# 11

# Worship

## *God Transforms*

Thirteen points every follower of Jesus should know. A study by Pastor Andy Cisneros.

Guthrie Grove
CHURCH OF GOD OF THE ABRAHAMIC FAITH

13 POINTS · 11

# Worship: *God Transforms*

True worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.

## John 4:23

In ancient cultures social life revolved around sanctuaries, temples, and stadiums. There, various gods and goddesses were worshiped as people gave their time, self, money, and treasures as sacrifices to the devotion of their god. Even the buildings themselves were built as acts of worship.

Today, not much has changed. It has been said this way:

- The temple of Ra, the sun god, has now been replaced with warm weather resorts and tanning salons where worshipers pay homage to their bronzing god.
- The temples of Ptah, the god of craftsmen, are today hardware stores and Craftsman tools.
- The Temples at Nemea, Olympia, Delphi, and Isthmia included stadiums, which have now been replaced with soccer fields, baseball parks, football stadiums, and basketball arenas where pagan fans dress up—like they always have—as birds and animals to cheer for their gods as they score points.
- The healing cults of Asklepios, with sanctuaries at Epidaurous and Corinth, have now been replaced with holistic health spas.
- The Oracular gods often had sanctuaries near fresh water sources that we refer to as beaches, campsites, golf courses, and fishing holes.
- The temple of Apollo, prophetic pronouncements about the future were given; these have now been superseded by speculating newscasts, talk radio and blogs as a sort of digital divination by which the future can be predicted.
- The temple of Thoth was where the god of writing and knowledge was worshiped, and he is now housed in local libraries and universities.
- Monthu, the god of battle, was worshiped at Armant but is now more commonly found at war and veteran monuments along with appearances in violent video games and cage fights.
- Min, an early fertility deity, was worshiped at Coptos but today is present at medical fertility clinics.
- Hathor, the goddess of motherhood, was worshiped at Byblos in ancient days but has relocated to birthing centers.

- The temple of Neith in the Delta was connected to medical education, which is presently found in medical schools and research centers.
- The temple of Aphrodite in Corinth where sex was part of worship has now gone global with strip clubs and porn.
- The small shrines that filled ancient homes and required homage and financial sacrifice have long since been upgraded with home entertainment systems and high-speed Internet connections.
- Paul once said that our god is our stomach, and that god is worshiped by the gluttonous and obese at all-you-can-eat buffets.

When our culture is considered through the lens of worship and idolatry, primitive ancient paganism seems far less primitive or ancient. This is because everyone everywhere is continually worshiping, and idolatry is, sadly, seen more easily when we examine other cultures rather than our own. This is because we often have too narrow an understanding of worship and do not see that idolatry empowers our sin.

## Words Used to Define Worship

Glory

Glory means weightiness, importance, preeminence, and priority, or our greatest treasure, deepest longing, and fountain of hope. People can and do hold various people and things in a position of glory and then worship them by making sacrifices. Because we have limited resources (time, energy, money), we must allocate them to what we consider most important or glorious to us. Thus, we make sacrifices for our functional god. Whatever we hold in the position of highest glory is by definition our god. Practically, worship is making sacrifices for what we are living to glorify. Because we were made for the express purpose of worshiping God, every person is a worshiper. The only question is what or who we worship.

Sacrifice

The biblical word for worship is also sometimes translated “sacrifice.” This helpful insight indicates that we can uncover what we truly live to glorify by examining what exactly we are making the greatest sacrifices for. In short, we give our time, energy, body, money, focus, devotion, and passion to that which we glorify most, and we make sacrifices to worship that person or thing.

False Worship

The first two commandments (Exodus 20:1–6) state that there is only one God and that that God alone is to be worshiped. If I only have the One True God as my God and I only worship that God, then I will not end up committing idolatry by worshiping such things as my job and not taking a Sabbath, worshiping my anger and becoming violent, worshiping sex and committing adultery, worshiping things and stealing them, or worshiping success and becoming covetous of what other people have.

Idolatry

The opposite of worship is idolatry (which is worshiping something or someone other than the One True God of the Bible, or worshiping God in a way that is contrary to His Word). On this point, Christian philosopher Peter Kreeft has said, “The opposite of Christianity is not atheism, but idolatry.” This theme of worship versus idolatry is in some ways the theme of the entire Old Testament. Romans articulates the pattern of false worship as failing to glorify God, which leads to an over-inflated and arrogant view of self that ends in worshiping created things rather than the Creator God alone.

Perfect Worship

Not only do we worship through Jesus, we must also worship like Jesus. Jesus is the person who has worshiped God with the most glory of anyone who has ever lived. He is the perfect worshiper. Jesus lived a life of perfect glory to His Father and SO we can look at everything in his life, from the ordinary to the extraordinary, as born out of a life of ceaseless worship that glorified God.

Unceasing Worship

Jesus’ life destroys any notion that worship is a sacred thing we do at a special time and special place. All of life is to be lived as ceaseless worship; cutting our grass and cleaning our dishes are as sacred and God-glorifying as raising our hands in church. Jesus Himself modeled this: He spent roughly 90 percent of His earthly life doing chores as a boy and working a carpentry job as a man. Paul sums up the life of unceasing worship best in 1 Corinthians 10:31, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

## What is Worship?

“The LORD takes pleasure in His people” Psalms 149:4. God has given you worth so that you would worship Him.

In the New Testament there are a couple of words used for worship throughout the New Testament. One of them is the word proskuneo, and it literally means to kiss toward, and that was because it was somewhat common in days of kings and monarchs for people to come down and kiss the feet or kiss the ring or kiss the hand as an act of homage, an act of submissive honor and adoration. It can mean to kiss the hand, it can mean to bow down, it came to mean to prostrate oneself, which is what subjects did beneath the feet of kings who were elevated on thrones. And that is the word that is used here. Where you literally bow down and prostrate yourself before one who is superior to you.

There is another word in the New Testament is used and translated worship in English, it is the word latreuo and it means to render service, to render homage, to render honor, and it's used elsewhere in the New Testament.

Our goal is to bring pleasure to God and not to ourselves.

Worship is utterly involved with giving honor to God. And that's why we come together and it has to rise out of the heart. The psalmist said in Psalm 45:1, "My heart is overflowing with a good matter." And he used the Hebrew term that means to bubble up like boiling water going over the edge of the pan. My heart is just bubbling, boiling over.

True worship will affect and change you.

Worship, rightly understood, begins with God, and the understanding that we are made in His image. God is continuously pouring into us with communication, love, friendship, and joy. If God does that, it follows that humans created in God's image would also be unceasing in their worship as continuously outpouring. We were created in that condition. This means that we all worship. We were created as beings that pour out and into something. What we pour our lives into is what we worship.

Worship is not merely an aspect of our being but the essence of our being as God's image bearers. As a result, all of life is ceaseless worship. This means that while worship does include corporate church meetings, singing songs, and forms, it is not limited by these things, defined solely as these things, or expressed only in these things, because worship never stops. Rather, we are continually giving ourselves away or pouring ourselves out for a person, cause, experience, achievement, or status. Sadly, as the fall reveals, much of how we pour ourselves out and what we pour ourselves into in worship is someone or something other than God.

We are not created to worship, but rather we are created worshiping. Everyone worships all the time. Atheists, agnostics, Christians, and everyone in between are unceasing worshipers. Everyone, everywhere, all the time, is always worshiping. While the object and method of worship vary, the act of worship does not.

One of the more insightful sections of Scripture on worship is Hebrews 13:15–17, which says:

*"Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you."*

In this section we see that worship includes (1) praise; (2) proclamation, (confess his name) (3) service, which means doing good as a demonstration of the gospel to the world; (4) participation, which means sharing with others as a demonstration of grace to the world);

(5) sacrifice, the giving of time, effort and love; and (6) submission, (respecting godly authority placed over us).

We can examine our lives to see if our worship is honoring or dishonoring to God:

1. Who or what do you praise most passionately and frequently?

2. How commonly and clearly do you confess the Kingdom of God in the words you speak, type, and sing?

3. Are you one who serves others with gladness in response to God's so faithfully serving you? Or are you someone who prefers to be served rather than to serve? Do you serve when it is inconvenient or unnoticed, or when you are unmotivated? (Do you want to serve Jesus now? UPs mission statement).

4. Are you an active participant in the life of your church and community? Do you give your time to share God's love in tangible ways with others?

5. For whom or what do you sacrifice your time, health, emotion, money, and energy? What do these acts of worship reveal about what you have chosen to worship in your life?

6. Are you submissive to godly authority or do you tend to ignore or rebel against godly authority (e.g., parent, teacher, pastor, or boss)?

## What is Idolatry?

The opposite of worship is idolatry. Every human being—at every moment of their life, today and into eternity—is unceasingly doing either: worshiping God or idolatry. On this point N. T. Wright says:

Christians are not defined by skin color, by gender, by geographical location, or even, shockingly, by their good behavior. Nor are they defined by the particular type of religious feelings they may have. They are defined in terms of the god they worship. That's why we say the Creed at the heart of our regular liturgies: we are defined as the people who believe in this god. All other definitions of the church are open to distortion. We need theology, we need doctrine, because if we don't have it something else will come in to take its place. And any other defining marks of the church will move us in the direction of idolatry.

Worship is a biblically faithful understanding of God combined with a biblically faithful response to him. Conversely, idolatry is an unbiblical, unfaithful understanding of God, and/or an unbiblical, unfaithful response to him.

Underlying idolatry is the lie. In John 8:44 Jesus describes Satan as "the father of lies." The lie in its various forms says that you are god, you can become a god, you are a part of god, you are worthy of worship as a god, you can be the source of your life's identity and meaning, you can transform yourself, and you can transform the world as a sort of hero/savior. The answer, therefore, is not to look outward to God for identity, meaning, insight, and salvation. Rather, the answer is to look inward to self for identity, meaning, insight, and personal freedom. The answer, the lie says, is to be found in self rather than in a creator God who is separate from me and rules over me. I don't know who said this but helpful in this inward process

are such things as drugs, trances, meditation, self-esteem, self-actualization, self-improvement, and self-help, all of which allow a person to go inward for peace, harmony, and enlightenment, it is said, by enabling him or her to experience oneness with the divine consciousness.

This explains why ancient non-Christian spiritual practices are becoming increasingly popular. For example, Wicca and other ancient pagan religious practices, even demonic spirituality, are being taught and networked online and are incorporated into the teachings of spiritual gurus such as Deepak Chopra and Oprah and the pagan spiritual leaders she endorses, such as Marianne Williamson and Eckhart Tolle. Sadly, some of this is even finding its way into "Christian" worship practices under the guise of ancient-future worship. Just because a practice is ancient does not mean it is Christian. The Bible warns us against adopting pagan worship practices and commands us to test the spirits. So we examine the source and symbolism of proposed practices. One pagan example is circular prayer labyrinths, where the symbolism is often one walking inward on oneself rather than outward in repentance toward God. This worship works against the gospel, which commands us to turn to God for our hope and help.

Echoing Jesus, Paul examines worship and idolatry in Romans 1:18–32 by contrasting the lie of idolatry with the truth of worship. His statement on all this is Romans 1:25, which speaks of idolaters *who "exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen."*

The truth is that the Creator and creation are separate and that creation is subject to the Creator.

The lie is the idolatry that there is no distinction between Creator and creation, and/or a denial that there is a Creator. The popular word for this notion is monism. Monism is the eradication of boundaries and differences to bring opposites together as one. The materialistic form of Monism is atheism. Spiritual Monism is also often called New Age, New Spirituality, or Integrative Spirituality. According to spiritual Monism, the universe is a living organism with a spiritual force present within everything. Everything is interconnected by the life force or the world soul. This life force manifests as spiritual beings (Christians realize these are demons) that manipulate the course of world events. These spirits can be influenced to serve people by using the ancient magical arts. Humans possess divine power unlimited by any deity. Consciousness can be altered through the practice of rite and ritual. Magic is the manipulation of objects, substances, spirit entities, and minds, including humans and demons, by word (ritual, incantations, curses, spells, etc.) and objects (charms, amulets, crystals,herbs,potions,candles, etc.).

As a worldview, Monism works against Christianity because it seeks to place everything on equal ground. Meaning there is no hierarchy. If there is a God you are equal to Him and everything else.

1. There is no distinction between God the creator and creation. This results in pantheism and panentheism, which even some young "Christian" pastors are advocating.

2. There is no distinction between God and mankind. This results in a spirituality that does not look out to God for salvation, but looks in to self for enlightenment.

3. There is no distinction between good and evil. This results in the claim that all we have are perspectives, opinions, and culturally embedded "values"; there are no timeless moral truths that apply to all peoples, times, and places because all that is left is situational ethics. There is no distinction between angels and demons because all spirits and spiritualities are considered only good.

4. There is no distinction between mankind and animals. This results in radical animal rights activism, and, in some cities, a disdain for children but a love for animals.

5. There is no distinction between mankind and creation. This results in radical environmentalism that moves beyond stewarding creation to deifying creation as our "Mother Earth" and an opposition to cultivating creation for human life and culture.

6. There is no distinction between men and women; gender is reduced to asexual androgyny. This results in lesbianism, transgender, homosexuality, cross-dressing, and the like, which Romans 1 says is the logical conclusion of idolatry.

7. There is no distinction between religions. The result is a vague pagan spirituality that believes the answers to all the world's problems are religious and spiritual in nature and can only be overcome by all religions worshiping together as one. Subsequently, a Christian who makes distinctions (such as between God and man, Jesus and Satan, angels and demons, man and animals, holiness and sin, the Bible and other texts, male and female, heterosexuality and homosexuality, truth and error, good and evil) is considered a fundamental threat to the world of peace, love, and oneness.

While idolatry is manifested externally, it originates internally. This is first revealed in Ezekiel 14:1–8 as God rebukes the elders of Israel who "have taken their idols into their hearts." Indeed, before people see an idol with their eyes, hold it with their hands, or speak of it with their lips, they have taken it into their heart. What this means is that they have violated the first two of the Ten Commandments, choosing something as a functional god they long for in their heart and then worshiping it by their words and deeds.

To have a god is to have something in which the heart entirely trusts. It is all idolatry; for it consists not merely in erecting an image and worshiping it, but rather in the heart. . . . Ask and examine your heart, and you will find whether it holds to God or not. If you have a heart that can expect of Him what is good, especially in want and trouble, and that, moreover, fights against and forsakes everything that is not God, then you have the only true God. If, on the contrary, in adversity your heart flees from Him, then you have an idol, another god.

For those wanting to avoid idolatry, the following insights might be helpful. Be careful of making a good thing, such as marriage, sex, children, health, success, or financial stability, an ultimate thing, or what Jesus called our "treasure." Avoid participating in any religious community where the clear truth-claims of Scripture are ignored while mystical practices are favored simply for their spiritual experience. Be careful

of any church or ministry wherein acts of mercy and environmental stewardship are not done thru a theology in the Word and wind up being little more than the worship of created people and things. And be careful not to worship a good thing as a god. Even the blessings of God can be worshiped as a God.

## How Does Idolatry Harm?

We were created to worship God and make culture in which God is worshiped in all of life. When idolatry is committed, all of life is involved and affected, damaging individuals and societies.

First, idolatry harms the individuals who participate in it. Commenting on philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's 1849 book The Sickness Unto Death, Tim Keller says:

- Sin is the despairing refusal to find your deepest identity in your relationship and service to God. Sin is seeking to become oneself, to get an identity apart from him. . . . Most people think of sin primarily as "breaking divine rules," but Kierkegaard knows that the very first of the Ten Commandments is to "have no other gods before me." So, according to the Bible, the primary way to define sin is not just the doing of bad things, but the making of good things into ultimate things. It is seeking to establish a sense of self by making something else more central to your significance, purpose, and happiness than your relationship to God."

Whatever we base our identity and value on becomes "deified"; this object of worship then determines what we hold in glory and live for. If that object is anything other than God, we are idolaters worshiping created things. For most people, their "tell" happens when they introduce themselves: they first say their name and then say something to the effect of "I am a_____." How they fill in the blank (e.g., education, vocation, number of children, neighborhood they live in) often reveals what they are idolizing and are building their life on.

The problem is that our marriage, children, appearance, wealth, success, career, religious performance, political party, cause, loving relationship, possession, hobby, pleasure, status, and power crumble under the weight of being god to us. Regarding the instability of an identity based upon anything other than Jesus Christ's saving work to claim us as his own, Keller says:

- If anything threatens your identity you will not just be anxious but paralyzed with fear. If you lose your identity through the failings of someone else you will not just be resentful, but locked into bitterness. If you lose it through your own failings, you will hate or despise yourself as a failure as long as you live. Only if your identity is built on God and his love, says Kierkegaard, can you have a self that can venture anything, face anything. . . . An identity not based on God also leads inevitably to deep forms of addiction. When we turn good things into ultimate things, we are, as it were, spiritually addicted. If we take our meaning in life from our family, our work, a cause, or some achievement other than God, they enslave us. We have to have them.

As God's image bearers we will have a true, lasting, deep, satisfying, and sufficiently rooted identity only in God's love.

Keller says:

- Remember this—if you don't live for Jesus you will live for something else. If you live for career and you don't do well it may punish you all of your life, and you will feel like a failure. If you live for your children and they don't turn out all right you could be absolutely in torment because you feel worthless as a person.

If Jesus is your center and Lord and you fail him, he will forgive you. Your career can't die for your sins. You might say, "If I were a Christian I'd be going around pursued by guilt all the time!" But we all are being pursued by guilt because we must have an identity and there must be some standard to live up to by which we get that identity.

Whatever you base your life on—you have to live up to that. Jesus is the one Lord you can live for who died for you—one who breathed his last for you. Does that sound oppressive?

This explains why those whose idol is beauty become frantic to maintain their appearance, even if it should compel them toward eating disorders, abuse of cosmetic surgery, and panic as they age. This helps to explain why those who are the richest and most famous among us struggle with substance abuse, depression, and even suicidal thoughts.

Second, idolatry harms the societies in which it is practiced to the degree it is practiced. Just because a culture turns away from God, it still turns toward something to replace God:

Western society, in turning away from Christian faith, has turned to other things. This process is commonly called secularization.

One of the great evils of idolatry is that if we idolize, we must also demonize.

Tim Keller reminds us that if we idolize our race, we must demonize other races. If we idolize our gender, we must demonize the other gender. If we idolize our nation, we must demonize other nations. If we idolize our political party, we must demonize other political parties. If we idolize our socioeconomic class, we must demonize other classes. If we idolize our family, we must demonize other families. If we idolize our theological system, we must demonize other theological systems. If we idolize our church, we must demonize other churches. This explains the great opposition that plague every society. If something other than God's loving grace is the source of our identity and value, we must defend our idol by treating everyone and everything who may call our idol into question as an enemy to be demonized so that we can feel superior to other people and safe with our idol.

Some people are aware of this fact and idolize tolerance and diversity, as if they were more righteous because of their open-mindedness. However, even those who idolize tolerance and diversity must demonize those they deem to be intolerant of certain diversities. Everyone who idolizes also demonizes

and in so doing is a hypocrite contributing to the tearing of a social fabric of love, peace, and kindness they say they are serving.

## What is Required in Corporate Church Worship?

We have established that God alone is to be worshiped. We will now examine how the church is supposed to be a countercultural kingdom community that worships God alone and helps people to see and smash their idols. God's people gather for corporate worship. Mutual understanding and unity requires company. Continuous outpouring demands fellowship. The corporate assembly is where love and mutual community come together. If there were no such things as church buildings and regularly scheduled services, Christians would, out of necessity, seek each other out for the sheer pleasure of finding Christ in each other, hearing different stories about his work in them, enjoying the ordinary and the exceptional, and perhaps only then gathering around what we call our rituals.

The mutual indwelling that God's people enjoy in corporate worship is essential to our growth personally, joy collectively, and witness culturally. God's people gather because, in the heart of their regenerated nature, the Holy Spirit gives them deep desires to worship God with His people. We want to see God's people, we want to hear of God's work in their lives, we want to know of ways we can lovingly serve them, and we want to be part of something bigger than ourselves that reaches beyond the details of life and connects us all together despite our differences in age, race, gender, and income to seek and celebrate evidences of God's grace.

Regarding how God is to be worshiped, God must be worshiped as He wishes, not as we wish. The Bible is clear that God is to be worshiped in ways and forms that He calls acceptable. This explains why God judges those who seek to worship Him with either sinful forms externally or sinful hearts internally. Some churches care more about what is in people's hearts than about what they do in their lives, whereas others are more concerned about doing things the "right" way and care little about the motivations behind those actions. When it comes to worship, which is all of life, the God of the Bible cares about both what we do and why we do it. We first see this, for example, in Genesis 4 where Cain and Abel bring their worship offerings to God and while what is in their hands is acceptable, Cain's offering is rejected because what is in his heart is unacceptable to God—he was jealous of his brother (1 John 3:12).

A biblically informed Christian definition of worship includes both adoration and action. John Frame says:

In Scripture, there are two groups of Hebrew and Greek terms that are translated "worship." The first group refers to "labor" or "service." . . . The second group of terms means literally "bowing" or "bending the knee," hence "paying homage, honoring the worth of someone else." The English term worship, from worth, has the same connotation.

From the first group of terms we may conclude that worship is active. It is something we do, a verb. . . . From the second group of terms, we learn that worship is honoring someone superior to ourselves.

Our worship also includes what we do as Christians when we scatter for action (1 Cor.10:31) and gather. D. A. Carson has said, "We cannot imagine that the church gathers for worship on Sunday morning if by this we mean that we then engage in something that we have not been engaging in the rest of the week. New-covenant worship terminology prescribes constant 'worship.'"

The New Testament is clear that God's people are to regularly gather for corporate worship. This is apparent by the frequent use of the Greek word ekklesia, which simply means *"gathered assembly of God's people." Likewise, Hebrews 10:24–25 commands, "Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another."* When God's people gather for corporate worship, church leaders must ensure that the methods they employ align with six biblical principles for worship.

1) Corporate worship is to be God-centered (Matt.4:8-10). Worship is not an occasion for us to hear sermons about us, sing songs about us, or focus on how to make ourselves feel happily inspired. Since we are prone to worship ourselves as idols, corporate worship is an important occasion to redirect our worship back to God.

2) Corporate worship is to be intelligible (1Cor.14:1-12). This means that not only is the service conducted in the known language of the hearers but also that doctrinal terms (Christianese) are explained so that everyone understands what is being said and sung.

3) Corporate worship is to be seeker sensitive (1 Cor.14:20-25). Because there are non-Christians present in corporate worship meetings, people leading those meetings need to be hospitable to non-Christians. This includes the preacher presenting the gospel to the non-Christians, someone explaining why the church meetings have certain elements such as Communion or singing, and explaining Christian terms in a way that allows the non-Christian to understand what the Bible says. This does not mean that the entire service is to be seeker sensitive and designed mainly as an evangelistic rally but that a sincere effort is made to help non-Christians understand and experience the gospel.

4) Corporate worship is to be unselfish (1 Cor.14:26). If people want to express their personal response to God in a way that draws undue attention to them and distracts others from responding to God, then they should do that kind of thing at home, in private, because the meeting is for corporate response to God, not just individual response. In worship, God gives to his people truth, love, hope and those who distract others from receiving what God has for them and from focusing on God need to be rebuked so that they may mature and learn to consider others more highly than themselves, as Scripture says.

5) Corporate worship is to be orderly (1Cor. 14:40). While the Bible does not prescribe or describe any church service order, it is important that such meetings actually function with enough thought to be useful and not frustrating and distracting for the worshipers. While no church is perfect, nor is the goal of corporate worship meetings an impressive performance, musicians who cannot keep time, singers who cannot sing, audio speakers with continual feedback, long awkward pauses because no one knows what

is happening next, and people speaking in tongues or prophesying out of turn in a way that the Bible forbids all distract people from being able to focus on God and, furthermore, falsely portray God as chaotic.

6) Corporate worship is to be missional (1Cor. 9:19-23). Human beings are, as God's image bearers, culture makers, receivers, and interpreters. It is not right for Christians to ignore culture or assume that Christianity is in itself a culture that exists completely separated from the cultures in which the church exists. To be missional, a church meeting has to fit the culture it is in rather than being a subculture imported from another time or place. This does not mean that older traditions (hymns) are not used, but that they are used because they contribute to informing faithful worship of God rather than perpetuating a dated form that is no longer best for ministry. Culture, in general, and creativity and the arts, in particular, are expressions of our worship and do not lead us into worship. When such things as the arts and music are used to lead God's people into worship, the understanding that we are continually worshiping has been lost and we have supplanted the leading of the Holy Spirit with music and the arts. Such a move is pagan because music becomes feelings oriented in a way that only Jesus Christ is supposed to be.

When God's people gather, the church leaders are also required to ensure that what the Bible commands for worship is actually done. There are certain elements that Scripture prescribes for corporate worship services of the church:

1. Preaching (2 Tim.4:2)

2. Sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Table, (Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 11:17–34).

3. Prayer (1 Tim. 2:1)

4. Reading Scripture (1 Tim. 4:13)

5. Financial giving 2 Cor. 8-9)

6. Singing and music (Col. 3:16)

7. Spiritual gifts expressed (I Timothy 4:14; II Timothy 1:6-7)

8. Laying on of hands (Acts 9:17; 19:6)

God in His great wisdom has given clear principles and practices to guide the corporate worship of His people. However, He has not given his people clear methods or an order of service. There is no clear prescription of an entire worship service anywhere in Scripture, and there is no record of any early church worship service.

While God is very clear on the principles and practices to govern corporate worship, He has left it up to church leaders led by the Holy Spirit to determine the methods and service order used to implement them. This means that, for example, what kind of music is sung, in what order the elements are arranged,

how Communion is administered, etc., can and should vary from culture to culture and church to church because God provides such freedom for His people.

However, this freedom does not include the freedom to sin and do what God forbids in the name of worship. An Old Testament example is found in Deuteronomy 12:4, where God points to how other religions worship their demon gods and commands, "You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way." Another Old Testament example is found in the second commandment, which forbids idolatry—that is, the worship of any created thing, or seeking to reduce God to something that is made.

A New Testament example is found in 1 Corinthians 10:14–22, where God through Paul forbids Christians from worshiping with members of other religions, because to do so is to entertain demons. In our day, this means that while Christians should have evangelistic interfaith friendships with members of other religions, we must never do such things as pray or sing with members of other religions because they worship different and false gods.

## How Do We Become Like What We Worship?

In his book We Become What We Worship, G. K. Beale states, "What people revere, they resemble, either for ruin or restoration." Because we are created in the image of God, everyone is always, without exception, reflecting either God or a god. If we do not reflect our Creator to our restoration then we will reflect creation to our ruin.

This explains why one of the recurring themes in the Bible is that idols are deaf, mute, and blind, and so are idol worshipers who do not hear from God, speak to God, or spiritually see God. In Exodus 32 Israel is portrayed mockingly as rebellious cattle because they worshiped a calf and thus became like it. Just like a stubborn cow that refuses to go in the right direction, idolatrous Israel is "stiffnecked."

Idolatry began with our first father, Adam. Because Adam was committed to something over God, namely himself, he was guilty of idolatry. Therefore, Adam set in motion a course of history in which the most common created thing we worship in idolatry is ourselves; we live for ourselves and our perceived glory.

In the New Testament Gospels, the idol revered by the Jews and renounced by Jesus is religion. Even though there are not many explicit references to Jewish idol worship in the Gospels, Beale argues that it is clear that the generation of Jews at the time of Christ were at least as sinful as their spiritual forefathers: "The Jewish nation took pride in the fact that they were not like the nations who bowed down to stone and wooden images. Yet what is also clear is that the majority of the Israelite nation were at least as sinful as their ancestors, especially because they crucified the Son of God (Matt. 23:29–38)." Israel worshiped their dead tradition rather than the living God according to his living Word.

Moving on to the book of Acts, Luke presents the fact that the temple actually became an idol for Israel. Jesus exposed this idolatry when he said he would destroy the temple. Rather than letting Jesus destroy the temple, the religious leaders chose instead to destroy Jesus. They preferred the temple as their place of meeting with God and presence of God over God's Son. God had the temple destroyed in AD 70.

In our own day religious people continue in various idolatries when they elevate their denomination, church building, order of systems, Bible translation, worship music style, pastor, theological system, favorite author, or ministry program to where it is a replacement mediator for Jesus, one in which their faith rests to keep them close to God. This also explains why any change to the tradition of a religious person is met with such hostility—people tend to cling to their idols, including their church buildings, which are worshiped as sacred, just as the temple was.

Like the Jews in Jesus' day, Christians must be continually aware of their religious idols. Religious idols include truth, gifts, and morality.

These are things people trust in addition to Jesus Christ for their salvation, not unlike the Judaizers who added circumcision to the gospel and were rebuked by Paul in Galatians as heretics preaching a false gospel.

Truth idolatry is perhaps most common among those who are most committed to sound doctrine and biblical study. These people are prone to think that they are saved because of the rightness of their belief rather than the simple fact that Jesus died for them. Religious people who idolize truth are often guilty of a sense of superiority. They continually enjoy sarcastically making fun of their opponents.

Gift idolatry is perhaps most common among those most gifted and capable in ministry service who mistake spiritual gifts for spiritual maturity and spiritual fruit. These people commonly think that they are saved because of the great gifts they possess and that any ministry they have accomplished—and subsequently their faith—rests more on the fact that God is using them than that Jesus died for them. Sadly, this is common among Bible preachers who have made their pulpit into an idol where they go for identity and joy. They seek the approval of their hearers who cheer them on, and eventually the pastor whose idol is preaching becomes the idol of his listening flock, whose devotion to him is nearly god-like, and he becomes virtually sinless in their eyes.

Morality idolatry is perhaps most common among the most wellbehaved and decent religious people. Often these people think that they are saved because they have lived a decently moral and good life of devotion and obedience rather than seeing themselves as sinners by nature whose sin is serious enough to require Jesus' atoning death. Such people are much like the older brother in the story of the prodigal son—they are offended when grace is given to repentant sinners because it is undeserved. Their attitude in such moments reveals their idol of self-performance; their ultimate trust resides in their performance and not in Jesus.

One of the longest teachings of idolatry in all the New Testament is found in 1 Corinthians 10, where Paul describes idolatry as participation with demons that leads to all kinds of evil, including gluttony, drunkenness, sexual sin, and grumbling. Indeed, the more we commit ourselves to our idol, the more we become one with it and increasingly like it, to our destruction. Furthermore, as 1 Corinthians 10 makes clear, our idolatry also strains our relationships with fellow Christians, gives a false witness to non-Christians, and causes others to be tempted to join us in idolatrous sin. Idolatry damages every category of relationship we have and is a deadly cancer in a church body and in society.

Religious idolatry uses God for health, wealth, success, etc. In this broken gospel, God is used for our glory; not only do we worship ourselves but we try to make God a worshiper of us. This kind of false gospel preaching is evident whenever God is presented as the means by which idolaters can obtain their idol. Examples include promises that God will make you rich, happy, healed, joyfully married, parentally successful, and the like, as if God exists to aid our worship of idols.

## How Are Regeneration and Worship Related?

Because sin is not merely doing bad things but an even deeper problem of building our identity on someone or something other than God alone, the solution to idolatry is not to change our behavior but to have a complete reorientation of our nature at the deepest level of our being, or what Jesus called being born again.

In the third chapter of John's Gospel, a man named Nicodemus came to meet with Jesus. Nicodemus was a religious man. As a Pharisee he would have committed large sections of the Hebrew Old Testament to memory and been looked at as morally upright, intelligent, and among the holiest of men. In John 3:3, Jesus said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." This confused Nicodemus, so Jesus explained that there are two births. The first birth is our physical birth that occurs when our mother's water breaks and we are brought into this world. By virtue of our first birth we are physically alive but spiritually dead. The second birth is our spiritual birth where Holy Spirit causes us to be born again so that we are both physically and spiritually alive.

Nicodemus considered himself spiritually alive by virtue of his religion, spirituality, theology, and morality. But he was likely astounded when Jesus told him plainly, "You must be born again." In this way he was much like those today who know some theological truth, have been baptized, attend religious meetings, live a moral life, believe in God, devote time to serving others, and even give some of their income to spiritual causes and organizations as members, leaders, and pastors, but who need to be born again. Why? Because they are living out of their old nature solely by their will and effort rather than out of a new nature by the power of God. John Piper says:

What Nicodemus needs, and what you and I need, is not religion but life. The point of referring to new birth is that birth brings a new life into the world. In one sense, of course, Nicodemus is alive. He is breathing, thinking, feeling, acting. He is a human created in God's image. But evidently, Jesus thinks he's dead. There is no spiritual life in Nicodemus. Spiritually, he is unborn. He needs life, not more religious activities or more religious zeal. He has plenty of that.

Being born again is called regeneration, which is the biblical teaching that salvation includes both God's work for us at the cross of Jesus and in us by the Holy Spirit. To say it another way, regeneration is not a separate work of the Holy Spirit added to the saving work of Jesus; rather, it is the actualization of Jesus' work. While the word regeneration appears only twice in the Bible, it is described in both the Old and New Testaments by a number of images. Each signifies a permanent, unalterable change in someone at his or her deepest level.

The Old Testament frequently speaks of regeneration in terms of deep work in the heart, our total inner self, so that a new life flows from a new heart empowered by the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus explained to Nicodemus.

Like the Old Testament, the New Testament speaks on many occasions of being born again. The New Testament uses many other images to explain regeneration. These include "partakers of the divine nature," "new creation," "new man," "alive together with Christ," and "created in Christ Jesus."

Three very important truths help to understand regeneration in the New Testament. First, regeneration is done to undeserving, sinners. Therefore, regeneration is a gift of grace, as Titus 3:5 says: *"He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit."* Second, regeneration is something the Holy Spirit does for us. Therefore, unless God accomplishes regeneration in people, it is impossible for them to live as worshipers of God. Third, without regeneration there is no possibility of eternal life in God's kingdom. Therefore, regeneration is required for someone to be a true worshiper of God.

Accompanying the new birth are ten transforming, life-changing, and eternity-altering occurrences.

1. Regenerated people have the God of the Bible as their new LORD, displacing all other false and functional god's who had previously ruled over them.

2. Regenerated people are new creations so that they are transformed at the deepest levels of their existence to begin living a new life. People being renamed upon conversion, so that Saul becomes Paul and Cephas becomes Peter, illustrates that we are new people in Christ.

3. Regenerated people have a new identity from which to live their new life because their old identity no longer defines them.

4. Regenerated people have a new mind that enables them to enjoy Scripture and thus to begin to think God's thoughts after Him.

5. Regenerated people have new emotions so that they love God, fellow Christians, strangers, and even their enemies.

6. Regenerated people have new desires for holiness, and no longer is their deepest desire for sin and trouble.

7. Regenerated people enjoy a new community and fellowship with other Christians as members of the church.

8. Regenerated people live by a new power to follow Kingdom principles by the Holy Spirit's enabling.

9. Regenerated people enjoy a new freedom to no longer tolerate, manage, excuse, or accept their sin but rather to put it to death and live free from habitual sin.

10. Regeneration is a new life of worship that is markedly different from how life would otherwise be.

In some ways our new birth is like our physical birth. At birth babies cry, move, hunger, trust their father to protect and provide for them, enjoy human comfort, and begin to grow. Similarly, newly born-again people cry out to God in prayer, move out in new life, hunger for the Scriptures, trust God as Father, enjoy God's family the church, and begin to grow spiritually, maturing in God. Beale explains regeneration in terms of how Christians become restored into the image of God:

It is in Christ that people, formerly conformed to the world's image (Rom. 1:18–32), begin to be transformed into God's image (Rom. 8:28–30; 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:4). . . . This process of transformation into the divine image will be completed at the end of history, when Christians will be resurrected and fully reflect God's image in Christ

(1 Cor. 15:45–54; Phil. 3:20–21). They will be resurrected by the Spirit-imparting power of the risen Christ. Since it was the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead (Rom. 1:4), so the Spirit of Christ will raise Christians from the dead at the end of the age. . . . The Spirit's work in people will enable them to be restored and revere the Lord and resemble his image, so that God will be glorified in and through them.

Therefore, it is only through the regenerating and ongoing empowering ministry of the Holy Spirit that we can worship, until one day in our glorified resurrected state we will image God perfectly as unceasing worshipers. This is exactly what Jesus meant when he said in John 4:24, "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." Commenting on this verse, Andreas Köstenberger says:

The terms "spirit" and "truth" are joined later in the expression "Spirit of truth," referring to the Holy Spirit (see 14:17; 15:26; 16:13; cf. 1 John 4:6; 5:6; see also 2 Thess. 2:13) . . . the present reference therefore seems to point John's readers ultimately to worship in the Holy Spirit. True worship is not a matter of geographical location (worship in a church building), physical posture (kneeling or standing), or following a particular format or external rituals (Matt. 6:5–13); it is a matter of the heart and of the Spirit.

Because of our new hearts, worshiping God by imaging him well through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit is exactly what we want to do in our innermost depths. Speaking of the Spirit-empowered regenerated desires of the heart, Psalm 37:4 says, "Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart." This means that as we enjoy and delight in who God is, what he has done, and what he will do for us, our regenerated hearts share in the same desires of God. Unlike religion, which is based on fear that forces people to do what they do not want to do, regeneration is based on love and on God inviting new people to live new lives of worship, which is exactly what their new hearts want to do at the deepest level. The result is passionate continuous worshippers.

## How Does Worship Transform Us?

Because we worship our way into sin, ultimately we need to worship our way out. When Christians commit sin, they do not cease worshiping. Rather, their worship is directed away from the Creator and toward created things. Repentance is the act of turning from sin and returning to God by trusting in Jesus Christ, who alone is the perfect worshiper. This fact helps idolaters be transformed into worshipers. John had just this in mind when he summarized his entire epistle with the closing line, "Keep yourselves from idols." The following examples are intended to be practical helps in uncovering our idols so that we can smash them in repentance and worship God alone.

Proverbs 29:25 says, "The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe." Biblical counselor Ed Welch says:

Fear in the biblical sense . . . includes being afraid of someone, but it extends to holding someone in awe, being controlled or mastered by people, worshipping other people, putting your trust in people, or needing people. . . . The fear of man can be summarized this way: We replace God with people. Instead of a biblically guided fear of the Lord, we fear others. . . . When we are in our teens, it is called "peer pressure." When we are older, it is called "people-pleasing." Recently, it has been called "codependency."

The only way out of panic is to fear God, as Proverbs 1:7 says: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge."

Those who fail to worship God their creator worship that which is created. This can be any created person or thing but is often the worship of the self and sex. Why? Because, of all the things God made, the human body is the apex of God's creative work. This fact makes its passions and pleasures the most likely candidate for idolatrous worship. In our age, this includes an addiction to beauty, pornography, sexual sin, drunkenness, drug abuse, people-pleasing fear of man, and gluttony, as Paul said, since for some people their god is their stomach.

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# Notes & Reflections

What stood out to you in this study? Write down questions, verses to look up, and what God is teaching you.