

Worship: A Practical Guide

Excerpt from *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* by Adele Calhoun¹

Worship is a word most often associated with religion. But worship can be found in the lives of secularists, agnostics and even atheists. The simple truth is that everybody looks to something or someone to give their lives meaning. Worship reveals the somethings or someones we value most. What we love and adore and focus on forms us into the people we become. Some of us highly value our independence. Others pour our time and energy into totems of power, approval, success, control or happiness. We may not consider our obsession with these things acts of worship, but they are. They are what we look to, to get us up in the morning and keep us going throughout the day.

True worship does not equal going to church on Sunday. This is not a particularly new thought. Jesus knew people could attend the synagogue while focusing on the closing of their business deal on Monday or the new house addition on Tuesday. He put it simply: “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Matthew 15:8). Worship can be offered in the power of the self rather than in response to the Spirit.

True worship of God happens when we put God first in our lives. When what God says matters more than what others say, and when loving God matters more than being loved. Discipline, willpower, giftedness, and going to church can be good things. But they do not guarantee transformation. Transformation comes through valuing God above all else. Jesus knew people could do the same things he did: they could heal and perform miracles and preach — but that did not mean that they loved and worshiped God.

His words are devastatingly clear: “Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you’ ” (Matthew 7:22 – 23).

The heart of worship is to seek to know and love God in our own unique way. Each one of us fulfills some part of the divine image. Each one of us loves and glorifies God in a particular way that no one else can. It should not surprise us then that worship styles and tastes differ: traditional, contemporary, liturgical, folk, emerging. One style of worship is not better than another. The quality of worship emerges from the heart and its focus.

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Worship can touch our deepest feelings. But that is not the litmus test for worship. Feelings can come and go. But the joyous Trinity remains forever worthy. In light of the Trinity's beauty and loveliness everything else on the horizon of our attention takes its proper secondary place. Above and before all other good things remains the Pearl of great price, the King of all kings, and the Lord of all lords.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How has a particular style of worship — charismatic, traditional, contemporary, liturgical— shaped you and your image of God?
2. How does a particular form or style of worship shape you now?
3. Who is God to you? What name for God — Shepherd, Lord, Father, Day Spring, Bread of Life, etc. — best describes your relationship with him right now? What does this name mean to you?
4. How does worshiping alone and worshiping with others affect you?
5. What about God moves you to worship?

SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

1. Consider the many names God uses to reveal himself to us. Which of these names identifies where God is in your life now? • Talk to God about what this revelation of who he is means to you. Use this name when you pray.
2. Since God reveals himself to us in worship, visit a worship service with a different tradition or style than you are used to. Attend an ethnic service or a children's service, if you wish. Ask God to open you up to seeing him in new ways. What do you sense about the worshipers? Do you see anything new about God in their worship?
3. Think of the times you have been deeply moved in worship. What was happening in your life at that time? • What was going on in worship? • Put yourself in places where you most easily connect with God in worship.
4. Write a letter or song to God expressing your love and honor of him.
5. Come before God with an open and listening ear. Write the question, "What do I value most?" at the top of a sheet of paper. Answer the question. • Then answer this question from the viewpoint of your kids, your spouse, your colleagues, family members, church friends and God. What do you see about yourself through their eyes? • How might what you worship need to change?