

The Divine Pattern of Acceptable Worship — Part 1

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

Human beings are instinctively worshiping creatures. When the Psalmist declared, “As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God” (42:1), he perhaps expressed a need that is basic to the human soul. As far back as the time of Cicero in the first century B.C., or even earlier, pagan thinkers had observed that religion in some form or other is a universal trait in human nature (Dummelow 1944, ci).

Men are going to worship something or someone. It may be the sun, a cow, a golden idol, the true God, or oneself! Humans worship. The issue is, then, what or whom and how will people worship? Will they be “true worshipers” (John 4:23) or false worshipers?

Worship is a dominant theme in the Bible. The concept is represented by several terms in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the Greek New Testament. Basically, worship involves a deep sense of religious awe that expresses itself in ritualistic acts of devotion and service. The English word “worship” literally means “worthship” and it denotes a being or object that the worshiper deems worthy of devotion.

False Ideas about Worship

Before exploring God’s pattern of worship, it is fitting that some consideration be given to a few of the prominent false theories regarding worship.

No Need to Worship

Some people see no relationship between the existence of God and the need to worship. This deistic philosophy views the Creator almost as an abstraction. If God is self-sufficient, it is argued, he does not need human worship; thus, acts of religious devotion are futile.

This concept, of course, ignores the fact that the Lord has commanded human beings to worship him. It must be emphasized, though, that Jehovah does not demand worship because of his need; rather, true worship is prescribed for man’s benefit. Serving God will result in humanity’s greatest happiness (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

For example, there is a vital connection between genuine worship and character of life (see Romans 1:18-32). When men turn away from genuine devotion to the true God, all sorts of vileness and discontent ensues (Proverbs 13:15).

All Human Activity Is Worship

Others allege that worship is merely an emotion; thus, one is actually worshiping all of the time (Winder n.d., 4, 5). Such assertions have been made in an attempt to justify the use of instrumental music in Christian worship, but they are for naught because the Bible plainly indicates that worship in ancient days, in addition to the emotion involved, was something practiced at specific times, places, etc.

Abraham went to Mt. Moriah to worship (Genesis 22:5). The wise men came from the East to worship the Christ child (Matthew 2:2; cf. 1 Samuel 1:3; 2 Kings 18:22; Jeremiah 26:2; Matthew 14:33; Acts 8:27). All Christian activity is not worship.

Worship as You Please

It is occasionally argued that worship is unregulated, that “God has spelled out no formula for the worship of Himself” (Blakely 1987, 14). Hence, supposedly, one is at liberty to improvise his own worship agenda.

We will deal with this matter more fully in a subsequent section, but for the present let us observe that the worship-is-unregulated theory was the philosophy of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat. After the division of the Hebrew nation, Jeroboam initiated his own worship program (see 1 Kings 12).

He authorized golden calves as representatives of Jehovah. He substituted the cities of Bethel and Dan for Jerusalem as centers of worship. The new king selected priests for his digressive system from tribes other than the tribe of Levi. Finally, Jeroboam started a religious feast in the fifteenth day of the eighth month (likely to simulate the feast of the

tabernacles which occurred on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, according to the law of Moses).

All of these changes he “devised of his own heart” (1 Kings 12:33). It is no wonder that this innovator was chastised no less than twenty-one times in the Old Testament as one who caused Israel to sin. We must remember that such examples were written for our learning (Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:6, 11), because we will have “Jeroboams” with us always.

New Testament Worship

As he was traveling from Judea to Galilee, Jesus stopped at Jacob’s well near the city of Sychar. There he engaged a Samaritan woman in conversation. Presently, the topic turned to worship. It was within this context that the Lord affirmed that God wants people to be “true worshipers” (John 4:23).

Christ then set forth the components that were to constitute the type of worship with which the Father would be pleased. Those elements were three: object, attitude, and action (4:24). The proper object of worship is God, i.e., deity. The correct attitude is in spirit. And the standard by which acts of worship are to be measured is the truth. Each of these is crucial.

Deity, the Object

In his debate with Satan, Christ declared that only God is worthy of worship (Matthew 4:10). By the term “God,” the entire Godhead is indicated—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father is deity (Ephesians 1:3), the Son is likewise deity (John 1:1), and the Holy Spirit is deity as well (Acts 5:3, 4).

The term “deity” simply describes the nature of the Trinity. These persons possess the qualities or traits that constitute Godhood. Thus, the Godhead is worthy of worship (Psalm 18:3). Since only God is to be worshiped, all others are excluded.

Even though we are a little lower than the angels (Hebrews 2:7), we do not worship these created beings. When the apostle John attempted to worship an angel, he was warned to desist (Rev. 22:8, 9).

We do not worship great saints—dead or living. When Peter sought to give undue adoration to Moses and Elijah, he was shown that these Old Testament worthies were not in the same category with the Son of God (Matthew 17:4, 5).

Moreover, when Peter was dispatched to the residence of Cornelius and the Gentile centurion fell at his feet to worship, Peter raised him up and said, “Stand up; I myself also am a man” (Acts 10:26). The Roman Catholic dogma which asserts that it is acceptable to pray to Mary and the saints is clearly at variance with the Scriptures.

We are not to worship our ancestors as those devoted to Eastern mysticism do. As the world grows smaller by means of sophisticated communication and transportation developments, we will be forced to deal with the problem of ancestor worship.

Aside from the overt worship of objects or people, the Bible also cautions that any form of devotion that relegates God to a subordinate status—whether money, family, or profession—is idolatry. This is why covetousness is idolatry (Colossians 3:5; cf. Luke 16:13).

In Spirit, the Attitude

In the context under consideration, the Lord further declared that true worship must be in spirit. The meaning seems to be “that the entire heart enters into the act” (Hendriksen 1976, 167). Or, as Lenski notes, the whole soul is thrown into the worship” (1943, 323). The phrase obviously suggests that a sincere disposition must characterize the worshiper’s mind.

There is an Old Testament passage that is remarkably similar to John 4:24—“Now, therefore, fear Jehovah and serve him in sincerity and in truth” (Joshua 24:14).

Note the concurrence between these verses:

- Serve Jehovah in sincerity and truth (Joshua 24:14)

- Worship God in spirit and truth (John 4:24)

There are a number of passages which underscore the type of devotional attitude that must accompany the specific acts of worship in which the Christian is engaged.

For example, Paul stresses that it is very important, when observing the Lord's supper, that we "discern" the significance of the bread and fruit of the vine, i.e., how they relate to the Savior's body and blood. Carelessness in disposition can result in condemnation (1 Corinthians 11:27-29). Too, singing must be done "with the spirit," etc. (1 Corinthians 14:15).

There are several dispositions highlighted in the New Testament which are antagonistic to the nature of true worship. God will not accept arrogant worship. Jesus told of a Pharisee who went up to the temple to worship (Luke 18:9ff). In his prayer, which was little more than a self-eulogy, he extolled his lack of flagrant sin and cataloged his acts of religious piety. He even made God a party to his arrogance by thanking him that he was so unlike other men, and especially the publican who was praying nearby.

By way of contrast, the tax-collector humbly petitioned Jehovah, "Be merciful to me the sinner." The publican was justified; the Pharisee was not. The lesson simply is this: worship saturated with egotism is unacceptable.

Hypocritical worship is void. The Lord once addressed certain Jewish leaders with these sentiments:

You hypocrites, Isaiah spoke of your kind when he declared that though you honor God with your lips, your hearts are far from him. Your worship is thus vain (cf. Mark 7:6, 7).

Christ went on to describe how these Pharisees and scribes skirted parental responsibility by slick, contrived traditions. We must learn this lesson: when we knowingly and persistently live in direct violation of Heaven's will, and then feign worship, we are literally wasting our time (see Isaiah 1:11-17). Hypocritical worship is meaningless.

Ostentatious worship is worthless, for, rather than seeking to honor the Maker, it covets the attention of men. Jesus addressed this issue in the Sermon on the Mount. He warned:

Take heed that you do not your righteousness before men to be seen of them: else you have no reward with your father who is in heaven (Matthew 6:1).

Of special interest here is the expression "to be seen." It translates the Greek term *theathenai*, which is the basis of our modern word "theater." The Lord is condemning performance worship! He illustrates his point by mentioning alms-giving (v. 2), prayer (v. 5), and fasting (v. 16).

If one's worship is designed to attract the attention of an audience, when those human accolades have been collected the performer has been "paid in full," for such is the significance of the expression "they have received their reward" (6:2).








Can we learn anything from this in these days when some are clamoring for choirs, soloists, and religious drama in the church assembly? Elsewhere we have shown that such innovations are not sanctioned by the New Testament (Jackson 1990, 34-38).

What shall we say of those clergymen who adorn themselves in lavish robes? And what of those brothers who, when preaching or leading public prayers, adopt those sanctimonious tones that reek of pompous artificiality?

It is clear that worship, if acceptable, must be correct as to object and attitude. But what about the form of worship? That will be considered in [The Divine Pattern of Acceptable Worship — Part 2](#).

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John 4:23; Ecclesiastes 12:13; Romans 1:18-32; Proverbs 13:15; Genesis 22:5; Matthew 2:2; 1 Samuel 1:3; 2 Kings 18:22; Jeremiah 26:2; Matthew 14:33; Acts 8:27; 1 Kings 12; 1 Kings 12:33; Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:6, 11; Matthew 4:10; Ephesians 1:3; John 1:1; Acts 5:3, 4; Psalm 18:3; Hebrews 2:7; Revelation 22:8, 9; Matthew 17:4, 5; Acts 10:26; Colossians 3:5; Luke 16:13; John 4:24; Joshua 24:14; 1 Corinthians 11:27-29; 1 Corinthians 14:15; Luke 18:9; Mark 7:6, 7; Isaiah 1:11-17; Matthew 6:1

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