

What is worship for?

Surely God isn't a narcissist who demands our attention.

by [Debie Thomas](#) in the [October 2023](#) issue



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Those of us steeped in church life often take churchy things for granted. For me, one of those things is worship. Growing up, it never occurred to me to ask why I had to worship God; worship was simply a fact of life, as normal and unexceptional as breathing. Many of my childhood memories are memories of worship. Of standing next to my mother on Sunday mornings, singing hymns to gorgeous organ accompaniment. Of listening to my father praise God with his hands raised in the air

during family devotions. Of gathering around campfires at summer Bible camps, testifying to God's miraculous work while eating gooey s'mores.

There is no ambivalence in these memories. No sense of weirdness or even curiosity. I was a Christian, Christians were supposed to worship, and so I did. It's only now, as I spend a lot of time thinking about what my religious practice looks like from the outside, that thorny questions emerge: Why do we Christians worship God? Why does God want us to and even command us to? Why is scripture filled with exhortations to give God honor, glory, praise, and adulation?

I suppose the real question here is about God's character and personality. Does God need our worship? Is there something missing in God that we human beings supply with our regular contributions of praise? A more cynical reframing of the question might be: Is God a megalomaniac? Someone who requires the constant ego reinforcement of our adoration? After all, we humans tend to recoil from people who insist on receiving steady streams of compliments. We call them narcissists. We grow weary in their company. Why and how is God different?

I have a lot of sympathy for these questions. I understand why people who don't practice Christianity find Christian worship odd. But I don't think that God's desire for human worship stems from any kind of divine brokenness. In fact, I think that God's goodness and graciousness toward us flow from God's utter wholeness and self-sufficiency. God is free to love us precisely because God is not needy as we are. In the perfect communion of the Trinity, God has everything God needs.

Perhaps, then, we are the ones who need to worship God, won't be whole unless we give God thanks and praise. Why?

Because worship is far more than expressive; it is formational. It makes us. It focuses our attention. It orders our priorities. It teaches us what's important and what isn't. As Richard Rohr puts it, we have to be careful, because we will always become the God we worship. Our prayer, our devotion, our praise—these rewire us. They enable us to see, hear, and think in new ways. What we worship makes us who we are.

It's taken me a while to realize that I'm always worshiping something, whether I notice it or not. If worship is the act of giving honor, reverence, devotion, or admiration to something or someone, then worship truly is as natural as breathing. We're wired to do it: to flock to objects of devotion, to pay exquisite and adoring

attention to things that draw our gaze and elicit our respect, to put pretty things on pedestals. We're wired to ascribe greatness to people, places, ideas, and objects outside ourselves.

We do this with athletes and movie stars, political candidates and pundits. We do it at football games and rock concerts, at car dealerships and open houses. Increasingly, we do it with the little gadgets we hold in our hands and manipulate with our thumbs, allowing these compact miracles of technology to capture our attention for hours each day.

What draws my gaze? What holds me captive? What keeps me coming back for more? I am a devotee to these things. A worshiper. These are the things—for better or for worse—that keep me on my knees.

I believe this is why we're commanded to worship God. This is why the ancient psalmist invites his congregants to "worship the Lord in holy splendor" (Ps. 96:9) and tremble before him. Why Jesus reminds his first-century listeners to "worship the Lord your God, and serve only him" (Luke 4:8). Why, in the book that draws our scriptures to a close, St. John of Patmos describes heavenly worship at glorious scale: "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created" (Rev. 4:11).

If I'm wired and destined to worship, if my worship has the power to make or unmake my heart, then these scriptures make all the sense in the world. They're reminding me to focus my attention on the only one who is truly good, truly worthy, and truly just. They're inviting me to align my loves with the divine love. To walk in the way that is the Way and to live in close and intimate company with the one who is the Life.

To be clear, this God we're commanded to worship is a servant God, one who grew up a peasant under empire, washed the feet of his disciples, rode a donkey into Jerusalem, and wept at his beloved friend's graveside. This is a God who "emptied himself," "humbled himself," and "became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:7–8).

This is no narcissist. This is a God who commands my worship so that my heart can be softened into servanthood, gentleness, humility, and love. This is a God who offers me the practice of worship as a gift. Not for God's benefit, but for mine.

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Christian Century community engagement editor [Jon Mathieu](#) chats with columnist [Debie Thomas](#) about her motivation for this article and some further thoughts on formational worship.