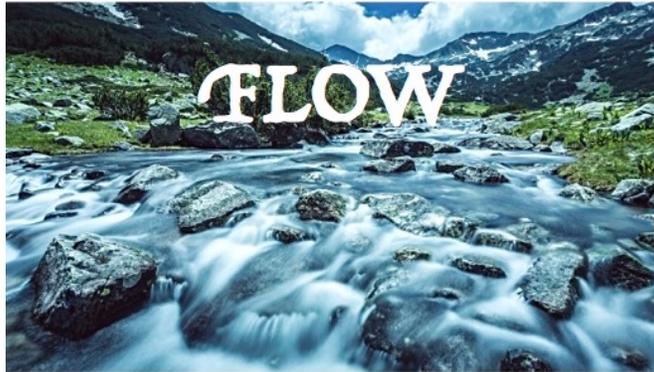


#4 March 6, 2017



"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me."

Deut. 5 & Ex. 20, NIV

"God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

John 4:23-24, NRSV

First Commandment, Part 1

Whom and How Are We to Worship?

by Matt Hilgaertner

Here's a song by Steve Bell, a friend of mine from Canada. He's a Christian singer and songwriter, whose lyrics are always amazingly worshipful. Listen closely to the words of this song, based on the prayer of Jesus for his Disciples, and the love Jesus has for all of us, a love that drove him to the Cross. May these words lead you into a time of worship.

<https://youtu.be/iHRmqKM0tiU?list=PLAEF421EA09DDBCA7>



Worship is central to who we are as God's children, because it helps us to express our devotion to God and our adoration of God. But it's more than just singing or praying or celebrating, which really are forms of praise that may lead us into worship. Though praise and worship are closely related, there's an important distinction between the two. God gave us free will, and it's difficult (if not impossible) for us to really worship God without first prepping ourselves. Just like athletes and musicians need to "warm up" their bodies before they perform, we need to "warm up" our spirits before we can worship God.

I can think of three reasons we worship God. One reason we worship God is because God *created* us to worship Him. Worship is God's initiative, and not our own. We didn't invent or "think up" the idea of worship. The fact that throughout history and among every culture human beings desire to worship *something* or *someone* just goes to show that it's a part of God's design. As created beings, the worship of God is really our highest calling. We learn from Scripture that worship is something God instilled inside all of God's creation.

A second reason why we worship God is because God *commanded* us to worship Him. In the Ten Commandments, worshiping God is first and foremost. We are not to replace the worship of God by worshiping things or other people, which is idolatry. We may compliment others with our praise, but we give God alone our worship. And we do this out of reverence, respect, love, and obedience. It is right for us to worship God for His providence, forgiveness, goodness, compassion, and mercy. The Holy Spirit moves us to respond to God's grace in our lives, the Church, and in the world.

A third reason why we worship God is simply because we're *compelled* to worship Him. When we understand the gospel – if we really get its meaning and receive it as the amazing yet undeserved gift God intended for us – then we can't help but worship God. When we take the time to consider the holiness and love of God, to meditate on the beauty and hope and majesty of Jesus Christ, it touches something deep within our souls and it makes us want to respond – it literally compels us to worship God.

So then, *how* do we worship? We begin by announcing the majesty and power of God, proclaiming the truth and beauty of God’s great and mighty works, and then praising God for who God is and what God has done. Jesus tells us in John 4:24 that those who worship God must “worship in spirit and truth.” When we worship God by acknowledging God’s faithfulness, power and wisdom, it enables our spirit to connect with the Spirit of God. This causes our hearts to be stirred and leads us toward the act of *surrendering* to God – which is at the heart of worship.

The Apostle Paul wrote these words to the Christian church in Rome: “*Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.*” (Romans 12:1) Authentic Christian worship services aren’t designed to please the believer or the seeker; they are designed to please God. But we don’t seek to please God in order to gain God’s mercy or favor. We can’t do anything to make God love us more; and God will not love us less. Even our very faith is a gift from God, something we haven’t earned. Paul reminds us that authentic worship is to be done “in view of God’s mercy” – that is – in response to what God has done for us in Christ. So everything we do to worship and please God is a *response* to God’s mercy, and grace, and love.

The 19th Century theologian Soren Kierkegaard wrote many things about the Christian life and faith, but he was particularly outspoken on the subject of worship. He was quite critical of churches who had become “user friendly” in their worship, those who provided worship experiences for the congregation that was based more on entertainment than participation. In an attempt to explain his perspective of the problem, Kierkegaard developed the idea that Christian worship was a drama. And what he observed in many worship services is that in the drama, God was the prompter, the worship leaders were the actors in the drama, and the congregation was the audience. This is the same understanding of worship that is taught and practiced in many churches today.

But Kierkegaard taught that this understanding was totally wrong. The people of the church were taking on the wrong roles. Instead, the worship leaders were to be the prompters in worship. The congregation are the actors in the drama of worship. Which puts God alone as the audience for the drama. The point of our worship isn’t getting what we want out of it, but really, what we’re putting into it. At the conclusion of our worship services, we need to be asking ourselves, “How did *we* do?” or “How did *I* do?” Worshiping well corporately prepares us to continue to worship individually. All effective worshipers have this in common – that they give their lives as a thank offering to God. This pleases God, because it sets us apart for God’s service in the world, as ambassadors on mission for God.

As we worship God, let's gaze deeply upon the cross of Jesus Christ, and join with Isaac Watts who wrote in his great hymn, As I Survey the Wondrous Cross, "*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.*" Amen.

Questions:

Why is it important for us to separate – at least in our minds – our times of praise vs. worship of God?

What's the difference?

When do you find yourself worshiping God most deeply and authentically?
How often does this occur, and what prompts it?

What often gets in the way of, or distracts you from, worshiping God, and Why?

What can you do to change that?