

Worship in the Church of Christ.

What is worship?

1 Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. 2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:1-2)

Worship in the church always has one meaning: to focus our thoughts on God so that we then venerate Him. The different strands of church tend towards placing more or less value on congregational singing or the Communion (taking bread and wine) or prayer and meditation but the purpose is the same – to elevate God in our minds through our actions of worship.

In recent decades there has been more participation by the congregation in worship services (church meetings, assemblies etc) and the different denominations of church can often be identified by the manner in which worship services proceed. From High Church to Happy Clappy, the church of Christ finds many ways to express the worship of God.

The Jewish Nation, the Israelites of the Old Testament, was defined by their worship at the Tabernacle. Originally the Tabernacle was a mobile arrangement of cordoned-off areas, tools for the butchery and burnt sacrifice of animals etc and a tent which housed the Ark of the Covenant (think *Raiders of the Lost Ark*).

And the Angel of God, who went before the camp of Israel, moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud went from before them and stood behind them. So it came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel. Thus it was a cloud and darkness *to the one*, and it gave light by night *to the other*, so that the one did not come near the other all that night. (Exodus 14:19-20)

The Jewish nation had left Egypt and was walking in the wilderness. The Egyptians certainly had no shortage of gods but this Jewish God was quite different and very, very present. The presence of God was close and could be seen. When Moses talked with God up a mountain, God could be heard.

Why worship?

I think that it's natural when, in the presence of big supernatural phenomena, you should be impressed and that you should want to express that feeling. It might even cause you to reflect on your own behaviours and to want to set yourself in a right relationship with such a God.

Now the LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation." So Moses made haste and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshiped. Then he said, "If now I have found grace in Your sight, O Lord, let my Lord, I pray, go among us, even though we are a stiff-necked people; and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us as Your inheritance."

Later, a temple would be built (and re-built) and that would become the heart of the Jewish nation and its worship and the priests of the nation would do the business of worship on behalf of the everyman.

Whatever our opinions are on animal sacrifice, that form of national worship has been gone for 2000 years and Christian worship certainly doesn't look like that. However the first quote (above) from Romans 12 encourages us to use that Tabernacle business as a metaphysical model for personal worship - we should be *living* sacrifices.

I think that some basic pre-requisites are needed if you're going to worship anything:

1. You have to believe in it – you need some form of evidence of its existence.
2. The object of your worship needs to be special in some way otherwise, why worship it? I don't worship my vacuum cleaner but I might worship a Ferrari.
3. You need to get something out of it otherwise it's not sustainable.

I'm not going to argue for the existence of God here. Those early Jewish people had actual phenomena to believe in, a pillar of smoke and a pillar of fire, the presence (or glory) of God; we do not have that. The bible indicates that the whole universe is an obvious evidence of God the Creator.

Many people believe in a force or spirit in the world without believing that it has a personality or any form of control of its own destiny and especially no desire (or capability) to interact with humans and yet, when we reflect on that, it makes less sense than an interactive, creative God who is pervasive. We know that any God vast enough to have created a universe must be outside of most of our understanding and yet we insist on proofs that we can understand with our senses.

So how can we know Him to believe in Him?

But 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. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.
(John 4:23-24)

We know God by our spirits. Our consciousness seems to be a delicate thing and yet nearly all humans now and throughout history have believed that they have a spirit, an essential 'being'. So if God is a spirit, I must know Him by my spirit and that is the way that I should worship Him.

So if we acknowledge that God exists and that it makes much more sense that He is sentient and pervasive then acknowledging His value is a simple issue.

Perhaps we don't recognize the phenomena of God in our lives because it's so fully integrated into our life experience and so it seems that most of us largely ignore God most of the time, like we ignore air or gravity. Even devout Christians would admit that our attentiveness to God is still a fraction of His pervasiveness in our whole experience of living.

So what do we get out of worshipping God? Many Christians will talk of their feeling when talking about their worship 'experience' and their 'feelings' and that is understandable however the method of worship is, like in the days of animal sacrifice, just an external way of making internal (spiritual) change.

And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.
(Colossians 3:14-17)

This act of worship re-aligns us with God. Christians would say that it puts us more closely in line with God's will and the more close we are to God's will the more 'right' we feel. We become in 'perfect harmony' and we actively have 'peace' in our lives; who wouldn't want that?

How to worship.

How do we worship? It's easiest to think about worship as like being in love. You go around telling anyone who'll listen how wonderful 'they' are. You list their attributes (as you see them) and, although you wouldn't normally talk like that, well, you know ... you're in love.

1 Ascribe to the LORD, you heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. 2 Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness. 3 The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD thunders over the mighty waters. 4 The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is majestic. (Psalm 29:1-4)

Our human expression of worship, our expression of our love for God and our desire to be more closely aligned with Him finds its outward nature in prayers,

poems, paintings, dance, signing and, of course, music, especially singing. In fact singing is such a strong and prevalent example of worship that, in the modern church, it is now synonymous *with* worship. "Let's worship" says the pastor and the band strikes up and the congregation sing.

And singing our worship is wonderful. Great lungfuls of air, the joy of singing with a crowd of like-minded people, the elevated language of hymns and psalms and modern worship music ... it's wonderful!

The shared, elevated and sometimes ecstatic experience of congregational singing makes us feel closer to each other and closer to our creator and rightly so; we are uniquely created to sing intelligibly and abstractly and so to turn that ability to the worship of God seems entirely right and proper.

... be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord (Ephesians 5:18-20)

Making melody with your heart to the Lord – could there be any finer purpose in life? The Holy Spirit resides in each Christian believer as a deposit (Ephesians 1:13-14), a guarantee that this mortal life will be superseded by an immortal life in the presence of God (and there'll be plenty of singing there (Rev 15:1-4)).

Draw close to God.

James 4:8 says that if we draw closer to God then He will draw nearer to us. That is very reassuring because, a lot of the time, we can feel that God is distant. To know that if we move closer to God through prayers and songs (which can be thankful or repentant or plaintive), if we acknowledge out aloud our love and admiration for God, our thankfulness and our joy then we will become closer to Him and we will become transformed in some way.

Music isn't redemptive, only Christ can save us, but singing can be a vehicle to move away from the obstructive things of life, to clear our minds and to move towards God – and that is worship.