

The Essence of Worship

from *Worship* by Ronald Allen and Gordon Borrer

Ponder the phrase *worship service*. Is your reaction “Oh, that’s Sunday morning at eleven”? Perhaps for some people the phrase worship service serves only as a means to distinguish the Sunday morning service from the Sunday evening Gospel Hour and from the Wednesday evening Prayer Meeting.

But what do you think when you see or hear that phrase? Maybe your mind presents images of a lofty building with transcendent structure, muted organ tones, soft lighting, and of humble people kneeling quietly and communing reverently with God. For others, the words worship service might lead to thoughts of a storefront church filled with rollicking music, rhythmically swaying bodies, with smiles and laughs and shouts and luster.

Does the word *worship* make you think of robed priests with incense and candles, of color and ceremony? Or does worship suggest a wayside chapel on a country road having a battered sign: A Place for Prayer? Does worship make you think of preaching or communion? Of singing or praying? Of praising or meditating?

The word worship is used by many Christians for a wide variety of experiences and impressions. It is not surprising that the phrase worship service is used in several ways as well.

A Response to God

Whatever else the word worship suggests to you in your own experience and expression, this word should speak paramountly about one’s responses to God. While we do not wish to bring artificial limitations to the use of the word worship by believers today, we do object to its use in the phrase worship service if in that service there is no real opportunity truly to worship God. A worship service does not happen merely because a certain time period in the church schedule of events is so labeled. It is likely that we have all been in worship services where, by appearance at least, there seemed to be little true worshipping of God.

What, then, is worship? *Worship is an active response to God whereby we declare His worth.* Worship is not passive, but is participative. Worship is not simply a mood; it is a response. Worship is not just a feeling; it is a declaration.

Sometimes seminary-trained preachers bedazzle and benumb a congregation with repeated emphasis on the meanings of Hebrew and Greek words “in the original text,” acting as evangelical priests with new substitutes for Latin barriers which only they may breach. But on occasion the English words we use are of surpassing worth and it is they that should be explained. So it is with the term worship.

Declare His Worth

The English word worship is wonderfully expressive of the act that it describes. This term comes from the Anglo-Saxon *weorthscipe*, which then was modified to *worthship*, and finally to *worship*. Worship means “to attribute worth” to something or someone. When we say of someone that “he worships his money” or that “she worships her children,” we are using the word a bit loosely. If, however, the supreme worth for him is

in his money, or the highest value for her is in her children, then it is an accurate use of the term.

In Great Britain, the honorific title used to describe the leading citizen of a town is, “His Worship the Mayor.” In the States we have changed this phrase to “His Honor the Mayor.” To worship someone or something is to attribute supreme worth or to declare supreme value to that one or that thing. Along this line, Ralph P. Martin writes,

If we may elevate this thought to the realm of divine-human relationships, we have a working definition of the term worship ready-made for us. *To worship God is to ascribe to Him supreme worth, for He alone is worthy.* ¹

He Is Worthy

Because of who God is and what He does, we attribute to Him the glory that is due His name. Such is the strong sentiment of Psalm 96:7-8.

*Ascribe to Yahweh, O families of nations,
ascribe to Yahweh glory and strength.
Ascribe to Yahweh the glory due his name;
bring an offering and come into his courts.
(Psalm 96:7-8, NIV)*

We worship God when we ascribe to Him the glory that is due His name. This Old Testament hymnic text of Psalm 96 is balanced by a New Testament hymnic passage of great worship of the Living Christ, the Lamb Who is worthy:

*Worthy is the Lamb
that was slain
to receive power
and riches
and wisdom
and might
and honor
and glory
and blessing. (Revelation 5:12)*

The triune God, the Supreme Being of the Scriptures, the Most Blessed One, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—to Him worship is due from all creatures for all time.

Father, we adore You!
Lord Jesus, we love You!
Holy Spirit, we honor You!
We worship You by declaring
Your inherent worth.

Celebrate Him

What, then, is the essence of worship? It is the celebration of God! When we worship God, *we celebrate Him*: We extol Him, we sound His praises, we boast in Him.

Worship is not the casual chatter that occasionally drowns out the organ prelude; we celebrate God when we allow the prelude to attune our hearts to the glory of God by the means of the music.

Worship is not the mumbling of prayers or the mouthing of hymns with little thought and less heart; we celebrate God when we join together earnestly in prayer and intensely in song.

Worship is not self-aggrandizing words or boring clichés when one is asked to give a testimony; we celebrate God when we boast in His name to the good of His people.

Worship is not irrelevant thoughts or fragmented elements, silly asides or unconnected directions in purpose; we celebrate God when all of the parts of the service fit together and work to a common end.

Worship is not grudging gifts or compulsory service; we celebrate God when we give to Him hilariously and serve Him with integrity.

Worship is not haphazard music done poorly, not even great music done merely as a performance; we celebrate God when we enjoy and participate in music to His glory.

Worship is not a distracted endurance of the sermon; we celebrate God as we hear His Word gladly and seek to be conformed by it more and more to the image of our Savior.

Worship is not a sermon that is poorly prepared and carelessly delivered; we celebrate God when we honor His Word with our words, by His Spirit.

Worship is not the hurried motions of a “tacked-on” Lord’s Table; we celebrate God pre-eminently when we fellowship gratefully at the ceremonial meal that speaks so centrally of our faith in the Christ Who died for us, Who rose again on our behalf, and Who is to return for our good.

As a thoughtful gift is a celebration of a birthday, as a special evening out is a celebration of an anniversary, as a warm eulogy is a celebration of a life, as a sexual embrace is a celebration of a marriage—*so a worship service is a celebration of God.*

One of the grand calls for celebrative worship within the Book of Psalms is found in the words of Psalm 100. In the words of the “old one-hundredth” we find a strong encouragement for celebration in our own worship. Here are these words:

*Shout joyfully to Yahweh, all the earth.
Serve Yahweh with gladness;
Come before Him with joyful singing.
Know that Yahweh Himself is God
It is He who has made us, and His we are;
We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.
Enter His gates with thanksgiving,
And His courts with praise.
Give thanks to Him; bless His name.
For Yahweh is good;
His lovingkindness is everlasting,
And His faithfulness to all generations.
(NASB, with marginal reading at verse 3)*

In our services devoted to the worship of the Living God and His Christ, let us celebrate our God!