

CHAPTER ONE

What Do We Love?

EXERCISE

When you walk in the door on a Sunday morning, what are you hoping is going to happen to you? What should be true of the worship service to bring this about?

Introduction

While there are many things we hope for when we come to church on Sunday morning—community, pastoral care, teaching—in this study we are going to talk about the most fundamental purpose for gathering: worship. When we come to worship we bring our desires to love God and to be loved by him, to experience his love and be changed by it, to find ourselves in a community of love that God is creating, and to play a role in the story of love between God and his people. It shouldn't be surprising that worship is so deeply bound to love. In Deuteronomy, God begins to teach his people how to worship by saying, "Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart with all your soul with all your might." (Deuteronomy 6:4-5) Everything that follows—all the Levitical codes, all the specifications for the tabernacle, all the Law—issues from this love for God.

So to talk about worship is not to talk about ideas, styles, or even music at all; to talk about worship is to talk about what we love. When we talk about worship together—when we debate which songs to use in the worship service and find ourselves embroiled in arguments about worship—we are exposing the most intimate desires of our hearts to each other.

In any healthy love relationship, our actions and choices both express our love and form our love. Our love finds expression in loving words and actions. Our love is also formed by regular actions that we commit to—such as conversations and date nights—which we carry out no matter how we are feeling toward our loved one. In the same

way, worship is a place for us to come to express our love for our God through our words, our songs, our actions, and even our physical worship space. And it is where we come to be formed into the sort of people who can love God deeply and richly by participating in regular practices that shape our love and us. We are going to look at these two complementary aspects of worship—the *expression* of our love and the *formation* of our love—and talk about them in terms of their scriptural sources and their lovely fruit.

Discussion

Worship: The Expression of Our Love

Worship is the expression of our love for God and our life with God.

1. *Scriptural Source*

This understanding of worship as the expression of our love is deeply biblical. The Scriptures depict worship as a place where God's people express the fullness of their lives with and the many aspects of their love for God. There are expressions of praise in Psalm 103:1, *Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name*; gratitude in Psalm 107:1, *Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever*; and mourning in Psalm 88, *Darkness is my closest friend*. In the New Testament in Revelation, God's people worship in a highly expressive manner: *In a loud voice they were saying: 'Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!'* (Revelation 5:12) The Bible expects God's people to be expressive in corporate worship.

2. *Lovely Fruit*

Over time, the congregation that cultivates this healthy expressive aspect of worship will see beautiful fruit. The service will be in a language people can immediately understand. The music will be readily accessible and the pastor will preach in an approachable manner, helping us to make a connection to the text. And we will see the full range of human emotional experience brought before the Lord and submitted to his lordship. There

will be engagement with what is said, sung, and prayed. Worship will become a place of refuge, solace, consolation, and profound spiritual power.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

Which emotions are being expressed in our worship service? Do we have the healthy expression of our love for God, gratitude for his grace, and humility and trust in him even in the midst of grief?

Worship: The Formation of Our Love

Worship is also the formation of our love for and life with God.

1. Scriptural Source

This understanding of worship as the formation of our love is also deeply biblical. The Psalms urge and invite us to come and worship the Lord, to open our mouths, to give thanks, to wait for the Lord, and to sing joyfully to the Lord. The Psalms call us to these actions because we don't naturally do them. Have you ever heard the phrase, "Please stand for the call to worship," and thought, "I'd rather sit, thank you"? Cultivating formation in worship means saying, "Stand because you are being called into something and what is being formed in you is as important as what is being expressed by you."

Soon after God rescued his people from Egypt, they created a golden calf, a false god, to worship. So God said, "I will teach you how to worship and how to be a human being again. Here are practices for you to follow that will shape you into my people." In Deuteronomy 6:6-9, God tells his people, "*And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*" Lest you think this passage is about discipleship and not worship, understand that that distinction is almost completely absent in the Old Testament. God's commands to his people are all part of the worship vision of the Old Testament. And this worshiping life takes shape when they work, walk, talk, as well as when they gather in worship. So this text shows us that God recognizes there are times when we don't want to hear the Word of God, we don't want to talk about these things with our children,

and we don't want to hang them on little pieces of paper in front of our eyes. Worship is not only something coming out of us through expression, it is also something being formed into us. There is an expectation in the Bible that we need to be formed into a people who can worship.

2. Lovely Fruit

Over time, cultivating the formative aspect of worship will grow spiritual maturity and an understanding that God cares about what we do in worship. Our worship will include music that is rich and challenging. It will cultivate in us patience and trust in the Holy Spirit's work. It will free us from frustration and despair when we find that worship is not a rapturous emotional experience every single week. Instead, we can declare together, "God was present, I heard his word, and I know that he is at work in me." This is not an affective experience on one given Sunday; it is a lifetime of Sundays.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

What kinds of things are being formed in us in our worship service? Are we learning to confess our sin? Are we learning how to pray for and care for others? Are we learning the humility of putting our brothers' and sisters' needs before our own?

Lesson

Christian worship is both the formation and the expression of our deepest loves. (Psalm 51:7-13)

Psalm 51:15 says, *Oh Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.* In this passage we see that the only way we will properly express our love for God is if he forms that love in us.

Every worship service is forming us to express something. Is our worship service forming us to open our mouths and declare the praise of our Maker? Or is it forming us to see the world only as a set of principles for us to silently evaluate? If we desire biblical worship, we cannot ask worshipers to only express what is already in their hearts because that would not be forming our congregation into the kind of worshipers our God wants us to be. The Bible paints a beautiful picture of worship in which the expression of our love blossoms out of practices cultivated in obedience to the Scriptures. In the coming chapters we will talk about how our love is expressed and formed by Scripture.

Exercise

When you walk in the door on a Sunday morning, what are you hoping is going to happen to you? What should be true of the service to make that happen?

Discussion Question

1. Which emotions are being expressed in our worship service? Do we have the healthy expression of our love for God, gratitude for his grace, and humility and trust in him even in the midst of grief?
2. What kinds of things are being formed in us in our worship service? Are we learning to confess our sin? Are we learning how to pray for and care for others? Are we learning the humility of putting our brothers' and sisters' needs before our own?

Lesson

Christian worship is both the formation and the expression of our deepest loves. (Psalm 51:7-13)

What are obstacles in our path to applying this lesson?

Glorious God,

It is our crown and glory of our souls to worship You. Give us knowledge of Your goodness, and make us over-awed by Your greatness. Crowns to give we have none, but what You have given, we return. Make us content to feel that everything is ours when it is Yours, and more fully ours when we have yielded it to You. We are bought by the blood of Jesus. Give us a new sense of it – may we come every day to its fountain, and every day be washed anew, that we may worship You always in Spirit and Truth. Amen.