

# What is Worship?

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

If it were not for the traditional use of the word 'worship' amongst Christians, substantial arguments could be raised against its continued use. For one thing, the denotative meaning of 'worship' is different from the related Greek and Hebrew terms. For another, the connotative meaning of 'worship' in the Christian community is substantially different from the biblical teaching on the topic. Since the evangelical Christian community is committed to the use of the term worship, it certainly bears careful examination so that we mean what God intends when we use it.

## 'Worship' Is An Inadequate Translation Of The Greek And Hebrew Terms

Our word worship derives from the Old English *weordhscipe* meaning worthiness or meritoriousness and thus giving God the recognition He deserves. There are some problems with this English translation, however, because the Greek & Hebrew terms do not mean precisely the same thing.

*'aboda* (Hebrew; also - *abad* or *asab*) and *latreia* (Greek; also - *latreuo*) are frequently translated as worship. Although, these are not the only words translated worship and even these words are not always translated, 'worship'<sup>2</sup>. When translated as worship in the OT these words typically mean service associated with the work done in the temple. In the NT the related Greek term *latreia* either refers back to the OT temple cultus<sup>3</sup>, to the false belief that killing disciples would be regarded as service to God<sup>4</sup> or as an OT allusion that Christians should offer their own bodies (i.e. meaning 'life') to God as a sacrifice.

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.<sup>5</sup> (Rom 12:1)

Paul uses the related Greek word *leitourgia* (i.e. translated service) to refer to a monetary gift collected for the Jerusalem Christians<sup>6</sup> and for the assistance he received from others<sup>7</sup> and the term *leitourgos* (i.e. translated serves or servant) is used of Christ<sup>8</sup>, angels<sup>9</sup>, rulers<sup>10</sup>, Epaphroditus's delivery of the Philippian gift<sup>11</sup>, and of ministry to the Gentiles<sup>12</sup>. Thus, the term *latreia* and its cognates are directly associated with both service & sacrifice when directed toward God. It might have been better if the translators had chosen the words 'serve', 'service' and 'minister' instead of worship.

Other terms are translated as worship including the Greek word *proskyneo*<sup>13</sup> and its Hebrew equivalent *shachac*.<sup>14</sup> Both of these terms refer to a posture of submission and thus an acknowledgment of

God's sovereignty. Obeisance requires an attitude of reverential fear. This is evident in the behaviors of bending the knee (i.e. *gonu* or *gonupeteo*) and bowing down (*histahawa* or *shachac* {Heb.} or *proskyneo* {Gk. to kiss forward}) which are associated with worship. It should be noted, however, that these postures are associated with other things too (i.e. one can have this attitude in petitions to God, gods or man).

The terms that communicate attitudes of service, submission & reverence (i.e. which are translated 'worship') do not indicate how such attitudes ought to be shown. We must rely on context to specify ways that God expects us to worship Him. When we examine the behavior of worshippers what do we see? Worship may be personal or corporate. It took place at and apart from the temple, however, God doesn't intend that worship be connected with place but with the heart attitude (Jn.4:20ff spirit & truth). It requires unity between believers (Mt.5:23f; Luke 10:25ff). An important term associated with worship is *homologia*.<sup>15</sup> Worshippers frequently spend some or all of their time professing faith, praising God, thanking God and proclaiming truths about God.

Another term often associated with worship is *thusia* meaning sacrifice. The reason this term should be connected to worship is that such references are allusions to the thank- offerings in the OT which were an important daily ritual of temple worship.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, in the cases where this term is used in the epistles it is usually in reference to self-sacrifice in the service of others.<sup>17</sup>

...and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma. Eph 5:2

But even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service<sup>18</sup> of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all. Phil 2:17

## **'Worship' is Assumed to Involve Singing and Praising God by Most Believers**

In *Putting an End to Worship Wars*, Elmer Towns asked the questions: What do you do in worship? How do you worship? What motivates you to worship? and What are the results of worship? From the responses he identified six worship styles in America: Evangelistic - winning the lost; Expository - teaching the word; Renewal - excitement, revival, 'touching God'; Body-life - fellowship, relationships and small groups; Liturgical - serving & glorifying God through liturgy and Congregational - worship expressed by the laity.

Of these, the renewal, liturgical, congregational approaches are arguably what most Christians conceive of as worship - times of personal and corporate singing and praise. As we have seen, however, the biblical principles and commands related to worship are much broader and more integrated into the Christian life. Worship is the response of grateful and humble people to the living God where submission, sacrificial

service, praise, profession, testimony and gratitude are freely expressed in innumerable ways. This is a much richer concept than mere corporate singing and praise once each week for 20 minutes - an event that could occur without any actual worship going on at all.

## **Conclusion**

As long as we are culturally bound to the unfortunate English word, 'worship,' we need to keep our understanding biblical rather than anchored in church traditions. A worshipper must be a humble person who is willing to:

- Subordinate their goals to God's goals by prioritizing service toward the Kingdom of God;
- Express gratitude and praise toward God and
- Tell others about God, his truths and the love they have enjoyed as His child.

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## **Endnotes**

1. This synopsis is, in large part, drawn from the article on worship by G. W. Bromiley in the Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Volume 5.

2. the labor of a slave or hired servant is associated with these terms

3. Rom.9:4; Heb.9:1, 6

4. Jn.16:2

5. logiken latreian umon

6. 2Cor.9:12

7. Phil.2:30 (c.f. Rom.15:27)

8. Heb.8:2

9. Heb.1:7; leitourgikos in 1:14

10. Rom.13:1

11. Phil.2:25

12. Rom.15:16; Phil.2:17

13. It is the word found in John 4:20ff; the meaning of this word is not entirely clear but is thought to be related to the word 'kiss' or 'to kiss forward' and is connected with the Greek practice of kissing the ground in deference to earth deities. Thus, the notion of prostration or obeisance is captured by the term. This term is never used outside of the gospels & Acts except once in reference to an unbeliever (1Cor.12:45). In the gospels obeisance is done to Christ repeatedly.

14. This word means 'bow down' e.g. Genesis 22:5

15. (and homologein) - 'to say the same thing'; 'to agree with'; to the Hebrew mind it means agreeing with God about ourselves and about Him. Thus, it is typically translated from the Hebrew to mean confession of sins and the subsequent praising of God (c.f. 1Ki.8:33,35; Neh.9:3-37). Here the praise carries with it the flavor of a proclamation (Ps.118:17ff) and/or of prayer. Some passages (Rom.10:9f; Acts 23:8; 1Tim.6:13; Heb.11:13) use terms related to this to indicate, not a mere statement of fact but profession of faith. It includes agreement with God about articles of truth.

16. See Exodus 29:39-41 for an example of a thank offering

17. Besides the two verses below see Rom.12:1,7;

18. thusia and leitourgia of your faith; to be consistent this should be translated, 'the sacrifice and worship of your faith'.