

Worship

Genesis 4 relates man's first attempt to worship God. Abel, a shepherd, brought an offering of the firstlings of his flock. Cain, a farmer, brought an offering of the fruit of the ground. The Bible says, "And the Lord had regard for Abel and for his offering, but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard" (vv. 4-5). Whatever may have been the difference in this case, one thing is clear: God does not accept everything offered Him as worship.

The Concept of Worship

Worship is our acknowledgment of God's worth. Occasionally, the Bible uses the term of everyday living which respects His will (Romans 12:2). Mostly, worship refers to special acts of devotion intended to express to God our regard for Him. Either way, the underlying principle is reverence for God. Worship may therefore be defined as a reverent attitude which is expressed by a life of service and special acts of devotion.

Common Mistakes

The prophets of the Old Testament had much to say about the ancient Israelites' worship. While the forms were different back then - offering animal sacrifices, burning incense, tithing, etc. - we can still learn much from their experiences. The prophets identified three common mistakes: (1) People often mixed their own preferences with God's instructions. Instead of honoring God by doing what He said, they added or substituted what they liked. (2) Even when people were doing exactly what God said, worship at times became a boring ritual. Isaiah called it "lip service," "traditions learned by rote" (29:13). (3) Daily lives were too often segregated from what people expressed in formal worship. People praised God in songs and prayers but lived in complete disregard for His will. This was perhaps the prophets' most common complaint (Isaiah 1:10-17; Jeremiah 7:1-11; Amos 4:1-4; 8:4-6; etc.). Surely you understand why God would not accept worship from people who are just going through the motions or who substitute their own will for His. How does that honor Him?

Modern Applications

Jesus taught that "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24). Spirit emphasizes that worship is the product of a spiritual relationship. Worship is a privilege, not a right. It is the privilege of those who are in Christ, who "through Him . . . offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name" (Hebrews 12:15). Both in the formal sense and the broad sense of daily living, it is the conscious expression of a heart devoted to God. Truth emphasizes worship as God directs. Only that kind truly honors Him. Omission of spirit leaves empty formalism. Omission of truth results in honoring self, not God.

The New Testament reveals several avenues of formal worship, either in individual or group settings. The history of the first-century church begins, "And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). Instruction in God's word clearly has a part in our assemblies. Breaking bread refers to eating the Lord's Supper, a memorial of Jesus' death (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). This is to be eaten on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7), the day also specified for the contribution, a means of Christians joining together to do the work God has assigned us collectively (1 Corinthians 16:1-2). Prayer is our means of communicating with God, both for praise and requests (1 Timothy 2:1-6). Singing is another means of praising God, with the added benefit of teaching and admonishing each other (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16).

Whether done individually or collectively, God's honor, not our pleasure, is the goal of worship. Therefore, His word dictates what is done and how. Is it surprising that the means He has given appeal more to the spirit than the flesh? How it looks, how it sounds, how it feels - these are not the critical factors. Instead, God says, "Let all things be done for edification" (1 Corinthians 14:26). Remember, "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24).

- by Frank Himmel

In the Thickets

Sometimes we have the tendency to complain about little things in life. It is those little things which ought to prepare us for the more difficult things. Paul saw persecutions as hurdles one may jump. You won't jump those high hurdles if you can't jump the low ones. Use those low hurdles in life to be more successful as a Christian in the future. Jeremiah 12:5, "If you have raced with foot-runners and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses? And if in a safe land you fall down, how will you fare in the thickets of the Jordan?" (NRSV) Do you see what God is saying? If you can't succeed when the going is easy, how will you succeed when the going gets tough? Many complain about how hard it is to confess Christ in our society. I wonder what they would do if their life were on the line. Many first century Christians faced just that sort of challenge.

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What to Do If You Disagree

From time to time, as we listen to sermons or attend Bible classes, something will be said with which we disagree. What should we do when this happens?

First, be sure that you properly understood what was said. It might be that you simply did not hear what the other person was saying. Changing a single word can sometimes drastically alter the meaning of a sentence. Also, expressions taken out of context can lead to conclusions that were never intended. Take notes, re-listen to the recorded sermon (if available), study the Scriptures that were referenced in the lesson - many potential problems will be resolved in this way.

Additionally, give the benefit of the doubt to your brother who is doing the teaching. Love actually demands this (1 Cor. 13:5). Do not automatically assume the worst.

If questions linger, it is best to go directly to the one who has done the teaching. Too often we complain or criticize to others, but never to the one who supposedly made the error. This is simply not right! Wait for a good opportunity (right after the lesson in front of other people is usually not the best time), or set up an appointment. Calmly discuss your concerns with the man face-to-face. If we do this, the vast majority of misunderstandings will be quickly settled.

Finally, in the few cases where the matter is not remedied by these initial steps, it will be necessary to press the matter further. If error has been taught, we cannot remain silent. We must oppose and expose the false teaching (Galatians 2:5,11-13). But even in this type of situation, we should be careful to conduct ourselves in a way that will make it easy for the erring brother to acknowledge his mistake and make correction (2 Timothy 2:25,26).

Disagreements are certain to arise. Let's be sure we handle all such situations properly as we endeavor "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3).

- *by Greg Gwin*