

LESSON 1

THE NATURE OF WORSHIP

Introduction

"Practice makes perfect." Actually it is perfect practice that makes perfect. Will you reflect on this old saying as I invite you to join me in exploring the nature of worship?

Psalm 95 exalts God as the reason for worship. It is an invitation for God's people to sing joyful praise in His honour. The congregation is instructed to come into His presence with thanksgiving and confession. The psalmist understands the nature of worship when he utters the familiar words:

Come, let us worship and bow down;
let us kneel before the Lord our Maker. For
He is our God, and we are the people of His
pasture, and the sheep of His hand (Ps.
95:6,7).

How does one describe worship? While worship may be defined in various ways, it is highly subjective. One needs a fundamental understanding of the nature of the worship experience as the basis for developing a working knowledge of worship terminology.

The Worship Experience

Worship is primarily an inner experience. It is the response of man to the revelation of God through Christ. Because of this awareness, individual worship is natural and normal. There is within the human race a spiritual hunger and thirst which draws one towards God. Recognizing his need of God, the psalmist expresses this thought poetically: "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for Thee, O God" (Ps. 42:1).

Christian worship glorifies God in a direct relationship between the persons worshipping and God as He is known to us in and through the person of Jesus Christ. Just as prayer is a living relationship of man to God, worship is also a direct, inner experience with God. One might think of worship as a conversation between the worshipper and the Lord. Martin Buber calls it an "I—Thou" relationship between God and ourselves as humble worshippers. The worshipper must recognize both the "otherness" of God and His "abiding presence." The worship experience is one in which the worshipper recognizes the Lord's holiness and majesty and responds in loving obedience.

If the statement by Augustine of Hippo is true,

Is the following statement true or false?

Human beings have a natural spiritual hunger for the knowledge of God. _____

(true)

that man is incurably religious, it is because he is made in the likeness and image of almighty God. The chief end of man is to glorify God in worship, service and in every area of his life (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14). In the worship experience vision, inspiration, guidance and strength are received for living the Christ-centred life.

Worship is both individual and corporate. The individual Christian who brings his own contribution to *corporate worship* in turn receives edification and strength from his fellow worshippers. It is my conviction that the primary ministry of the church is public worship.

The awaiting congregation must experience worship before the preaching of God's Word will be effective and meaningful. An atmosphere of worship is necessary for the teaching of God's Word to be embedded in our hearts. Gaines S. Dobbins suggests: "Teaching and preaching can result in one's knowing about God, but only worship can enable one to know God."¹ It is not an exaggeration to state that worship is the heart of the Christian faith. Dobbins describes several values that come to those who participate in worship.² The following discussion builds upon his outline.

Worship creates an atmosphere for redemption.

Over against God's holiness is man's sinfulness. Sin is a reality; it is not an invention of the mind. The Church does not save, but it is within the realm of the Church that Christ's salvation is made known and received. Worship discloses the ugliness of sin and the need of a Saviour. Isaiah's temple experience is an example of God's forgiveness during the experience of worship.³

Worship enhances the sense of individual worth and responsibility.

In today's world it is easy for the individual to get lost in the crowd. The congestion of the modern city may lead persons to feel that they do not count in society and that what they do with their lives is of little consequence. However, a fruitful worship experience enhances one's sense of worth and personal dignity. As a person, precious in the sight of the Lord, the worshipper is reminded that he has standing with God who walks with him in the lonely moments of life.

¹ Gaines S. Dobbins, *The Church at Worship* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1962), p. 61.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 35-43.

³ See Isaiah 6:1-6.

Mankind is to glorify God in _____,
_____ and in every area of his life.

(worship, service)

Worship is _____ and _____.

(individual, corporate)

Is the following statement true or false?

Worship is the heart of the Christian faith.

(true)

Worship creates an _____
for _____.

(atmosphere, redemption)

Our need of a Saviour becomes clear in _____.

(worship)

Is the following statement true or false?

Worship helps us feel good about ourselves.

(true)

Worship enhances our sense of _____ and
personal _____.

(worth, dignity)

Worship gives perspective to life.

Ours is a world of uncertainty and purposelessness in which people seem to be groping for some meaning to their existence. Life gets out of focus as easily as a misused camera. Even Christians become confused at times. Worship enables the believer to gain perspective and to entrust the "Why" of life into the Lord's hands. Jesus responds to man's anxiety by saying:

But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious for tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own (Matt. 6:33,34).

Through worship life takes on a clearer meaning.

Worship provides an occasion for fellowship.

Since people are gregarious by nature, they have a deep desire for community. Worship provides for this need of fellowship. Paul encourages the Church to be united in Christ: "Make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose" (Phil. 2:2). True worship demands a united fellowship.

Worship is educative.

The disciples recognize their need of instruction when they present Jesus with the request: "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). Worship is also a learning experience. Worship results in learning, and learning is necessary to worshipping. The psalmist recognizes our need to be teachable and God's role as the Great Teacher:

One thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to meditate in His temple....Teach me Thy way, O Lord, and lead me in a level path, because of my foes (Ps. 27:4, 11).

Worship enriches personality and strengthens character.

The spirit that God breathes into human beings is that which characterizes them and makes them unique. When Jesus speaks of "life," the word He uses might be translated "personality": "What shall a man be profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and forfeit his *life*? or what shall a man give in exchange for his *life*?" (Matt. 16:26, ASV, Italics mine). Personality is the total integration of physical, mental, social, moral and spiritual qualities of the human being. Worship

Worship gives _____ to _____.

(perspective, life)

Is the following statement true or false?

Though worship is beautiful, it mainly confuses its participants. _____

(false)

The human need for _____ is met in _____.

(fellowship, worship)

Worship is a _____ experience.

(learning)

Character is _____ in _____.

(strengthened, worship)

enhances our personality development and strengthens our Christian character.

Worship energizes for service.

A church gathers for worship in God's house; it then disperses to serve in God's world. Without worship, there would be little inspiration for service; without service there would be little value in worship.

Worship sustains the hope of world peace.

Ours is a world of political uncertainties, rival ideologies among super powers and Third World nations. Ours is a world of religious relativism, moral decadence, population explosion, universal economic inflation, hunger and poverty. Our world is engaged in the struggle over human rights and the conquest of natural resources. Even though our world totters on the brink of global conflict, one can be grateful that worship has a calming effect over the desires and instincts of the human soul. Certainly the most important enterprise in the world is to bring persons to a true worship experience with Christ who came to bring peace with God, peace with oneself and peace with mankind.

Worship Terminology

Since individual and corporate worship are both inner encounters with God in Christ, an adequate definition is elusive. Outstanding scholars and church leaders continue the struggle to compose a satisfying definition of worship. More often than not, these efforts result in a broader comprehension of the nature of the worship experience rather than providing an all-inclusive definition. Because worship is a spiritual experience in which the worshipper enters into spiritual communion with the Lord, it assumes a relationship between God and the believer that makes verbal expression difficult. Nonetheless, what actually takes place during the worship encounter is the starting point for developing further understanding of its nature.

The origin of the word "worship" is related to God's worth.

The English word from which the term "worship" comes was originally spelled *weorthscipe* or "worthship," combining the words "worth" (means of value) and "ship" which taken together mean "to ascribe honour or highest worth." For example, officials in high places of Church or State were often addressed as "Your Worthship" in recognition of their prestigious office. The act of worship means to recognize and declare God's worth. In the worship experience the Christian ascribes supreme worth to God for only

Worship energizes for _____.

(service)

Our hope for peace on earth is sustained by _____.

(worship)

List five values to worship.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

An adequate definition for worship is _____.

(elusive)

Is the following statement true or false?

The modern technological age makes it easier to adequately express what happens in a spiritual experience.

(false)

He is worthy of the greatest recognition. The psalmist manifests his esteem for God by declaring:

For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods, in whose hand are the depths of the earth; the peaks of the mountains are His also. The sea is His, for it was He who made it; and His hands formed the dry land. Come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord our Maker (Ps. 95:3-6).

Worship calls for the highest recognition the human mind can offer to God.

The biblical meaning of "worship" requires our submission to God.

The word most frequently used for worship in the Old Testament is the Hebrew word *sacha* which means "to bow down." In the divine encounter the worshipper prostrates himself or herself symbolically or even physically, should one feel the need to do so, in the presence of the majesty and holiness of God. The Old Testament term *sacha* conveys the idea of a reverential attitude of mind and body along with the idea of religious adoration, obedience and service. The result is an attitude of complete submission of the worshipper before a holy God. The submission is God-initiated: God is acting in the heart of the worshipper. This reverential attitude in worship is one's recognition that God is God and worthy of our worship. For example, it was reflected in the experience of Abraham's servant upon recognizing that God had led him to Rebecca in search of a wife for Isaac. The servant "bowed low and worshiped the Lord" (Gen. 24:26).

The Greek word *proskuneō* (translated "worship") means "to kiss towards," "to kiss the hand" or to "prostrate oneself before another," especially when something is wanted in return. The apostle John portrays Jesus as using the equivalent of the word *sacha* or *proskuneō* when He says to the woman of Sychar, "God is spirit; and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24). The picture is one of reverential awe, of bowing prostrate upon the ground in complete submission before God. For example, the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Jesus, bowed down before Him and made a request of Him.⁴ A review of the biblical meaning of "worship" puts a spotlight on the necessity of our submission to God.

⁴ See Matt. 20:20.

Illustrate the biblical truth that God is worthy of our worship.

(your response)

The Hebrew word *sacha* means to _____

(bow, down)

Worship requires our _____ to God.

(submission)

The New Testament word for worship is p_____. It means:

(Compare your answer with the text.)

The worship experience confronts us with God's "glory."

The term "glory" is often attributed to God in the worship experience. The Hebrew word *kabōd* (translated "glory") means the "honour" or "weight of God." Isaiah saw the Lord high and lifted up and said, "The whole earth is full of His glory" (Isa. 6:3).

The Greek word *doxa* (also translated "glory") signifies that God is worthy of praise and honour. *Doxa* is the root of the word "doxology." The angels expressed a doxology at the birth of Jesus when they exclaimed: "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased" (Luke 2:14). *Doxa* was also used to denote the illumination (John 1:14) and the character of God (Rom. 3:23).

In his Book of Revelation (literally "unveiling") John pictures angels exulting the worthiness of the slain Lamb to receive power, riches, wisdom, might, glory and blessing. In response, every created thing answers:

To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever (Rev. 5:13).

Four living creatures add a coda by saying repeatedly, "Amen" (Rev. 5:14). After this reply, John says that elders fall down and worship. The weight of God's holiness, manifested through His glory, drives the worshipper to the ground. The experience of worship also provides us with a new sense of God's glory.

The worship experience elevates the importance of "liturgy."

The Greek term *leitourgia* (translated "liturgy") means "ministry" or "service." *Leitourgia* is the combined form of *leitōs*, "public" (which comes from *laos*, meaning "people") and *ergon*, "work." The expression "liturgy" loses its association with formality when its raw meaning is defined as ministry or service of the people. It is this sense of public involvement which colours the root word *laos*, the Greek term from which comes the word "laity" (or "layman"). According to the apostle Paul, the true *leitourgia* of God is a life of faith that shows forth fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). Worship which expresses itself in spiritually motivated service is the climax of Paul's exhortation which says:

I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship (Rom. 12:1).

When we worship, we are confronted with God's

_____.

(glory)

Liturgy means _____ or _____ of the _____.

(ministry, service, people)

The term *leitourgia* which Paul uses is correctly translated as "service of worship."

Among Evangelical Free churches today the term "liturgy" has become expanded to refer to the congregation's participation in the worship service and in the "order of worship." Negatively, the temptation is for the minister to dominate the service to the extent that true *leitourgia* becomes weakened. For worship to be meaningful, the congregation should be actively involved in the worship process.

The worship experience is closely associated with the terms "religion" and "cult."

The etymological meaning of the word "religion" is unclear. In all probability it means "to reunite" with a higher being. The term generally refers to the individual's taking the initiative; however, in the Christian context God takes the initiative. The concept seems to denote the outward expression of worship. James says:

This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world (James 1:27).

The outward expression of religion appears to move in at least three directions: that of cult or worship, of doctrine or beliefs, and of behaviour or morals.⁵ Segler affirms that these are forms of expression or manifestations of religion. The total concept or content of religion is present in all three.

The Latin term *cultus* (translated "cult") has long been used to define the content and practices of the worship experience. Mowinckel defines "cult" in the following manner:

the socially established and regulated holy acts and words in which the encounter and communion of the deity with the congregation is established, developed and brought to its ultimate goal.⁶

Unfortunately, the term "cult" is often used negatively to refer to types of non-evangelical sects. The worship of God puts us in touch with the entire realm of "religion" and finds expression in particular cultic practices.

⁵ Franklin M. Segler, *Christian Worship: Its Theology and Practice* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1967), p. 6.

⁶ Sigmund Olaf Plytt Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, trans. D.R. Ap-Thomas (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 15.

Answer true or false.

Evangelical Free churches do not allow the people to participate in the worship service. Only the clergy has any active part. _____

(false)

Briefly define religion.

(Compare your answer with the text.)

The word "cult" usually refers to the _____ and _____ of worship.

(content, practices)

The heart of the worship experience is "adoration."

The adoration of God means both committing our mind and will while recognizing the infinite perfection of God. Inward devotion expresses itself in outward regard of the Lord with the utmost reverence and affection. Adoration becomes the central act in worship because the acknowledgement of the "otherness" of God reinforces the sense of His abiding presence and nearness in the life of the worshipper. Even though God is separate from us He is far from aloof when He is experienced as caring for us.

Adoration presupposes the splendour, wonder and beauty of the Lord. Recognizing these attributes of God, the psalmist cries: "Ascribe to the Lord the glory due to His name; worship the Lord in holy array" (Ps. 29:2). While one sees the beauty of the Lord reflected partially in the world, he or she adores the Creator rather than the creation. Evelyn Underhill asserts: "Creation matters because of him."⁷ God's incomprehensible grandeur inspires the soul with adoration and gives meaning to creation.

The worship experience is inseparable from Christian "praise."

In the Christian sense "praise" means not only magnifying or lauding the glorious attributes of God but esteeming these to be of highest value and worth. Praise is a way in which we give expression to Christian worship. We "adore" God because of what He is in all His glory. We "praise" Him for all He has done in and through Jesus Christ, the Redeemer and Reconciler of mankind. Guide, counsellor, comforter and defender is He who is worthy of highest praise and adoration.

Early Christians were amazed at God's work in the salvation of mankind. They struggled to understand the meaning of God's redemptive acts through Christ. Their worship centred around Jesus, the divine Word made flesh. In view of all that God accomplished through Christ, these believers offered thankful praise.

The worship experience reaches its climax in the act of "response."

It is not enough to lose oneself in the contemplation of God because of what He is and has done for mankind through Christ. True worship motivates one to action which transcends contemplation. Isaiah's beautiful Temple experience is climaxed with a deliberate act of responsiveness when he says: "Here am I. Send me!" (Isa. 6:8).

⁷ Evelyn Underhill, *Worship* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1937), p. 5.

The heart of the worship experience is _____

(adoration)

Is the following statement true or false?

When we recognize the "otherness" of God, we also recognize He is near to us. _____

(true)

_____ is an essential part of _____

(Praise, worship)

True worship motivates us to _____

(action)

Few persons of this century have achieved in their lives as meaningful a balance between contemplation and action as Dag Hammarskjold. His life excelled in dedicated service to others through his post as Secretary General of the United Nations. Hammarskjold states: "in our era the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action."⁸ The secret of this man's strength which sustained him within the stormy, tangled political arena is given in his own words:

He who has once been under God's hand . . .
. how strong he is, with the strength of God
who is within him because he is in God.⁹

The worship which Hammarskjold gave to God was lived out through a faithful life of service.

Summary

Does your experience confirm my earlier suggestion about the nature of worship that "(perfect) practice makes perfect"? You have brought your own understanding of the worship experience and worship terminology to this study. My summary will provide a check list by which you may determine those areas in which your practice of worship may be similar or different from mine. A check or question mark will let you know where we stand.

_____ You have convinced me that worship is at the heart of my Christian faith? God has placed the need to worship Him in my heart as a true believer? Through the act of worship, I regularly receive vision, inspiration, guidance and strength for living the Christ-centred life.

How many of the following values have accrued during the course of your worship experience?

_____ Worship enables me to see myself in light of God's holiness.

_____ A fruitful worship experience enhances my sense of worth and personal dignity which gives perspective to my life.

_____ Through worship I have communion with God and fellowship with other believers.

_____ I learn from my spiritual encounter to grow

⁸ Henry P. Van Dusen, "Hammarskjold and Holiness," *The Christian Century*, December 23, 1964, p. 1597. Quoted by Charles A. Trentham, "Some Theological Bases of Worship," *Review and Expositor*, Vol. LXII, No. 3, Summer, 1965. (Louisville: Faculty of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary), p. 269.

⁹ *Ibid.*

stronger in character and faith which energizes me for Christian service.

_____ Worship enables me to look to Jesus as the answer to world conflict.

Your experience with worship terminology may be different from mine. Let me suggest that you use the next check list to confirm or question the extent to which we are together in defining worship terminology.

_____ The word "worship" indicates honour and highest worth. Through worship believers ascribe supreme worth, recognition and honour to God.

_____ The biblical terms most often used for worship indicate that worship is an act of humble bowing down or symbolically prostrating myself before the Lord. Involved is an attitude of reverence and submission lived out in Christian service.

_____ The confusion that I have had with the term "liturgy" is no longer a problem because I now understand that the word means "the work of the people." In other words, it is the participation people have in the act of worship. All churches have some form of liturgy. I now realize that the word has a broader connotation than a responsive reading printed on an order of worship.

_____ I am less confused by the difficult terms "religion" and "cult." Religion is the term used to denote the outward manifestations of worship. Religion may be expressed as cult or worship, as doctrine or beliefs and as behaviour or morals. The total concept of worship is present in each of these expressions. The term "cult" refers to the content and practices of the worship experience. It refers to the socially established and regulated holy acts and words which are used in worship.

_____ I now understand that "adoration" is a biblical term closely related to "praise." It is an inward expression or attitude of mind and will in which the infinite perfection of God is recognized. Christian praise is the outward manifestation of adoration which motivates thanksgiving, confession of sin, intercession, submission, surrender and service.

_____ You have pricked my conscience by reminding me that worship is incomplete until it leads to an act of "response." I now can see worship within the larger context of my total response-ability as a Christian. Thank you for forcing me to move beyond the sanctuary as my life becomes a "liturgy" — a service of worship.

It is my hope that any question marks on your check list will be addressed in the lessons which follow. Having concentrated initially on the breadth of the study, you will not be surprised as

our exploration next leads to the depth of theological understanding.

Here we go! Take a deep breath!

Home Study Exercise

Basic activity *Levels 1, 2, and 3*). After reading the study guide text, answer the following questions.

1. According to the author, what is the chief end of mankind?

What do we receive in worship?

2. State five values to worship.

3. Why is it difficult to compose an adequate definition of worship?

4. Give the biblical meaning of worship.

5. What does God's glory have to do with worship?

6. State the "raw" meaning of liturgy.

7. What does the author mean by cult? How is this idea associated with worship?

8. According to the author, why is adoration the central act of worship?

9. What is the relationship of praise to worship?

10. How does worship affect us?

Supplementary activity (*Levels 2 and 3*). Read pages 4-12 in *Christian Worship: Its Theology and Practice* by Franklin M. Segler and answer the following questions.

1. Why do people worship?
2. Show the relationship between cult and worship.
3. Give the biblical meaning to these words:
kabōd, doxa, shachah, proskuneō, leitourgia.
What influence do they have on worship?
4. List the aspects of worship as identified by Segler.
5. Give Segler's definition of worship.

Advanced activity (*Level 3*). Read pages 76-90 in *Christian Worship* by Segler and do the following things.

1. List five ways people respond to God.
2. Explain objective and subjective worship.
3. State the basic human needs to be met in worship.
4. Write a paper based upon Segler's chapter "A Psychology of Worship."

Seminar Discussion

1. Discuss the biblical background to the idea of worship. Compose an acceptable definition of worship.
2. Discuss liturgy and how it can be used meaningfully in worship.
3. Discuss cult and worship.
4. How does worship affect us?