A New Definition Of Worship Big Enough To Live In

We need a more compelling definition of worship. Our current one is causing crazy problems with our stages, experiences, and direction. This generation has come to equate worship with music and what happens on a Sunday morning. A definition of worship should include that, but not be limited to it. If our definition of worship is the size of our Sunday morning experiences, we are living in a tiny, tiny world.

I'd like to make my argument here for a fresh definition of worship. At the bottom of this piece, I'll unveil it.

What Kind Of Definition Do We Need?

First, we need to nail down what kind of definition we're after. It needs to go way beyond Sunday morning, and make sense across a generation's experiences with God. We need to disengage from our worship conferences and Christian jargon to get to it. Let's try.

1. We Need A Biblically-Based Definition

Let's draw on themes from familiar, biblical "worship definition" passages such as

- Romans 12:1-2 (self-offering and loyalty in all aspects of every day life),

- John 4:21-23 (the heart of who we are, flowing in spirit and truth, in an engaged relationship),

- John 12:3 (devotional intimacy, such as the moment when Mary is pouring out perfume on Jesus' feet),

- 1 Chronicles 29:3 (sacrifice and offering (the whole complex of Old Testament worship practices), as well as material offerings, such as the moment when David gives his personal belongings in sacrifice to enhance a space designated for worship),

- The Book of Psalms (a body of creative work that includes individual and gathered expressions of worship including praise, thanksgiving, prayer, lament, intercession, sacramental rituals, and remembrance), and

- Revelation 4-5 (John's vision of the centrality of the resurrected Christ in the ordering, and consummation, of all things – culminating in the New Creation that is breaking in the now and will be established in the age to come).

We want the spirit of our definition to embrace the whole counsel of the Scriptures related to worship, from ancient ideas of animal sacrifice, to Jesus' teaching and modeling of living worship, to the visions of heaven's worship expressed in John's revelation.

2. We Need A Historically-Affirmed Definition

We also want to draw on the Church's ongoing historical interpretations of the meaning of worship (particularly gathered worship), including

- The worship languages of time and space (events, gatherings, places),

- The worship languages of public Scripture reading and prayer,

- The worship languages of sacred actions (Eucharist, baptism), and

- The worship languages of art, architecture, and music.

In other words, we want our definition to find meaning in the fact that human beings were designed to respond to God, and to express meaning about life, in some very precious and sacramental ways.

These pathways both nurture us in the Christocentric (Christ-centered) life, and keep faith's truths bustling in hearts and minds over generations.

3. We Need A Humanity-Inclusive Definition

Further to this, we want a definition of worship that isn't only accessible to Christians, but rather applies to *everyone*. If the Christian Story is actually the human story, and not *just* a story for Christians, then our ways of talking about worship should connect on some level with all human beings – rather than just the spiritual in-crowd.

- We want an atheist to be able to understand and apply our definition of worship to the orientation of their own life,

- We want a Jew, a Muslim, a Buddhist, a New Ager, or an agnostic to not be completely befuddled when we apply our definition of worship to a conversation with them about our life following Jesus (i.e. we don't want our definition to only work in a Christian subculture),

- We want a scientist, a stenographer, a skiing instructor, or a senator, an astrophysicist, an engineer, or a mother of 3 to be able to understand and apply our definition of worship to the orientation of their own life, and

- We want to a Christian to be able to reasonably and comfortably talk about the worshipping life in any setting, with any person with whom they are conversing – and to find common ground in that discussion.

3. We Need A Missionally-Charged Definition

We want a definition of worship that will arm the Church with fresh, clear, nuanced ways of talking about worship. This is important to stem the tide of the noise that is already going on in our heads and in our intra-Church conversations.

- We want a definition of worship that will stir our theology, practices, and faith to blossom in a way that thrusts us into the very heart of the world around us – not away.

- We want a definition of worship that will replace more insular musical and sacramental language about worship that disconnects us from the culture around us,[i]

- We want a definition of worship that enables us to apply the Christian worldview to what it means to be human, and to what it means to follow Jesus in every generation, and

- We want a definition of worship that affirms the widest scope of a life at worship while simultaneously affirming what happens in a church service.

4. We Need An Experientially-Holistic Definition

Here is a tough one, but we must say it and swallow this pill if we want to have any impact in the world that is *becoming* all around us. We want a definition of worship that leaves room for

- 20K-30K denominations to uniquely express worship in the forms, patterns and unique styles that create a space of encounter for their community,

- Co-existence of liturgical, traditional, contemporary, emerging, and future expressions of the Body of Christ in peaceful and mutually beneficial harmony,

- International and multi-ethnic expressions of worship to expand to their full potential in reclaiming faith and engaging unique communities over generations, and

- The spiritual, intellectual, emotional, physiological, and creative facets of the human person to be engaged in the gathered worship experience, as well as in the whole expression of a life lived *coram Deo* (in the presence of God).

And One More Thing Before We Define Worship

We have something spicy to add to these ideas, something sweet – perhaps an understanding about worship that has come from extended and important thinking about the topic in academic and spiritual formation worlds. Evelyn Underhill, in her seminal book *Worship* written in the early 1900s, said

> *"Worship, in all its grades and kinds, is the* response *of the creature to the Eternal."*

Here is a very helpful idea that should shape our definition. According to Underhill, a human being at worship (not just a Christian human being) is a human being *responding* to the Eternal. To *respond* is our act of worship – whether that response is appropriate or adequate, in quality or form. Note that there is no mention of music related to worship here, just as there is no mention of the study of microbiology or gardening. According to Underhill, and affirmed by others in the study of worship, *Worship is the response of a human being to God*. With this current set of

ingredients in place, and stirring in our spirit, let's attempt a definition of worship that can provide the launch pad we need to speak clearly about worship once again.

A New, Working Definition Of Worship For Christians

Our ingredients mingle together to form a broad definition that is applicable to all human beings, and then to provide for the specific understandings of worship that we have as Christians. As you read it, listen for the whispers of Romans 12:1-2, 1 John 4:19, the Psalms, Genesis, the Epistles, Revelation, church history, and what you have come to experience in your relationship with God through all the mechanisms and forms of worship.

A Working Definition Of Worship For The World

The truth is, everyone worships whether they know it or not. So, the first version is broad, and something we can talk about with anyone of any faith or non-faith stripe. Here it is:

"Worship is a response of [loving] allegiance (the reason)
To a person, place or thing (the object)
By focusing all activities of the human spectrum (the action)
On that objects' ultimate honor (the result)."

A Working Definition Of Christian Worship

For the Christian, we are responding with loving allegiance to God the Father, by expressing our allegiance to the Son, Jesus Christ. We express this by focusing our daily, and corporate activities, on elevating God and making Him famous.

"Worship is a response of loving allegiance (the reason)
To God (our Loving Father and Creator of Life),
The Lord Jesus Christ (the Resurrected Son of God and Returning Savior),
And the Holy Spirit (the Indwelling Comforter and Advocate)
By focusing all activities of the human spectrum (the action)
On His ultimate honor (the result)."

Here, worship is a *response* to God's approach of love to us in Christ Jesus. For the Christian, the worship relationship is initiated by the Father, through the work of the Son, and Christ Himself acts toward us in love through the Holy Spirit (Webber). That leads us to 4 Fresh Ways Of Talking About Worship For Every Pastor And Worship Leader.

[This is an excerpt from my book, Worship White Noise.]



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