

PHILOSOPHY OF WORSHIP

With Scriptural Proofs and Examples
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1. The Principle of Worship: The reigning theme of all creation and redemptive history is that of the true worship of God. The word *worship* encompasses at its core the verbal idea of *ascribing worth* to the object of one's adoration,¹ and since it is God who created the heavens and the earth and the seas and the springs of waters, He alone must be worshipped by His creatures.² We find that God's purposes of speaking creation into existence³ are found in Himself, that is, He made creation for His own pleasure and self-glorification.⁴ Therefore, the heavens continually recount the glory of God and His *worthiness* to be praised,⁵ and as a part of God's creation, man himself was created to worship God and enjoy Him forever.⁶ Men are not free to worship God as they see fit, rather they must ascribe to God His worth according to God's divinely revealed means.⁷

2. The Priority Worship: The act of worship is the unique privilege reserved for the people of God and His elect angels. Overall, the subjects of His kingdom are called to the priority of worshipping Him, and this is the very reason for their existence: To worship and praise God *through His truth*.⁸ When the saints of God gather they are to give attention to the priorities of worship found in the teaching of the Word of God, fellowship, the breaking of bread, prayer and the singing of His praises.⁹ Regarding this last component of worship, God's people are clearly commanded to speak to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in their hearts *towards God*.¹⁰ And are the people of God adequately equipped for this sacred privilege? Yes! Christ gave gifts to the church for the equipping of the saints for the work of service.¹¹

3. The Substance of Worship: There are many texts in Scripture that inform us about the very substance of worship and therefore the treatment of this subject could be greatly expanded beyond the scope of this philosophy, however, for the sake of simplification, one primary text will be consulted in the Gospel of Mark: When our Lord was asked "what

¹ The word *worship* comes from the old English word *weorthscipe* (*weorth* ~ worth and *scipe* ~ ship). The primitive idea of this English word is that of casting to God a declaration of His worth, value or glory.

² Rev. 14:6-7 "... and **worship Him** who created the heavens and the earth and the seas and the springs of waters."

³ Heb 11:3, 3 Pet 3:5. See also all of Psalm 148.

⁴ Colossians 1:16 For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created by Him **and for Him**. NASB.

⁵ Psalm 19.

⁶ Gen. 1:27-31.

⁷ Psalm 29:2, Psalm 96:9. While Moses was on the mountain receiving the Word of God, the people began to have entertain their doubts concerning God and His chosen leader. Deciding that something had to be done, they persuaded Aaron to provide some new spiritual direction. Aaron capitulated to the pressures of the people and offered them the golden calf, the idol of their innovationistic worship. Whatever might be said about the intent of the people and of Aaron, God was displeased with their self-styled worship.

⁸ Psalm 29:10; 149:2; 148:2; Rev 5:8-14; 7:9-17; 15:2-4. The angelic realm is part of the kingdom of God as well as the people of God's choosing of Israel and the church.

⁹ Acts 2:37-47.

¹⁰ The saints are to have a ministry of encouragement to one another by stimulating one another concerning the truths of God with songs and hymns and spiritual songs. These songs must therefore be firmly rooted and grounded in Holy Writ if they are to accomplish this task. We communicate and admonish one another with these truths, but we sing them *from the heart* to God. Our worship in song must always be considered as a gift given to God for His sake.

¹¹ Eph 4:7-16.

commandment is the foremost of all?" He responded by citing two very simple commands that direct us to the love of God and the love of man as being the very culmination of all of the teaching found in the Law and the prophets. Our Lord's simple response gives us a wealth of truth regarding the very substance of worship. To simplify all that could be said about our Lord's instructions here, let us examine just three principles that can be gleaned from His teaching; specifically the *object, essence and priority* of worship:

3.1. The Object of Worship: The first great commandment¹² *actually contains two distinct instructions* regarding worship: The *object* and *essence* of true worship. In Deut. 6:4 we see that the *object* of our worship is the LORD God. This first part of the first great commandment begins with the imperative to *hear* key truths about Him:¹³ 1. Our object of worship is Yahweh, the faithful covenant keeping LORD Who stands alone as the eternally sovereign God; 2. He is our personal God, Redeemer, Savior and Shepherd and 3. He is one: Utterly perfect in unity of person and purpose. The importance of vs. 4, in relation to vs. 5, cannot be underestimated. The simple yet profound lesson before us is this: Before we can attempt to serve and love God, we must be certain that the object of our worship is the true God and not a god of our inventions.¹⁴ Throughout the generations the Jews had continued their activities of worship, but many times they worshipped and loved the gods of their own imaginations rather than the God of Holy Writ.¹⁵ Uninformed, mis-directed worship is nothing less than idolatry and cannot be taken lightly. One cannot love the Lord with all of one's heart, soul and might without a proper understanding of who He is. Without a Biblical view of God, man is left to the innovations of his own heart as to the matter of worshipping God.¹⁶

3.2. The Essence of Worship: The first great commandment then continues with its second component, found in vs. 5. Deut. 6:5 which commands us to *love* the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and strength.¹⁷ Having established much truth about the object of our love and worship, the worshipper is now informed regarding the *essence* of true worship: *devotional love*. As creatures of weakness, it is far too easy for us to generate an appearance of worship in a heartless and spiritually dry vein. However, the worshipper is commanded here to engage his heart, soul, mind¹⁸ and strength in the worship of the very LORD who is defined in verse 4.¹⁹ The very *essence* of true worship is therefore derived through the worshipper's

¹² Mark 12:29-31.

¹³ Deut 6:4. God is YHWH, the eternal, faithful covenant keeping God. He is our God. He is forever *one*.

¹⁴ These truths predicate the nature of worship and loving obedience. For one to apply verse 5 without verse 4 would be similar to shooting an arrow without making the effort to aim. This is both foolish and dangerous.

¹⁵ Consider the house cleaning that was performed by Josiah (2 Kings 23). His monarchy was best characterized by his willingness to uncompromisingly destroy the idols that had been imported into the temple over the years. Self styled worship is an abomination to God.

¹⁶ We are to worship God in spirit and in truth (John. 4:24). God, who is spirit, never energizes worship that is apart from His divine revelation.

¹⁷ Jonathan Edwards, Evidence of True Religion Lies much in the Affections, (commenting on the foremost commandment, Matt 22:37-40) "For love is not only one of the affections, but it is the first and chief of the affections, and the fountain of all the affections."

¹⁸ Mark 12:30 "...and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The insertion of the word mind here is not an addition to the original text of Deut. 6:4-5, rather it is a completion of the Hebraic idea of the heart (H. *levav*). The heart of the man included his intent, emotions *as well as his mind*.

¹⁹ Strength (H. *meod* > scalar adverb meaning "mightily"). We are not to love and serve our God insipidly, but with all our being and effort as wrought by the Spirit of God.

complete surrender of self to the one true God revealed in Biblical revelation.²⁰ This means that the believer's every emotion, intent, desire and thought, should be lovingly directed to the true God, and to no-one else.

3.3. The Priority of Worship: The second great commandment then turns to the practical outpouring of theocentric²¹ worship: The loving servitude that is given to our fellow neighbor. At the broadest level of inspection we see a very simple principle given through the order of the commands concerning the worshipper's priorities: God is first, his neighbor is second and by implication from this text, and from the analogy of Scripture,²² the worshipper is third. It is a great danger for the church to modify this order given by our Lord. All that we do in worship should be governed by the priorities of Scripture and not our felt needs.

Substance Cont' - General Application: The clear comprehension of these principles helps us to better understand the proper place and priority of the worshipper's thoughts and emotions. Throughout the centuries, the Christian community has debated the relevance of emotion and introspection in the matter of worship. Any true believer would have to admit that the Christian experience is filled with various feelings, affections and emotions that are offered to God in prayer and worship. The book of the psalms, perhaps more than any other book, gives many different examples of saints who have come to God with much joy, anxiety, emotion and introspection. The question should then be asked "is it valid for the worshipper to relate to God in such a manner that he draws heavily from such emotions?" One could possibly respond with yes and no. For example the introspection of the psalmist in Psalm 22 is very strong at the beginning of the text: *"My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"* This highly *emotive* discharge is a classic example of David's expression of fear and isolation. These were the very words of despair that Christ quoted while on the cross, bearing the sins of many upon Himself. But does this example then prescribe a higher priority of worship that begins with personal feelings? How can this be a right means of worship? If it is established that God commands us to worship Him based upon what is true about Him, then how is it that the psalms, which are very worshipful, can many times begin with the emotive expressions of the psalmist? Consider again David's emotion and deepening introspection in Psalm 22: *"Far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning...O my God, I cry by day, but Thou dost not answer; and by night, but I have no rest..."* We see in this Psalm that David does cast His anxieties upon the Lord in his despair, as every believer is commanded to do,²³ but he certainly does not remain in the subjectivity of his personal feelings: David, in psalm 22 continues, no longer focused on himself: *"Yet Thou art holy, O Thou who art enthroned upon the praises of Israel..."* The example of this Psalm, as well as all of the corpus of Scripture, is that ***the believer must seek the Lord and His sufficiency, and not his emotions as a substitute.*** It is this resolve that leads the worshipper away from a dependency upon his own subjective feelings, to an objective trust and confidence in God alone. From this it is understood that one's emotions are certainly involved in every dimension of worship, however they are not the focus, nor are

²⁰ This is the identical point that is made by the Apostle Paul in Romans 12:1-2 1 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*. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. [italics mine].

²¹ Theocentrism speaks of God (Theos) centerdness. All that the believer does should be accomplished with this priority and objective.

²² 1 Cor. 3:5, Phil 2:3, Eph. 5:21.

²³ 1 Peter 5:7.

they the chief end of what the worshipper seeks. Were Psalm 22 to end with David's introspection, without the hope that comes through divine revelation (not personal experience), he would have remained in his subjective despair. In worship it is necessary that we transcend ourselves and *ascend* to the higher ground of Scriptural worship.

4. The Direction of Worship: The corporate worship service is directed by the Lord Jesus Christ, by means of the sacred Scriptures as they are illuminated by the Holy Spirit and taught by those men who have been called to teach God's people. No other system of leadership or direction can possibly satisfy our Lord, for the removal of the church's head, authority, power or called servants is an unthinkable consideration.²⁴ The presentation of the Word of God through preaching, reading and singing is to be carefully presented in every context so that the body can be properly built up in Christ. For the church to be led in the area of worship through songs, it is profitable to call upon a gifted man to serve as a worship leader, as one who clearly understands that worship encompasses more than just singing. The worship leader's responsibility is to direct the congregation in the matters of teaching, exhortation, the pedagogy of sound hymnody, scripture readings and any other aspects of corporate worship that revolve around the proclamation of God's Word through the singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. We find clear examples of such worship leadership in the book of Psalms.²⁵ It is seen in the examples of worship from the Old Testament that it was the responsibility of the *director of music* or *choirmaster* to provide leadership, exhortation and direction for the people of God in the matter of corporate worship.²⁶ Such a ministry was, and is, a remarkably important one that requires the servant of God to direct and teach the congregation in a kind of para-pulpit ministry, administering the Scriptures and directing the people of God in song throughout the worship services. As he leads the body in worship, his goal must be to uphold the true *object, essence and priority* of worship.

4.1. Examples of Direction: With the aforementioned principle of the first great commandment in mind, let us now examine some examples of leadership in worship. The worship leader, as he develops the worship service outline each week, must carefully consider the songs that are selected. Songs that are to be sung in the assembly of the saints should be carefully evaluated for their theological content, accuracy and even historical significance. Songs that fail to direct the worshipper to the clear adoration of God should be avoided if they are deemed useless for proper worship. To illustrate this point, consider the following example in the song *Sing Alleluia to the Lord*:

²⁴ Eph 4:11, Titus 1, 1 Tim 3:1-7.

²⁵ There are one hundred and sixteen psalms which begin with a superscription or title. All of the superscriptions of the psalms provide instructional guidance concerning the historical context, the origin and what is the nature of the psalm as an instrument of praise. Fifty-five of these superscriptions (including Hab. 3:19) contain the notation: "for the director of music." Willem A. VanGemeren, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* vol. 5 (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan) p. 34. Books I, II, III, V of the psalms contain these superscriptions

²⁶ Various words occur in the collection of superscriptions and in the psalms themselves: 1) Selah: Some have thought that this was a musical marker or a pause, crescendo or musical interlude; 2) Maskil: May have meant a didactic or contemplative psalm; 3) Shiggaion (Psalm 7): Probably refers to a lamentation; 4) Miktam: There are various suggestions concerning this word: A private prayer, a golden psalm, an atonement psalm etc. 5) Tehillah: This speaks of a psalm dedicated towards praise. 6) Lezhazkir: A remembrance psalm or memorial song. The psalms show us that the *means of worship* vary in their expression. They may encompass times of contrition and brokenness over sin. They may call us to silent meditation, pause and prayer or to shouts of joy. The expression of worship as revealed in the psalms is a *multidimensional matter*. As the Word of God is proclaimed, the mode of expression in worship must be prayerfully and carefully considered by the Worship Pastor. While joy should be the result of valid worship, the means to that end will vary in their expression.

Sing Alleluia To The Lord

Sing alleluia to the Lord.
Sing alleluia to the Lord.
Sing alleluia, sing alleluia,
Sing alleluia to the Lord

This song was a favorite of mine for many years until I gave careful consideration to what I was actually saying. Nowhere in Scripture is the worshipper directed to "sing alleluia to the Lord." The reason is very simple: Alleluia is an Old English transliteration of the Hebrew word Hallelujah.²⁷ This word is a contracted command: *Hallelu* (you must praise!) *Jah* (a contracted form of Jehovah). It is a second person *command* that instructs the *worshipper* to praise the LORD.²⁸ Hence David, for example, commands his own soul in Psalm 104:35: "Bless the Lord, O my soul. **Praise the LORD!**" The exclamation mark is there for a reason. David is commanding his own soul to praise YHWH. It seems to make little sense to command God to praise Himself. God does indeed accomplish His own glory and praise, but this is what we are merely to affirm in His presence. The worshipper does not command God, but the worship leader and the people of God can claim amongst themselves *hallelujah!* in order to exhort themselves to extol God.²⁹ From this example we are reminded that as we seek to worship the Lord with all our heart, soul, *mind* and strength we must remain mentally engaged with our *thoughts set upon the Lord through His Word*.³⁰ Other songs which seem to be weak in theological content can still be used, but with care and helpful leadership. As songs written by men are fallible, they will always need careful scrutiny. Some songs may require a better pretext before being sung so that the congregation can better appreciate the Biblical theocentricity of the song. The Psalms are inspired and perfect. Hymns and spiritual songs written *and edited* by men are not inspired and must therefore be carefully evaluated by the plumb-line of Holy Writ. The chorus based upon Nehemiah 9:5-8 is one such example, from which a song was written.

I Will Bless the Lord

I will bless the Lord and give Him glory.
O, I will bless the Lord and give Him glory.

This song is one of many songs and hymns which call attention to the worshipper's intent to praise God, while falling short of declaring the very truths regarding God's *worthiness* to be praised. If our songs or hymns do not include specifically what we are giving God glory for, then we are left with a song or hymn which is still primarily focused on the horizontal aspect of the author's actions and not the vertical aspect of God's true worth.

²⁷ This is a poor transliteration in English, for it removes the identifying features of the command itself (*Halel*) and the object of worship, who is God (YHWH). This is affirmed by Rev. Robert Baker Girdlestone in his work *Synonyms of the Old Testament; Their Bearing on Christian Doctrine*: "This word is sometimes spelled alleluia in modern hymn-books, in imitation of the mode of spelling which found favour in mediaeval times. *The letter H ought certainly to be restored at both ends.*" [Italics mine]. While this matter should not be overstated, it does provide an important teaching moment and should remind us all of the importance of every *jot and tittle* of Holy Writ.

²⁸ The Tetragrammaton [YHWH], the formal and covenantal name of God [Ex. 3], normally appears as "LORD" with the distinguishing small capital letters: This is to distinguish it from other Hebrew names that can be translated as *Lord*, such as *Adonai* or *Elohiym*.

²⁹ Ephesians 5:19-20 19 speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; 20 always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father.

³⁰ 1 Cor. 14:15-16.

However, songs like this can be greatly assisted, from time to time, by the reading of the very Scriptures that they are based upon, which, in this case, is Neh. 9:5-8:

Neh. 9:5-6 "...O may Thy glorious name be blessed...*Thou alone art the Lord. Thou hast made the heavens, The heaven of heavens with all their host, The earth and all that is on it, The seas and all that is in them. Thou dost give life to all of them And the heavenly host bows down before Thee.*"

We see that in this text there is a great wealth of truth regarding the praiseworthiness of the Lord. The very substance of Neh. 9:6 (and following) provides a foundation and basis for His praise, being more important than the worshipper's expressed intent to praise the Lord. In addition to the reading of the Scriptures as a substantive aid, songs such as *I Will Bless the Lord* can very easily be strengthened by the simple scripting of an additional verse or two, based upon the verses of Neh. 9:5-8. If the worship leader is willing to do this, it can be very helpful, especially for those in the congregation who have never considered the Biblical contexts of such songs. While it is relevant to give some expression of how we feel about God, or to express our intent to praise God, it must be our ultimate goal to move from our subjective experience to the objective adoration of God, allowing our feelings to trail behind the priority of Biblical revelation: Failure to do so will leave the worshipper with man-centered worship. There are several Bible passages that warn about the negative consequences of man-centered worship.³¹ Positively, Isaiah 58:13-14 encourages us with the promise of blessing that comes from staying God-centered in our worship.

4.2. Other Examples & the Need for Discernment: Throughout the generations, there have been hymns and spiritual songs that have both helped and hurt the efforts of worship within the Christian church. Putting it another way, there are good and bad songs and hymns from every generation and it requires sound judgment and Biblical discernment in order to sort through these works and make proper use of them. Sometimes the worship leader may want to explain the background of a song in order to steer clear of any misunderstandings that could possibly arise from the text of a hymn, or from the author. For example, the hymn *Love Divine, All Loves Excelling*³² contains the following words in verse 2: "... take away our bent to sinning...". With this, one should ignore any possible connotations of Charles Wesley's theology of perfectionism.³³ In another of Wesley's hymns, *And Can It Be That I Should Gain?* (one of my favorite hymns), what could possibly be meant when it says of the Son of God that He "...emptied Himself of *all but love*..." denoting an questionable interpretation of the *kenosis*³⁴ of Christ, whose attributes of holiness, righteousness and patience were just as present as his attribute of love?³⁵ It would be safer to avoid any attempt to divide and

³¹ Is. 1:12-15, Lev. 10:1-3, Is. 43:24.

³² The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration, Charles Wesley, #92.

³³ Charles Wesley advocated that a believer could attain a stage in his or her sanctification whereby they could cease volitional sin *in this life*.

³⁴ Philippians 2:7...(He)...emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. The *kenosis* of Christ here refers to the willful act of Christ in His *setting aside* the *full* use of *all* His attributes. While it is very true that Christ's love was magnificently displayed in His life and death on the cross, it is also true that His attributes of holiness and righteousness were equally magnificent. It would be safer to avoid any attempt to divide and differentiate His indivisible attributes: This represents another possible opportunity for the worship leader to clarify the meaning and content of a song.

³⁵ Some hymnals have masterfully edited such lyrics such as the New Trinity Hymnal by Great Commission Publications. Their rendition is: "...humbled Himself *so great His love!*..." While this is probably what Wesley meant, it doesn't come through very well in light of his choice of words.

differentiate His *indivisible* attributes. Or when the congregation sings of being engaged in the “fight to set men free” in *God of Grace and God of Glory*, they won't want to connote H. E. Fosdick's thought of setting men free from mere social and religious injustices of the world. Rather, the people of God should capture the meaning of setting men free from the absolute bondage and slavery of sin, despite Fosdick's beliefs.³⁶

5. The Form of Worship: The principle of helping to maximize the congregation's ability to focus on God is a main consideration in the discussion of form in worship. There are complex considerations related to the worship environment that arise from time to time. It should be the church's goal to continue to evaluate the worship environment, with the purpose of minimizing those things that hinder our ability to focus on God and His Word. In light of the biblical considerations previously stated, the leaders should carefully discern and examine what elements may or may not be perceived as God-honoring.³⁷

5.1. Form of Worship and Instrumentation: God gave us the book of Psalms so that we would have His inspired hymnal to use for worshipping Him. What has been preserved in the Psalms is not the music, but the theology of worship itself. Hebraic musical forms of past time may have been quite unique from our standards. Even their instrumentation is a bit of a mystery today.³⁸ What then is the proper musical form for worship?³⁹ What are the right instruments to be used? There are a variety of instruments mentioned in the Bible⁴⁰ that were used for music and worship, of which God approved, but in subsequent generations the questions pertaining to taste, preference and style of music have been variously debated. It is not any less the case in this generation as there is normally a great variation of opinions among the people of God, and it should therefore fall to the church leaders to carefully evaluate the choices of instrumentation that would be best suited for the worship service, understanding that such determinations will always be subjective in nature. While it is true that there is no Biblical list of prohibited instruments in the Bible, this should not then lead to an unbridled approach to musical form and instrumentation. If musical forms and instruments ultimately dominate or deride the message of our songs, then something is being lost in the priority of worship. The Church, in all her freedom, must guard against the influences of secularism knowing that Christian liberty must be carefully governed by godly wisdom and charity.⁴¹

5.2. Form of Worship and Choral Support: The principle of instrumental and vocal accompaniment is as ancient as the psalms themselves. The processional for God as King in Psalm 68, for example, reminds us of this.⁴² Additionally, we have in Scripture examples of special vocal participation within the context of worship: Nehemiah established two choirs for singing in the temple and on the walls of Jerusalem.⁴³ While

³⁶ Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration*, #292. Since Fosdick denied the existence of a literal hell, among other things, it isn't very clear what men might need to be set free from (from his perspective). As a liberal theologian, his advocacy of a social gospel is probably what is in view here.

³⁷ Is. 5:12.

³⁸ Psalm 150.

³⁹ *Plainsong*, for many years, was thought to be the only musical form to be used in worship. Developed by Pope Gregory the Great (590-604), he determined to standardize musical style as part of his control as the Pope of Rome.

⁴⁰ Psalm 150

⁴¹ Romans 14

⁴² Psalm 68:25-25 The singers went on, the musicians after them, In the midst of the maidens beating tambourines.

⁴³ In the temple (“the house of God,” v. 40) the choir leader Jezrahiah led the two large choirs. Sacrifices were made and the people rejoiced so loudly that they could be heard far away.

these texts are not to be treated prescriptively (i.e. all churches are to have choirs), it does give us some understanding concerning the possible benefits of choral assistance.

Conclusion:

The church exists for the glory and pleasure of God and it therefore behooves His children to labor well in all aspects of worship, whether individually, or corporately. The church must therefore carefully guard herself from worldly imports that would take her away from the very *object, essence* and *priority* of true worship. Rather than trying to lure the masses by providing entertainment and self-centered forms of worship, it should instead be the prayer of the local church that all would be done for the loving adoration of the eternally glorious Lord, through the building up of the body of Christ and the evangelization of the lost. May God's people then be filled with the Holy Spirit, declaring the substance of songs, hymns and spiritual songs to one another while singing from our heart *to the Lord*. May God be praised in Spirit and in truth!

Soli Deo Gloria