
Three Implications of Understanding New Testament Worship

What is worship?

More specifically, **what does it mean to worship?** Is there a right way or a wrong way to do it?

Is it singing, clapping and/or raising your hands at your local church on Sunday... or is there something more to it than that?

The question of what worship is is extremely important. Far too many arguments have been had over what is and is not a legitimate form of worship. Preferences can too easily become elevated to precepts if we're not carefully grounding our understanding of worship in what we see in the Bible.

Worship is singing... but not only singing.

Many Christians today understand worship as singing. When we talk about Sunday morning, we refer to congregational singing as "worship." When we say, "I really enjoyed the worship," we almost always mean "I really enjoyed the music."

This isn't entirely wrong... it's just incomplete. There are clear examples of singing as worship found in Scripture (see [Ex. 15:1, 21](#); [Num. 21:17](#); [Judges 5:3](#); [2 Sam. 22:50](#); [Psa. 5:11](#); [7:17](#); [9:2, 11](#); [18:49](#); [33:3](#); [1 Cor. 14:15, 26](#); [Eph. 5:19](#); [Col. 3:16](#)). We're admonished to sing to the Lord and to encourage one another with hymns and spiritual songs.

So singing, biblically, is a part of worship.

However, we must be careful not to equate worship *with* singing and music.

The word "worship" at its most basic level means *to ascribe worth*. This is helpful to keep in mind, especially when you consider the words translated as "worship." The two most commonly used words in Hebrew and Greek that we often translate as "worship" (*??·w?[h]* and *proskyne?*) refer to bowing or kneeling down, both to God and to men.

They describe an act of reverential deference.

This is the important thing to understand, then, about worship. It's not merely about singing, it's about reverence—it's about having a biblical fear of the Lord.

At its most basic level, then, you could define worship as **the humbling of yourself before the One who is your better.**

This, naturally, has serious implications.

Worship is not primarily about how you feel.

First, if worship is about humbling yourself before God, we have to consider the place of our feelings. Many today seem to equate fired up feelings with genuine affection for the Lord. The louder the music, the higher the hands are raised, the more our hearts must be inclined toward God... right?

But this understanding places too much emphasis on feelings. We must always remember that while emotional expressiveness **can** be a sign of genuine affection, "Nothing can be certainly known of the nature of religious affections by this, that they much dispose persons with their mouths to praise and glorify God," as Jonathan Edwards puts it so well in *Religious Affections*.

His point is simple: people can fervently praise God with their mouths and still be far off from Him. This is much the same warning Paul gives when he tells the Corinthians that you can have a great outward show, but without love, it's worthless (cf. [1 Cor. 13:1-3](#)).

Is it any wonder that Jeremiah reminds us not to put too much stock in our feelings ([Jer. 17:9](#))?

Worship is what you do every moment of every day.

Second, in the Old Testament, particularly once the nation of Israel is established, there's a definite connection between place and worship. God's people were to worship in a specific place (first the Tabernacle, then the Temple). This was the meeting place between God and His people. At the Temple, God's people would offer sacrifices for the forgiveness of sin, peace offerings to God, and numerous other offerings and acts of service.

It can be tempting to take the imagery of the Temple worship and place it upon the local church. However, the New Testament doesn't allow for this. Instead, starting with Jesus, the New Testament presents a definite shift away from "place and time" worship to "every moment, everywhere" worship.

In his discussion with the woman at the well, Jesus tells her:

Woman, believe me, **the hour is coming when neither on 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 the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.** ([John 4:21-24](#), emphasis added)

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ([Romans 12:1](#))

Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such

sacrifices are pleasing to God. ([Hebrews 13:15-16](#))

While I've only included a few brief examples, the general thrust of the New Testament, while never neglecting the importance of believers gathering together in corporate worship ([1 Cor. 14:25](#)), drastically broadens our understanding of what worshipping God truly is. It's not a matter of getting together on Sunday, singing songs, giving money, listening to a sermon and heading home for the rest of the week to do whatever we want.

Every moment of every day is to be an act of worship to God.

This brings us to the most serious implication of the New Testament understanding of worship: our need for the gospel.

The gospel perfects our worship.

On our best days, our efforts are half-hearted, our motives conflicted. The flesh is constantly at war with the spirit... it's no wonder Martin Luther said that Christians are all simultaneously sinners and saints (see Rom 7). If our worship were up to us alone, we'd be utterly lost. None of it would be pleasing and acceptable to God.

But this is where the good news of the gospel aids us in our worship—Jesus is the perfect worshipper. In His incarnation, He obeyed every command of God without flaw or failure. His devotion is unwaivering.

He gives us His perfect worship to cover our imperfect offerings of songs, service and sacrifice.

The gospel gives us reason to stand before the throne of grace, imperfect as we are, because we have an Advocate there who has completed the work for us, one who appeals to us to rely on Him increasingly to purify our motives, and perfect our worship (cf. [Heb. 4:16](#)).

That's what biblical worship looks like. Don't settle for a substitute.

Read more from Aaron [here](#).