

## **Use of Scripture in Worship**

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### **Introduction**

Worship is a phenomenon which cuts across race, language, colour, and nationality. Tate (2009) defines it as the human response to the perceived presence of the divine, a presence which transcends normal human activity and is holy (114). As asserted by Bamidele, God created man for the ultimate purpose of worshipping him. This, he notes, serves to establish worship as a universal priority and the number one responsibility of every believer (2014:1). This fact was visibly prominent in A. W. Tozer's (2002) statement, "we are here to be worshipers first and workers second." As a universal phenomenon, worship is also practiced by Christians of Nigerian extraction.

However, a number of issues have arisen in recent times concerning the art and act of worship in the Nigerian church. One of such issues is the place assigned scripture in the overall scheme of worship. This includes the reading, interpretation (teaching and preaching), and application of scripture within a given worship experience and cumulatively within the particular milieu of different church bodies. The intent of this paper, therefore, is to accentuate the meaning of worship, identify the elements of worship from the biblical perspective, highlight the role of scripture in worship, and present a case for the development of an apt theology of worship for the contemporary church

## **Definition of Basic Terms/Concepts**

**Worship:** Evelyn Underhill (2004) defines worship as “the total adoring response of man to the one Eternal God self-revealed in time” (61). This implies that worship reflects man’s response in totality to the person and activities of God. In this paper, worship is viewed from the perspective of man’s attitudinal and dynamic response to all of what God is and does, without necessarily anticipating anything in return.

**Scripture:** Vine (2005) refers to scripture primarily as a drawing, painting, or writing of the Old Testament or some portions of it. He notes further that scriptures are frequently personified by the New Testament writers as connoting to speak with divine authority. This context was reflected in Romans 4: and 9:17 where it was recorded that ‘the scripture spoke to Pharaoh’ when it was actually a message given by God to Pharaoh through Moses. Scriptures, according to Vine is also presented by the New Testament writers as that which is possessed of the sentient quality of foresight, and the active power of preaching. This is reflected in Galatians 3:8 where the passage to which reference was made only came to be written more than four hundred years after the words had been spoken. The above show that NT writers viewed the scripture from the standpoint of the Old Testament which consists of the Law (Torah), the Prophets (Neviim), and the Writings (Kethuvim).

However, by later NT times, part of the sayings of some apostles like Paul had come to be regarded as scripture and therefore were being used in the meetings and worship of the early church. In the context of this paper, scripture refers to the totality of the Christian Bible which comprises of thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and twenty-seven books of the New Testament to make a total of sixty-six books in all.

## Concept of Worship

Rob Harbison (2008) defined worship as a sacred spiritual exercise that links man with God through the expression of an adoring heart. He added that, it proclaims our dependence on God. In Kevin J. Conner's (1992) view, the word 'worship' means 'to bow down, to stoop very low or to prostrate oneself'. Conner's view is in consonance with the meaning of the Hebrew word for worship 'Shachah'. According to Ralph Mahoney (2002), worship is an expression of love and adoration to God. It can be expressed only with the giving of one's whole heart and life to Him.

Larmer Boschman (2006) argued that worship is not music and musicological skills in and of themselves are not worship skills. Musical instruments on the other hand are not only for worship but can however be dedicated to God to be used as part of worship. This implies that worship is not mechanical or inanimate but rather a matter of the heart not a style of music. In Rick Warren's (2002) book, '*Purpose Driven Life*,' he noted that every part of a church service is an act of worship. These include, Praying, Scripture reading, singing, confession, listening to sermon, taking notes, giving offering, baptism, communion, ushering and etc.

Having defined worship from the viewpoint of contemporary scholars, there is a need to juxtapose these definitions with the biblical description of worship. In the Old Testament, the common word used for worship is *shachah* which literally means "to bow down, to do homage" (Vine 2005:105). This word is mostly used of man in relation to God as can be established in Joshua 5:14 when "Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshipped." *Shachah* is often used to convey the sense of a lesser being paying homage and obeisance to a greater being such as in the case of man to God or a god, a vassal to a conqueror, and subjects to a king. The action of Elkanah's family in 1 Samuel 1:19 "Then they rose up early in the morning and worshipped before the LORD..." as well as Sennacherib's

action in the temple of Nisroch in 2 Kings 19:37 both illustrate the use of *shachah* in human-deity relationship. Similarly, Joab's action in 2 Samuel 14:22 reflect the usage of *shachah* a subject-king situation.

Another word used in the Old Testament to express the concept of worship is the word *abodah* which literally means "to serve or minister" (Vine 2005:174). *Abodah* is from the verb *'abad* which means "he served, he ministered" and it connotes the idea of a lesser being rendering service, often in the spiritual and sacred sense to the greater. This graphics was portrayed in Exodus 23:25 and Judges 2:7 where the word was used in describing Israel's cultic and sacred devotion and consecration to Yahweh.

Like the Old Testament, the New Testament also contains a number of words which convey the idea of worship. The most common of these is *proskuneuo* which literally means "to pay homage, to kiss toward, or to bow down" as construed in 1 Corinthians 14:25. This word reflects the idea of showing reverence and paying obeisance to someone. Another New Testament word used to express the concept of worship is *latreuo* which basically means "to serve, to minister." This Greek word often translated 'serve' is a form of the word worship and is used by the New Testament writers in the context of service and worship. Another form of the word worship is the Greek word *therapeuo* which is the root form of the English word therapy and which is most often translated 'heal' in reference to the healing of others. This word is seen in every case of Jesus' healings and connotes the healing power embedded in sincere worship.

Other related New Testament words used to paint the picture of worship include *sebazomai*, meaning 'to render religious honor' (Romans 1:25), and *sebomai* meaning to revere or adore (Acts 16:14). Hebrews 12:28 records that God must be served acceptably with reverence and godly fear. This implies that worship in the New Testament connotes both an attitude

of reverence and adoration to God as well as actions of service to him.

The above terms imply that worship in the biblical perspective involves both attitudes (awe, reverence, respect) and actions (bowing, praising, and serving). It is on this premise that Warren Wiersbe (2004) describes worship as both a subjective and objective activity which involves the intelligent coordination of the mind, emotion, and will. It is motivated by love, reaches deep within and must lead to obedient actions that glorify God. Biblical worship is connected to godliness and is exemplified in the Puritan perspective which states that:

Worship comprehends all that respect which man oweth and giveth to his Maker... it is the tribute which we pay to the King of kings, whereby we acknowledge his sovereignty over us, and our dependence on him... All that inward reverence and respect, and all that outward obedience and service to God, which the word [viz 'godliness'] enjoineth, is included in this one word, 'worship' (Carson, nd:21).

Likening worship to the fragrance of the incense in Exodus 30:34-38, MacArthur (1982) states that "worship is to be a unique, seaparated, sanctified holy act that rises out of a person's heart to the very nostrils of God" (9). Worship therefore can be said to be the expression, in attitude and action, of man's gratitude and appreciation to God. It is a means to acknowledge His authority as creator of the universe as well as the savior of the human race. For this and many other reasons, worship, is of the highest priority for the believer as well as the corporate church.

### **Elements of Biblical Worship**

The Bible in both Testaments reveals certain elements that dominated the worship practices and experiences of first, the Jewish worshippers, and later the early Christian church. After

the Israelites arrived at the foot of Mount Sinai, and the Tabernacle had been completed, God showed them a new way of life with clear instructions on how sinful people can relate to a Holy God. Animal sacrifice became the means instituted by God to facilitate communion between Himself and worshipers. In the offering of sacrifice, worshippers gave themselves to God and the shedding of the blood of the sacrificial animal became a vital power of life (Leviticus 17:11). God honors this act and gives life back to the worshiper who is dead in sin and could not have fellowship with God.

The institution and the purpose of this blood sacrifice in expiation for life and to reestablish fellowship with God is found in the statement, 'For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have assigned it to you for making expiation for your lives upon the altar; it is the blood, as life that effect expiation' (Leviticus 17:11). This, therefore, makes Leviticus 17:11 the fulcrum around which the entire worship structure of the Old Testament rotates and the foundation on which it is built.

In the light of the above text, the elements for worship in the Old Testament, based on the sacrificial system, are God, man, blood and altar. Though the sacrifice on the altar is the sole duty of the Priest, the four named elements are the major players and include the Priest (since the Priest is a man). At this point the significance of each of the named elements shall be treated as well as how they relate to worship.

God: The Old Testament presents God as the central focus of all worship practices. He alone should be worshipped and with wholehearted devotion. The presentation of the Old Testament and indeed, the entire Bible is that God is the personal creator worthy of human worship. He is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in His being. He is the only holy, righteous, justice and merciful God. He is the creator and sustainer of life. No person, object, or idea can be compared to God. He is so holy that sinful men cannot come into His presence and have fellowship with Him until their sinful situation is dealt with.

In English translations, He is Lord in two ways. LORD spelled with capital letters all-through represents the Hebrew 'Yahweh', the personal name of God, by which He introduced Himself to Moses (Exodus 3:15; 6:3). Lord with lowercase letters represents the Hebrew 'adonai' and the Greek 'kurios'. This refers to the master, the boss, the owner, the person with authority over another.

As Lord, God is a sovereign Ruler over all the earth; He is the Creator and Judge of all persons. Thus, the Hebrew identifies God as 'the LORD God (Yahweh), the God of Israel' (Exodus 34:23). He is 'Lord of lords' (Deuteronomy. 10:17) 'The LORD is righteous; ... He will do no unrighteousness' (Zephaniah 3:5). 'He is the Rock; His works are perfect; for all His ways are justice, a God of truth and without injustice; righteous and upright is He' (Deuteronomy 32:4). When the Bible speaks of God's ethical perfection and justice, it does not refer to a standard or realm of ideals outside of God but to God's very being itself. 'God is light and in Him is no darkness at all' (1 John. 1:5). God can only do what is right. Because of His nature, He can only do what is just.

The Bible also presents God as holy. His holiness demands a perfect holiness in people. To the Israelite He said: 'you shall be holy; for I am holy' (Leviticus 11:44). He hates sin and cannot dwell with sinners (Habakkuk 1:13). He does not take pleasure in wickedness (Psalm 5:4-5). God is so infinitely holy that every sin that an individual commits merits death: physical, spiritual and eternal. God had warned Adam that the day he disobeyed Him, he would certainly die (Genesis 2:17). His intrinsic holiness set up a separation between Him and all sinners.

To deal with sin and reestablish fellowship with man, God instituted animal sacrifice as the means of expiation for sins in the Old Testament. Paul argued that it was necessary that Christ should be offered as an atoning sacrifice for sin, in order that God might be just while justifying the sinner (Romans

3:25-26). The important thing was that the justice of God should be maintained. In this regard, man can be reconciled with God and also have access to life.

The next major actor in the biblical worship drama is Man. Made in God's image, man was created to have a close relationship with Him; and when fellowship is broken, man becomes incomplete and needs restoration. Communion with the living God is the essence of worship. Man was created different from animal in terms of his moral conscience, self-acknowledgement, and capacity for a spiritual communion with his creator. All human beings in this view have two aspects, a bodily and a spiritual (body and soul, or body and mind, or body and spirit) and so the capacity to relate fully both to the created order and their Creator. This capacity has seriously been restricted, misdirected and abused because of sin.

Barnes (1946) observes that in the Scripture, there are three words relating to the constitution of man. These are (a) 'life' as opposed to death (Deuteronomy 30:15); (b) the 'soul' as distinguished from the body; (Genesis 2:7); (c) the 'spirit' as opposed to the flesh (Romans 8:6), and as distinguished from the life of the flesh. The spirit is the highest element in man that holds communion with God. This communion with God was destroyed by the sin of Adam and Eve. As the first man, lost the original holiness and justice he had received from God, the human race was also affected by sin. As a result, human nature became weakened in its powers, subject to ignorance, suffering and the domination of death, and inclined to sin (Romans 5: 12 – 14). Accordingly, the entire human race is born in a state of separation from God (Romans 3: 23; 6:23). Man was under the curse of the law and is in need of restoration and reconciliation with God (Galatians 3:10 – 14, Ephesians 2:3 – 5). Apostle Paul noted that the unbeliever is dead in sin, he is without Christ (life), a stranger from the covenant promises of God, has no hope, and is without God (Ephesians 2: 1, 14).

Also reflected in the biblical graphics of worship is the Blood element. Prior to the shedding of the blood of Jesus Christ on the cross, God ordained certain rituals, that were expression of worship, and among these rituals was animal sacrifice. This began from the fall of man in the Garden (Genesis 3: 21), continuing through the family offerings (Genesis 4: 4; 8: 20; 22: 1-14) and to the Tabernacle worship. The blood was to serve as a means for man to access life. The shedding of animal blood in this context illustrated the future salvation work of Jesus Christ.

Blood has great significance in the Bible. Its meanings involve profound aspects of human life and God's desire to transform human existence. Blood and 'life' or 'living being' is closely associated. The Life Application Study Bible commentary on Leviticus 17:11, states that the blood represents the sinner's life, infected by sin and headed to death. According to Jacob Milgrom, the life of animal was appointed and accepted by God as a substitute for the sinner's life, in reference to the life of Christ, which was to be given for the life of the world; but as this life is in the blood, and as the blood is the grand principle of vitality, the blood is therefore to be poured out upon the altar to make atonement for the life of the souls of men. This act gave the blood of Christ its inconceivable value. When it was shed on the cross, the sinless God-man gave His life. The reason is because, 'It is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats could take away sins' (Hebrews 10:4) In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness (Hebrews. 9:22).

According to Robert Thieme (1996), in the Old Testament shadow of worship, the blood of animals was used to represent redemption that men will receive through the saving work of Christ on the cross (Hebrew 9: 18 – 22). The ultimate purpose of Christ's sacrifice is expiation for the lives of mankind. Jesus Christ offered Himself on the cross as a sacrifice to remove the guilt of our sins. It is by expiation that propitiation, reconciliation and ransom take place. In this regard Hebrews 4:

16, states, 'Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need'. It is the blood that makes us holy in order to appear before the presence of God in purity and with boldness to worship.

Similarly, the Altar played a significant role in biblical worship. An altar is a structure used in worship as a place for presenting sacrifices to God. The Hebrew word that is most frequently used in the Old Testament for altar is *Mizbeach*. It is formed from the verb for 'slaughter' and literally means 'a slaughter place or a place of sacrifice' the Greek word *Thusiasterion* which is also commonly used in the New Testament also means the same. Altars were used primarily as places of sacrifice, especially animal sacrifice. Beyond this function, altars were also places that represented God's presence where the worshipper interacted with God.

*The New International Dictionary of the Bible: Pictorial Edition* mentioned that Moses' Altar of burning incense in the Tabernacle (Exodus 30: 1 – 4) was located before the veil that separated the 'Holy Place' from the 'Most Holy Place', midway between the walls (Exodus 30:6; 40: 5). Because of its special location, it was referred to as 'the altar before the Lord' (Leviticus 16:12). John Saliba (2005) argued that in Christianity, the altar is a symbol of Jesus' sacrificial death and the shedding of His blood for the salvation of mankind. He further stated that, by the Middle Ages (5th to 15th century), the Christian altar had become a richly decorated throne on which lay the consecrated host (bread and wine or the Holy Communion) for the purpose of worship. The altar in this view became the focal point of unity, reverence, prayer, and worship.

With the death and resurrection of Jesus, the New Testament was instituted and with it came a paradigm shift in the worship practices of the believers. The worship gradually shifted from that focused on animal/blood sacrifice and a physical altar to that of a spiritual encounter and experience. Other elements

were added to the worship encounter, and here, scripture began to play a prominent role in the worship experience of the disciples.

### **Practical Ways of Using Scripture in Worship**

One of the practical ways in which scripture is being used in worship is through Congregational reading. This could be in form of the entire congregation reading in chorus or it could take the form of responsive reading. As noted by Milgrom (1998), congregational reading of scripture helps to engender participation of all worshippers in the worship experience, especially with respect to scripture reading. Another dimension of congregational reading is that which prepares the worshipper for the sermon. This is when the text for the day's homily is read by a designated person while other worshippers follow along in reverence. It is often called lesson reading or homily in some contexts like the Anglican Communion.

Another practical way of scripture use in worship is for Preaching and Teaching. This involves the exposition of a chosen text previously read by a designated member of the congregation and then interpreted to worshippers by a preacher. Sometimes, the chosen text is read by the preacher himself. Use of scripture for the purpose of preaching and teaching is a practice which developed in the post-exilic era beginning with the role of Ezra who committed himself to the study of the scripture and teaching of the same to the returnee exiles (Oladeji, 2002).

Scripture is also used as basis for congregational prayer. It is often said that prayer that is not based on scripture lacks authority. Both in the apostolic era and the contemporary times, scripture has come to play a pivotal role in the prayer ministry of the church as well as the personal prayer and devotional life of individual believers. As noted by E.M. Bounds (2006), scripture is the clay from which prayer is molded and the breath from which it takes its life.

Many songs and hymns of the early church, medieval age, reformation era, post-reformation dispensation, and the contemporary church have the scripture, especially the Psalms as their base. Some songs are direct translation of scripture verses into music while others are a mixture of scripture texts and relevant day-to-day sayings. All, however, take their source directly or indirectly from the scripture and have intonations of scriptural sayings and spirit.

### **Role of Scripture in Worship**

In the history of the church, the divine character of Scripture has been the great presupposition for the whole of Christian preaching and theology. Scripture is the record of God speaking and revealing Himself to His people. The Bible was written for 'instruction' and 'encouragement' (Romans 15:4), to lead to saving faith (2 Timothy 3:15), to guide people toward godliness (2 Timothy 3:16b), and to equip believers for good works (2 Timothy 3:17). The purpose of Scripture is to place men and women in a right standing before God and to enable believers to seek God's glory in all of life's activities and efforts. It is above all a book of redemptive history.

In the Old Testament system of worship, the priests were not only there for offering sacrifices on the altar but also for the purpose of instructing God's covenanted people His word so that they may know the will and the purposes of God concerning them (Deuteronomy 31:9-37 J. William Thompson, hymn, Holman Bible Dictionary for Window version 1.0g, (Parsons Technology, 1994). This practice went on even till the time of Jesus Christ. In the gospel of Luke, it is recorded that Jesus Christ did attend to the reading of Scripture in the synagogue as His custom was (Luke 2: 42 – 47; 4: 16 – 17). The early church also did the same as the custom was. According to the Acts of the Apostles, 'they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer' (Acts 2:42). 1 Timothy 4:13, also attests to the role of Scripture in worship when it stated, 'until I come,

devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching’.

Scripture reading, interpretation and application is essential in worship to facilitate spiritual development. As noted by Oladeji (2014), spiritual development is a process of divine, non-physical growth, improvement or maturity of an individual. While speaking on this, Trone (2002) notes that throughout the history of the ages, people’s eyes have habitually looked elsewhere for spiritual fulfilment. He, however, emphasizes that seeking spiritual development and fulfilment outside the scripture is tantamount to idolatry. Scripture has proven time and over again as the competent and wholesome source of spiritual development for believers throughout the church age. Paul reiterates this when he admonished the Colossian Christians to let the word of Christ dwell in them richly. Consistent reading, balanced interpretation and apt application of scripture helps to develop believers and this enhances the quality of worship they bring to God.

Also, scripture aids the formulation and establishment of doctrinal positions. The church has in its centuries of existence formulated different doctrines. Those that have stood the test of time and passed down to the contemporary church are those having the scripture as the base of their authority. The contemporary church also makes reference to the scripture in the formulation of her doctrines, policies and practices. All of these invariably engender quality worship in the church.

### **Developing A Theology of Worship for Contemporary Church**

The word theology came from two Greek words, *theos* (God) and *logos* meaning word, speech, expression, discourse and etc. According to Stone and Duke, theology is the reflection on God. It is through this reflection that we better know and understand God, as well as how we should relate to Him (God). This comes as a result of our hunger for God and the knowledge of God.

Theological reflection gets us deeper into the things we confess. Through theology one is able to learn about God, His nature, His will, and how they apply to mankind. They further stated that theology is typically expanded to embrace the totality of things having to do with religious life. This includes God, His word (Scripture) and everything associated with faith, Church and ministry.

Apart from God being the central point for theological reflection, one cannot also do theology without the Scripture. This fact is clearly noted in Joshua 1: 8, 'Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful'. In addition to the statement in Joshua, 2 Timothy 2: 16 – 17, also provided the argument, 'All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be equipped for every good work.'

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined the concept of worship with inferences from both the Old and New Testaments. The elements of biblical worship were accented and the role of scripture was highlighted historically from inception of the church down to the contemporary age. In the light of the above arguments, this paper concludes that the reading and teaching of the word of God 'Scripture' in worship is very essential. The reason is because the text of the Bible is the means through which a believer seeks to hear a message from God<sup>39</sup>. It is also a means to access life. This was noted when Jesus said, '...the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life' (John 6: 63). It also helps the believer (worshiper) to keep away from sin (Psalm 119: 101, 1Timothy 4:15-16). In developing the theology of worship, Scripture reading and teaching must become one of the essential ingredients.

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