

The Function of Priesthood in Worship

What is worship

Worship is the act of recognizing the value of God. It springs from the heart's desire to acknowledge His goodness and mercy. In its Old Testament usage, the act of worship is to bow down in reverence, typically flat on the ground. In the New Testament, to worship is to prostrate oneself in reverence and adoration, being derived from a word that describes how a dog licks his master's hand. The New Testament Greek also has a term that means to serve God. Therefore, we may conclude that the act of worship is an outward expression of adoration and reverence to God.

In the Old Testament, three verses of the many that mention worship, help us gain a better understanding of the process of worship. In 2 Kings 17:36 we read "*Him shall ye fear, and him shall ye worship, and to Him shall ye do sacrifice.*" This passage seems to describe the chronological sequence required in worship. We must first fear, which means to regard with respect and affection. Out of this fullness of the heart our response, according to the passage, is to worship, or fall flat on our faces in adoration and submission. From this lowly position, it would follow that we would make an offering to our God. Logic would suggest that from a prostrate position it would be difficult to carry out any physical act, so how is this final step carried out?

Another instance where worship seems to be a progression is found in 1 Chronicles 16:29. There we read, "*give unto the Lord the glory due unto his name; bring an offering, and come before him; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.*" According to this list of steps, giving glory to God, or recognizing his copiousness, is followed by an offering. This offering is an apportionment, or distribution of a gift. We may infer that this offering could be that of a contrite spirit, or a dedication of talents or time. It is a return to God of something that is already His. After this, we then may truly worship.

Still one more verse shows this progression. In Psalms 22:27 we find, "*All the ends of the world shall remember and turn unto the Lord; and all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before thee.*" We may glean from this passage that worship is the culmination of remembering and turning. These words bear a close resemblance to the New Testament process of faith and repentance. In these three verses we understand that worship is the bowing in reverence and adoration as part of a process of acknowledging God's greatness.

There are three passages in the New Testament that also demonstrate the meaning of worship. All three verses deal with the story of the leper that came to Jesus seeking a healing, but the three testimonies differ slightly. This is an example of how the scriptures interpret themselves. In Matthew 8:2, we read that the leper came and worshipped Jesus. In Mark 1:40 we are told that the leper came, "beseeching Him, and kneeling down." In Luke's account (5:12) we find that the leper "fell on his face, and besought Him." We may therefore conclude that worship involves paying homage to the God that created us.

As shepherds of God's flock, the priesthood bears the responsibility of bringing the people to worship. The calling of priesthood is to remind the people of His goodness, to challenge them by His standards, and to invite them to repentance, adoration, and service. The following is a brief survey of how this may be done in our worship services.

Types of worship services.

Sunday morning. In the Sunday morning meetings, the priesthood fill many roles. Typically, one will preside, one will preach, one or more will pray, one will offer the offertory remarks, one or more will teach class, and one or more will serve as or assist the deacon in-charge. Whatever the capacity in which a man serves, the goal of worship should not be lost. God is ever calling His people to communion with Him on a higher level. The efforts of the minister should always be anchored in this mission, and all the glory and honor be unto God.

Presiding. The presider over the service is charged with insuring, by the direction of the Holy Spirit, that the purpose of worship is fulfilled every time the Saints meet. He must be humble enough to follow, but bold enough to intervene and redirect, if necessary. There are times when the Lord demands that the direction of the service be changed. The presider who will not accede to the desires of the Lord risks forfeiting the greater blessings that follow the direction of the Spirit.

The presider should be satisfied that there is no confusion in the minds of the people, either during the service or after. When the speaker, or any other participant, makes comments that are at variance with Scripture or the direction of the Spirit, it is the responsibility of the presider to address the issue. Every time a message is uttered under a claim that it was the voice of the Spirit, there is the potential for confusion. The mere claim that it is of God does not make it so, and verification of it rests with the presider, and by extension, every Elder in attendance. Making no response to the statement should not be construed as verification of the source of the message, for there should be no pocket approvals. If the presider cannot discern the Spirit in the claim, he must seek verification from the other Elders present, for dismissing the congregation without addressing the issue leaves room for doubt and confusion to settle in.

During the service, the presider should be in constant prayer while maintaining vigilance over every word spoken or prayed during the service. This open line of communication with God frequently produces enhancements to the service in the form of greater enlightenment or direction.

Prayer. Our petitions to God in the worship service serve various purposes, just as there are different types of prayer. In life, we frequently approach God for safe travels, for thanksgiving, for wisdom, for health, etc. Each prayer has a purpose. While every prayer may have similar elements, such as praise, petition, and confession, we generally do not interchange the purposes of the prayers. Therefore, the purpose of each prayer offered during a worship service should be observed.

Every service contains an opening prayer. We typically call this prayer the invocation. According to Webster's Dictionary, the meaning of the word, invocation, is *the act of addressing in prayer, or the act of calling for the assistance or presence of any being, particularly of some divinity*. While Webster includes the act of calling for God's presence as part of the definition of invocation, consulting multiple other resources reveals that the primary meaning of the word is to call upon God for assistance.

We have often interchanged the words invitation and invocation, and formulated our prayers accordingly. When the promise of God is to be in our midst, for He desires to commune with His children, why does He need an invitation? Is it not we who need the invitation? And has that invitation not been extended when Jesus said, *"Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart; and ye shall find rest unto your souls; for my yoke is easy and my burden is light."* It is not God that needs to be invited, but rather the people need to be invited to a state of mind and spirit that will allow them to worship their King and to find His rest.

The primary meaning of invoke is to call upon God for assistance. That assistance that is needed is a preparation of our minds and hearts. There also needs to be Divine assistance in the worship atmosphere, such as protection from untoward influences and spirits. It is therefore the duty of the invocator to pray for this assistance throughout the service. He must be vigilant in his attendance to continual prayer, praying not only for the speaker, but for the hearers as well, that all may come *unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ*.

The prayer of benediction has the purpose of sending the people forth under the blessing of God. Once again, we consult Webster's Dictionary to gain an understanding of this term. There we find the definition of benediction to be *the act of blessing or giving praise to God or rendering thanks for his favors*. The word is also used to represent a *solemn or affectionate invocation of happiness*. If the people have gathered in a sincere desire to worship, why would we not pronounce upon them the blessings of a merciful God, sending them forth under the care of Divine Providence? This prayer should not be an occasion to rehearse the sermon, or to add thereto. It should not be taken as an opportunity to pray over things that are not relevant to the service just concluded. As in all prayers, God does not answer or grant our requests based upon the number of words used or the volume with which they are offered. One of the best examples of a benediction found in scripture takes less than a minute to pronounce. We quote it here from Numbers 6:23-26, and the reader will notice that it is introduced as a pattern for blessing the children of Israel:

Speak unto Aaron and unto his sons, saying, On this wise ye shall bless the children of Israel, saying unto them, The Lord bless thee, and keep thee; The Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee; The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.

The instruction concludes with this statement: *And they shall put my name upon the children of Israel, and I will bless them*. From this example, we discover that the benediction has the purpose of bringing the children before the throne of God for His blessing. We can see in its form three aspects of Divine blessing. First, we see the prayer of blessing and protection, or the placing of a protective hedge round about them. Second, we see a prayer for the blessing of His grace and His presence. Third, we find the blessing of peace that comes from His presence.

We learn from this passage that it is the sons of Aaron that will pronounce this blessing. Fulfilling this role in the worship service requires discernment of the blessing God desires to bestow upon the people. Yes, it is a sending forth, but it is much more. It is a calling down of God's blessings upon His people. The need for those blessings will be varied, but by diligent seeking, and by discernment, that which God desires will be pronounced by the voice of His servant.

Offering. The offertory comments are an appeal to the people to remember the blessings that God has given them, and to remind them of their stewardship over them. The offertory prayer is an appeal to God to bless the giver and to accept the offering being made. In our worship culture, the offering plate is passed among the congregation. In other cultures, the offeror makes a special effort to leave his or her seat and to go to the offering plate. In either format, the offeror acknowledges that all things come from God. The offertory statement, therefore, need only be lengthy enough to remind the people of their blessings and to move them into a state of gratitude.

Homily. The man who fills the pulpit to address the people must also consider the purpose of his assignment. Just as there are different types of prayers, there are different types of sermons, but each has the same goal, which is God's work of bringing to pass the immortality and eternal life of man. The purpose of the homily will be a determinant in the type of sermon delivered. The funeral requires a different approach than the youth rally, just as the baptismal charge is different from the marriage charge.

What is the difference between the charge preceding an ordinance and other types of sermons? The ordinance charge has as its focus a preparing of the candidates and the congregation for participation in the ordinance. The reason for the ordinance and its purpose in the life of the church must be brought into focus. An ordinance charge should be kept short, since the reason for worship in that service is participation in the ordinance.

The worship service on Sunday morning is too often the only contact the people have with the Lord during the week. With so much at stake during this hour of worship, the minister faces a difficult challenge. However, he must ever remember that this is the Lord's work, and that His plan is the eternal life of man. Since this is a foundational principle, we will refer to this as rule number one.

The sermon is the culmination of a process that includes prayer, fasting, and study. One of the challenges of the preacher is to determine the topic for the sermon. Under the guidance of rule number one, we understand that God will provide the direction if we will seek it of Him. This underscores the necessity of prayer and fasting. It would be well to remember the sons of Mosiah who are described in the 12th chapter of Alma, beginning in verse 4 as follows:

For they were men of a sound understanding, and they had searched the scriptures diligently, that they might know the word of God. But this is not all: they had given themselves to much prayer, and fasting, therefore they had the spirit of prophecy, and the spirit of revelation, and when they taught, they taught with power and authority, even as with the power and authority of God.

The sons of Mosiah searched the scriptures diligently. If the minister is to present the Lord to the people, it is imperative that he know what the word of the Lord is, both historically and contemporaneously. In gaining this knowledge of the scriptures, the preacher also gains understanding. A curiosity, a desire for deep understanding, are essential traits of the man that preaches the word of the Lord. Just as a scientist looks upon the phenomena of nature and asks questions of its origin and meaning, the man of God must look upon the history of God's interaction with His people and ask why, and how, and its application. He must desire to be part of that experience, not just an observer of it. Out of that experience he will gain the understanding necessary to convey the Divine call unto men.

How does a man search the scriptures diligently? There is no substitute for consistent reading of God's word. In the Restoration, we have the gift of three witnesses that help illuminate the mind and will of God. One method of study is to cross reference the topics between books. For example, much is to be gained in understanding the message of the Sermon on the Mount by comparing Matthew's account to Nephi's account. Doing so lends to our understanding a clearer division of the words of the Lord found in Matthew's testimony.

Another useful approach is to seek patterns in the literature of the Word that emphasize the spirit of the Word. Again, using the Sermon on the Mount as an example, we can find a beautiful organization of the words that helps clarify the message. Observing the Hebrew writing style of using parallelisms helps focus our thoughts on the emphasized message of the passage of scripture, and helps us to identify the entire message. For example, some key verses that were omitted over time have been restored to the text of the Sermon on the Mount in the Inspired Version, completing the pattern that was lost. The completed pattern opens to our understanding the essence of the Word.

The use of biblical reference tools is also of great value. Over the centuries devout men have gained understanding of the Word of God through diligent study and the enlightenment of the Holy Ghost. Using their works provides a springboard for our own study. Bible dictionaries, commentaries, and encyclopedias are a rich source of information. While they offer diverse perspectives on the Word of God, none of the most popular works approach the topic from a Restoration understanding. This means that ultimately the Holy Spirit must be the source of truth, so each resource must be tested against that standard. A list of some of these tools appears in the appendix.

Once the topic has been selected and the research completed, it will be time to present the topic to the people. Once again, the direction of the Holy Spirit is key to this ministry. However, there are things the minister can do (or not do) that will positively affect the outcome. First, the preacher must know something about the audience. What is the general age? Preaching to youth is much different than preaching to the elderly. What is their background and current situation? Perhaps some significant event has just happened in the group or in their community. What is the environment? Will the service be held indoors, or will the congregation meet in a special location outside of their regular meeting place? Is there a particular theme for the service? All of these factors have an impact on the worship service.

The preacher must grasp the magnitude of his call to share the Word of God. In a recent survey of Americans on the subject of church attendance, two questions were asked that emphasize the importance of the preaching ministry. Church attendees that had recently returned to church after a long absence were asked what was instrumental in their choice of churches. A large majority of respondents cited the pastor/minister as a primary reason behind their decision. Conversely, a question was asked of those who no longer attended church as to why. The pastor again was cited as a primary reason for leaving. From this we may glean that the pulpit ministry is critical in the life of the church. We may also glean from this survey that church goers are willing to lay the credit or blame for their attendance upon the preacher instead of taking responsibility for those decisions.

So how do we preach the word of God effectively? Here are some tips for effective preaching. A conviction to the truth is more effective than "scratching itching ears." Knowledge of the subject is essential. It is better to speak for 10 minutes with authority than to ramble for 30. The sermon must be organized and delivered in an orderly fashion. It is imperative that a corrective action plan be delivered with every citation of evil. For instance, if the topic is pride and its evil effects on the church, there must also be a way presented to counteract this evil influence. Every wall torn down and not rebuilt leaves the flock vulnerable.

There are several types of sermons, and each one has its place and purpose. One popular approach is the personal testimony sermon. People are generally inspired by the testimony of another. As long as the testimony gives credit to God, and demonstrates His providential care and His work among men, it can have a great impact on the worship experience. However, there is danger in relying upon this format. Unless adequate caution is exercised, it may seem to the hearers that the minister is exalting himself. It may also cause the audience to examine their own testimony and to make comparisons to the ones shared by the preacher.

Another common method of preaching is a biographical narrative of a particular person found in scripture. This can be a very simple, but effective way to illustrate biblical truths. As the hearer identifies with the object of the story, he or she may recognize the same need of repentance, or the same joy of deliverance. A similar approach is known as the historical narrative, wherein the object is not a person but an event. This is a fantastic opportunity to make a biblical event come to life in the minds of the hearers. When the scriptures come to life in the minds and hearts of the people, they are better able to connect with the principles that God is sharing. Both of these approaches require of the preacher to look beyond the page of words and to seek the deeper meaning, and more importantly, the current application. In all things the word of God must be brought to relevance in the minds of the people.

The next three types of sermons all derive the topic from a text of scripture, but take different paths to developing its meaning. The topical sermon is one in which the preacher identifies the main point of a passage of scripture and develops the sermon around it, typically using external sources to build his case. By comparison, in the textual sermon the preacher develops a sermon where the topic is extracted from a passage of scripture, and the main points of developing the sermon are also derived from the text. In the most extensive scripture preaching model, the expository sermon extracts the topic from a passage of scripture, develops the theme from text within that passage, and then expounds its deeper meanings, also relying upon the passage. It is said that this is the most difficult approach but also the most beneficial to the people. The success and benefit of any ministry is subjective and dependent upon the audience, but the minister that walks with the Spirit will ultimately be more successful. While the difficulty level may be

high, the success of this approach depends upon the preacher's knowledge of the topic and his willingness to probe into its deepest meanings. With the help of the Holy Spirit, the preacher can unlock the mysteries of the kingdom using this style of preaching.

The Holy Spirit and occasion dictate the style of preaching for each audience. The minister must strive to develop a style that fits his skill set. While it can be very beneficial for a young preacher to imitate the habits of effective ministers, each man must ultimately adapt the style that matches the talents God has given him. Men do not become outstanding speakers merely by desiring it. It takes dedication to study, fasting and prayer. Each man is also molded by his experiences. It is the collection of those experiences that provides the effective preacher a reservoir from which he can draw living water.

Wednesday evening. Another worship service in which a man may minister is the mid-week service that we call the prayer and testimony service. The Saints meet together at this time for the purpose of sustaining one another through prayer and testimony. The ministry offered in this setting is by the ordained as well as the unordained. It is therefore incumbent upon the minister to recognize and respond to the Spirit in a way that edifies the body. This edification has three functions in which it may be manifest.

Prayer. Like in the service above, the prayer service is also blessed when the prayers of invocation and benediction are included and observed properly in the service.

Presiding. Whenever the Saints gather for worship, it should be under the direction of a member of the priesthood, who is in turn under the direction of the Holy Ghost. The man presiding should observe the same purpose in the service as he who presides over the Sunday morning service.

Lead testimony. The ministerial function that is unique to the prayer service is the lead testimony. It is the purpose of this participant to bring in a few words something that will prompt the people to reflect upon God's goodness. This role may be served by sharing a reading, a testimony, or a very short homily as directed by the Lord. This address must be no longer than five to ten minutes. The people did not gather for the purpose of hearing this man talk. Instead they gathered to find or share strength, and the minister that recognizes this offering will more likely understand his role in this worship service.

Sacrament and ordinance services. There are eight recognized ordinances in the church. They are marriage, child blessing, baptism, the Lord's supper, laying on of hands for confirmation, laying on of hands for administration to the sick, laying on of hands for ordination, and laying on of hands for a Patriarchal blessing. Many of these ordinances are preceded by a charge, or short talk by a minister. It is well in the worship atmosphere when the preacher remembers the purpose for which the congregation has assembled. The charge should be short, consuming no more than 20 minutes, for the purpose of gathering is to observe the ordinance. The charge should explain the ordinance. Even though many in attendance may have participated in many of these ordinances over time, there frequently are visitors who are not familiar with the observance of the ordinance. The minister should explain the purpose of the ordinance in the life of the church, and how it prepares God's children for His kingdom. The charge should remind its hearers of their stewardship in the life of the candidate(s).

Funerals. Graduating from this life to eternity should be a joyous occasion as we celebrate the passing of the deceased from his or her earthly existence. Unfortunately, we are separated from the deceased by the dark glass to which Paul refers. In our earthly existence, we are too often dominated by the temporal concerns rather than the eternal. We mourn the loss, because their presence meant something to us, and their absence will leave us with a void. The minister is to step into this environment and to bring hope through the power of the Holy Spirit. The role of he that would bring the funeral message is to bring to bear on the hearts of the grieving the mercy and compassion of a holy God whose plans are frequently beyond our understanding.

Appendix A. List of biblical research tools.

Albert Barnes' Notes on the Bible (1834)
Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Bible (1826)
John Gill's Exposition on the Entire Bible (1763)
Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible (1721)
Jamieson, Fausset and Brown Commentary (1871)
The Pulpit Commentary (1900)
Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament (1885)
Robertson's Word Pictures (1927)
Vincent's Word Studies (1900)
Easton Bible Dictionary (1893)
Fausset's Bible Dictionary (1949)
International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (1939)
Smith's Bible Dictionary (1987)
Strong's Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries (1979)
The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah (Alfred Edersheim 1883)
The Interpreter's Bible (1955)
Bible History Old Testament (Alfred Edersheim 1887)