

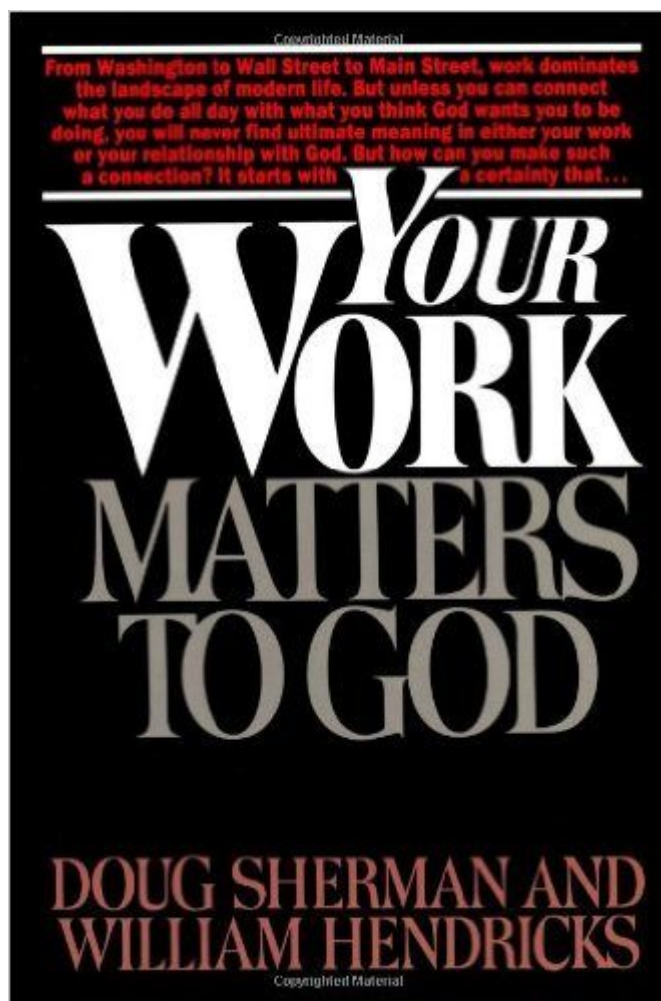
Your Work Matters to God

Sue Bohlin helps us look at work from a biblical perspective. If we apply a Christian worldview to our concept of work, it takes on greater significance within the kingdom of God.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

Many Christians hold a decidedly unbiblical view of work. Some view it as a curse, or at least as part of the curse of living in a fallen world. Others make a false distinction between what they perceive as the sacred—serving God—and the secular—everything else. And others make it into an idol, expecting it to provide them with their identity and purpose in life as well as being a source of joy and fulfillment that only God can provide.



In their excellent book *Your Work Matters to God*,^[1]



Doug Sherman and William Hendricks expose the wrong ways of thinking about work, and explain how God invests work with intrinsic value and honor. Rick Warren echoes this idea in his blockbuster *The Purpose Driven Life* when he writes, “Work becomes worship when you dedicate it to God and perform it with an awareness of his presence.”^[2]

First, let's explore some faulty views of work: the secular view, some inappropriate hierarchies that affect how we view work, and work as merely a platform for doing evangelism.

Those who hold a secular view of work believe that life is divided into two disconnected parts. God is in one spiritual dimension and work is in the other *real* dimension, and the two have nothing to do with each other. God stays in His corner of the universe while I go to work and live my life, and these different realms never interact.

One problem with this secular view is that it sets us up for disappointment. If you leave God out of the picture, you'll have to get your sense of importance, fulfillment and reward from someplace else: work. Work is the answer to the question, "Who am I, and why am I important?" That is a very shaky foundation—because what happens if you lose your job? You're suddenly a "nobody," and you are not important because you are not employed.

The secular view of work tends to make an idol of career. Career becomes the number one priority in your life. Your relationship with God takes a back seat, family takes a back seat, even your relationship with other people takes a back seat to work. Everything gets filtered through the question, "What impact will this have on my career?"

The secular view of work leaves God out of the system. This is particularly unacceptable for Christians, because God calls us to make Him the center of our life.[{3}](#) He wants us to have a biblical worldview that weaves Him into every aspect of our lives, including work. He wants to be invited into our work; He wants to be Lord of our work.[{4}](#)

Inappropriate Hierarchies: Soul/Body, Temporal/Eternal

In this article, we're examining some faulty views of work.

One comes from believing that the soul matters more than the body. We can wrongly believe that God only cares about our soul, and our bodies don't really matter. The body is not important, we can think: it is only temporal, and it will fade and die. But if that view were true, then why did God make a physical universe? Why did He put Adam and Eve in the garden to cultivate and keep it? He didn't charge them with, "Go and make disciples of all nations which aren't in existence yet, but they will be as soon as you guys go off and start making babies." No, He said, "Here's the garden, now cultivate it." He gave them a job to do that had nothing to do with evangelism or church work. There is something important about our bodies, and God is honored by work that honors and cares for the body—which, after all, is His good creation.

Another wrong way of thinking is to value the eternal over the temporal so much that we believe *only* eternal things matter. Some people believe that if you work for things that won't last into eternity—jobs like roofing and party planning and advertising—you're wasting your time. This wrong thinking needs to be countered by the truth that God created two sides to reality, the temporal and the eternal. The natural universe God made is very real, just as real as the supernatural universe. Asking which one is real and important is like asking which is real, our nine months in our mother's womb or life after birth? They are both real; they are both necessary. We have to go through one to get to the other.

Those things we do and make on earth DO have value, given the category they were made for: *time*. It's okay for things to have simply temporal value, since God chose for us to live in time before we live in eternity. Our work counts in both time and eternity because God is looking for faithfulness *now*, and the only way to demonstrate faithfulness is within this physical world. Spiritual needs are important, of course, but first physical needs need to be met. Try sharing the gospel with someone who hasn't eaten in three days! Some needs are

temporal, and those needs must be met. So God equips people with abilities to meet the needs of His creation. In meeting the legitimate physical, temporal needs of people, our work serves people, and people have eternal value because God loves us and made us in His image.

The Sacred/Spiritual Dichotomy; Work as a Platform for Evangelism

Another faulty view of work comes from believing that spiritual, sacred things are far more important than physical, secular things. REAL work, people can think, is serving God in full-time Christian service, and then there's everything else running a very poor second. This can induce us to think either too highly of ourselves or too lowly of ourselves. We can think, "Real work is serving God, and then there's what others do" (which sets us up for condescension), or "Real work is serving God, and then there's what I have to do" (which sets us up for false guilt and a sense of "missing it").

It's an improper way to view life as divided between the sacred and the secular. ALL of life relates to God and is sacred, whether we're making a business presentation or changing soiled diapers or leading someone to faith in Christ. It's unwise to think there are sacred things we do and there are secular things we do. It all depends on what's going on in our hearts. You can engage in what looks like holy activity like prayer and Bible study with a dark, self-centered, unforgiving spirit. Remember the Pharisees? And on the other hand, you can work at a job in a very secular atmosphere where the conversation is littered with profanity, the work is slipshod, the politics are wearisome, and yet like Daniel or Joseph in the Old Testament you can keep your own conversation pure and your behavior above reproach. You can bring honor and glory to God in a very worldly environment. God does not want us to do holy things, He wants us to be holy people.

A final faulty view of work sees it only as a platform for doing evangelism. If every interaction doesn't lead to an opportunity to share the gospel, one is a failure. Evangelism should be a priority, true, but not our *only* priority. Life is broader than evangelism. In Ephesians 1, Paul says three times that God made us, not for evangelism, but to live to the praise of His glory.[\[5\]](#) Instead of concentrating only on evangelism, we need to concentrate on living a life that honors God and loves people. That is far more winsome than all the evangelistic strategies in the world. Besides, if work is only a platform for evangelism, it devalues the work itself, and this view of work is too narrow and unfulfilling.

Next we'll examine at how God wants us to look at work. You might be quite surprised!

How God Wants Us to See Work

So far, we have discussed faulty views of work, but how does God want us to see it? Here's a startling thought: we actually work for God Himself! Consider Ephesians 6:5-8, which Paul writes to slaves but which we can apply to employees:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, *as if you were serving the Lord, not men*, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.

It's helpful to envision that behind every employer stands the Lord Jesus. He sees everything we do, and He appreciates it and will reward us, regardless of the type of work we do. I learned this lesson one day when I was cleaning the grungy bathtub of a family that wouldn't notice and would never acknowledge or thank me even if they did. I was getting madder

by the minute, throwing myself a pity party, when the Lord broke into my thoughts. He quietly said, “I see you. And I appreciate what you’re doing.” Whoa! In an instant, that totally changed everything. Suddenly, I was able to do a menial job—and later on, more important ones—as a labor of love and worship for Jesus. I know He sees and appreciates what I do. It forever changed my view of work.

God also wants us to see that work is His gift to us. It is not a result of the Fall. God gave Adam and Eve the job of cultivating the garden and exercising dominion over the world *before* sin entered the world. We were created to work, and for work. Work is God’s good gift to us!

Listen to what Solomon wrote:

After looking at the way things are on this earth, here’s what I’ve decided is the best way to live: Take care of yourself, have a good time, and make the most of whatever job you have for as long as God gives you life. And that’s about it. That’s the human lot. Yes, we should make the most of what God gives, both the bounty and the capacity to enjoy it, accepting what’s given and delighting in the work. It’s God’s gift! [6](#)

Being happy in our work doesn’t depend on the work, it depends on our attitude. To make the most of our job and be happy in our work is a gift God wants to give us!

Why Work is Good

In this article we’re talking about how to think about work correctly. One question needs to be asked, though: Is all work equally valid? Well, no. All legitimate work is an extension of God’s work of maintaining and providing for His creation. Legitimate work is work that contributes to what God wants done in the world and doesn’t contribute to what He doesn’t want done. So non-legitimate work would include jobs that are

illegal, such as prostitution, drug dealing, and professional thieves. Then there are jobs that are legal, but still questionable in terms of ethics and morality, such as working in abortion clinics, pornography, and the gambling industry. These jobs are legal, but you have to ask, how are they cooperating with God to benefit His creation?

Work is God's gift to us. It is His provision in a number of ways. In *Your Work Matters to God*, the authors suggest five major reasons why work is valuable:

1. Through work we serve people. Most work is part of a huge network of interconnected jobs, industries, goods and services that work together to meet people's physical needs. Other jobs meet people's aesthetic and spiritual needs as well.

2. Through work we meet our own needs. Work allows us to exercise the gifts and abilities God gives each person, whether paid or unpaid. God expects adults to provide for themselves and not mooch off others. Scripture says, "If one will not work, neither let him eat!"[{7}](#)

3. Through work we meet our family's needs. God expects the heads of households to provide for their families. He says, "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."[{8}](#)

4. Through work we earn money to give to others. In both the Old and New Testaments, God tells us to be generous in meeting the needs of the poor and those who minister to us spiritually. [{9}](#)

5. Through work we love God. One of God's love languages is obedience. When we work, we are obeying His two great commandments to love Him and love our neighbor as we love ourselves.[{10}](#) We love God by obeying Him from the heart. We love our neighbor as we serve other people through our work.

We bring glory to God by working industriously, demonstrating what He is like, and serving others by cooperating with God to meet their needs. In serving others, we serve God. And that's why our work matters to God.

Notes

1. Doug Sherman and William Hendricks, *Your Work Matters to God*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1987.
2. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002. p. 67.
3. Philippians 1:21
4. Romans 12:1, 2
5. Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14
6. Ecclesiastes 5:18-19, The Message.
7. 2 Thess. 3:10
8. 1 Tim. 5:8
9. Leviticus 19:10—Nor shall you glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the needy and for the stranger. I am the LORD your God. Ephesians 4:28—Let him who steals, steal no longer but rather let him labor performing with his own hands what is good in order that he may have something to share with him who has need. Gal 6:6—The one who is taught the word is to share all good things with the one who teaches him.
10. Matthew 22:37-39

© 2004 Probe Ministries.

Biblical Worship

Kyle Skaggs provides a look at what constitutes worship that pleases God.

What is worship? Is it attending church service on Sundays? Is it singing hymns or praise songs? What does good worship look like?

It is generally understood that worship is an activity not limited to hymns or offerings on Sunday. Despite this, it is all too common that we find ourselves viewing it in just such a way. Worse, we find ourselves going through the motions of worship, but find ourselves treating it more and more like a chore.

The source of this problem is that we either do not have a biblical understanding of worship, or that we don't know how to apply it. We need to define what constitutes worship in a biblical worldview, what worship is pleasing to the Lord, and what worship is not pleasing to the Lord.

Worship is any honor rendered to God that would be sinful to give to anything else. Worship is more than hymns and prayers. Worship can be rendered in every moment of our waking lives. It is worship when we learn and meditate on the Scriptures. The act of talking to God when we offer prayers of thanksgiving, intercession, or even when we pour our hearts out in grief, is also worship. When we give back our firstfruits. When we clothe and feed the needy in Christ's name. When we proclaim the gospel to those who do not know Christ. All of these activities and more are part of worship.

Worship That Pleases God

With worship defined, we can now jump to what worship is pleasing to God. The passage I am focusing on, to break down the components of what kind of worship God wants, is the burnt offering of Leviticus 1. Why the burnt offering? Because the themes and narrative techniques point towards proper worship.

The first things which stand out in this passage are recurring themes found in the rest of Leviticus. These themes are

atonement and purification. God has made a covenant with the Israelites, saying, "Be holy, because I, the Lord your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). A theme more specific to chapter 1, yet still present throughout, is goodwill from God and from man.

The first repeated instruction is that the sacrifice must be without blemish. This occurs three times. The second is the sprinkling or pouring of blood, which also -occurs three times. The third is the laying of hands on the offering at the Tabernacle before killing it. The fourth is an instruction to skin and divide the offering on the altar. The last repeated instruction is to wash the offering. Some key words and ideas that are repeated include the need for one's sacrifice to be "without defect," atonement, the head and the fat of the offering, that all of the animal (except any explicitly described parts) is to be burnt, and finally, the idea that the smoke from the offering makes "an aroma pleasing to YHWH."

The sprinkling of blood, as translated in the New International Version, is technically correct, but there may be better choices of translation. The root word is זָרַק[zaraq] meaning to spurt, splatter, or sprinkle. Some translations have the word "cast" or "throw."^{1} There is nothing gentle in this act. Blood is life, and from dietary laws, it is clear that life is highly valued. The implication is that the loss of something as precious as life is required for atonement. Sanctification is conveyed through the shedding of blood on behalf of the person who gives the offering.^{2}

The reasons for laying one's hand on the offering's head are threefold. First, that it may be accepted as an offering on the person's behalf. Second, there must be a cost to this offering, and the act of laying hands declares ownership^{3}, so the owner takes responsibility for that cost. Third, the hands are laid so that the animal may atone for one's sin.^{4}

The innards and the legs of the offering are to be washed with

water. Water and fire are both purifying agents in Jewish rituals. The innards contain excrement, and the legs gather dirt as the animal walks around. For birds, the crop and feathers are to be thrown down the eastern side of the altar with the ashes. Therefore, the act of washing the guts and legs of the bull and ram, as well as dumping the feathers and crop from an offering of turtle doves into the ashes, is a final act of purification before the offering is burnt and the smoke goes up to the Lord.

An “aroma pleasing to the Lord” is a recurring phrase. One translator writes that the Hebrew equivalent to “pleasing” is “placating,” “tranquilizing,” “quieting,” and “soothing.”^{5} Another translates the word to mean “sweet,” “pleasant,” “restful,” and “delightful.” Some translations even use the word “savory.”^{6} Both translations work well in conveying the meaning of the text: that the sacrifice is pleasing to the Lord, so “a sweet aroma” or “a placating aroma” seems to be the best fit among the other meanings.

As you read through this passage, note how the offering provides atonement for sin. The burnt offering in chapter 1 is different from the sin offering found in chapter 4, which is for the atonement of accidental sins. The Hebrew word used in this passage, קָרְבָּן (qarban), can translate directly to “offering,” but when we compare the offering of Leviticus 1 to those in later chapters, we find different words used for offering. For example, Leviticus 4:1-34 uses the word חַטָּאת (haṭṭāṭ), which translates roughly to “sin offering.” The offering in Leviticus 1 is קָרְבָּן (qarban), which simply refers to an offering in general. It is also used to mean “gift.”^{7} So, the offering of Leviticus 1 is a casual affair compared to the sin offering and offerings for holidays like Passover.

Both the gift and the giver must undergo purification. It also reveals bits of our nature relative to God’s early on, despite

it being a freewill offering; the sinful nature of humanity necessitates that one receive atonement simply to worship God! From this, we gather that God demands reverence even in the most casual forms of worship. As previously stated, the purpose of the burnt offering was to provide atonement, to make oneself acceptable to God, and to please Him with one's gift. It shows that God is merciful and patient, allowing for sin to be covered by the application of a sacrifice. It shows that He is just, He will not tolerate sin. The wages of sin are death (Romans 6:23), and something must die for any transgressions to be covered up. While the laying of hands on the sacrifice does not quite translate well to English, it shows responsibility and a willingness to give from one's own possessions. This in turn shows that God desires whole-hearted worship.

Unpleasing Worship: Pagan Practice

As you can see, the most important part of worship is one's attitude towards God. This in turn requires a correct understanding of who God is, and His nature in relation to our worship. The sacrificial system in Leviticus is similar to that of the pagan cultures in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. By contrasting the nature of their gods and worship with that of the one true God, we can gain insight on what our attitude should be toward Him.

In the pagan myths of the Mediterranean and the Middle East like the *Enuma Elish*, humanity was frequently created as an afterthought. They were made to do tasks the gods couldn't be bothered to do themselves, or were made to pay tribute since they happened to exist. They are never made in God's image. For example, the Sumerian gods created humanity out of the blood and bones of an evil primordial being to serve them so they could focus on other tasks. In the Greek myths, man is created by the titan brothers, Epimetheus and Prometheus, to provide the gods with entertainment, and is only given the

ability to walk upright like the gods because all other gifts had been foolishly given to all the animals.

Our God, on the other hand, deliberately created mankind in His own image. He told man (male and female) to fill the earth and have dominion over all in it. God made humanity the crowning jewel of His creation.

The pagan gods needed sacrifices like food offerings. They depended on humans to feed them with their offerings, and they gained strength from their worship, as can be seen in Elijah's showdown with the prophets of Baal who conducted increasingly desperate rituals in the hope that Baal would send fire down from heaven.

Our God has no such needs. He does not need us to provide sustenance for Him because He needs nothing. He is the ultimate power and authority whether we worship him or not.

In contrast to the gods of the Canaanites, who were as sexually immoral, violent, and greedy if not more so than the culture that created them, God is wholly good. It can be seen from the emphasis of purity throughout Leviticus that God will not accept impurity in His people or in their offerings.

Finally, the worship of the Canaanites could not be separated from magical practice. Words had power, and thus prayers were formulaic in order to properly evoke the powers of the deity.[\[8\]](#) A worshiper who said the right words and presented a suitable sacrifice in just the right way may receive blessings in return, like a magical sword or a good harvest. The Scriptures condemn this: "And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words." (Matthew 6:7) The Lord is nothing like this; He knows the desires of our heart. He cannot be influenced by our worship, but blesses the obedient according to His good pleasure.

Unpleasing Worship: Cain's Offering

As we can see from the nature of God, how He prescribed the burnt offering in Leviticus, and how worship as practiced by the pagans is offensive to Him, the core of good worship is found in one's attitude towards God. Where the pagans did not have the benefit of a special revelation of God's word (though they are without excuse, Romans 1:20), those who did know the Lord also gave offerings that displeased Him. When we look at the next kind of offering that displeases God, we again see that one's worship is determined by the inclination of the heart.

In Genesis 4, Cain and Abel both offered sacrifices to the Lord, but one was loved and the other was spurned because his works were evil and he treated the Lord's offering with contempt. Able offered the fat portions from the first of the flock, while Cain only offered some of his produce. When God rejected his offering, Cain became angry, and when God warned him to do what is right. Cain was unwilling to change his ways. That is why Cain murdered his brother, "because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous" (1 John 3:12). Therefore, to respect God and His offering we must, as John puts it, abide in love. If we do not love God, then we cannot love the people around us who are made in His image. Rather, we easily come to hate them, even to the point of murder.

The self-righteous do not approach God with humility. They give only what they want when they want, live like the rest of the world, don't spend any time with God, and then wonder why they can't hear the Holy Spirit! It is impossible for the self-righteous to present a pleasing offering to the Lord.

This self-righteous offering appears again and again in the Old and New Testaments. This is why the prophets frequently decry the people's sacrifices. What they say concerning the offering shows just how much the offering was disrespected.

“When you offer blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice lame or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?” says the Lord Almighty. (Malachi 1:8)

Again in Isaiah, “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught.” (Isaiah 29:13)

In the New Testament, we have the example of Ananias and his wife Sapphira, who lied about the portion of their offering and were struck dead. In the gospels, we have the Pharisees whom Jesus called hypocrites. Their actions appear to be righteous, but the inclination of their hearts render their worship worthless.

Application

So what does this mean for us? The foundation of God-pleasing worship is the inclination of our heart. It is our attitude towards our relationship with God that determines how we worship. Pagan-style worship approaches God as if He were inattentive, finite, and uncaring. If we can evoke His name just right, if our offerings are good, then we have an ‘in’ with God. Ultimately, we are trying to bribe God.

Cain’s worship was characterized by apathy and self-righteousness. Outside of church, one dedicates no time to God. In finance, in time, in prayer, and in actions people offer up the scraps from the prosperity God has given them. They say that Christ is Lord, yet are too self-righteous and self-reliant to listen to the Holy Spirit.

We are obligated to worship God simply because *He is*. He doesn’t need it, but He desires it. As a personal God, worship is a part of His relationship with us. God is good. Therefore,

we must approach Him with humility. Good worship is giving Him the respect He deserves as our creator and ruler of the universe.

What we offer in worship needs to be pure. Our hearts need to be reconciled to God, and we need to approach Him with humility and the respect He deserves as our creator. The key to God-pleasing worship is the inclination of the heart.

Furthermore, worship is tied to everything we do day to day. Jesus said, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these, . . . you did for me." (Matthew 25:40). So even when we are not singing praises, praying, or meditating on God's word, we can still be worshiping, because our deeds are a kind of offering. This means we need to consistently choose to abide in love, or we will stumble over Cain's sin. Whatever we do, even if it is just a morning devotional, we should examine the state of our heart and ask the Holy Spirit to align it with God's.

Notes

1. The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (Peabody MA: Hendrickson Academic, 1994), 284.1.
2. Wenham, Gordon, J. The Book of Leviticus (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), p. 62.
3. Keener, Craig and Walton, John. NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017) p. 182.
4. Rooker, Mark, F. Leviticus. The New American Commentary. Volume 3A (Brentwood TN: Holman Reference, 2000), p. 87
5. The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, 629.2
6. Strong, The New Strong's Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010), #5207.
7. Ibid. #7133
8. Frazer, James. The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion, Volume II. (London, 1919).

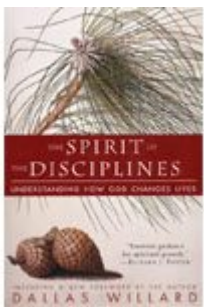
Spiritual Disciplines and the Modern World

The spiritual disciplines help us cooperate with God in our transformation into the likeness of Christ. Don Closson discusses disciplines of abstinence and of engagement.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

Spirituality and the Body



As a seminary student I was given the assignment to read a book on Christian spirituality called the *Spirit of the Disciplines* by Dallas Willard.^[1] I obediently read the book and either wrote a paper on it or took a test that covered the material (I can't recall which), but the book didn't have a major impact on my life at that time. Recently, over a decade later, I have gone back to the book and found it to be a jewel that I should have spent more time with. In the book, Willard speaks to one of the most important issues facing individual Christians and churches in our time: "How does one live the Spirit-filled life promised in the New Testament?" How does the believer experience the promise that Jesus made in Matthew 11:29-30: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light"?



Willard argues that modernity has given us a culture that offers a flood of self-fulfillment programs in the form of political, scientific, and even psychological revolutions. All promise to promote personal peace and affluence, and yet we suffer from an “epidemic of depression, suicide, personal emptiness, and escapism through drugs and alcohol, cultic obsession, consumerism, and sex and violence”[\[2\]](#) Most Christians would agree that the Christian faith offers a model for human transformation that far exceeds the promises of modern scientific programs, but when it comes to delineating the methods of such a transformation there is often confusion or silence.

Christians frequently seek spiritual maturity in all the wrong places. Some submit themselves to abusive churches that equate busyness and unquestioning subservience with Christ-likeness. Others look for spirituality through syncretism, borrowing the spiritualism of Eastern religions or Gnosticism and covering it with a Christian veneer.

According to Willard, Christians often hope to find Christ’s power for living in ways that seem appropriate but miss the mark; for example, through a “sense of forgiveness and love for God” or through the acquisition of propositional truth. Some “seek it through special experiences or the infusion of the Spirit,” or by way of “the presence of Christ in the inner life.” Others argue that it is only through the “power of ritual and liturgy or the preaching of the Word,” or “through the communion of the saints.” All of these have value in the Christian life but do not “reliably produce large numbers of people who really are like Christ.”[\[3\]](#)

We evangelicals have a natural tendency to avoid anything that hints of meritorious works, works that might somehow justify us before a holy God. As a result, we reduce faith to an entirely mental affair, cutting off the body from the process of living the Christian life.

In this article we will consider a New Testament theology of human transformation in order to better understand what it means to become a living sacrifice to God.

A Model for Transformation

Faith in Jesus Christ brings instant forgiveness along with the promise of eventual glorification and spending eternity with God. However, in between the believer experiences something called sanctification, the process of being set apart for good works. Something that is sanctified is holy, so it makes sense that the process of sanctification is to make us more like Christ.

Even though the Bible talks much of spiritual power and becoming like Christ, many believers find this process of sanctification to be a mystery. Since the Enlightenment, there has been a slow removal from our language of acceptable ways to talk about the spiritual realm. Being rooted in this age of science and materialism, the language of spiritual growth sounds alien and a bit threatening to our ears, but if we want to experience the life that Jesus promised, a life of spiritual strength, we need to understand how to appropriate God's Spirit into our lives.

According to Willard, "A 'spiritual life' consists in that range of activities in which people cooperatively interact with God—and with the spiritual order deriving from God's personality and action. And what is the result? A new overall quality of human existence with corresponding new powers."[\[4\]](#) To be spiritual is to be dominated by the Spirit of God. Willard adds that spirituality is another reality, not just a "commitment" or "life-style." It may result in personal and social change, but the ultimate goal is to become like Christ and to further His Kingdom, not just to be a better person or to make America a better place to live.

The Bible teaches that to become a spiritual person one must

employ the *disciplines* of spirituality. "The disciplines are activities of mind and body purposefully undertaken to bring our personality and total being into effective cooperation with the divine order." [\[5\]](#) Paul wrote in Romans 6:13 that the goal of being spiritual is to offer our body to God as instruments of righteousness in order to be of use for His Kingdom. Moving towards this state of usefulness to God and His Kingdom depends on the actions of individual believers.

Many of us have been taught that this action consists primarily in attending church or giving towards its programs. As important as these are, they fail to address the need for a radical inner change that must take place in our hearts to be of significant use to God. The teaching of Scripture and specifically the life of Christ tells us that the deep changes that must occur in our lives will only be accomplished via the disciplines of abstinence such as fasting, solitude, silence, and chastity, and the disciplines of engagement such as study, worship, service, prayer, and confession. These disciplines, along with others, will result in being conformed to the person of Christ, the desire of everyone born of His Spirit.

Salvation and Life

When I first read in the Bible that Jesus offered a more abundant life to those who followed Him, I thought that He was primarily describing a life filled with more happiness and purpose. It does include these things, but I now believe that it includes much more. Salvation in Christ promises to radically change the nature of life itself. It is not just a promise that sometime in the far distant future we will experience a resurrected body and see a new heaven and new earth. Salvation in Christ promises a life characterized by the highest ideals of thought and actions as epitomized by the life of Christ Himself.

Although there is no program or classroom course that can guarantee to give us this new life in Christ, it can be argued

that in order to live a life like Jesus we need to do the things that Jesus did. If Jesus had to “learn obedience through the things which he suffered” (Hebrew 5:8 KJV), are we to expect to act Christ-like without the benefit of engaging in the disciplines that Jesus did?

In *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Willard argues that there is a direct connection between practicing the spiritual disciplines and experiencing the salvation that is promised in Christ. Jesus prayed, fasted, and practiced solitude “not because He was sinful and in need of redemption, as we are, but because he had a body just as we do.”[\[6\]](#) The center of every human being’s existence is his or her body. We are neither to be neo-Platonic nor Gnostic in our approach to the spiritual life. Both of these traditions play down the importance of the physical universe, arguing that it is either evil or simply inferior to the spiritual domain. But as Willard argues, “to withhold our bodies from religion is to exclude religion from our lives.”

Although our spiritual dimension may be invisible, it is not separate from our bodily existence. *Spirituality*, according to Willard, is “a relationship of our embodied selves to God that has the natural and irrepressible effect of making us alive to the Kingdom of God—here and now in the material world.”[\[7\]](#) By separating our Christian life from our bodies we create an unnecessary sacred/secular gulf for Christians that often alienates us from the world and people around us.

The Christian faith offers more than just the forgiveness of sins; it promises to transform individuals to live in such a way that responding to events as Jesus did becomes second nature. What are these spiritual disciplines, and how do they transform the very quality of life we experience as followers of Jesus Christ?

The Disciplines of Abstinence

Although many of us have heard horror stories of how spiritual disciplines have been abused and misused in the past, Willard believes that “A discipline for the spiritual life is, when the dust of history is blown away, nothing but an activity undertaken to bring us into more effective cooperation with Christ and his Kingdom.”^{8} He reminds us that we discipline ourselves throughout life in order to accomplish a wide variety of tasks or functions. We utilize discipline when we study an academic or professional field; athletes must be disciplined in order to run a marathon or bench press 300 lbs. Why, then, are we surprised to learn that we must discipline ourselves to be useful to God?

Willard divides the disciplines into two categories: disciplines of abstinence, and disciplines of engagement. Depending on our lifestyle and past personal experiences, we will each find different disciplines helpful in accomplishing the goal of living as a new creature in Christ. Solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, and sacrifice are disciplines of abstinence. Given our highly materialistic culture, these might be the most difficult and most beneficial to many of us. We are more familiar with the disciplines of engagement, including study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, and fellowship. However, two others mentioned by Willard might be less familiar: confession and submission.

Abstinence requires that we give up something that is perfectly normal—something that is not wrong in and of itself, such as food or sex—because it has gotten in the way of our walking with God, or because by leaving these things aside we might be able to focus more closely on God for a period of time. As one writer tells us, “Solitude is a terrible trial, for it serves to crack open and burst apart the shell of our superficial securities. It opens out to us the unknown abyss that we all carry within us . . .”^{9} Busyness and superficial

activities hide us from the fact that we have little or no inward experience with God. Solitude frees us from social conformity, from being conformed to the patterns of this world that Paul warns us about in Romans 12.

Solitude goes hand in hand with silence. The power of the tongue and the damage it can do is taken very seriously in the Bible. There is a quiet inner strength and confidence that exudes from people who are great listeners, who are able to be silent and to be slow to speak.

The Disciplines of Engagement

Thus, the disciplines of abstinence help us diminish improper entanglements with the world. What about the disciplines of engagement?

Although study is not often thought of as a spiritual discipline, it is the key to a balanced Christian walk. Calvin Miller writes, “Mystics without study are only spiritual romantics who want relationship without effort.”[\[10\]](#) Study involves reading, memorizing, and meditation on God’s Word. It takes effort and time, and there are no shortcuts. It includes learning from great Christian minds that have gone before us and those who, by their walk and example, can teach much about the power available to believers who seek to experience the light burden that abiding in Jesus offers.

Few Christians deny the need for worship in their weekly routines, even though what constitutes worship has caused considerable controversy. Worship ascribes great worth to God. It is seeing God as He truly is. Willard argues that we should focus our worship through Jesus Christ to the Father. He writes, “When we worship, we fill our minds and hearts with wonder at him—the detailed actions and words of his earthly life, his trial and death on the cross, his resurrection reality, and his work as ascended intercessor.”[\[11\]](#)

The discipline of celebration is unfamiliar to most of us, yet Willard argues that it is one of the most important forms of engagement with God. He writes that “We engage in celebration when we enjoy ourselves, our life, our world, in conjunction with our faith and confidence in God’s greatness, beauty, and goodness. We concentrate on our life and world as God’s work and as God’s gift to us.”^{12} Although much of the scriptural argument for holy celebration is found in the festivals of the Old Testament and the book of Ecclesiastes, Jesus was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard because he chose to dine and celebrate with sinners.

Christian fellowship and confession go hand in hand. It is within the context of fellowship that Christians build up and encourage one-another with the gifts that God has given to us. It is also in this context that we practice confession with trusted believers who know both our strengths and weaknesses. This level of transparency and openness is essential for the church to become the healing place of deep intimacy that people are so hungry for.

Walking with Jesus doesn’t mean just knowing things about Him; it means living as He lived. This includes practicing the spiritual disciplines that Jesus practiced. As we do, we will be changed through the Spirit to be more like Him and experience the rest that He has offered to us.

Notes

1. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).
2. Ibid., viii.
3. Ibid., x.
4. Ibid., 67.
5. Ibid., 68.
6. Ibid., 29.
7. Ibid., 31.
8. Ibid., 156.

9. Ibid., 161.
10. Ibid., 176.
11. Ibid., 178.
12. Ibid., 179.

© 2004 Probe Ministries

What the Dallas Mavericks Show Us About Worship

We had a little excitement here in Dallas last week (June 20, 2011). Our Mavericks won the NBA Title. (For you non-sports people—like me, actually—this means that our local professional basketball team won the game that makes them Best Basketball Team in the U.S. It's like winning the World Series. Or the Superbowl. It's really big.)

The game was on the TV in our living room, and I (being a non-sports people) was working on my laptop in the same room. I enjoyed watching the Facebook news feed churn out all kinds of happy updates from ecstatic fans. Then the news showed over five thousand Mavs fans crazy happy outside the American Airlines Center in Dallas, the reporters giddy with excitement and the cameras recording people who looked like they were ready to explode with joy. Immediately, scores of people drove to sporting goods stores to buy t-shirts commemorating the freshly-minted champions.

This corporate fervor was so much more than simply being pleased that the home town boys had won a championship! Everybody was a Mavericks fan that night and for the next week, especially leading up to the big parade in downtown Dallas. People were thrilled by the almost electrical

connection to The Mavs as a winning team – and the joy of being a part of something bigger than themselves. People streamed to downtown Dallas the night of the big win and to the parade the following Thursday so they could be with other people honoring and praising the heroes.

I was struck by this great illustration of our hearts' desire to be connected to the transcendent, to be part of something bigger and more important than ourselves. Our hearts were made for something greater than our lives and our individual stories; I believe our hearts were made for Kingdom living, and for a quality and quantity of Life that is far more and better than our puny little earthly kingdoms. And there is something powerful, almost magical, about being connected to a community of joyful people all celebrating the Something-Bigger-Than-Ourselves together. I believe our hearts were made to be knitted together with other Kingdom hearts as well.

People's desires to shout out happy praises for Dirk Nowitzki (the Mavericks' superhero) and the rest of the team was, I believe, a part of our design to be worshipers. We were made to worship—and if we won't worship the One most worthy of worship, our Creator and Lord, then we will worship the creation. Such as the Mavericks. We are incorrigible worshipers. And there is such a feeling of “rightness” when we worship, because that is how we are made. Perhaps those who get the most excited about whooping and hollering at professional and college (and even high school and younger) sporting games, just might be the best worship leaders some of us will ever see, if they would direct their worship to the One worship was created for!

Whenever I hear people say they think heaven will be boring, like one interminable church service, I think about times like the Mavs' win. Yeah, heaven will be boring like the Mavs winning the NBA title is boring! We were made for worship, and worship is joyous, ecstatic union with God and with other worshipers. So maybe, just maybe, all the hoopla over our team

winning the title is an emotional peek into what heaven will be?

Bring it on!

This blog post originally appeared at

blogs.bible.org/what-the-dallas-mavericks-show-us-about-worship/ on June 21, 2011.

“I Don’t Feel Connected to God”

April 28, 2011

What should I do if I don’t feel like I need to repent? How can I make myself more humble towards God?

This question is coming from a time of doubt in my life. I just have not been very connected with Jesus lately. I feel somewhat connected with God, though the personal relationship I used to have with His Son has gone out the window. It’s a strange situation. Part of this problem may be coming from not being humble before God – I feel like I can get by on my own sometimes. I don’t have any specific sin, just general ones that I struggle with day to day like pride. I was mostly looking for repentance in general.

Thanks for responding, and I hope this is clarifying. I also hope you enjoy your job. ☐ Thanks!

Hey Kara,

Yes, this is helpful, thanks. It seems as though you’re basing the status of your relationship with the Lord only on how you

feel. Perhaps you no longer have those warm-fuzzy feelings that you used to have in high school (I'm guessing based upon your email address that you graduated in '09). This kind of experience is very common for several reasons. Firstly, in most of American Christianity (especially in Evangelical and Charismatic circles, and most especially in youth group programs) we over-emphasize [feelings](#). Of course some of this is very natural because as we are growing into adulthood through our teen years, our emotions are developing and often on overdrive, which isn't bad per se; it's just how it is. Other reasons we often over-emphasize feelings have to do with our Church history in this country, especially the Great Awakenings and the efforts made to reach those on the Frontier. At any rate, the point is you're not alone. I have experienced the same exact thing you're talking about.

Here's my recommendation. We are all driven much more by our bodies than our brains. We typically consider this a bad thing, but it isn't. It's how we were created, embodied. I don't start feeling tired until I brush my teeth at night. Why? Because I brush my teeth right before I go to bed and my body associates the two habits. But if I wait until I *feel* tired, I'll stay up way too late. We have all sorts of routines like this. Since we are creatures of habit (by God's design), what we often need are habits and routines (which is a word we're really scared of) to help us remember God because *most of us* feel like we can get by on our own most of the time.

So, some suggestions.

- *Go on walks... without your iPod. You can train yourself to pray for your friends, family, the world... during these times. It will take time to discipline your mind, and that's okay; be gracious with yourself. Eventually, your mind will associate prayer with these walks, and it will just happen without your having to think about it. You might need to make these walks at the same time every week or every day, whatever. This can be tricky when our schedules are regularly*

changing, but that's okay too. The lunch hour can be a good time for this, especially since we are highly influenced by our stomachs. You can take your lunch with you or use that time to fast and pray (which includes, of course, repentance).

- Visit churches with different practices than you're used to. This may seem like an odd suggestion, but if you've only ever experienced one type of liturgy (which all churches have, it's just a church's Sunday morning (or whenever) routine), how can you know if it's a liturgy that is a good fit for you? We're all a bit different, and some habits won't work for some people like they will for others. On the other hand, visiting other churches can help us understand our own church liturgy in ways we never really thought about before, making our Sunday morning practices less mere routine and more spiritually-connected routine. These visits can occur frequently if you're not that connected to your current church or not going to church, or they can be more spread out like once every other month or so. Some churches have weekly communal prayers of repentance. I find these quite helpful.*

- Finally, be communal with whatever habits you try. With one or two friends or a mentor you can really trust, let them into this part of your life. Another reason we struggle so much with spiritual habits is because we have the insane notion that we have to do it all on our own—just me and God—like if I tell someone I'm going to try to start prayer-walking or whatever, then I'm just bragging and being unspiritual. This is a trick of the Enemy; he knows us well.*

I hope this will be a helpful start for you. Please feel free to let me know how things are going, because, yes, I do really like my job. 😊

Blessings to you,
Renea

Wow,

Thank you very much for your suggestions! These sound like great ideas that will work. I'm especially excited to see what kind of churches I can visit – although I love my own church, that I am involved in, I love to see different ways of worshiping. Thank you very much.

This blog post originally appeared at
reneamac.com/2011/04/28/i-dont-feel-connected-to-god/

Mapping America

Jan. 18, 2011

A new study verifies what many of us have known for some time. Children who grow up in an intact family and attend religious services do better than children who do not. Dr. Patrick Fagan at the Family Research Council documents this in [Mapping America](#). He uses the data collected by Drs. Nicholas Zill and Philip Fletcher from the National Survey of Children's Health.

They found a significant discrepancy between children who grew up in intact families (with both biological parents) and those who came from broken homes. They also found a similar discrepancy between those who attend religious services weekly and those who worship less frequently. They found that children in the former groups were five times less likely to repeat a grade, less likely to have behavior problems at home and school, and more likely to be cooperative and understanding of others' feelings.

The benefits not only accrued to the children, but also had an impact on the parents. For example, parents of kids from intact families who worship regularly were much less likely (21 percent) to be contacted by the child's school about behavior or achievement problems compared to parents (53 percent) whose kids were not living with both parents and not attending church services regularly. Parents of the children in the first group also report less stress, healthier parent-child relationships, and few concerns about their children's achievement.

Even more surprising in the study was the these differences held true even after controlling for family income and poverty as well as for the parents' education level, race, and ethnicity. In essence, the study suggests that the best prescription for society is a stable family and family worship. In this environment, children thrive emotionally and achieve academically. They become the foundation for the next generation of leaders and citizens.

In a sense, this study is the flip side of studies that were published years ago about the impact of divorce on children. In my book, [Christian Ethics in Plain Language](#), I document the three e's of negative impact of divorce (emotional impact, educational impact, and economic impact). Whether you look at these positive studies or the earlier negative studies, you can see the importance of family and worship. I'm Kerby Anderson, and that is my point of view.

“Isn't It Egotistical of God

to Command Our Worship and Praise?'

Hi there! Someone once raised this objection that really bugs me... They asked whether it isn't vain or egotistical of God to command our worship and praise and be so passionate about His own glory. While I certainly don't agree that God could be vain or egotistical, I'm at a loss for how to respond to this objection. I can understand why some people read verses like these and conclude that God is tooting His own horn:

For my own name's sake I delay my wrath; for the sake of my praise I hold it back from you. *Isaiah 48:9*

I will say to the north, 'Give them up!' and to the south, 'Do not hold them back.' Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth—everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made." *Isaiah 43:6-7*

For my own sake, for my own sake, I do this. How can I let myself be defamed? I will not yield my glory to another. *Isaiah 48:11*

How would you respond to this objection to the Christian faith?

What a great question! I meditated on it for a couple of weeks.

God wants us to relate rightly to Him. Because He is so immense, so powerful, so sovereign, so righteous, so holy, so pure, so right, so good, so loving, so kind, so just, and most importantly, so *glorious*, relating rightly to Him means responding in awe, in fear, in love, in attraction, in worship, and in praise.

His commands are His loving gifts to us because He created and designed life to work the way it does, and His commands align with His design. The Ten Commandments are powerful because that's the way He created life to function, and we are blessed when we obey. We have trouble when we disobey. His command to praise and worship him is no different because He knows that He is the only source of life. Being rightly related to God is the only way to enter into life, to get our empty souls filled up. Being rightly related to Him means humbly accepting our position as creatures, and affirming that He is God and we are not. It means praising, worshipping and glorifying Him and, as the Westminster Catechism starts out, "enjoying Him forever."

God is not a limited, finite creature for whom it would indeed be prideful and arrogant to say, "Worship and praise me." There is no sinful pride in His invitation to be rightly related to Him, to invite us to enjoy and partake in His glory.

We don't look at the sun and say, "How arrogant of it to shine so brightly, to relentlessly give off heat and light that makes life possible on the earth." It's the nature of gargantuan balls of burning gas to do these things. Our response to the sun is one of respect, gratitude and fear: we can't even look directly at it for more than a glance or it damages our eyes.

It's not arrogant or prideful for God to shine with a radiance beyond a million suns. That's what glory does: it radiates. It shines. That's how He is, that's who He is.

The God who created the billions of galaxies can pinch the entire universe between two fingers like a toddler picking up a Cheerio. This same God, who keeps the galaxies in motion just as He holds the atoms of physical matter together, not only revealed Himself through His prophets, He actually became one of us, then died in our place and came back to life just as He said He would.

The only response to that kind of God that makes any sense is to fall down at His feet and worship Him.

Thanks for writing!

Sue Bohlin

* * *

After reading this article from my Facebook, a friend sent me a link to a short essay on this subject he thought I'd enjoy. I did, and I'm posting it here because I bet you'll enjoy like it too! [C.S. Lewis' Most Important Discovery](#)

© 2009 Probe Ministries

“What Do You Think About Headcoverings for Christian Women?”

Sue,

I am intrigued by this article “Should a Christian Woman Wear a Headcovering?” by Daniel Botkin (enclosed by mail and also available online [here](#)) about headcoverings, and it makes sense to me, but I would really like your input as a woman.

I read the headcoverings article with a huge smile across my heart. Its an excellent article! . . . And I couldn't agree more.

Before I go further, though, let me first state that Probe does not have an official position on this issue; my answer is about me and my response to this issue. For six years or so I

struggled with the plain command of scripture [*1 Cor 11:10 Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.*] and finally gave in. I just could not get around the phrase “because of the angels,” which has absolutely nothing to do with cultural- and time-bound practices. So, about a year ago, I started wearing hats to church. Recently, I purchased a couple of scarves which I also use as a headcovering in worship and for public prayer.

It's been interesting the strong response I've received from men, who absolutely love to see a woman in a hat, even though they usually don't know it's not a fashion statement for me. They just know something strikes them as very, very right about it. What startled me was the effect on ME: I have so enjoyed feeling so feminine! I have also enjoyed experiencing the peace that is the fruit of obedience.

I started out wearing lace doilies or some other kind of headgear when I was in Catholic grade school. In the 60s and 70s, there was a wholesale dropping of the headcovering in almost all Western churches (with the rise of feminist thought, and I think they are related). I never even thought about how quickly 1900 years of church history were overturned in a mere decade until I couldn't come up with a single good reason to disobey scripture.

So there you have it! Thanks for sharing the great article with me!

Sue Bohlin

Hi Sue!!

Your response was such a blessing and encouragement to my wife and me! Thank you so much for taking the time to read it and respond. Because of your response actually, my wife went out and bought a couple of scarves today! ☺ Well thank you for your faithfulness and may the Lord continue to guide you in His word and in His love.

See Also:

- ["Do the Bible's Statements on Head Coverings Apply Today?"](#)
 - [Sue Bohlin's Blog Post: "Why I'm the Lady in the Hat"](#)

"How Does Christians' Singing Hallelujah Differ From Hindu Chanting?"

In discussing chanting with a Hindu, I stumbled when he pointed out that we Christians also repeat God's name when we sing "Hallelujah, hallelujah...." So are we repeating vainly? Of course not. If we are praising God, he claimed, so are they.

How can I make my point against chanting but still justify our glorification of God singing "Hallelujah"? Also he pointed out that they are praising God like we also praise God in Psalms.

It seems to me that a few points can be made to distinguish what Christians are doing from what Hare Krishnas and other Hindus are doing.

1. "Hallelujah" comes from two Hebrew words meaning "Praise the Lord" (i.e. *Hallelu Yah*). When we say Hallelujah, we are praising the Lord. This seems different from simply repeating the name of a particular god over and over. We are praising the Lord, not simply repeating His Name.

2. Although this may not be true for all of those engaged in repetitive chanting of the name of a god, nevertheless, for many of these people such chanting is intended to focus the

mind and help induce an altered state of consciousness in which one “realizes” that “All is One,” “All is God,” “I Am God,” etc. This, of course, is not what Christians are trying to achieve when they praise the Lord. Thus, the intentions of Christians in praising the Lord are very different from the intentions of some Hindus in repeating the name of a god.

3. Hindus and Christians typically have very different conceptions of “God.” Even if we both refer to the Supreme Being as “God,” we mean something very different by this term. Hindus are typically pantheists or polytheists; Christians are monotheists. Thus, we have very different ideas or definitions about what (or who) “God” is.

These three differences, at least in my opinion, make it very difficult to equate what Christians are doing when we praise the Lord with what Hindus are doing when they engage in the repetitive chanting of a god’s name.

The Lord bless and keep you!

Shalom,

Michael Gleghorn
Probe Ministries

The World in Our Worship

Worship is an essential part of the Christian life. Rick Wade briefly considers a few essentials of corporate worship, and then looks at three characteristics of secular thought which undermine proper worship.

Choices in Worship

Church historian Bruce Shelley reports on a speaking engagement he had with a group of senior adults about recent changes in evangelical churches. When he mentioned drums in worship, he said, “even the breath-taking surroundings [of the Colorado Rockies] couldn’t suppress the sanctified outrage” he heard. “Like a match dropped on a haystack,” he said, “the room erupted first in a corporate groan, followed by an outburst of laughter.”^{1} Clearly such changes don’t sit well with many Christians. Those who appreciate a more traditional approach to worship are concerned that the contemporary style of worship risks diluting the message of the church by modeling itself on the secular entertainment industry in its style, and thus risks the accommodation of the message to the ways of the world.

On the other hand, those who believe the traditional approach has become outdated are accepting contemporary worship widely. For some, the change is simply a matter of taste: they like contemporary music and a relaxed atmosphere. For others, contemporary worship seems like a better approach to reach today’s generations. In his book, *The Second Coming of the Church*, George Barna makes this startling statement: “After nearly two decades of studying Christian churches in America, I’m convinced that the typical church as we know it today has a rapidly expiring shelf life.”^{2} The church is not effectively speaking to its surrounding culture, he says, and is becoming largely irrelevant. Adapting worship services is one part of addressing this problem.

Still a third worship option for evangelicals who are tired of traditional worship but think the contemporary style is inadequate as well, is that of liturgical worship. Through the ceremony and ritual of liturgical services conducted in settings with objects rich with symbolism, some Christians look for a special encounter with God. The October 6, 1997

issue of *Christianity Today* had on its cover a picture of a woman with a glazed look in her eyes. Above her head was the question: "Missing God at church?"^{3} A student interviewed in the cover article said this about her church background: "There was no imagination, no mystery, no beauty. It was all preaching and books and application." Another student spoke of the loss of the sense of the divine in worship today. "Gymnasiums and impermanent buildings" have replaced "the splendor and holiness of cathedrals," she said. "Plastic cups and folding chairs aren't enough," she continued. "There has to be an environment that communicates God's holiness to my senses and to my spirit."

A fourth option for worship is one championed by Robert Webber: that of blended worship. This is especially appealing to young people. It reflects, to a degree, postmodern thinking. We are no longer restricted to choosing one style over another. Now that the rigid demands of modernism have broken down, people feel free to choose facets of different styles to form something new.

Some might think that differences between worship services are really merely stylistic. Each person has his or her preferences regarding worship, right? Some prefer one style, some another. But are the differences only stylistic? Is it true that worship style is basically a matter of individual preference? Are there any objective criteria for corporate worship? If there are, then we can look for the necessary elements as we consider a certain style of worship.^{4} On the other hand, we can also look for things to avoid in worship, things that would hinder true worship. Are influences from secular culture coming into the church and adversely affecting our worship?

Let's consider first some goals of corporate worship. Following that, we'll consider three cultural forces that serve to undermine proper worship.

Three Goals of Worship

In her book, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, [\[5\]](#) Marva Dawn says there are three goals of worship: praising God, building up the community, and nurturing the believer.

Praising God

The obvious answer to the question “Why do we worship?” is, “To give praise and glory to God.” Said the Levites, “Arise, bless the Lord your God forever and ever! O may Your glorious name be blessed and exalted above all blessing and praise!” (Neh. 9:5). In praise we have our focus on God and not ourselves. At least we think we do.

However, too often our thoughts about God center around what He has done for *us*, for *me*. Consider, for example, the songs many of us sing in church. So many of them have *I* as the real subject. God is praised for what He means to *me*.

Is it wrong to praise and thank God for what He has done for me? Not at all! Of course, we should do this. The problem is this: we come to worship God in His *fullness*, but we end up praising Him for what *we’ve* experienced. The being and work of God is reduced to the limits of our own experience! But we’re dealing with the transcendent One here! The One who spoke the stars into existence, who cares for all others in His family the same as He cares for me, and all at the same time! God’s project is bigger than I am. God’s being is bigger than what I have personally experienced. In addition to praising God for what He has done for us individually, we should be worshiping God for the things He does that have nothing to do with us in particular. By worshiping Him in His fullness we open ourselves up for riches we didn’t expect and maybe never even imagined.

Building Up the Body

In worship we also build up the community of faith. We are

part of something much bigger than our own church or denomination; we are part of something which began two millennia ago and which will continue to grow until the Lord returns.

What does this have to do with worship? First, when we come together for worship we are a worshipping *community*, not just a bunch of individuals gathered in the same room. When we are together we can turn from our occupation with ourselves and focus on the development of God's people as a body. We are not to mirror our narcissistic and individualistic society, but rather to turn outward to the community. Says Dawn, "Worship that draws all its participants into a common understanding of God will develop vibrant communities—and then the communities in turn will also deepen the character growth of their members."[\[6\]](#)

Second, in worship we can also hear from members of the church from generations past through their writings and art. In turn, we nurture and protect that which we have inherited so we can pass it on intact to succeeding generations. Worship aids significantly in this project. Says Dawn, "Worship forms us; all the elements of the service develop the character of believer in us. And worship forms the community if it unites us in common beliefs, traditions, renewal, and goals. Worship schools us in the language of faith as we listen and sing and participate in its rites." She continues: "We can only pass on the faith if it has nurtured our character to be its carriers and if we are part of a community, the Church, that has carried the faith down through the ages."[\[7\]](#)

So, when we sing, for example, do we draw into ourselves and enjoy our own private worship? Or are we purposefully singing *with* other believers, lifting up one sound of praise to God? Do we come to church with our focus on what we hope to get out of the service? Or are we thinking about how we are going to lift others before the Lord? Are we listening to Christians from ages past who have dealt with some of the same ideas and

issues we struggle with? And are we thinking about those who will come after us, about the legacy we will leave behind?

The individualism of our age fights us here. It sets us up to be a lot of little Christian islands in a sanctuary or auditorium. We are not many individuals who just happen to have a religious bond. What we are really is a body made up of many members. Worship that recognizes God as the subject will be worship that builds up His body.

Nurturing Character

Another goal of worship is the nurturing of our character. Worship should transform us as a result of being brought into the presence of the living God. It was entering the sanctuary of God that gave Asaph a right understanding of God and His ways with men, which took away Asaph's bitterness (Ps. 73). Think of Isaiah, who was made whole and prepared to serve after beholding the glory of God and his own sinfulness (Is. 6). This isn't just a matter of growing in faith and going deeper in our prayer life. It's also a matter of becoming good people, people whose character is like that of Jesus!

Too often, however, *our* idea of being transformed is leaving church feeling good! We want to feel better about ourselves, to be lifted up! Yet, we all know in the normal course of life that building up often means tearing down first. This is especially the case when we think about being conformed to the image of Christ. In fact, Marva Dawn says that worship ought to *kill* us. What does she mean by this? She says:

"In a society doing all it can to make people cozy, somehow we must convey the truth that God's Word, rightly read and heard, will shake us up. It will kill us, for God cannot bear our sin and wants to put to death our self-centeredness Once worship kills us, we are born anew to worship God rightly." [\[8\]](#)

Worship, then, serves to praise God, build up the community,

and nurture our character.

Subjectivism: Worship Beginning With Me Rather Than With God

Let's begin looking at three forces, which work to undermine proper worship: subjectivism, self-focused individualism, and dumbing down the message. Our critique will not be focused on any particular worship style. Indeed, these problems can be found across the spectrum.

"Me" As Subject

Let's begin with subjectivism. This is a common attitude today. I find what is true and good within myself. My personal experience is what counts.^{9} Therefore, I am the judge of what is worthwhile in my worship. I expect the sermon to be on my level (none of that heavy theology stuff), the music to suit the tastes I've already developed, and the service time to not be too long. And the service is evaluated by how I feel when it's over. What matters is *my* spiritual experience *now*.

Seeing God As Subject As Well As Object

The problem here is that the center of worship is *I*, not God. Although I might be directing my thoughts toward God, I am patterning my worship so as to satisfy *myself*. The effect is that my understanding of God is restricted to what He has done in my life; my view of God is thus limited by my experience. When *my* experience of God sets the limits, I'll have a shrunken view of God.

The key to getting God fully into the picture is to see Him as the *subject* of worship, and not just the *object*. What do I mean by this? Says theologian Marva Dawn, "The gifts of worship flow from God the subject and return to God as the object of our reverence."^{10} The content of our worship *comes* from Him; He is the source. He gives us Himself, tells us His

characteristics, and informs us of His plans. Having received this we turn back to God and make Him the *object* of our worship, giving it all back to Him in praise. As one writer puts it, "Worship . . . is an encounter in which God's glory, Word, and grace are unveiled, and we respond, in songs and prayers of celebration." In our worship, we "recognize a Lord whose majesty evokes strong praise, petition, and transformation."[\[11\]](#) When we worship, we are reflecting God back to God. In filling our vision with God, we are met by Him. If we engineer our worship to meet *our* needs as we see them, on the other hand, we risk missing out on being touched by God in unexpected but vital ways.

I'd like to make one other point. With God as subject or source of worship, grace once again becomes central, for grace is the theme of His works on our behalf. When we are the subjects, however, *our* actions are the focus making *law* central. This leads to an emphasis on what we must do, rather than what *God* has done.[\[12\]](#)

On Worship Killing Us

With God as the subject of worship, it then becomes a vehicle of transformation in His hands. As I noted earlier, worship ought to *kill* us. It ought to make us see the great distance between God and ourselves. Once in God's presence our sinful nature is put to death. Then we are ready to be infused with His life.[\[13\]](#)

Worship is a subversive act, Dawn insists. We don't come before God to get His stamp of approval on our interests and agendas. God intends to turn us upside down. As Dawn says, "If the Church's worship is faithful, it will eventually be subversive of the culture surrounding it, for God's truth transforms the lives of those nurtured by it. Worship will turn our values, habits, and ideas upside-down as it forms our character; only then will we be genuinely right-side up eternally."[\[14\]](#)

When we have the attitude that the worship service is provided primarily to fix our individual problems, we get the cart before the horse. We aren't interested in being brought low before God. But it is only in being brought low that we can be lifted up, because it is only then that we both see our real need and surrender ourselves to God to do with as *He* pleases, not as we please.

We thus recognize God as both subject and object of worship, as the One who fills us with Himself, and as the One upon whom we shift our focus for our time of corporate worship.

Self-Focused Individualism: Worship Focused on Me Rather Than on the Body

One of the weaknesses of the church in modern times has been the failure to give due recognition to the fact that we are part of a community of faith. Ours is a narcissistic age; we've been taught to be self-absorbed in our "I did it my way" culture. Marva Dawn notes that in her observation of the church today Christians "rarely . . . think in terms of 'we' instead of 'I'." [\[15\]](#)

The Body Present, Past and Future

We aren't just a bunch of individuals thrown together in some loose confederation. We are a *body* that extends geographically around the world at the present, and which extends back in time 2000 years and forward until the Lord returns.

How can the church address this individualistic attitude? Dawn believes "that worship which keeps God as subject is the most important key, for God is the Creator of community and the preserver of the Church. . . . [W]orship that draws all its participants into a common understanding of God will develop vibrant communities—and then the communities in turn will also deepen the character growth of their members." [\[16\]](#) In our worship we study Scripture together, we speak the words of the

great creeds to each other, we sing as one voice, we agree in prayer. Such things foster in us a sense of oneness, of being part of a unity.

As we are part of the community present in our own day, we are also part of a community that began with the apostles and that will continue until the Lord comes. In our worship services the past can remain a part of the present through the inclusion of the wisdom of our forefathers through their writings, prayers, and liturgies. As I mentioned earlier, there is a new interest in liturgical worship among young people. Ancient writings "are seen as providing needed maturity as well as a connection to the faith of the church historical."[\[17\]](#) Also, the awareness that we are leaving a legacy for those who come after us provides an encouragement to transmit and maintain a correct understanding of God in our worship. A renewed understanding of the importance of the community of faith, then, gives us a foundation upon which to stand, and makes us aware of our responsibility to others.

Speaking to our Society

There is positive change in this regard in churches attuned to the situation of the younger generations. One of the characteristics of modernism was the psychological isolation it produced. We have been thinking in terms of personal needs and choices rather than in terms of obligations to the group. Against the existential idea that *my* experience *now* is what makes me what I am, leaving me essentially rootless and radically free, Christians find their identity in the enormous body of believers made alive through faith in Christ. Today, however, young people are crying out for community, and churches are meeting this challenge through various means. This is a key area where the church reveals its eternal relevance to the human situation; to ignore it will impoverish the church body, and will make Christianity seem truly irrelevant to the younger generations.

Dumbing Down the Message

A third problem sometimes found in churches today is that of “dumbing down” the message in an effort to make it understandable to everyone equally, even to non-believers who may be visiting.

While we should welcome nonbelievers into our churches, we have to ask whether keeping our worship on an elementary level is worth the cost of holding believers at the level of nonbelievers or new believers.

We need to remember first of all that the church is . . . well, the *church*. It’s the body of Christ made up of those who have been taken hold of by the Savior. It isn’t *unbelievers*. Worship is the work of believers, and the worship service should be geared toward them. It should not be governed by what the general population finds acceptable. As Martin Marty has said, “To give the whole store away to match what this year’s market says the unchurched want is to have the people who know least about the faith determine most about its expression.”[\[18\]](#)

Bringing People Up Rather than Dumbing the Message Down

Part of the mission of the church is bringing people into the kingdom, and our worship services can be good places to do this. But if in our worship we water down the message, we are robbing the visitor of the full truth he or she needs to hear. If we don’t give visitors an idea of how big God is, in the long run we won’t keep them. Why should they stay if they get little more than they can get outside the church? Church historian Martin Marty said this:

This writer fears that we are on the verge of seeing happen what happened in the 1950s to mainstream Protestant churches; they retooled for people who were casually attracted and liked big parking lots, spectacle, and low

demands; and the people left as easily as they came.{19}

One of the problems of the liberal church this century was that in its effort to be timely and relevant it “plunged more deeply into the needs and wishes of human beings—or a God sculpted more closely to the image of man.”{20} The attempt to keep God up-to-date winds up allowing “the world to call the tune for God.” It ignores the complexity of God; it forgets “the tensions that must exist between human’s wishes and the Creator’s intentions.”{21}

We must relate the message in accessible ways, but we needn’t assume that people can’t learn or aren’t willing to be stretched. The things of God, not the sensibilities of contemporary culture, should be the measure of our worship.

On Christians Getting Their “Meat” Elsewhere

Some might say that Christians can get their real “meat” in Sunday schools or in other separate study time. We forget that we learn about God through all parts of worship, and not just from the didactic teaching of a sermon or Sunday school class. To suggest that Christians get the “meat” of the faith in Sunday school is to reveal a modernistic bias in favor of head knowledge; i.e., the idea that knowing is simply a matter of adding to our mental database. Some might say that we are worshiping in Sunday school when we are being taught facts and ideas. But this is only a part of worship. Corporate worship is a special time for interaction with and getting to know God on multiple levels.

What is lost by not developing our understanding of God in the context of *worship*? Worship takes us beyond mere head knowledge; there is interaction between God and man and between Christians. In Sunday school we listen; in worship we listen and then talk back to God. It is like the difference between reading about someone and talking with him or her.

The goal in all of this is to see God as fully as we can and

be touched by Him. We use words and images and whatever else we need to lift us up to God, to let Him speak to us through whatever means are available.

Conclusion

Although someone will be hard pressed to find in Scripture a clear description of a proper worship style, we can find principles of proper worship, which apply whether one uses electric guitars or organs or no instruments at all. Furthermore, we can be careful to weed out of our worship—indeed, out of our thinking generally—ideas and attitudes that do not accord with what Scripture teaches. Subjectivism, individualism, and the dumbing down of the Word of God should not characterize our worship. It is hard to stand against one's culture, especially since we're all influenced by it. But we need to do it, for the health of the body and the individual, and for the advancement of the kingdom of our Lord.

Notes

1. Bruce L. Shelley, "Why Does Worship Keep Changing?" *Christian Reader*, December 1996. www.christianitytoday.com/cr/6r6/6r6049.html. This article gives a brief overview of the changes in worship since the Puritans. See also Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), pp. 97-101.
2. George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church: A Blueprint for Survival* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), 1.
3. Gary Burge, "Missing God at Church," *Christianity Today*, October 6, 1997, 20-27.
4. See Jerry Solomon, "[Worship](#)," available on our web site at www.probe.org/docs/worship.html.
5. Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.)

6. Dawn, 133.
7. Dawn, 149.
8. Dawn, 206.
9. See Donald G. Bloesch, "Whatever Happened to God?" *Christianity Today*, Feb. 5, 2001, 54-55.
10. Dawn, 80.
11. Burge, 22.
12. Dawn, 236.
13. Dawn, 206.
14. Dawn, 58.
15. Dawn, 131.
16. Dawn, 133.
17. Daniel Harrell, "Post-Contemporary Worship," *Leadership Journal*, Spring 1999.
www.christianitytoday.com/le/912/912037.html on Jan. 11, 2001.
18. Martin E. Marty, "Build a Parking Lot, and the People Will Come (and Go)," *Context* 25, no. 4 (15 Feb. 1993): 3-4. Quoted in Dawn, 258.
19. Marty, "Build a Parking Lot," quoted in Dawn, 258.
20. James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 113. Quoted in Dawn, 299.
21. Turner, quoted in Dawn, 300-301.