraham said to his young servants, 'Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you*” (Gen. 22:5). Abraham had confidence in knowing that both he and Isaac would “come again to” his servants. Although he

had no idea of how God would accomplish it, he had full assurance that God would still fulfill the promise of his legacy. Because his relationship with and trust in God was so strong, he was able to obey with the assurance that his obedience would produce a response from God – a response that would have the byproduct of blessing to Abraham. Certainly, God provided a ram for sacrifice as soon as Abraham raised the dagger to slay his own son in effort to worship (obey) God.

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Based on the biblical references of worship described previously, it can be concluded that worship and obedience are synonymous. God desires more than any accoutrements of worship (e.g., songs, hand claps, adulation or bowed heads). He seeks obedience. Obedience is only accomplished when there is a healthy reverence for and submission to the sovereignty of God. When we recognize God as potentate, we willingly submit to his commands. The accoutrements of worship are important but should not be confused with worship itself. The reality is that God is already omnipotent. No song that we sing or action that we perform can ever make Him even the slightest bit bigger or more powerful