



PRESERVING BIBLE TIMES^{inc.}

Because Context Matters

When “worship” isn’t Worship

Unintended Consequences of Doing Church “Right” Series – Part II



A view of ancient Shechem. A short distance from here at Jacob’s Well Jesus encountered a Samaritan woman and gave her (and us) the litmus test of biblical worship – in Spirit and Truth (John 4:23).

This is the second Reflection in our “*Unintended Consequences of Doing Church ‘Right’*” series. The first one focused on what a flawed church Vision/Purpose Statement includes or lacks. This Reflection discusses authentic **Worship** in contrast to what often passes as our Western Evangelical pretense of “worship.”

At its core, **Worship** is responding to God with our heart, mind and soul, which means that **Worship** is a participatory event. If that doesn’t happen, it’s not **Worship**. So much of what passes for contemporary “worship” may, without realizing it, be creating a generation of (passive) attendees who are much more observers of a worship scene rather than spiritual participants in its reality. Over time that creates “religious” spectators untransformed by their worship “experience.”

Over 40+ years ago, Abraham Heschel saw a passive, observational dynamic beginning to take root in American religious culture:

People of our time are losing the power of celebration. Instead of celebrating we seek to be amused or entertained. Celebration is an active state, an act of expressing reverence or appreciation. To be entertained is a passive state – it is to receive pleasure afforded by an amusing act or spectacle...

From *The Wisdom of Heschel*

Sadly, a half century later more and more “worship” services have become increasingly entertainment/spectator based, offering subtle narcissistic lyrics as “worship” that increasingly replaces **Worship**. Let’s dig deeper to differentiate biblical **Worship** from what often passes as our Western Evangelical pretense of “worship.”

It’s who you are and the way you live that counts before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That’s the kind of people the Father is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly themselves before him in their worship. God is sheer being itself – Spirit. Those who worship him must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration.
John 4:23, 24 *The Message*

These two verses are foundational to understanding **Worship**. Here Jesus defines **Worship** and explains what it entails. Four key words we need to probe are *must, worship, spirit* and *truth*. But first, we can quickly observe that:

- We can sit through a “worship” service, even be moved to tears, and still not have worshiped at all.
- We can sing in the choir, usher, be a greeter, and not engage in **Worship**.
- We can recite the liturgy, yet miss **Worshipping**.
- If we don’t know who God really is, His attributes/character/nature, it is impossible to **Worship**.
- If we are preoccupied with the issues of our daily life as we sit in a worship service and mechanically go through the motions, we are not **Worshipping**.

Worship has nothing to do with a place or a building. It doesn’t happen just because you sit in a sanctuary and mindlessly go through the rituals and mechanics. Genuine **Worship** happens when two things are fused together - *spirit and truth*. Those two dynamics **must** travel together like Siamese twins. And if spirit **and** truth are not fused together, it may be church “worship” but it isn’t biblical **Worship**!

The bedrock of **Worshipping** God is adoringly responding to Him from the interior of who we are (our *spirit*) for 1) **Who He is** – His attributes, nature and character, 2) **What He cares about** – rescuing and restoring broken, marginalized, sin-imprisoned people, and 3) **How He does things** – surprisingly, graciously, lovingly, taking the initiative.

This leads us to what should be obvious – God’s Word is where we accurately learn (more) about God. And what we accurately/**truthfully** learn about God infuses our **Worship** – our (**truthful**) response to Him. There is a flip side to this reality. The less we study Scripture, the less we know (accurately) God, the bigger the risk we run that our response to God is misguided. And that’s a gentle way of expressing it. (increasing Biblical illiteracy is a future topic.)

Any time we respond to God other than for who/how He is revealed in Scripture; i.e., responding to a caricature of God we have mistakenly/deliberately created, we are responding to an idolatrous view of God. As Biblical illiteracy becomes more and more rampant in the Western Evangelical Church, the more bona fide **Worship** evades us. Leviticus 4 & 5 reminds us that there is such

a thing as unintentional, unknowing sin. That is why I believe “**Knowing God**” is the most important course taught in any fellowship. When we have misguided views of God, everything else tends to get out of whack, including our worship.

Genuine **Worship** is done in **Truth**. That brings us to the Greek word *aletheia*. It means being totally transparent – full disclosure - revealing the essence of who you are before Him. In this context, *aletheia* cuts two ways. We need the truth about God - an accurate/correct/biblically sound view of God - if we are to authentically **Worship** (respond to) Him in adoration. But equally important to genuine **Worship** is having an accurate/sober (Romans 12:3) view of ourselves.

One of the inherent maladies that afflicts us in our humanity is the tendency to have too high of a view of ourselves and too low a view of God. That’s a prescription for non-worship. In real **Worship**, we come “*just as I am*” as the old hymn puts it. No pretending. We need to leave our “false selves” and self-deceiving pretensions behind and be totally and brutally honest. Don’t bring the kind of person you would like to be, but bring the person you are – the real you. As a friend recently put it, “*worship is a come-as-you-are celebration, not a masquerade ball.*”

When God’s Holiness is the measuring rod, you and I have much more in common with Attila the Hun than we do with Joan of Arc. Authentic **Worship** unfolds when we bring our real selves to God. Think about it. God knows everything about us. So why would we bring our pretentious, disguised selves to **Worship** and, in so doing, deny the omniscience of God? The truth of the matter is: He knows everything about us and still likes/loves us! Embrace that reality and be totally honest about who you are in God’s sight when you come to **Worship**.

We must **Worship** God *in spirit and truth*. There are two parts to our being – physical and spiritual. It’s the spiritual aspect of who we are that engages in **Worship**. Since God’s nature is *Spirit*, we need to respond to Him in our *spirit*. The sensory part of our physicality – our eyes and ears – has little to do with biblical **Worship** per se. If our eyes wander from one stain glass window to another, those stain glass windows have nothing to do with **Worship** unless they evoke us to adore and praise God. And when the choir’s anthem is particularly moving and we find ourselves evaluating the professionalism of the soloists, or comparing this week’s performance to last week’s, we may be “worshiping” but not **Worshipping**. Unless the elements of our “worship” services evoke adoration, praise and thanksgiving within us toward the Father, the Son, and (the self-effacing nature of) the Holy Spirit, these elements actually serve to inhibit authentic **Worship**.

Worship is an affair of both the head and the heart in a balanced, integrated way. Too much head and too little heart results in a lukewarm, passionless orthodoxy. Too much heart and too little head can easily result in misguided zeal and passion. In our (fallen) nature, we tend to veer toward the ditch on one side of the road (head) or the other (heart) depending on how each of us is “wired.” The challenge to Jesus’ definition of genuine **Worship** – *in spirit and truth* – means each of us has to cultivate either more of *truth* or more of *spirit* (passion and affections) in what we bring to **Worship**. It’s a flawed understanding to say, I’ll bring truth, you bring spirit, and together we’ll cover both bases.

Why does worshipping *in spirit and truth* matter? Because authentic **Worship** is inherently transforming! You can’t adore and praise God in **Worship** for His Sovereignty – celebrating His total control over all things, that He never makes a mistake, the way His Providence has faithfully kept and guided you – and then go home and worry and fret over the current issues in your life. **Worship** reminds us again of who God is, what God cares about, and how God does things. And that shapes not only how we live today, but how we confidently anticipate tomorrow.

Is there authentic biblical **Worship** happening in your fellowship, or merely different flavors of secular (entertainment aspects) worship that happens to use biblical words? It hugely matters. Authentic **Worship** is transforming, secular worship is ultimately debilitating with inevitable unintended consequences, even if we don’t realize it.

Things to Ponder

- Before reading this Reflection, how have you typically approached “worship”?
- Will you consider approaching **Worship** differently in the future? In what way(s)?
- When were you exposed to sound teaching on “*Knowing God*”? What did that do to you and for you?
- Is your head and heart balanced (and integrated) in **Worship**, or do you tend to veer more towards the head or heart?
- When was the last time you found **Worship** personally transforming?

- Which ditch (side) of the spirit-truth road do you tend to drift toward? Any rebalancing needed?
- What most struck you in this Reflection? What most challenged you?

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