



Christianity: The Basics — Worship

Worship is a word that is difficult for us to define. Often we might think of worship as synonymous with the liturgy, or particular services happening in church. Some use it as a designation for particular parts of a service, the music, for instance: the preacher will give a sermon and then ask the people to stand to 'begin' the time of 'worship', as a group of musicians ascend to the front. Some even use the word 'worship' to refer to a particular style or type of music: there is classical, folk, rock, indie, and apparently, 'worship' music. For others worship implies an inward disposition toward God, a humility of spirit which acknowledges God as primary and supreme over all.

If we turn the pages of history back a few hundred years, however, we see this word used in startlingly different ways. The 'Liturgy of Holy Matrimony' in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, for example, includes these words during the giving of the rings: 'With this ring, I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow'. Here the meaning seems to not refer to some special devotion to the spouse, but to the giving of some token, and to the sharing of possessions: a sort of offering. Throughout the King James Version of the Bible, worship seems to refer primarily to relationship rather than particular devotion or ritual. Particular physical actions and rituals, such as bowing or prostrating, are seen not as mere symbols of worship, but are worship itself as they place the worshiper in a certain relationship to God, the object of worship (McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship*, 2-3).

Catherine Bell put it like this in her famous study of ritual practice (*Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*): 'The moulding of the body . . . primarily acts to restructure bodies in the very doing of acts themselves. Hence, required kneeling does not simply

communicate subordination to the kneeler. For all intents and purposes, kneeling produces a subordinate kneeler in and through the act itself'. So worship does not refer only to specific ritual practices, or in the Christian sense, what happens in the liturgy or within this sacred space, but to the wider reality which these things represent, sustain, and even *create*. Belief, song, ritual practice, inward devotion, only make sense within this wider whole. (McGowan, 3).

Worship then does not only refer to our common life of prayer and ritual action, but to our deepest beliefs and aspirations, both our embodied practice and inward faith—it refers to the entirety of the Christian life—our entire relation to and response to God. But our shared identity through prayer and liturgical practice is not divorced from this wholeness; it works to both represent and to sustain and create this holistic vision of our life with one another and before God. It gives us a certain posture, a relation towards God, and opens up our humanity to our ultimate end and fullness. This worshiping posture exemplified in the liturgy and in prayer is a posture of *offering*. Worship is self-gift—a de-centring of ourselves in adoration of God.



Gustave Doré, *The Beatific Vision*.

Worship is thus a reorientation of our entire vision of the world and ourselves before God. And this is one way in which our ritual life in liturgy and sacrament works creatively in our life of worship. In the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church we are being enculturated, trained to see the world in a certain way, from a certain vantage point, and towards a certain *end* or purpose. We are being given a new interpretation of the world. It is a gathering up of our whole lives and the entirety of the world around us and bringing it before God as an offering, acknowledging God's reign over all of it; a reign which rests on his own offering of self-giving love.

If we harken back to the definition of worship in what we might call the 'week' sense, or more particular sense, referring to what we do in our churches, we often hear people talking about what they 'get out of' church services. This question is a categorical error. Worship is necessarily not about us or what we can gain from it, it is just the opposite: it is about losing everything.

Worship cannot be treated like another product or utility in our endless cycle of consumerism, it is not something by which we seek to be entertained or obtain some feeling of bliss. There is in fact a great saying about our experience of church: 'Blessed are the bored, for they will see God'.

God's economy works differently than ours. And entering into this economy of grace through the offering, the sacrifice, of worship is to live in conscious critique and protest to our culture in which people seek fulfillment in taking all that they can. Worship is not consumerist taking, but giving everything away.

But in this giving we are paradoxically truly filled: the offering of the work of human hands returns to us as the bread of life; the offering of the fruit of the vine returns to us as the cup of salvation. Worship creates a different sort of society, a culture of self-gift which opposes our culture of production and consumption.

This makes worship—this great act of de-centring the self—a life not only of offering to God but also gift to others. The traditional liturgy of the mass ends with the words: *Ita, missa est*, quite literally translated as, 'Go, the dismissal is made'. There is a sense in which the ultimate liturgical act is to walk out of the church and continue giving ourselves away: when we offer ourselves to God in worship we bring the whole world with us, and in turn become a gift from God to the world.

Worship then renews us, transforms us, reorients us, even fulfills us—brings us to our true human 'vocation', we could say; but it is in no way *about* us. The object of

our worship is decidedly and definitively not ourselves. And this is precisely how worship renews and transforms us, this is precisely why worship is defined as the entirety of our existence, the root and foundation of our human condition: our true vocation.

It is the worship of the self, self-idolatry, which creates and resources the breakdown of human flourishing and peace; and it is because the true worship of God is not about us—because we are de-centred, de-throned, from our self-serving, idolatrous vision of the world—that the true worship of God fulfills us and is where we find our true home.

And we might say that worship is just that—being at home with God. Sharing in the divine life of Father, Son, and Spirit, and not engaging in some power struggle with God over who should rule my own life. We are fulfilled in true worship precisely because we are not seeking to fill ourselves up, but to give ourselves away. And there is no point in which we are closer to our fullness, in which we are more like God, than when our lives are made offerings of self-gift.

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<https://www.theschooloftheology.org/posts/essay/christianity-the-basics-worship>



Suggested Discussion Questions

1. If worship is “a reorientation of our entire vision of the world and ourselves before God”, does this mean that we don’t have to go to church, and can worship wherever we are best able to reorient our vision? If not, why not?
2. This essay provides a critique of worship *preferences*. Does this mean that there are better and worse ways to worship, independent of our tastes?
3. What can we do when we don’t *feel* like worshipping, or when we feel like we cannot worship authentically (and what does that mean)?