

What Does the Bible Say About Worship?



By Joseph Tkach and Others



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What the Bible Says About Worship

By Joseph Tkach

With additional articles by others

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What

of Scripture

Many Christians have different views on the case with worship styles. Let's look at the Bible before and after Jesus and after Jesus to see how worship in the

worship styles. As is often the case with expressions and reactions to the Bible says about worship. Before Moses, after Moses, the Bible's insight can help inform our

Definitions

The Bible doesn't give a formal definition of worship. But perhaps we can start by seeing what various words for worship mean. The English word "worship" comes from two Old English words: *weorth*, which means "worth," and *scipe* or *ship*, which means something like shape or "quality." We can see the Old English root word "-ship" in modern words like *friendship* and *sportsmanship* – that's the quality of being a friend, or the quality of being a good sport.

So worth-ship is the quality of having worth or of being worthy. When we worship, we are saying that God has worth, that he is worthy. Worship means to declare worth, to attribute worth. Or to put it in biblical terms, we praise God. We speak, or sing, about how good and powerful God is.

This is a purpose for which we are called: "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, *that you may declare the praises of him* who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). We were called for the purpose of praising God, worshiping God. That is one of the job descriptions of a Christian. We should declare that God is worthy, worth more than everything else put together.

Now let's look at the biblical words. In both Hebrew and Greek, there are

two major kinds of words for worship. The first kind means to bow down, to kneel, to put one's face down as an act of respect and submission. Our body language is saying, I will do whatever you want me to. I am ready to listen to your instructions and I am willing to obey. The other kind of biblical word means to serve. Roughly half of the time these words are translated as worship, and the other half as serve. It carries the idea of doing something for God — making a sacrifice or carrying out his instructions.

Of course, word meanings don't prove what worship is, but they do illustrate three kinds of worship. There is

- * worship that involves speaking, and
- * worship that involves listening, and
- * a worship that involves doing.

There is a worship that expresses the heart, and worship that involves the mind, and a worship that involves the body. There is a worship that is giving praise upward, a worship that is receiving instructions from above, and a worship that carries out instruction in the world around us.

We need all three types of worship. Some people focus primarily on speaking or singing praise to God. Praise is good, but if all we do is praise God, without ever *listening* to what he says, we have to ask whether we believe the words we are saying. If he is really all wise and all loving, then we need to be attentive to what he is telling us, because he is worth listening to.

Similarly, all talk and no action does not show God the respect he deserves. Actions speak louder than words, and if our behavior isn't changed by God, then our actions are saying that God isn't important — he's a nice idea, but not relevant to our day-to-day lives. When we really believe that God is worthy of every praise, then we will be willing to listen and to change the way we live in response to such a worthy God. We will trust him and *seek*

him and want to *please* him as much as we can. Worship should affect our behavior.

Response with all our being

Another preliminary point is that worship is a response to God. We can't know God's worth, much less declare it, unless God reveals himself to us. So God *initiates* worship by revealing himself to us. Then we respond, and the proper response is worship. The more we grasp his greatness, his power, his love, his character, the more we understand his worthiness, the better we can *declare* his worth – the better we can worship.

Our worship is a response to what God has revealed himself to be, not only in who he is, but also in what he has done and is doing and will do in the future. Worship includes *all* our responses to God – including a response with our mind, such as our *belief* in God's worthiness, our emotions, such as *love* and *trust*, and our actions and our *words*. Our heart expresses itself in words and songs; our mind is active when we want to learn what God wants us to do, and our bodies and strength are involved when we obey and when we serve.

Both Old Testament and New Testament tell us that our relationship with God should involve our *heart, mind, soul, and strength*. It involves all that we are. Worship involves heart, mind, soul and strength, too.

The fact that we *believe* God says something about his worthiness. The fact that we trust him and love him declares that he is worthy of love and trust. The fact that we *obey* him also says that he has worth. Our words complete the picture by *saying* that God has worth. In the words we say to one another, in the prayers we say to God, in the songs we sing, we can declare that God is worth more than all other gods, worth more than all other things.

We can worship God all by ourselves. But it is also something we do

together. God has revealed himself not just to me, but to *many* people. God puts us in a community, he reveals himself to a community and *through* a community, and the community together responds to him in worship, in declaring that he is worth all honor and praise.

Moreover, God promises that whenever we gather in Jesus' name, he will be there. We gather in his presence, and because of his promise, we *expect* him to be with us. He is the One who calls us together, who reveals himself to us, who initiates the worship and is the object of our worship.

One important method we use to worship God is that of music. In church, we have someone called a worship leader, who leads us in singing hymns and spiritual songs. So a worship leader is a song leader, and because of that some people automatically think of music when they hear the word worship.

Music is important, but worship is not just music – it involves our entire relationship with God, all our heart, mind, soul, and strength – it involves *all* the ways in which we can respond to God, all the ways we can praise him by what we say and do, all the ways we can demonstrate that God is worthy of all praise and honor and allegiance.

Worship before the time of Moses

If we survey the Bible, we will see a wide variety of methods that God's people have used to worship him and express their devotion to him. Some of these methods were done by specific command from God; others seem to have been the choice of the persons involved. We see this pattern throughout the Bible: some things are commanded and some things are optional.

We don't have to read the Bible very far before we encounter a story about worship. Genesis 4 tells us that Cain and Abel brought an offering to the Lord. We aren't told why – we are just told that they did it. A few chapters later, we read that Noah built an altar after the Flood, and he sacrificed some animals.

Later, Abraham made sacrifices. He built an altar at Shechem, another at Bethel, then at Hebron, and at Mount Moriah. As part of his worship, Abraham also prayed, circumcised and tithed. Isaac built an altar at Beersheba and he prayed. Jacob set up a stone pillar at Bethel and poured a drink offering on it, and he poured oil on it as some sort of worship. He built an altar at Shechem, and one at Bethel. He vowed to tithe and he prayed. What conclusions can we draw from this?

First, no one needed a priest. Everyone built their own altars, sacrificed their own animals and did their own worship. The head of the household acted as the religious leader for the family. We see that in the book of Job, too: Job made sacrifices on behalf of his children. There was no special priesthood. Each person could worship without a priest.

Second, there aren't many commands about the worship that the patriarchs did. God sometimes told his people where to build an altar and what to offer, but for the most part, the altars and offerings seem to have been initiated by the people. There's no mention of special times or special days or special seasons. There doesn't seem to be any restriction on place, either. The patriarchs stayed away from Baal worship, but other than that, they worshiped the true God wherever and whenever and however they wanted.

Third, not much is said about method – the people could pour out wine or oil, totally incinerate an animal, or roast it and eat part of it. Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were not limited by time, location or method. The key word is flexibility. The detailed rules that God gave through Moses did not apply to the patriarchs. They were not restricted by rules about special places, people, rituals and days.

One thing was important – probably the greatest commandment about

worship, the most important rule about worship no matter who we are or when we live. The first and greatest commandment is this: You shall worship no other gods.

When God dealt with Jacob, he was not concerned about *how* he was worshiped – his primary concern was *that* Jacob worship the true God and no other gods. God demands exclusive worship, 100 percent allegiance. *Only that* can do justice to his worth. There's no room for loving any other gods even 1 percent. We cannot allow *anything* to get in the way of our worship relationship with God. We cannot let money, self-consciousness, busyness or anything else get in the way. Worship is to be our highest priority.

Moses and the tabernacle

In the days of Moses, worship went from very little structure to very specific and very detailed structure. God specified exactly

- * *when* sacrifices were to be made,
- * *how* they were to be made,
- * *where* they were to be made, and
- * *who* was supposed to make them.

Worship became much more formal. Under the law of Moses, there were holy places, holy people, holy animals, holy rituals, and holy times. God designated certain things for certain uses in worship.

The tabernacle was a holy place. Wherever it was, it marked off holy space. It was somewhat holy in the outer court, more holy in the inner court, and extremely holy behind the veil. The design of the tabernacle communicated something important about God: that he was holy. You just can't walk up on him every day. You had to be a very holy person on a very holy day in order to walk into the Holy of Holies, and you had to go through special rituals in order to do it. The tabernacle was a symbolic message about God.

The tabernacle pictured God's holiness, but it also pictured that he was not some far-off God. No – he was in the camp of Israel. When the Israelites broke camp and the tabernacle was dismantled, the ark of the covenant could be seen. People knew what it was, but when the tabernacle was set up, it was hidden. Close, but not accessible. Although God was near, he was also holy and off-limits, and people could come to him only by using proper channels.

For worship in ancient Israel, there were holy people. The Levites were holy and assigned to work with the tabernacle. There was a priesthood between the people and God. For many acts of worship, the priests had to perform the actions. There were also holy animals and holy plants. Every firstborn animal was holy, dedicated to the Lord. The first-ripe fruits were holy, set apart for worship. There was a holy incense formula, too, and if anyone made the same formula, they were supposed to be expelled from the nation. It was that special. It was reserved for worship. It was holy.

There were holy times. Every week, one day was holy. Every year, some extra days were holy. Every seven years and every 50 years, a whole year was set apart for special use. These designated times gave structure to the Israelite worship. The who, the what, the when, and the where were all spelled out. Everything was structured, organized, formalized.

Most of those details are obsolete, but the most important principle carries over into today's worship, too. Only God should be worshiped. It's not that he should be worshiped *more* than other gods are. It's that he is the only God *worthy* of worship. He is so great, nothing else is even close. There is no god like our God. Nothing can compare with him, so we give him *exclusive* worship. We do not divide our loyalties between him and Baal, or between him and Mammon, or between him and self. All allegiance and all worship go to him alone.

A matter of the heart

In the Law of Moses, it is easy to be distracted by all the detailed worship regulations, but that is not the real focus. All those details were given in order to serve a larger purpose, and that is God. Our focus should be on God, and the same was true for the ancient Israelites. They were to focus on God.

Worship in ancient Israel was not just at the tabernacle – it was also in the *heart* and in the home. God did not want people to think that they could do the rituals and then live as they please. It was not enough to “do” the worship – a person’s honor and respect for God should be genuine, in the heart, which meant that God was to be praised in all of life.

In Deuteronomy 6, Moses told the Israelites to put God’s instructions in their hearts, and teach them to their children, to talk about them when they sat, when they walked, and when they lay down. They were to write these instructions on the doorposts, to immerse themselves in God’s way of life. All of life is worship.

Some of the later prophets build on this theme. Samuel told Saul that obedience is better than sacrifice. God wants a right attitude more than he wants correct rituals. In Jeremiah 7:22, God says, I didn’t bring you out of Egypt because I wanted sacrifices. I just wanted you to obey me, and sacrifices are only a tiny part of what I commanded.

Isaiah is even stronger – saying, in effect, “I’m sick of your sacrifices. I’m sick of your sabbaths and holy days.” Here is Isaiah 1:11-17:

I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.... 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.... 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.

The people were doing rituals, bringing animals, keeping Sabbaths and

festivals, even praying, but despite all that, there was something seriously *lacking* in their worship.

Why didn't God like their worship? He does *not* say they were keeping the wrong days or doing the rituals incorrectly. The problem was that their lives were full of sin. So Isaiah counsels: "Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean.... Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow."

Their sacrifices, prayers and praises were not accompanied by performance in their day-to-day lives. They had worship rituals, but they did not obey God's commands for how to treat their neighbors, and the result was unacceptable worship. As Jesus said, quoting Isaiah 29:13, their worship was in vain. It was hypocritical to do the worship if it wasn't changing the other aspects of their lives.

For worship to be acceptable to God, we must have obedient lives. The ritual is not enough – the attitude is what is most important. God does not want hypocritical worship, people who say he is great but do not act like it. Perhaps this is commandment number 2 regarding worship – that it must be sincere. If we are going to say that God is worthy of all worship, then we should believe it in our hearts, and if we believe it, it will show in our actions. Real worship changes everything we do, because it changes who we are. Worship must be in the heart, not just at the place of worship.

Micah tells us this: "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 child?... 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).

We do not have to have a perfect life. David did not have a *sinless* life, yet overall, he pleased God. His attitude was right, and that's the kind of worship God wants most. God even used David in two major developments in Israelite worship.

Music at the temple

Many know that David initiated the building of the Temple, a “permanent” place for worship. But David's other contribution has lasted even longer than the Temple did. That is in the area of music. David had a background in music. As a shepherd, he played the lyre, a simple stringed instrument. He composed music and sang about God. He worshiped God while he took care of his sheep – it was worship on the job. David's songs are called *psalms*. That comes from the Greek word *psallo*, which means “to pluck a string.” Psalms is a book of songs for stringed instruments. We can worship God with songs and musical instruments.

David didn't write all the psalms. Some were written centuries later. But David got the psalm-book started, and he organized the way that music is used in worship. He assigned some of the Levites to be worship musicians (1 Chronicles 23:5; 25:1-8). Music became a permanent part of worship.

Psalms come in a wide variety. Some are historical, reminding us of God's great works in creation, in the Exodus, in giving the Israelites the land. Some psalms offer praise. Other express thanksgiving, or ask for God's help. Some express adoration, ask questions, or complain to God about suffering. The mood ranges from anguish to hope, fear to joy, anger to pride. These songs may have begun as private prayers, but they became prayers in which all the people could join in. The people became participants in these worship songs.

All the psalms are worship – even the psalms that complain. The fact that our questions and complaints are directed to God shows something about our

relationship to him. All of life is in his hands, in his control. The psalms show our dependence on him.

The psalms are often in the form of a prayer, in words spoken to God. He is the audience, and the people are the participants, the worshipers. These songs are memorized prayers, since they are spoken to God. Some people think that Christians shouldn't have memorized prayers. But we actually have several of them during worship services every week. We just have them with a melody, and that is a legitimate form of worship. Even without the melody, a recited prayer can be a legitimate form of worship.

Psalm 150 points out a variety of worship methods: "Praise the Lord. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens. Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness. Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with tambourine and dancing, praise him with the strings and flute, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord."

We might find some of these worship methods unusual today, but all these artistic expressions are permissible when they are done to the glory of God. The main principle of worship is that we worship only God, and that we really mean it.

Synagogue worship

After the temple was destroyed and Jews were scattered throughout the Middle East, a new format for worship was developed. In the synagogue, the focus was on Scripture, not on sacrifices. It was a much simpler format.

Synagogue services typically began with praises and prayers. There were standard prayers and benedictions, some of them used every week. The Scriptures would be read, translated when necessary, and explained in some sort of sermon. We can see glimpses of this in the New Testament, but the

best description is in Nehemiah 8. Under the leadership of Ezra, some of the Jews had come back to Jerusalem.

Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion... [today we might call it a pulpit] Ezra opened the book [the Law of Moses]. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and *worshipped* the LORD with their faces to the ground. (verses 4-6)

Have you ever seen that kind of response in a modern church service – people lifting their hands, saying Amen, and bowing down? If it's a genuine response to God, it is a good response. They listened with great respect, with a willingness to obey. "The Levites...instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read" (verses 7-8). Synagogue worship followed in this pattern, with a focus on Scripture.

Even though the Temple was eventually rebuilt, the public reading of Scripture in synagogues continued to be an important part of Jewish worship. Most Jews could not go to the temple every week. But with a synagogue, they could gather for worship every Sabbath, with prayers, songs, and Scripture.

One result of this was a new focus for the Sabbath. Even in the days of David, most Israelites could not go to Jerusalem every week. The focus of Sabbath-keeping was therefore on rest, as commanded in Scripture. But when synagogues became common, the Sabbath was also seen as a day of participating in worship. Laymen had a greater role in worship – they could do every portion of the synagogue service. People could worship without a temple, without priests, and without sacrifices.

Jesus

Now let's survey the New Testament. What did Jesus do in worship, and what did he *say* about worship? We may begin by noting that he grew up in Galilee. Although he went to Jerusalem for annual festivals, most of his worship was done *away* from the temple. We are told that he went to the synagogue, where he would read and explain Scripture. He prayed, in private and in public, and he sang songs.

Jesus would have been involved in some rituals, such as killing a Passover lamb every year. He taught in the temple and chased moneychangers out of it because he wanted the place to be worshipful, a place of prayer. But Jesus also predicted the destruction of the temple. It was not necessary for worship.

The Gospels' most direct teaching about worship is in John 4. This is set in the context of the centuries-old Jewish-Samaritan squabble about the correct place of worship. The woman said, "Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus replied, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem" (verses 20-21). In other words, location will not be important. Worship will not be associated with *any* particular spot.

Jesus added,

You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for *they* are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth. (verses 22-24)

God seeks people who will worship him. Worship is something he wants. He knows it is good for us to worship him. In speaking of "spirit and truth,"

Jesus is echoing the prophets: worship must be sincere. External things don't matter if the heart isn't right. It doesn't do us any good to worship at the right place or with the right rituals if our attitude isn't right. We can sing the right songs and hold our hands in the right way, but if our heart isn't in it, it isn't really worship.

Jesus criticized the Pharisees, quoting Isaiah, when he said, "These people worship me in vain; they honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." They are hypocrites, he said. (Matthew 15:8). They said the right things, but they didn't believe them. God does not want hypocritical worship — he wants sincere worship. We aren't supposed to fake it. We need to believe the praises we say, and if we really believe them, our lives will show it.

Externals are not primary, but if our hearts are right, then we will have externals. Rituals are not primary, but we do have rituals. Jesus himself gave us some, and it is inevitable that people will also develop some *customs* in their worship. But the focus should be sincere praise for God.

The early church

Acts 2 tells us how worship was done among the people who saw Jesus' example and followed it. "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about 3,000 were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (verses 41-42). This is their response to God, their devotion, their worship: they accepted the message — they believed, they were repentant, they were baptized — and they devoted themselves to

- * being taught,
- * sharing with one another,
- * breaking bread, and
- * prayer.

Luke is giving a summary description, not a formula for worship services.

“Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people” (verses 46-47). They worshipped in the temple, and they worshipped in their homes. They praised God, they were happy, and they were sincere.

Apparently many of the Jewish Christian in Judea continued to participate in the temple rituals until the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70 (Acts 21:20-26). Christian faith did not require them to abandon the rituals – but neither did the rituals seem to help them in their faith.

When we examine worship customs, we need to distinguish between what is required, what is permissible, and what is helpful. *Few* things are required, and *few* things are forbidden. The *many* things in between are permissible – **if** they are done for the glory of God. Luke doesn’t tell us much more about worship. To learn more about worship, we turn next to the writings of Paul.

Paul’s words for worship

Paul is a primary source for what first-century churches did and how they operated. But Paul says very little about worship. Words for worship are found only a few times in Paul’s letters. He doesn’t tell us how we should worship. Perhaps that is because Paul sees worship as something we are to do all the time. John Piper expressed it in this way:

What we find in the New Testament, perhaps to our amazement, is an utterly stunning degree of indifference to worship as an outward ritual, and an utterly radical intensification of worship as an inward experience of the heart... The very epistles that are written to help the church be what it ought to be in this age [are] almost totally devoid of...explicit teaching on the specifics of corporate worship. (<http://www.soundofgrace.com/piper97/11-09-97.htm>)

The New Testament clearly tells us that Christians meet together

regularly. It gives us commands regarding meeting together regularly. And if we are worshipping in all aspects of life, we will certainly worship when we get together. Paul uses worship-related words in some surprising ways. Romans 12:1 is one of the better-known uses: “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.”

Worship is the giving of our entire self, our thoughts and our emotions, to God’s use. All of life is an act of submission, an act of worship. Our service to God is not centered on a time or a temple, but is done whenever and wherever we are, because we *are* the temple of God. The emphasis is taken away from ceremony, seasons, places and rituals, and is shifted to what is happening in the inner person. Worship should invade our entire lives. The test of worship is not only what happens at church, but what happens at home, on the job and wherever we go.

Paul used another word for worship in Romans 1:9: “I serve [*latreuo*, one of the Greek words for worship] God with my whole heart.” How? “...in preaching the gospel of his Son.” A similar thought is in Romans 15:16: “God gave me the grace 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.”

In these verses, preaching the gospel is an act of worship. Paul was not a Levite, but he had a priestly duty, and that was to worship with all his heart by preaching. In our worship services today, the *sermon* is just as much a part of the worship as the songs are. Whenever the gospel is preached, worship is being done. God’s greatness is being proclaimed. Worship is in the listening, too, as people seek to learn what God wants us to be doing. A worshipful attitude toward God is one that respectfully listens to what he may be saying to us.

Every act of obedience is an act of worship. It declares that God has worth. And whenever we share the gospel with someone, we are declaring God's worth. We are engaging in the priestly service of preaching the gospel, the worship of being a witness to God's grace. We tell what a great thing God has done in Jesus Christ, and how that has been good news in our life. We are declaring his worth. We are giving worship in everyday life. We don't have to wait for a church service.

We get our English word "liturgy" from the Greek word *leitourgia*. In the Greek Old Testament and in pagan Greek literature, it refers to public works of worship. But Paul used it in a different context — an offering of money — money to be used in helping other Christians in famine relief, or money to be used in helping spread the gospel of Jesus Christ. Romans 15:27 uses this word: "If the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to minister to them" — literally, to give liturgy to them — "with material blessings." Paul uses this word for worship to describe financial help. This seemingly ordinary service to the saints was actually an act of worship, a religious activity.

We see a similar thing in Philippians 4:18, which Paul wrote after receiving financial help from the Christians in Philippi: "I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant *offering*, an acceptable *sacrifice*, pleasing to God." And in 2 Corinthians 9:12, he wrote, "This service — this liturgy — that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God." The people were worshipping with their money, which we can do with our offerings today, as well.

Hebrews 13 combines two New Testament forms of worship. "Through Jesus, therefore, 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). Some worship is given in words of praise, and some worship is given to God when we help one another.

In the old covenant, God required the Israelites to serve him through a priesthood, a sacrificial system and a temple. In the new covenant, all believers are priests, all believers offer sacrifices all the time, and we as a body of people *are* the temple of God. Worship is dramatically different. The ministry of worship has been given to all the people.

Devotion

Historically, several types of devotion have been recognized as important in a person’s spiritual maturity. The top two are prayer and Bible study. These have demonstrated their value time and time again in the lives of millions of Christians of all denominational affiliations. If we want spiritual health, we need a good spiritual diet, and these disciplines are helpful. They don’t *guarantee* spiritual growth, but they do provide an environment in which growth can occur more readily.

If we are in poor spiritual health, we need to check ourselves: Are we doing the things that Christians throughout the centuries have found helpful? We’d like to have quick fixes, like an easy-to-swallow pill that puts us right, but there aren’t any shortcuts like that. We may be able to get away with a junk-food diet for a while, but eventually we are going to feel some negative results, and we can’t expect one week of good food to restore us to excellent health. It requires a long-term commitment for slow, almost imperceptible improvement, and the same is true for spiritual health. There are no quick fixes, no magic potions. It requires a long-term commitment and some sacrifices.

God doesn’t give us rules about prayer and Bible study. He doesn’t say 30

minutes a day or 90 minutes a day. We have to make our own decisions, and what's right for you isn't necessarily right for me. But we each have to make spiritual health a *priority* in our lives.

Of course, we do not worship entirely on our own, each going our separate way. The New Testament picture is that we regularly get together – and when we gather, we *will* worship. That's what we do all day long, so how much *more* will we do it when we gather together! But our gatherings are not the only place we worship. True worship is in the heart, and in its outward expression it can take place in the home, on the job, *and* in the church.

Worship services

In our worship services today, where is the worship? It's in the songs, in the sermon, and in the attentiveness that we have in listening to the sermon. But there is also worship in the work that goes on behind the scenes. People who get the building ready may be making sacrifices to God that are pleasing to him. Those who help with refreshments may worship as they work. When we do good and share with others, we are giving the kind of worship that God wants.

People who work with children are worshipping as they help children understand the good news about Jesus Christ. In their actions *and* in their words, they are praising God. They are showing that he changes our lives, and he changes our priorities. We no longer live to please ourselves, but to serve others. This is a form of worship.

During the time of the apostles, what happened in church meetings? We don't know for sure. Neither Luke nor Paul gives us a complete description. However, we have some glimpses. We saw in Acts that prayer, teaching and fellowship are involved. Other verses talk about songs, too. Colossians 3:16 tells us the early church sang in their worship: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as

you *sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs* with gratitude in your hearts to God.” Ephesians 5:19 is similar: “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord.”

Prayer was also part of the worship. It was mentioned in Acts 2, and it’s supported by 1 Timothy 2. What kind of prayers were these? Did everyone say the same prayer in unison, like Jews in the synagogues did? Or did they just take turns, each saying a prayer out loud? We do not know. Either way would be possible.

Scripture reading was probably an important part of the church meeting, since it had been an important part of the synagogue service. In addition to this, the New Testament admonishes believers to stick to the apostles’ doctrine, to the standard of teaching, to the word of life, to the words of faith, to good doctrine and sound words, to sound teaching and the faith once delivered. These are different ways of saying that doctrine was important to the New Testament church. It was important to teach and learn certain truths.

One of the longest passages about church meetings is in 1 Corinthians 14. Some unusual things were happening in the church at Corinth, and Paul had to give them some guidance about it. Most of the chapter is trying to bring some control to a situation that had gotten out of control. Paul summarized their situation and provided a focus in verse 26: “What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.”

The church meeting included songs, teaching, and the use of spiritual gifts. Of all the things Paul mentions, what is the most important? Notice what he says in the last part of verse 26: That all “must be done for the *strengthening* of the church.” In verse 31 he says the goal is “so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged.”

That's the priority: Everything should be done in such a way that the church is instructed, edified, built up, strengthened. It doesn't matter how many songs we sing or what spiritual gifts we have — if we aren't helping anybody, we are missing the point of gathering together. Songs, sermon, and service: All three are forms of worship, and all three are important.

Worship today

Worship involves our entire relationship with God: our words, our attitudes, and our actions. Our words may be normal conversation, songs or prayers. In any style of speaking, we can declare God's praises and express our faith reliance on him.

God wants worship not only on our lips, but also in our hearts. He wants our worship to be sincere — *he* wants to be the most important thing in our lives, that we are truly submissive to him. He wants our worship to affect our behavior, that we make sacrifices, that we put to death the deeds of selfishness, that we seek justice, be merciful and humble, and help others. He wants us not just to obey him, but to serve in ways that go beyond specific commands. We are to worship wherever we go, doing all things to God's glory, praying always, giving thanks always, never ceasing to be a temple of the Holy Spirit. Our worship involves how we work, how we drive, and how we choose what to watch on television.

There are also actions that are more specifically times of worship. We might call these private devotions, or spiritual disciplines. These are habits and actions of worship we do individually, as opposed to worship when we gather as a church.

Worship is not restricted to a specific place and time. The best thing that has ever happened to us is that we have God in our lives. The best thing that's happened to us *this week* is that we have God in our lives. We have reason to celebrate all the time. When we live each day praising God in our hearts, it is

natural that we praise God when we gather together, when we speak to one another about the best thing that's ever happened to us. We worship all the time, but we also worship together at specific times at meetings designated for that specific purpose.

What's involved in our worship services?

1. Our first act of worship is gathering together. Simply by gathering, we are showing that God has worth. Where two or three are gathered in his name, he will be present in a special way. When we gather, we gather in the presence of God. As the Old Testament says, we appear *before the Lord*. It's like an ancient throne room, and we are invited to be with him.

In our worship services, we *want* God to be present. We specifically *ask* him to be present. He *promises* to be present. And if we are sincere about this, we should *expect* him to be present. And when we sing in God's presence, we are singing *to* him. It's not just a song about God — it is a song *to* God. These are words spoken to him. Like many of the psalms, the hymns we sing are often prayers set to music. He is the audience; we are the participants.

2. Like the psalms, our music comes in a wide variety. Some songs express positive emotions, such as adoration, praise, thanksgiving, confidence, faith, joy or excitement. We should always be happy that God is in our life. Even when we have trials, we are to rejoice. The psalms tell us to come before him and rejoice, to praise the Lord, to sing a new song unto the Lord. Praise him in the heights. Praise him, praise him, praise him. Our joy in him should spill over into praises. Our worship should be dominated by praise.

But joy is not the only legitimate emotion we can have with God. The psalms also have prayers of confession and supplication. Some of our

hymns are more meditative than celebrative. Some ask questions, some express sorrow, or anguish or fear. All of these are legitimate emotions we can sing about.

3. Our worship services usually contain several prayers, too. They include praise, usually a request, sometimes a confession. When someone near the beginning of services asks God to be in the service, to inspire the service, this is something we all want. We join in the prayer not as an audience, but as *participants*. When we say “amen,” we are saying, That’s my prayer, too. I want God to be here, too.

When we express our dependence on God, when we give all our requests to him, it shows his worth. When we want to be in his presence, it shows that he is good. When we confess our sins to him, it shows his greatness. When we give him thanks and praise, it exalts him and glorifies him. We worship when we participate in the prayers.

4. A fourth major part of our worship service is the sermon. The sermon is a communication of God’s word to us. It explains to us what God’s will is for our life. We expect God to speak to us through his Word, by inspiring the speaker, and we listen for what God is telling us. God’s truth affects our lives and our hearts. It affects real life, and it demands a *heart-felt* response. The sermon should therefore appeal to our mind *and* to our emotions.

In the sermon, we are not just an audience — we should also be participants. We should actively *think* about the Scriptures, think about the sermon, think about what it means in *our* lives. This isn’t just information about God — it is information about how God wants to change our lives. Part of our worship, part of our respectful response to God, is listening for what he wants to teach us and how he wants to change us.

We have to listen with the expectation that the sermon contains something God wants to tell us. It may be different for you than it is for me. The point is that we have to participate in the listening. Just as we participate in the music, and we participate in the prayers, we are all supposed to participate in the sermon, too.

5. As we listen, we should also be ready to *respond* to the message. The response can come in many different forms, depending on the message we have heard. One way to respond is to *do* what God is telling us to do. Some people are doing this by serving in various capacities within the church. Others respond with service outside of the church, and some may respond by *telling* others how good and great God is — worshiping him by doing the priestly duty of sharing the good news of salvation — and hopefully all these responses will be common.

Sometimes the proper response is more in *emotion* than it is in action. The most important response is that of faith – a willingness to believe what God has said. The response may include thankfulness, sometimes expressed as an offering during the worship service. Sometimes the appropriate response is simply joy. Sometimes it is repentance, a change in behavior or a change in attitude toward other people.

Sometimes silence is the best response. Sometimes we are simply dumbfounded at God's greatness, or his mercy, and we just don't have the words to say anything intelligent. So we cover our mouths and sit in awe of God. We are speechless at how utterly different God is from us, how holy, how righteous, how perfect, how powerful, how completely beyond limitations of time and space he is. And we are awe-struck that he has been so humble as to care about persons such as ourselves. Overwhelming awe is one of *many* possible responses to God, depending on how he reveals himself

to us.

No matter what, we should expect God to affect both our emotions and our minds. Our relationship with him involves all our heart, mind, soul and strength. God wants all of us, not just part of us, as we worship him.

The real test of worship is not what happens at church, but what happens at home, and on the job, and wherever we go. Is God important enough to make a difference in the way we live, in the way we work, in the way we get along with other people? When the Holy Spirit lives in us, when we are the *temple* of the Holy Spirit, worship is a part of everyday life.

Worship rituals

To some people, “ritual” suggests meaningless actions. Some rituals are like that, but not all rituals are bad. God has commanded us to have some rituals, some repeated actions. We don’t want them to become meaningless, and to avoid that, we need to keep reminding ourselves of the meaning.

Some churches have many rituals, a highly structured service, a liturgy with carefully designed prayers, responsive readings, reciting creeds, and other repeated actions. In some respects, this is like what the temple worship was. Other churches are much simpler, more like the synagogue, with a focus on Scripture. Neither approach is commanded or forbidden.

We in Grace Communion International have traditionally been on the simpler side of things. We have a small number of ceremonies, such as weddings, funerals, ordination, blessing of children, anointing the sick, and a few others. But two ceremonies are much more important than the others – baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Both of these practices picture in a symbolic way, in physical actions, some spiritual truths about the gospel. They proclaim God’s worth not only in what we say, but also by what we do. In different ways, they picture the death and life of Jesus Christ. (See our articles on [baptism](#) and [the Lord’s Supper](#).)

Here is a simple three-fold test regarding worship practices. This test encapsulates some of the major themes of worship. To analyze a worship practice, we need to ask these questions:

- * Does it glorify God? That is one major purpose of worship.
- * Does it build up the body of Christ? That is another major purpose.
- * And third, does it help us be what God wants us to be in the world?
Does it have practical results in our lives?

Perfect worship

There is a serious problem with the way the worship: we don't do it right. We try to be living sacrifices for God, but we don't always do that right. As some have said, the problem with living sacrifices is that they keep crawling off of the altar. Like the people of ancient Israel, our lives are mixed with sin. We do not have the faith that we'd like to have. We do not have as much love as we'd like to have. We do not pray as well as we wish we could. Our songs do not express our emotions as well as we'd like. We would like to present our king with sparkling jewels, but we have only plastic trinkets to give.

How do we face our failure in the area of worship?

We respond in the same way that we respond for other areas of failure: we look to Jesus. He has offered the perfect sacrifice for all of us; he has given his life to God as an act of worship for all humanity. He is our substitute — this is what theologians mean by a *vicarious* sacrifice. What he did counts for us. He had no sins of his own, and yet he gave himself as a sacrifice for sin — our sins.

Many Christians realize that Jesus was our substitute when it comes to sacrifice. “Christ died for us” is part of the New Testament message. He has given the worship that we could not.

But Jesus is our substitute in other ways, too, because our lives are hidden in him (Colossians 3:2), and he lives in us (Galatians 2:20). The prayers that

we offer are not perfect, but we pray in Christ's name, and he intercedes for us. He takes our defective prayers, removes the parts where we ask amiss, adds the details that we have neglected, and offers those prayers to God as perfect worship.

Because Jesus Christ is our representative, he offers perfect worship on our behalf, and our role is to join him in what he is already doing for us. Whether it is sacrifice, prayer, study or response, he has already been there and done that for us. The worship he gives to God is a *vicarious* worship, done for us, on our behalf.

We do our best to "get it right," but part of being "right" is admitting that we aren't always right (1 John 1:8). So the last word on worship is that we must look to Jesus as the one who is doing it right for us, and he invites us to join in what he is doing.

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Responding to God With Worship

By Joseph Tkach

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. 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. They were sitting on the riverbank with a rope and life ring, and they just watched while someone else drowned. They had the power to save, but did not use it. Power is praised only when it is used for good. Goodness is more praiseworthy than power is, and God is both good and powerful.

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 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 (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 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; 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, 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, shout, to use harps, flutes, tambourines, trumpets, cymbals — even to worship with dancing (Psalms 149-150). The picture is of exuberance, unrestrained joy, and happiness 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 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 the Mosaic requirements. 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, who have him as the center of all life.

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 includes obedience. This includes 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 is similar to Isaiah's scathing criticism of people who perform worship rituals while indulging in social injustices:

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 the 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 genuine, should 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.

Worship is much more than outward actions — it involves a 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 by magic — it happens through time spent in fellowship with God.

Paul’s expansive view of worship

Worship involves all of life. We see this especially in the words of Paul. He uses 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 some time 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 believer 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).

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.

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Is There Only One Right Way to Worship God?

By Randal Dick and J. Michael Feazell

Liturgy has become a hot topic in the church.

“Excuse me, but what’s a liturgy?” you ask.

Liturgy is simply the pattern or program of worship chosen by a church. It includes the gospel-related topics, themes, forms, symbols, styles, seasons and days that help facilitate effective worship for that particular church. In other words, liturgy refers to the whole set of seasons, days, tools and methods we use to worship, celebrate and enjoy God.

We all agree that God doesn’t want his people to fight about when to worship him. In fact, all our worship should be a source of unity and joy in the power, love, glory and grace of God. Yet, so often, our choices about when and how to worship our God and Savior become a source of division and controversy.

While some members don’t mind attending everything the church offers, and some simply avoid the activities that are not meaningful to them, others get angry just knowing any space is being given to the “other side.”

In this article, we’d like to present a few basic principles related to worship that might help us all to lay down our weapons and give each other some space about when we choose to worship our great God who loves us all.

Worship is celebration

The first thing that might help us get some perspective is to understand that worship is a human response to God — who he is, what he has done and what he is doing. It is an active, often spontaneous, celebration of God’s work through Christ. In worship Christians are participating in Christ’s work of human redemption.

New Testament liturgy is the recurring patterns of worship that developed

among the first-century Christians. It developed as the disciples rehearsed and remembered Jesus' death and resurrection by meeting together to participate in the Lord's Supper and to baptize new converts. These events were discussed, read about in the Scriptures, rehearsed and reenacted in an atmosphere of prayer, singing of hymns, thanksgiving and praise.

God likes variety

As we learn to obey Jesus' command to love one another, we also learn to appreciate and respect our cultural diversity. Jesus values human culture and human customs because he values humanity. Our cultural lenses, as it were, are a necessary part of who we are. Consequently, the forms or styles we prefer for worship are necessarily shaped by our particular culture, and rightly so.

As we view life through our particular cultural lenses, we tend to look upon other ways of doing things with suspicion, distrust, ridicule or even fear. Our culture tends to shape our values, and our values govern how we draw our conclusions about what is good and what is bad.

When we come to faith in Christ, God purifies our hearts. He softens our hearts toward others. He gives us a new commandment — that we love one another. This does not require that we must abandon our unique cultural values. It means we must learn to respect the cultural values of others, without feeling threatened ourselves.

Of course, if a particular cultural value is sinful, we must abandon it. But most of our cultural values are not sinful; many are neutral and many are quite compatible with godliness in Christ.

Culture and sin

Culture, of itself, is not evil. Our unity in Christ affirms and purifies culture; it does not do away with it! When Jesus returns, we are told in Revelation, men and women from every tribe and tongue and people and

nation will form the kingdom of God. God works with us in the context of our respective cultures. He is the author of human freedom, and he enjoys the rich tapestry of human diversity and cultural variety. God hates sin, but he does not hate culture.

It is sin that corrupts and spoils culture, not culture that causes and produces sin. Because there is sin in every human, there is sin in every culture. As God's people, Christians should turn away from sin in their respective cultures, but they do not need to turn away from their culture to embrace someone else's culture.

At the same time, no particular cultural form is an absolute. In other words, we must not think that just because a cultural form we especially like is not sinful and has a certain value in worship, therefore it must be used in worship at all costs. To make any cultural form essential to worship is to make the opposite mistake from discarding all cultural forms.

We must be free to use cultural forms in worship, while also remaining free not to use a particular cultural form. We must not allow any form or style of worship to become an end in itself. We worship God, freely using forms and styles of worship; we don't, however, allow ourselves to become slaves to those forms and styles.

Communing with God

Silly as it sounds to have to say it, God is just as comfortable communing with Filipinos in a Philippine culture as he is communing with Arabs in an Arab culture, Indians in an Indian culture, Danes in a Danish culture, Mexicans in a Mexican culture or Latinos, Anglos, African Americans or American-born Chinese in a United States culture. And God loves the worship of his people regardless of its cultural flavor and style.

Our congregations do not need to have the same songbooks, the same musical instruments, the same style of body movement or even the same days

on which we worship in order to be united in Christ. Our unity comes from our faith in Jesus Christ and our mutual love for one another, not from worshiping in the same way and at the same times in every congregation around the world.

Each culture may have different symbols that are meaningful to them. In many cultures, for example, the cross is a fitting symbol of Christian faith, while in certain other cultures it may not be, because of its widespread use in that culture as a symbol of something else. In many cultures, the Christmas season is a fitting celebration of the birth of Christ, while in certain other cultures it is not, because it has become so entrenched with ungodly rituals.

Liturgy and culture

As a congregation matures, it develops an increasingly deeper participation in the Incarnation of Christ through its worship and liturgy. That means the members of the congregation are growing in love for God and in love for others. And that means they are becoming less and less likely to condemn others for being different and for doing things differently.

It should be obvious that the more we love God, and the more we worship and honor him, the less we would tend to condemn our brothers and sisters in Christ who prefer to worship him on days and in ways different from those we choose.

But it isn't obvious, is it? We tend to condemn it anyway. And Christians always have. Less than 25 years after Jesus' death, Paul addressed this issue in his letter to the Romans: "Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls," Paul writes. "And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand" (Romans 14:4).

Such instructions are necessary for the very reason that Christians do tend to have a spirit of condemnation toward others. Paul continues in verse 10: "You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on

your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat."

What does this have to do with liturgy? Just this: We must learn not to condemn one another over the seasons and days on which we decide to worship.

For example, if one of our congregations in the United States decides to adopt an unusual format for worship, then congregations in Europe and South America do not need either to 1) feel they must immediately do the same thing, or 2) get angry and upset that the U.S. congregation has made this decision.

Likewise, if a congregation in South America feels it should not get involved in local Christmas customs, then congregations in the United States and Canada do not have to feel their South American brothers and sisters are being disloyal to Christ.

Freedom not to condemn

We are all free in Christ to worship during whatever seasons and on whatever days we find fitting and appropriate. As Paul wrote to the church in Rome: "He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God" (Romans 14:6).

Can we let this principle rule our attitudes toward one another? If our brothers and sisters in other congregations are gathering to worship the Lord, then we should not get upset about the particular choice of days on which they do so, or the specific details they incorporate in their worship.

Let's take it one step further. In any given congregation we have fellow believers who want to worship in one way, as well as fellow believers who want to worship in quite a different way.

How do we treat one another? Are we angry and judgmental? Are we considerate and patient? Do we try to understand and appreciate the feelings

of those who differ from us? What is the real value of worshiping at all if the fruit of our worship is judgmentalism and condemnation?

Within the essential and central framework of Christian orthodoxy there is much room for diversity. We have unity in the worship of the Lord, the faithful observance of the sacraments (the Lord's Supper and baptism) and the faithful proclamation of the Word.

We have diversity in the styles and forms we use in administering the sacraments, proclaiming the Word and worshiping the Lord. The Holy Spirit makes us one in Christ, and our diversity in how we express that unity is a gift of God.

Responsible choices

Each congregation in its unique setting in the world must take up its own task, with the help of the Holy Spirit, of filling cultural forms with Christian substance. Choices about symbols, order of meeting, styles of music and prayer forms, and choices about seasons and days, must be the responsibility of the local congregation under the pastor's guidance within the broad and general guidelines provided by the denomination and the regional offices.

We allow for flexibility. Congregations are free to gather for worship during those seasons and days that are most fitting for their circumstances and situations. They are not compelled to make the same choices as other congregations (that means there is significant freedom within denominational limitations). At the same time, congregations are expected to respect the choices made by other congregations.

Complications

We realize these issues are complicated. The fact is, some of our members worship in a particular manner for wrong reasons: they believe it is a sin not to observe a particular custom. Many of these members also believe it is a sin to worship in other ways. They feel sullied or dirtied, as some have put it,

having to belong to a church in which there are people who worship in a particular way.

Some have defined the old customs as a “better” way to celebrate Christ, and they look down on others as inferior. And they are upset that we no longer forbid or avoid the customs that they view as sinful, and some of them are praying that God will put everything back the way it used to be.

However, there are others who observe the old customs simply because it is their tradition and custom. They associate pleasant memories with those patterns of worship, and they have made them better than they used to be. They are glad they can worship Christ in a new and meaningful way and see their tradition as one means to that end.

But on the extreme, some of them do not want to belong to a church that still observes the old traditions. Many of these have a keen sense of having been freed from the legalism that characterized the way our church understood those customs, and they want to steer completely clear of them. They cannot understand why the church would continue to allow for the old customs when their observance was a major source of our spirit of exclusivity and our misunderstanding of the gospel.

Others don't mind the church observing the old traditions, as long as participation is not mandatory and as long as new forms of worship are used as well.

Our policy

There is no solution that will please everyone. Our goals are 1) faithfulness to God, and 2) denominational unity in the light of his Word.

That is why we provide flexibility within an overall biblical framework. Congregations are free to formulate their own liturgical calendar and practices, taking into account the needs and preferences of all the members.

Whether we can handle such freedom is yet to be seen. Can we have

diversity in this way and yet remain united in our faith in Jesus Christ and in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit? Surely we can. Whether we will is a matter of choice. God loves all his children, but his children still struggle with the challenges of working together in love.

May we join together in prayer that as we assemble for worship, God will lead us into a closer walk with him and with one another.

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Worship — A Small Group Study

By Susi Albrecht

Introduction

“The Lamb is worthy – the Lamb who was slain. He is worthy to receive the power, and the riches, and the wisdom, and the strength, and the honor, and the glory, and the blessing.” In these beautiful words from Revelation 5:12-13 we see a powerful example of worship. These inspired words are filled with wonder as they describe the reality of Jesus Christ.

The Bible teaches us how to worship and lift up the name of God so our lives can be changed through it. In John 4:23 we see that God is the one who seeks and draws us into worship. Worship is our human response to God’s divine initiative.

When they think of worship, some people think of singing, attending church services or praying. These are certainly beautiful expressions of worship, but it goes beyond that. *Worship is what our lives ought to be – a dynamic, everlasting celebration of God.* Our spiritual service of worship is ultimately giving ourselves to Him gladly and sacrificially with each passing day — it is a lifestyle. This is our privilege, our purpose and our fulfillment.

Key passage: Romans 12:1-2

Therefore, 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. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.

1. Please share with the group what worship means to you. Discuss with one another what may be new to you about this topic, and what you have learned in the last few months or years.
2. We just read that we ought to “offer our bodies as living sacrifices.” What do you understand that to mean?
3. What does verse 2 of the key passage add to your understanding of true

worship?

4. In your own words, what is the difference between “attending worship” and “living in worship”?
5. How does regular fellowship with other believers help you worship God with new and fresh eagerness?
6. When is it the hardest for you to concentrate on worshipping God?
 - * When I’m sick or hurting
 - * When bad things happen to me or someone I love
 - * When something really good is happening to me
 - * When I’m really busy

Other:

- * Have you found ways that help you remain focused on God?
- * How can worshipping Jesus transform lives of people around us? Have you seen any of that kind of change in the people with whom you have had contact?

John 4:23 says, “A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.” How does God seek you, drawing you to worship him?

“Because ‘God is spirit’ (without material being), worship must be bound up with spiritual realities, not physical formalities. Consequently, true worship is not limited by time, place or ceremony. To worship in ‘truth’ means to worship the true God, honestly, genuinely, and from the heart.” —J. Carl Laney

There are many different ways, forms and traditions that may aid us in worshipping God. The New Testament does not tell us to follow a particular form for worship, other than to worship in spirit and truth. The formats

Christians use today are not the worship, they simply help lead us *into* the worship. How do you see this happening in your congregation and in your personal worship?

The first commandment Jesus gives us is to worship God above all other things: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30).

Please discuss the following concept Richard Foster makes about the priority of worship:

The divine priority is worship first, service second. Our lives are to be punctuated with praise, thanksgiving, and adoration. Service flows out of worship. Service as a substitute for worship is idolatry. One grave temptation we all face is to run around answering calls to service without ministering to the Lord himself.

Challenge for growth

1. Look up some passages in the Bible that deal with worshiping God and that especially inspire you and (for example, Matthew 4:10, Romans 11:33-36, Psalms 116, 135, 138, 139 and 145). Sing some hymns or praise songs that especially move you.

2. As you study these passages and sing, use each as an opportunity for worship. For what can you praise God? What thanks can you offer him?

3. Look at your life and ask yourself: What can lead me to adore him more today than I did yesterday?

4. Restudy the key passage for this guide, Romans 12:1-2. What does worshiping God include and exclude? Ask yourself these questions:

* How am I hampering my life of worship by conforming to the world?

* How can I encourage my life of worship by renewing my mind?

For further reading

William Watkins, *The Busy Christian's Guide to Experiencing God More*

Richard Foster, Celebration of Discipline

Dallas Willard, The Spirit of the Disciplines

Dallas Willard, In Search of Guidance

Henri Nouwen, Seeds of Hope

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Why Our Worship Style Is Changing

By Joseph Tkach

God has done marvelous things for us! The love he has shown us in Jesus Christ is beyond our ability to understand (Ephesians 3:19). The joy he gives us in salvation is beyond our ability to express (1 Peter 1:8). The peace he gives is also beyond our comprehension (Philippians 4:7). Words simply fail to describe adequately the experience of salvation we have in Jesus Christ.

How shall we respond to these magnificent blessings? With worship — with praise and thanksgiving, giving glory and honor to God. This is our privilege and our joy. Our relationship with God is characterized by love, joy, peace, praise and worship. All that we do should be for his honor and glory — and we rejoice in being called to proclaim his praises (1 Peter 2:9).

In recent years, many congregations have changed the way they do things in their weekly meetings. Church services are called worship services. Song leaders are called worship leaders. We have more music, and a greater variety of music. The goal, of course, is that we become more conscious that we are gathering to worship our Creator and Savior, and that we express that worship in the words we sing and in the emotions that songs can convey. In a way, the “culture” in the church is changing.

It should be no surprise that some of us find this change uncomfortable. We have grown used to our traditional way of doing things, and we can easily view a change in music as an unnecessary interruption of our comfort levels. With that in mind, I would like to share with you a slightly edited letter I sent a member in response to questions about our changing worship format:

You question whether a revised worship format can bring anyone closer to God. It is true that simply changing terminology and behavior cannot force anyone to change their hearts. However, it can *facilitate* a change of heart. I

do not know what songs were done in your church area. I do know that contemporary worship songs have helped many members come to greater awareness of why we gather each week: to worship, to praise God, to rejoice before the Lord.

Salvation is a wonderful gift — better than winning a million dollars in a sweepstakes. Should we treat it as a ho-hum, matter-of-fact experience? I think not. The knowledge of salvation should make us excited, expressive, enthusiastic, anxious to praise our Father and Savior. For many people, this is done with lively songs.

As you note, the way people sing praise to God has varied from culture to culture and century to century. Eighth-century chants were effective worship expressions in the eighth century. Today, they are not. Eighteenth-century hymns were also worshipful in the 18th century. Some still are; others are not. Each type of song began as contemporary music. As time went on, it became traditional and some other style became contemporary. Today, different styles are becoming contemporary, and 18th-century hymns do not invoke worshipful thoughts in large segments of the population.

You suggest that we are changing our worship song styles without scriptural precedent. I believe that Scripture actually gives us precedent for much greater change. Scripture tells us about very expressive worship styles:

“I will be glad and rejoice in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High” (Psalm 9:2).

“Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!” (Psalm 32:11).

“Shout with joy to God, all the earth!” (Psalm 66:1).

“May the righteous be glad and rejoice before God; may they be happy and joyful. Sing to God, sing praise to his name, extol him who rides on the clouds — his name is the Lord — and rejoice before him”

(Psalm 68:3-4).

“Shout for joy, O heavens; rejoice, O earth; burst into song, O mountains!” (Isaiah 49:13).

“My lips will shout for joy when I sing praise to you — I, whom you have redeemed” (Psalm 71:23).

“Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation” (Psalm 95:1).

“Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem!” (Zephaniah 3:14).

“Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise” (James 5:13).

Have you ever shouted for joy — in the presence of other believers — at the blessings God has given you? Have you ever exulted in God? Has your heart leaped for joy? Have you clapped hands in worship? There are scriptural precedents for these. We want our worship services to allow people to express their praise and joy in the Lord.

You note that some of our minority members prefer traditional music. That is true. It is also true that some of the majority members enjoy minority music. We want to provide a variety of musical styles that reflects the variety of people that we have in our fellowship. Of course, music preferences change over time, too. After listening to a style of music for a while, it can become more enjoyable.

Another thing that we need to consider is the people who do not attend our services, and yet we want them to. What styles of music will help them worship? What songs will best express to them the joy Christ is giving us? What will magnify the Lord to them? If we want our church to grow, if we want people to stay to hear the gospel message, then we need to consider their preferences, too. Some songs are more beginner-friendly than others. I hope you can take that into consideration, too, because that is another reason

we wish to have more variety in our worship music. We want the church to grow, to bring more people to salvation through Jesus Christ.

Worship and cultural diversity

Worship styles are fundamentally a matter of culture. That means that the outward form of the worship service does not need to be the same everywhere. The key to the worship service is that a suitable environment is created in which people can come into the presence of God in the context of the body of Christ. Worship is a meeting between God and his people.

Robert Logan puts it well when he explains that the worship service should take people through a process of active response to God – helping them recognize who he is, what he is like, who we are and what we are like in relation to him, the change he desires to make in our lives, and our proper response to his will for our lives (*Beyond Church Growth*, page 77). This should be done in a way that is *culturally relevant*. In other words, the goal of worship, leading people to meet God, is best attained in the context of their particular cultural expectations.

Why we worship and what happens to us when we do are the *substance* of worship. *How* we worship, or the *form*, is rooted in our culture. If we first understand why we worship God, then we can adapt the form so that it is culturally relevant. This means that although it is essential that the substance of worship be the same everywhere, the form of worship will inevitably vary from region to region and from congregation to congregation. Certain forms of expression are more comfortable, expressive or appealing in some areas than others. Resources also vary from place to place, allowing some to enjoy worship styles that are not feasible in other places.

We do not need an identical worship form in all our congregations. What we need is to provide an environment in every congregation that allows a congregation to express its worship and praise to God in a way that is

meaningful to them as they experience and share his forgiving grace and empowering love. Because our congregations come from different cultures, we will naturally gravitate toward varying worship environments.

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John 4: True Worship

By Joseph Tkach

Jews and Samaritans simply didn't get along. The trouble went way back, five centuries or so, to the days of the Jewish leader Zerubbabel. Some Samaritans offered to help the Jews rebuild their temple, and Zerubbabel rebuffed them. The Samaritans responded by complaining to the king of Persia, and the work stopped (Ezra 4).

Later, when the Jews were rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, the governor of Samaria threatened to take military action against the Jews. The Samaritans eventually built their own temple on Mt. Gerizim, and in 128 B.C., the Jews destroyed it. Although their religions were both based on the laws of Moses, they were bitter enemies.

Jesus enters Samaria

But Jesus was not shackled by the squabbles of the past. Although most Jews avoided Samaria, Jesus walked right into it, taking his disciples with him. He was tired, so he sat down at a well near the city of Sychar, and sent his disciples into town to buy some food (John 4:38). Along came a Samaritan woman, and Jesus talked to her. She was surprised that he would talk to a Samaritan; his disciples were surprised that he would talk to a woman (verses 9, 27).

Jesus shows us a simple way of dealing with people who have different religious beliefs, people who are from a different ethnic group, people who are traditional enemies: just treat them like normal human beings. Don't ignore them, don't avoid them, don't insult them. But Jesus had something much more profound than that to say.

He began in the simplest possible way: He asked the woman for a drink. He was thirsty, but he had nothing to draw water with — but she did. He had

a need, she had a means of fulfilling it, so he asked her for help. She was surprised that a Jew would actually drink from a Samaritan water pot — most Jews considered such a vessel ritually unclean. And then Jesus said: I have something a lot better than water, if you want it. I am willing to ask you for a drink of water — are you willing to ask me for something that's better? (verses 7-10).

Jesus was using a play on words — the phrase “living water” usually meant moving water, flowing water. The woman knew quite well that the only water in Sychar was in that well, and there was no flowing water nearby. So she asked Jesus what he was talking about. He said he was talking about something that would lead to eternal life (verses 11-14). He was talking about religious ideas — but would the woman be willing to listen to spiritual truth from a religious enemy? Would she drink Jewish waters?

The woman asked for the living water, and Jesus invited her to get her husband. He already knew that she didn't have one, but he asked anyway — possibly to show that he had spiritual authority. He was the vessel from which she could receive the living water. The woman got the message: “I can see that you are a prophet” (verse 19). If Jesus knew the facts about her unusual marital status, then he probably knew spiritual truths, as well.

True worship

After learning that Jesus was a prophet, the woman brought up the age-old controversy between Samaritans and Jews about the proper place to worship: We worship here, but you Jews say that people have to go to Jerusalem (verse 20). Jesus responded: The day will soon come when that won't be relevant. It won't matter whether people look to Mt. Gerizim or Jerusalem — or any other location. The hour is already here when people will worship God in spirit and truth (verses 21-24).

Has Jesus suddenly jumped to a different subject? Maybe not — the

Gospel of John gives us some clues about what he meant: “The words I have spoken to you are *spirit* and they are life” (John 6:63). “I am the way and the *truth* and the life” (John 14:16). True worship means listening to the words of Jesus, and coming to God through him. Worship does not depend on place or time or ethnic group — it depends on our attitude to God as shown in our attitude to his Son, Jesus Christ. True worship comes along with the living water.

Jesus was revealing a profound spiritual truth to this stranger — a truth just as profound as what he had discussed with one of Israel’s religious leaders (John 3). But the woman was not quite sure what to make of it, and she said, When the Messiah comes, he’ll tell us what’s right (verse 25).

Jesus responded, I am he — probably his most direct claim to be the Messiah — and yes, what I am telling you is right. The woman left her water jar behind and went back to town to tell everyone about Jesus, and she convinced them to check it out for themselves, and many of them believed. They believed not just because of the woman’s testimony, but because they listened to Jesus himself (verses 39-41).

Worship today

Sometimes people today get too opinionated about worship — true worship has to involve a certain day of the week, a certain type of song, a certain posture or some other detail. But I think that Jesus’ answer to the Samaritan woman covers it well: The time will come when you will worship God neither this way nor that, because God is not to be found in earthly places, rotations of the earth, cultural music or human gestures.

God is spirit, and our relationship with him is a spiritual one. We live in time and space, and we use time and space in our worship, but those details are not the meaning of worship. Rather, our worship centers in Jesus, and in our relationship with him. He is the source of living waters that we need for

eternal life. We need to admit our thirst, and ask him for a drink. Or to use metaphors from the book of Revelation, we need to admit that we are poor, blind and naked, and ask Jesus for spiritual wealth, sight and clothing. We worship in spirit and truth when we look to him for what we need.

In marriage, different people express love in different ways, and some forms of expression are appropriate in public, and some are not. This is true of worship, too. We express our adoration in different ways, and some ways are more appropriate in private than in public. Certain activities, though they may seem worshipful to one person, may appear disrespectful or distracting to another person. When we worship together, we do not want our activities to put other people off. At the same time, believers who are more formal need to be tolerant of a little diversity. True worship is not defined by external matters, but by our attitude toward Jesus Christ.

When it comes to worship, though there will always be room for improvement and maturity, may we continue to learn from Jesus not only about what worship really is, but also the way we interact with people who think about it differently than we do.

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Psalms in Praise and Worship

The Psalms are not only of historical interest in understanding how the ancient Israelites worshiped God — they greatly influenced the New Testament church in how it worshiped and praised God and his Son, Jesus Christ. Moreover, the legacy of the Psalms continues to influence worship services in the church today.

Jesus told his disciples, “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44). The apostles were thoroughly familiar with the book of Psalms and quoted from it frequently. Of the 263 times the Old Testament is quoted by the New Testament writers, 116 quotations are from Psalms.

Even when not directly quoting the Psalms, the apostles and evangelists were often influenced by them in the expressions they used. Ralph P. Martin tells us that the early church, like Jesus himself, “turned to the Psalms for language in which to express their deepest emotions” (“Worship,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, p. 1125).

Undoubtedly, the early church created psalms in which they praised Jesus Christ. Donald Guthrie notes, “Many scholars have considered that Philippians 2:6-11 and Colossians 1:15-20 were originally hymns which had been composed and used before being incorporated into the respective epistles” (*New Testament Theology*, p. 343). Other hymns of the early church may have included 1 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 1:1-3 and 1 Peter 3:18-22.

The Psalms had been central to the Jews’ worship of God for centuries, providing the inspiration for their prayer patterns. These prayer patterns, in turn, were used by the early Christian communities. David E. Aune writes:

The Jewish *hodayah* (‘thanksgiving’) pattern of prayer, which characteristically began with the phrase “I/we thank you,” is frequently found in the NT and early Christian literature (Luke

2:38; Heb 13:15; Rev 11:17-18). This type of prayer is also frequently used [by] Paul to introduce petitions and intercessions (Rom 1:8; cf. Phil 4:6; Col 4:2; 1 Thess 5:16-18). (“Early Christian Worship,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6, p. 980)

As you read the epistles, you will come across sayings based on the doxologies in the Psalms. A doxology is an ascription of praise to God by the congregation. For example, Psalm 72 concludes: “Praise be to the Lord God, the God of Israel, who alone does marvelous deeds. Praise be to his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen” (verses 18-19; see also Psalm 41:13; 89:52; 106:48). A typical Christian doxology similarly attributes various characteristics — especially glory — to God and/or Christ, and includes phrases such as “forever” or “for ever and ever.” It usually concludes with an “Amen.”

Here are some examples of doxologies in Paul’s writings:

“Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen” (1 Timothy 1:17).

“For from him [God] and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen” (Romans 11:36).

“To the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen” (Romans 16:27).

Other New Testament writers also used this format:

“To him [Jesus Christ] be glory both now and forever! Amen” (2 Peter 3:18).

“To the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen” (Jude 25).

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb [Jesus Christ] be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!” (Revelation 5:13).

Another area in which the Psalms have continued to influence Christian worship throughout the centuries is that of congregational singing. In the sixth century, when Benedict set up a monastic order, he commanded the monks to chant all 150 psalms during each week. A thousand years later, Martin Luther established a church hymnal in the language of the people. He wrote a number of hymns himself, the most famous being “Ein’ feste Burg ist unser Gott” (“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”), which is based on Psalm 46. And Psalm 23, in its numerous arrangements, remains a favorite with all denominations.

Paul’s encouragement to the New Testament church, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God” (Colossians 3:16), is as important today as ever. During the song service, a congregation offers its praise to God and strengthens its relationship with Jesus Christ. Singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs helps unify the congregation in an inspirational endeavor that draws it closer together as the Body of Christ.

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Worship Looks Back, Looks Forward

By Joseph Tkach

The ancient Israelites recited their history as a reminder of who they were in the world, what their relationship with God was, and how they were supposed to respond to the God of their salvation. Their expressed who they were, and how they were to live. Deuteronomy tells us one of their confessions:

My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, putting us to hard labor. Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, O Lord, have given me. (Deuteronomy 26:5-10)

Remembering our salvation history is part of our worship. It is part of our confession and part of our understanding of who we are before God and how we are to respond to him in the world. That is one reason most Christians celebrate Advent, Easter and other commemorations of our Savior. These say something about who we are, because they rehearse the story that is central to our lives and our identity. Jesus the Christ defines who we are in the world.

We do not know exactly when the story began. The creation story starts simply “in the beginning.” We do not know when Adam was created, nor do we know exactly when the Word became flesh. We do not need to know. However, we know that the Incarnation happened at a definite point in history, as recorded by the Gospel writers Matthew and Luke. The story is

unparalleled *good news*, and because it is, we celebrate. It is good news for us, and good news for the entire world.

The Christian church has a history, too. In one way, we could say that it began before Moses, with the call of Abraham. In another way, we could say it began with Jesus' birth, or with his calling of his disciples, or with his death and resurrection. From any viewpoint, of course, we could say that the Pentecost recorded in Acts 2 was a significant beginning point for the church. The rest of the book of Acts expands the story, helping us see our connection to the Jesus who died and rose again, and how the church spread from Jerusalem into a worldwide mission. Rehearsing the story, we are reminded of who we are and our call to be about our Father's business.

Church history marches onward, though most of it did not become part of Scripture, as Acts did. The martyrdoms of Polycarp, of Perpetua, and of many others, help us glimpse the faith of the early believers. The rise of Constantine, the council of Nicea, the writings of Augustine, the rivalry between Rome and Constantinople, were major developments that helped shape the future of the church for centuries to come. Sometimes everyone "did what was right in their own eyes." Sometimes there was a powerful leader who ruled well, and sometimes there was a leader who abused the people with excessive power. There were times of sin, of captivity, of exile and of restoration.

A significant moment came in 1517, when Martin Luther challenged the authority of the Roman pontiff on doctrinal grounds, resting his case on the Word of God. There were significant milestones in Geneva, in Holland, in England and in America. People remember these milestones, for they help shape our identity. Though we are not Lutherans, we can identify with the stand of Luther. Though we are not Methodists, we can identify with the Aldersgate experience of John Wesley, when he found his heart strangely

warmed as some of Luther's work about the grace of God was read.

We do not want to forget where we have come from, how Christ has led us toward himself, and how grace liberates us from legalism. Many people not in our fellowship have benefitted from [our story](#), just as we benefit from Martin Luther's. Many people can identify with our struggle, with seeing our relationship with God in terms of our works, in terms of what we do. Many well-meaning Christians still need to be liberated with a new and personal reformation.

But we do not need a new holiday on our church calendar. There is something more important to think about than ourselves, and that is Jesus Christ. He is where our salvation begins, where our reformation begins, where our identity is centered and where our response is given. Our identity and our life are based on God made flesh, on God so humble as to freely choose to be born in poverty and oppression as one of us.

What ironies! Jesus, a Jew, was persecuted by Herod, king of the Jews, but Jesus found a safe place among the Gentiles, in Egypt. But he did not remain in safety — he returned to his people, to be rejected by them in his home town and in the capital city. He was killed by religious leaders who prided themselves on their superior ethics, and by political leaders who prided themselves on the administration of justice.

The Holy One died a cursed death, the Righteous One became sin for us. The Author of Life died — all because we humans could not be saved in any other way. We could not save ourselves. Our only hope was that God himself would come to us as one of us, that he would be without sin and be a sin offering for us.

This is where our identity is — in humility, in suffering, in trusting God from birth to death. Jesus set that example and calls us to follow him. Our story begins, as Matthew tells it, with Abraham. Our story includes Gentile

ancestors, a prostitute and an adulterer, and a woman who became pregnant before marriage. The glory of God was hidden in Mary's womb in what was, as far as everyone else could see, scandalous circumstances. The glory of God is often hidden today, too, isn't it?

That is our identity — humility and sometimes shame. We don't look like much, even though the glory of God is living within us. Our story begins in shame, in sin, in God seeking us. We have nothing to boast about; we must simply admit our inability and look to God for mercy — mercy he has already shown to us and guaranteed for us in Jesus Christ. Our story becomes merged with his, a story that includes shame and a glory that is hidden until the resurrection.

Jesus is not only our point of identity, he also shapes the response we give to God. The formula "Be holy, for I am holy" is given shape by the saying "Be merciful, for I am merciful" (Luke 6:36). Or, "Forgive, as I have forgiven you" (Colossians 3:13). God's graciousness toward us, shown most tangibly in Jesus Christ, carries with it the power to be gracious toward others. In him, we can do for them what he has done for us. This is how ethics is built in the new covenant; this is how grace teaches us to have godly lives (Titus 2:11-12). As he has loved us, we are freed to love others — tangibly, not just in pious sentiments.

We trust our lives to Jesus and know that our salvation is secure in him. We are freed from the fear of death, freed from the fear of persecution, freed from the fear of ridicule, freed from feelings of insecurity. Because we are secure in Christ, we are free to do good works despite the negative consequences that sometimes come with good works in this fallen world — and we are free not to withhold forgiveness until the other person has been punished enough or is sorry enough. We are free to forgive right away.

We are also free in Christ to worship any time, any place. We are free in

Christ to meet when it is most expedient for the *congregation and the mission field*, rather than when it is most comfortable for us personally. In short, we are free to join one another in the stable and make the feed trough our bed, to serve one another in the love of our Savior, to be harmless as doves, wise as owls and always willing to learn.

Time cannot stand still. We can reminisce about and reflect on our journey, but our focus must not stay there. We must move on, for our journey is not yet done. Christ has commanded us, “Go, make disciples, baptize them and teach them to do what I have commanded” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Our understanding is shaped by our history, but our future is in Christ. Our vision is informed by the past, but it exists *for the future*. Any attention we give to our history is pointless unless we also ask how it shapes what we do right now, and how it affects our ultimate destination. So where we were five years ago may not be as important as where we plan to be five years from now. What kind of people do we want to be — rather, what do we believe Christ wants us to be?

Whether we look backward or look forward, let’s make sure that we look to Jesus. It is to him that we owe our lives, it is in him and for him that we live and move and have our being. It is his kingdom that we belong to and serve. Christ the King, born in a manger, pleased to dwell with the humble who admit their need for him.

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Worshipping in Spirit and in Truth

By Joseph Tkach

In the last few decades, many churches have made major changes in the way they conduct worship. They have become more flexible and even adventurous, realizing that “praise and worship” (as worship in song and prayer is often referred to) is an important component of the service.

Congregations that formerly were extremely conservative and tradition-bound have learned to embrace multiple music styles. They have also learned the importance of gifted worship leaders, musicians and others who facilitate worship. Many churches, who previously would not have allowed anything but a piano or organ to accompany the hymns, now have praise bands. We have seen the increasing use of electronics to enhance worship.

Not all have appreciated this change, and worship styles, especially in regard to choice of music, have become a point of contention in many churches. Some have even talked of “worship wars.”

Something important is being lost in the clamor. Worship is so much more than just what style of music you choose, or what gizmos you hook up to go along with it. So let’s remind ourselves of what worship is, and why it is important.

Worship is an interesting word. It comes from an Old English word, *weorth* meaning “worth.” In its earliest form, *weorthscipe* (worth-ship) meant the appropriate treatment of something or someone of worth. So worth-ship or worship is the act of affirming God’s worth. It is a declaration that God is worthy — to be praised, preached about, confessed to and served.

Jesus makes one of the most pointed scriptural statements concerning worship in his encounter with the Samaritan woman. Living in a society polarized over the details of “getting worship right,” this woman seized the

opportunity to ask Jesus about it. “I can see that you are a prophet,” she said. “Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem” (John 4:19-20).

Jesus explained that the physical details of worship were not most important. “A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks” (John 4:23).

The true worship of God is expressed in a number of ways. We see this by noting that there are three basic meanings to the Greek and Hebrew words translated as worship in our English Bibles.

The first meaning is that of praise and adoration. We express this when we sing and pray (together or individually).

The second meaning pertains to public or ceremonial gatherings, like church services, where we sing, pray and fellowship together.

The third meaning, which is the broadest, is *to serve*. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *abad* is used for both worship and for work. The Greek verbs for this meaning are *latreuo* and the similar word *leiturgeo*, which is the root word for our English word liturgy.

The most important point about worship is found in the New Testament book of Hebrews, where the risen and ascended Jesus is said to be our *leitourgos* (“minister”); our worship leader (8:2). He leads us in worship, conveying all of God’s graces to us and taking all our responses to him, sanctifying them and giving them to the Father in the Spirit.

Our worship of God, with and through Jesus, can occur in large groups and small. For the first 300 years of Christianity, church services occurred mostly in homes, and therefore in small groups. That original pattern carries the blessing of simplicity. The early church did not set up banks of amplifiers, speakers, soundboards, microphones, projectors, organs and such.

These resources are not needed in small congregations. In fact, it would be ridiculous to set up for a group of 250 people when there are only going to be 10 to 20 people in attendance. Sitting in a circle is just as good as sitting in several rows — in fact, it is often better for small congregations, providing an intimate environment where genuine, quality worship can happen.

So let's remember that, although advanced technologies and live praise bands can enhance worship, they are not essential to worship. A small congregation need not feel inadequate because its worship service is not a "mega-media-event." Keep it simple — make use of the resources you have, knowing that God will meet you where you are. Instead of becoming preoccupied with the mechanics of doing church (like Martha in the kitchen!), embrace the freedom that Jesus gives you to focus on worship (like Mary at our Lord's feet). Remember what Jesus told us: "For where two or three gather in my name, I am there with them" (Matthew 18:20).

What about liturgy?

Another important aspect of worship to keep in mind is that not all worship takes place in church, or even in a group setting. Remember, one of the Greek words that is translated as "worship" can also be translated as "liturgy."

Churches with a "non-liturgical" worship tradition tend to equate liturgy with formal worship that incorporates standardized prayers accompanied by what my friend Professor Eddie Gibbs describes as "bells and smells." Though a "liturgical" approach toward worship might seem contrived and artificial to those used to a less formal style, it is perfectly valid when given to the Father, through Jesus "in spirit and in truth," as Jesus explained to the Samaritan woman at the well. But if we limit our understanding of liturgy to this particular worship style, we miss something important.

Liturgy is not just something that "high churches" like Roman Catholics,

Anglicans and Eastern Orthodox Christians do. Whether we recognize it or not, liturgy is fundamental to the rhythm of a Christian's daily life before God. The original meaning of *leitourgia* is a public duty or a service to the state undertaken by a citizen. A *leitourgos* was "a public servant." In ancient Greece, *leitourgia* was performed by wealthy citizens at their own expense. It was not limited to religious good works. Any general service of a public kind could be described as liturgy (and a person who did not accept his public duty was known as an *idiotes!*).

In Romans 12:1, Paul writes, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God — this is your true and proper worship [*latreia*]." He saw a parallel: as citizens of a community accepted their responsibility for public service, so Christians should make themselves available to God for the work of the kingdom.

Paul also draws from his own Jewish background of sacrifice associated with temple worship. The sacrifice here seems to represent an act of total self-giving of one's life for the benefit of and in response to God's mercy. But notice the radical transformation of the idea of sacrifice. In ancient Israel, the animal gave up its life as it poured out its blood. The life was given over for others so that it became dead. Here Paul proclaims that we are *living* sacrifices, *continually* self-giving.

Where did Paul get that striking insight? From the gospel of grace he laid out in the previous eleven chapters! Our sacrifice is a mirror image, reflecting the self-giving of Christ, who passed through death to eternal life, never to die again! We join in and participate in Christ's own liturgy of pouring out his life even to the extent of death, but in a way that leads to fullness of life. Christ's own worship transforms the very notion of sacrifice and worship.

Paul goes on to say: "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be

transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Romans 12:2). Our sacrificial worship demonstrates a whole new pattern of living that comes from sharing daily in the grace of Christ, our crucified, risen and ascended Lord. We read in Hebrews 8:2 that as one of us, in our place and on our behalf, he is our worship leader in every moment of our lives. In union with Christ, we daily die to ourselves in repentance and rise with Christ to newness of life through faith in him.

Coughing up prayers

So you see, liturgy is not just something "religious" we do in church, or when we pray or study the Bible. It is characteristic of the whole rhythm of our daily life. When Paul admonished Christians to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17, KJV), he was not saying that we continually pray and never stop.

The Greek word is used outside the New Testament to describe a hacking cough. When you have a hacking cough, you are not coughing all the time, but you feel like you are. That is what it means to pray without ceasing. It means being in an attitude of prayer at all times. So, when I say that worship is the rhythm of daily life, it is like saying that we "pray without ceasing" — just as we breathe without ceasing.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus showed how the practical aspect of living and worshipping in "spirit and truth" can be more important than engaging in more noticeable religious behavior. "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23).

Whenever Christians are drawn together into Christ as the common center of their desire and faith, it is worship. Jesus' teaching of a process to

eliminate conflict between fellow-believers includes purposeful fellowship, prayer, and church involvement so that forgiveness and reconciliation can occur when there are members in conflict (Matthew 18:15-17). This act of reconciliation is worship.

The temple in Jerusalem was a liturgical place that involved more than sacrifice. At its dedication, Solomon prayed, “May your eyes be open toward this temple *day and night*, this place of which you said you would put your Name there. May you hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place” (2 Chronicles 6:20). We no longer have (nor do we need) a physical temple. God’s people are God’s temple — built up by the Holy Spirit, where acts of sacrifice and service continue day and night, “without ceasing” as together, we share God’s love and life with those around us (1 Peter 2:5).

Worship is much larger than what we do when we attend church. Authentic worship is how we conduct our lives at all times. Or as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

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What Events Are Worth Celebrating?

These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:31)

Which events of Jesus' life do you think were insignificant? Which of the things he said or did is *not* worth taking notice of, or remembering, or examining? The answer is obvious: if God considered any event of Jesus' life worth recording for us, he must consider that event to be important for us.

The life of Jesus has the power to save us. The events that make up his life—what he said and what he did—can be used to lead us to faith in him. As we immerse ourselves in what he did, we can grow in our conviction (Luke 1:4) and become more established in the truth (2 Peter 1:8, 12).

The events of Jesus' life are recorded for us to remember, study, re-enact, commemorate and meditate upon. By regularly doing this—for instance, by an annual cycle that keeps returning us to events in the life of Jesus Christ—we grow in faith, we draw closer to the heart of God and we are increasingly equipped to produce fruit for our Lord.

If events of the past remain nothing more than a written record, they lose part of their power. They exercise their power in our lives only to the degree that we remember them. We are called to do more than just read about them or study them; we are called to experience Jesus' life by celebrating and even re-enacting major events. When we remember those events with ongoing celebrations, lives continue to be transformed.

Ancient Israel's experience teaches us the value of an annual rehearsal of God's acts of salvation. Every year they rehearsed the great salvation events of their history, the events in which God acted to save them. Their weekly Sabbath and annual festivals were designed to remind them how God had freed them from their slavery in Egypt (Deuteronomy 5:12-15; Exodus

12:11-12, 26-27, 42; 13:3, 8-10; Deuteronomy 16:10-12; Leviticus 23:43).

By celebrating this way, they annually remembered what God had done for them, they renewed and deepened their relationship with God, and they remembered their responsibility to God. They were not restricted to worshiping on those days alone. They continued to see the hand of God in their history long after the Exodus, and so they created additional days of worship to remember and celebrate his intervention, power and love. For example:

- * They instituted fasts in the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth months to remember the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by Babylon, and the beginning of their exile (Zechariah 7:5; Jeremiah 52:12; 2 Kings 25:8-25; Zechariah 8:19; 2 Kings 25:1; Jeremiah 39:2).
- * When God delivered them from persecution by Haman through Esther in the fifth century B.C., they commemorated his deliverance by creating the Feast of Purim (Esther 9:27-28).
- * After God delivered them from the oppression of Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century B.C., they instituted the Feast of Hanukkah, mentioned in John 10:22, as a festival of remembrance and rejoicing.

Like Israel, we Christians have a great salvation-event to remember. Unlike Israel's, ours is not just a salvation event. It is *the* salvation event: the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ by which we are saved from sin and death.

The new covenant, which God has made with his church, contains no commanded days of worship. Under the new covenant, the church is free to designate days on which to celebrate and re-enact God's act of salvation in Jesus Christ. Those celebrations can draw upon imagery from some of the festivals of Israel, which, while they looked back to that nation's salvation from Egypt, also can remind us of a greater salvation, which has now come in

Jesus Christ. Or they can be Christian celebrations at various times of the year, designed to remember and celebrate events of the life of Jesus.

The church is not commanded to adopt worship celebrations for all the events of the Gospels, but it is permitted to adopt as many worship celebrations as it feels appropriate. The church is also free to reinterpret the festivals of Israel, and to create new festivals to remember major events in our salvation through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Don Mears

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Perfect Worship

There is a serious problem with the way the worship: we don't do it right. We try to be living sacrifices for God, but we don't always do that right. As some have said, the problem with living sacrifices is that they keep crawling off of the altar. Like the people of ancient Israel, our lives are mixed with sin. We do not have the faith that we'd like to have. We do not have as much love as we'd like to have. We do not pray as well as we wish we could. Our songs do not express our emotions as well as we'd like. We would like to present our king with sparkling jewels, but we have only plastic trinkets to give.

How do we face our failure in the area of worship?

We respond in the same way that we respond for other areas of failure: we look to Jesus. He has offered the perfect sacrifice for all of us; he has given his life to God as an act of worship for all humanity. He is our substitute — this is what theologians mean by a *vicarious* sacrifice. What he did counts for us. He had no sins of his own, and yet he gave himself as a sacrifice for sin — our sins. Many Christians realize that Jesus was our substitute when it comes to sacrifice. “Christ died for us” is part of the New Testament message. This was an act of worship, done on our behalf.

But Jesus is our substitute in other ways, too, because our lives are hidden in him (Colossians 3:2), and he lives in us (Galatians 2:20). The prayers that we offer are not perfect, but we pray in Christ's name, and he intercedes for us. He takes our defective prayers, removes the parts where we ask amiss, adds the details that we have neglected, and offers those prayers to God as perfect worship.

Because Jesus Christ is our representative, he offers perfect worship on our behalf, and our role is to join him in what he is already doing for us. Whether it is sacrifice, prayer, study or response, he has already “been there

and done that” for us. The worship he gives to God is a *vicarious* worship, done for us, on our behalf.

We do our best to “get it right,” but part of being “right” is admitting that we aren’t always right (1 John 1:8). So the last word on worship is that we must look to Jesus as the one who is doing it right for us, and he invites us to join in what he is doing.

Joseph Tkach

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Thoughts About Worship

In the last two decades, our denomination has made major changes in the way we conduct worship. Many of us remember when our worship services began with a song leader and a pianist. They would lead the congregation in two or three hymns as a prelude to the “main event.”

We have become more flexible and even adventurous. We have realized that “praise and worship” (as worship in song and prayer is often referred to) is an important component of our services. We have learned to embrace multiple music styles (understanding that people of different backgrounds and cultures express themselves differently, especially in music). We have learned the importance of skilled worship leaders, musicians and others who facilitate worship. Many of our congregations have praise teams with multiple musicians.

Many of our congregations have learned to use modern technology to enhance worship, but not all congregations have the same resources. Although technology and praise bands can enhance worship, they are not essential to worship.

Worship is an interesting word. It comes from an Old English word, *weorth*, meaning “worth.” In its earliest form, *weorthscipe* (worth-ship) meant the appropriate treatment of something or someone of worth. Worth-ship or worship is the act of affirming God’s worth. It does not mean we flatter God to boost his self-esteem. Rather, it is a declaration that God is worthy — to be praised, preached about, confessed to and served.

Jesus makes one of the most pointed scriptural statements concerning worship in his encounter with the Samaritan woman. Living in a society polarized over the details of “getting worship right,” this woman seized the opportunity to ask Jesus about it. “I can see that you are a prophet,” she said.

“Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem” (John 4:19-20).

Jesus explained that the practical details of worship were not critically important. “A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks” (John 4:23).

True worship of God is expressed in a number of ways. We see this by noting three basic meanings of the Greek and Hebrew words translated as worship. The first meaning is that of praise and adoration. We express this when we sing and pray (together and individually). The second meaning pertains to public or ceremonial gatherings, like church services, where we sing, pray and fellowship together. The third meaning, which is the broadest, is to serve. In the Old Testament the Hebrew word *abad* is used for both worship and for work. The Greek verbs for this meaning are *latreuo* and the similar word *leiturgo*, which is the root word for our English word liturgy.

The most important point about worship is found in the New Testament book of Hebrews, where the risen and ascended Jesus is said to be our *leitourgos* (“minister”); our worship leader (8:2). He leads us in worship, conveying all of God’s graces to us and taking all our responses to God, sanctifying them and giving them to the Father in the Spirit.

Our worship of God, with and through Jesus, can occur in large groups and small. For the first 300 years of Christianity, church services occurred mostly in homes, and thus in small groups. This original pattern comes with the inherent blessing of simplicity.

The early church did not set up a bank of amplifiers, speakers, soundboards, microphones, projectors and such. These resources are not needed in a very small congregation. It would be a waste of energy to set up for a group of 250 people when there will be only 10 to 20 in attendance.

Sitting in a circle is just as good as sitting in several rows — indeed, it is often better for small congregations, providing an intimate environment where genuine, quality worship can happen.

If you are a small congregation, you need not feel that you are inadequate because your worship service is not a “mega-media-event.” Keep it simple — make use of the resources you have, knowing that God will meet you where you are. Instead of becoming preoccupied with the mechanics of doing church (like Martha in the kitchen!), embrace the freedom that Jesus gives you to focus on worship (like Mary at our Lord’s feet). Remember what Jesus told us: “For where two or three have gathered together in my name, I am there in their midst” (Matthew 18:20).

Joseph Tkach

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Worship and Cultural Diversity

Worship styles are fundamentally a matter of culture. That means that the outward form of the worship service does not need to be the same everywhere. The key to the worship service is that a suitable environment is created in which people can come into the presence of God in the context of the body of Christ. Worship is a meeting between God and his people.

Robert Logan puts it well when he explains that the worship service should take people through a process of active response to God – helping them recognize who he is, what he is like, who we are and what we are like in relation to him, the change he desires to make in our lives, and our proper response to his will for our lives (*Beyond Church Growth*, page 77). This should be done in a way that is *culturally relevant*. In other words, the goal of worship, leading people to meet God, is best attained in the context of their particular culture.

Why we worship and what happens to us when we do are the *substance* of worship. *How* we worship, or the *form*, is rooted in our culture. If we first understand why we worship God, then we can adapt the form so that it is culturally relevant. This means that although it is essential that the substance of worship be the same everywhere, the form of worship will inevitably vary from region to region and from congregation to congregation. Certain forms of expression are more comfortable, expressive or appealing in some areas than others. Resources also vary from place to place, allowing some to use worship styles that are not feasible in other places.

We do not need an identical worship form in all our congregations. But every congregation needs to provide an environment allows the people to express their worship and praise to God in a way that is meaningful to them as they experience and share his forgiving grace and empowering love.

Because our congregations come from different cultures, we will naturally gravitate toward varying worship environments.

Joseph Tkach

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Thoughts About Liturgy

Churches with a “non-liturgical” worship tradition tend to equate liturgy with rituals (what my friend Professor Eddie Gibbs describes as “bells and smells”), including standardized prayers. Though a “liturgical” approach toward worship might seem contrived and stiff to people used to a less formal style, it is valid when given to the Father, through Jesus, “in spirit and in truth,” as Jesus explained to the Samaritan woman in John 4.

But liturgy is much more than a style of worship practiced by “high churches” like Roman Catholics, Anglicans and Eastern Orthodox. Whether we recognize it or not, liturgy is fundamental to the rhythm of a Christian’s daily life before God.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *abad* is used to describe both worship and work. In the New Testament, the equivalent Greek words are *latreuo* and *leitourgia*, from which comes our English word “liturgy.” The original meaning of *leitourgia* was not just religious good works, but any public duty or service rendered by a citizen for the benefit of the state.

In Romans 12:1, Paul writes, “I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship [*latreia*].” He saw a parallel: as citizens of a community accepted their responsibility for public service, so Christians should make themselves available to God for the work of the kingdom. The sacrifice here seems to represent an act of total self-giving of one’s life for the benefit of and in response to God’s mercy.

Notice the radical transformation of the idea of sacrifice. In most religions of the first century, the animal lost its life as its blood flowed out. Here Paul proclaims that we are living sacrifices, continually self-giving.

Where did Paul get this striking insight? From the gospel of grace, which

he had set forth in Romans 1-11! Our sacrifice is a mirror, reflecting Christ's own self-giving. He passed through death to eternal life, never to die again! We join in and participate in Christ's liturgy of pouring out his life even to the extent of death, but in a way that leads to fullness of life.

Christ's act of worship transforms the notion of sacrifice and worship. Paul goes on to say: "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (verse 2). Our sacrificial worship demonstrates a whole new pattern of living that comes from sharing daily in the grace of Christ, our crucified, risen and ascended Lord.

Hebrews 8:2 says that Christ is a minister [*leitourgos*] of the true holy place. As a representative of humanity, as one of us, in our place and on our behalf, Jesus is our worship leader in every moment of our lives. In union with him, we daily die to ourselves in repentance, and rise with him to newness of life through faith in him.

Liturgy is not just "religious" activities done in church, or when we pray or study the Bible. It is characteristic of the whole rhythm of our daily life. When Paul admonished Christians to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonian 5:17), the Greek word he chose is used outside the New Testament to describe a hacking cough. When you have a hacking cough, you do not cough all the time, but you feel like you are. That is what it means to pray without ceasing. It means being in an attitude of prayer at all times. So when I say that worship is the rhythm of daily life, it is like saying that we pray without ceasing or breathe without ceasing.

The temple in Jerusalem was a place not just for animal sacrifices, but also other worship activities. At its dedication, Solomon prayed, "May your eyes be open toward this temple day and night, this place of which you said

you would put your Name there. May you hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place” (2 Chronicles 6:20).

We no longer need a physical temple. God’s people are the temple—built up by the Holy Spirit (1 Peter 2:5), where acts of sacrifice and service continue day and night, “without ceasing” as together we share God’s love and life with those around us. In formal times of worship, the same truth and reality are depicted. For example, baptism and communion announce in action both the sacrifice of self-giving and the transformation to new life we share with Christ. In immersion and in the breaking of the bread, we portray our death with him; when we rise from the water and consume the wine, we portray our participation in his life. In both instances we share in what is his, enveloped in his baptism and partaking of his bodily death and resurrection. That’s part of our liturgy.

Joseph Tkach

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What Events Are Worth Celebrating?

These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:31)

Jesus has the power to save us. The events that make up his life—what he said and what he did—can be used to lead us to faith in him. As we immerse ourselves in what he did, we can grow in our conviction and become more established in the truth (Luke 1:4; 2 Peter 1:8, 12).

The events of Jesus' life are recorded for us to remember, study, re-enact, commemorate and meditate upon. By regularly doing this—for instance, by an annual cycle that keeps returning us to events in the life of Jesus Christ—we grow in faith, we draw closer to the heart of God and we are increasingly equipped to produce fruit for our Lord.

If events of the past remain nothing more than a written record, they lose part of their power. They exercise their power in our lives only to the degree that we remember them. We are called to do more than just read about them or study them; we are called to experience Jesus' life by celebrating and even re-enacting major events. When we remember those events with ongoing celebrations, lives continue to be transformed.

Ancient Israel's experience teaches us the value of an annual rehearsal of God's acts of salvation. Every year they rehearsed the great salvation events of their history, the events in which God acted to save them. Their weekly Sabbath and annual festivals were designed to remind them how God had freed them from slavery in Egypt (Deuteronomy 5:12-15; Exodus 12:11-12, 26-27, 42; 13:3, 8-10; Deuteronomy 16:10-12; Leviticus 23:43).

By celebrating this way, they annually remembered what God had done for them, they renewed and deepened their relationship with God, and they

remembered their responsibility to God. They were not restricted to worshiping on those days alone. They continued to see the hand of God in their history long after the Exodus, so they created additional days of worship to remember and celebrate his intervention, power and love. For example:

- * They instituted annual fasts to remember the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and the beginning of their exile (Zechariah 7:5; Jeremiah 52:12; 2 Kings 25:8-25; Zechariah 8:19; 2 Kings 25:1; Jeremiah 39:2).
- * When God delivered them from persecution in the fifth century B.C., they commemorated his deliverance by creating the Feast of Purim (Esther 9:27-28).
- * After God delivered them from the oppression of Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century B.C., they instituted the Feast of Hanukkah, mentioned in John 10:22, as a festival of remembrance and rejoicing.

Like Israel, we Christians have a great salvation-event to remember. Unlike Israel's, ours is not just a salvation event. It is *the* salvation event: the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ by which we are saved from sin and death.

The new covenant contains no commanded days of worship. Under the new covenant, the church is free to designate days on which to celebrate and re-enact God's act of salvation in Jesus Christ. Those celebrations can draw upon imagery from some of the festivals of Israel, which, while they looked back to that nation's salvation from Egypt, also can remind us of a greater salvation, which has now come in Jesus Christ. Christian celebrations can occur at various times of the year, designed to remember and celebrate events of the life of Jesus.

The church is not commanded to adopt worship celebrations for all the events of the Gospels, but it is permitted to adopt as many worship

celebrations as it feels appropriate. The church is also free to reinterpret the festivals of Israel, and to create new festivals to remember major events in our salvation through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Don Mears

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Money and Worship

Are offerings in church an unpleasant mixing of the spiritual and the secular? Perhaps sometimes they have been — but they don't need to be. An offering *should* be an act of worship to God, motivated by a heart that pleases God.

Paul says very little about worship practices of the early church. He rarely uses the usual Greek words for *worship* in connection with the newly developing Christian communities. But he does take a Greek word for *worship* used throughout the Greek Old Testament, and he uses it for offerings. He was referring to a collection for famine relief (Romans 15:27; 2 Corinthians 9:12). This seemingly ordinary service to help other believers was an act of worship.

The same is true for offerings gathered for the support of the gospel and the church. These are also a type of worship, and are treated as such by thousands of churches around the world. Most churches include an offering as part of the weekly worship service.

God does not need any of our service — it is we who need to give it. He does not need our money, but we need to be generous. Offerings are one way to express our devotion to God in an act of worship.

Some ministers have been a bit embarrassed about offerings, and have pushed them into some corner of the room as if they really didn't belong. We believe this is a mistake, perhaps reflecting a lack of understanding of the worship nature of the offerings. We should emphasize that the offering is an act of worship. It is not the *only* way that we worship God, but it is important. In *every* aspect of our lives, we should be submissive to our Lord and Savior. Offerings are part of the picture.

Offerings may be incorporated into the worship service in several ways. A

very brief message about the offering may be helpful. It would also be appropriate to have a prayer about the offering, acknowledging that it was given to worship him, and asking him to guide its use. The prayer sets the offering in its correct context, as part of our relationship with our loving Creator and Savior.

Michael Morrison

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Offerings Express Love for God

The church's financial need is less important than the need for each of us, as children of God, to honor him with our substance. God has given us everything. He is our life, our hope, our future. Giving to him is one of the ways his people worship him and express their thanksgiving for his boundless love and grace.

The church has needs, and the need is great. The church depends on these offerings as an important part of the budget. But our giving is not a response to an obligation of the law—it is an expression of our love for God, our thankfulness for his grace and love through Jesus Christ.

God has transformed us by his grace. Because he is our God, and because he has planted his love in our hearts, our souls long for him. We desire to gather in grateful adoration and worship of the One who has saved us and given us a future and undying hope. We gather to worship him as his children. We gather to praise the name of Jesus.

We give offerings not out of obligation to the law, but from worshipful hearts of adoration for our Lord and Savior, and because we are committed to the work of his gospel that we are called and commanded to do.

Friends, God has given us the greatest gift he could have given — his Son. He has blessed us beyond what anyone imagined. Offerings are an opportunity to put our hearts into the work he is doing among us. Let us pray that the offerings will not be disappointing, and that God will inspire all of us to put our treasure where our hearts are.

J. Michael Feazell

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Poverty and Generosity

In Paul's second letter to the believers in Corinth, he gave an excellent illustration of how the wonderful gift of joy touches the lives of believers in practical ways. "And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches" (2 Corinthians 8:1).

Paul wasn't just giving a news report—he wanted the Corinthian believers to respond to God's grace in a similar way as the church in Macedonia had. He wanted to describe for them a right and fruitful response to God's generosity.

Paul notes that the Macedonians had a "severe trial" and "extreme poverty"—but they also had "overflowing joy" (verse 2). Their joy did not come from a health-and-wealth message. Their great joy was not in having lots of money and goods, but in spite of the fact that they had very little!

Their response shows something "otherworldly," something supernatural, something beyond the natural world of selfish humanity, something that cannot be explained by the values of this world: "Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in *rich generosity*" (verse 2).

This is astonishing! Combine poverty and joy, and what do you get? Rich generosity! This was not percentage-based giving. "They gave as much as they were able, *and even beyond their ability*" (verse 3). They gave more than what was "reasonable." They gave sacrificially.

Now, as if that were not enough, "entirely on their own, they *urgently pleaded with us* for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints" (verses 3-4). In their poverty, they were begging Paul for an opportunity to give more than what was reasonable!

This is how the grace of God worked in the Macedonian believers. It was

a testimony to their great faith in Jesus Christ. It was a testimony to their Spirit-empowered love for other people—a testimony that Paul wanted the Corinthians to know about and to copy. It is something for us today, too, if we can allow the Holy Spirit to work freely within us.

First to the Lord

Why did the Macedonians do something so “out of this world”? Paul says, “They gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will” (verse 5). They did it in service to the Lord. Their sacrifice was to him first and foremost. It was a work of grace, of God working in their lives, and they found themselves *happy* to do it. Responding to the Holy Spirit in them, they knew and believed and *acted* as if life is not measured by the abundance of material things.

As we read further in this chapter, we see that Paul wanted the Corinthians to do the same: “We urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—*see that you also excel in this grace of giving*” (verses 6-7).

The Corinthians had been boasting that they excelled in spiritual riches. They had a lot of financial resources to give, too, but they weren’t giving! Paul wanted them to excel in generosity, because that is an expression of godly love, and love is what is most important.

Paul knows that no matter how much a person may give, it doesn’t do that person any good if the attitude is resentful instead of generous (1 Corinthians 13:3). So he doesn’t want to bully the Corinthians into giving resentfully, but he does want to exert a little pressure, because the Corinthians were falling short in their behavior, and they needed to be *told* that they were falling short. “I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by

comparing it with the earnestness of others” (2 Corinthians 8:8).

Jesus our pacesetter

True spirituality is not found in the things that the Corinthians boasted about—it is measured by the perfect standard of Jesus Christ, who gave his life for all. So Paul presents the attitude of Jesus Christ as theological proof of the generosity he wanted to see in the Corinthian church: “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (verse 9).

The riches Paul refers to here are not physical riches. Our treasures are infinitely more important than physical riches. They are in heaven, reserved for us. Yet, even now, we can already begin to experience a small foretaste of those eternal riches as we allow the Holy Spirit to work in us.

Right now, God’s faithful people have trials, even poverty—and yet, because Jesus lives in us, we can be rich in generosity. We can excel in giving. We can go beyond the minimum because our joy in Christ can overflow to help others.

Much could be said about the example of Jesus, who often spoke about the right use of riches. In this passage Paul summarizes it with “poverty.” Jesus was willing to be impoverished for us. Following him, we are *also* called to give up the things of this world, to live by different values, to serve him by serving others.

Joy and generosity

Paul continued his appeal to the Corinthians: “Here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. Now finish the work, so that your *eager willingness* to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means” (verses 10-11).

“For if the willingness is there”—if the attitude of generosity is present

—“the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have” (verse 12). Paul was not asking the Corinthians to give as much as the Macedonians had. The Macedonians had already given beyond their ability; Paul was only asking the Corinthians to give within their ability—but the main thing is that he wanted generosity to be voluntary.

Paul continues his exhortations in chapter 9: “I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action” (verse 2).

Just as Paul was using the Macedonian example to stir the Corinthians to generosity, he had earlier used the Corinthian example to stir the Macedonians. The Macedonians were so generous that Paul realized that the Corinthians could do a lot better than they already had. But he had bragged in Macedonia that the Corinthians were generous. Now he wanted the Corinthians to follow through. He wants to exert some pressure, but he wants the offering to be given willingly:

I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you in this matter should not prove hollow, but that you may be ready, as I said you would be. For if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we—not to say anything about you—would be ashamed of having been so confident. So I thought it *necessary* to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised. Then it will be ready as a generous gift, *not as one grudgingly given*. (verses 3-5)

Then comes a familiar verse: “Each person should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (verse 7). This cheerfulness does not mean hilarity or laughter—it means that because Christ is in us, we *enjoy* sharing what we

have with others. It makes us feel good to give. Love and grace work in our hearts in such a way that, little by little, a life of giving becomes more enjoyable for us.

The greater blessing

In this passage, Paul also speaks about rewards. If we give willingly and generously, then God will also give to us. Paul is not afraid to remind the Corinthians of this: “God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work” (verse 8).

Paul is promising that God will be generous to us. Sometimes God gives us material things, but that is *not* what Paul is talking about here. He is speaking of grace—not the grace of forgiveness (we receive that wonderful grace through faith in Christ, not through works of generosity)—Paul is speaking about the many other kinds of grace God can give.

When God gave extra grace to the Macedonian churches, they had less money than before—but more joy! Most people, if forced to choose, would rather have poverty with joy, than wealth without joy. Joy is the greater blessing, and God gives us the greater blessing. Some Christians even get both—but they are also given the responsibility to use both to serve others.

Paul then quotes from the Old Testament: “He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor” (verse 9). What kind of gifts is he talking about? “His righteousness endures forever.” The gift of righteousness outweighs them all. The gift of being counted righteous in God’s sight—this is the gift that lasts forever. God gives us the best possible gift.

God rewards a generous heart

“Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness” (verse 10). This last phrase, about the harvest of

righteousness, tells us that Paul is speaking metaphorically. He is not promising literal seeds, but he is saying that God rewards generous people. He gives them more to give.

To the people who are using their spiritual gifts to serve, God will give more. Sometimes he gives in kind, grain for grain, money for money, but not always. Sometimes he blesses us with joy immeasurable in return for sacrificial giving. He always gives the best.

Paul said that the Corinthians would have all that they needed. For what purpose? So that they would “abound in every good work.” He says the same thing in verse 12: “You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion.” God’s gifts come with strings attached, we might say. We need to use them, not hide them in a closet.

Those who are rich are to become rich in good works. “Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, *to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share*” (1 Timothy 6:17-18).

Real living

What is the reward for such unusual behavior, for the people who do not cling to wealth as a thing to be grasped, but willingly give it away? “In this way they will lay up *treasure* for themselves as *a firm foundation for the coming age*, so that they may take hold of *the life that is truly life*” (verse 19). As we trust God, we are taking hold of real life, life that will last forever in love, joy and peace.

Friends, faith is not always an easy life. The new covenant does not promise a comfortable life. It offers more than a million-to-one return on our investments—but it may involve, for this temporary life, some significant

sacrifices.

And yet there are great rewards in this life, too. God gives abundant grace in the way he (in his infinite wisdom) knows what is best for us. In our trials and in our blessings, we can trust our lives to him. We can trust all things to him, and when we do it, our lives become a testimony of faith.

God loves us so much that he sent his Son to die for us even when we were sinners and enemies. Since God has already demonstrated such love for us, we can surely trust him to take care of us, for our long-range good, now that we are his children and friends! We do not need to have anxious thoughts about “our” money and our future.

The harvest of praise

Let’s go back to 2 Corinthians 9 and notice what Paul tells the Corinthians about their financial and material generosity: “Your generosity will result in *thanksgiving* to God. This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God’s people but is also *overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God*” (verses 11-12).

Paul is reminding the Corinthians that their generosity is not just a humanitarian effort—it has theological results. People will thank God for it, because they understand that God works through people. God lays it on the hearts of those who have, to give. That is the way his work is done.

“Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, people will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else” (verse 13). There are several noteworthy points in this verse:

First, the Corinthians were able to prove themselves by what they did.

They showed in their actions that their faith was genuine.

Second, generosity not only causes thanks but also praise to God. It is a form of worship.

Third, accepting the gospel of grace also requires obedience, and that includes sharing physical resources.

Giving for the gospel

Paul was writing about generosity in connection with a famine-relief effort. But the same principles apply to the financial collections we have in the church today in support of the gospel and ministry. We are still supporting an important work. It allows workers who preach the gospel to make their living from the gospel, as best as we can distribute the resources.

God still rewards generosity. He still promises treasures in heaven and pleasures forevermore. The gospel still makes demands on our finances. Our attitude toward money still reflects our faith in what God does both now and forever. And people will still thank and praise God for the sacrifices we make today.

We receive benefits from the money we give to the church—the donations help pay for a place to meet, for pastoral support, and other benefits. But our contributions also help others, to provide a place for people to come to know a fellowship of people who love sinners, to pay for the expenses of a body of believers that creates and nourishes a climate in which newcomers can learn about Jesus and salvation.

These people do not (yet) know you, but they will thank you—or at least thank God and praise him because of your living sacrifices. It is a significant work. The most significant thing we can do in this life after accepting Christ as our own Savior is to help the kingdom grow, making a difference as we allow God to work in our lives.

Let me conclude with the words of Paul in verses 14-15: “In their prayers *for you* their hearts will go out to *you*, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!”

Joseph Tkach

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Three Reasons to Give

God's old covenant people had to give at least 10 percent of their income, plus offerings on other occasions. In contrast, the new covenant does not specify a certain percentage. However, the underlying principle is still valid: Humans ought to honor God by returning some of the blessings he gives them. Here are three reasons: 1) God blesses those who give. 2) God commands his people to give. 3) The church needs money to serve the members.

God could supply all our needs miraculously, if money were the only need we had. Instead, he supplies our needs through the contributions of his people. That's because he is not only working in the church as an organization, he is also working in the hearts of his people. By making the church dependent on the members, he is addressing the most important need we have: that each of us become more closely conformed to the love shown to us by Jesus Christ.

Until Christ returns, the church will always need money. Sometimes the needs will be urgent, sometimes more predictable. There will always be more work to do. However, even if the church did not need money, God's people should still give — at the least, simply because God commands it. God's commands are given to us for our own good. Our generosity does not enrich God at all — but it does enrich us (Acts 20:35).

Those who are generous from the heart are becoming more like Christ, putting treasures in heaven for eternity. God often blesses us in this life, too, for the sacrifices we make in his service (Luke 18:29-30). It takes faith and trust — trust not so much in the people to whom the money is given, but trust in the living Jesus Christ to follow through on the promises he has made. That's where our faith needs to be — and our actions need to be consistent

with our faith.

Paul asks for generosity

The apostle Paul encourages us in 2 Corinthians 8. He was encouraging the Corinthian Christians to give an offering. Although this particular offering was not for himself, what he says is relevant to our need to be generous with the church that is teaching us the gospel of salvation.

Paul mentioned the example of the Macedonian churches, who gave even to the point of self-sacrifice (2 Corinthians 8:1-5). Paul is implying that the Corinthians needed to make some sacrifices themselves. But Paul did not command this (verse 8). Instead, he wanted a change of heart — this is the result that he wanted most of all. He wanted the Corinthians to give themselves to the Lord first, and then to others. He wanted their gift to be done in love, not grudgingly (verses 5, 8). Paul reminded them that Christ had become poor for their sakes; the implication is that the Corinthians should be willing to make some financial sacrifices of their own.

The Corinthians could not give more than they had, and they did not have to impoverish themselves to enrich others. But the rich should share with the poor (verses 12-14). Since some of the Corinthian members were wealthy, Paul was confident that they would give generously (verse 14). He asked them to prove their love (verse 24) and to do as well as he had told the Macedonians that they would (2 Corinthians 9:2-5).

Paul again said that the offering should come from the heart (verses 5-7). He reminded them that God rewards generosity (verses 6-11), and that a good example causes people to praise God and puts the gospel in a favorable setting (verses 12-14). These are good reasons to be generous. Christ has made many sacrifices for us, willingly, not grudgingly, so we also ought to be willing to give to help others, to share significant portions of our blessings with others.

This collection was for the poor saints in Judea; it was not designed to support Paul. This gave Paul an extra reason to be confident that the Corinthians would be generous. He was not asking for something in addition to ministerial support, but a substitute for it. Paul had not asked for any financial support from Corinth (2 Corinthians 11:7-11; 12:13-16). Instead, he had been supported by the Macedonians (11:9).

Paul had a right to financial support

However, Paul had a *right* to be supported by the Corinthians, even though he did not use it (1 Corinthians 9:3-15). This passage tells us more about our Christian duty to give financial support to the gospel. Workers should be able to receive benefits of their work (verse 7). Priests, soldiers, vineyard workers, herdsmen, oxen, plowers and threshers all receive pay from their work. Jesus said, “The worker deserves his wages” (Luke 10:7). Paul mentioned these principles again in 1 Timothy 5:17-18. Elders, especially those who preach and teach, should be honored financially as well as with respect.

Jesus also commanded, “Those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:14). This implies that those who believe the gospel must contribute toward the living expenses of those who preach. There is a financial duty, and there is a promised reward.

Jesus had much to say about our use of money. For example: “Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me,” said Jesus to a rich man (Luke 18:22). He said the same thing to his disciples (Luke 12:33). He praised a widow who put two coins into the temple treasury, because she gave “all she had” (Luke 21:2). The new covenant makes astonishing demands on us — it demands all that we have. This is fair, since Jesus gave all he had for us, and he paid for our entire lives.

Jesus warns us about the dangers of greed and about the danger of storing up wealth for self without being “rich toward God” (Luke 12:15-21). When we use wealth to help others, however, we gain “treasure in heaven” (verse 33). Generosity helps put our heart in heavenly things instead of earthly, temporary things (verse 34).

Self-examination needed

In summary, Christians have a spiritual need to give, to share their resources and blessings with others. They have a duty to support the preaching of the gospel and give financial support to their leaders.

The old covenant was glorious, but the new has a much greater glory. The old covenant required 10 percent; the new covenant commands us to give as we are able. How shall we respond to the better blessings we are given in the covenant of liberty? Each of us must examine our hearts before the Lamb of God, realizing he gave everything he had for us.

Although the new covenant does not specify a percentage for giving, it does not tell us to give less. Instead, it tells us to give what we can. The new covenant requires more soul-searching, more training for the conscience, more selfless love for others, more faith, more voluntary sacrifice and less compulsion. It tests our values, what we treasure most, and where our hearts really are.

Christians should examine their circumstances and the blessings they have been given in the new covenant — blessings such as the forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit and the promise of eternal life. I believe that when we understand how much has been given to us, we will respond with *greater* generosity to support the church in its collective work of preaching the gospel and for the expenses involved in the congregations and pastors.

The church does have financial needs. Members do have financial responsibilities toward the church. And God does bless the cheerful giver.

Joseph Tkach

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How Much Is Freedom Worth?

Jesus once helped a woman who had been held captive 12 years by a health problem that had made her ritually unclean. How important was this problem to her? She had spent all her money seeking a cure (Mark 5:25-29). It was worth everything she had. Women didn't ordinarily touch rabbis, but she reached out and touched Jesus — and Jesus gave her freedom. It cost her nothing, but it was worth everything!

Contrast that for a moment with the ancient Israelites, who were in slavery in Egypt. They wanted freedom, and they could not buy their way out. They suffered and groaned, and God heard their cry. He delivered them with amazing miracles. It cost them nothing, but how much was it worth to them? Not much, it seems. Although God set them free, they preferred a golden calf. They preferred the unholy fire, murmuring and self-centeredness. They grumbled about the person God was using to lead them. They grumbled about God, their food, and life itself.

Let's go back to the New Testament, where Christ again sets people free — free from spiritual bondage of sin and death (Hebrews 2:14-15). How much did it cost? It was incredibly expensive. It cost Jesus his life, and all of the suffering he endured that we might have eternal life.

The benefits of his sacrifice are given to us. Freedom is given to us without charge, because we are unable to pay. How much is it worth to us? *Our entire lives.* “He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him” (2 Corinthians 5:15). We are to give our entire lives to him in service, as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1).

In the church of God, people are being set free! Free from the fear of “not making it” into the kingdom of God. Free from rules that God does not require us to keep. Free from rules that tempt us to condemn other Christians.

Each of us may examine our own hearts to see how much we value this freedom.

It is thrilling to see that many have responded with enthusiastic *worship and support*. But it is sad when it seems that some people are afraid of the wilderness and look for the comforts of Egypt. It is just as sad when some try to enter the promised land on their own, or sit in the desert by themselves.

Christ has given us freedom, and he used humans to bring that about, and people respond to that in different ways. Some rejoice, and some do not. I suppose that there will always be reasons to complain about the imperfections of leaders, the food or the music. But some are *quietly working* to build the kingdom of God.

The old covenant had many obligations. It specified a certain amount of time, a certain amount of money, numerous rules about behavior, and many sacrifices for worship. Those requirements teach us something about God and the relationship we have with him.

God no longer requires animal sacrifices — but that does not mean that he no longer requires us to make any sacrifices. The demands are now *more profound than ever*. God no longer requires all the same rules of behavior — but he still gives many commands regarding our behavior, and more importantly, about our *hearts*.

God no longer has the same rules about money — now, his exhortations are more profound. Do we resent God's claim on "our" money? Some do. Some say that no one is good enough to be given God's money. In a way, that is true, but then that would mean that no one is good enough to keep God's money, either. If we as Christians *keep* all our money, we are not responding to freedom the way the New Testament describes we should.

God brought the Israelites out of Egypt so that they could serve him. Jesus gives us freedom so that we can serve him. The freedom comes with

responsibility.

How much is freedom worth to us?

Thousands of people are rejoicing in the freedom Jesus is bringing to people through the gospel message. You probably know many of them, and you probably know a few people who have not accepted that freedom. Please do not abandon them in their time of need. Help us continue to reach out, despite our imperfections, with the message of freedom in Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

You may have seen people profoundly transformed by God's grace. Perhaps you have been there when people begin to grasp the depth and width and height of God's love for them. This experience is one of our greatest joys.

If you cannot see the joy of burdens being lifted, if you cannot see the peace of anxieties released, be assured that freedom is indeed ringing around the world. Ask God to help you see it. Ask him to bless the results of your work and ours. Pray for us so that our priorities might be drawn yet closer to the heart of God. Pray for your brothers and sisters who need to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Joseph Tkach

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Stewardship: Our Lives Are Not Our Own

The New Testament, although emphasizing grace, has hundreds of commands. These are not requirements for salvation, but rather describe the *results* of salvation—results of God’s grace and his Spirit working within us. The new covenant makes comprehensive demands on us—not just one day a week, but an eternal lifetime. Not just 10 percent, but everything we own. Not just outward conduct, but our hearts and minds.

The apostle Paul explained it like this: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

The price of our salvation is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. He is our Redeemer—he has bought us. In ancient times, this terminology was used in the slave market, where one person could buy another. If a person could not pay a debt, he or she could be sold into slavery to pay the debt. But if a friend or relative could pay the debt, that person could act as a redeemer, to buy the slave back.

Spiritually, this is what Jesus did for us. We were in debt and could not pay our way out. We were in slavery to sin. So Jesus paid our debt, purchased us with his blood (Acts 20:28), so we should no longer be slaves of sin, but be slaves of righteousness (Romans 6:6-18).

Paul says that Christians are to glorify God in everything they do. “Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). This is a comprehensive command. No matter what we do, we are to bring glory and honor to God.

Voluntary limitations

Paul is talking here about eating meats offered in sacrifice to idols. In

verse 28, Paul says that “if anyone says to you, ‘This has been offered in sacrifice,’ then do not eat it, both for the sake of the man who told you and for conscience’ sake.” He explains: “The other man’s conscience, I mean, not yours. For *why should my freedom be judged by another’s conscience?*” (verse 29).

Paul implies that my freedom should not be judged by someone else. But, nevertheless, it is *voluntarily limited* to serve someone else. I modify my behavior because of what the other person believes, in this case, about meat sacrificed to idols.

This exact situation may not present itself today, but it illustrates what Paul means when he says all our activities are to be done for God’s glory and honor. We serve him by what we do in front of our neighbor. Our decisions about eating and drinking can serve to glorify God in our bodies—but those decisions are shaped in part by the circumstances we are in.

The new covenant does not just give us a list of dos and don’ts—it gives us the responsibility of thinking through a situation to see what brings glory to God, including how we might need to limit our behavior based on the conscience of others.

The gospel does not let us do anything we want. No—far from it. The new covenant limits what we can do not only in our private lives, but even more so in public. The gospel gives us a new perspective toward God and neighbor, a perspective that presses us to do whatever brings honor and glory to God.

Paul says: “I try to please everybody in every way.” Does this mean that Paul was a two-faced hypocrite? No, it means he was living out the reality of the new covenant. Notice what he said in chapter 9: “Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible..... I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its

blessings” (verses 19, 23).

This is the kind of freedom we have in Christ. We are not our own; we no longer just live as we please. We are slaves of Christ, and to serve him, we make ourselves slaves of others.

Property that belongs to Christ

Our lives are not our own. Our time is not our own. Our minds and hearts are not our own. Our relationships are not our own. Our skills and abilities are not our own. They all belong to Jesus Christ. However, we still must decide how to use our lives, our time, relationships, skills and abilities.

We have the new covenant gift of managing someone else’s property. The biblical term for a person who does this is steward. In the parable of the faithful and wise steward, we see this concept:

Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions.

But suppose the servant says to himself, “My master is taking a long time in coming,” and he then begins to beat the menservants and maidservants and to eat and drink and get drunk. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers.

That servant who knows his master’s will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked. (Luke 12:42-48)

Everything we have is to be used in the Lord's work. That applies to physical property such as our bodies and homes. It also applies to intangible things such as emotions, relationships and spiritual gifts. Everything we have is the Lord's. Everything we have should be used for his honor and glory.

Joseph Tkach

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