

“God is Spirit and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and truth.” - John 4:24 (ESV)

“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 act of worship.” – Romans 12:1 (ESV)

Last fall, at the Gathering, I had the opportunity to talk about a “theology of worship.” I’d like to share some of that here. Let’s focus on two questions from that evening.

1) What is worship?

The “theological” answer is something like this: Worship is the outcome of a rightly ordered relationship of creature to Creator, man to God. Worship is a kind of justice. It is giving God what He is due. God is Holy, which means that He is wholly other, the perfection of every power, and that there is nothing like Him. Moses was told that no one could see God’s face and live. Isaiah, upon seeing God on His throne, believed that He was “undone” because of his sin.

God’s holiness (and our sinfulness) means that worship of Him is made possible by, and must be centered around, sacrifice. To enter into communion with God requires atonement. The Old Testament ritual of sacrifice foreshadowed Christ’s perfect sacrifice; which fulfilled God’s justice. More remarkably, it made it possible for Him to invite us into His eternal life.

Worship is also a response to His Glory; what He has done, what He is doing, and what He will do. He has created all things. He has entered into creation and made it possible to know Him through His death and resurrection. God the Holy Spirit currently dwells within His people in an intimate relationship. He will come again to judge the living and the dead, and His kingdom will have no end! In those days, He will dwell with His people physically, and He will call them His own.

God is also perfectly righteous, which means that He must also be perfect in knowledge and power. Because His knowledge of His creation is perfect, His commands are not arbitrary or accidental. His commands are objectively true and He is due our obedience. His commands are blueprints for our becoming the kind of people He meant us to be. We are meant to love Him with all of our hearts, and we are meant to love our neighbors as ourselves.

“On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matt. 22:35-40). He is due our obedience, and these are the activities in which we find our greatest happiness.

Worship, then, is not (only) about what we do on Sunday mornings, it is about our entire lives, which Paul tells us in Romans 12:1 above.

2) How should we worship?

We should worship in community. Private worship is right and good and healthy. If worship is our offering our bodies as a living sacrifice, then it would be impossible to not do this when we are alone, or in any of the places that we live outside of “the Church.” Private worship, however, is incomplete and finds its fulfillment in the Sunday worship of our family. We are formed through unifying love and spiritual gifts of the Body of Christ.

We should worship in the ways that He made us to worship. Christ tells the woman at the well that those who worship God must do so in Spirit and in Truth. To worship in Spirit takes some unpacking. The Samaritan woman told Jesus that her people and the Jews disagreed about where to worship. Jesus corrected this by teaching that God is immaterial and present everywhere. He isn’t confined to mountains or temples, etc. Nor is He confined to the rituals that He revealed to His people in the Old Testament. Love for God does not originate in ritual, but the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Though external ritual serves true worship, it cannot be identified with true worship. This was a both a corrective to the woman at the well, but also a promise! Our hearts will be regenerated, which makes it possible to worship Him in Spirit. However, when we take into account what Paul tells us in Romans 12:1, we understand the external is not empty and useless. The external is useful inasmuch as it connects with the internal. Lifting our hands is not worship. Our hearts exalting Him in principle is worship, and sometimes lifting our hands can aid that action in our hearts, or it can be a response.

To worship Him in truth means that we should do so with right understanding. We should worship Him as He is and not as we desire Him to be. The historical church has a principle, *lex orandi lex credendi*, or “the law of prayer is the law of belief.” What we pray corporately should track with what is true, but also, what we pray *should be believed*. The Sunday worship experience (liturgy) is both reflection and teacher. You might wonder why anyone would pray what they don’t believe.

There are two ways we can “not believe” something. We can believe the opposite of some proposition, as in “I believe it’s not going to rain today” when the weather person tells us it will. But we can also not yet believe something, as in “I don’t know yet that it’s going to rain today because I haven’t watched the news. Proper worship corrects both ways of “not believing.” If we are in error, we are given the opportunity to submit to the truth and be corrected by it. If we are naïve, we are taught what we did not know.

And because truth is not just about propositions, but about what we are (which is shaped by what we do), the most purpose of “right understanding” is “right being.” If we are malformed when we enter into true worship, we will become rightly formed toward Him and His character.

Put very simply, community worship reminds us of and invites us to celebrate who He is, which reminds us our longing for Him and our sin, which motivates us to repent,

which allows us to participate in communion with Him, and which motivates us to go out and share this with others.

We haven't been able to go much beyond first principles in this article. Given more room, we would ask how should those principles be applied in our context? Mostly these are answers provided by Fr. Peter in dialogue with the vestry. Musicians have a role, but that would also be in dialogue with Fr. Peter, and would be focused primarily on what role music plays in liturgy. I'll say something about that here.

Liturgical worship music should reflect those ideas that we have identified as His due; His exaltation, our reverence, our humility, our adoration, our repentance, and our thanksgiving. Our songs should be consecrated both in their lyrical content and their aesthetic form, for His glory. The historical church made a strong distinction between the sacred and profane in music, limiting what may be played in worship to a certain kind of music, and not just to a certain kind of lyrical content.

Perhaps they have been too legalistic in their application of the principle. It certainly will sound foreign to modern ears trained by the phrase, "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" to say that there are pieces of music that are objectively more beautiful than others. Further, there is the practical obstacle of disagreement in identifying which songs are "more" beautiful than others. Common sense should reign here.

True lyrical content contained in relatively beautiful music that results in our loving God and neighbor is a good rule to follow. That said, the historical church has provided many clear examples of the numinous and transcendent in their Chant, their Litanies, and their hymns. I'll leave some examples here.

A [Gregorian](#) Chant. An [Icelandic Hymn](#). The [Aramaic Our Father](#). The [Miserere Dei](#).

We will hopefully aim toward God's beauty in the expression of our music, and at the same time affirm His transcendence by recognizing that our music can never match His beauty. It is a shadow and a reaching. And since we are all reaching toward Him from different places, our music must draw each of us from where we are.

Contextualizing our music for our cultural sensibilities is not a bad thing. But it is not the goal; it is a beginning, or a middle. Our music should meet us where we are, yet draw us out of the mundane, so that our affections can be moved toward an active love for Him

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