

WORSHIP AS INTERPERSONAL

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Worship is an interpersonal act in the vertical direction. It requires awareness, imagination, and concentration in contrast to habit or a stimulus-response elicited by form, place, or atmosphere. There is no required posture of the body, just a posture of the heart and mind. There is no necessary location such as one mountain or city (John 4:21). Instead, God wants people to worship him in spirit and truth because he is spirit and truth. Spirit lies inside interpersonalism. It does not require a temple, church building, or prayer room. It does not call for quietness or loudness, stillness or movement.

Worship calls for self-expression, which means that the worshipers' character forms a context for the activity they perform: "*The prayer of righteous people avails much*" (James 5:16). "*People need to test themselves and then observe the Lord's Supper*" (1 Corinthians 11:28). Since worship is interpersonal, the character of the worshiper is relevant to its validity.

Worship seeks closer conscious unity with God—drawing near to God (Hebrews 10:1-4). The goal is not to lose identity in the worship experience, but to express our identity to God through that experience. Our identity is the means of associating with God. Worship is not the mystical experience of the flight of the soul to God, where unity comes from being absorbed into the ultimate monolithic One. Worship is not a striving after nirvana.

Worship does not call for making ourselves into zeros replaced by the Spirit. Worship does not reduce us to instruments by which God in the person of the Spirit speaks to himself. Glossolalia destroys worship if it means that we do not even know what we are saying. It cannot be communication. Worship disallows self-negation.

Worship is directed to God. It is not attention-getting behavior aimed at any audience for display. Worship should not feel like performance, where the stress falls on eloquence, the lack of mistakes, polished production. Performance implies "Look at me," "Praise Me." There may be nothing wrong with performance as such and there may be nothing wrong with performance even with religious music; but in such cases, it is not called worship lest it replace worship. Art expresses something captivating, arresting, impressive for the observer's advantage more than the performer's praise. Performance art in a worship setting changes the experience from worship to self-aggrandizement or audience benefit. Emphasis must fall, not on aesthetics, but on power to accomplish the upward purpose. Any concern for accuracy or "quality" is to avoid detracting from that purpose and for enhancing it naturally. The concern is not primarily for technical proficiency, but for having the heart in it.

Worship is addressed to God as a person. Stressing the interpersonal nature of worship tempers any tendency to overly exalt God. Exalting him too far loses personal contact with him. Mariolatry and saintly intercession likewise push God away. The same can be said of the confessional and priestly intercession as a means of getting through to God. The more stress there is on priestly, saintly, and Marian mediation, the farther away God becomes from putting them between the worshiper and the Lord.

The prohibition against idolatry comes from the fact that an idol depersonalizes God. Looking at a lifeless statue fosters the sense of a lifeless god, even though in theory the idol or icon only represents the reality beyond it or serves as the dwelling place of the deity within it. (1) Besides causing the worshiper to misconceptualize the deity as an animal or human being, the idol also obscures personhood because of what it is made of—wood, stone, gold, or silver. (2) That problem compounds even more basic difficulties stemming from the fact that producing the statue (Acts 17:29), being able to move it around, being able to leave its presence creates a sense of superiority to it, ability to manipulate it, ability of avoiding it. Idolatry makes god a projection of human imagination in contrast to his coming to us from beyond. God is a person, not a thing.

Worship is directed to God as a person, not as a force. God as person differs from god as force. Conceiving of him as a force leads to emotionalism, which is self-centered, individualistic, and person-thing rather than I-Thou. It strives to experience a zing or exhilaration by way of ecstasy, frenzy, psychological release from problems, or emotional detachment from the world. The Spirit gets misconceptualized as a mysterious energy or a force field, and worship means entering that force field or getting on the right “wave length.” God is a person, not a force.

Worship is directed to God as person, not idea. He is not the symbol of perfection, the principle of order, or the symbolic answer for the unknown. So, worship is not meditation. God is a person, not an idea.

The criterion for worship is what keeps it interpersonal. Beyond that, worship must be outward and upward directed instead of impersonal, horizontal, or internal.

Worship must balance form and spontaneity. Form in worship need only be present sufficiently to make the experience orderly so other persons are not distracted from God while trying to worship him. When the form becomes so elaborate that the worshiper worries more about it than God, the ritual becomes counterproductive.

Worship does not require any particular form. If worship is interpersonal, the only patterns are those natural to the relationship. It is appropriate for God to call for certain forms of worship such as the Lord’s Supper. The forms of worship can be generated by the worshipers because they can determine what they mean by them.

Worship proscribes inappropriate forms. Examples are those contrary to God’s character or to relationship with him: idolatry, human sacrifice, debauchery. Positive commandment would

be necessary for eliminating any practice that is not contrary to first principles. Worshipers do well to be cautious about matters that might be culturally tainted.

Interpersonal does not mean that people cannot use impersonal instruments to express worship. Giving someone a flower is giving them something impersonal, but the giving itself is interpersonal. Mowing someone's yard when the person is sick is an interpersonal act done for that person. Even language, the voice, sound, postures are all impersonal items used for relational purposes. In fact, all interpersonal activity uses what itself is impersonal to express one person's self to another.

In this light, prohibiting the use of an instrument in worship cannot rest on its own lack of interpersonal character, a reason from the nature of the case for God's prohibiting it. Besides the distinction between what is worship and what is used to express worship, there is a distinction between what is worship and what accompanies worship. We might as well note that not all Christian music is worship music if we define worship as directed to God. A high percentage of songs is directed to other people for teaching and encouragement.

As to a New Testament basis for non-instrumentalism, interpersonalism arises again in connection with the nature of the New Testament and the hermeneutic to be applied. Our understanding makes the New Testament an interpersonal communication written on the heart rather than rules written on tablets of stone, rather than a constitution that operates like a legal code. In legal matters, by its very silence a constitution may prohibit what it does not contain (depending on what it is dealing with even here). Only specified processes can have validity.

Confusion about the nature of the New Covenant demonstrates itself in the idea that the New Testament is as much a constitution for the church as the Old Testament was a law for Israel. The legalism that results in matters of worship and elsewhere is unfortunate.