

Whatever Happened to Worship in the Modern Church?

A.W. Tozer asked this question as a part of a sermon series that was turned into a book after his death.

This question has stuck with me for some time as I have tried to understand worship in the context of the New Testament church: Is it ever-changing or has it fallen away?

This has led me to ask the following questions: What exactly is worship? How is worship done? Why do people worship? Does worship play any role in our spiritual formation?

Sometimes I wonder, “Why wouldn’t God just give us clear-cut instructions?”

Surely if we were given step-by-step instructions on worship, we couldn’t mess that there wouldn’t be the need for any debate regarding these practices.

Then I remember the examples of the Israelites and how, even with rigid rules, they seemed to miss the heart of what God was communicating.

So perhaps worship is not something that fits a perfect mold or style, but something more.

What is worship?

Louie Giglio says it this way: “Worship is our response, both personal and corporate, to God for who He is and what He has done, expressed by the things we say and the way we live.”

Worship is a response.

I remember driving one night in the middle-of-nowhere Texas, where there was no ambient light from nearby cities to muddy

the night sky, and the brilliance of every single star pierced the darkness in the way that causes you to hold your breath. I had never witnessed anything like that.

Immediately, my mind was taken to the greatness of God and how He created something so magnificent. Theologians call this “natural revelation.” Things that are created attest to the existence, greatness and glory of God.

Psalm 19:1 (ESV) says, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.”

How I responded in that moment wasn’t as important as the fact that I did respond.

How is worship done?

If the “what” of worship is our response to God, then the “how” of worship is our expression. Again, instructions on how these expressions should be practiced would be welcomed, but in their absence, we must interpret what is given in Scripture.

I am always taken back to Job. In a matter of moments, everything came crashing down around him, literally killing his children and taking all his possessions. Job responded by tearing his robe, shaving his head and falling on the ground to worship.

He humbled himself, he lifted God up and he did not sin. What a powerful statement. Through all the difficulties that Job experienced, he expressed himself to God and worshipped.

So how should we express ourselves during worship?

Are there song styles, or mannerisms that are more biblical than others?

While some postures of worship are mentioned in the Bible, none are given any priority over the other. Worship comes in

song, obedience and care for one another. If strict adherence to a posture or performance of worship mattered to God, he would have made that clear through Scripture.

This doesn't mean the "how" of worship isn't important. Kevin Vanhoozer says, "Does it really matter how we worship? Yes, it does, because ultimately, it is not simply a question of 'how,' but also of 'what.' Questions of style are not unrelated to questions of substance. This, I submit, is the point of Jesus' teaching on worshiping the Father in Spirit and in Truth."

Why do people worship?

It is innate within us; our nature has rendered us unable to fully understand the complexities of the universe and the mysteries of God. So, in moments where we find ourselves incapable, we worship. To worship God is to acknowledge our relation to God and to fully submit our lives, our circumstances, our hopes and our desires to him. To worship God is to demonstrate our devotion to Him by our delight and recognition of His sovereignty over every area of our lives.

Does worship play a role in our spiritual formation?

Yes! When we worship God, we humble ourselves completely before Him. Humility is the first step in recognizing God for who He is and what He has done. Humbling ourselves is the first action that puts us in our rightful place to recognize the work that God is capable of doing in us, and our need for what only He can give.

Romans 11:33-36 says, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen."

So whatever happened to worship? Well, it never left. Worship may have changed stylistically over generations, but worship that is done in Spirit and truth resides in the hearts of men and women who are humbled before God. {eoa}

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