5 Things Every Congregation Must Understand About Worship

What We Get Wrong, and How We Get It Right

I've now spent most of my adult life (30 years) thinking about, leading, and teaching on the topic of worship. It's been central to my life's call to reflect on why we do what we do in worship in settings like local churches, conference events, and universities. After interacting with contemporary worship ideas around the world over these past 3 decades, here are the top 5 most important things I believe every congregation needs to understand about worship.



As each of the following sections is a summary, I promise that I will leave out language about worship that is important to someone. But in this setting, the summaries will have to suffice.

Under each point, I suggest "What We Get Wrong," and "How We Get It Right." I hope these insights are helpful to our shared understanding of worship.

5 Things Every Congregation Must Understand About Worship

I will use the words, 1) Who, 2) What, 3) Where, 4) Why, and 5) How to cover these 5 ideas.

1. **Who Do We Worship?** ***We Worship The God Of The Scriptures.***

If Christian worship is distinctly anything, it is a response of affection to the God who has pursued us since the beginning of time. That God is not the generic God of all faiths, or all religious narratives.

That God is the specific God revealed in the creating Father, the saving Son, Jesus Christ, and the empowering and comforting Holy Spirit.

Creational stories (not to be confused with "Creation" stories) may resonate with similar human virtues between religious faiths, but our Redemptive stories are radically different, as are our Descriptive stories of Who God is and how He works in our lives. (I explored that idea in 2008 here.)

According to the Gospel of John, where the Spirit is, there is Jesus and the Father. Where the Son is, there is the Father and the Spirit. Where the Father is, there are the Son and the Spirit.

We worship the trinitarian God, and we worship each Person of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and gives thanks for specific things each does and has done.

If we mess up whom we worship, we become lost in idolatry – and when we miss who God is, we skew who we are as well as others around us. Injustice always follows idolatry.

We worship the God who is Creator (Gen. 1:1), King (Ps. 142:1), Trinity (Deut. 6:4), and Savior (Matt. 1:21).

What We Get Wrong

It is cool to be "non-specific" about God today. But not everything everyone believes is true. It can't *all* be true, as many things people believe contradict other views of the world – and the results of belief systems have extreme impact.

Christians worship the specific God who reveals Himself in Jesus Christ. It sounds good to today's tolerance-generation to say we're all worshipping the same God, but the reality is this – not all of the competing stories about God can be simultaneously true, and we are being lazy if we think they are.

The Trinity *centers* us. The Trinity keeps us focused on worshipping God in the Person of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who reveals Himself in both Love AND Truth.

We also sing too generically about God. It's reminds me of some of my Hindu friends whose homes would have hundreds of images of gods in them, along with a picture of Jesus, just in case one of the other religions is right!

How We Get It Right

We need to talk about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all the time, so it is clear "the God we mean" when we talk about God.

And we need to sing clearly about the Father, about the Son, and about the Spirit.

2. Why Do We Worship? *Worship Is A Response To God's Pursuit.*

John 4:19 tells us the reason we worship. I've watched churches for years, get this fundamental idea wrong when they gather.

As the KJV puts it, "We love Him, because He first loved us." We love, because we have been loved.

I worship because I love, and I love because I worship. God loved you, and now, it's your turn to respond with complete surrender. Then, God expresses His love to you more, and you and I respond again.

What We Get Wrong

We act like we are the ones doing the work of worship. We hype people up, rate their "interaction" on a scale of 1-10, and build false visions of when worship is being "effective" or not based on how demonstratively people are responding.

Pastors (and I speak as one) are notorious for evaluating the effectiveness of worship expressions on the response of the room. Yes, we can read *some* things by observation; but to make our senses the evaluation monitoring system to determine if real worship is happening at any given time?

Room dynamics are the wrong metric for evaluating the worship experience, and our perceptions will often fail us related to worship.

How We Get It Right

If someone is responding to and experiencing God's love, and drinking deep of the Story of God through Word, Sacrament, and the other means given to us, then all is well. Full stop. We don't need to do religious gymnastics so, as Eugene Peterson said, God sees how hard we're working and smiles on us.

3. What Is Worship? *Worship Is A Whole Life Response To God.*

Romans 12:1-2 is a peculiar passage in the New Testament. In it, the writer is using a common worship practice of their age – sacrifice – as a metaphor for what God is really after in worship. Here it is from *The Message*:

"So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out."

The writer of Romans is saying that "As dead as a dead sacrifice is, that is how living our living sacrifice is to be." In our personal lives, public lives, financial stewardship, choice of college majors, job choice, relationships with family members, etc. – we are responding to the love of God.

The quality of that response is the ongoing task of the Christian.

What We Get Wrong

If worship is only as big as our church services (and I have great regard for our gathered worship life as communities of faith), then our vision of worship is very small.

What I mean by that is this. Our "gathered worship" is vital to our life of faith – our individualism becomes holy individuality within community when we break the bread and receive the cup.

But we must never confuse the flower of faith, our lives, with the rain and the earth that nurture it. God is seeking our lives – not our songs and sacraments.

Though I will say here that they mutually feed one another, and we may ultimately not be able to sustain the life without the liturgies – *selah*.

Corporate, gathered worship is central to our life of faith; we need larger fires to keep our individual flame alight.

How We Get It Right

If worship is a response to God, then everything I do in life is a response to God. The way I treat my spouse, my kids, my boss, my roommate – it's all my response to God's pursuing Love

I see 4 levels of worship going on, simultaneously, in our lives. The first is the worship God is after, the melody of worship, and the others are harmonies.

If we talk this way about worship, it will change our "music-only" fixation.

- Life Worship (your life, offered to God in all areas)
- Gathered Worship (worship experiences in community)
- Family Worship (worship experiences in our homes)
- Personal Worship (worship experiences in private)

4. How Do We Worship? *We Worship By Any Means Available To Us.*

To withhold worship is to breed cynicism and interior self-sufficiency. That will serve many, it seems, just fine – until we reach our limits (typically revealed by crisis or nearness of death) and see we are not enough.

To offer worship is to get beyond spectating at the electrical outlet; it is to plug into the power that it helps connect us to. That is a choice.

Our physical actions affect our emotions. We posture ourselves to pray, our hearts lean into prayer. We engage in worship physically, our hearts are affected.

This is the reason we're demonstrative at a football game or a concert. We need to put 2 and 2 together.

In other words, what happens in church is important to the degree that we both respond to it, and live out its implications in all areas of daily life.

What We Get Wrong

Every Sunday, in various shapes and forms, the liturgies of all kinds of churches provide vehicles for us to respond to God in worship. The sharing of the word, the sacraments, the singing of the songs that lead us home – these are all vital to the worshipper.

But if a worshipper does not engage with these mechanisms of devotion, then the heart may fail to experience the love of God for lack of initiative.

In other words, if we don't lean – we don't glean. (And yet, there is Grace, sweet Grace).

How We Get It Right

If music is provided for us, we engage with it and enter into prayer with it. We don't spectate, "view" it, or get lost in thinking about which songs we prefer, asking if the worship personnel are moving us adequately.

We engage in the Eucharist. We engage in the reading of the Scriptures. (But we also engage in responding to God in the way we talk about our boss when they are not there. We engage in worship by thinking about how we are responding to God in the way we speak to our spouse.)

We engage our whole selves in a time of worship. We step in. We lean in. We then expect God will meet us as we do.

Sacraments and songs and Scripture readings are places we go to meet with God. We choose to meet with God when these mechanisms of devotion are presented to us.

And we begin to develop rhythms in our lives that keep us thanking God at all times throughout the day.

5. When & Where Do We Worship? *We Worship Anytime & Anyplace We Can.*

First, before I speak to this topic, know that the gathering of the Church to worship around the Scriptures, the sacraments, and the songs, is vital to the life of the Christian in my view.

As a general statement, on a Sunday, or in whatever time and space a community of Christians is gathering for worship that you or I can access, we should always be looking for ways to be with the Body of Christ (in a growing depth of community life).

While being alone in worship is both important, and at severe times, inevitable, we must not give up meeting together as Paul said – or our faith will become fragile and fragmented.

Having said that, this is also true: You and I don't need a comfortable seat and a well-planned out set of songs to worship. We need a heart that is postured to worship.

We can then worship anywhere. It's portable. We can sing in the shower, and it will change our hearts. We can listen to music and pray with it, and it will change our hearts.

We can quietly thank God when we can't sleep in the middle of the night due to stress. It will change our hearts. We can be in captivity, as many great saints are and have been – and we can meet with God in worship.

There are no limits to when and where we can worship.

What We Get Wrong

We often speak of worship in limited, and limiting, terms. We need to begin to see all of life as an opportunity to respond to God.

Then our community gatherings for worship have a context, feeding and fueling the life of faith that can take a Christian through hell and back, and to the ends of the earth.

How We Get It Right

Begin to make plans to engage with God at many times and many places during the week you would not have normally chosen. Try the Daily Office. Try it. Start to see worship as part of your design, and your hope, and your healing.

Fill your life with worship, in all its forms.

God will meet you in the middle of your Life Worship.

::

Resources: These ideas form the foundation of the Essentials In Worship video course for worship leaders.

Question: Do you agree that these 5 points are hinge points for many of the things we and our churches miss related to worship?

Bio: Dan Wilt, M.Min. is an author, communicator, and innovative voice in the fields of Worship and the Arts. He is the creator of the Essentials In Worship Video Training Course for worship leaders and teams, and is the Founder of the 35K member WorshipTraining.com. Dan serves as the Director of Communications & Resources for Vineyard USA, and his ancient-future worship leadership blog offers weekly tools and team encouragements at DanWilt.com.

Subscribe to his blog to receive tools and weekly insights.