

“The Object of Worship”
Dr. Jerry Nelson

Article summary:

Over the past few years there has been a great deal of ink used in describing and decrying the war over worship that has been raging in evangelical churches across America. I wish to sharpen the focus on the subject of worship. My hope is that by seeing what worship is and isn't, we may gain a new appreciation for what is supposed to be happening on Sunday morning and enter into that experience in ways that bring unity rather than division. *“Worship is the believer’s response of all he (the believer) is - in mind, emotions, will and body - to all that God is and says and does.”* (Wiersbe p27) That definition is fairly straightforward but to help us put worship most sharply in focus I want you to think about worship in these five ways:

- 1. Worship is about God; it is not about us.**
- 2. Worship is a relationship and lifestyle before it is a Sunday activity.**
- 3. Worship has both content and emotion.**
- 4. Public worship is personal but it is not private.**
- 5. Worship requires variety to give it the richness God deserves.**

I am tired of the worship wars. I am tired of trying to please people by selecting the music they will like and of balancing the demands for more spirited, lively, engaging, in-your-face music with the demands for more reflective, devotional, quietness-of-the-heart music. I want to meet God and I want to meet him with you. I want to know his presence - to be reminded of his greatness and grace. I want to be with him, to enjoy his closeness – to know the security of his love. I want to express to him my affection and admiration and exuberant adulation. And I want to do it with you.

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Over the past few years there has been a great deal of ink used in describing and decrying the war over worship that has been raging in evangelical churches across America. It would probably be excessive to call it a “war” except that the subject of worship has in fact caused some ecclesiastical casualties along the way. When relationships sour and some even break over the subject of worship – something is very wrong. To use the language of the book of Hebrews when people of any age (younger or older) “forsake assembling together” to worship because of worship, they have missed the point.

Have you ever left a worship service thinking or even saying: “I didn’t get a thing out of that.” “The music was terrible, I didn’t know the songs, it just didn’t do a thing for me”? You are not alone, apparently many people have had those thoughts.

I wish to sharpen the focus on the subject of worship. My hope is that by seeing what worship is and isn't, we may gain a new appreciation for what is supposed to be happening on Sunday morning and enter into that experience in ways that bring unity rather than division.

Let me begin by asking you a rhetorical question. What is the primary purpose for gathering a large group of us in one room on Sunday morning? I wish to give you five options. The following options are not necessarily mutually exclusive but only one is the primary purpose for worship?

1. To teach the Word? People need to know the Bible. Music, prayers and other activities ought to prepare us to hear the Word.
2. Conversion of the lost? With so many people needing to know Jesus, our music, testimonies, etc need to make them thirsty to know the Lord.
3. Encouragement of God's people? A lot of weary people need a spiritual lift on Sunday to help them make it through another week.
4. Celebration of the Christian life? Like the 4th of July for an American ("The Star Spangled Banner"), so Sunday for the believer is a day to celebrate being a Christian ("I'm So Glad I'm Part of the Family of God").
5. Gather with other Christians to express our love and allegiance to God?

Of the above, only one is actually our primary purpose. The other four may be ways we accomplish the primary purpose or they may be by-products of the primary purpose – but only one is actually our primary purpose. Which is it? To answer that, think with me about worship.

What is worship? Psalm 96:9 "Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness." What does the psalmist mean? Most of you know that our English word "worship" simply means "worth-ship". We worship what is worthy. The Lord is worthy. One Hebrew word translated "worship" is the word "to bow down, to do homage". One Greek word translated "worship" is a word that means "to kiss toward" – "to show reverence." Another Greek word means "to serve". Notice the words convey something about our hearts and our conduct – it is about both, attitude and action. Let me give you a simple definition of worship: "*Worship is our response to God for who he is and what he has done.*" (Anderson p8) Slightly expanding the same definition we have this: "*Worship is the believer's response of all he (the believer) is - in mind, emotions, will and body - to all that God is and says and does.*" (Wiersbe p27) That definition is fairly straightforward but to help us put worship most sharply in focus I want you to look at it more closely with me. And I want you to think about worship in these five ways:

1. Worship is about God; it is not about us.

It is not something done to us or for us. Instead, worship is something we, you and I, do. Worship has an object and it is not us. Mark Horst wrote, "*As soon as we come to worship looking for and expecting an experience, we have violated the most basic principle of (worship). We easily become religious aesthetes capable of judging the entertainment value of a church service while remaining unaware of the reality it can open us to. Unfortunately for us, when our worship becomes self-conscious rather than God-conscious, it points not to God's reality but (only to) our own.*" (Mark Horst as quoted in Anderson p76)

One of my friends recently said, *“There are few places where our self-indulgence is more obviously seen than in our attitudes and words about public worship.”* We want what we want when we want it in worship because the focus of our worship has become us rather than God. We think of worship mostly or solely in terms of how it impacts us rather than how it impacts God. And we are the losers when we do that. When we seek an experience we may get it but it will be empty and fleeting. Don Carson wrote, *“If you seek peace you will not find it; if you seek Christ, you will find peace. If you seek joy, you will not find it; if you seek Christ you will find joy. If you seek the experience of worship you will not find it; if you seek to worship the living God, you will experience” Him.*” (Carson p15) If we think of ourselves as the necessary beneficiaries of worship we won’t truly worship. If we think of God as the beneficiary of worship, we will also benefit. One of the major reasons people fight over worship today is that they have the wrong person (themselves) in view. Worship is not about us it is about God.

I want to help people come into the presence of God and allow them time to interact with Him. I want people to consciously, intentionally think about God and engage Him in singing, prayer, listening to His word, vicariously interacting with Him through the testimonies of others, etc. I don’t want to help organize services where the main staple seems to be the routine of a set liturgy, a rather thoughtless ritual where people seem to “do the religiously comfortable” thing week after week without personally engaging God. Neither do I want people to observe a worship service as they do a concert – reflecting not on God but on how the “service” makes them feel. Too many times I have heard people, following a concert by some well-known “Christian” artist, express what a great experience it was but when I listened to what made it “great” I didn’t hear anything about God. God wasn’t worshiped, the experience was. Music, especially, has the power to evoke emotions but too often those emotions are not directed toward God but toward ourselves – the music made us feel something such as happy, glad, sad, triumphant, guilty, etc. I too often feel that people judge a worship service as “good” or not, based on how the service made them feel. We get worship all wrong when we become the object rather than God. A man named Christiansen wrote this little piece that says it all too well:

*“To be spectators,
that’s what we like,
isn’t it?
No involvement,
no participation,
not too close,
just sit back and watch.
Be a critic.
If it isn’t professional enough,
or isn’t popular,
it’s the performers!
I won’t come back.
I want my money’s worth –
at church.”* (from Christiansen Don’t waste your time in worship)

But true worship is about God not us.

2. The second way I want you to think about worship is this: Worship is a relationship and lifestyle before it is a Sunday activity.

When the devil asked Jesus to worship him by saying that he would give Jesus the kingdoms of the world if Jesus would bow down and worship him, what did the devil mean? Was this an invitation to change styles of music from pipe organ to guitar? No, it was a question of allegiance – whom will you serve. That's where worship begins. When God calls us to worship him, he is not calling us just to say certain words, in certain ways, in a certain place. It is not worship just because Christian words are used on Sunday morning in a church building. One of Jesus harshest criticisms of the Pharisees, the most outwardly religious people of his day, was this: "These people honor me with their lips but their hearts are far from me." (Matthew 15:8)

Worship is a way of life begun in repentance and faith in Christ – conversion – and lived out in obedience to Him. Any words of worship spoken outside of that context are hollow and even blasphemous. To expect non-Christians to worship is fruitless. To expect Christians who are living in self-centeredness to worship is also fruitless. Those who aren't Christians and those who are self-centered will always approach a public church service with the same mind-set with which they approach a concert or a movie – they will judge its value based on how they, the listeners, feel or think. But true worship requires a heart that has been changed by God and a heart that is hungry for God. Worship, including Sunday corporate worship, flows out of the life that is lived Monday through Saturday. Albert Day wrote, *Worship, "is not merely a flash of God-ward desire, but the passionate fervor of a whole self that pants to know God and his will above all other knowing. It is not a hurried visit to the window of a religious drive-in restaurant for a moral sandwich or a cup of spiritual stimulants, but an unhurried communion with God, who is never in a hurry. It is not merely the expression of a transient mood of dependence or loneliness, but the consistent cry of one who seeks to perceive and express the ultimate beauty. It is the antithesis of dillydally devotions, drowsy murmurs from a pillow where sleep lies in wait, the lazy lisping of familiar phrases that should shake one to the core of one's being. It is the find-or-die outreach of the soul to God."* (in Existence under God)

Worship on Sunday won't happen unless there is first of all a relationship of worship – a life of loyalty to Christ – during the week. Paul Faulkner wrote, *"Trying to worship publicly if you are not a private worshiper is sort of like the dry heaves – trying to bring something up you don't have in you."* (in Anderson In search of wonder p15-16) Worship is a relationship and a lifestyle before it is a Sunday response.

3. Worship has both content and emotion.

It is from both the head and the heart. It is both informed and it is expressed. Worship is not only correct thoughts about God but correct thoughts expressed to God. Some of the heat generated in the worship wars is over the issues of substance versus style. Some will argue that the old hymns are stuffy and

lifeless. Others will argue that the new songs are trite and shallow. Some want content while others want energy. Almost every Psalm in the Old Testament combines passion with content. The Psalmist uses emotive words of excitement or reverence to express specific things about the Lord. He wrote, "My heart yearns for you" (emotion) because you are shelter and you are strength (content). Knowledge without emotion is sterile. And emotion without knowledge is equally sterile. *"A young man falls in love with a young woman. He begins to whistle a tune as he walks down the sidewalk. Then he sings. He believes that he has never seen a day more beautiful than today the sky, the trees the people. Now he is skipping, almost dancing down the sidewalk. "Young man, do you know what you are doing?" someone asks. "What good will all this singing, dancing and joy do you?" What a silly, impertinent question to ask of someone who is in love. Of course he doesn't know what he is doing, and that's just the fun of it... If it is only thought it isn't good worship... Worship is a way of being in love, of glorifying and enjoying the One of whom we can say, "We love, because he first loved us."* (Willimon p63) On the other hand imagine the young man saying to his girlfriend, "I love you, I love you, I love you." And then she asks him what it is he loves about her. He responds, "I don't know, I just love you!" She would have every right to say, "Go away – that is nonsense." Some people fear emotionalism, others fear deadness. Bishop Moule of England was supposed to have said he finds it easier to tone down a fanatic than to resurrect a corpse. Do you know why we sing so much in church? Because music expresses a range of emotions better than almost any other activity. Or as William Willimon said it, *"Prose is usually too confining for the joyful business" of worship.* (With Glad and Generous Hearts p60) We are able to take our thoughts (content) and express them to God from our hearts (emotion). Expressed emotions of wild enthusiasm are every bit as valid as emotions of quiet adoration. And conversely, expressed emotions of speechless quiet awe are every bit as valid as dancing before the Lord. Worship has content and emotion. To further sharpen the focus on worship I want you to think of worship in still another way:

4. **Public worship is personal but it is not private.**

Some people want to be left alone in worship as if corporate worship is little more than several hundred people in the same room at the same time, each doing his or her own thing with God. Too many think of public worship as simply many people, in the same place, engaged in private worship.

The Denver Post carried an article telling that the Denver Archdiocese is debating whether to continue the practice of asking parishioners to hold hands during the recitation of the Lord's Prayer (as they call it, the "our Father"). Michelle White of Lakewood commented that she dreads holding hands. Her comment was, "My religion is very private." (Denver Post Wednesday August 21, 1999) Many people think and speak of their religion as a private matter. It is personal to be sure but not private. We are important to each other in worship. We each bring our personal thoughts and emotions into worship but it is the merging of those thoughts and emotions into our expressions of worship that enrich the worship of our God. Many years ago our family had a marvelously fun time together visiting the streets and sites of Rome. We wondered through the

Coliseum. We happened onto an outdoor concert at the Campadoglio in the evening and a carnival in the plaza outside the Parthenon. Seeing all of that alone would have minimized it greatly. But wandering through the streets constantly asking, “Do you see that?” “Look, there!” and “Can you believe that?” made the experience richer by far. And later when we recalled the experience we would constantly say, “Do you remember...” That is what it is like in collective worship – it is the shared experience of being in the presence of God and remembering and responding to his grace. It’s not the same without you. My worship of God is enriched by yours. You sing with reverence about his holiness and I am helped to remember and express my awe at his holiness. You sing with spirit about the joy of forgiveness and I am helped to remember and express my joy for his forgiveness. The American flag passes in a parade and all the older men doff their caps and as the national anthem is played, tears stream down their cheeks – the younger people all around slowly remove their caps and stand in awe recognizing that something important is taking place. When you kneel in the presence of God, when you come to complete silence, when you bow your head and refuse distractions in such a holy moment, you teach me about the awesomeness of such a privilege – to be in the presence of God. Your presence here, singing and speaking, reassures me that what I hold to be true and valuable is truly true and valuable. Your presence and testimony confirm my faith and enable my worship. Worship is personal but it is not private – what you do greatly enhances or diminishes my worship. I am troubled with how many people I see each week who appear to be little more than spectators. Maybe they are worshipping privately but I seriously doubt it. Your worship is personal but it is not private – “Come, let **US** worship the Lord...”

5. Worship requires variety to give it the richness God deserves.

No one of us is capable of expressing the worship that is due our God. Not one of us has had all the experiences that reflect his goodness. Not any one age group or any other group of us can adequately remember and adequately express with sufficient creativity the worship our God deserves. But we forget that too easily and opposition to the way others express their worship is not new to the church. One group saw fit to express their disapproval of the new music entering the church in these words: *“There are several reasons for opposing it: It’s too new. It’s too worldly, even blasphemous. The new Christian music is not as pleasant as the more established style and because there are so many new songs you can’t learn them all. It puts too much emphasis on instrumental music rather than on godly lyrics. This new music creates disturbances, making people act disorderly. The preceding generation got along without out.”* These comments were made in 1723 and there were made in criticism of Isaac Watts who wrote Joy to the World and I sing the Mighty Power of God. There were made because Watts was encouraging congregations to sing hymns in the church. (from Hocking The Joy of Worship –23-24) These are the people who have forgotten that the infinity of our God deserves an ever-changing, ever-creative expression of worship. No one music style, not several music styles, can possibly express all the glory of our God. But it is not only the conservatives who are limiting worship by their

opposition to the more contemporary. It is also those who want more contemporary music who limit the worship of God by their refusal of the traditional. C.S. Lewis wrote: *“I very much disliked (the church) hymns, which I considered to be fifth-rate poems set to sixth-rate music. But as I went on I saw the great merit of it.... I realized that the hymns (which were just sixth-rate music) were, nevertheless, being sung with devotion and benefit by an old saint in elastic-side boots in the opposite pew, and then you realize that you aren't fit to clean those boots. It gets you out of your solitary conceit.”*

Is God more pleased with hymns than choruses, more pleased with Michael W. Smith than Charles Wesley? When I look at Psalm 98 or Psalm 150 I see worship with a variety as great as: “harp, singing, trumpets, ram’s horns, rivers clapping, mountains singing, tambourines, dancing, strings and flutes and crashing cymbals. The issue isn’t what kind of music do we like, but what kind of worship does God like. And God likes worship from the heart – and worship from the heart will be as creative and varied as we are able because the bigness of our God can only be reflected in that way.

I am tired of the worship wars. I am tired of trying to please people by selecting the music they will like, of making certain the heating, cooling, sound and chairs are comfortable, of balancing the demands for more spirited, lively, engaging, in-your-face music with the demands for more reflective, devotional, quietness-of-the-heart music. I want to meet God and I want to meet him with you. I want to know his presence - to be reminded of his greatness and grace. I want to be with him, to enjoy his closeness – to know the security of his love. I want to express to him my affection and admiration and exuberant adulation. And I want to do it with you.

What would we do if Jesus chose to physically appear here this morning? I would stop talking – you and I would not be needed to speak his word. I think we would also instinctively kneel – only the truly infirm would not go to their knees. We would ask his forgiveness. And when he pulled us to our feet, we would delight in hearing him tell how much he loves us and that it was his love for us that took him to the cross. We would ask him to remind us about the future and he would. Then we would be unable to contain ourselves as we told how much we respect and love him. And the longer we spent in his presence the more likely we would tell stories about his provision for us in the past. Like the family gathered at Grandma’s and Grandpa’s 50th wedding anniversary - Everyone could hardly wait to tell why they appreciate him. “I remember when...” The stories of the past would be told and retold with the subtle but important differences that was each person’s experience with Jesus. Somebody would remember a song that expressed our thoughts and love so well and we would gladly sing it. The style, instruments, and tempo would make no difference because these are personal expressions of love and thanks, which we are using as our own. Little kids would be allowed to sing or read even though the words or melodies weren’t all that sophisticated or even that well done. No one would be judging the music for its quality but for its intent. And all of us would be saying, “Yes, that’s what I feel too, Jesus.” And it would happen because: Worship is about God, it is not about us. Worship is a relationship and a lifestyle before it is

a Sunday experience. Worship has both content and emotion. Worship is personal but it is not private – we need each other. Worship is as varied as the expanse and creativity of our God.