

WORSHIP OVERVIEW

Worship describes the rites by which a faith community pays respect and gives religious adoration to its deity. Rites or rituals are the ways a group acts—the expected or repeated ways in which people express their respect, needs, gratitude and adoration.

Worship is a celebration. And celebrating is natural to the human spirit. Celebrations of one kind or other can be found in all human cultures. Religious worship and secular celebrations therefore tend to overlap in function and spirit. All religious worship draws on culture to some extent; some may appear rather secular—perhaps catering to pop culture, dance movements, or a music concert atmosphere. Similarly, some secular celebrations—especially funerals and patriotic memorials—can border on the religious. Secular celebrations celebrate the human spirit and community; religious worship seeks transcendence and God.

Youthful celebrations (whether around sports, music, dance, or special events like graduation) provide for a release of energy, expression of feelings (negative and positive), a certain temporary but intense bonding, lamentation (of personal hurts or social ills), escape and renewal.

Religious worship may consist of sitting in silence, standing in awe, bowing or other repeated actions, praying, bringing offerings, music and singing, listening to readings and/or sermons.

Worship is more popular among youth today than at any time in the remembered past. Worship was either considered boring or a necessary requirement through most of the twentieth century. Toward the end of that century it became more varied and often more animated. Music became very important in youthful worship. Still, praise music is not the whole story of worship.

You may find students walking a labyrinth as an act of worship. In some places, youth stream into a cathedral to worship in silence and solemnity on a Saturday or Sunday evening. Alternative styles of youthful worship, using youth's own music, multimedia and interactive experiences also have sprung up.

In 1940 Brother Roger founded an ecumenical community in Taizé, south of Burgundy, France. Catholics and Protestants from 25 countries have joined this monastic brotherhood over the years. Their commitment to meditative prayer and singing has attracted thousands of youth from all over the world. Their songs and style of worship are also used as special services in churches worldwide. (www.taize.fr/en)

Greenbelt started on a Suffolk pig farm in England in 1974 and has grown to a much larger setting at a racecourse in Cheltenham. It is a music, arts and ideas festival that points toward worship. It has grown, attracted large crowds of youth (and all ages) besides inspiring innovative and alternative styles of worship in the UK and beyond. (www.greenbelt.org.uk)

In the U.S., Passion "exists to glorify God by inviting students everywhere to seek God wholeheartedly in an atmosphere of corporate worship.... To unite in worship and prayer for awakening in this generation." Louie Giglio was its founder in 1995. The OneDay Campus Tour Band is part of Passion's ministry and has visited 120 campuses. (www.passionnow.org) Similarly, Creation East is located halfway between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania on Agape Farm. Music, speakers and worship continue from 9am to 11:30pm each day. Like Greenbelt, Creation provides a great variety of activities. (<http://creationfest.gospelcom.net>) The Alive Festival is held at Clay's Park Resort in Canal Fulton, Ohio. It presents an impressive array of musicians, speakers and worship leaders. (<http://alive.org>)

Much of the above, but definitely not all, tends to be white and middle-class. It is important to hear from urban voices.

I believe hip-hop culture can be used as a vehicle for ministry to young people.... The fact that hip-hop encompasses dance, beats, and rhythm should help us rethink how we approach praise and worship. In my church in Minneapolis, hip-hop is being used to create a new culture of the emerging Christ-centered,

multiethnic, urban community. Within our worship experience we use spoken word, dance, rap, and visual art to present biblical truth. We've used hip-hop culture through fashion to create a "dressed-down" environment where people don't feel less important in our church if they don't come wearing their "Sunday best." (Efrem Smith is the senior pastor of The Sanctuary Covenant Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota as well as an itinerant speaker and author.)

It seems important to state that praise music does not equal worship. Singing and worship leaders should be regarded as secondary (and preparatory) to preachers of the Word and those who officiate at Holy Communion. Throughout biblical and church history the primary act of worship is the bringing of an offering. (Cain and Abel, Noah, Abraham, etc. through Revelation).

When you come into the land the Lord your God is giving you... (as you proceed through life and receive blessings from God), you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground which you harvest... (be sure to bring a tithe or offering) you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name... (to the church of your choice) to the priest (the pastor receives your offering as "the stuff" of communion). Deuteronomy 26: 1-11, NRSV and paraphrase

Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts... worship... (Psalm 96:8, NRSV. This verse we take to be central to the study of biblical worship.)

Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it (the berakah), he broke it, gave it to his disciples and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks (berakah or eucharist) he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you: for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matthew 26: 26-28, NRSV. Note, the bread and wine had been offerings of the disciples.)

Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." (John 6: 53, NRSV)

(The first believers after the resurrection of Jesus Christ) devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread (the Last Supper or Eucharist was first called "the breaking of bread") and the prayers.... Day by day, as they spent much time in the temple, they broke bread at home with glad and generous hearts praising God and having good will of all the people. (Acts 2: 42, 46-47, NRSV)

Christian worship took the synaxis (liturgy of Scripture reading and prayers) from the synagogues and combined with the seder (Passover liturgy of Jewish homes) to become the breaking of bread which soon became known as the Eucharist, later the Mass and then the Protestant Communion or Lord's Table/Supper. This is the classical form of Christian worship.

Now we face the challenge: how can worship be the most significant part of youthful life? And questions: How far can worship be adapted to cultural styles and tastes? when do we lose the form of classic worship? how do we protect both form and spirit? what significant offerings can young people bring to the altar? how can worship appeal to old and young together, and when do age or cultural/ethnic groups need, at least temporary, separation?

Along with celebrating God and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Christian youth need to express themselves, celebrate their own spiritual journeys, lament their world and personal situation, experience grace, find healing and forgiveness, hear hope from the Word of God, bond with others, and find strength to confront an adverse culture. In short, they need a holy and safe place to dump their garbage and offer up their choice offerings. Through such worship they will find relief and significance. In the Body and Blood of our Lord, they will find hope in a sometimes-dark world. Hopefully they will also find respect for all other religions in a common effort to bring justice and peace to our world.

Above all, worship should take us beyond ourselves and lift us above the humdrum and tragedies of life. Worship is to God and for God, showing us that gratitude, apology, humility, and acceptance of divine grace make us more human, more fully alive, and more capable of service to others.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What does worship mean to you?
2. How important is worship in your life? Are both the form and spirit of worship important?
3. How can we today bring the first fruits of our lives as an offering to God in our worship?
4. What about the article above impresses you, or do you question, or with what do you disagree?
5. Do you think the idea of worship is worthy of study (biblical study, historical study and study of the contemporary church)? Are there things we can learn from the study of other churches and other religions?
6. Where and how do you see significant discussions of worship?

IMPLICATIONS

1. We do affirm that celebration and worship are an important part of spiritual life.
2. In secular society and church youth are taking a lead in celebrations.
3. Western individualism and consumerism has influenced approaches to worship. We need to understand the importance of solidarity and corporate worship—and that it's "not all about me and what makes me feel good."
4. Scripture and history affirm that both the form and spirit of worship are important.
5. The importance and tensions around worship call for both study and dialogue among scholars, clergy and laity—old and young.
6. The Liturgical Renewal Movement was one of the important features of 20th century church history. It led to intense study of early Christian worship, and those concerned about worship should note its results. This movement has also led to increased attention to the Eucharist in many denominations.

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