

How Scripture Can Guide Christians to Unity in the Twenty-first Century

**ARE WE
MISSING
SOMETHING?**

*Discovering God's House, God's Church, and
True Worship*

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Are We Missing Something?

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Discovering True Worship

How We Can Offer to God What He Really Wants

“Worship God” (the angel in Revelation 22:9)

Why Should We Worship?

“Such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers.” (John 4:23)

There is something that God cannot give to Himself. Although He is unlimited in His power and ability and provides everything we need (Acts 17:25), He can only receive that one thing from those He has created. And it is what He longs for from us. It is a primary reason why He made us. It is the one thing that should never be given to anyone or anything other than God. That one thing is worship.

How do people worship?

There is almost an unlimited number of ways that people in this world engage in worship and religious service these days. For example, Buddhists use an image of Buddha and chant mantras. Muslims recite the Koran and pray to Allah five times a day. Native Americans worship nature, both in the sky and on the Earth. Devout orthodox Jews pray with a swaying motion while wearing a yarmulke on their heads. Catholic Christians worship the Virgin Mary, use relics, and celebrate the Mass. Some Protestant churches have a highly formal liturgy and rituals, while others are very emotional and demonstrative. Some Christian services are very traditional, while others are contemporary. Some use worship leaders and performers. Some have special robes and vestments. Some use prescribed books of worship, while others are spontaneous. Some offer worship services for seekers; others just offer them for the members of the congregation. There is an almost endless variety of what is called worship.

Are these all just cultural differences, matters of personal preference or tradition? Does God enjoy this variety? Does it matter to Him how we do it? Is He looking for creativity in how we worship Him? If it does matter how we do it, what kind of worship pleases Him? How can we know whether or not our worship is acceptable to Him? Again we have to turn to God’s Word—the Word of truth—for the answers.

Is all worship acceptable?

God cannot possibly regard many of these activities that are listed above as worship of Him (see John 4:22). Worship involves people who know God

offering to Him something that He values. The first time the Bible uses the word is in Genesis 22:5 where Abraham, at the mountain in Moriah, *“said to his young men, ‘Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and return to you.’”* Abraham was prepared to offer his own son as an act of devotion to God, and it illustrates what God the Father would Himself do years later in offering His own Son at Calvary. It illustrates the essence of what pleases God in worship - appreciation of Christ His Son.

The first people mentioned in history who made offerings to God were Cain and Abel, the two sons of Adam and Eve (Genesis 4:4,5). One of those offerings was accepted and one was not. Presumably Cain and Abel had both been instructed by their parents on how to offer to God, and so it was not just a matter of chance. But Cain did it his own way, by bringing an offering that did not cost a life and was the product of his own labour, and it was not accepted. Abel on the other hand sacrificed a lamb, the best of his flock. This was accepted. And so, right from the start, we see that not all worship is acceptable to God.

Worship is not about us, what we want or what we can do. It is not even primarily about what God has done for us. It is all about God Himself and what He does. The word “worship” comes from the word “worth.” Worship of God focuses on His worth and our appreciation of that. Therefore, when we are worshipping, we have to take the focus off ourselves and put it on Him. David, who understood worship very well, put it this way: *“I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised”* (2 Samuel 22:4).

That is the point—God is uniquely worthy to be praised, and that is the fundamental reason for our worship. Therefore, the more we understand Him and His intrinsic worth, and the better we appreciate what He does and has done, the fuller our worship will be.

God wants our worship. He deserves it! And He will get worship—if not from us, then from others. When God’s people Israel, at the end of the Old Testament period, was bringing worship to Him that was not acceptable, He said to them: *“‘I am not pleased with you,’ says the LORD of hosts, ‘nor will I accept an offering from you. For from the rising of the sun even to its setting, My name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense is going to be offered to My name, and a grain offering that is pure; for My name will be great among the nations,’ says the LORD of hosts”* (Malachi 1:10,11). And then, when the Jewish leaders told Jesus to stop His disciples from praising Him, He replied, *“I tell you, if these become silent, the stones will cry out!”* (Luke 19:40)

Two aspects of worship

When the magi came to see the young child Jesus, the Bible says that *“they fell to the ground and worshiped Him”* (Matthew 2:11). This illustrates two aspects of worship—bowing down in humility before a superior being (paying homage), and then offering up a gift to him. In our worship we bow down our hearts in reverence to God. (The Greek word used is *“proskuneo,”* usually translated “worshipped.”) We also offer spiritual sacrifices; this is often referred to as “serving” God (Hebrews 9:14; 12:28).

What is true worship?

When Jesus met the woman of Samaria at Sychar’s well, He gave her a wonderful revelation about worship. She had said to Him, *“Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship.”* He then replied to her with this amazing statement:

“Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:20–24).

Christ was disclosing to this woman that worship was no longer going to take place at any particular geographic location on Earth, with “earthly ordinances” (Hebrews 9:10), rituals and animal sacrifices (as it had done up to that point, most recently by Jews at the temple in Jerusalem). These were only temporary symbols, which pointed to the real thing that was to come. But now God was about to institute true worship of a spiritual nature, which would come from peoples’ hearts, by means of the working of the Holy Spirit of God within them (Philippians 3:3). Jesus told her that this was what God was looking for—to be worshipped *“in spirit and truth”*—that is, in reality. He was looking for “true worshippers.”

What Does Worship Involve?

“A holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 2:5)

When Christ spoke to the woman at the well in John chapter 4, He was introducing the fact that true worship does not involve the presence of God coming down to a place on this Earth (as it did in the tabernacle and temple in the Old Testament), but involves us accessing the presence of God in heaven in our spirits, as we looked at previously. We have been given a spiritual nature as part of our human make-up which enables this to take place. In our worship we “*draw near*” (come close) (Hebrews 10:22) to Him through our spirits. Before we explore what this involves, let’s be sure about what it does not involve.

What is not worship?

Some people find certain types of traditional worship services boring. Perhaps there is no band (or not a good one) or no entertainment. Perhaps the service is too quiet, and there is not a dynamic sermon. What is it that they may be looking for that causes them to be disappointed?

Worship is not for audiences; it is for participants. We are not there primarily to receive, but to give to God. Hebrews chapter 10 tells us that, as we draw near in the presence of God, we must do so “*in full assurance of faith*” (verse 22)—that is, fully believing. We need to be conscious of what we are doing spiritually. If we do not come this way, not only will our worship be ineffective, but we may find it deadly dull. But when we do it in full assurance of faith, realizing the reality of the experience, it will become the highlight of our week. We will realize that we have actually been in the presence of God.

Some people prefer a good sermon to participative worship. But hearing the Word spoken to us is intended for our benefit, while worship is for God. Some people prefer just to do work for God; it makes them feel more useful. But God says that He is not worshipped by men’s hands as though He needed anything (Acts 17:25). He is worshipped by us expressing to Him what is in our hearts. That is what He wants to receive from us.

Old Testament worship

People in Old Testament times never had the privilege that we have today of worshipping in spirit and truth in heaven itself. Their access to God was limited, and their consciences were never finally cleansed of their sin, because the animal sacrifices they offered were incapable of getting rid of sin. Sin is always the barrier that keeps us from God.

Israel gathered as the people of God on the designated feast days in the courts of the temple: *“Enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise”* (Psalm 100:4). Some of the Psalms in our Bible are from those times. They are “songs of ascents”—the “going-up” songs. The city of Jerusalem is at a very high elevation. It is over 2500 feet above sea level and 3700 feet above the Dead Sea, which is only eighteen miles to the east. As the people came on those feast days, from all over the country and lands beyond, they climbed the mountain to Jerusalem, to the temple, on the pinnacle of Mount Zion. As they went, they sang these psalms of ascents. As they arrived and congregated from all directions, the singing would combine and become louder and louder. As they arrived at the gates of the temple, which was God’s house, their songs were thanksgivings for what God had been doing for them. In fact, they brought thank-offerings with them for this purpose. They had entered His gates with thanksgiving, as Psalm 100 says. Then, as they went inside, the courtyard would become more and more crowded, and they would join in singing praises to God for His greatness. They had entered His courts with praise.

However, that was as far as they could go. They were not allowed inside, into the sanctuary, into the very presence of God. Only one man, the high priest, could go in there, once a year on the Day of Atonement, to atone for their sin. When he went in, it was silent. The sanctuary was off limits for the rest of the people. But it is not off limits for us today. In our true spiritual worship we are summoned to come right inside, not to an earthly replica of the holy place, but into heaven itself (Hebrews 9:24).

Certainly God is to be thanked, and God is to be praised. But thanks and praise are not unique to God; they can also be offered to people. However only God is to be worshipped. We today do not have to stop at the courts anymore; we are beckoned to come right into the presence of God, inside the holy place in heaven, because Christ our mediator and high priest is there on our behalf. We are now allowed to go all the way, so that we can give God the worship that He desires!

What does God want?

The apostle Paul told the heathen worshippers he met in Athens that God does not need anything from us. He is self-sufficient: *“The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things”* (Acts 17:24,25).

However, God does desire something from us. He longs for the adoration of our hearts, the voluntary expression of our appreciation. Although it comes from our hearts, it flows out through our mouths. It is called *“a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks [makes confession] to His name”* (Hebrews 13:15).

God knows what is in our hearts of course, but He wants us to say it, to tell Him ourselves. And so we do it aloud, we speak our thanksgivings and meditations, and we sing praises together. We are “confessing” to God what we believe about Him and His Son.

So many times in the Bible, when people encountered the very presence of God, they fell on their faces. That is what John did, for example, when he saw the ascended and glorified person of Christ, even though He had been so familiar with Him when they were together on Earth. He fell down on his face *“like a dead man”* (Revelation 1:17). Worship involves complete awe and adoration of our majestic, almighty, eternal God. How much do we know about this kind of worship?

The Lord is not interested in our rituals or the procedures of our own invention that we may go through. He is interested in what is in our hearts. That does not mean that we can be careless in our actions or irreverent in our words, but neither is dry orthodoxy the answer, mere mindless compliance with ritual. For example, the epistle to the Hebrews says that we are to come *“with a sincere heart”* (Hebrews 10:22). Attitude, sincerity, and reverence are all-important.

Worship is not only an offering. It is in fact also a sacrifice, even though it does not involve us giving money or any material things. It certainly does not involve sacrificing the lives of animals, as used to be the case. But it does require serious thought and meditation, as well as preparation time beforehand in the Word of God. Psalm 45:1 describes the process: *“My heart overflows with a good theme; I address my verses to the King.”* We do not just come to recite words from a prayer book or to produce lengthy dissertations. We come to express what God has given to us of an understanding and appreciation of Him and His Son. That takes forethought. The words that come out of our mouths should express what overflows from our

hearts. This kind of worship will never be boring or routine.

Israel was instructed, *“Three times a year you shall celebrate a feast to Me. ..And none shall appear before Me empty-handed”* (Exodus 23:14,15). Similarly, we should never come into the presence of God without something that He values to offer to Him.

What pleases God?

How do we make sure that our worship pleases God? For example, is there anything that we know without a doubt really pleases Him? Yes there is, because He has said so, on more than one occasion. It is His own beloved Son. God His Father spoke out audibly from heaven about Christ on two separate occasions, once in the valley of the Jordan River and once on the mountain top, when He was being transfigured. Both times He said, *“This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased”* (Matthew 3:17; 17:5).

God does not speak audibly from heaven very often and so this must be significant. It shows us that when we speak well of His Son, it is very pleasing to Him. And so now it is our turn to tell God that we too are well pleased in Him. When we present our appreciation of the excellencies of Christ to God His Father from genuine hearts, we know for certain that it will be acceptable. And here again, our worship about Christ is not primarily about what Christ has done for us; it is primarily about Him and what He means to God His Father.

What displeases God?

There are also things that we should avoid in our worship. For example, Israel was commanded not to add leaven or honey to their offerings (Leviticus 2:11). The lesson for us is that we must not mix in with our worship anything that is extraneous to what God commands, even though it might be appealing to us: *“Let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth”* (1 Corinthians 5:8).

The Worship of the Holy Priesthood

“So that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 15:6)

Individually we should be living worshipful lives all the time, as the apostle Paul wrote to the church of God in Rome: *“Therefore I urge you, 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”* (Romans 12:1). Much that we do for God personally is described as being an offering or a sacrifice that is pleasing to Him. But there is more to our worship than this.

Previously we saw that the house of God serves as a priesthood to God—not just individuals serving as priests, but a collective priesthood. We saw from the Old Testament that a primary job of the high priest was to represent the people as a whole. Christ is now high priest over the spiritual house of God (Hebrews 10:21), and He offers to His God and Father the worship of God’s collective people (Hebrews 8:3). The unique privilege of being in the house of God is to be able to come into His presence as one people (even though gathered physically in different churches of God in different places). There is no closer relationship to God than worshipping in His presence. It is our crowning experience, and everything else flows from it.

Why say the “Amen”?

The words of praise and thanks that are spoken in worship are said by various individual men in the churches (1 Corinthians 14:34), as the saints gather for this purpose, but they are spoken on behalf of the whole congregation. The others express their participation in them by saying “Amen” (1 Corinthians 14:16), which means “let it be.” Amen is the language of heaven, which is the place where God’s will is always fully done (Revelation 19:4). It is also a title of the Lord Jesus, the one who always did His Father’s will and gave Him all the glory (Revelation 3:14). A sincere and hearty “Amen” after an expression of thanksgiving and praise demonstrates that our worship is with one accord and one voice (Romans 15:6).

Therefore, an essential aspect of our worship is that it be done unitedly. The epistle to the Hebrews, in its climactic passage that describes our

access to God in worship, stresses gathering together to do it: *“Let us draw near ... not forsaking our own assembling together”* (Hebrews 10:22,25).

As Christians we may possibly wish to confine ourselves to personal worship and not feel the need to join with others. We may think that this is sufficient and there is no need to be part of a group of people doing it together. Or we may think that it does not really matter with whom we worship. However, if that is the case, we will miss a lot of the privilege that God has provided for us. More importantly, it will leave out a lot of what He is looking for from us.

Is the Lord’s Supper worship?

The Lord Jesus commanded His disciples to remember Him regularly by taking the emblems of bread and wine. In this way we proclaim His death until He comes back (1 Corinthians 11:26). When we do this, we honour Him and obey Him. It is by obeying His commands that we show our love for Him (John 13:35). The bread and the wine that we use are just symbols, nothing more, and yet they are full of meaning. They are designed to help us remember the reality of His body given and His blood poured out, and what they have accomplished. As we take them each time, we are intended to discern in our minds and hearts what they represent. Failing to do this is eating and drinking *“in an unworthy manner”* (1 Corinthians 11:27-30).

We have reviewed how Israel was never allowed beyond the veil (curtain) into the sanctuary, the most holy place, except for the high priest going in once a year on the Day of Atonement. But Christ has now gone into, and is still inside, the true holy place in heaven as our high priest. It says that He is our “forerunner” (Hebrews 6:20), and that He has gone in to appear there before the presence of God—*“for us”* (Hebrews 9:24). That is what makes it possible for us to come in as the holy priesthood—because He is there to mediate for us. He is a man in God’s presence—and He is the only one there who has a body!

These verses state that we enter *“through the veil”*—not a physical curtain, but the humanity of Christ, who is alive there. With confidence based on His blood having been poured out at Calvary, and having been applied to us to deal forever with our sin, we draw near. It is these two things, His flesh and His blood, that are symbolized in the bread and wine.

“Since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near...” (Hebrews 10:19-22).

The way is now clear for us to come before God on His throne. What a privilege!

And so the Lord's Supper, the remembrance of the Lord Jesus, is not the epitome of worship by itself, but it initiates our priesthood worship in the presence of God, whereby we offer our spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:5).

Is music worship?

In some Christian circles these days, it can seem that instrumental music is equated with worship. There are worship bands, worship leaders and worship performers. Does true worship require instrumental music?

Back in Old Testament days, instrumental music was an important part of Israel's service. For example, in preparation for the building of the temple, King David organized musicians for the service of the house, as described in 1 Chronicles 25. Yet the New Testament is silent on the subject of musical accompaniment for worship in God's house today. The whole emphasis is on singing from the heart (Ephesians 5:19). The sacrifice of praise is "*the fruit of lips*" (Hebrews 13:15).

The activity of offering spiritual sacrifices by a holy priesthood (1 Peter 2:5) is a matter of presenting to God expressions of thanksgiving and praise by speaking and singing to Him. This is not something that a worship leader can orchestrate; it must come spontaneously from our hearts. When we assemble for this purpose, it is for "*each one*" to offer, as 1 Corinthians 14:26 emphasizes. Hebrews 2:12 shows us that Christ Himself joins in our worship in heaven: "*In the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.*" There is a lot more to true worship than music. Instrumental music has nothing of value in itself to offer.

To Whom Do We Speak in Worship?

“True worshipers will worship the Father ...” (John 4:23)

When we come to God to make requests, we pray to Him as our Father, because we’re told that He is the one who answers our requests: *“Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father”* (James 1:17).

But there is another expression for God the Father that has a unique and very special meaning. It is *“the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”* It is a great thing that God is our God and is our Father, but it is much greater that He has those relationships with Christ. In worship it is His relationship with Christ that matters most.

As we saw previously, Christ’s role in our worship is not to receive it for Himself, but to act as an intermediary between us and God His Father. The Holy Spirit’s work is to enable us to offer it spiritually (Philippians 3:3). And so the entire godhead is involved when we worship (Ephesians 2:18).

A very special title

Christ often referred to God as His Father, but only three times does Scripture record that He called Him His “God.” All three have to do with His humanity—because as a man, He had a God. The first of these was when He came to Earth at His incarnation: *“Then I said, Behold, I have come ... to do your will, O God”* (Hebrews 10:7). The second was when He was on the cross, when He cried out, *“My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?”* (Matthew 27:46). And the third was at His resurrection, when He told Mary, *“I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.”* (John 20:17). These were three pivotal experiences for Him as a man in His earthly ministry, and each time He acknowledged that His Father was also His God. That involved His humanity.

It is particularly appropriate for us to address God with this title as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ when we are worshipping Him. This elevates our approach to Him, by highlighting His relationship to Jesus Christ, rather than to us. Christ has saved us in order to produce worshipers for His God and Father (Revelation 1:6), because He knew that this is what His Father dearly wanted. Note that Revelation 1:6 refers to “His

God,” not just ours.

The expression of praise, “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ...*,” is used three times, twice by the apostle Paul and once by the apostle Peter (2 Corinthians 1:3; Ephesians 1:3; 1 Peter 1:3). It is an expression of exaltation and adoration. This is genuine worship.

What can we speak to God about?

In Revelation chapter 4 we are told that the apostle John was allowed to see into heaven, and there he saw wonderful things. He saw the majesty of God the Creator on His throne. What could be greater than that? That is the centre of everything. The wonders of God as Creator in all His wisdom and power are a very fitting subject matter for our worship: “*Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created*” (Revelation 4:11).

In the next chapter, John saw something even greater. He saw the Lamb of God, as though it had been newly killed, as the redeemer of mankind, and the only one qualified to carry out the righteous judgment of God. And so even the glory of God in creation is exceeded by the glory in His work of redemption. As far as we know, it did not cost God anything to create this world, but it cost Him His Son to redeem us. We can properly worship God for His great power and wisdom in what He has made, but we can especially worship Him for what He has done in saving us and bringing us to Himself through the work of Christ on Calvary: “*Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth*” (Revelation 5:9,10).

John also saw myriads of angels engaged in worship. Hebrews 12:22 tells us that in the presence of God in worship there are innumerable hosts of angels. Revelation 4:8 tells us that they worship God day and night without rest. Isaiah also saw a vision of the throne of God, in His temple, where he saw the worship of angels:

“Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said, Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory. And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke” (Isaiah 6:2–4).

But no angel can worship as we can, for we are “*the redeemed of the Lord*” (Psalm 107:2). Angels cannot worship God for their salvation.

We will never exhaust appropriate material from the Scriptures for our offerings. The Lord Jesus said that all the Scriptures testify of Him (John 5:39). On the road to Emmaus He expounded in all the (Old Testament) Scriptures the things concerning Himself (Luke 24:27). David said in 1 Chronicles 29:14: *“of Your own we have given You.”* The Scriptures are the source where we go for our meditations of Christ; they come from His own Word. But we can only give to God in expressions of worship what we already have received ourselves, and all of that comes initially from Him. That is what enables true worship.

Lessons from King David

“David arose ... and he came into the house of the LORD and worshiped.”
(2 Samuel 12:20)

David was Israel’s greatest king. God called him a man after His own heart (1 Samuel 13:1) because he loved the same things that God loved. He loved God’s house, as we saw earlier in Psalm 27. And in the well-known Psalm 23, he said: *“Surely goodness and loving-kindness will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever”* (verse 6).

David understood the heart of God, and He understood a lot about worship, even though he did not have the privilege that we can now have. And so let us look at some of the things that we can learn about worship from David’s life.

It is not about appearances

“The LORD said to Samuel, ‘Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart’” (1 Samuel 16:7).

When God was pointing out which son of Jesse He had chosen to be king in place of Saul, He passed over the obvious choices until he came to David, the youngest. Others were looking at external appearances—height, regal appearance, and “presence.” But God was looking inside at the heart of each of the eight sons. And he chose David, because of what was in his heart.

When we worship, God does not look merely at our actions or listen to the eloquence of our words or the quality of our singing. He looks for what is coming from our hearts. We may enjoy some services more than others, perhaps when there are big crowds, high energy, or good singing performances, but God evaluates on a whole different basis. True worship is not about appearances.

It must be done God’s way

“They placed the ark of God on a new cart that they might bring it from the house of Abinadab which was on the hill; and Uzzab and Abio, the sons of

Abinadab, were leading the new cart. So they brought it with the ark of God from the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill; and Abio was walking ahead of the ark. Meanwhile, David and all the house of Israel were celebrating before the LORD with all kinds of instruments made of fir wood, and with lyres, harps, tambourines, castanets and cymbals. But when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out toward the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen nearly upset it. And the anger of the LORD burned against Uzzah, and God struck him down there for his irreverence; and he died there by the ark of God. David became angry because of the LORD'S outburst against Uzzah, and that place is called Perez-uzzah to this day" (2 Samuel 6:3–8).

David keenly wanted to restore the Ark of the Covenant to its proper place in Jerusalem. It had been gone for a long time. He knew it represented the presence of God among His people. His predecessor, King Saul, had not paid attention to it, even though it had been stolen by the Philistines. As soon as he became king, David set about bringing the Ark back. But he was careless in how he did it. The Ark was heavy, and he used a cart drawn by oxen, the way the Philistines had carried it. David should have known better. God had prescribed that the Ark should only be transported on the shoulders of the Kohathites of the tribe of Levi (Numbers 4:15). It was to be covered and never touched directly. Yet Uzzah touched it while it was being transported, and he lost his life because of it. Uzzah was sincere in what he did, because he was afraid that the Ark might fall. But it was not allowed.

David learned the hard way that when we are dealing with things that are precious to God, they must be done God's way. The worship and service of God is holy, and is not to be treated lightly or carelessly. We are not at liberty to do it just as we think best, however sincere we may be.

The church of God in Corinth was warned that they were treating the Lord's supper in a casual way, and they were being disorderly. They were not observing God's divine order (1 Corinthians 11:17-22). God had judged them as a result, causing some of them to be sick and some even to die. They were warned therefore to examine themselves each time before they took of the bread and the cup, to be sure that they were properly discerning their meaning. True worship must be taken seriously.

It is not for spectators

"Then it happened as the ark of the LORD came into the city of David that Michal the daughter of Saul looked out of the window and saw King David leaping and

dancing before the LORD; and she despised him in her heart” (2 Samuel 6:16).

David finally brought the Ark successfully to Jerusalem. He was so elated at this that he leaped and danced before it in public. He understood the significance of the occasion. But his wife, Michal, who was watching it all from a window, was disgusted at David’s performance and thought that, as the king, he had degraded himself in the eyes of his subjects. From that time on, they were estranged from each other. They were not in agreement on this vital matter of the service of God.

David understood that worship is a participative activity. Watching or listening to other people praising God or speaking about God may be enjoyable, and even edifying, but it is not worship. One of the errors that came into the early churches in the first few centuries was the practice of leaving everything to a few people at the front (the clergy, the pastor, or the “professionals”), while the congregation basically acted as an audience. But we have been made to all function collectively as a priesthood, and to all be involved in offering the spiritual service. Worship is not for spectators.

In good times and bad

“When David saw that his servants were whispering together, David perceived that the child was dead; so David said to his servants, ‘Is the child dead?’ And they said, ‘He is dead.’ So David arose from the ground, washed, anointed himself, and changed his clothes; and he came into the house of the LORD and worshiped. Then he came to his own house, and when he requested, they set food before him and he ate” (2 Samuel 12:19,20).

Sometimes we may not feel like worshipping God or coming together to keep His remembrance in the Lord’s Supper. We may be discouraged or may be going through difficult times. We may be preoccupied with our own problems and may not feel like doing it. But if we allow our variable emotional state to dictate our actions, we will be very irregular in our service. David had just experienced a huge trauma, the loss of his newborn son, due to his sin with Bathsheba. He had pleaded with God to spare the boy’s life, but to no avail. When David was finally told that his son was dead, he must have been devastated. Yet His first action was to prepare himself and go to the house of the Lord and worship, even though it was God who had taken his son.

If it had happened to us, we might have been angry at the Lord because He could have spared the boy’s life. But not so with David. He immediately went and worshipped, despite how he may have felt. David understood worship.

There is a cost

“The king said to Araunah, ‘No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price, for I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God which cost me nothing.’ So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver. David built there an altar to the LORD and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings” (2 Samuel 24:24,25).

David went up to offer to the Lord in order to stop a plague that had been caused by his sin in numbering the people. He went up Mount Moriah, the same place where Abraham had gone to offer Isaac about a thousand years before. David knew that he was going to the right place, but the site belonged to a Jebusite named Araunah. Araunah was willing to donate it to the king, but David would not allow it. He knew that an offering to God that had not cost him anything was not of any value. He insisted on paying for it.

So it is with us. Our worship to God is referred to as a sacrifice—*“spiritual sacrifices”* (1 Peter 2:5). There are personal costs involved. It takes time to study and meditate. There may be time or cost for travelling to the assembly gathering. It may in some cases involve ridicule, or overcoming apathy or resistance from others. It certainly involves self-denial in living holy lives, and in confessing sins that we commit. If what we bring to God in worship has not cost us anything, how much is it worth? We must be sure that we are not just giving God our left-overs.

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How Can We “Come Clean”?

*“Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD?
Or who may stand in His holy place?
He who has clean hands and a pure heart.”*
(Psalm 24:3,4)

When King Hezekiah came to the throne of Judah at age twenty-five, things were in disarray (2 Chronicles 29). The temple was in disuse and disrepair. Idolatry was rampant throughout the country. The nation was losing its distinct identity as the people on whom God had placed His name; they were being assimilated into the surrounding culture. The feast days and holy convocations were not taking place. The annual Passover was not being kept. The priests and the Levites were not engaged in the temple service. Nor were they being supported financially by the people as they should have been; instead they were engaged in purely secular activity. The nation was under the constant threat of the cruel Assyrians from the northeast. There had been numerous casualties among the people, and many had been taken captive. Hezekiah’s father had tried to compromise with the Assyrians to pacify them, but had failed miserably. The people were disorganized and disheartened.

This was rather a big challenge for a twenty-five year-old. As he took the throne, Hezekiah realized that a massive clean-up was necessary. He organized an intensive sixteen-day work program. The temple and its courts were cleaned thoroughly and repaired. The priests and Levites were restored to active service. But even when he was finished, Hezekiah knew that worship could not take place until cleansing for the people’s past sin had taken place. It could not be ignored. And so, on the seventeenth day, he got up early in the morning and made arrangements for something that he knew had to happen first. He gave the command for sin offerings to be offered. The people had sinned, and He knew that, in God’s things, we cannot just ignore sins and move on. Hezekiah commanded the people to sacrifice bulls and lambs and goats as a sin-offering to atone for their sins. He knew how important cleansing was before coming into the presence of God. The people had to “come clean.”

Today we never need to offer sin offerings. The last (and only effec-

tive) sin offering was Christ’s death on the cross. His blood cleanses us from all sin: *“The blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin”* (1 John 1:7). His work on Calvary is sufficient.

Cleansing of our consciences

None of the Old Testament animal sacrifices that was offered over the centuries could ever permanently remove the people’s sin. The people knew that their sins had been dealt with in the prescribed way, but they did not realize that this was only a temporary covering until the one effective sin offering would be made to take them away forever (Hebrews 10:12). *“Both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience, since they relate only to food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until a time of reformation ...”* (Hebrews 9:9,10).

But now the single offering of Christ has been made which has totally cleansed our consciences to enable us to come near in worship: *“... For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?”* (Hebrews 9:13,14)

As a result, when we approach God in our worship in the holy place in heaven, we are able to do so because the blood of Christ has been applied to cleanse our hearts forever. Our consciences are now clean: *“Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience ...”* (Hebrews 10:22). We no longer have to deal with the problem of guilt for our sin.

Cleansing for fellowship

1 John 1:9 tells us to confess the sins that we continue to commit: *“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”*. This was written to believers, as 1 John 5:13 shows: *“These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God.”*

Since we are already eternally saved from the guilt of our sins, why is this confession of on-going sin necessary? It is because sin of any kind keeps us apart from God. It breaks our fellowship with Him. The only thing that will bring us back into close fellowship again is repentance and confession, and we must never overlook the need for that. We need constantly to be on the alert for sin occurring in our lives, so that we might confess it and be cleansed from it. This is a prerequisite for our worship and service. *“The eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous, and His ears attend to their prayer, but the face of*

the Lord is against those who do evil" (1 Peter 3:12).

Cleansing from defilement

Even after our sins have been dealt with, there is another problem, the fact that we become defiled in our everyday lives, simply through contact with the world, which is a defiled place. Nothing that is defiled can enter the presence of God (Habakkuk 1:13). Our minds are particularly vulnerable to thoughts that are contaminated by exposure to the world around us. This need for cleansing from defilement is something that we also need to remind ourselves about constantly, about how seriously God regards any taint in the lives of His people. We may tend to become rather tolerant and blasé about it, and certainly the world's standards will not help us here.

We can also become very good at trying to justify our own actions, but the Lord has said: *"To this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word"* (Isaiah 66:2). The apostle Paul exhorted the Corinthians: *"Let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God"* (2 Corinthians 7:1).

Constant cleansing from defilement is a prerequisite if we are to enjoy the presence of the Lord. It is very significant that the Lord Jesus washed His apostles' feet in the upper room before He introduced His remembrance to them (John 13:5). As He was doing so He said to Peter, *"If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me"* (John 13:8). He did not wash their feet because of any sin that they had committed, but because their feet were dirty from walking in the world outside. In a similar way, the Old Testament priests' feet always had to be washed at the laver before they went inside the tabernacle or temple (Exodus 30:17).

While sin can only be cleansed by the application of the blood of Christ (through confession), defilement from the world is cleansed through the application of "the water of the Word" of God (Ephesians 5:26). Psalm 119:9,11 says, *"How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to Your word... Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You"*. It is by spending time in God's Word that we cleanse our minds of the natural defiling effects of living in a godless world. It changes our focus and corrects our thinking, as well as making us conscious of any sin that needs to be confessed. This cleansing prepares us for the act of worship.

Defilement due to unresolved conflicts

Because worship in God's house is collective, our relationships with one other are vitally important. Any inter-personal conflicts between us must be

put right first. Inter-personal difficulties inhibit true worship: *‘If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?’* (1 John 4:20). For example, when the apostles were on their way to the upper room, they had been debating who among them would be the greatest (Luke 22:24), which is hardly the state of mind to be in to keep the Lord’s Supper.

The Lord Jesus spoke about what a worshipper should do when he or she is aware that another person is in conflict with them: *‘If you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering’* (Matthew 5:23,24). Personal reconciliation is an urgent priority, and failure to attend to it impairs the service of God. Even though the worshipper in this case was not the one with the problem, he was still expected to take the initiative to get it sorted out. Similarly, the apostle Paul stressed to the saints in Rome the need to persevere in being on good terms with each other for their worship to be effective (Romans 15:5,6).

Defilement due to divided loyalties

Israel’s worst sin was not murder or adultery, as serious as they were. It was idolatry. It broke the first commandment: *‘You shall have no other gods before me’* (Exodus 20:3). It involved them giving God’s unique place as the one who should receive all worship to someone or something else, to a created thing. The worst instance of idolatry was when the devil, who was a created angel, expected Christ, God the Son, to fall down and worship him when he tempted Him in the wilderness: *‘He said to Him, ‘All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Go, Satan! For it is written, you shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only’*” (Matthew 4:9,10).

Anytime we substitute anything in the place of God we are committing idolatry, and it is something we must carefully guard against. In the book of Revelation, when the apostle John had seen all the marvellous visions of the future, he was so impressed that he began to worship the angel that had showed them to him. But the angel stopped him abruptly with the words *‘Worship God’* (Revelation 19:10). God alone is to be worshipped. One of the evidences of the deity of Christ is that during His lifetime He never prevented anyone from worshipping Him (Matthew 14:33; 28:9; John 9:38). If He had not been God, that would have been idolatrous.

Defilement due to conflicting priorities

But the problem in Israel was not only worshipping false gods. It was that at times they claimed to be continuing to worship God as well. They wanted it both ways, and that is impossible. That is why Elijah said to them: *"If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him"* (1 Kings 18:21). This practice of trying to mix two incompatible beliefs is called "syncretism." In our commitment to the Lord, it is not enough for us to be doing the right things, such as participating in church services, reading our Bibles, and praying. We must also stop doing the wrong things, things that contradict or interfere. James in his epistle said that a double-minded person is unstable and will not receive anything from the Lord (James 1:7,8). True worship is single minded.

Defilement due to misplaced focus

We may tend to be attracted to things that we can look at and visualize, even in our service for God. But we need to take care that they do not themselves become the focus of our worship. The second of the ten commandments given to Israel at Sinai prohibited any images from being made and worshipped: *"You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth"* (Exodus 20:4).

God knew very well our human tendency to want visual things to stimulate our minds and how potentially dangerous this can be. So He forbade them. The brass serpent, which had been raised by Moses in the wilderness when the people of Israel were dying from a plague, was kept by them. They should have destroyed it, because centuries later it became an object of worship (2 Kings 18:4). It is a natural tendency.

Today some churches use relics and images to stimulate reverence. But, as Paul told the people of Athens, God is not worshipped by things men make with their hands (Acts 17:25). He wants to be worshipped in spirit and truth. He Himself is to be our focus. True worship is invisible, but it is very real.

Defilement due to reliance on ritual

Towards the end of the Old Testament, God sent word to His people that He was displeased with their offerings because they were not bringing their best. Their heart was not in their worship, and He hated it. He said to them: *"Oh that there were one among you who would shut the gates, that you might not uselessly kindle fire on My altar! I am not pleased with you," says the LORD of hosts, 'nor will I accept an offering from you'"* (Malachi 1:10). Even though the people were still engaging in all the activity, God wanted it to stop. They were just going

through the motions. It was not acceptable to Him.

In a similar way, the Lord told the Pharisees that their offerings were not acceptable because they were offering to God money that the law required should have been used to care for parents (Matthew 15:5,6). When we disobey God, we cannot compensate by offering God service. It does not work that way.

And so, if we are to “come clean” in our approach to God in worship, we must examine our hearts and our lives and put right those things that will disqualify our worship. True worship is offered by clean worshippers.

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me” (Psalm 139:23,24)

True Worship - A Summary

Let us now summarize the main points of this section on the subject of true worship:

- God alone deserves our worship and He desires it from us.
- Not all worship is acceptable to Him. He has told us in His Word what He desires.
- Worship is more than thanking God for what He has done for us; it especially involves praising Him and expressing our awe and adoration of Him for what He is and does.
- Nothing pleases God more than us expressing to Him genuine appreciation of His Son.
- True worship is offered, not by physical means in physical places, but in spirit and truth.
- Gospel preaching, sermons, instrumental music, and good works are for people's benefit, but true worship is directed to God and gives Him what He wants.
- God wants audible worship, speaking and singing aloud what comes from our hearts.
- God does not want rituals. He is looking for genuine, devout, informed confession of His name to Him.
- Our highest privilege as disciples today is to engage in the collective offering of spiritual sacrifices to the God and Father of the Lord Jesus.
- This collective worship is offered by the holy priesthood of the house of God. The offerings are made acceptable to God through the high priestly service of Jesus Christ in heaven.
- The remembrance of the Lord Jesus in the bread and wine initiates this collective worship.
- Many things can interfere with true worship, such as failure to confess sin, defilement from worldly influences, and unresolved inter-personal conflict. We need to make it a priority to correct these things in order that our worship not be invalidated.