

Four perspectives of true worship

Most people living in the western world today know what a 'selfie' is. With the advent of the mobile phone which doubles as a camera the practise of sending photos of ourselves to others has created the term selfie. A popular type of selfie is a photo of ourselves with a celebrity person—royalty, sporting hero, film star, etc.

Recently I have been troubled that so many Christian worship songs are in fact selfies—the picture is of 'me and Jesus'. *My Jesus, my Saviour, Its your blood that cleanses me*, and so on. One song even has me singing *You took the fall and thought of me, above all*. Now we need to be clear, when it comes to worship the selfie is a valid, indeed important, component of our worship perspective. Christian faith must be personal, and its basic unit is the covenant relationship between the believer and his/her Lord.

Died He for me, who caused His pain—
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be,
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me? (Charles Wesley)

The worrying thing in the western context is that 80+% of the songs we are singing are 'me and Jesus' songs. The effect of this personal preoccupation is that, not only does it pander to and mirror the very selfish western culture of our time, but it also eclipses other vital and worshipful aspects of God's greatness. The narrowing and limiting effect of such myopic worship is that it seriously starves even the personal aspect that is being focused on.

Four perspectives of worship

What then are the other broader perspectives of Christian worship? We have acknowledged the first perspective, the personal, as valid and basic. Here are three others which are essential in honouring God and expressing His full worthiness of our worship. As we shall see, these three perspectives greatly enhance the personal perspective.

'The people of God' perspective

Here's a good question: Who is it who is worshipping? Most of our acts of worship are in the context of the gathered church, the body of Christ, and it is as this 'spiritual house' that we are to worship God.

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 1 Peter 2:4-5

The spiritual sacrifices of worship offered when the living stones are 'built up as a spiritual house' are more profound than the offerings of individual living stones. When the body of Christ is gathered together the power of Jesus is present (1 Corinthians 5:4).

All praise to our redeeming Lord,
Who joins us by His grace;
And bids us, each to each restored,
Together seek His face. (Charles Wesley)

It is sobering to count the number of first person singular pronouns (*I, me, my and mine*) there are in worship songs. *Here I am to worship, here I am to bow down, here I am... etc.* But the body of believers who are singing these words are not just individuals who happen

to be worshipping in the same time and place. Just as the branches of a tree are related differently than a bundle of sticks, so the people of God worship as branches of the vine which is Christ.

O Church of Christ, invincible,
The people of the Lord,
Empowered by the Spirit's breath
And nourished by his word.
His covenant of grace will be
Our portion evermore,
For He who called us will not change,
Our help and our reward. (Stuart Townend)

The perspective of 'the nations'

In recent days I have been using Charles Spurgeon's *Morning and Evening* as a devotional book, but I must confess that I have become dissatisfied with it. The reason is that its perspective is almost entirely that of personal salvation and piety. The great Spurgeon's insights in this field are profound and important to the soul; however by having this exclusive preoccupation so much of the greatness of God and the Lordship of Christ is not viewed.

By contrast, an enormous biblical perspective is that of the nations. In my English Standard Version of the Bible the nations are mentioned 465 times and the Gentiles (same word as 'nations' in the Greek New Testament) are mentioned 86 times. This is because the nations figure prominently in the purpose, the action, the grace, the rule and the rightful worship of God.

The Lord Jesus Christ is 'the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth' (Revelation 1:5). 'On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords' (Revelation 19:16), and 'before him will be gathered all the nations' for judgement (Matthew 25:32): America, China, Russia, the United Kingdom, Australia, etc. The 'gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come' (Matthew 24:14).

Our worship of God is enlightened by this vista of His great glory and the supreme elevation of Jesus as Messiah King and Lord of all. The following are stunning highlights of that vista:

- that Jesus is the King of every current monarch and Lord of every person now in authority (Revelation 19:16);
- that he strikes the nations with the sharp sword which comes from his mouth, i.e. the word of just judgement and restoring mercy (Revelation 19:15);
- that in him 'shall all the nations be blessed' (Galatians 3:8);
- 'that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations (Luke 24:4);
- that through him 'the glory and the honor of the nations' will enter the city of God (Revelation 21:26);
- and that the multi-national heavenly worship is 'the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, "Hallelujah" for the Lord our God the Almighty reigns' (Revelation 19:6).

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

Revelation 7:9-10

Our gathered worship on earth is in concert with the worship of ‘the angels and the whole company of heaven’. It should therefore have the same essential perspectives, and not be myopically preoccupied.

Ev’ry kindred, tongue and nation,
Worthy the Lamb;
Join to sing the great salvation,
Worthy the Lamb.
Loud as mighty thunders roaring,
Floods of mighty waters pouring,
Prostrate at His feet adoring,
Worthy the Lamb. (J Kent)

The perspective of ‘all creation’

Francis of Assisi could not worship God without calling on the whole creation to join in.

All creatures of our God and King
Lift up your voice and with us sing,
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Thou burning sun with golden beam,
Thou silver moon with softer gleam!
O praise Him! O praise Him!
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! (St Francis of Assisi)

St Francis was very aware that ‘the whole earth is full of (God’s) glory’ (Isaiah 6:3), and that every day the creation offers overflowing praise to God. Francis could see what David saw, that

**The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.** Psalm 19:1

He therefore confidently called on all things to bless their Creator—the rushing wind, the rising morn, the lights of evening, the flowing water, the flowers and fruits. It is not insignificant that Christian worship videos back the words of the songs with glorious views of the creation which seems to be chorusing in with the worship song.

But there’s more, for the creation’s worship of God mirrors our own worship in its groaning, hopefulness and longing.

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. Romans 8:19-23

There is a bitter-sweet tone in the creation’s worship and, like us, it rejoices over the coming into the world of our Lord, and worships in expectant hope of his return to establish ‘new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells’ (2 Peter 3:13).

**Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
let the field exult, and everything in it!
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
before the Lord, for he comes,
for he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness,
and the peoples in his faithfulness.** Psalm 96:11-13

In his song *Creation Sings* Stuart Townend has given us words to worship in hope with the whole creation.

Creation longs for His return,

When Christ shall reign upon the earth;
 The bitter wars that rage
 Are birth pains of a coming age.
 When He renews the land and sky,
 All heaven will sing and earth reply
 With one resplendent theme:
 The glory of our God and King.

Hallelujah!

Let all creation stand and sing: "Hallelujah!"
 Fill the earth with songs of worship,
 Tell the wonders of creation's King. (Stuart Townend)

True worship changes us

Many times in the Scriptures people had an encounter with God. E.g. Moses in Exodus 3, Isaiah in Isaiah 6, Ezekiel in Ezekiel 1, Daniel in Daniel 10, and John in Revelation 1:12-18 where he recalls his encounter with the risen Lord Jesus. Such stunning encounters had a profound and life-changing effect on those who met with God.

In a less dramatic but equally real way we meet God in true worship, and cannot but be changed by that encounter. When you came to church this morning, what did you expect would happen? Same old same old? Or did you expect that in this service of worship you might meet with God, and that that encounter might change you, and change us as a congregation?

Having looked at four perspectives of worship, let us return to each to see how that perspective of worshipping God changes us.

The personal perspective of worship shapes and enhances our own repentance of lingering sin, our faith in Christ alone, and our being filled with the Holy Spirit. It causes the love of God to be shed abroad in our hearts enabling us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbour as our self. The inward fruits of true worship are humility, gratitude, joy, obedience, and abounding love and compassion.

When I survey the wondrous cross
 On which the Prince of glory died,
 My richest gain I count but loss,
 And pour contempt on all my pride.

‘The people of God’ perspective of worship shapes and enhances our corporate conscious. Modern westerners are wary of marriage,

parenting or any other group commitments. This is because they tend to prefer being ‘me’ to being ‘us’. ‘Me’-ness comes through the doors of our churches, but true worship awakens a sense of ‘us’ as the family of God, the body and the bride of Christ.

The church's one foundation
 Is Jesus Christ her Lord:
 She is his new creation
 By water and the word;
 From heaven he came and sought her
 To be his holy bride;
 With his own blood he bought her,
 And for her life he died. (Samuel John Stone)

True worship kindles a gracious ‘one another’ consciousness, leading us as the Scripture says to ‘love one another’, ‘care for one another’, ‘serve one another’, ‘be at peace with one another’, ‘submit to one another’, ‘encourage one another’, ‘comfort one another’, and ‘pray for one another’. True worship changes us into a ‘one another’ body of people

‘The nations’ perspective shapes and enhances our godly love for all the tribes, races and nations of people on the earth. True worship dissolves racism, kindles compassion for the

poor, moves us to share the gospel with the lost, and emboldens us in the name of God to call rulers and leaders to account for their actions.

Give the winds a mighty voice
 Jesus saves! Jesus saves!
 Let the nations now rejoice
 Jesus saves! Jesus saves!
 Shout salvation full and free
 To every strand that ocean laves—
 This our song of victory
 Jesus saves! Jesus saves! (Priscilla Jane Owens)

The ‘all creation’ perspective of worship shapes and enhances our sense of being one with the whole of God’s creation. We are able to see the beauty and abundant provision of the earth as our God-given home. As divinely appointed stewards of the creation we are able to feel its groaning and its longing, and we are quickened with love for all our fellow creatures.

*All things bright and beautiful,
 All creatures great and small,
 All things wise and wonderful:
 The Lord God made them all.*
 He gave us eyes to see them,
 And lips that we might tell
 How great is God Almighty,
 Who has made all things well. (Cecil Alexander)

Worship—false or true

False worship narrows our perspective down to one myopic focus—*it’s all about me*. Such worship is nothing more than a religious expression of the spirit of our age which strengthens our prejudices rather than breaking them down.

By contrast true worship opens believers to the whole vista of God’s glory—His holiness, goodness and mercy, and the whole spectre of His action: His creation, providence and redemption of each of us, of His church, of the nations, and of His whole creation. Understandably God desires such worship. Jesus prophesied that

...the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. John 4:23

The Father is seeking such worshippers because they are in short supply. As stated earlier there is a huge preoccupation in modern worship songs with the personal perspective. Song writers need to express the broader perspectives, and worship leaders need to seek out songs and hymns that have the other perspectives. Then our worship in song can canvas the whole vista of God’s glory, and we can praise God ‘with the faithful of every time and place, joining with choirs of angels and the whole creation in the eternal hymn:

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,
 heaven and earth are full of your glory.
 Hosanna in the highest!
 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
 Hosanna in the highest!’ (Holy Communion liturgy)

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