

Worship in Spirit and Truth

By Santiago Lange

Controversy concerning how to worship God has raged since the Garden of Eden and continues today. This article addresses this important topic, but instead of offering a “one size fits all” formula, it offers three essential principles related to how we can worship God in spirit and truth.



1. Worship is theocentric

Several years ago, Donald Bloesch, Emeritus Professor of theology at University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, wrote an article in *Christianity Today* titled “Whatever Happened to God?” Concerning the worship that occurs in many churches, he noted this:

Worship has become performance rather than praise... a spectacle that appeals to the senses rather than an act of obedience to the mighty God who is both holiness and love. Contemporary worship is far more egocentric than theocentric. The aim is less to give glory to God than to satisfy the longings of the human heart. Even when we sing God’s praises, the focus is on fulfilling and satisfying the human desire for wholeness and serenity. (“Christianity Today,” 2/5/01, p. 54)



Donald Bloesch

Irrespective of personal preferences in worship styles (I personally like contemporary Christian music), Bloesch’s concern ought not be ignored, particularly in an age when so much emphasis is placed on market-driven approaches to church growth. One church growth expert wrote that growing the church is fundamentally about “providing our product” (which he describes as “relationship”) as the “solution to people’s felt needs.” He then emphasized that it is the needs of the audience that are of greatest importance in Christian communication, not the message. Against this egocentric approach toward the church and its worship comes the word of God through Moses:

These are the decrees and laws you must be careful to follow in the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess—as long as you live in the land. Destroy completely all the places on the high mountains and on the hills and under every spreading tree where the nations you are dispossessing worship their gods. Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and burn their Asherah poles in the fire; cut down the idols of their gods and wipe out their names from those places. You must not worship the LORD your God in their way. But you are to seek the place the LORD your God will choose from among all your tribes to put his Name there for his dwelling. To that place you must go; there bring your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, what you have vowed to give and your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks. There, in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your families shall eat and shall rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the LORD your God has blessed you. (Deut. 12: 1-7)

Though these instructions were given to the people of Israel in a particular cultural setting under the old covenant, they contain a principle that remains relevant for the church under the new covenant: The worship of God is not to be directed by our own desires—it is to be theocentric, not egocentric.

The worship practiced by the Canaanites in the land that Israel was about to occupy was shockingly gruesome and destructive. The Canaanites burned their children as offerings to their gods. In worship they had erotic rites that denigrated women through unspeakable sexual acts. Their worship was also quite pragmatic, designed to address their personal desire for security and prosperity. Desiring peace, they killed their own children in hopes that the gods would not harm them.

As Christians, we should heed what Moses told Israel on the edge of the Promised Land. Our worship of God must never be designed merely to satisfy our own needs and preferences. The Psalms of the Old Testament (which largely are lyrics to worship songs) focus primarily on two topics: 1) who God is, 2) what God has done.

We ought not imagine that we are capable of devising our own ways of approaching God in worship. Due to sin, our minds tend to produce “idols” fit only for destruction. When we seek to encounter God on our own terms, we reverse the order of true worship. We see this happen when well-meaning Christians make the audience, rather than God, the starting point of worship.

2. Worship is Christ-centered

As evangelical Christians, we believe that our guide in all matters of faith and practice (including how we worship) is the written word of God, the Bible, read through the lens of Jesus, the Living Word of God. From a new covenant perspective, the ultimate issue when it comes to worship is not the place, day or form of worship, but the who—Who is being worshiped. This was Jesus’ point in what he said to the Samaritan woman:

The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. (John 4:23-24, NRSV).

When it comes to being a true worshiper of God, what counts is not the location of the worship (and, by implication, its form) but the object of that worship. Jesus, himself, is the Truth. If we are to properly worship God, Jesus must be at the center of our worship.

3. Worship uses the language of adoration

Unfortunately, some Christians shape their worship services with the primary goal being to attract unbelievers. With that goal in mind, they seek to use a language and certain forms of worship that would be familiar to unbelievers. But what is overlooked in that strategy is that the worship of God shown in the Bible uses the language of adoration, where God is the primary audience, not the people in the pews (believers or unbelievers). Worship using this language nurtures believers, forming them into the kind of people who reach out evangelistically, serving the non-believing world around them.

When we worship God using the language of adoration, our songs, prayers and sermons will focus first on God and his grace. Flowing from that will then be our grateful response. Note the order, for it is vital. Worship that is in spirit and truth focuses first on God before it deals with our needs as worshippers (including our needs for forgiveness, healing, restoration, etc.). In this way, our worship honors God first, leading to whole-life worship of the sort addressed in this quote from the ancient church father, Clement of Alexandria:

We are commanded to reverence and to honor the same One, being persuaded that He is Word.... We do not do this just on special days.... Rather, we do this continually in our whole life, and in every way.... For that reason, not in a specified place, or selected temple, or at certain festivals and on appointed days, but during his whole life, the spiritual man honors God. He does this in every place—even if he is alone by himself. He does this wherever he has with him any of those brethren who have exercised the same faith.

May all our worship, at all times and in all places, be theocentric and Christ-centered, using the language of adoration, to the glory of our triune God. □