



Let Me Entertain You!

Reclaiming Worship in an Entertainment-Driven Society

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Striving for Success

Everyone strives after success. Individuals. Businesses. Countries. And, yes, churches. We want to succeed. We want to do the right thing, and we want to do it well.

Unfortunately, “success” is a slippery term, and can often bring significant problems into the church. One of the ways that happens is when we define success (at least in part) as having “good” worship. The difficulty with this definition of success is that people can have very different opinions as to what constitutes “good” worship ... some are scriptural, and some are not!

So let's start with what worship is all about. How would you define worship?

Worship is the act of reverence to someone or something of superlative worth. It is “worth-ship” as some have said. The Hebrew word for worship means “bowing down.” One Greek word for worship directly translates as “to serve, to give homage.” Another means “to make obeisance, to do reverence” and conveys respect and submission.

Paul Plew writes an excellent explanation of John 4:24, a key verse on worship. John 4:24 reads, “God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” Plew comments:

“Worshiping in spirit refers to worship being for the obedient, those who have been washed in the blood of the Lamb. Our worship must be from the heart and empowered by God’s Spirit.

“Worshiping in truth denotes worshiping with sincerity. Not only must we be children of the King, we must also be living spiritually. In other words, we must be authentic and genuine in our obedience to Christ. The phrase ‘in spirit and in truth’ relates to the heart of an individual and the outward display of his/her life. When both are in order, true worship is unleashed.”

Consider also the definition of worship provided by Robert Webber, “Worship is a verb. It is not something done to us, or for us, but by us.”

How did your definition of worship compare with the definitions provided here? What were the areas of similarity? Of difference?

Fun is #1

Problems with desiring “successful” worship often arise because we take our definition of “good” worship from our entertainment-driven society – rather than from the Word of God. The entertainment philosophy is both subtle and pervasive. Because we encounter it everywhere, it is easy to become numb to it, and to no longer recognize it for what it is.

Let’s talk for a moment about entertainment. What are some characteristics of entertainment?

Review your answers – in themselves, are any of these things bad things?

In its place, and under the guidelines set by Scripture, entertainment is perfectly appropriate. It is part of God’s image in us that we can laugh, rejoice, relax, have fun, enjoy excitement, etc. But are those the types of words that should define successful worship?

No. Of course not. However, many times, in many churches, people fall into that snare. Let’s look at three of the top traps Satan uses to weaken or destroy our worship.

Trap #1: Worship is about me.

Trap #1 is simply stated: “Worship is about me.” Now, you wouldn’t necessarily hear people actually tell you that outright, but you can hear it in what they say:

- ◆ “I really got a lot out of worship today.”
- ◆ “I want a church that engages me in worship.”
- ◆ “That was a great worship experience.”

Let’s look at each of those statements. Where is the focus in each statement? In each statement, whose responsibility is it to ensure “good” worship?

How could you turn those three statements around so that the focus is on God, and on what we bring to the worship experience?

Who is worship about? Yes – worship is about God. Worship is something we do for him. It’s something we give to him. It is about focusing all our attention on him. Paul Plew defines corporate worship as “God’s people gathered together to give homage to God because of who he is.” All the focus is on God. Worship is not about us. That gives us the truth we need to avoid the trap:

Truth #1: Worship is about God.

Trap #2: I have to feel good to worship well.

Trap #2 is stated this way: “I have to feel good to worship well.” People may not say that outright, but the following statements accurately reflect many people’s attitudes toward corporate worship services:

- ◆ “My emotions have to be engaged.”
- ◆ “I have to feel good when I go.”
- ◆ “I want to be excited – I want to experience a spiritual high.”

Now, this is a very sticky issue – like so many issues in the Christian walk. Remember that the most effective lie is 99% truth and 1% falsehood. So let’s examine this carefully.

Is emotion a valid part of the Christian life? Why or why not?

Certainly, emotion is a valid part of our lives. It is part of the image of God. The Bible talks about God feeling delight, anger, grief, and many other emotions. So do we. That is part of what it means to be human.

Next question: is emotion a valid part of Christian worship? Why or why not?

Again, yes. It is. Worship should engage our entire person: body, mind, emotions, spirit. We are to “love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.” If that’s how we are to love him, and part of the demonstration of our love is our worship, then we should worship in the same way: with our whole being.

John Piper writes of the importance of heart and mind when he says, “Genuine worship is based on the mind’s perception of historical and biblical truth. It has solid intellectual content. It is not

the frenzied emotional product of manipulation or gimmickry. But there is no genuine worship where *feelings* for God are not quickened. There is not true worship where the heart is far from God. But the heart's approach to God happens in the quickening of our feelings for God. Therefore, where feelings are dead, so is worship.”

Therefore, feelings are valid and important in worship. Where does the problem come in? The biggest place it comes in is an *incorrect attitude* we can bring to corporate worship times. We often come to worship wanting to *feel good*, or we judge our worship experience based upon whether we *felt good*. We believe that if we don't feel good during worship, it has not been a success.

Is it true that we can judge the success of our worship experience based on whether or not we feel good afterwards?

When might you not feel good, but still be worshipping “in spirit and in truth”?

The Psalms are full of lousy emotions ... and true worship. Often in the same few verses. So we have to conclude that while emotion is an important part of worship because we worship with our whole person, *good emotions are not essential to true worship, nor are they necessarily a product of it.*

It's important to look at the opposite situation, too: can you feel good during a worship time and not actually worship at all? Under what circumstances might that happen?

Certainly. You get caught up in the music, you like it, it's fun, it's exciting, it's soft and soothing, whatever the case might be – but your mind isn't engaged, and you aren't really worshipping “in spirit and in truth.” The music played on your emotions and nothing more – whether that was the fault of the music because it was sentimental rather than doctrinal, or whether that was the fault of you, because you just weren't interested in focusing on God.

So here's a very important question: how can you judge whether your emotions have been a valid part of your worship?

The answer lies in the fruit of those emotions. *If your emotions (whether glad, sad, joyful, grieving, etc.) during worship have drawn you closer in your relationship to God, then they have been a valid part of your worship.*

Let's look at some examples of emotions and their fruits in the Psalms. Please pay careful attention to the fact that many of these emotions are not what would popularly be called “positive” emotions. They don't necessarily make you “feel good.”

“The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise” (Psalm 51:17).

Emotion: _____

Fruit: _____

“As a hart longs for the flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Psalm 42:1, 2).

Emotion: _____

Fruit: _____

“Let all the earth fear the Lord, let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him” (Psalm 33:8).

Emotion: _____

Fruit: _____

“Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him, and bless his name!” (Psalm 100:4).

Emotion: _____

Fruit: _____

“Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart” (Psalm 32:11).

Emotion: _____

Fruit: _____

You can see how all these emotions are God-focused ... not self-focused. That is why they bring forth good fruit and help us draw closer to God. And that brings us to the truth we need to combat this trap:

Truth #2: I have to desire God to worship well.

Trap #3: Worship involves the heart, not the mind.

Trap #3 is stated this way: “Worship involves the heart, not the mind.”

This is a very insidious trap. It comes into our churches under disguises like these:

- ◆ “You don’t have to be a theologian to worship God.”
- ◆ “Just love God – that’s all you need to do ... just love God.”
- ◆ “We want to experience God personally, not sing dry and dusty hymns.”

Now, I want to make something extremely clear right from the start. This is not a discussion about musical style. Style is completely irrelevant to true worship.

The problem comes in when we talk about content ... not style. In our culture, we have marginalized the importance of head-knowledge in favor of heart-experience. But just as we said when discussing Trap #2 that emotions are a valid part of worship, the flip-side is also true ... you can’t check your brain at the door when you worship, either.

Scripture is very clear on this point: Colossians 3:16 reads “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.” We see therefore that music has a mind-aspect: the word of Christ. That is, Scriptural references and Scriptural principles should be present in your “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.”

This makes a lot of sense, especially when we really come to grips with the importance of music in our lives – in all our lives. We learn things by putting them to music – starting with our ABCs. Music reflects the up and coming culture ... check out who’s hot with today’s teens to get a glimpse of where we’re going as a country. (Frightening, isn’t it?) Plato said, “Let me make the songs of a nation and I care not who makes the laws.” Why did he say that? Because music is more powerful even than government when it comes to influencing people’s minds and hearts.

Therefore, we should be very careful in our churches about what we’re singing. We need to look at the words, because the words we put to music are going to have a key influence on people’s minds and hearts.

That being said, where do you think the dangers to the church lie?

Exactly – in either singing words that are wrong, so you get heretics; or in singing words that are shallow, so you get spiritual babies who never grow up.

We’re going to focus on the latter right now – the tendency of some churches to rely exclusively on choruses or songs that are light on doctrine.

Calvin Johansson puts it this way, “Exclusive use of choruses tends to produce a people who have the same depth of spirituality as the music they sing. The result is a faith which lacks depth, is simplistic, pleasure-oriented, emotionalistic, intellectually weak, undisciplined, and prone to the changeability of feelings. The end result of nothing but chorus singing is immaturity.”

Have you ever been part of a church, or known of a church, where the worship tended to be exclusively composed of choruses which were light on doctrine? What was the spiritual maturity level of the church participants, on the whole?

Ed Vasicek contributes the following, “Christian worship involves sincerity, honesty, understanding, and spiritual depth. It is truth-loving and does not remain ignorant, for it is impossible to worship God and yet choose to remain in ignorance, to not be a lover of truth.”

Listen to that again: “It is impossible to worship God and yet choose to remain in ignorance.” Think of being in love ... what do lovers want to do? They want to know everything about their beloved. Would you say that a couple had a mature love for one another if they didn’t know much about each other?

Of course not. Love and knowledge go hand in hand ... to have a mature love for someone, you have to have a deep knowledge of that person. And it’s the same way between us and God – to

really grow in our love for him ... and therefore in our worship of him ... we have to get to know him more and more, deeper and deeper.

It's important to become aware of what is being taught in the songs we are singing. Below are verses from two contemporary songs (contemporary songs were selected to emphasize that style is not at issue here). Both the songs are doctrinally sound: there's no scriptural errors here to be concerned about. What we want to examine is the difference in *content* between these songs.

Take a few minutes and jot down next to the verses how many scriptural doctrines or principles are referenced in each of the songs:

<p><u>In Christ Alone – verse 2</u></p> <p>In Christ alone! – who took on flesh, Fullness of God in helpless babe! This gift of love and righteousness, Scorned by the ones He came to save: Till on that cross as Jesus died, The wrath of God was satisfied – For every sin on Him was laid; Here in the death of Christ I live.</p>	<p><u>Doctrinal/Scriptural points:</u></p>
<p><u>I Give You My Heart</u></p> <p>This is my desire, to honor You: Lord, with all my heart I worship You. All I have within me, I give you praise: All that I adore is in You.</p> <p>Lord, I give you my heart, I give you my soul; I live for you alone. Every breath that I take, every moment I'm awake, Lord, have your way in me.</p>	<p><u>Doctrinal/Scriptural points:</u></p>

Here is a summary of what is contained in the two verses. Compare what you wrote down to the answers below:

<p><u>In Christ Alone – verse 2</u></p> <p>In Christ alone! – who took on flesh, Fullness of God in helpless babe! This gift of love and righteousness, Scorned by the ones He came to save: Till on that cross as Jesus died, The wrath of God was satisfied – For every sin on Him was laid; Here in the death of Christ I live.</p>	<p><u>Doctrinal/Scriptural points:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Incarnation of Christ ◆ Dual nature of Christ ◆ Salvation is a free gift of God ◆ Salvation satisfies both God’s love and his righteousness (justice) ◆ Rejection of Jesus by the world ◆ Sacrificial death of Jesus that satisfied God’s wrath against sin ◆ Substitutionary death of Christ ◆ Our position in Christ
<p><u>I Give You My Heart</u></p> <p>This is my desire, to honor You: Lord, with all my heart I worship You. All I have within me, I give you praise: All that I adore is in You.</p> <p>Lord, I give you my heart, I give you my soul; I live for you alone. Every breath that I take, every moment I’m awake, Lord, have your way in me.</p>	<p><u>Doctrinal/Scriptural points:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ The appropriate human response to God: honor and worship ◆ The need for worship to include the whole person ◆ The need to live for God with everything we are

You can see that there is a significant difference in the *amount* of content between the two songs. But the difference goes deeper than that. “I Give You My Heart,” while accurately describing our appropriate response to God, doesn’t actually tell us anything *about* God, or *why* it is appropriate for us to worship and honor him and live for him. In contrast, “In Christ Alone” actually has four verses – only one is shown here. The other three are just as packed with doctrine. Those four verses tell us in great detail *why* we should worship, honor, and live for God.

The point is this: Both songs urge us to worship – but “I Give You My Heart” does so by appealing to the heart directly as an inspirational song, bypassing the head; while “In Christ Alone” appeals to the heart by telling us *why* we should be inspired to love God – that is, it appeals to the heart by going through the head.

Now, both of these songs are thoroughly appropriate for corporate worship. That is not the issue. Consider Gary Gilley's comment: “Do the modern praise choruses have a place in our worship services? I personally believe that they do, but that place could be likened to the place of dessert in our diet. Almost everyone loves dessert, but dessert must not be the main feature of our daily diet or we will suffer grave consequences. To me, praise choruses are best used in response to more substantial communications of truth, rather than the primary means of that communication.”

Look at it this way – if you sang “In Christ Alone,” and then followed it up with “I Give You My Heart,” you have a great package – “In Christ Alone” teaches all that God has done for us, and by doing so causes us to feel gratitude and love and devotion. “I Give You My Heart” then helps us verbalize those very feelings of gratitude and love and devotion. They work beautifully together.

That is what we need to understand: we need a *balance* in our worship – a balance that includes serious doctrine and scripture, as well as inspirational music focusing on our response to God. The more we learn about God, the more we will be inspired to love him. Music is a key way of building our love *for* God as it builds our knowledge *of* God. And that is how we come to our final truth, to counter this third trap:

Truth #3: Worship involves both the heart and the mind.

Review the three traps and three truths discussed in this lesson: Do you need to make any changes in how you define worship? In how you approach worship?

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Worship (definitions): _____

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⊗ **Trap #2: I have to _____ to worship well.**

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⊗ **Trap #3: Worship involves the heart, _____ the mind.**

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