

What Are You to Do?

True Worship:

Isaiah 29:13

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As a child and youth, I often visited with missionaries staying in our home. Some of the customs they encountered were so different from ours. In some tribes of Africa, their modesty is seductive to us, and our modesty is seductive to them. The custom variation that I liked most had to do with eating. For one African tribe, the belch or burp was a polite expression of gratitude after a meal. You can't imagine what that meant to a young boy who loved to make funny noises! You can imagine what it meant for a mother concerned with her children learning good etiquette. The gratitude my brothers and I expressed was not warmly received. Despite the compelling argument that we were in solidarity with our African brothers, I no longer believe that our belching expressed gratitude to my mother. First, my mother did not grow up in that tribe. Second, her word told us otherwise, and third, so did the discipline that eventually came.

Did you know that we are privy to such insight with God? In the Bible, we witness God both speaking and disciplining his children who argue that they are truly worshiping him.

We've been discussing true worship for over a month. We've learned that God does not need worship. Instead, we need to worship to be in touch with reality. We've also learned that God looks for people who will worship him in spirit and truth. He looks for people who welcome his presence now and who trust what he has done in the past. Third, we've learned that you can't turn worship on and off like a water spigot. True worship, like true love, offers ourselves completely to another, namely God.

Today, we examine what we do in worship. God spoke through Isaiah:

These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men. (Isaiah 29:13, NIV)

Most early Christian believers read a Greek version of the Old Testament that predates the earliest Hebrew manuscripts we have. Most Old Testament quotations in the New Testament come from this Greek version. The Greek version of Isaiah reads:

Their worship is a farce, for they merely teach human commands and teachings. (LXX: Isaiah, 29:13, NLT)

How much of what we do in worship is merely human commands and teachings? How much is comfortable or fun for us, but misses the mark like my belching?

When we sing, we participate in a form of worship. When we bring offerings, we participate in a form of worship. When we read or listen to the Scriptures, we engage in a form of worship. What I am saying is that we act in the shape of worship. Like construction workers, we lay wood forms with the songs, offerings, prayers, Scripture and message; however, they remain empty forms until the concrete is poured. When what we do both expresses a heart devoted to knowing and pleasing God and is in response to what God says and does, then our form of worship is not empty. The concrete is being laid. Then, and only then, is the way of the Lord prepared for him to come and truly bless us in our worship.

Do some of you remember singing “The Gloria Patri” or “Glory Be to the Father”?

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen. Amen. (UM Hymnal, pages 70 and 71)

This Third or Fourth Century Latin prayer was translated into English and set to tunes in the middle 1800s. I grew up singing this song as a response every Sunday, with one tune or another. This is an ancient form of worship that bubbled out of someone’s heart for God nearly eighteen hundred years ago. It expressed many people’s passion and confidence that honor be given to

God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, even as it was before humanity's rebellion in the beginning, even now through broken humanity and forever in the renewal of all things. It states that creation will glorify God forever. As this song or prayer flows out of my understanding and love for God, or lacking that understanding, as it flows in response to what God asks of me, it constitutes true worship. Outside that, it is an empty form and a farce as the Greek translation of Isaiah 29:13 declares.

In America, we've recently focused on worship forms that are more comfortable to us than on what comes from a heart truly tuned to God and his word? Does it really matter that you are comfortable in worship, or does it matter more that what you do truly honors God? The two, on occasion, can compete. Some of the greatest ways we honor our loved ones is when we go beyond our comfort zone in responding to what we hear from them.

Knowing that, are there forms of worship that are uncomfortable to you? Are their things you avoid doing that would please God?

Many Westerners prefer a form of prayer that I call *Concord Prayer*. In public, one individual prays and others silently agree with an occasional outburst of "yes" or "amen". The other day a biblical scholar pointed out to me how brief some of the prayers in Scripture are. I didn't answer him at the time, but I suppose they are, if the words recorded in the Bible were taken verbatim from *Concord Prayer* sessions. However, the Bible often describes these prayer meetings as quite long; and Jewish people and early Christians are known to have engaged in *Concord Prayer*. Everybody prayed aloud at the same time. (To taste this, I want each of you to think of two sentences that praise Jesus. It can be "I love you Jesus," "praise you Jesus," or "You are my Lord and King." It can be "Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost." Have you thought of two sentences? Now, on the count of three, say it aloud. One,

two, three...) This is *Concert Prayer*. This kind of prayer is still practiced among Jews, Moslems and many Christians across the planet. In Acts 4 when Peter and John were released from prison, they met with other believers and the Bible says:

They raised their voices together in prayer to God. (Acts 4:24, NIV)

Understand that no one wrote down the prayer in Acts 4:24 through 30 in advance for them all to recite. The Bible goes on to say what ***they*** prayed. No one individual prayed the recorded prayer while the rest agreed. Instead, they likely all cried aloud to God and as the murmur softened different voices spoke, read Scripture and cried out what was recorded. Six verses of the Bible may well represent six hours of prayer and song. Does God say in the Bible that we must pray in this specific form? No. Do some pray this way with fully devoted hearts? Yes. Do some pray this way because they sense God calling them to? Yes. Is it true worship for them? As long as they are listening to God! However, if they do it because it is expected by others or they are comfortable with it, then worship of God is not the issue or the action.

Some folks raise their hands in worship. They read Paul's word to Timothy:

I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing. (1 Timothy 2:8, NIV)

They see David's example in his Psalms:

Hear my cry for mercy as I call to you for help, as I lift up my hands toward your Most Holy Place. (Psalm 28:2, NIV)

I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands. (Psalm 63:4, NIV)

They read Psalms 119:

I lift up my hands to your commands, which I love, and I meditate on your decrees. (Psalm 119:48, NIV)

They sense a call from God in the words of the Psalmist:

Praise the LORD, all you servants of the LORD who minister by night in the house of the LORD. Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and praise the LORD.
(Psalm 134:1-2, NIV)

They hear God's voice in the words of the Prophet Jeremiah:

Arise, cry out in the night, as the watches of the night begin; pour out your heart like water in the presence of the Lord. Lift up your hands to him...
(Lamentations 2:19, NIV)

They feel convicted by Jeremiah and see their raised hands as signs of surrender when they read:

Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD. Let us lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven, and say: "We have sinned and rebelled and you have not forgiven." (Lamentations 3:40-42, NIV)

When people lift up their hands in response to what they hear the Spirit saying to them, they truly worship. When they do it because it is expected or they are trying to appear spiritual, their actions are empty and have no meaning.

In Matthew 15 Jesus, citing Isaiah 29:13, spoke of how empty worship is, no matter what form you employ – praise songs, hymns, lifted-hands, the Gloria Patri – if your heart carries evil thoughts, murder, adultery, pornography, theft, lie, slander. In that state, true worship begins with a desperate cry for forgiveness and deliverance from those sins.

What then do we do in worship? We seek God with all our hearts, minds, souls and strength. We tend to his word that we might know him and understand what will please him. We bare our hearts before him and yield them to him, that he might purify what we offer. Tending to the voice of his Spirit, we offer our bodies, our abilities, our possessions and time for his pleasure. He alone, not the acceptance or admiration of others, is the focus. True, his love compels us to care for others; but it does not call us to substitute their acceptance for God's pleasure. Love God with all your heart, soul and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself.