

Praise in the Church

What is praise?

The word "praise" is used 261 times in the Old Testament, almost always in the context of verbal and visual expressions about God's greatness and goodness. We read about people praising God through words, shouts and dancing, but on at least 42 occasions it specifically refers to singing or music (e.g. II Chronicles 5:13; Ezra 3:11; Nehemiah 12:46; Psalm 7:17, 33:2, 66:2-4, 149:3; Isaiah 42:10). The Old Testament worship of God in the Temple included teams of musicians and singers who were led by directors (Nehemiah 12:46). The songs they sang were the Psalms. Some of these psalms express the need to praise God, the reasons why He should be praised and the range of ways in which He can be praised (see, for example, Psalm 150). In the New Testament the word "praise" occurs 41 times, and on two of these singing in praise is specifically mentioned (James 5:13; Revelation 5:13). The idea of God's people singing together in praise of Him is also found in the New Testament, and Paul twice refers to using Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs (see Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16). Although the exact meaning of the last two terms is not clear, the idea is certainly that Christians should sing Scripture **and** songs of our own composition to express our experience of God's greatness and goodness in our lives. Although some Christian traditions have rejected the use of any songs other than psalms (imagine never mentioning the name *Jesus* in praise!) and others have rejected the use of some or all musical instruments in praise in the church, there is no New Testament reason for these restrictions, and we should encourage the use of a variety of styles and instruments. Praise came naturally to the early church, but is not listed as one of the four core activities they were devoted to in v42 (Acts 2:42-47). Corporate singing should not be the focus of our meetings together, although it can be a highly useful part as many people will experience God's blessing and will learn His truth through the singing of thoughtfully written, Biblically based songs. So, in summary, we can describe **praise** as:

A verbal or visual declaration of the greatness and goodness of God that flows from the joy of experiencing God's grace.

Why worship does not equal praise

The word "worship" is used 112 times in the Old Testament, and only one of these is in connection with singing and music, although even in that case it is not the singers or musicians who are described as worshipping, but the people who bowed in silence (II Chronicles 29:28). Worship in the Old Testament is normally not connected with any action or noise, but where it is, it is normally associated with the offering of sacrifices (e.g. I Chronicles 16:29; II Chronicles 32:12) and a posture of bowing or kneeling (e.g. II Chronicles 29:28; Psalm 95:6). In the New Testament the word appears 47 times, never in connection with singing or music. The focus is always on the attitude – true worship must be in spirit and in truth (John 4:23&24) and in reverence and awe (Hebrews 12:28) as we offer the living sacrifice of our being to God (Romans 12:1&2). Based on all of this we can define **worship** as:

A response to truth about God that leads to awe and joyful thanksgiving in the spirit and sacrificial service of Him with the body.

Introducing the "worship leader"

In the Old Testament pattern the worship of God was displayed through the sacrificial system, and the priests could be described as "worship leaders" since they led the people to sacrifice to God. In the New Testament the sacrifice that God desires is a life of service and obedience to Him. Every believer is now a priest (Revelation 1:6), and we do not need a special class of people to lead us in our worship of God. When we describe people as "worship leaders" we are ascribing to them the quality of priests, and this belittles the role of the other believers in the congregation. We must aim for a Biblical use of language instead of using terms in ways that may be misleading or even cause some believers to stumble. The true worship leader in New Testament terms is the Holy Spirit (Philippians 3:3). The person who leads the singing can be referred to as the praise leader, and the person who coordinates the praise team could be called the praise coordinator or director, but we should never call any person the "worship leader".

How praise can be worship

So, then, it should be clear from this consideration of the Biblical meaning of worship that worship is not the same thing as praise and that worship embraces our whole lives. We should avoid speaking of our time of singing in church as the "worship time". However, we should aim to make our praise times a time of worship to God. If praise is to be worshipful it must be, as John 4:24 says, "in spirit and in truth":

- a) **In spirit** – our praise must be led by the Holy Spirit and must engage our spirits.
We have to mean the things we say and it must flow from our inner being.
- b) **In truth** – the words we sing must be true. We are not really praising God if the songs we sing are not Biblical and do not accurately reflect His person.

Worship during praise cannot necessarily be measured by outward appearances. We cannot judge whether people are worshipping by how loudly they are singing, since worship is an attitude of heart, but it would be strange if the joy of the Lord never overflowed in our praise times into exuberant singing.

Principles to hold in balance

1. Unity / diversity

The way in which we praise should hold in balance the facts that we are one body but that each of us has a unique personality and cultural background. We should choose songs (perhaps not always, but probably in a majority of cases) that speak of "we", "us" and "our" rather than "me", "I" and "my". It will also mean that we will learn to be sensitive to the effect of our actions on the others around us (following the most excellent way of love – I Corinthians 12:31) without being distracted from our focus on God. Being God focused and sensitive to others should not be mutually exclusive if we appreciate that we are a body praising with one voice. People will not feel pressurised to engage in a physical expression of praise (for example raising hands) if this is not in keeping with their culture or personality, but others who feel this is a natural expression for them will do it and will not feel judged. Those who raise hands or dance will do so in a way that does not unnecessarily distract those who don't. When leading praise we will be less likely to tell people to "stand or sit – whatever you feel comfortable with" and more likely to seek some kind of unity in this respect.

2. Order / authenticity

In I Corinthians 14 Paul gives certain rules for the use of the gifts of tongues and prophecy in the meetings of the local church. In v26 Paul speaks of the way in their meetings that different people would come prepared to contribute to the meeting, and one of the ways they may do this is with a "hymn". However, the key principle in this chapter is found in v33 – that God is a God of peace, not disorder, and our meetings must reflect His character. The way in which praise is led must be orderly and not chaotic. It is not meant to be a time of selfish emotional indulgence but of mutual edification. It must also fit into the whole service in a way that prepares people for what comes next and recognises what came before. When leading praise it is worthwhile thinking about choosing songs that follow the theme of the teaching for that day or that reflect the general mood of the service (e.g. joyful celebration or humble repentance). However, we should also allow freedom for genuine expression of joy and to respond to the leading of the Spirit. It is good to prepare well the order of songs and what you plan to say in between songs, but to be flexible enough to vary this depending on how it goes.

3. Professional / performance

The New Testament never speaks of a spiritual gift for leading praise. However, God has given us many abilities that will be useful in leading praise including gifted singers, musicians and song-writers. We must always be careful not to have such a strong focus on excelling at the technical side of praise that we exclude from the team those who are not quite as gifted. Likewise, we must always be careful not to allow praise to become a performance and to judge its success on how good it sounded and how much people were moved by the music. Our aim is to give praise to God's name, and this will depend more on the attitude of our hearts than the purity of our voices. Church is a place of grace, and we must always be open to giving those who are learning an instrument the opportunity to play even if they are not the best available musician. When mistakes are made we will forgive them and continue to praise God. It must also be clear that those people who cannot sing well or are not musically talented should not despair. Out-of-tune singing could be just as full of praise as pure notes and harmonies, and spoken words, and even shouts, can convey praise just as clearly as singing. Those people who really cannot sing in tune probably shouldn't lead praise, and even in the congregation they may refrain from singing at the top of their voices, but their hearts can praise God just as well as the finest singer.

4. Contemporary / traditional

We stand in a continuous line of faithful people who have praised God throughout human history. We must remember that although our generation needs to write new songs to express the amazing truths of our faith, we can also learn a great deal from older songs (even ones that are centuries old). It is always good to seek new ways to sing old classics and to include them in our times of praise.

5. Objective / subjective

One of the less helpful developments in praise songs in recent years has been a tendency to focus more on our own subjective experience of our relationship with God rather than on objective truth about Him. Whilst our singing should include both truth about God and our response to it, we must always seek to sing songs that are grounded in the realities of God and that speak more about His character and greatness than about our feelings and the benefits we get from Him. We must also guard against the tendency to sing certain songs because we like the tune or they move us emotionally rather than because the words are meaningful or true. We must always test the words of songs and be sure that they are theologically sound and that we understand what they mean. The tune is important too, and our emotions should be involved together with our minds, but singing is never praise if it is not true. It is often helpful to include reading of Scripture between songs.

6. Intimacy / reverence

Our praise must maintain a balance between reverence and awe for God and the expression of our intimate relationship with Him. Praise songs should not remind us of contemporary love songs. God may be our closest friend, but He is also the sovereign King over all creation! We must choose songs that reflect this balance.