

Worshipping in Spirit and in Truth

In the midst of an evangelistic conversation Jesus takes time to discuss the subject of worship with the woman at the well at Sychar. Worship, the Savior implies, is not an optional add on to trust in him, but rather is crucial to your relationship with God.

All of life belongs to God and is to be lived to his glory. Yet public worship holds a special place in the life of a Christian. In it the rest of our existence is taken up and is presented to him. Private and family worship are important, but are beyond the scope of discussion here. What happens when we worship God together?

“God is spirit,” Jesus said, as he spoke of the importance of worshipping the true God. That means that God is at the center of our worship. The purpose of the worship service is to glorify and honor him and to receive grace and blessings from him. Although a number of important things happen during worship (as we will see, we are fed by the Word of God, and we are refreshed and renewed), those elements are secondary. In worship we enter the very presence of God through Jesus Christ. We join with the rest of the church on earth—and even with the glorified saints in heaven—in praising him, Hebrews 12:22-24. Thus a basic question to ask about worship is not, “what makes me feel good?” but “what has God said we are to do to glorify him and what does he give to us?”

God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. John 4:24 (ESV)

resurrection of his Son. So how do we worship him?



God welcomes us into his presence. The prelude and the time for meditation provide an opportunity for us to prepare to come into God's presence. Through the one who has been appointed to proclaim God's Word the Lord's people are called to begin their worship. The triune God greets them with grace and peace.

Oh sing to the Lord a new song;
sing to the Lord, all the earth!
Sing to the Lord, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to
day. Psalm 96: 1-2 (ESV)

We praise God in word and song. Our worship service reflects a reciprocal pattern that we find throughout Biblical history: God speaks to his people and they respond with praise, prayer, confession, and

obedience. The Psalms present a theme, echoed by some of the prophetic writings, that as God comes with great works of salvation, his people respond with new songs. We sing God's praise, often using settings of some of the Psalms, singing hymns of praise, adoration, and confession. Our responsive readings, used from time to time as part of our worship, involve the congregation and its leader alternating in reading passages of Scripture, usually from the Psalms.

We speak to God in prayer. Another of the ways in which the people of God respond to him is in prayer. The prayer that Christ taught his disciples is our model. We praise God's name, honor him, and ask that his mighty rule advance and his will be done. We also bring to God our requests, interceding for his church, our nation, the world around us, as well as asking that he would provide for our specific needs. We ask his forgiveness for sin and pray for the powerful grace of his Spirit to keep us from evil. Not every prayer contains all of those elements. Sometimes one or more is prominent. But the prayers in our worship service include those different parts.

God calls us to covenantal obedience. God gave his law to the people of Israel, not as a way for them to earn their salvation (an impossible task), but to show them their need of his saving work. He prefaced the Ten Commandments with an assurance that he was the God who had redeemed them from Egypt. As we hear



the words of that law in our worship service we are reminded of his holiness and our need of the Savior. Thus we regularly confess our sins. In that law we also find the instructions of our heavenly Father, instructing us how to live as his children. His powerful Holy Spirit gives us the grace to live, not as rebels, but as his redeemed covenant people, those who are growing in grace week by week.

We worship God with tithes and offerings. Although some of the Old Testament offerings were intended to picture the covering of sins, others were primarily expressions of thanks and praise. The latter find expression in New Testament worship as we bring our offerings and give them to God. Our giving is a concrete way of acknowledging that all that we have comes from God and even what remains after we have brought our tithe to the Lord is to be used to his glory. The presentation of offerings as part of worship is a confession that God is our Lord every day of the week—not just on Sunday. His saving work ultimately renews creation. He does more than snatch our souls from destruction.



God speaks in the reading and preaching of his Word.

The Bible is God's Word—the primary way in which he communicates with us. The 66 books of the Old and New Testaments form a unit. Both parts are important to understanding his revelation to us. Our Scripture readings typically include portions of both Testaments. Throughout the Biblical history of God's people, he has been pleased to use the proclamation of his Word both to bring the good news to those who are perishing and to strengthen and build up his people. Thus the preaching of the Word holds a central place in our worship.

I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. Acts 20:27 (ESV)
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God seals his grace in the sacraments. The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are not only signs of God's grace, they present the Word in visible form. In Jesus Christ our sins are forgiven, we are cleansed from its pollution, and we are united to our Savior in his death and resurrection (Romans 6:1-14). Baptism is God's seal, marking believers and their children as belonging to him. Our own baptism (and each time we witness the baptism of one of God's people we are reminded of this) summons us to continue to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as the only Savior.



The Lord's Supper, the meal ordained by Christ on the eve of his sacrificial death, presents us with the Savior's death and resurrection in our place. Those who trust him feed upon him by faith, depending not on themselves, but on him alone. Our gracious God assures us of his grace by inviting us to table fellowship at a symbolic meal at which he is the host. In a wonderfully mysterious way, by the power of his Spirit, we feed upon the Savior who gave his body and blood for us. The Lord uses the sacraments, along with the Word, to strengthen our faith in Christ.

God blesses us and sends us to serve him. God instructed Aaron the high priest to bless God's people and place his name on them, Numbers 6:22-27. At the conclusion of the worship service the God who has spoken to us in his Word places his name, the name of the triune God, upon us. As the assembled worshippers scatter with his blessing of peace, they do not leave God's presence, but he goes with them as they go to serve him throughout the week.

Certainly worship can degenerate to an empty form if we go through the parts of worship simply out of habit. But Jesus reminds us that God is to be worshipped in Spirit. By his Spirit Christ is present in a mysterious way in the sacraments as well as in the rest of the worship service. It is only the Spirit who can work faith in our hearts. He alone unites us to Christ. He gives life to us, enabling us to grow in grace and obedience.

Worship has an eternal aspect to it. The Book of Hebrews reminds us that we have already come to the heavenly Jerusalem, to Mount Zion, and join the angels and saints in glory in praising God. Parts of the work of the church in the present age are crucially important now, but will not be needed in the new heavens and earth (think of the diaconal ministry to the poor and suffering and the task of evangelizing the lost). But the worship in which the church is now engaged will continue, perfected and freed from sin, for all eternity. There will never be a time when the church ceases to worship her God—and we are involved in that each Lord's Day.

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