

WHAT IS WORSHIP?

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What is worship? Some churches call their building a “worship center.” Many, if not most, churches call their Sunday morning meeting a “worship service.” In the latter part of the twentieth century, the traditional “song leader” was replaced with a “worship leader.” So, in the worship center, the worship leader leads the people in worship, which means worship is something people do while there are singing on Sunday morning. Yet people are aware that not all singing is worship. In that case, it is singing plus something else that is vaguely thought of as a mood or emotion.

Is worship a building, a church service, or singing? Is it a mood or an emotion?

In the Old Testament

The Hebrew Word The Hebrew word for worship (שָׁחָה; shâchâh; Strong #7812) means “to bow down, prostrate oneself.” It is often rendered “bow.” It consists of falling upon the knees and touching the forehead to the ground (Gen. 19:1, 42:6, 48:12, 1 Sam 25:41, etc.). Simply put, worship is bowing. For example, Genesis says, “Now the two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw *them*, he rose to meet them, and he bowed himself with his face toward the ground” (Gen. 19:1) and “Abraham said to his young men, ‘Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you’” (Gen. 22:5). The Hebrew word is translated “bowed himself” in Genesis 19:1 is the same one rendered “worship” in Genesis 22:5.

Worship is bowing down, but at the same time, the act of prostrating is more than an activity of the body. It is an external act intended to convert an internal attitude. The attitude is honor or reverence. Unger says the Hebrew word means to “bow down, to prostrate oneself before another *in order to do him honor and reverence*” (*Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, italics added). Thus, in the Old Testament, worship is an action (prostrating oneself) with an attitude (honor and/or reverence).

The Usage Worship is used of bowing down (prostrating oneself) before God (Gen. 22:5; Ex. 24:1; 33:10), idols (Ex. 34:14; Judges 2:19; Isa. 2:8), angels (Gen. 19:1), and a superior (Gen. 33:6). In the New King James Version of the Bible, the word “worship” appears 68 times. It is used of worshipping idols 27 times and worshipping the Lord 41 times. Of the 41 times where “worship” is used of worshipping the Lord, 14 just mention worshipping the Lord and 17 of them refer to the *place* of worship, such as Jerusalem (Isa. 27:13), the Temple (2 Kings 5:18), and at the Lord’s footstool (Ps. 99:5). That leaves ten references of “worship” being used of worshipping the Lord. Those ten occurrences referred to something that accompanies (is connected with) worshipping the Lord; they are ways of honoring the Lord.

Worshipping (honoring) the Lord was often connected to **offering a sacrifice** (six times: Gen. 22:5; Deut. 26:10; 1 Sam. 1:3; 2 Kings 17:36; see worship and keep the feast of Tabernacles in Zech. 14:16 and worship and burn incense in 2 Chron. 32:12). “And Abraham said to his young men, stay here with the donkey, the lad and I will go yonder and worship and we will come back to you. So Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son and he took the fire in his hand and a knife and the two of them went together” (Gen. 22:5-6). The fact that

Abraham said he was going to worship and took the material for a sacrifice suggests that what he meant by worship was to offer a sacrifice.

Gill says Abraham was going to “worship God by offering sacrifice to him.” Keil says, “The servants were not to see what would take place there; for they could not understand this ‘worship.’” Matthew Henry says, “It is a teaching question to us all, that, when we are going to worship God, we should seriously consider whether we have everything ready, especially the lamb for a burnt-offering.” Honor the Lord by offering a sacrifice to Him.

Worshipping (honoring) the Lord was connected **with serving**. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for worship and the Hebrew word for serve appear together (Ex. 20:5; Deut. 4:19, 8:19, 11:16, 30:17; 1 Kings 9:6; 2 Chron. 7:19; Jer. 13:10, 25:6; see *serve or worship* in Dan. 3:12, 14, 18, 28). Honor the Lord by serving Him. To honor the Lord by serving is to “worship (honor) by means of sacrifice and religious ceremonies” (Keil and Delitzsch on Ex. 20:5).

Commenting on the use of “worship” and “serve” in Exodus 20:5, Gill says to “bow down” was to “perform any worship to them, show any reverence of them by any gesture of the body; one being mentioned, bowing the body, and put for all others, as prostration of it to the earth, bending the knee, kissing the hand, lifting up of hands or eyes to them, or by any outward action expressing a religious esteem of them, as if there was divinity in them.” He says to serve them means to serve them “in a religious manner, internally or externally, by offering sacrifice and burning incense to them; by praying to, or praising of them; by expressing love to them, faith and trust in them, hope and expectation of good things from them, and the like.”

Worshipping (honoring) the Lord was to be done **with holy living** (see worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness, which appears three times: 1 Chron. 16:29; Ps. 29:2; 96:9). Honor the Lord by living a holy life. The expression “worship the Lord with the beauty of holiness” has been interpreted to mean “God’s beauty (majesty) is His holiness” (*Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*), the holy garments worn by the priest (see ASV; Luther; Lange; Clarke; K&D), the holiness of God’s people (Alexander; *Bible Knowledge Commentary*). Barnes says it means “the state of the heart, the ‘internal’ ornament with which we should approach God ... that beauty or appropriateness of the soul which consists in holiness or purity” (Barnes on Ps. 29:2).

Worshipping (honoring) the Lord could be connected **with singing** God’s praises (Ps. 66:4; 138:2). This idea only appears a few times, namely in Psalms 66 and Psalm 138. Psalm 66 says, “All the earth shall worship You and sing praises to You; they shall sing praises *to Your name*” (Ps. 66:4). Notice, worship is not singing. Those are two different things (worship *and* sing; the same is true in Ps. 138). Concerning Psalm 66, one commentator says, “All the earth shall worship” means all the inhabitants of the world will bow down before the Lord, or render Him homage and sing, that is, shall ‘celebrate’ God’s praises” (Barnes). “Worship is sacrifice and “praise is the best of all sacrifices” (Calvin on Ps. 66:4). Honor the Lord by sing His praising.

Thus, in the Old Testament, worship was an attitude of honor and an activity of sacrifice, holy living and singing. The emphasis is on sacrifices (see 31 references to worship and the reference to service. The next greatest focus is on holy living and singing, probably God’s praises, in connection with worship is mentioned once or twice. “Worship, for the Israelites, truly circumscribe a life relationship with God, and involved an *attitude* of fear, honor, respect, and adoration, an *activity* of sacrifice and praise, and a *lifestyle* of obedience and walking in God’s way” (Radmacher, p. 163, italics his).

In the New Testament

The Greek Words Several Greek words are translated “worship.”

The Greek word translated “worship” (*proskuneo*; Strong #4352) comes from the word “to kiss” and means “to make obeisance, do reverence to, worship.” This word conveys the same idea as the Hebrew word for worship, namely obeisance to honor or reverence the Lord. In the New Testament, this is the main Greek word for worship.

The Greek word translated “worship” (*latreia*; Strong #2999) means “hired service, service, divine service, worship.”

The Greek word translated “worship” (*sebomai*; Strong #4576) means “to worship, devout” (A-S). It only occurs ten times in the New Testament and is the word used of Gentile proselytes to Judaism. It is used in Matthew 15:9 (Jesus said, “These people draw near to me with their mouth, and honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me and in vain they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men,” Mt. 15:8-9), Mark 7:11 (NKJV: people declared their money is “a gift to God;” NASB: “given to God,” so they would not have to give it to their parents), Acts 16:14 (Lydia was a “worshiper of God”), Acts 13:43 (“God-fearing proselytes”), Acts 13:50 (“devout and prominent women,” a reference to the Gentile proselytes), Acts 17:4 (“God-fearing Greeks”), Acts 17:17 (“God-fearing Gentiles”), Acts 18:7 (a worshiper of God), Acts 18:13 (Paul was accused of persuading men “to worship God contrary to the law”), Acts 19: 27 (all the world worships the idol Artemis).

The Greek word translated “worship” (*ethelothreskeia*; Strong #1479) means “self-imposed worship” and only appears once in the New Testament (Col. 2:23).

The Greek word translated “worship” (*therapeuo*; Strong #2323) comes from a noun that means “service, care, attention, household attendance, servants” and means “to do service, serve, to treat, cure, heal.” The verb means to “do service.” This is a medical term often used in the New Testament of medical treatment (for example, in Mt 12:19, it means “to heal”). In Acts 17:25, it refers to pagan worship. “God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men’s hands, as though He needed anything since He gives to all life, breath, and all things” (Acts 17:24-25).

In the New King James Version, the word translated “worship” is used 44 times. It is used of worshipping idols (13 times worshipping Satan twice), the Lord (16 times, including worshipping Christ three times), the place to worship (eight times) and worshipping in truth (seven times).

Usage Although there are five different Greek words translated worship, only two are particularly important to understand the New Testament concept of worship for believers.

The Greek word translated “worship” (*proskuneo*; Strong #4352) is the word that is used repeatedly in the most important passage on worship in the Bible. In John 4, the women at the well said to Jesus, “Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you *Jews* say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (Jn. 4:20-24).

The Jews insisted that the exclusive place of worship, that is, the place to perform the divine services commanded by God, was in the Temple in Jerusalem. The Samaritans had set up a rival

place of worship on Mt. Gerizim. Jesus tells her that a time is coming when all limitations of worship will disappear. The place is not the issue! Furthermore, she is confused about salvation, which comes from the Jews (Jn. 4:22), and true worship, which must be in spirit and in truth (Jn. 4:23-24). The Samaritans had a false worship. True worship must be according to the truth of God's Word and be in spirit. Spirit is the nature of God and the opposite of that which is material and earthly, such as this mountain. Jesus makes it all a matter of the heart (Tenney). It is not where, but the how of worship that is important. Worship in spirit and in truth implies prostration of the inner most soul before divine perfection (Plummer).

Thus, worship (honoring the Lord) in the New Testament is an attitude (spirit) of honor (the very meaning of the word "worship") done in according to the truth of God's Word.

The Greek noun translated "worship" (*latreia*; Strong #2999) only appears five times in the New Testament (Jn. 16:2, Rom. 9:4, Rom. 12:1, Heb. 9:1, Heb. 9:6). The verb means "to work for hire, to serve, worship." It appears (21 times) in Matthew 4:10, Luke 1:74, Luke 4:8, Luke 2:37, Acts 2:7, Acts 7:7, Acts 7:42, Acts 24:14, Acts 27:23, Romans 1:25, Philippians 3:3, 2 Timothy 1:3, Hebrews 8:5, Hebrews 9:9, Hebrews 9:14, Hebrews 10:2, Hebrews 12:28, Hebrews 13:10, Hebrews 1:9, Revelation 7:15, Revelation 22:2. It means "to render religious service or honor and in the strict sense to perform sacred services, to offer gifts, to worship God in the observance of the rites instituted for His worship (Heb. 10:2, 9:9)" (Unger).

In Romans 12:1, Paul writes, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service." The Greek word translated "present" is the same one that was used in Romans 6:13, 16, 19. In Romans 6, this word is used to convey the connotation of using of the body either for sin or for righteousness. Thus, Romans 12:1 is not calling for an act of dedication but simply obedience to God through the body. In short, use your body to obey God.

Using the body to obey God is using the body as a sacrifice to Him. Such a sacrifice is living. The Old Testament animal sacrifices were dead. In contrast, the presentation of our bodies is a living sacrifice. Moreover, the sacrifice of the bodies (obedience) is holy; it is set apart to the Lord. Consequently, it is acceptable to God. He is well-pleased; He delights in such sacrifices.

Using the body to obey God is using the body as a sacrifice to Him is a reasonable service. The Greek word translated "reasonable" is the word from which we get the English word "logic." In light of God's great mercies, a life of obedience is rational and reasonable. It is a reasonable service. In other words, it is like the service the priest rendered to God in the Tabernacle.

An examination of the five appearances of the noun form of this word in the New Testament indicates its meaning.

In Romans 9:4, Paul describes Israel's relationship with God. He says they had "the covenants, the giving of the law, the service *of God*, and the promises." The service here is the Levitical system of sacrifices.

In Hebrews 9:1, the author says, "first *covenant* had ordinances of divine service and the earthly sanctuary." The Moosic Covenant had a Tabernacle (sanctuary) in which divine services were rendered. The writer goes on to describe the Tabernacle (Heb. 9:2-5) and the service rendered in it (Heb. 9:6-10).

In Hebrews 9:6, the author says, "the priests always went into the first part of the tabernacle, performing *the services*."

Thus, in three of the five occurrences of the noun "service," the meaning is the sacred services performed in the Tabernacle.

In John 16:2, Jesus said, “They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service.” In other words, Jesus tells the disciples that the Jews will kill believers and think they are rendering to God the same kind of service that the priest performed in the Tabernacle.

Thus, worship (honoring the Lord; see “reasonable service” in Rom. 12:1) in the New Testament is offering the Lord the sacrifice of obedience. In short, it is honoring the Lord with obedience.

There are other *sacrifices* that are to be offered to the Lord. “Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of *our* lips, giving thanks to His name. But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased” (Heb. 13:15-16). There are three spiritual sacrifices mentioned in this passage.

The first sacrifice is the sacrifice of praise (Lev. 7:12). It should be offered continually, not just in the public meeting. It should be the fruit of our lips, a phrase taken from Hosea 14:2 and emphasizing that the praise of the lips is the fruit coming from the root of a grateful heart. It should be thanksgiving to His name.

The second sacrifice is the sacrifice of doing good. Paul says we are to do good to all, especially to those who were of the household of faith (Gal. 6:10). The writer to the Hebrews calls such a service a sacrifice to God.

The third sacrifice is the sacrifice of sharing, which at least includes giving money and maybe more (see Phil. 4:18). All three of these sacrifices were well-pleasing to God. They are acceptable services (Heb. 12:28). Peter put it like this, “You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 2:5).

Thus in the New Testament, worship is an attitude of honor and the sacrifices of obedience, praise, good works, and giving. The emphasis is on sacrifices (see 31 references to worship and service. The next greatest focus is on holy living and singing, probably God’s praises, in connection with worship is mentioned once or twice.

Barnhouse and his wife were on a trip in their car. She was driving. Barnhouse reports, “As we were going along, we came to a small town. She slowed down to 35 miles an hour and then to 25 miles when the sign so indicated. I believe that most drivers go 30 in a 25-mile zone, 40 in a 35-mile zone and 55 in a 50-mile zone. This Christian woman was doing exactly 15 in a school zone and I commended her on the nature of her driving.” She then told her husband, “Since I delight to worship God since he told us that we are to obey Him, and since He tells us to submit us to every ordinance of man *for His sake*, I would consider that I was worshipping the Lord with my accelerator foot.”

Summary: Worship in the Bible is an attitude of honoring the Lord by offering sacrifices of an obedient (holy) life, praising, doing good works, and giving.

Worship is not a church service, nor is it a mood or an emotion. It is an attitude of honoring the Lord, which can be done in a number of ways.

“Throughout the Scripture, worship was first and foremost an attitude and a lifestyle that inspired an activity, not vice versa” (Radmacher, p. 163). “True biblical worship is an attitude that results in a lifestyle of obedience” (Radmacher, p. 165).

“A son honors *his* father, and a servant *his* master. If then I am the Father, Where *is* My honor? And if I *am* a Master, where *is* My reverence? Says the LORD of hosts to you priests who despise My name. Yet you say, ‘In what way have we despised Your name?’ ‘You offer defiled food on

My altar, but say, ‘In what way have we defiled You?’ By saying, ‘The table of the LORD is contemptible.’ And when you offer the blind as a sacrifice, *is it* not evil? And when you offer the lame and sick, *is it* not evil? Offer it then to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you favorably?” says the LORD of hosts” (Malachi 1:6-8).

They have despised Him by offering defiled food on His altar and saying the table is contemptible, which is the same Hebrew word translated despised in verse 6. Using the figure of food on a table, the Lord says they offered a defiled sacrifice and they despised the altar. In short, the priest was despising the Lord by presenting defiled sacrifices to Him, that is, sacrifices that were ritually unclean according to the Mosaic Law (Constable). Imagine inviting a guest to your home for dinner and serving stale bread and cold coffee. The guest could legitimately say that you were despising *him*.

Instead of offering a lamb without spot or blemish as a sacrifice (Lev. 22:19), the priest offered lambs that were blind, lame, and sick, which were unacceptable according to the Law (Lev. 22:20-24). The Lord says that sacrifices are evil and asks if they offered such a gift to the governor, would he be pleased with you and accept you favorably.

This was a deeply *personal* issue. God was not just unhappy with their sacrifice; he was displeased with them personally.

“Anything second-rate that we offer to God is inappropriate in view of who He is. This includes our worship, our ministries, our studies, physical objects—anything. The Lord is worthy of our very best offerings to Him, and we should give Him nothing less. To give Him less than our best is to despise Him. Shoddiness is an insult to God. Shoddy holy is still shoddy” (Constable).

Years ago, several homeless people began to attend our church. They sold cans so they could rent a room on Saturday night to take a bath before they came to church Sunday morning.