

“Real Celebration”

1 Chronicles 29:20–22; Psalm 96:1–9; Acts 2:43–47;
Colossians 3:12–16

Why do you come to worship?

I’ve gone to church my entire life. Every Sunday, rain or shine. I served as an acolyte when I was a kid. I sang in choirs for decades. Worship was where you went for sacred music, to hear a (hopefully) helpful message, and see friends. But in recent years I have come to see worship very differently. This week, I want to help you think about and experience worship differently as well. We will rely heavily on the writing of James K. A. Smith, who reflected long and hard on this in a massive three-volume work on God’s kingdom and in a lay treatment of this work in a recent book, *You Are What You Love*.



We begin with an idea we’ve considered before in these studies: you are what you worship. Worship money and you become greedy. Worship sex and you become lustful. Worship food and you become gluttonous. . . . Worship God and you become Christlike. Thus, we must develop holy habits that reorient our hearts away from the idols of this world and toward our Creator and Redeemer. This isn’t easy or natural; there are no shortcuts and no other path. Smith quotes the novelist David Foster Wallace on this from a commencement address at Kenyon College:

In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship—be it JC or Allah, be it Yahweh or the Wiccan mother-goddess or the Four Noble Truths or some infrangible set of ethical principles—is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things— if they are where you tap real meaning in life—then you will never have enough. Never feel you have enough. It’s the truth. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you. On one level, we all know this stuff already—it’s been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, bromides, epigrams, parables: the skeleton of every great story. The trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness. Worship power—you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart—you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.

The insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they’re evil or sinful; it is that they are unconscious. They are default settings. They’re the kind of worship you just gradually slip into, day after day, getting more and more selective about what you see and how you measure value without ever being fully aware that that’s what you’re doing.¹

Our challenge is to move past these “default settings” that so much of the world seeks to plant within us. This is why worship is an essential feature of Christian discipleship and by this I mean corporate worship, those times and places where we gather together to worship our Lord. Take another look at the passage from Colossians above. We are to clothe ourselves in love (v. 14). Ok . . . but how? As Smith puts it, “by letting the word of Christ dwell in us richly, by teaching and admonishing one another, by singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.” It is all verbs and action; we put on love by

¹ Smith, James K. A.. *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (pp. 23-24). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition

doing. And that doing, that training, is worship. Worship is in many ways God's gymnasium, where God brings us so that he can reorient our hearts by practicing the habits of worship.

God's gymnasium?

Perhaps you are like me. I had always viewed worship as the place I went "to get fed" or, in current parlance, to have my "felt needs" met. But I was wrong; I was cheating myself, much less God. Worship, in the full sense of song, liturgy, and message is about God. Worship is not only God's gym where we are brought to be trained, it is where God is the object of our adoration, confession, proclamation, and thanksgiving. God is both the subject and object of worship. God is the one worshipped but is also the one who empowers and propels our worship. It is all about God, through and through.

God and we use various liturgical forms in worship, such as Holy Communion, baptism, calls to worship, confession, prayer, responsive readings' and more. Smith observes that for Abraham Kuyper, the Dutch Calvinist, the "various parts of the liturgy, and the liturgy as a whole, are to be seen as 'an interaction between God and the congregation'. Liturgy is action' and the actions are not just human action and not just divine actions but 'an interaction between God and his people, in which the people self-consciously participate.'"² To put it bluntly, when we come to think of worship only as our action, "I bow down, I kneel before you," we deeply misunderstand worship and rob it of its power to transform, for we have sought to remove the interaction, we have squeezed God out.

In my experience, this is a massive shift in orientation. If I come to worship thinking of myself as the audience, focused on what I might be given, then I have destroyed the interaction. But, on the other hand, if I come thinking only that God is the audience, then I have still destroyed the interaction. It is only when I come ready to give and to receive, ready to do the rhythms of call and response, grace and gratitude that God's gymnasium really flourishes. I suppose it is like having a personal trainer – it is only when trainer and trainee work together that real progress is made.

Working on our imaginations

If worship is this interaction between God and the congregation, why is it that so many worship services earlier in my life were so boring. I'm sure that some (much?) of it was me, my own inability to grasp what was really going on and why. And more to the point, why my presence was necessary to my growth as a disciple. But I also think some of it was failure on the part of the worship leaders to engage our imaginations and hearts in a way that moved me. Smith quotes Antoine de Saint-Exupery on this, "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea."³ It is that longing I never felt. Smith goes on:

In a similar way, Christian worship should tell a story that makes us want to set sail for the immense sea that is the Triune God, birthing in us a longing for "a better country—a heavenly one" that is kingdom come (Heb. 11:16). The biblical vision of shalom—of a world where the Lamb is our light, where swords are beaten into ploughshares, where abundance is enjoyed by all, where people from every tribe and tongue and nation sing the same song of praise, where justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an everlasting stream—is the vision that should be enacted in Christian worship. And that vision will captivate us, not just because we "know" it's what God wants, but because the tangible practices of Christian worship paint the picture, as it were—in the metaphors of the biblical story, the poetics of the Psalms, the meter of hymns and choruses, the tangible elements of bread and wine, the visions painted in stained glass—all of which works on our imaginations, teaching us to want.

² Ibid. p. 72-73. Smith is quoting Nicholas Wolterstoff who is quoting Kuyper. Obviously, this is a key

³ Ibid. p. 91

Worship works as fiction does: both traffic in story and target the imagination. Thus, an axiom for novelists is also relevant for worship leaders: show, don't tell. In a profound little book of literary criticism, *How Fiction Works*, critic James Wood delves into the very operation of literature. "Fiction does not ask us to believe things," he points out, "but to imagine them. 'Imagining the heat of the sun on your back is about as different an activity as can be from believing that it will be sunny. One experience is all but sensual, the other wholly abstract.'" Is there not a suggestive, analogical intuition here for Christian worship? "When we tell a story," Wood continues, "although we may hope to teach a lesson, our primary objective is to produce an imaginative experience."

Every pastor I've ever known has struggled with how to get the folks to come to worship more often, to see that they need it. But, perhaps if we are more open to worship that moves our imaginations, people would want to be here every week, sailing forth on a reoriented heart. More to the point, are we ready to hit the gym?

Daily Bible Readings

More on gluttony and restraint

Monday	<i>Galatians 3:27-31</i>	We worship together, all together, as one body
Tuesday	<i>Ephesians 1:3-21</i>	This passage is rooted in Jewish worship and tells the story of what God has done in creation.
Wednesday	<i>Romans 12:1-2</i>	How should this passage inform our understanding of worship?
Thursday	<i>Romans 15:7-13</i>	The Christ whom we worship is the hope of all the nations
Friday	<i>Revelation 4</i>	All the elders and the cherubim kneel in worship before God.
Saturday	<i>Revelation 5</i>	All creation worships not only God, but also the Lamb.