



THE
Dwell Richly
COURSE

leading others in singing the gospel

1. WHAT IS WORSHIP?

1. What is worship?

Introduction

*Were the whole realm of nature mine
That were an offering far too small
Love so amazing, so divine
Demands my soul, my life, my all.¹*

When we think about leading music in church, we can't jump straight to the practicalities of arranging music and leading a band. Our singing is part of something much bigger – a life of worship for the glory of God.

Worship is so much more than just singing on Sundays (Romans 12:1-2). But singing together about who God is and what He's done for us in Jesus Christ can be a significant means through which our congregations are built up to live lives worshipping Jesus from now into eternity! (See Figure 1: The Scope of Worship.)

Our theology² of worship, drawn from the Bible, is the foundation for our singing and it deeply affects and shapes our role as music leaders.

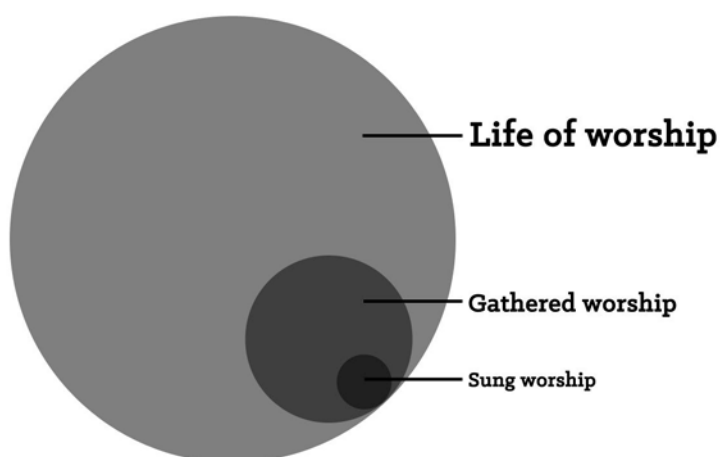


Fig. 1: The Scope of Worship

1 Our study of God: theo = "God", -ology = "study of"

2 Issac Watts, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross", Public Domain.

Defining worship

Here is one big-picture definition of what the Bible says about worship:

Worship is the right response to God's glory, revealed in Jesus Christ and His gospel, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Worship is a response of adoration, expressed in action; a picture now of the age to come.³

The scope of this is huge! It "demands my soul, my life, my all", as the great hymn says. We'll look at each part of our definition to discover what the Bible says about worship. As we do, we'll begin to think how these truths shape our life of worship, with some specific implications for us as we lead singing in church gatherings.

Worship is the right response to God's glory...

Worship starts with God, not us. There are lots of commands in the Bible to worship God; each command is accompanied by a reason that is located in who God is and what He has *already* done for us. Look at this song in the book of Psalms...

Read Psalm 47

What is Israel commanded to do in response to God?

What has He *already* done for them?

Worship is the response to God the Father's glory – the outward display of His inner beauty and majesty. Throughout the Bible, God reveals His glory through His creation, His works of salvation and by making Himself known to His people. And when people encounter God's glory, they worship Him (e.g. Exodus 34:5-8; 2 Chronicles 7:3; Daniel 7:14; Revelation 15:4).

We see how glorious God is in what He has done. God's work in creation reveals His eternal power and divine nature (Romans 1:20). Each time we stare into the tapestry of the night sky, gaze at a majestic sunset, or enjoy the smile of a loved one, we encounter something of God's glory. Ultimately, God's work of *redemption* reveals to us His heart of love and compassion, justice and mercy. The supreme

³ This definition is largely based on Don Carson in D. A. Carson, "Worship Under the Word," in *Worship by the Book*, ed. D. A. Carson (Michigan: Zondervan Press, 2002), 11-62.

revelation of God's glory was at the cross, as His one and only beloved Son gave His life to pay for our rebellion against God, and bring us to Him as His adopted children.

As God reveals to us His glory, we respond by living lives that display His greatness. When it comes to worship, we don't start by thinking about what we do, but about who He is and what He has done!

As Christians, we live our lives "in view of God's mercy"; we respond by offering ourselves "as a living sacrifice" because of the mercy He has *already* shown us (Romans 12:1).

...revealed in Jesus Christ...

Jesus reveals God's glory to us; His life, death, resurrection and ascension are at the heart of our worship. More than that: our response of worship to His revelation can only be acceptably offered through Him; only He makes worship possible.

Hebrews 2:12 captures both of these aspects of Jesus' ministry:

*I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the assembly I will sing your praises.*

Jesus is the one who reveals the Father by declaring His name (everything He is to us). And Jesus Himself leads our response of worship as He's described here as singing God's praises "in the midst of the assembly".

Jesus reveals the Father

Just before this verse, the author of Hebrews shows us how Jesus reveals the Father to us...

Read Hebrews 1:1-3

How did God reveal Himself in the past (v1)?

Through whom has He now spoken (v2)?

Where should we look to see God's glory (v3)?

Jesus reveals the Father's glory to us by becoming flesh and dwelling among us (John 1:14; John 14:8-9; Colossians 1:15). There is no greater way for the Father's glory to be revealed than for Him to send His beloved Son to die on a cross for us

while we were still sinners!

We no longer go to a building, a ritual or a 'worship leader' to meet with God. Jesus Himself is the temple where God dwells and reveals His glory (John 1:14; Matthew 12:6)! We go to Jesus to worship God.

Jesus leads our response of worship

In fact, left to our own devices, our worship as imperfect sinners could never be acceptable to a holy God. It's only through Jesus' death on the cross to pay for our sin, and His on-going work as our Great High Priest in Heaven that our worship is made acceptable to God, and we can draw near to Him with freedom and confidence (Hebrews 10:19-22).

So in every aspect of our worship, including our singing:

Jesus Christ has promised to be in the midst of His people... gathering up our imperfect offerings and offering them as part of His perfect offering to the Father.⁴

John Calvin describes Jesus as the "chief conductor of our hymns".⁵

That gives us wonderful grounding and security as music leaders. Our engagement with God doesn't hang on our skill but on God's faithfulness to reveal His glory to us in Jesus. He takes our weak, broken offerings and presents them as perfect before the Father.

The Father reveals His glory through Jesus; we respond in worship through Jesus.

Worship is empowered by the Holy Spirit

So how can we 'see' Jesus – and respond to God's glory – today? The role of the Holy Spirit is to show us Jesus as He ministers His word to us. The Holy Spirit empowers our worship in two key ways. Firstly, He reveals Christ to us – the one to whom we respond in worship. And secondly, He empowers us to respond rightly by transforming our hearts and giving us gifts to serve.

4 Ron Man, "Proclamation and Praise: Christ our Worship Leader" Doxology and Theology [podcast]. Available at: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/doxology-theology/id1015072160?mt=2&i=1000382668817> [Accessed 24 May 2018].

5 John Calvin, The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St Peter, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1963), 27.

1. The Spirit shows us Christ

The Holy Spirit empowers our worship by revealing Christ to us through His word:

Read John 15:26

In what two ways does Jesus describe the Spirit?

What will He do?

The Father sends the Holy Spirit to testify about His Son. If we're seeking to be true worshippers, His testimony is vital. In John's gospel, Jesus says to a Samaritan lady during a discussion on worship:

a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain [Gerizim] nor in Jerusalem... a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.

– John 4:21-24

True worshippers worship "in the Spirit" as the Spirit reveals God's truth to us in His word. Jesus, the Word, and all He has done, *is* the "truth", according to John (John 1:9, 6:32, 15:1).

Our worship depends on the Holy Spirit ministering the truth about Jesus to us. Each time we open God's word for ourselves or in order to lead others, we need to prayerfully depend on the Holy Spirit to reveal to us God's glory in Christ.

2. The Spirit enables our response

As the Spirit reveals Jesus to us, He makes us more like Jesus. In and of ourselves, we can't respond rightly to God's revelation. It's as the Holy Spirit transforms our hearts by showing us Christ through His word that we are changed into His likeness and respond in lives of worship.

2 Corinthians 3:18 says:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.
(ESV)

According to this verse, what does the Spirit do as we behold "the glory of the Lord"?

Read 2 Corinthians 4:6

Where do we see the Lord's glory?

God's glory is displayed "in the face of Jesus Christ". As we behold "the glory of the Lord", we "are being transformed into [Christ's] image from one degree of glory to another" by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Whenever we read, preach or sing God's word, the Holy Spirit is at work transforming each of us to be more like Jesus! So His work is utterly indispensable – only in His power can we respond rightly in worship to God's glory revealed in Jesus.

3. The Spirit gives gifts for service

One way the Spirit transforms us is by empowering us to serve God and each other. He gives us a love for God and His people, and a desire to serve them. The Spirit also empowers our worship by giving us gifts to use in service.

A key part of our worship is serving God and His church. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul goes to some length to show us that all of the gifts we use to serve God and His people come from the Holy Spirit:

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. – 1 Corinthians 12:4-7

Our skills as musicians and music leaders are given by the Holy Spirit to empower our worship when used "for the common good" of God's people. What a wonderful privilege – one that comes with a responsibility to honour God and serve His people. It's also humbling to know our musical gifts were not earned, but given by our generous God. As we lead music in our church, it's only by depending on His power that we can behold Christ, serve His church, and help others do the same.

Worship is a response of adoration, expressed in action

So far, we've been thinking about how God reveals His glory and enables us to respond. Now we'll think about our response; what does it mean to respond rightly to God?

A response of adoration

Right at the centre of our worship is our inward (heart) response to God's revelation. Without this, all our outward attempts to serve God in worship are dead, falling short of true and appropriate worship. Jesus had very strong words for those who loved doing outward acts of worship, but had hearts that were far from God (Mark 7:1–8; cf. Amos 5:23–24). Right worship always starts in the heart, but that heart-response of adoration always leads to action, living lives in response to God's glory. We can see this from the different words for worship in the Bible...

The main word for worship in the Old Testament⁶ emphasised "physical falling down in reverence before a majesty"⁷ in "response to some gracious revelation of the LORD".⁸

It's strange, then, that the equivalent Greek word⁹ is hardly used in the New Testament. It is used when people physically bow down before Jesus when He was physically present (e.g. in the gospels and Revelation). But between Jesus' first and second comings, worship is not bound to a physical location. It's de-localised; it's "in Spirit and in truth". New Testament worship isn't characterised by the same outward forms as the Old; it's no longer bound to place or posture. John Piper says:

This is what [Jesus] meant when he said, "This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. In vain do they worship me" (Matthew 15:8–9). When the heart is far from God, worship is vain, empty, non-existent. The experience of the heart is the defining, vital, indispensable essence of worship.¹⁰

The heart of authentic worship is expressed first by adoration in our hearts. As the Spirit reveals God's glory in Christ through His word, we respond to His revelation with adoration, reverence and thankfulness. Without this response of adoration, our outward acts of worship are dead.

6 The Hebrew word *hishtahavah*

7 John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals* (Inverness: Christian Focus Press, 2003), 230.

8 David Peterson, *Engaging with God* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 59.

9 *proskynein*

10 John Piper, "Gravity and gladness: the Pursuit of God in Corporate Worship," <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/gravity-and-gladness-on-sunday-morning-part-1> [Accessed 3 Oct 2018].

Expressed in action

This inward response of adoration flows out into action; in fact “all of life and ministry [is] an expression of that inner experience of worship”.¹¹

The second key worship word in Scripture refers to our service. In the Old Testament, this referred to offerings and the ministry of priests.¹² But in the New Testament,¹³ its meaning is exploded out to incorporate all we do in life.

Read Hebrews 13:15-16

What Old Testament worship language does Paul use here? (Hint: think about what they did in the Temple.)

How does he describe: Our praise?

Doing good to others?

Paul even takes Old Testament words that describe the ministry of priests in the Temple and applies them to his own ministry. He calls his preaching a “priestly duty” and those who hear it “an offering acceptable to God” (Romans 15:16; Philippians 2:17).

John Piper sums this up in saying:

*the essence of worship is not external, localized acts, but an inner, Godward experience that shows itself externally, not primarily in church services (though they are important), but primarily in daily expressions of allegiance to God.*¹⁴

Worship starts in our hearts, as we respond to God’s revelation with adoration. Our adoration manifests itself in action – a life lived to display God’s greatness. There are two directions in our worship happening at the same time: a “vertical” honouring of who God is, expressed “horizontally” as we make manifest the gifts of the Spirit.

11 John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*, 231

12 The Hebrew word ‘abad

13 The Greek word *latreuo*

14 John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*, 232–233

Worship now is a picture of the age to come

As we've seen, Jesus is now seated in Heaven, making acceptable our offerings of worship (Hebrews 10:19–22). Spiritually speaking, we are there with Him now (Colossians 3:1–4), even as we await the glorious Day when we will worship Him not by faith but by sight. David Peterson says:

Jesus our ascended high priest and saviour-king has gathered those who trust him to God's throne in heaven, where by faith we are already a part of the joyful assembly that is Christ's heavenly and eternal 'church' (Heb. 12:22-24).¹⁵

Our worship now (both in our lives as individual believers, and expressed particularly as we gather) not only anticipates the great gathering to God in eternity; we're joining in as Jesus leads the worship in Heaven! As Harold Best says, "our songs (and our very lives) are caught up in the worship service Jesus is leading in the true tabernacle".¹⁶

Our church gatherings can sometimes seem weak and underwhelming. However, the reality is that, as we gather, it's a glimpse – a foretaste – of the great gathering to God around the Throne as we encounter Him by faith and pour out our praise for all He has done for us. Spiritually, we join the heavenly gathering even now as the Holy Spirit reveals Christ through His word. One day, we will see Him face to face! And the result will be unending praise.

Summary

Worship starts with who God is and what He has done for us. We see that most clearly in Jesus and His gospel, as the Holy Spirit reveals Him in all His glory through His word. As we respond, our worship overflows into lives lived to display His glory. One day, we'll be gathered round His throne "at last reflecting perfectly the glory of our king".¹⁷

¹⁵ David Peterson, *Encountering God Together* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2013), 19.

¹⁶ Harold Best, *Music Through the Eyes of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 95.

¹⁷ "Where, O Grave, is your Victory?" © Ben Slee 2015, published by Christ Church Mayfair.

Questions

- In what ways are we tempted to think that worship is something that starts with us? How do we often live as if that were functionally true?
- How do you find worship as a way of life both freeing and challenging?
- How could we rely more consciously on the Holy Spirit's power, not ourselves, as we worship?
- How might the worship in the age to come shape your daily living now? And the way you lead music in church gatherings?

Things to read & listen to

1. The chapter "Worship under the word" in *Worship by the Book*, edited by D. A. Carson¹⁸
2. "Gravity and Gladness: The Pursuit of God in Corporate Worship" by John Piper¹⁹
3. David Peterson, *Engaging with God*.²⁰ Alternatively, the smaller version of this book: *Encountering God Together*²¹
4. Ron Man, "Proclamation and Praise: Christ Our Worship Leader" *Doxology and Theology* [Podcast]²²

18 (Michigan: Zondervan press, 2002), 11-63. (This chapter formed much of the definition of worship discussed above.)

19 Accessed Jan 16 2019, <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/gravity-and-gladness-on-sunday-morning-part-1>. (The section above on adoration and action was shaped by these seminars.)

20 (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992)

21 (Nottingham, Inter-Varsity Press, 2013)

22 Available at: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/doxology-theology/id1015072160?mt=2&i=1000382668817>.

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