

What is Worship?

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During Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well in John 4, she asked Jesus whether the Jews or Samaritans were worshiping rightly. She went to the right person with her question. Jesus tells her the Samaritans worship what they do not know but that the "hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him."¹ If there is a "true worship," then that means there is also a category for "false worship." False worship can have catastrophic consequences for our churches. Scripture is full of examples where God's judgment fell upon those who worshiped wrongly in both the Old and New Testaments, some of which we will consider throughout this essay. We must learn to distinguish between true and false worship so that we will worship in a way which is acceptable to God.

I often wonder if God is judging Baptist churches by allowing them to divide over worship styles. Baptists tend to believe that anything directed toward God in a positive and adoring manner is worship. In many contemporary churches, there are no rules around worship whatsoever. If it feels right to you and has something to do with God, many Christians believe that God will accept it. A lack of any theology of worship has opened the door to worship being defined by popular opinion. The members want to worship in ways right in their own eyes and the leadership seeks to please everyone to the detriment of the weekly gathering. Unlike the woman at the well, Baptists rarely set aside personal preferences to ask God what He wants our worship to look like. Until we remedy our worship problems, we will continue to see division and decline in Baptist churches. One step in the right direction for Baptists is to recover a stronger theology of worship. To do that we must first define worship in a biblical manner.

The Challenge of Defining Worship

Defining worship in a scriptural manner is a very complex task. The difficulty lies within the word "worship" itself. The English word "worship" is not the same as

¹ John 4:22-23, ESV.

the concept of what we call “worship.” Worship comes from an Old English word that meant “a condition of being worthy, glory, honor, renown.”² The idea is that we give someone their “worth ship.” You may have heard someone in a high-ranking position being called “his worship” meaning that they are someone of high worth. This directly correlates with the current definition of worship as “to have or show a strong feeling of respect and admiration for God or a god.”³ The issue is that this definition does not even come close to meeting the whole of biblical worship.

I will portray what I mean by looking at another example. If I ask you what the word “holy” means, you might give me a definition. However, the finite definition provided would not be sufficient to describe the Holiness of God. B.B. Warfield says it best, “What, then, do we mean when we speak of the ‘holiness’ of God?... We fall back at least on this negative description of it just because language has no positive word which can reach up to the unscaleable heights of this one highest word, holiness.” Warfield is saying that when we attempt to explain the Holiness of God, we can only state what His holiness is not (the negative description) because the human tongue does not have the capability to describe the Holiness of God. Our definition of “holy” cannot measure up to the concept of God’s Holiness.

The biblical concept of worship encapsulates much more than expressing someone’s value. This is evidenced in the many different words we translate into “worship” from both the Old and New Testaments. The following image shows different words translated from the original languages into worship. While these words often have meanings apart from worship, in each context where the English renders “worship,” the use of the word is closely related to our concept of worship.

² Online Etymology Dictionary, “Worship,” accessed August 25, 2025, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/worship>.

³ Cambridge Dictionary, “Worship,” accessed August 25, 2025, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/worship>.

Old Testament			
Original Word	Definition	English Translation	Example References
שָׁחָה	bow down, prostrate oneself	worship	Gen. 22:5; Ex. 34:14; Dt. 11:16; Josh. 5:14
עָשָׂה	do, make	worship, do (KJV)	Dt. 12:4; Dt. 12:31
יָרָא	fear, stand in awe of	worship, fear (KJV)	Josh. 22:25
עָבַד	work, serve,	worship, serve (KJV)	2 Sam. 15:8; 2 Kings 10:19*
דָּרַשׁ	resort to, seek	worship, seek (KJV)	Ezra 4:2; Ezra 6:21
שָׁרַת	minister, serve	worship, serve (KJV)	Ezek. 20:32
סָגַד	do homage	worship	Dan. 3:5-7
עָבַד	suppliant, worshipper	worshiper, suppliant (KJV)	Zeph. 3:10

*In 2 Kings 10:19, עָבַד appears twice. In the KJV, the first usage is translated "servants" and the second is "worshippers."

New Testament			
Original Word	Definition	English Translation	Example References
προσκυνέω	prostrate oneself before, do reverence to	worship	Mt. 14:33; Lk. 4:8; John 4:22-24
σέβω	express allegiance through rites, show reverence	worship	Mt. 15:9; Acts 17:23
λατρεύω	serve	worship; divine service (KJV)	Lk. 4:7; Acts 7:42; Rom. 12:1; Heb. 9:1
λειτουργέω	render service	worship	Acts 13:2
θρησκεία	expression of devotion in cultic rites	worship	Col. 2:18

One example above is “to prostrate oneself.” Prostrating oneself low or paying homage might be acts of worship, but they are not true worship accepted by God in of themselves. One could bow before God, yet there may be a good reason for God to reject that as worship. Both Cain and Abel brought offerings to the Lord, yet God had no regard for Cain’s offering, which resulted in Cain murdering his own brother.⁴ Something prevented Cain’s worship from being true worship. True worship goes beyond good intentioned expressions of devotion toward God. As Jesus said, true worship happens in spirit and truth.

⁴ Genesis 4:5.

Worship in Truth: Fear, Obedience, and Love

“And now, Isreal, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good?”⁵

When I gather my wife and children for family worship in our home before bedtime, part of our liturgy⁶ is quoting Deuteronomy 10:12-13 while raising one finger for each of the five commands. I want this passage to be seared into the minds of my children as they grow because this passage is foundational to serving and worshiping God. In these two short verses, God tells His people exactly what he requires of them in all things. If we want our worship to be true and acceptable to God, we begin here and we stay within the guidelines of this passage.

As I survey the contemporary Christian landscape, I do not believe that a lot of the Baptist world would begin where God does. We begin with things like, “God loves you where you are,” or “God has a plan for your life.” However, God begins with fear. I can almost hear the response now, “But fear means respect, right?” No. Respect is a part of fear because we respect things we fear, but the fear of God involves more. Consider visions of God like Isaiah 6:1-7 and Revelation 1:9-20. Was it only respect that Isaiah and John felt when they stood before God? John fell down like he was dead at the sight of Christ.⁷ Paul tells us to work out our own “salvation with fear and trembling.”⁸ We do not tremble at things we respect. Picture the fear of God like watching the lightning in a terrible lightning storm. There is so much beauty in the electrical arc, yet the power of the lightning strikes a sense of fear in your heart because you know the damage it could cause. To fear God is to stand before Him in awe to such a degree that you realize your

⁵ Deuteronomy 10:12-13, ESV.

⁶ Many Baptists resist liturgical worship because they see it as unspiritual or even too Roman Catholic. They believe they prefer worship that is spontaneous and free. However, I have found that all churches follow some sort of pattern in their worship, even if it is unwritten. I use a liturgy with my children because consistency is key with training my children up in the faith.

⁷ Revelation 1:17.

⁸ Philippians 2:12, ESV.

position and you see the gravity of your sinfulness. You realize that just to behold His glory would drop you dead, but you never want to be away from His presence. Just as “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,” worship also begins with the fear of God.⁹ To give God glory, one must first know dangers of His glory to approach Him properly as a creature.

The rest of God’s requirements focus upon living in service and obedience to God in our love for Him. Out of the five commands given, three of them relate to obedience to God. It is very important to God that we submit our living to His moral standard. We cannot begin to worship God if we are not seeking to live in obedience to His commands. David says that God would find no pleasure in his sacrificial worship until he was broken over his own sinfulness.¹⁰ James warns us that if we are living in a sinful lifestyle that we should “be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.”¹¹ We are only fooling ourselves if we think that our worship is true and acceptable if we refuse to live obediently to God.

This does not mean that we cannot worship God if we do not live perfect lives. It is impossible for us to live perfectly in this sinful flesh. If we think we are perfect, the truth is not in us.¹² God has always given mankind forgiveness for our imperfections in His covenants. While we are called to live perfectly,¹³ this is not a standard which we can match and this is a tension in which we constantly live as we wage war on the flesh, hoping in Christ for our failures. There is a major difference in struggling with sin and giving yourself over to sin, and God is the judge of that difference. Though we are not perfect, we strive for obedience in everything we do.

Our obedience to God’s commands and statutes is not only something we do with our daily lives, but we are called to obey in our public worship gatherings. God is very careful to teach His people how He wishes to be worshiped throughout scripture. There are grave warnings to those who invent new and innovative ways of worshipping our Holy God. To worship God apart from His Word is itself sin and is also false

⁹ Proverbs 9:10, ESV.

¹⁰ Psalm 51:16-17.

¹¹ James 4:9-10, ESV.

¹² 1 John 1:10.

¹³ Matthew 5:48.

worship. Nadab and Abihu offered up “unauthorized (strange) fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them.”¹⁴ God consumed the brothers in the fire. When writing to the Corinthians, Paul warns them that the way they were taking the Lord’s Supper was so terrible that they couldn’t even consider it Communion.¹⁵ They were making a mockery of Christ’s body and blood, making themselves guilty of the body and blood, and some were dying because of it.¹⁶ In both of these cases, God’s servants were worshiping in ways that were at odds with God’s Word. For us to have true worship, our worship must be under the authority of scripture.

While our obedience is central to our worship, it is not the driving force behind our worship. Our love for God is the key ingredient for our worship. Our obedience and worship hinge upon our love for Him. We seek to be obedient to Him because we love Him. We want to glorify Him because we love Him and realize that He is worthy of all glory. It is love that separates Christian worship from all other religious worship. All other religions require man to earn their reward from their god. When they worship, they worship out of a place of doubt, never knowing if they have done enough. In Christianity, we worship because our God has done everything for us because He loves us first. He has freed us from our hatred of Him so that we are able to love Him,¹⁷ obey Him, and worship Him. In love, we now worship the God that we also fear through our obedience and service to His commands and statutes.

Worship in Truth: Religious Service and Religious Rituals

“Christianity is a relationship, not a religion,” is a phrase repeated far too often by modern Christians. It feels good to those who say it because they think they are emphasizing the importance of a personal relationship with God and separating what they believe to be true Christianity from the many forms of legalism which have developed throughout Christian history. While the intentions behind this statement are usually good, we should stop repeating such phrases. This claim drives an erroneous wedge between the relationship of a believer and their religious worship. Christianity is a religion that has congregational worship and rituals commanded by God in the

¹⁴ Leviticus 10:1, ESV. Other translations use “strange” instead of “unauthorized.”

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 11:20. In verse 17, Paul tells them that when they come together, it is “for the worse.”

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 11:27-30.

¹⁷ John 3:16-21.

scriptures. Christians do have a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, but it is that personal relationship that drives us into the religious worship of God with others who also know God.

Religious service to God is intricately weaved together with the worship of God in scripture. In the Old Testament, the service of God's people through religious rituals was central to their worship of God, as we have seen in Deuteronomy 10:12. God commands Pharaoh to let His "firstborn son" go that they may "serve" Him.¹⁸ God later reveals that Israel's service would be a feast unto the Lord¹⁹ and sacrifices and burnt offerings.²⁰ As Daniel Block says, "at Sinai the Israelites ceased to be the slaves of Pharaoh and were formally inducted into the office of 'vassal' of YHWH, commissioned with his agenda."²¹ God was not calling Pharaoh to free His people so they could do as they pleased, but that they could be free to serve their God.

Even within the Old Testament people of God, the Levitical priesthood had a more specific role to "do the service of the tent of meeting" as ministers and servants.²² Block observes well that the priest's duty was "serving the service ['ābad 'ābōdâ]"²³ as their role was to serve the people of Israel in the people's service of God. The worship of God's people was so important to God that He gave them an entire tribe to ensure the purity of their religious service. Imagine with me if the people of Israel had decided that their worship was only relational and did not revolve around the religious rituals God commanded them to follow. What would happen? They might have been invaded by nations like Assyria and Babylon. Now that we are in the New Covenant under Christ, has ritual and religious worship ceased in its necessity? We know that the Old Covenant is "obsolete" and has vanished away,²⁴ did all forms of religious service go with it?

It is true that a major shift has taken place from the old to the new. This shift is not that God has decided that religious rituals no longer matter to Him, as modern

¹⁸ Exodus 4:23, ESV. The Hebrew word עָבַד ('ābad) is a word closely associated with acts of service in worship and is sometimes translated as "worship" in English translations as shown in the chart above.

¹⁹ Exodus 5:1.

²⁰ Exodus 10:25-26.

²¹ Daniel I. Block, *For the Glory of God: Recovering a Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 17-18.

²² Numbers 18:1-7, ESV. Both terms עָבַד ('ābad) and שָׁרַת (šērēt) are used in this passage to denote the service of the Levites.

²³ Block, *For the Glory of God*, 18.

²⁴ Hebrews 8:13, ESV.

Christians might believe. For mankind to be righteous, the ritual worship had to be completely perfect, but mankind is incapable of such a task. God knew for the work to be done correctly; He had to do it Himself. Thus, He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to be the great High Priest who fulfills all the ministerial service roles of the Levitical priesthood.²⁵ Not only is Christ the High Priest, but Jesus is the true Son of God (the True Israel) who brings the feast, sacrifice, and offerings to worship God.²⁶ The sacrifice He bought was not that of bulls and goats, which cannot take away sins,²⁷ but was His own body and blood. The one-time sacrifice of our Lord fulfilled the entirety of the sacrificial system of the Old Covenant, rendering those forms of sacrifice completed. There is nothing of the old which was not fulfilled completely in Christ Jesus. The major shift from the old to the new is that our ritual worship is no longer about what we offer to God, but what Christ has offered on our behalf. All our religious services and rituals are resting in Christ's work²⁸ and we receive the benefits of Christ as sons and daughters of God.

This new position of Christian worship does not mean that we no longer have any rituals and religious services which we must practice. We Baptists call the Christian rituals "ordinances." Ordinances are those things which God has instituted for His Church to be done in obedience. They necessitate that we gather as local congregations because the ordinances require our participation in the Body of Christ. While it is common for Southern Baptists to say there are only two ordinances, historically Baptists have held the position that there are many ordinances. The following is from the Baptist Catechism of 1689:

"Q. 95. What are the outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption?"

A. The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption are His ordinances, especially the Word, Baptism, the

²⁵ See Hebrews 5-10.

²⁶ See Hosea 11 and Matthew 2:13-15.

²⁷ Hebrews 10:4.

²⁸ Hebrews 3:7-4:13.

*Lord's Supper and Prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation."*²⁹

Each one of these ordinances are given to us by Christ as elements of our worship. Notice that none of these ordinances are what we offer to God but are ways in which God communicates to us the benefits of Christ's work. True worship, even ritual worship, is rooted in the fulfillment of Christ's person and work. In John 4, Jesus tells us that we must worship in truth. Later in John 14, Jesus reveals that He is the truth and that "no one can come to the Father except by Him."³⁰ As Sinclair Ferguson says, "it's almost as though John is saying at that point: 'You were wondering what He meant in chapter 4 by saying, 'You worship in truth.'"³¹ The culmination of worshipping in truth is to worship in Christ Jesus, as our Great High Priest who serves our service.

Since there is nothing that we can bring to God that surpasses what Christ has given, our only response is to give our whole selves to God in service. In Romans 12, after a detailed explanation of the work of Christ, Paul says, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."³² The word, "worship," in this sentence is the Greek word, λατρεία (latreia). This word relates to our service of God in religious ritual. We see this word in Hebrews 9:1 and 9:6 describing the regulations of the worship and duties in the Old Covenant. Many English translations will render this word as "worship" in Romans since it is tied to the concept of worship, but the literal translation of the word is "religious service."³³ Our religious and ritual service is to present our lives to God completely and live in a manner that glorifies Him in everything we do. Whether we are eating or drinking, everything we do is for the glory of God.³⁴

²⁹ *The Baptist Catechism* (Commonly called *Keach's Catechism*), 1689, Question 95.

³⁰ John 14:6-7, ESV.

³¹ Ferguson, Sinclair, "In John 4:23, What Does it Mean to Worship God 'in Spirit'?", Ligonier, accessed September 14, 2025, <https://learn.ligonier.org/qas/in-john-4-23-what-does-it-mean-to-worship-god-in-spirit>.

³² Romans 12:1, ESV.

³³ In the context of the provided passages, "worship" and "service" are fitting translations since both are within the bounds of biblical worship.

³⁴ 1 Corinthians 10:31.

This idea of being living sacrifices sounds very familiar to the requirements found in Deuteronomy 10:12-13 as both call us to live completely in obedience to God. They are familiar because the requirements of the Old Covenant and the New Covenant have not changed; however, the ability of mankind has been changed through the imputation of Jesus' righteousness and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In fulfillment of the promises of the New Covenant, God has put his law within our heart, made us His people, and causes us to walk obediently in His statutes for His own sake.³⁵ Because God has done such a work for us and within us, our living sacrifice is a true offering to God in which He delights. This offering of our bodies does not gain anything for us in matters of right standing with God, but God can look at us as a father looks at the actions of His son and says, "I'm proud of you." For worship to be true, God must be pleased with the worshipper himself. Our worship then must be in Christ Jesus who makes us righteous as we give ourselves completely to God as living sacrifices and gather with other believers to participate in the religious ordinances through which God communicates to us His grace.

Worship in Truth: Physical Gesture

Modern Christian music is obsessed with raising our hands unto the Lord. I would love to know the number of times a Christian song has contained phrases about raising our hands to God in the last decade. The only other lyrics I would think that have been more dominant in Christian music are phrases about chains being broken which seems to be in every other new song. Yes, I am poking fun at the modern overuse of hand-raising and chain breaking, but physical gesture is a very biblical aspect of Christian worship. We are specifically encouraged to raise our hands in places like Psalms 63:4 and 134:2, and Paul encourages us to lift holy hands in prayer rather than quarrelsome fists.³⁶ There are additional forms of physical gestures which we might employ in our worship of God which we will not explore here. Physical gestures are appropriate and good responses in worship when one has been moved by God to do so. We do not worship God with only our minds and lips, but our whole body.

³⁵ Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:22-32.

³⁶ 1 Timothy 2:8.

The main form of biblical gesture in worship is to bow down before the Lord. There is nothing more closely associated with the English word “worship” in scripture than $\pi\eta\psi$ in the Old Testament and $\pi\rho\omicron\sigma\kappa\upsilon\nu\acute{\epsilon}\omega$ in the New Testament. Both words are gestures of reverence and submission by bowing down, kneeling, or prostrating oneself before a superior. Bowing is not always worship, for someone might bow before a king in reverence to their position³⁷; however, these words are usually translated as worship in English Bibles. Regrettably, it is extremely rare for Southern Baptists to practice bowing before God as part of their worship, especially in churches that have adopted the contemporary style of worship. It is odd to me that raising our hands has become the standard posture of worship in contemporary churches when the standard posture we find in scripture is to bow down before the Lord.

To prostrate oneself is about more than just the physical act. It is about humility before God. When we bow before someone, we put ourselves in a vulnerable state and acknowledge that they are above us in some manner. To bow before God is to concede our own unworthiness to even look upon Him. In Hebrews, we are told that we are to “be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.”³⁸ I fear that we Baptists have lost our sense of reverence and awe when we gather to worship God because we have forgotten that our God is a consuming fire. Forgive me as I turn into an old fogey for just a moment, but please consider what I am saying. In modern Christianity, casualness has become a sign of hype worship. We want to “create environments of worship” where everyone who attends can feel welcome and comfortable, no matter what sort of life they are living. It often feels as if we are entering a concert and not a place where Christ’s Body has gathered for the worship of their God. Even worse, many contemporary Baptist see no issue in worship feeling like a concert. In most Baptist churches, our worship is geared to make us excited about Jesus because we think that we need to generate enthusiasm to grow our churches.

When was the last time your church’s worship was solemn? In the church which I was raised, it was common for us to gather around one another on our knees and pray to God as a congregation. That is not something I have seen in a long time, and I think many today would find it weird. We live in a generation of Christians who love to look

³⁷ In Genesis 23:7, Abraham bows down before the Hittites as a sign of honor and respect.

³⁸ Hebrews 12:28, ESV.

upward toward heaven and raise their hands to God in worship but who have never bowed themselves before the throne of God in fear and awe. It is no wonder that modern worship has derailed because we have no sense of reverence for the God of the universe. To many, Christian worship is just one big celebration party.

If we really want to have a good theology of worship, we ought to have reverence and awe for the Lord just as the angels and the saints in heaven. In Isaiah 6, the seraphim were flying around Christ on His throne.³⁹ Their wings were covering their face and their feet in reverence for the Lord as they repeatedly cried out, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”⁴⁰ These great beings who live in the presence of God would not dare look upon His holiness. In Revelation, every time we get a glimpse of heavenly worship, people fall down on their face before the Lord.⁴¹ If heavenly creatures and saints who have gone ahead of us are bowing before Christ, how much more should we who are still in the war of sin and flesh bow down before our Lord in humility? Our God is not a God of casualness, but He both demands and deserves our utmost respect and honor. Let us give God what He is due.

Worship in Spirit

As we have seen, to worship God in truth is to center one’s entire life, mind, heart, body, and attitude around the glory of God. Sinners like me look at that and ask how we could ever offer God acceptable worship. Our hearts are constantly pulling us away from God and we find ourselves caught up in the sinful snares that we know too well. As fallen man, we do not have the ability to worship God truly if we are left to ourselves. Praise be to God that He has not left us to ourselves but has given us a Helper who leads us into true worship.

In His conversation with the woman at the well, Jesus told her that she must worship truly, but that true worship must also be in spirit.⁴² To worship in spirit has a two-fold meaning. First, Jesus is teaching the woman that acceptable worship to God is

³⁹ While Isaiah 6 does not call out Jesus’ name, Isaiah is getting a glimpse of Jesus on His throne in His glory.

⁴⁰ Isaiah 6:2-3, ESV.

⁴¹ Revelation 4:10; 5:8, 14; 7:11; 19:4; 19:10

⁴² John 4:23-24.

not based on location and ceremony. He gives this conclusion from God's nature for He says that "God is spirit," therefore, we must worship Him as He is. This means that our worship is "to lay aside the entanglements of ancient ceremonies, and to retain what is spiritual in the worship of God; for the truth of the worship of God consists in the spirit, and the ceremonies are but a sort of appendage."⁴³

The second characteristic of spirit worship is to worship by the power of the Holy Spirit. In John 3, Jesus has a conversation with a ruler of the Jews named Nicodemus. Jesus tells Nicodemus that "unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." He further explains that to be born again one must be "born of water and the Spirit." In the same chapter, John the Baptist speaks to those who are worried about the success of Jesus' ministry and says, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven."⁴⁴ In the same answer, John says, "He who comes from heaven is above all. He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure."⁴⁵ It is just after these events that Jesus is at the well speaking with a Samaritan woman telling her that she must worship in spirit and truth. In these two chapters, everyone from the least to the greatest, whether they are Jew or not, are being taught that if they want to come to God in anyway, they must do so through Christ and the Spirit. The rest of the Gospel of John affirms this core idea.

To worship God, we must worship Him in the Holy Spirit. We cannot worship God by our own power and will. The Old Testament is proof that even with the Law and the priesthood, Israel was unable to keep God's Word. God promised through the prophet Ezekiel that He "will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them."⁴⁶ Our hearts are too wicked and sinful and would have us turn away from God rather than glorifying Him. Scripture tells us that we are not even able to understand the things of God

⁴³ John Calvin and William Pringle, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 163–164.

⁴⁴ John 3:27, ESV.

⁴⁵ John 3:31-34, ESV.

⁴⁶ Ezekiel 11:19-20, ESV.

without the Spirit.⁴⁷ Paul tells us that “the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is in the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”⁴⁸ In the same chapter where Jesus says He is the truth (John14), Jesus tells His disciples that “the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.”⁴⁹

The Spirit of God must lead us into worship. Baptist churches today often get this backward. They tend to think that we enter worship and then the Holy Spirit comes and joins us. The way you know that the Spirit has entered is that the “worship experience” is heightened. Depending on your tradition, this “Spirit-filled worship” will have people running the aisles, doing backflips, shouting, diving into the baptistry,⁵⁰ dancing, heavy displays of emotions, extended periods of singing,⁵¹ people flocking to the “altar,” and more. I find that we can sum up this view of how the Spirit works in worship in two ways, one for “traditional worship” and one for “contemporary worship.” Those in the “traditional” tradition will say, “The Spirit showed up and showed out.” Those in the “contemporary” tradition love to sing this chorus, “Holy Spirit you are welcome here, come flood this place and fill the atmosphere, your glory God is what our hearts long for, to be overcome by your presence Lord.”⁵² In both of these quotes, we enter into worship and the Spirit decides if He wants to enhance it or leave it alone. Whenever the Spirit does “appear” in our worship, only then do congregants describe the worship as “good worship.” The rest of the time worship is seen as “all right” or even boring. We can see how much modern Baptists have been influenced by the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements of the twentieth century.

In recovering a theology of worship, we must understand the Holy Spirit’s proper role in our worship. He leads us into worship, and we do not worship apart

⁴⁷ 1 Corinthians 2:14.

⁴⁸ Romans 8:26-27, ESV.

⁴⁹ John 14:26, ESV.

⁵⁰ “This is How Some Churches Act when they praise our Lord!”, accessed September 8, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ka6TC8nBpm0>.

⁵¹ On many occasions, the preaching of the Word will be abandoned because the “feeling of the Spirit” will lead the congregation to want to continue singing.

⁵² Bryan Torwalt and Katie Torwalt, “Holy Spirit,” 2011.

from Him. True worship is happening within the heart of the worshiper even if not accompanied by visible excitement. When the people of God gather in Christ, the Holy Spirit is present because He resides in them, and He is working in the hearts of those who are worshiping in truth. It is fine to worship enthusiastically if it is done in an orderly manner,⁵³ but let us stop looking to our emotional expressions as the climax or even the test of what worshiping in the Spirit means. Instead, let us come into our worship knowing that it is the Spirit who is leading us into to true worship that is acceptable and pleasing to the Lord.

Summarizing Worship

Thus far, I have not provided a succinct definition of worship. There have been many theologians who have given definitions of worship, and I am not sure that I can or need to add much to what they have already said. Daniel Block understands the difficulty of defining worship and instead offers up a description of worship as follows:⁵⁴ “True worship involves reverential human acts of submission and homage before the divine Sovereign in response to his gracious revelation of himself and in accord with his will.”⁵⁵ Personally, I am rather fond of D.A. Carson’s definition of worship however long it may be:

“Worship is the proper response of all moral, sentient beings to God, ascribing all honor and worth to their Creator-God precisely because he is worthy, delightfully so. This side of the Fall, human worship of God properly responds to the redemptive provisions that God has graciously made. While all true worship is God-centered, Christian worship is no less Christ-centered. Empowered by the Spirit and in line with the stipulations of the new covenant, it manifests itself in all our living, finding its impulse in the gospel, which restores our relationship with our Redeemer-God and therefore also with our fellow image-bearers, our co-worshippers. Such worship therefore manifests

⁵³ 1 Corinthians 14:24-40.

⁵⁴ Southeastern Seminary, “Daniel Block - A Theology of Worship - Adams Lecture Series,” accessed September 14, 2025, YouTube, 07:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rMkoot1kxro>. In this video, Block observes that his not defining worship but is a “description of the phenomenon.”

⁵⁵ Block, *For the Glory of God*, 23.

itself both in adoration and in action, both in the individual believer and in corporate worship, which is worship offered up in the context of the body of believers, who strive to align all the forms of their devout ascription of all worth to God with the panoply of new covenant mandates and examples that bring to fulfillment the glories of antecedent revelation and anticipate the consummation."⁵⁶

Giving a single definition for worship seems almost impossible because there are so many elements involved within the concept. True worship involves our entire lives because "to be human is to worship."⁵⁷ We may come to God with songs, prayer, financial offerings, and all the praise we can muster, but if we are far from God in our lives, none of it is worship. Worship is to give God reverential fear and awe both in spirit and truth by resting in the work of Jesus Christ with the obedience and the service of our entire lives in our love for God through the power of the Holy Spirit. God is seeking such people to worship Him.

At an earlier time in ministry, I believed that what churches needed the most was proper doctrine through the preaching of God's Word. Do not misunderstand, I still believe that to be true. However, I have come to realize that view is incomplete because the preaching of God's Word is just one element of our worship. If our churches are going to grow, we need a wholistic theology of worship in which we all engage with our whole being. We must seek God's Word and His will for our gatherings. Let us strengthen the things which we are doing well. Where we have gone astray, we must correct being careful not to overcorrect. If we truly want to worship God, let us align ourselves with what God has said about worship. May God heal the divisions that stylistic traditions have torn in our congregations so that we can come together as one for the glory of our God. After all, what is the chief end of man?⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Mark Ashton, R. Kent Hughes, Timothy J. Keller, D.A. Carson, [*Worship by the Book*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 26.

⁵⁷ Block, *For the Glory of God*, 1.

⁵⁸ *Westminster Catechism*, Question 1.