

Worship

Worship: What is it?

One of the most ancient human activities is worship. Worship is the direction of the mind, emotions, body, and goods toward a person or object of devotion. It varies through culture and time, but this definition will help narrow our focus to Christian *public* worship:

worship. *The act of adoring and praising God, that is, ascribing worth to God as the one who deserves homage and service. The church, which is to be a worshipping community (1 Pet 2:5), expresses its worship corporately and publicly through prayer; through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; through the reading and exposition of Scripture (preaching); through observance of the sacraments (baptism and communion); and through individual and corporate living in holiness and service.¹*

We could add to this definition a few words about *private* worship. Worship is a matter of the heart. It has to do with what we cherish above all else in life. Jesus spoke about the kind of worshippers God desires in John 4:21-24, where he says God's worshippers must worship in *spirit* and in *truth*. If we are to worship in spirit, then worship is not only a matter of external observances, rituals, or liturgy but an internal posture toward God *as well as* whatever external things God desires in worship, such as prayers, songs, preaching, and so on.

Integrity in Our Lives of Worship

Throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament God is clear that he desires followers whose internal lives and external lives match up. In one famous passage, Jesus quotes the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, saying, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules" (Matthew 15:8-9 and Isaiah 29:13). The positive take is that Jesus also quoted from two places in Moses' writings to establish the basis for a life of worship, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:37-40 quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18). So, worship begins in the heart and moves outward. *Christian worship can be external but must be internal.*

There is a lot of confusion today about whether external worship is so important. Some people think that having a relationship with Jesus in the internal/private sense is all they need and that the external/public forms of worship are burdensome, legalistic, or inauthentic. It's common to hear someone who does not attend public worship say, "I'm spiritual, but not religious." Let's think about why gathering for public worship is so important. Then we'll look at how we can cultivate a life of private and internal worship that bubbles up into consistent and hope-filled participation in gathered worship.

¹ Grenz, S., Guretzki, D., & Nordling, C. F. (1999). [*Pocket dictionary of theological terms*](#) (p. 122). InterVarsity Press. Quote lightly edited for clarity.

Why Gathering is So Important

Gathering to worship with others is one of the first things Jesus did with his followers. Mark 3:14 says he “appointed twelve that they might *be with him* and that he might send them out to preach.” Notice the words: that they might *be with him*. Discipleship is about being with Jesus, imitating Jesus, and learning to do what he does. It is an apprenticeship. And where does Jesus take those who are with him? Luke 4:16 says Jesus “went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day (Jewish worship gathering) *as was his custom*.” Later, the same phrase is used about another follower of Jesus, Paul, as just one of many examples that Paul and early Christians continued to gather for worship like Jesus did (Acts 17:2).

Early Christians made a habit of gathering on Sunday in recognition that this was the day Jesus was raised from the dead. This sets the life of discipleship and worship squarely on the hope of the resurrection. What a great reason to worship! The phrase “first day of the week” is used in all four gospels about the day Jesus was raised and in Acts 20:7 we see, “*On the first day of the week* we came together to break bread (a reference to the Lord’s supper, i.e., communion). At this gathering we know that Paul preached to the people, and it was normal to sing, share testimonies, give offerings, and receive the sacraments at the same gatherings on Sundays.

Early Christian preaching also encouraged Christians to consistently gather. “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” (Hebrews 10:24-25). Notice the reasons given for gathering include encouraging one another and spurring one another to love and good deeds. The gathering time hones and prepares us to grow in love and service.

There’s a lot more that could be said about the importance of gathering, but for now here’s just a few comments. There are 59 times in the New Testament when Christians are commanded to do something for “one another,” such as love one another, encourage one another, and so on. Early Christian worship was participatory, not merely performative like the Greco-Roman religions around it, so much so that Paul instructed one church that, “when you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation.” (1 Corinthians 14:26). In other words, Paul expected everyone had something worth sharing in the worship gathering. And the earliest Christian response to receiving salvation through Jesus Christ was to be baptized and begin participating in communal gatherings that included teaching, fellowship, shared meals, and prayer. (Acts 2:38-47). A clear and distinctive mark of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus throughout the New Testament is the public gathering for worship and shared life. It is incredibly important!

For us, this promotes two obvious implications: the first is that we dedicate ourselves to regularly meeting with the entire church on Sundays for worship that includes preaching, singing, giving offerings, lots of prayer, and the sacraments of baptism and communion. The second is that we dedicate ourselves to participation in life with other Christians that is small, intimate, and consistent. This is why community group life is so important. It is in these settings that we get to mutually encourage “one another,” pray more closely for each other’s needs, celebrate the breakthroughs and answered prayers that God provides, and confess sin, discuss convictions, share hopes, and rest in the presence of those whom God has provided as friends and allies.

Barriers to Gathering

If you think about why a Christian would *not* gather with the church for worship a few reasons come to mind. Near the top is that other priorities have taken the place of God's call to us. Let's make the priority of our lives reflect God's call and God's plan. Let's give the first portion of the first day of the week to God. And let's also give a portion of our week to others in our community group life, sustaining each other in the life of faith by our mutual submission to each other and to the Spirit of God who binds our hearts together.

Also, there are sometimes felt risks to gathering, such as being rejected, let down, hurt, or missing out on other opportunities. Also, sometimes Christians are angry, harboring grudges, distracted by circumstances, or just plain bored. Let's be clear that we are not thinking about people who are homebound or have other very serious life situations that prevent them from gathering – we are considering why an otherwise available believer in Jesus would stay away.

The felt risks are serious. Being in community does come with risks and Christians, including pastors and elders, make mistakes, cause hurt, and need repentance and forgiveness to maintain community. This is why Jesus instructed us to cultivate our ability to forgive others and Paul taught us to "bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." (Matthew 18:21-35 and Colossians 3:13). Jesus and Paul did not say these things thinking it would be easy but knowing that community life is very hard and staying away would be a real temptation.

This is not an article dealing with all the ways hurt and disappointment can be dealt with, but because they are such prevalent barriers to gathering here are two suggestions.

First, when dealing with painful experiences that threaten to keep you from gathering with the church lean into those people whom you *do* trust and continue to go with them and for them until reconciliation is possible with those whom you have barriers. Go because of how much Jesus loves them and how much he loves you and lean into those Christian friends, elders, and pastors with whom you share a deep and abiding connection. If you don't have that kind of connection yet, seek it out and ask for it. Don't give up! Ask someone if you can sit with them. Ask a pastor or elder, they won't say no.

Second, continue your personal discipleship in private worship. As you cultivate a worshipping life on the inside, it becomes easier and more important for you to worship in community. The next section offers insights on developing a personal, semi-private, internal worshipping life. As we noted in the first section, God deeply desires this, and private worship naturally leads to full participation in gathered worship.

Cultivating a Worshipping Life

Worshipping once a week or less does not build up a spirit any more than working out a few times a year builds a body. Like physical health, spiritual health rests on rhythms of life that are repeatable, sustainable, and nourishing. Many of the same ingredients of gathered worship go into a personal daily worship plan, such as: scripture, song, prayer, and reflection on God and his ways.

We have already noticed how the earliest Christians responded to the wonderful news of their salvation by gathering. The New Testament also shows that they learned or continued in daily prayer practices. In Acts 3:1, Peter and John, disciples and friends of Jesus, are going to pray at three in the afternoon *which was their regular time of prayer*. Paul encourages believers

to “pray in the Spirit on all occasions... always keep on praying.” (Ephesians 6:18). He also tells believers in many places how he prays for them regularly.

Even more important for a disciple of Jesus, Jesus himself often went off for private prayer and devotion to God. Mark 1:35-37 tells about Jesus getting up early while it was still dark to pray alone. Luke 4:42-44 talks about this habit again. He worshipped privately as a regular habit and on occasions of great importance or preparation such as before he chose his twelve disciples (Luke 6:12-13), before his ministry began in earnest (Luke 4:1-2, 14-15), to recharge after hard work (Mark 6:30-32), to work through grief (Matthew 14:1-13), and when he was distressed (Luke 22:39-44). Jesus himself gives us ample examples that cultivating a private and regular worshiping life is of utmost importance in becoming a person who worships God in spirit and in truth, with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Practices and Resources for Going Further

*Here are some ideas to cultivate daily habits for worshipping alone and weekly rhythms of worshipping in community. These are just a few of our favorites. If you are looking for more ideas, just reach out to a pastor or elder and we would be happy to talk! **Open this PDF at covenantdolyestown.org/disciple to use the following hyperlinks.***

Get a Bible reading plan. Use <https://bibleplan.org> to set up a Bible reading plan. You can receive a daily email with readings at the time of your choosing. New to this? Start with a Gospel and read it over a few weeks. Better yet, read your plan in sync with a spouse or a few trusted friends and discuss what you are reading weekly.

Learn to pray scripture. Dust off the [Covenant Praying Scripture Guide](#) and refresh yourself on the simple practice of making your Bible reading your prayer prompt for the day. This is seriously the most sustainable, boredom-beating, and ancient way of doing a daily devotional. You can go deeper by [reading “Praying the Bible” by Donald Whitney](#).

Make a worship playlist for your run or commute. Almost everyone has Spotify, Apple Music, or the like. Take five minutes to build a playlist. There is so much you can do with this concept: playlist of praise songs, hymns, or scriptures set to music. YouTube is another place you can save favorite worship videos. **Bonus idea:** make a small group playlist with each member submitting one or two songs. Share with everyone to build each other up!

Expose yourself to great Christian prayers. Learn from the rhythms and topics of the prayers of faithful Christians. One great prayerbook is [“A Diary of Private Prayer” by John Baillie](#). It comes in hardback with a ribbon, Kindle, or Audible versions and has a month of beautiful prayers, one for each morning and evening. If you have time and like to write, write out some of your own prayers in a journal.

Get in a group! You need more community than only Sunday worship. Get in a group that reads scripture, prays a lot, and refuses to stay in the shallows. [Use Covenant’s Group Finder](#) or get trained to lead a group yourself. [We can train you to do this!](#)