

The Path to Worship

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Introduction.

1. In your own words, what is worship?
2. What do you now consider the thing you do best in worship? Why?
3. What's your worship weak point? Why?
4. How do you think you could become a better worshipper?

Exploring the Path to Worship.

Scriptural Form. Most people in the church are already aware that there is a right way and a wrong way to worship. Often, this attitude causes us to focus on the form worship takes. This material is not going to be particularly form-focused, but the proper form still needs to be mentioned.

According to Ephesians 5:19, our worship needs to take the form of "songs, hymns, and spiritual songs," three different types of religious song employed by the first-century church. Because God commands us to sing, that command excludes all other kinds of activity that might become part of our musical worship. No music other than the song of the saints can be pleasing to God.

Furthermore, the way we participate in worship is also important to God. In Colossians 3:16, Paul informs us that our song worship must involve "teaching and admonishing one another." Just as the command to sing excludes worship modes ranging from organ music to a Christian rock band, so this command to teach excludes an audience-choir arrangement. All of us must be taught in worship. All of us must be admonished. However, we ourselves must teach and admonish too. This is why our singing must be congregational. No so-called "worshipper" who chooses to be silent can hope for God's approval.

The Path to Worship. In our focus on these formal requirements for song worship, we do well. The Bible makes abundantly clear that God delights only in those who adhere to the teachings of His word. However, this focus on form has caused us to lose sight of other, equally important things

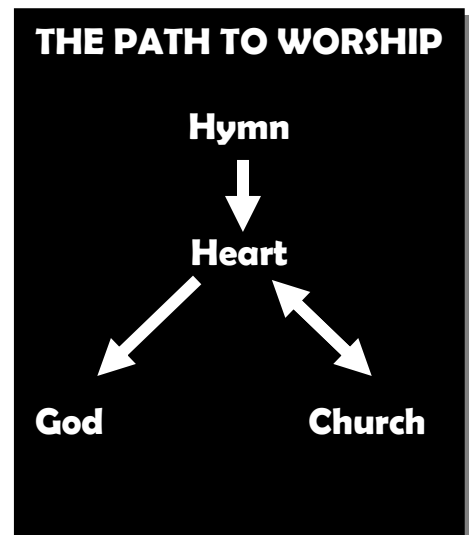
that our worship must be. It is possible for us to be singing together as a congregation, yet be utterly displeasing to God. Our outward show of godliness may conceal a godless apathy of mind and heart.

This danger is very real, and it is all the more dangerous because it is so subtle. I can tell within ten seconds of the opening hymn whether a church is engaged in congregational song or not, but I may never know that the brother who has sung beside me for ten years has failed to worship in the eyes of God. Unless I examine myself, I may never even realize that I also have ceased to worship. For this reason, we must consider the path of our own worship, so that we can learn from our own lives whether we are doing what God requires.

This path to worship begins with a **HYMN**, which can be any of the three types listed in Ephesians 5:19. Without a pre-written hymn, it is impossible for a congregation to worship together. Hymns provide the spiritual idea and impetus for congregational worship.

This hymn must stimulate the **HEART** of each congregational worshipper. In order to understand this, we first have to understand the way "heart" is used in the Bible, which is much broader than the way we use it today. The Bible uses "heart" to describe much more than the seat of the emotions. In Biblical language, "heart" can also represent concepts ranging from desire to intellect to wisdom to will.

In order to worship with our hearts, we must engage all of these different areas of our being. For example, we must be intellectually involved in worship. In 1 Corinthians 14:15, Paul notes the importance of understanding in worship even when he is singing a hymn that has been given to him by the Holy Spirit. Unless we have some spiritual idea in mind, something that directs our intellect to God, it is impossible for us to worship.



However, this does not mean that our worship should be purely intellectual in nature. We can understand and consider every word in a hymn, but unless that understanding provokes joy, love, and thanksgiving within us, it has been a useless exercise. Numerous Scriptures throughout the Old and New Testaments describe the emotion that must be a part of worship, of which Psalm 84:2, Luke 1:46-47, and Colossians 3:16 are just a few. We cannot directly hear emotion in worship (although we can guess at its presence or absence), but God is keenly aware of its existence.

Indeed, **GOD** is one of the next steps in this progression. As Romans 15:6 implies, glorifying Him is one of the primary objects of our worship. God loves to hear us praise Him, both in a proper way and in a proper spirit. If we forget that our hymns are directed to the Almighty, we have forgotten one of the main reasons why we sing.

However, just as we sing to God, so too we sing to the **CHURCH**. This is the way in which we fulfill our Colossians 3:16 responsibility to teach and admonish one another in song. We need to be aware of our brethren as we worship, and sing in a way that edifies them as well as it glorifies God.

We must also remember, though, that the Colossians 3:16 process is not a one-way street. Just as we seek to edify them, we must learn to consider what they are saying, once again with the **HEART**. Thus, each of us teaches and admonishes the other. This process sets up a feedback loop. As we consider the song of our brethren, it moves us emotionally and causes us to take our praise to a higher level. As they listen to our heightened praise, they also worship more intensely. Ultimately, the reinforcement we receive from the congregation is a powerful tool we can use to make our worship acceptable to God.

Thus, the path to worship can be summarized in this way: The spiritual thought of a hymn provokes our hearts, which then sing praises that are heard both by God and by the church. In turn, the church sings to us, which stirs our hearts again. This is the pattern for praise that is pleasing to God.

The Sacrifice of Praise. However, it is not enough to understand or even to half-heartedly practice this pattern. The Bible tells us that God is a jealous God (Exodus 20:5), and He requires worship from us that demonstrates His pre-eminent place in our lives. The consequences of failure in our worship are recorded in the book of Malachi.

In the time of Malachi, the Jews had repented of their idolatry and were at least nominally servants of God. However, their service proclaimed their disinterest in God rather than their devotion to Him. Instead of sacrificing to Him the very best of their flocks, they presented Him with the sick and the lame, the things that they themselves no longer wanted (Malachi 1:7-8).

God was far from pleased with their imperfect worship. In Malachi 1:9, He cries out, "Oh that there were one among you who would shut the gates, that you might not uselessly kindle fire on My altar!" God's message here is plain: If you're not interested in offering Me your very best, don't bother. Quit wasting My time and yours. Just go home and leave Me alone.

Just as the Levites ministered to God under the Mosaic Law, Christians today are the priesthood of the new covenant (1 Peter 2:5). Our sacrifices to God consist not of bulls and goats, but of the praises we offer to Him. However, God's standard for sacrifice remains the same. He demands nothing less from us than the very best that we have to give. Apathetic worship is pointless worship.

Throughout this series of lessons, let us keep in mind the nature of the God we serve. We do not approach a God whom we dare take lightly. As Hebrews 12:29 points out, He is a consuming fire. If we don't come to Him with the reverence that He deserves, then He may well consume us. Worship is not something at which we dare fail. Let us consider it carefully, then, that we may succeed.

HEBREWS 12:28-29

“. . . let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire.”

Understanding the Path to Worship.

1. What can attention to the forms of worship cause us to overlook?
2. With what must the process of song worship begin?
3. What does Ephesians 5:19 tell us about the heart's role in worship?
4. Why are both God and the church hearers of our worship?
5. What effect should the worship of the church have on us?
6. What is the problem Malachi describes with the worship of his time?
7. As we worship, what do we need to remember about God?

Applying the Path to Worship.

1. How can we avoid losing sight of the purpose of worship?
2. How can understanding the process of worship help us to worship better?
3. To what extent is the ability to worship well an inborn ability, and to what extent is it a learned skill? Explain.
4. Which part of the worship process do you have the most difficulty with? How can you change that?

Lord We Come Before Thee Now (#419)

Lord, we come before Thee now
At Thy feet we humbly bow:
O do not our suit disdain; Shall we
seek Thee Lord in vain?
Shall we seek Thee Lord in vain?

Lord, on Thee our souls depend:
In compassion now descend;
Fill our hearts with Thy rich grace,
Tune our lips to sing Thy praise
Tune our lips to sing Thy praise.

In Thine own appointed way, Now
we seek Thee, here we stay;
Lord, we know not how to go,
Till a blessing Thou bestow
Till a blessing Thou bestow

Send some message from Thy Word
That may joy and peace afford;
Let Thy Spirit now impart
Full salvation to each heart.

Comfort those who weep and mourn,
Let the time of joy return;
Those that are cast down lift up,
Make them strong in faith and hope.

Grant that all may seek and find
Thee a God supremely kind
Heal the sick, the captive free
Let us all rejoice in Thee
Let us all rejoice in Thee

UNDERSTANDING "LORD WE COME BEFORE THEE NOW"

1. What is this song about?
2. Look at the first verse – what is the author saying?
3. What does he mean by "O do not our suite disdain"?
4. How might we seek the Lord in vain? Can we do it in song?
5. Do our souls really depend on the Lord? How?
6. How might we "tune our lips" to sing His praise?
7. How might we "know how to go"?
8. How might God "grant that all might seek and find" Him a supremely kind God?