

GODFIRST:

Kingdom Priorities for Christian Living 7; “Making GODFIRST in our Worship”

“Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need.” Mt 6:33 NLT

Worship in the Kingdom of God, which is defined as the rule and reign of God in the hearts and minds of God’s people; is not an act conducted on Sunday morning, but a way and style of living that uniquely recognizes all of life as an act of worship. Whether eating breakfast, or watching the grandkids play soccer; whether selling clothes at the Gap, or making laws at the Capital; all of life should be considered an act of worship for followers of Jesus Christ. That being said what exactly does Kingdom Worship look like? There is only one instructive passage in the NT that deals exclusively with worship, and it is familiar

*But the time is coming—indeed it’s here now—when true **worshippers** will **worship** the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for those who will **worship** him that way. For God is Spirit, so those who **worship** him must **worship** in spirit and in truth. John 4: 23-24*

Good, we understand that right? Not exactly? Two things: Worship must be spiritual, meaning that it connects our spirit with God’s Spirit. Secondly, it must be truth-full, honest, without pretense. This week I read over 400 verses from the Old and New Testaments that mention worship; from them I was able to glean 6 key components of worship conducted by our Jewish forefathers and mothers, and from our New Testament brothers and sisters. I’ll share them with you in a minute.

I stumbled on this passage that caught my fancy, and I’ll use it as a foundational thought to center our thinking:

*But when the people come in through the north gateway to **worship** the Lord during the religious festivals, they must leave by the south gateway. And those who entered through the south gateway must leave by the north gateway. They must never leave by the same gateway they came in, but must always use the opposite gateway. The Prince will enter and leave with the people on these occasions. Ezekiel 46: 9-10*

Ponder this passage with me for a second. I can't be 100% certain what this means, but this is what struck me this week. When coming to worship, we have to come all the way in...go all the way through... and we leave a different way than we came! From North to South takes us past the center of the temple, where two things prominently reside: the holy of holies, and the altar of sacrifice.

It is not good enough to come to worship, in order to renew acquaintances, or see familiar faces. It is not the purpose of worship to conduct business or schmooze potential clients. It is not good enough to enjoy the singing, and tune out the rest. Worship is about more than the sermon, more than the singing, more than the setting, more than the sounds, sights, and even smells. Worship is about meeting God, and being changed by God even when we don't expect it, especially when we think we don't need it. Kingdom worship is about going all the way in, all the way through, and leaving...different...because the Prince will meet us there, and leave with us! That's how the verse spoke to me...what do you see?

Here then are the 6 common characteristics I saw in my cursory glimpse at worship in the Old and New Testaments. Kingdom worship involves:

1. BOWING DOWN

*The man bowed low and **worshiped** the Lord. Genesis 24: 26*

*Come, let us **worship** and bow down. Let us kneel before the Lord our maker,
Ps. 95:6*

*And as they went, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they ran to him, grasped his feet, and **worshiped** him. Matt. 28:9*

Without debate, the number one physical posture mentioned with worship is this; bowing down. Our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters have one over on us in this respect; most of their churches come with built in, hinge activated kneelers to permit and allow the easy access to this apparently essential characteristic of Kingdom Worship. Though in reality, I'm not so sure this is a physical act as much as it is an attitude of worship.

Humility is the attitude most closely associated with kneeling, and most keenly connected with truthful, spiritual worship!

Who do we think we are trying to impress coming to worship with upturned noses, and haughty attitudes of superiority? Who do we think is impressed with our new clothes or fat wallets, or fancy cars? God...hardly! I'm not saying we have to enter worship with sackcloth's and sadness; but we better remember who we are... and who we have come to meet! Bowing down...is at the heart of Kingdom worship.

2. CONFESSING ALL

*They remained standing in place for three hours while the Book of the Law of the Lord their God was read aloud to them. Then for three more hours they confessed their sins and **worshipped** the Lord their God. Nehemiah 9:3*

Confession is good for the soul, ever heard that? What does it mean? Why is it good for the soul? It's good for the soul because confessing our sins, to God, and sometimes even to one another; reminds us who we are...and who God is! How important is that as an entry point to worship? God is God and I am not. I am not, but I know I am. Cute phrases but essential theology for a Kingdom Worshipper, especially in this day and age of self-sufficiency, self-reliance, self-made, self-empowered, self, self, self...ish!

When after years of neglect, ignorance, and apathy, the Book of the Law was rediscovered in Jerusalem; amidst the ashes while rebuilding the temple, the Book was found and read...for 3 hours, and then 3 more were spent confessing and worshipping. You don't get around to confession at the perimeter of worship; you get to it at the heart, near the throne. The closer one comes to God, the more one feels the need to confess; that's why completing the journey to worship takes one right past the confessional. We don't need a corporate prayer of confession as much as we need personal responsibility to make sure our hearts and minds and souls are right and ready to meet God.

When in the presence of God, how can we think of doing anything else besides confession! It's not that we are worthless worms, but we are sinners; saved by grace!

3. LIFING UP

*Then Ezra praised the Lord, the great God, and all the people chanted, "Amen! Amen!" as they lifted their hands. Then they bowed down and **worshiped** the Lord with their faces to the ground. Neh. 8:6*

Kingdom worship certainly involves lifting up our praises to God. I know, I know, we German, Norwegian, Scandinavian, Russian immigrants don't lift our hands in worship; that would be like showing off. This too is an attitude! (Raise hands straight up) What is this the universal sign of? Yes, Surrender...and I think that is the right and appropriate attitude necessary to offer praise and thanksgiving to God. I know different people use different means to express their worship to God, and I think that acknowledging, even applauding each of our differences is part of the journey all the way in and through the temple; from the north gate to the south gate, you will see it all! Without question, praising God, thanking God, honoring God, worshiping God involves lifting our spirits, our hearts, our heads, even our hands toward God can be a wonderful reminder of all that God has done for us, and all God means to us.

And just for the record...in 26 years of active ministry I have yet to see anyone die from clapping their hands, or raising their arms in worship! You might like it!

4. LOOKING IN

*And Solomon, my son, learn to know the God of your ancestors intimately. **Worship** and serve him with your whole heart and a willing mind. For the Lord sees every heart and knows every plan and thought. If you seek him, you will find him. But if you forsake him, he will reject you forever. I Chronicles 28:9*

Looking within is all about seeking to know God intimately. Looking within is all about seeking God not just with our emotions (*your whole heart*) (as important and legitimate as that is); but also seeking to experience God with our minds, (*and a willing mind*). Do you see those two distinctives; whole hearts, and willing minds?

Balance is a key in Kingdom Worship; hearts and minds are necessary to go all the way through the temple and come out a different gate...a different person.

Traditional Methodism has probably erred focusing on the mind. Traditional Charismatics probably erred focusing on emotions. Balance is the key in Kingdom Worship. I hope your worship experience challenges your mind, and moves your heart! One without the other is a half-way journey through worship...don't forget this!

5. OFFERING ON

*And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to **worship** him. Rom. 12: 1-2*

Placing offerings on the altar is a huge part of the Old Testament system of worship. In fact, the temples and tabernacles of our ancestors were bloody venues, that smelled more like butcher shops than bed, bath and beyond stores! And Praise God, aren't we glad that Jesus forever ended that seemingly endless and gory practice? And Praise God, that the symbolism and significance have not been lost from our worship today!

The offering is not about raising money for the budget or my salary (as important as those two things certainly are...) it is about reminding ourselves that all we are and all we have are gifts from God. The offering in Kingdom Worship is about reminding ourselves that God first gave...therefore we also give. Kingdom offerings are not about dollars but dedication, it is not about cents and checks, but checks and balances...not of the bottom line, but of the soul!

I think that the offering, might be at the heart of Kingdom Worship, not at the entry point of the temple, but nearest to the holy of holies. One can't go all the way from the North Gate to the South Gate without passing the offering altar. Maybe it wasn't in the Old or New Testament temple, but I think it is; especially in 21st Century American Christianity.

Many people enter worship, but leave the same way they came, because they fail to yield, surrender, sacrifice themselves (and their money) on the altar of offering.

6. REACHING OUT

*“Get out of here, Satan,” Jesus told him. “For the Scriptures say, ‘You must **worship** the Lord your God and serve only him.’” Matt. 4:10*

*They **worshiped** together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord’s Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity...Acts 2:46*

There is at least a minimal thread running throughout these various verses that highlight and connect our worship, with acts of service. When worship is finished the service begins. I don’t know why we call worship “a service” except to remind us and drive home to us that we serve out of our worship, we work out of our rest. Worship and service are like breathing in and out; the most important act depends on which you just did last. If you have just breathed out, then the most important thing is to breathe in. If we have been encountered by God in worship then the most important thing is to breathe out that experience of God by the ways we live and serve our fellow citizens. There is a response to worship in the Kingdom, it is serving one another.

I’ll close these thoughts today by citing another group of passages I discovered primarily in the OT. Here is an example:

*O people of Israel, do not rejoice as other nations do. For you have been unfaithful (committed adultery with) to your God, by hiring yourselves out like prostitutes, **worshipping** other gods on every threshing floor. Hosea 9:1*

I was stunned by the severity of these rather numerous indictments. Worshipping false gods and idols is comparative to committing adultery and acting like prostitutes. Do you know where the idols and images usually reside? In the outer court, in the entrances, at the edges, around the periphery of our houses of worship.

I know we don’t possess any icons or idols in this building...but I wonder if my vain attempts to worship, that are so overcrowded with ulterior motives, might make God feel like I’ve committed adultery; or prostituted what he has so beautifully created for me to enjoy?

I wonder if I've made an idol of my particularly preferred style of worship, to the neglect of some others. I wonder if my hesitancy to go all the way in, and all the way through all that worship of God entails, leaves me leaving the same way I came in; guarded, guilty, and unchanged? I wonder if I have kept God at arms length by refusing to be fully and completely obedient to His sacred invitation to come all the way in, to see all there is to see, to experience all of God's presence, to know all of God's forgiveness; and to leave, different...or have I stepped in just far enough to be counted, far enough to worship my favorite idol, far enough.

Come all the way in, meet God in Worship...you'll never be the same again. You might want to go out a different door today! AMEN

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