

Worship Practices

Written by Eric Shuster

Founder and Executive Director of the Foundation for Christian Studies



The method in which Christians worship as a faith community is usually specific to the faith community and often follows its cultural norms. Worship can vary in structure, the degree of ceremony and ritual, and the level of participation of the congregation. In short, besides showing great reverence and respect, there isn't one right way to worship our Heavenly Father and his only begotten son Jesus Christ.

Denominations have Varying Methods of Worship

Catholic masses are typically one hour in length and center around the partaking of the Holy Eucharist.

Evangelicals often gather together to hear a sermon given by a well-versed and experienced pastor. There are usually scriptures read from the Bible, music from a choir and/or congregation, and an active role in the congregation in raising hands and praising the Lord.

Pentecostals include a stirring sermon from a preacher, a demonstration of faith, and speaking in tongues.

A bit more structured and time intensive are the Sunday worship services of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It is usually a three hour block consisting of a sacrament meeting, Sunday school, and a third hour of instruction. Because of its extensive nature the Foundation will expound on the worship services of Latter-day Saints as an example to be considered:

The sacrament meeting brings together families to participate in the sacrament (bread and water as symbols of Christ's sacrifices) and to enjoy talks focused on specific subjects—generally by ward members. There are usually three songs sung by the congregation at the opening, sacrament, and closing, with special musical numbers that may be included. On the first Sunday of each month the talks given are replaced by testimonies given on an ad-hoc basis by members of the congregation as dictated by the spirit. The entire service is planned and executed by members of the ward.

Sunday school during the second hour follows a structured Church curriculum by age group, synchronizing subject matter as much as possible in order to allow families to discuss lessons together following Church. Adult classes are split between Gospel Doctrine—a more advanced theological study; and Gospel Essentials—a more basic theological study for investigators and members of less than one year. Sunday school teachers are called from the membership of the ward, with a Sunday school presidency called to assist the teachers—all unpaid volunteers who are called to service.

Third hour instruction allows for the teaching of gospel principles by gender and age, providing even more specific gospel doctrines to be taught. Children 18 months to 11 years old meet in Primary to sing and participate in activities that teach basic gospel principles. Young women in high school separate into three groups of 12 to 13, 14 to 15, and 16 to 18 for gospel discussion and activities—all synchronized with formal curriculum. Young men in high school separate into priesthood quorums of deacons (12 to 13 years old), teachers (14 to 15 years old), and priests (16 to 18 years old) for similar directed instruction. Women out of high school meet as a Relief Society, and men split up into an elders quorum and high priest group for adult instruction. This detailed separation allows for optimal discussion and topic relevancy for each class.

The three-hour block for Sunday services in the LDS culture is highly organized and strives to meet the needs of each age group and gender, preparing everyone to receive the blessings of the gospel and to prepare families for life in mortality and into the eternities.

Worship Should Maximize Member Participation

Christian worship services are best conducted with maximum participation from the congregation and a true feeling of family and fellowship. All too often worship services become a form of entertainment for the congregation, with dazzling sermons and well-produced music—diverting the spirit of the meeting from the worship of the Savior to an unintended worship of the performers. This is rarely the intention of the Christian pastor and its ministry; however, without careful consideration of the worship service this dynamic can be created indirectly and take on a life of its own.

Size of the Congregation can affect Worship

The size of the worshipping congregation can also have an impact on the worship service. There are some Christians who are more comfortable in worshipping with 10,000 other individuals in the comfort of what is often called a “mega church.” Others prefer smaller congregations where they are able to feel more like a family and enjoy the true spirit of ministry (closer to one-on-few as opposed to one-on-hundreds).

The Importance of Consistency in Worship

Another aspect of worship services to be considered is the consistency between congregations. If a youth grows up worshipping in a church in Houston Texas, and then moves to Chicago, how different will that new congregation be? In some cases it can be radically different depending on the denomination he or she belongs to, potentially causing disillusionment. While in mainstream Christian churches such as the Catholic, Methodist, and Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints they have very uniform worship services all over the world, non-denominational Christian churches are unlikely to have much uniformity to them. Some make like the change, while others may be looking for consistency.

Music in Worship Services

Music invites the Holy Ghost into religious services and can speak to the very soul of the faithful. While some Christian congregations place a great deal of emphasis on music in worship services, others may eliminate it altogether. For some Christian sects it may not be unusual to have a rock band play in certain worship services, while in others it may be an organ or piano for instrumentation.

Choirs, cantors, folk groups, and soloists can be found all over the Christian community each Sunday in trying to invoke the spirit through the gift of music.

Music augments our worship services by bringing together the congregation, expounding on true doctrines, and inviting the spirit into the meeting. Apostle Boyd K. Packer writes “I believe that those who choose, conduct, present, and accompany the music may influence the spirit of reverence in our meetings more than a speaker does” (Boyd K. Packer, “Reverence Invites Revelation,” *Ensign*, Nov 1991, 21). The Lord has said, “My soul delighteth in the song of the heart; yea, the song of the righteous is a prayer unto me, and it shall be answered with a blessing upon their heads” (D&C 25:12.).

Reverently Conducting Music during Services

Because of the importance of music, Christian congregations should be careful about how music is conducted during worship services. Both the music and the accompanying lyrics must be sacred, venerable, and appropriate for church meetings. While contemporary Christian music may be uplifting, some may not be appropriate for Church services. It’s best to stick with traditional Christian hymns, which have stood the test of time and are written for the ease of congregational participation, while adding edifying music that expounds correct Christian doctrine on special occasions.

Elaborate performances of music are not appropriate for worship services, as they bring attention to the individual performer and away from the purpose for the worship service—which is to praise and give thanks to Jesus Christ. This doesn’t mean an individual cannot sing a song for the edification of the congregation, it simply means the emphasis should be on the song and not on the person singing the song. Boyd K. Packer of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles writes: “A choir which favors secular music above sacred music on the Sabbath becomes a chorus. In that respect, they teach the ways of men and, in doing so, miss the opportunity to inspire, and deny the power that they might otherwise have. The Spirit does not ratify speech nor confirm music which lacks spiritual substance” (Boyd K. Packer, “Reverence Invites Revelation,” *Ensign*, Nov 1991, 21).

A final word about music: it is wonderful to be edified through the musical performances of individuals in worship services. If they are singing for the glory of God in order to invite the spirit of the Lord into the meeting, it can be truly inspiring. However, there is something about an entire congregation singing in unison together. It can be likened to a form of the gift of tongues when all are singing together, especially if it is being done in multiple parts. When this happens it is truly a worship service in giving praise and glory to Jesus Christ our Lord.

Conclusion

Worshipping the Lord can be an intensely personal matter to the practicing Christian. Effective worship allows the individual to be edified through the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, while being a contributing element to the spiritual experience of others in the congregation. Worship can be enhanced by well prepared speakers and spirit invoking music; however, the key to maximizing one's spiritual experience in worship is personal preparation. Preparation includes regular repentance, daily devotionals (scripture reading and prayer), and keeping the Lord's commandments.

About the Foundation for Christian Studies

The Foundation for Christian Studies (FCS) is a non-profit organization dedicated to the study, teaching, and practice of Christianity in a way that inspires all people, regardless of theological differences, to come together in support of essential Christian values and compassionate service to God's children across the globe. The FCS accomplishes this by providing rich scriptural course study and spiritual commentary, interactive web forums for thoughtful discussion, an online store offering inspirational Christian media, and a charitable giving program that emphasizes individual and community self-reliance.

About The Sword Series™

The Sword Series™ is an ongoing collection of Christian theological essays that are freely distributed by the FCS for the education and enjoyment of all. For more information on the Sword Series™ visit the FCS website at www.studychristianity.org.

For online versions of all four standard works of scripture (Old Testament, New Testament, Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants) see: <http://scriptures.lds.org/>

Note: The views expressed in this paper are those of the Foundation for Christian Studies (FCS) and its theological advisors based upon their collective study and understanding of the scriptures under the influence of the Holy Ghost. All formatted content in this paper is the property of the FCS and may be distributed freely. Any modification of the content of this paper without the express written consent of the FCS is prohibited. Copyright 2008