

Worship in the New Testament

Teaching Goals

To explain how worship in the New Testament is different from worship in the Old Testament.

To motivate people toward a lifestyle characterized by New Testament worship.

Introduction

It is common for churches to say that their first priority is the worship of God. This usually means that the corporate worship service on Sunday morning is the most important activity in which the church engages. Often, that worship service is liturgical--characterized by a set order of ritual, song, prayer, etc.

Is this what the New Testament teaches about worship?

A closer examination of the relevant biblical material affirms that worship is indeed the first priority of the church, but the New Testament defines worship in a very different way.

A Change in Sacrifices

Read 1 Peter 2:5. This verse (along with vs. 9) teaches that all Christians are priests. Whereas in the Old Testament, only select Levites had this privilege, every Christian now has this privilege.

What do priests do?

In the Old Testament period, their main function was to carry out the worship of God through the offering of sacrifices. There were essentially two different kinds of sacrifices: sin offerings, which were offered for moral offenses, and thank offerings, which were offered to express gratitude for God's goodness and blessing.

The New Testament tells us that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament sin offerings through his death (Hebrews 9:11-14; 10:1-14); therefore, we need never make such sacrifices to God again. But as Christians who have benefited from his sacrifice, we have the privilege to express our gratitude to God for Christ's work in many ways. Peter refers to this in 1 Peter 2:5 when he says that we "offer up spiritual sacrifices to God." Peter does not specify here what these sacrifices are, except that they are spiritual, not physical.

By studying other passages in the New Testament, however, we discover several different "sacrifices" by which the Christian may worship God. It is important to note that no one way is viewed as more spiritual than the others; all are important if we want to have full-orbed spiritual lives.

Ask the Group

Do you think we can go so far as to say that churches who practice a liturgy are wrong on that point?

Different Ways to Worship

Offer God Your Whole Self:

"I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, well-pleasing to God, which is your spiritual service of worship." (Romans 12:1)

When an Israelite had received a blessing from God, he could have a priest offer up an animal as a "whole burnt offering" to show God his gratitude. God was pleased by this costly sacrifice, and expressed this by calling it a "soothing aroma." (see Leviticus 3:5,16)

Paul says that as Christians, we have received the mercies of God through Christ's work - a gift so fantastic that he spent the previous eleven chapters of this letter describing it. How can we say "Thank

you!" to God for such a fantastic gift? Not by offering an animal, but by presenting to God something much more precious--our very selves. We can "sign over the title deed" of our lives and say "God, I want the rest of my life and every part of my being to be one long expression of my gratitude for the gift that you have given me."

We may think that this sacrifice is not very great because we have so many problems and faults, but God says that it is "holy" and "well-pleasing" to him! Notice that according to Paul, this sacrifice is our "spiritual service of worship."

The Greek word for "service of worship" is the word from which we get the term liturgy. Paul is saying that the elaborate worship service enacted by the Old Testament priests no longer has a place in Christian worship; it is now replaced by this very personal sacrifice.

Ask the Group

What are some lines of thinking which oppose a person's movement toward offering his or her whole self to God?

Offer God Your Praise:

"Through Christ then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of the lips that give thanks to his name." (Hebrews 13:15)

Here is another spiritual sacrifice which pleases God--praising him and thanking him for all that he is and all that he does for us. The practice of thankfulness to God is stressed over and over again in the New Testament (see 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18; Colossians 3:15-17). Why is this? Does God need our gratitude so that he can feel good about himself?

Such a view obviously does not befit the God of the Bible--he is the only being in the universe who is completely self-existent and therefore needs nothing. We add nothing to God by praising and thanking him. God is indeed pleased by our gratitude, but the ones who benefit from this practice are us!

As we choose (often against our present feelings and circumstances) to recall God's blessings and then to thank him for these, we are keeping ourselves properly aligned with reality. Rather than buying into the lie that we are mistreated and unfortunate, we are by faith asserting the truth--that we are fantastically blessed beyond anything that we could ever deserve! In spite of our rebellion against God which deserves his wrath, he has forgiven us, adopted us into his family, guaranteed us eternal life, given us a significant role in his purpose, indwelt us with his Spirit, provided us with Christian friends-- and the list goes on and on.

The author's emphasis here is that we should worship God in this way "continually." The idea that Christian worship takes place only (or especially) in a corporate worship meeting is utterly foreign to this verse. Because of Christ's payment for our sins, we have the privilege to draw near to God and communicate to him in this way at any time: in the morning when we wake up, on the way to work, during the busy day, when we are together with other Christians, alone in our room, etc.

It is wonderful to praise God with other Christians in song (Ephesians 5:19), but this should be only the "tip of the iceberg" of our thanks to God.

Ask the Group

What do you think erodes thankfulness in Christians? What do you think promotes thankfulness in Christians?

Offer God Your Material Resources:

"And let us not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased." (Hebrews 13:16)

The author touches on two more ways in which we can worship God: doing good and sharing. "Sharing" probably refers to the generous giving of our material resources to God's people and God's work. This is explicitly identified by Paul as a sacrifice which pleases God: "But I have received (your money gift) in full, and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God." (Phillipians 4:18)

Many Christians regard giving financially to God in the same way that they pay their taxes to the I.R.S. - they have to do it, and they look for ways to give as little as possible. Paul's view is very different from this. He says that giving is a privilege (2 Corinthians 8:4) and something that we should do generously (2 Corinthians 9:6), as an expression of our commitment to God (2 Corinthians 8:5).

When we give our money to God in this way by supporting our local church, other Christian workers and ministries, and helping the needy, God regards this as an expression of worship fully as spiritual as praising him. This is because giving of our money represents a giving of ourselves, since money represents the time and effort and creativity that we have invested in order to gain it. Such giving is also an expression of our trust in God's faithfulness to continue to meet our material needs--which Paul tells us God will fully supply (Phillipians 4:19).

Ask the Group

How can a Christian make the transition in his or her thinking from the "I.R.S." outlook on giving to the "privilege" outlook on giving?

Offer God Your Service to Others:

"And let us not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased." (Hebrews 13:16)

The other sacrifice mentioned in this verse is "doing good." This phrase refers to ministry--performing deeds of loving service to other people as representatives of Christ. When we relate to the people God brings into our lives with Christ-like, sacrificial love, God regards this as an expression of our worship to him. ". . . walk in love, just as Christ loved you, and gave himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice as a fragrant aroma."

God is pleased by this kind of life-style not only because he wants to love people through us, but also because this demonstrates that we are living with an attitude of trust in his love for us. We are motivated to love others because we understand and believe in the love that God has for us (1 John 4:16-19).

Every day, God gives us dozens of creative opportunities to say "thank you!" to him in this way-- serving our spouses, caring for our children, performing deeds of service for those in need, showing and sharing the love of Christ to our neighbors, those at work or school--the examples are endless.

We also have the special privilege of worshiping God through the exercise of our spiritual gifts. Paul speaks of his own apostolic ministry in this way: ". . . because of the grace that was given to me from God, to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, that my offering of the Gentiles might become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit." (Romans 15:15,16)

After urging us to present our lives to God as an act of worship in Romans 12:1, Paul goes on to urge us to express that worship through the use of our spiritual gifts (vs. 6-8). As we discover our spiritual gifts and exercise them regularly in the service of others, and give God praise for the fruit of this ministry, we discover a form of worship that is uniquely satisfying!

Ask the Group

What differences do you think it would make for you when facing situations (mentioned in the previous sentence) that you consciously thought about serving the Lord himself via serving this person?

(Responses might include: less fear, more boldness, more respect, more energy and resolve, deeper care about what you're doing, etc.)

Discussion Questions

What if we emphasize one form of worship to the virtual exclusion of another? Consider the different mixes of exclusions, the possible motives behind each mix, and the possible outcomes of each.

Prior to this study, which of these forms of worship did you understand the least and why? Which do you think is your strongest/weakest? Why?

Conclusion

It should be clear from this study that worship in the New Testament is a lifestyle made up of many kinds of activity, not necessarily a corporate meeting.

Why is this so important? When Christians view worship as the most important priority (which is correct) but have a superficial view of what worship is, the result is often a superficial and dichotomized Christian life. Such Christians are faithfully committed to attending the Sunday worship service, but because they view that as the essence of worship, fail to develop a lifestyle of whole-hearted commitment to God, thankfulness, financial stewardship and ministry. God is more pleased and we are more fulfilled when we develop lifestyles characterized by the full-orbed worship described in the New Testament.