



The Bridge Church

## The Spiritual Practice of Worship

Worship isn't just a religious reality, it's a human reality. Every life is turned towards its strongest desires and highest loves with devoted expectation and hope. The West may feel it has dethroned the divine, but it has merely deified its desires.

The modern temple can be found everywhere. Many hallow the halls of the office with their sacrifice of overwork and devotion. Pleasure is a hard-to-please goddess with worshippers all over the globe, seeking her blessing in bars, stadiums and resorts. Mammon smiles at unwitting congregants caught in a vicious pilgrimage toward wealth and status.

The question is not whether you worship, but what you worship. Like a high-pressure hose with a broken tap, you can't turn your worship off, all you can do is point it in the right direction.

For Christians, we must expand our understanding of worship beyond the walls of the church and the pages of Scripture. Our lives are worship. Romans 12:1-2 illustrates vividly: *'Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.'* Forget a sacrifice, we are the sacrifice.

There's so much we can say about a whole-life-of-worship. But this article is focusing on embedding a spiritual practice of worship through music into your life with God that might cultivate and contribute to a whole life of worship. We'll consider the topic as a whole, then some challenges that will hopefully put a rock in your worship shoes.

### Worship through Music

Worship through music pervades the whole of Scripture. Moses and Miriam on the edge of the Red Sea (Exodus 15:1-18), Israel in wilderness pilgrimage (Numbers 21:17-18), the victory of Deborah (Judges 5), the praises of Asaph (1 Chronicles 16:7-36), the rejoicing of Mary (Luke 1:46-56), and so on.

We have a God-breathed and God-appointed prayer and song book in the Psalms, along with the command to the church for Spirit-filled and heart-felt worship in song (Ephesians 5:15-20). You cannot avoid the priority, prevalence and importance of praise for the biblical expression of Christianity.

Like every spiritual practice, worship in music captures something unique and distinct that others do not. A few quick thoughts:

1. God delights in our praise through music and constantly invites us to sing (see previous references).
2. The medium of music pulls together the whole person as it draws forth emotion, expresses beliefs, engages our minds, uses our lips and binds us together as the church in unity.
3. Praise reinforces belief, refreshes the weary, reminds the wavering, expresses the joyful, encourages the downcast, and re-orientes the distracted.
4. Simultaneously, some will find words to give expression to their hearts; while others will sing words that they might not currently 'feel' as a great act of Job-like worship.

But, also here's a light challenge: **biblical praise should engage your head, heart and hands.**

## Use your Head

What we sing, how we sing it, and who we sing to makes all the difference. We must make sure we don't over-emphasise the emotional or experiential element of praise at the expense of a thoughtful, theological and biblical regard to our singing.

Take Taylor Swift as a case study.

It is unsurprising to me to find people with hands in the air and tears in their eyes at a Taylor Swift concert, because music is powerful, humans are worshippers, and TayTay is awesome (?). She taps into the modern human experience and people resonate and express that through her music. You could almost say she's giving some people a 'spiritual' experience.

Now, before you freak out on me, I'm not equating a good time at T-Swizzle with our worship at church. There is a difference, even in emotional expression and experience, in what we do at church than anywhere else. But we've already covered that worship isn't just a Christian thing, it's a human thing. And music has a way of bringing forth what lies below. Hence why we need to use our noggins.

This isn't anti-emotion or experience (quite the opposite as we'll see in a moment), rather it's a call to tether every part of our praise to the Word. We are singing truth about God, to God, with God, in the community of God, so everything about how we worship and what we sing should reflect that reality.

Moreover, we might not realise it, but so much of the content of our beliefs are shaped by what we sing regularly. And, more than content, we emphasise certain parts of our faith, theology and vision of God, because they recur in our playlist. We even catch the 'vibe' of worship. When it's always 'me and Jesus', our faith follows suit. When it's only 'Thou art great', the same is true. Like a good diet, we need to think holistically about how we nourish ourselves spiritually in song.

Practically? Don't switch off when you worship. Think about what you sing, and then sing it out with conviction to God. Biblical worship is thoughtful worship.

## Bring your Heart

There can be fear in Christian circles around (1) a manipulative approach to worship music, or (2) an emotionalism devoid of truth or substance. Both have no place in the church. But... don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.

*'Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord'* (Ephesians 5:19).

We should feel deeply in our life with God, and especially in our praise. The Psalms are not only full of songs that are deeply personal and emotional, but explicitly call us to seek God with emotional expression and experience. (There are so many, but see Psalm 42 for a great example).

Don't just sing with your lips and mentally ascribe with your head. The Apostle Paul says to sing from the heart!

In praise we come to God as we truly are, and allow God the space to shape, challenge and fill our hearts as we behold him in our music. He desires and calls for our joy in song. He longs for us to come with our sorrow and find fresh hope. He receives us in our apathy, and gently reminds us of what is true.

We cannot be afraid of experience, for true experience of God is a unique place of transformation. With the freedom and access granted by the Holy Spirit within us and among us as the church, we *'contemplate the Lord's*

glory, [and] are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.' (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Let's not be the frozen chosen. Refuse to switch off your feelings, or check-out emotionally from worship. Sing loudly with joy. Don't be afraid of tears. Our 'songs from the Spirit' (Ephesians 5:18) aren't described as such because the lyrics come from divine revelation - they are songs sung from the Spirit-filled heart. Lean in, and behold the beauty of the Lord, for as you draw near he will be at work.

## Lift Your Hands

By hands I don't just mean hands, but the involvement of our bodies in our worship. The biblical picture of a person refuses to separate the body from the soul or the spirit. Just as biblical fasting finds its importance as a bodily expression of faith, biblical worship is missing something if the body is left out of the equation.

Now, I know this one might feel jarring but bear with me. The Psalms relentlessly call us to worship with our bodies. We're called to clap (Psalm 47), lift our hands (Psalm 63), bow and kneel (Psalm 95), stand (Psalm 119), lift our eyes (Psalm 121), and dance (Psalm 149-150).

King David, who is described as a man after God's own heart, comes back to Jerusalem with the ark of the LORD with fresh reverence (after botching it the first time three months prior in 2 Samuel 6:1-11). Sacrificing after the first 6 steps, 'wearing a linen ephod, David was dancing before the Lord with all his might, while he and all Israel were bringing up the ark of the LORD with shouts and the sounds of trumpets.'

Interestingly, when he is confronted by the disdain of Michal he replied, 'I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes.' This is the outworking of a heart captured by worship.

Paul writes in 1 Timothy 2:8 'I want the men everywhere to pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or disputing.' The 1st century posture of Jewish and Christian prayer was embodied in lifted hands. Of course we know this verse isn't suggesting that true prayer requires elevated upper limbs. But we don't ignore the underlying principle of a biblical anthropology.

Many have shared with me that they don't often express their worship physically because they're not feeling a deep joy or gratitude as they sing, or it doesn't feel natural to them. I appreciate the sentiment here, because there is a desire to be authentic and true as we come to God.

But in the same way that we still sing despite (and often precisely because of) our cold hearts, I would suggest the same with expressing our praise physically. I rarely lift a hand as I sing because I 'feel like' it. I do it because God is worthy, and I choose to worship him however I currently feel. Often this intentional choice to worship fans the heart into flame.

We must be authentic in our singing, and we shouldn't be inauthentic. But we must ask how much of our approach is learnt behavior from our theological assumptions? Our church culture of origin? Our worries about how people will think of us? The culture of the moment, or even the culture of the church?

We believe strongly in a freedom of worship at our church. There will never (and should never) be an expectation or compulsion to worship in a certain way. I do want to ask you to consider your **head**, your **heart**, and your **hands**. What would, could or should it look like for you to worship God through music?

## Rhythms of Worship

We should make and keep singing worship an important part of our life. Head, heart and hands. These are only a few-of-a-billion reasons Christians should commit to showing up to the church gathering, but it also challenges us to consider where and how we will integrate praise into our personal and communal life as Christians.

Here are a few ideas.

- Sing in your personal time with God.
- Sing with your small group, even if it's acapella and off key.
- Sing with your family at home, even if you just play a song off your phone.
- Sing to yourself as you walk down the street.
- Sing in the car on your commute.
- Saturate your home with head-and-heart stirring worship music.
- Put it in your earbuds while you clean or run errands.
- Put a playlist on in the background when you have people over to your home.
- Sing over your children, share songs with your friends, and be unashamed in your joy when you sing.

However and wherever you find that works for you, embed it into your rhythms and routines as you can, to unthinkingly forge moments where you return to the all-of-life-worship that flows from knowing the God of love.