

Worship: More Than Singing and Style

“Worship” is a buzz word among Christians. Churches hold *worship* services led by *worship* leaders who work with *worship* teams. Some churches have a *worship* time to prepare for the sermon (evidently considered something other than worship). It is increasingly common to equate worship with singing. When told that a church has great worship, most of the time it means great singing. Yet to the surprise of many, nothing *substantial* is discovered about the greatness of a church’s worship by hearing them sing. Even if they close their eyes, raise their hands and shed tears, these practices alone do not inform us about the greatness of their worship.

“Worship,” one has written, “is not energized by artificial methods. If you feel you must have formalized ritual, or a certain kind of mood music to worship, what you do isn’t worship. Music and liturgy can assist or express a worshiping heart, but they cannot make a non-worshiping heart into a worshiping one. The danger is that they can give a non-worshiping heart the sense of having worshiped.”

Many churches debate style of worship. “Should our worship be contemporary or traditional?” they ask. Yet *style* is not the main issue concerning worship. The object of our worship and the depth of our devotion are primary. When Satan tried to entice Jesus to bow down and worship him, he was not inviting him “to change his style of ‘worship’ — to move, say, from pipe organs to guitars, from traditional to contemporary. It was private and personal; more importantly, it dealt with the fundamental question, the question of ultimate allegiance” (D.A. Carson, *Worship*). Jesus responded by quoting the OT scripture, “You shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only” (Deuteronomy 6:13).

True worship has to do with the undivided allegiance of our hearts to God. It is living out the command, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with *all* your heart, and with *all* your soul, and with *all* your mind’ (Matthew 22:36-37). Obviously one cannot discern the depth of a church’s devotion to God by hearing them sing. The Mormon Tabernacle Choir could sing Christian songs better than most churches, and they do not even worship the God of scripture.

The reality of meeting with God is basic to true worship. But if you want to meet with God, He sets the terms for the meeting. “Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord? And who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to *falsehood*, and has not sworn *deceitfully*” (Psalm 24:3-5). “Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands you sinners and purify your hearts you double minded” (James 4:8).

Where there is insincerity, dishonesty, and deception, true worship is not possible—no matter how well the church sings. Jesus said, “God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and *truth*” (John 4:24). Honesty and integrity are non-negotiable pre-requisites to great worship. Acts of worship like singing, sacrificing, or performing rituals actually become detestable to God when not accompanied by a life of honesty, sincerity, and obedience (see: Amos 5:21-24).

Some people mistakenly focus on the personal enjoyment or blessing they derive from worship. D.A. Carson noted that, “A little over a century ago, it was not uncommon to find Christians in some traditions asking after a sermon, ‘How did you get on under the Word?’

you enjoy the worship? (i.e. the rest of the service apart from the sermon). Worship can be rated according to our degree of enjoyment. It is part of the *genus* 'entertainment industry'."

We must be careful not to confuse what is central with the by-product. When we bless God it may result in our being blessed but our motive must be clear. In his magisterial work on the existence and attributes of God, Stephen Charnock wrote, "To pretend a homage to God, and intend only the advantage of self is rather to mock Him than worship Him."

To worship God is not to seek to *be* blessed but to bless him with our words *and* our lives. Let's not be like those Isaiah the prophet described, "These people draw near to me with their words and honor me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts far from me ..." (Isaiah 29:13).

"The crucial factor in worship in the church is not the form of worship, but the state of the hearts of the saints. If our corporate worship isn't the expression of our individual worshiping lives, it is unacceptable. If you think you can live any way you want and then go to church on Sunday morning and turn on worship with the saints, you're wrong" (John F. MacArthur Jr.).

Perhaps it is time to change the way we think about worship. We need a larger view of worship as something that extends beyond what we sing, say, and do in church to how we conduct ourselves in the home and workplace. The scripture refuses to separate these dimensions of our lives. Let's not try to "turn on" worship when our lives contradict our songs. Others might be impressed but God knows our hearts.