

Study Guide #12: Public Christian Worship

Introduction

You might be surprised that we have a Study Guide on public Christian worship in this series because many churches don't treat public worship as a fundamental Bible teaching. That lack of attention to this important topic has sadly led to the deterioration of public worship in many churches. We need to revitalize our public worship services in harmony with Biblical principles of true worship. We examine the definition of public worship, its purpose and importance, and its principles and elements in this Study Guide.

Question #1: What is the origin of a weekly day for public Christian worship?

Answer: A weekly day for public worship originated in ancient Israel, and it was called “**a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation**” (Leviticus 23:3, NKJV). The Hebrew word for “**convocation**” means “called out to an assembly or meeting.” Since it's called a *holy* convocation, the meeting was devoted to God. In the New Testament Jesus also made it His habit to attend public worship every week (Luke 4:16), even when people wanted to kill Him (Luke 4:28-30). So public worship must have been very important to Jesus. The apostle Paul addressed the need for orderliness in the church assemblies (I Corinthians 13:19, 23, 26, 28, 33-35, 40), which means the early Church was engaging in public worship.

Question #2: What is worship anyway?

Answer: Several words are used in the Bible in association with the word for “worship,” including the Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament) words meaning “reverence,” “awe,” and “fear.” Combining them together gives us the following definition of worship: Worship is the giving of extravagant honor, respect, and devotion to God with a sense of awe (humility) that one is in the presence of Almighty God.



Holy God, Holy Worship

Question #3: Why does God need to be worshiped?

Answer: *First*, God doesn't actually *need* our worship. By definition, God is self-sufficient and has need of nothing from anyone. If He needed anything, it would mean He would be lacking something and would in turn mean that He wasn't God. He *desires* worship, but He doesn't actually *need* it. Therefore, we deduce that worship is directed toward God, but it's *not* for *His* benefit.

Second, God doesn't desire worship for the selfish reason of seeking to boost His own ego, for God is the Personification of Love itself (I John 4:8, 16). If He wanted it for His own sake, when He doesn't need it,

then He would be the greatest egomaniac in the universe. Therefore, worship is directed to God, but must be for our *own* benefit. Thus, God *desires* our worship because He knows it will benefit *us*.

Question #4: How does the worship of the true God benefit us?

Answer: Worship benefits the worshiper in at least 4 different ways:

- It reminds us that God is the Source of all that we have, of every blessing, including our very lives (Deuteronomy 8:18; Psalm 50:10-12; Acts 17:28; Philippians 4:19; James 1:17).
- It brings us joy, faith, and peace because worshipers are in the very presence (albeit spiritually speaking) of God, who is the Source of joy, faith, and peace.



Coals of Fire

- It keeps the spiritual fires burning inside us for God. Like a burning coal that's plucked out of the group of burning coals and quickly dies out, the Christian will burn out if he consistently avoids public worship. It's an illustration of the principle that "no man is an island."
- It ennobles our character to become more like God's character, for the Scriptures tell us that by beholding we become changed (II Corinthians 3:18).

Question #5: What are the *principles* of true worship?

Answer: In some ways, the entire Biblical story of sin concerns false versus true worship. Remember that sin started in heaven by an angel in heaven who desired worship for *himself* (see Explorer II, Study Guide #2). From the definition of worship itself (see Question #2), we can deduce at least 5 principles of true worship. Anything that deviates from these principles would therefore be false worship:

First, true worship is *God-centered*, *not believer-centered*. It's about *God*, not about *us*! This means we should avoid anything in worship that is entertaining in nature. Unfortunately, much of modern Christian worship is tainted with elements of entertainment. Many attend church in order to get something out of it that's pleasing to their eyes and ears; decades of television and other forms of media have made us accustomed to wanting to be entertained. These entertainment elements include (1) making the platform into a veritable stage where performances are given; (2) using secular and often harmful music with Christian lyrics; (3) the frequent use of applause to show appreciation for "performances"; and (4) the raising of one's hands with fingertips pointing toward heaven, which is designed to create a tingling sensation—a feature common at rock concerts.

Second, true worship involves the heart of the worshipers, accompanied by obedience and mercy, not merely a habitual going through the motions. When the heart is not involved, God hates our worship, according to Genesis 4:1-8 with Hebrews 11:4; I Samuel 15:22; Psalm 40:6-8 with Hebrews 10:5-9; Psalm 51:15-19; Isaiah 1:11-17; Jeremiah 6:19-20; 7:22-24; Amos 4:4-5; 5:21-24; Micah 6:6-8; John 4:23-24.

Third, because true worship occurs in the spiritual presence of God, there should be an atmosphere of reverence or awe. This isn't congruent with an atmosphere of entertainment *or* mere ritualistic routine.

Fourth, true worship is also engaged in with great joy, not with a somber tone (Psalm 16:11; 51:11-12; 95:2; 107:22; Jeremiah 33:11). Of course, there's a difference between joy and boisterous exuberance.

Finally, true worship will avoid the use of pagan practices (Deuteronomy 12:2-4, 29-31) and maintain a clear distinction between that which is profane (i.e., secular—Ezekiel 22:26; 44:23) and that which is holy. This would apply to using secular music with Christian lyrics and avoiding the use of any images or objects in the worship of God. God is a spirit (John 4:24), so any images are inappropriate to use in the representation of God, as is the kissing and bowing to objects associated with God (such as a cross or a Bible). Such actions are acts of worship; calling them “adoration” rather than “worship” is simply a semantics word game.

Question #6: What are the major *elements* in public Christian worship?

Answer: There are 4 major elements consistent with the principles of worship that should be included in public Christian worship: (a) the returning of tithe and giving of offerings; (b) singing (and Christian music in general); (c) praying; and (d) preaching.

Regarding the element of tithing/offerings, the “**sacrifice of thanksgiving**” referred to a peace offering made at the tabernacle (Leviticus 7:12), and the Psalmist told people to “**offer**” (as in offering) thanksgiving and pay one's vows (Psalm 50:13-14). And Malachi 3:10 instructed God's people to return their tithes to the “**storehouse**,” which was at the Temple.

Psalm 95:2 calls on God's people to “**come before His presence with thanksgiving...with psalms**” (NKJV). This refers to the act of singing. The offering of the “**sacrifice of praise to God is the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name**” (Jeremiah 33:11, NKJV; cf. Hebrews 13:15). That could include singing as well as giving public testimonies in a religious gathering.



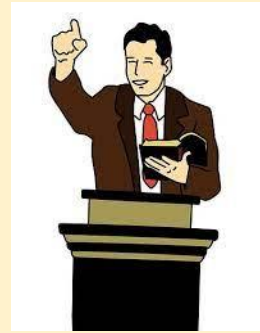
Congregational Singing

Prayer is compared to “**the evening sacrifice**” in Psalm 141:2 (NKJV). Remember that public worship is about God, not us and our needs. Thus, public prayer in a worship service should be about praise and thanksgiving rather than about the specific needs of the sick or other problems. These latter prayers are fine for our personal communion with God or with an actual prayer meeting. Therefore, if any public worship prayers mention any specific needs, they should be done in a way that *thanks* God in advance for meeting those needs. That keeps the prayer God-centered rather than believer-centered.

Question #7: What about preaching? Why is that so important in public worship?

Answer: Old Testament prophets preached, but not usually in the context of a public worship format. The first regular preaching in Judaism probably originated with the earliest synagogues, which most scholars

believe originated during the Babylonian Captivity, after Solomon's Temple had been destroyed in 586 B.C. Preaching seems to have been a vital part of Christian worship from the very beginning of Christianity.



Preaching

It's important for 2 fundamental reasons. *First*, no part of worship is true worship unless the believers know God and recognize His majesty of character that leads them to celebrate His presence and to obey Him. Thus, spiritual education is a part of preaching. *Second*, preaching is also an exhortation to believers to encourage them in the faith, to obey God's instructions, and to remain in a close relationship with Him. Sinful beings need persistent reminders and encouragement to do these things continually. That's the reason that Christians are strongly urged to **“not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching”** (Hebrews 10:25; cf. vv. 23-24). *Finally*, Romans 10:14-17 specifically declares that preaching the Word of God brings faith. [NOTE: Most Protestant churches

contain the 4 elements of worship. However, in recent decades some churches have minimized preaching in favor of rituals *or* dramatic “productions.”]

Question #8: What are the elements of music that make it good or bad?

Answer: Music is a very powerful tool to change people's moods and to impact their mental and physical health. Ancient scholars recognized this, including Plato, Aristotle, and Confucius. Hollywood also knows this, which is the reason they add and change the musical background in movies to fit the scene. For example, they never play marching band music as a background to a love scene. With this in mind, how can any Christian say that *any* kind of music is acceptable in the worship of Almighty God? Music is so powerful because it bypasses the frontal lobe, which is the part of the brain where moral decision-making is made. Therefore, the selection of the right kind of music is of vital importance for true worship. Just putting Christian lyrics with any kind of music doesn't make it Christian music.

There are 3 elements within music: (1) melody; (2) harmony; and (3) rhythm (or beat). All 3 elements are necessary to make a coherent piece of music. Human beings respond to rhythm (beat) on a physical and emotional level when the rhythm is dominant. All pagan worship emphasizes the beat. But Christian music should emphasize melody and harmony instead. [NOTE: Heavy repetitious beats eventually can place people in a partial trance-like state in which the 5 senses are numb. Syncopation occurs when a beat is on the offbeat. Syncopation is not bad in itself, but constant repetitious syncopation heightens the effect of heavy repetitious beats. It creates friction or confusion between the left and right sides of the brain and tends to loosen the hips so that they begin to sway in a sensual way. It also raises blood pressure and increases the heart rate. All this means that music is not *merely* a matter of personal taste, although there's room for different tastes within the context of good (i.e., healthy) music.]

Question #9: How would you define the kind of good music that's appropriate for Christian worship?

Answer: Good music that's appropriate for Christian worship should meet 5 criteria:

- It's joyous, not either overly somber *or* frivolous.
- It evokes an attitude of reverence or awe.
- It's not easily identifiable with secular music.
- It reflects the scientific standards of good music, which means (a) the melody is clearly heard; (b) there is harmony, not dissonance (when 2 sounds clash), (c) the rhythm or beat is subordinate to the melody and harmony, and (d) there's no monotonous repetition of sound patterns (no mantras), which would have the potential to put people into a trance-like state.
- Its lyrics should reflect accurate Biblical truth, be God-centered rather than believer-centered, and avoid monotonous repetition of phrases (no mantras), which would have the potential to put people into a trance-like state.

Question #10: Is it appropriate to use musical instruments in public worship?

Answer: Some churches teach that because the New Testament doesn't reflect the use of musical instruments in public worship that all instruments should be excluded from such worship. [NOTE: This is particularly true of the Church of Christ.] However, certain Levites in the Old Testament were organized as musicians (with several musical instruments mentioned) for formal public worship (I Chronicles 25:1-5). It's also significant that the largest book in the entire Bible is the book of Psalms, which is a hymnbook. Jewish historians also tell us that music was a major part of Jewish worship from the beginning. We can see no reason that moving from the Old Testament to the New Testament requires the abandonment of musical instruments in worship. Moreover, the New Testament *does* show one worship scene in heaven in Revelation 4 and 5, where harps are employed along with singing (5:8; cf. Revelation 14:2; 15:2). If a stringed instrument like a harp is acceptable in the worship of God in heaven, then at the very least stringed instruments ought to be acceptable in Christian worship here on earth. After all, it's not the instruments that are evil, but *how* they are played that *can* be evil.



Playing the Violin