

[Worship]

[Worship of Argumentative Wealth, Words & Wants of Materialism]



How we see [Worship] may be in the eye of the beholder, or perhaps written in the 'sacred place' we call the human mind &/or touched or conceived by the human heart (emotions) existing as our 'sacred space' found within us all

Worship Theology 101: What's in a Word?

The most commonly cited definition of the word “worship” is based on the etymology of the English word: “Worship” is derived from the Old English word “woerthship.” So, when we worship God, we are proclaiming (or giving him back) his worth.

The variety of individuals who use this as their functional definition of “worship” is staggering. When I searched for blogs on the topic of worship, the most common title I came across was “Worship Is...” and nearly all of these blog entries finished that sentence (eventually) with “giving God his worth.” Plenty of worship practitioners use this definition. Most “theology of worship” books make reference to it. Even N.T. Wright, in his book “For All God’s Worth” uses it.

In some ways an etymology-based definition can be a helpful start. God’s worth is infinite, so we can never give back enough – a fact that leads us toward the glimmer of a biblical (rather than etymological) definition: a life given in service of God.

The study of the history of words, however, can only get us so far as we strive to understand what it means to worship a triune God. It might be a good place to begin, but leaving the definition of “worship” in the old English is, at best, problematic for both understanding and practice.

Yes, “worth-ship” can lead us toward the glimmer of a biblical understanding. It does so, however, without reference to any biblical text, and therefore cannot answer any of the questions the definition raises: how do we know that God is worthy; assuming that he is, what is his worth; and what is the appropriate way to give it back to him? Old English, beautiful as it may be, can only stare at these questions blankly.

Not only does this definition fail to answer the questions it raises, it also fails to add much at all to our understanding of the word. Most of us have already been reading the word “worship” with tacit understanding of the word as “giving honour and praise to God.” I’m not sure the phrase “giving God his worth” adds anything at all to that meaning; it’s simply a trendier way of phrasing it. The word honour, at its root, means glory, dignity or reputation; the difference between giving God honour and giving him worth, therefore, seems at most a very short hop. I can give him what is due his dignity, reputation, or glory; or I can give him what is due his worth. Surely, in the case of a God who abhors dishonesty, these amount to the same thing. I have a hunch that our fascination with “worth-ship,” then, is nothing more than the search for a fresh pat-answer; a quick and shallow understanding that doesn’t take much effort, but allows us to feel like we’re getting a big pay-off.

Not only is it a shallow and unbiblical definition but, if we actually take the etymology seriously, we discover that it is also a stagnant definition. Worth-ship is a state of being (like friend-ship). When we apply the word “worship” to God, we simply affirm that he is of worth. There is no sense of movement, of interaction, of relationship with God. There is no sense of the narrative that underlies scripture; of the call and answer that enriches our lives before God; of the patterns and forms of approach that God has set in place. It’s a definition that would easily lend itself to a deist stance: my worship of God admits to his existence and his worth, but does not really infer any

interaction between us. God might have set things in motion, but he has now stepped away, and I can admire him from a distance.

Furthermore, what does it mean to say that God is worthy? Worth is usually determined in relation to function. A vase, for example, is considered worthy if it holds water, displays flowers to advantage, and has a pleasing shape, form, and colour. None of these virtues would cause you to proclaim a colander worthy. So it is useless to talk about “giving God his worth,” unless we are able to first articulate what makes God worthy. Some who use the definition take the time to biblically examine the character and person of God in an effort to understand what it means to “give God his worth,” but many more do not.

So, if this definition of worship is as woefully inadequate as I paint it, where should we turn for a better one? I would suggest that we begin with biblical languages, admittedly not my strongest skill-set, but no less essential because of that.

In Hebrew, there are a myriad of words used to describe the act of worship. Besides multiple words for dancing and singing, and various other rejoicing and mourning-type movements and noises, there are at least ten other words that are frequently translated worship. These ten words carry the following connotations: bowing down, falling down, service, labour, making, inquiring, seeking, fear, awe, ministering, and supplicating. Do you notice anything? Every single one of these words has a very physical, very active meaning. There is no “state of being” in this definition, but a very real and visceral description of the ways in which we are to act toward God. These words infer movement, action, interaction, and relationship.

The Greek is similar. Again there are multiple words devoted to rejoicing and mourning-type movements and noises. In addition, there are about thirteen words that are translated as “worship,” most of them indicating the following actions: bowing or prostrating oneself; ritual service; and acts of service toward God. Again, there is a physicality here (although less so than in the Hebrew) that specifies not just our attitude toward God or a vague understanding of him, but our actual day-to-day movements. And this doesn’t even include the countless subtle references to Hebrew worship that are woven through the New Testament text.

I hope it is apparent that even this over-simplified biblical word-study yields us more fruit than that of English etymology. But even in-depth Hebrew and Greek word studies, while they help, will not get us to a full biblical definition of worship. Scripture communicates far too actively for that. It is narrative, poetry, prophesy and rhetoric that we need to study in order to push aside stagnant, shallow, and unbiblical definitions and move toward the full knowledge of what it means to worship a triune God. I have only begun to move toward this type of definition. I could study for fifty years and still say I had only begun. But, with your help and company, I would like to continue to (in the words of C.S. Lewis) move “further up and further in.”

<http://thinkingworship.com/tag/worth-ship/>