

# From the Word 1/22/03: The Essence of Worship

Philippians 1:20,21

by Coty Pinckney, Desiring God Community Church, Charlotte, NC  
www.desiringGODchurch.org

We have seen that the fundamental purpose of the church is to bring glory to God; that is, to show what He is like. We also said that "providing opportunities for worship" is a secondary purpose. But what is the relationship between worship and bringing glory to God? What is the nature of true worship?

## The Nature of True Worship

In response to the question, "What is worship?" many think primarily of singing. Indeed, one question we are often asked is, "In your church plant, will the worship be traditional or contemporary?" The question, of course, refers to musical style. But biblically, worship is both much broader and much narrower than singing praise choruses together. Broader, in that worship includes much more than singing; narrower, in that it is perfectly possible to sing praise choruses for hours and never worship.

Let's probe this issue by examining a well-known passage that at first glance seems to have little to do with worship: Philippians 1:20-21 (this exposition will follow John Piper's – see the endnote). Paul is in prison, not knowing for certain what is ahead of him. But he maintains his focus on one central goal, writing:

<sup>20</sup> it is my eager expectation and hope . . . that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. <sup>21</sup> For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

Paul thus faces the possibility of life or death. But neither possibility concerns him. Paul's concern, Paul's major desire, is that God be honored, or magnified. The Greek word translated "honored" here means to make large; we might say "make much of". Mary uses this same word in her song of rejoicing at the house of Elizabeth:

Luke 1:46 Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord."

The Greek translation of the Old Testament uses this word often; a good example is Psalm 70:4

Let all who seek You rejoice and be glad in You; And let those who love Your salvation say continually, "Let God be magnified."

Given the context of Philippians 1:20, I think it likely that Paul had this verse in mind as he wrote these words. He is rejoicing and being glad in God despite his circumstances; and he is asking that God would be magnified continually in his life and even in his death.

Now, to magnify, exalt, extol, or make much of the Lord is to glorify Him. Thus Paul is fulfilling the purpose of the church even while in prison.

The implications for worship come out as we consider verse 21. Since this verse begins with the word "for", it explains why v. 20 is true. Let's consider how this explanation works for each of the two possibilities, life and death, in turn. Paul says, "It is my hope . . . that Christ will be honored in my body . . . by life . . . for to me to live is Christ." And Paul says, "It is my hope . . . that Christ will be honored in my body . . . by death . . . for to me . . . to die is gain."

Do you see what he is saying? Paul's death will honor or magnify Christ, because he knows that dying is gain – dying is "far better", as he says in v. 23. In his last seconds of life, Paul will be

confident that he is being ushered into the very presence of Christ, to live with Him for all eternity, to see Him face to face, to know even as he is fully known; Paul knows that the Lord will give him the crown of righteousness. So he can go to his death honoring Christ by taking no account of the loss he is suffering. To be with Christ is better than to be alive; to have Christ for all eternity is better than to have all the possessions and accomplishments and fame the world has to offer. In this way, Paul honors Christ in his death.

What if he lives? Paul honors Christ in his life by saying, "to live is Christ." He elaborates on this idea in chapter 3 verse 8:

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ

Paul says nothing else matters to him other than knowing Christ Jesus. Remember, Paul was a man of considerable accomplishment and influence; he had been to the best schools, he was on a career track to be a leader of the Jews; indeed, there is some evidence that Paul was already on the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, at the time of his conversion. He likely was a man of some wealth also. But Paul threw all that away in order to follow Christ.

Furthermore, does Paul sit back and say, "Weighing the two in the balance – knowing Christ versus all my worldly accomplishments and possessions – knowing Christ is a little better. I made the right decision.?" No! Paul says all that he once held dear is rubbish compared to knowing Christ. And "rubbish" is a rather euphemistic translation of this crude Greek word, which was often used to refer to human excrement. There is no comparison. The value of Christ far surpasses the value of everything else. For Paul, to live is Christ.

Thus, Paul honors or magnifies Christ in his life by living in such a way that all will see that Christ is worth far more to him than *anything* this world has to offer. Nothing else matters.

What does this have to do with worship? Everything! For worship in the New Testament does not refer to a regular religious event, but to the attitude of our hearts, and the continual outward expression of that attitude. Consider: When the Samaritan woman tries to divert Jesus from his pointed statement concerning her life by asking about the right place to worship, He emphasizes the internal attitude by telling her "true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John 4:23). Paul tells us in view of God's mercies to "offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-- this is your spiritual act of worship" (Rom 12:1). Our act of worship is thus a spiritual act – having the attitude that all of our time and all of our members belong to God, to be used for His glory. Thus when Paul writes, "whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor 10:31), he is saying, "Make all of your life worship! Value Christ above all, and display His value in all your outward actions – even seemingly trivial actions like eating and drinking."

## Why Worship Together? .

So these verses make clear that worship is fundamentally valuing Christ above all else in our hearts, and showing that in

our outward actions. Worship is thus located in the individual, and God's people should be worshipers every hour of every day.

This leads to a logical question: If worship is essentially an inner attitude, why not drive up to the top of Mt Mitchell on Sunday morning and praise God alone? What is the reason for meeting together? If worship is internal, then is corporate worship optional for Christians – we may choose to participate or not, depending upon how we feel?

Many Americans act this way: they go to church if and when they enjoy it, but if some other activity interferes, or if they go through a period of their lives when church becomes inconvenient, they simply drop out. Yet they will say, "Oh, I'm a Christian. Jesus lives in my heart, and I worship Him on my own. And that's what true worship is!"

Is this biblical? If so, why should we meet together in worship?

There are at least five solid, biblical reasons why worshipping together is vital for Christians, why we are not to isolate ourselves from other believers. First, **God commands us to meet together**. Hebrews 10:24-25 is the most explicit of many such Scriptures:

<sup>24</sup> And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, <sup>25</sup> not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

This by itself is sufficient reason to end all argument. God is under no obligation to inform us why His commands are good for us. But in this case, He is gracious enough to explain at least some of the reasons why He gives us this command.

Indeed, in this very Scripture God clarifies one of the reasons we are to meet together: we are to "stir up one another to love and good works;" we are to "encourage one another." So the second reason we are to meet together is to **help us fight the fight of faith**.

On our own, we are easy prey for Satan's schemes; on our own, sin is able to deceive and discourage us. God intends us to live the Christian life not on our own but as part of the body of Christ, with each part working properly so that the whole body might grow to maturity (Ephesians 4:15-16). God gives us gifts so that we might grow; He chooses to work through other Christians to make us grow (Proverbs 27:17: "Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another"). When we meet together, we exercise our Spirit-bestowed gifts for each other's benefit; we encourage and exhort each other; and all grow together into Christ. This does not happen when we isolate ourselves from other believers.

This reason for our meeting together gives some guidelines for what those meetings should look like. The need to hold each other accountable, to ensure that not one of us is hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Hebrews 3:12-13) implies a smaller group than is typical on Sunday mornings – more on that next time when we discuss the biblical basis and rationale for small groups. But a larger corporate gathering also should work to help us fight the fight of faith through:

a) *Acting out the truths of our faith through God's ordinances*: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Joining together with other believers to share these ordinances gives us visible reminders of our faith, and God chooses to work through these means of grace to strengthen our faith.

b) *Praying together* strengthens us in ways that praying privately does not (Matthew 18:19-20). We are to listen to each other's prayers and join them, thus receiving benefits ourselves (1 Corinthians 14:16-17).

c) We are to *sing together* to our mutual benefit (note that the command in Ephesians 5:19 to speak to one another in hymns and spiritual songs follows shortly after the command in v. 16 to "make the best use of the time."). One aspect of this mutual benefit is reminding us that the truths of the faith are real! When we sing praises to our God together, we are encouraged to fight against the continual bombardment of Satan's lies, telling us that the Bible consists solely of "cleverly devised tales" (2 Peter 1:16).

d) Finally and most importantly, coming together allows us to *hear and respond to the preaching of the Word* by the man gifted by God in this area. As Ephesians 4:11-16 shows, the pastors and teachers are given to the church to build up the church in faith and knowledge, thereby protecting us from false doctrine and leading us to maturity together. And 2 Timothy 3:16-4:5 implies that Paul's solemn charge to Timothy to preach the Word is necessary to bring forth the benefits of the Word outlined in 3:16-17.

Now, some might say, "But, Coty, you said that our services should be God-centered, not man-centered. Isn't this focus on coming to corporate worship so that we can live a better Christian life man-centered?"

That is an excellent question, showing that the one asking it has taken the message of God-centeredness to heart. We certainly do not want to say, "The reason we come together for worship is so that we can live better Christian lives." That would be like a couple saying, "The reason we are getting married is to share sexual intimacy." The desire for sexual intimacy plays a part in the decision to marry. And sexual intimacy helps to solidify the marriage bond, building up a good marriage. But the goal of marriage should be much larger than satisfying one's sexual desires! Thus, this couple has confused ends and means.

Just so, the statement "The reason we come together for worship is so that we can live better Christian lives" confuses ends and means. We come together in worship to glorify God. In worship, we glorify Him directly through our preaching, through the ordinances, through our prayers, and through our songs. We also glorify Him indirectly, by helping each of us to fight the fight of faith more effectively, and thus glorify Him in our lives more consistently during the rest of the week. But we must never make our edification the ultimate goal. The ultimate goal is always to glorify God, not to help us.

So we meet together because God has commanded it, and we meet together so that we might fight the fight of faith more effectively. The third reason we meet together is so that **we might serve as ministers of Christ's love to one another**. Although the preacher's role is vital, he is not the only person gifted by God for the building up of the body. Romans 12:4-10 says that we are each individually members of one another, and God gives us spiritual gifts so that we might serve and build up each other in love. Rather than speaking to us directly on our road to Damascus, God generally chooses to work through a human preacher or teacher of His Word; just so, rather than miraculously multiplying the food in our cupboards, God generally chooses to work through the gifts of generosity of His people to meet physical needs. 1 John 4:12 says that this allows us to see God, and thus glorify Him: "No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us."

Fourthly, our meeting together, living out the truths of our faith corporately, **provides a witness to the world**. In part, this witness will be in our coming together to serve non-believers directly, such as through meeting their physical needs and engaging in evangelism. These actions too complete God's love in the world (1 John 4:17; see also James 1:27).

But our love for each other (John 13:35) and our worship services themselves also provide a powerful witness to the world. When anyone, believer or unbeliever, comes into our services, they should be able to learn something about the God of the Bible through what they see and hear: our prayers, our reverence, our joy, our lyrics, our emotions, our preaching. Then God may grant the unbelieving visitor repentance, so that he opens his eyes and says, "God is really among you!" (1 Corinthians 14:25).

Lastly, **our corporate worship prefigures our eternity before the throne of God.** We are the bride of Christ, over whom He rejoices with great joy (Revelation 19:6-9, Zephaniah 3:17). One day He will perfect us into that perfect bride, and we will praise Him forevermore. As Jonathan Edwards contends in his sermon, "Praise: One of the Chief Employments of Heaven," we are one church with those who have gone to be with Christ ahead of us. As they are praising God continually, and as we will join them before long, we too should praise Him corporately, foreshadowing and fitting us for eternity. As Edwards says,

Here is laid the foundation of future misery, and of future happiness. If it be not begun here, it never will be begun. If our hearts be not in some measure tuned to praise in this world, we shall never do anything at the work hereafter. The light must dawn in this world, or the sun will never rise in the next. As we therefore all of us would be, and hope to be, of that blessed company which praise God in heaven, we should now inure ourselves to the work.

And this praise is best given corporately, for:

The saints in heaven praise God *unitedly*. They praise him with one heart and one soul, in a most firm union. Endeavour that you may thus praise God in union with his people; having your hearts knit to them in fervent love and charity; which will be a great help to your praising and glorifying God unitedly with them.

Thus, while the essence of worship is an internal attitude of valuing Christ more than all the world has to offer, and while

every minute of every day is to be an expression of worship, our coming together for times of corporate worship honors God in itself and enables us to honor Him more fully throughout the rest of the week. We come together to express our satisfaction, our happiness in God, and to enable ourselves to be satisfied in Him at all times, so that we might bring great glory to His name.

Thus, our times of corporate worship must be God-centered, focusing on producing an atmosphere consistent with entering the presence of the God of the universe. The entire service – the welcome, the announcements, the singing, the prayers, the preaching – must aim at helping God's people to know Him better and so love Him more, to feel the depth of His mercy and so to overflow with delight in Him. Every service must time and again bring out the truths of God's riches and our poverty, God's purity and our sinfulness, God's love and our need for that love. Our services must never consist of performance or entertainment, but instead the heartfelt expression of joy in God.

So what is worship? Worship is acting and thinking in a way that reflects the glory of God. And the inner essence of worship is valuing Christ far above all earthly possessions and attainments. May we in our church plant live in continual worship, and may God see fit to bring many more worshipers to Himself through us.

---

Note: The exposition of Philippians 1:20-21 follows closely John Piper's discussion of those verses in *Brothers, We are NOT Professionals* (Broadman and Holman, 2002), chapter 28, "Brothers, Focus on the Essence of Worship, Not the Form."

Copyright © 2003, Thomas C. Pinckney. You may copy this text for distribution to others, but only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All such copies of this text must contain this copyright notice. You may also use brief excerpts in sermons, reviews, or articles. Other than these exceptions, this text may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any products offered for sale, without the written permission of Thomas C. Pinckney, pastor@desiringGODchurch.org, Desiring God Community Church, PO Box 620099, Charlotte, NC 28262, USA.