Five Basic Principles of Worship

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 a new song to the Lord, to shout for joy, to use harps, flutes, tambourines, trumpets, cymbals — even to worship with dancing (Ps. 149-150). The picture is one of exuberance, of unrestrained joy, of happiness that is 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 now review some of the broader principles involved in worship.

Five facts about worship

1. God wants us to worship, to respond to him with praise and thanks.
2. Only God is worthy of our worship and total allegiance.
3. Worship must be sincere, not a performance.
4. If we really respect and love God, we will do what he says.
5. Worship is not just something we do at church -- it involves everything we do.

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 (Gen. 4:4; John 4:23; Rev. 22:9). Worship is one of the reasons we are called: to declare his praises (1 Pet. 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 Mosaic requirements and restrictions. 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 is to 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. 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 prevents us from obeying God, we need to get rid of it. God wants people who worship only him.

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 (Ps. 50:16-17). We cannot call him Lord and ignore what he says.

4. Obedience

Throughout Scripture, we see that true worship must include obedience. This obedience must include 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 reminds me of Isaiah’s scathing criticism of those who perform the worship rituals while indulging in social injustices:

When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? 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 that these 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 it is to be genuine, must 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 (Eph. 2:10).

Our concept of worship must go far beyond music, and far beyond days. Those details are not nearly as important as the way we live. It is hypocritical to keep the Sabbath while sowing discord among the brethren. It is hypocritical to sing only the psalms while refusing to worship in the way they describe. It is hypocritical to be proud about celebrating the incarnation, which sets an example of humility. It is hypocritical to call Jesus Lord if we do not also seek his sense of justice and mercy.

True worship is much more than outward actions — it involves a total 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 with magic words or magic water — it happens with time in fellowship with God. Worship involves all of life. We see this especially in the words of Paul.

Paul's expansive view of worship

Paul used 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" (Rom. 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 a few hours 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 Pet. 2:9) — a worship any member 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" (Phil. 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" (vs. 15-16).
When we understand worship as a lifestyle, involving day-to-day obedience, prayer and study, I think we have a better perspective when we look at the question of music and days. Although music has been an important part of worship at least since the time of David, music is not the most important part of worship.

Similarly, even the Old Testament recognizes that the day of worship is not as important as the way we treat our neighbors. The new covenant does not require a particular day for worship, but it does require practical works of love for one another. It requires that we meet, but it does not specify when we meet.

Friends, 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.

Joseph Tkach

Copyright 1998 Worldwide Church of God