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Is 'Worship' Biblical?

JOHN P RICHARDSON

Marshall on Worship

In the theological library I use, the article in the past volumes of *Churchman* which is most conspicuously well thumbed is that on worship written by Howard Marshall in 1985.¹ In this article, Marshall demonstrated what he called the 'remarkable fact' that in the New Testament 'Christian meetings are not said to take place specifically in order to worship God and the language of worship is not used as a means of referring to them or describing them'.² Instead, 'the action of God towards his people is at least as important as, if not more important than, their actions towards him'.³ Marshall concluded 'It is misleading to continue to call our meetings "services" or "worship" if the effect of this phrase is to concentrate attention on what we offer to God'.⁴

The worn pages indicate that Marshall's article continues to generate considerable interest, yet astonishingly there seem to have been no follow-up articles in the ten years since it was written. More predictably, given their radical nature, few of Marshall's conclusions seem to have been acted upon, even in evangelical circles. On the contrary, things have moved in the opposite direction. We have teaching material, books, conferences and even full-time posts devoted to 'worship'. Indeed, 'worship' has become the definitive activity of the church and provides the common ground on which Evangelicals, Charismatics, Catholics and Liberals can all meet – which is enough in itself to give some of us cause for concern.

Part of the trouble is that Marshall's conclusions have entered evangelical folklore. It has become commonplace to agree that 'we don't meet to worship God' on the grounds that 'all of life is worship'. But again, the fact that a general agreement on a principle has had little impact on behaviour should raise our suspicions. Clearly, something more is needed before Marshall's thesis bears fruit. This article therefore attempts to push our thinking on 'worship' further, though down a slightly different path from the one he suggests. It entails a more radical questioning of our use of language in general and the term 'worship' in particular. In fact the thesis of this paper is that there is no such thing as 'worship' – at least 'not as we

1 I H Marshall 'How far did the early Christians worship God?' *Churchman* vol 99-3 1985 pp 216-229

2 p 220

3 p 224

4 p 228

know it'. It will further be argued that worship (as we know it), and the emphasis it receives, find no parallel in the pages of the Bible. On the contrary, our present understanding of 'worship' actually obscures our understanding of the Bible, distorts our relationship with God and masks the true outworking of what it means to be his people.

The Etymology of 'Worship'

Our first difficulty is that 'worship' is an *English* word translating Hebrew and Greek expressions. Moreover, in discussions of the subject it is generally overlooked that the English word has itself undergone radical development. Since it was first used in translation, 'worship' has acquired a semantic range *quite different from its own original meaning*. That this is so can be seen in some surviving English archaisms. Judges are still called 'Your worship' and we still have a few 'worshipful companies', yet the term has no *religious* significance in these contexts. Again, the statement in the marriage service of 1549, 'With my body I thee *wurship*', evidently conveyed to everyone present what the ASB now expresses by 'With my body I *honour* you', yet the phrase seems very peculiar now.⁵

The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* states that until the early seventeenth century 'worship' was commonly used to denote 'respect or honour shown to a person or thing'. It quotes Jonathan Swift's acid comment that a certain woman was 'as fine as Fi'pence; but truly, I thought, there was more Cost than Worship'. However, by the early eighteenth century the term was being used more exclusively to refer to religious ceremonies and by the middle of that century its use in a secular context was evidently becoming rare. Today, of course, 'worship' is not merely an almost exclusively religious term but has acquired additional connotations far beyond showing respect or honour. Too frequently 'a time of worship' means 'a time of singing choruses', and the choruses themselves may be sung 'worshipfully' in the sense of 'slowly, with feeling'. However, it is obviously a flawed approach which moves from archaic English, via modern practice, to an understanding which claims to be biblical.

Worship in the Bible

What, then, does 'worship' mean in the Bible? In his book *Engaging with God*,⁶ David Peterson has carried out a thorough review, to which the reader is referred, of the Hebrew and Greek terms customarily translated

5 Given the way the English language has changed, it seems perverse that the compilers of the ASB reintroduced 'worship' in the husband's vow 'to love, cherish, and worship' his wife, since in the context there is no earlier precedent to help establish its proper meaning and moreover it reads as a 'trade off' against the wife's promise 'to love, cherish, and obey' her husband. The mental gymnastics involved in extracting an appropriate meaning are surely beyond most people.

6 D Peterson *Engaging With God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Leicester: IVP/Apollos 1992)

by the English 'worship'. The underlying Hebrew expression is *hištaḥwâ* and the corresponding Greek term, used in both the LXX and the New Testament, is *proskunein*. Peterson notes (p 75 n 9) the conclusion of recent scholarship that the root of *hištaḥwâ* is *ḥ-w-y* meaning 'to curl up', rather than as was previously supposed *š-ḥ-w* (to sink down or subside), but for our purposes the difference is slight since the meaning in practice is the same, ie a bowing or prostrating of the body as a mark of honour. Similarly, *proskunein*, whose root meaning is 'to kiss towards', may originally have indicated blowing a kiss of respect or adoration, but by far the commonest use in both secular and sacred literature of the time denotes honouring by kneeling or falling prostrate.

Both the Hebrew and Greek terms also have a secular as well as a religious or cultic usage.⁷ Throughout the biblical period, one would bow to an honoured guest or a superior just as one might to an idol or the true God (eg Gen 18:2; 27:29 or Matt 18:26). However, both *hištaḥwâ* and *proskunein* have a similar semantic range which is simultaneously narrower and broader than the *modern* sense of 'worship'. The range is narrower in that, as regards actions, both *hištaḥwâ* and *proskunein* are almost entirely confined to bowing or prostrating oneself. It is broader in that neither the Hebrew or Greek words nor the actions they denote have an exclusively religious reference.

Nevertheless, the original choice of 'worship' to translate *hištaḥwâ* and *proskunein* was not inappropriate. Though it did not refer primarily to the adoption of a particular posture, 'worship' was a term which denoted an *attitude* of honour and respect. Moreover, it had a secular as well as a sacred usage in an age when honour and respect were still expressed through posture, such as by bowing or curtsying. The modern sense of 'worship', however, clearly has a semantic range substantially different from that of either *hištaḥwâ* or *proskunein*. It includes numinous feelings of adoration and awe, as well as a wide variety of cultic actions such as singing, prayer and ceremony. Furthermore, these feelings and actions necessarily have few secular parallels, which is undoubtedly one reason why attempts to broaden application of 'worship' to include 'the whole of life' have failed to make any real impact. It is impossible by definition to extend 'transcendental' feelings and actions into the everyday world. However, since to us 'worship' signifies a specifically 'religious' awareness or action, and since an equivalent secular convention of bowing or prostration hardly enters our consideration, we may begin to suspect that 'worship' can no longer properly be said to translate either *hištaḥwâ* or *proskunein*.

7 I have used the words 'cultic' and 'cultus' throughout this article in the sense of referring to 'a system of religious worship esp[ecially] as expressed in ceremonies' (*Concise Oxford Dictionary* 1983).

Worship as 'Homage'

It will be objected, however, that the Bible in general and the Old Testament in particular are replete with descriptions of 'worship' in the modern sense. Most obviously, there are the sacrifices and all the apparatus of the Temple and Priesthood that accompanied them. Even when one allows that these things are shadows replaced by the reality of Christ, there remain to the New Testament community singing, prayer and praise, not to mention the Old Testament activities of shouting, clapping and dancing. We read of the church coming together and praying 'liturgically' with one voice (Acts 4:24ff). We observe the 'hymns' such as Phil 2:6-11, or 2 Tim 2:11-13. In some Bibles, passages such as 1 Cor 11 or 1 Tim 2 are even headed '*Instructions for Worship*'. Moreover, it seems we are indeed told that our whole lives should be an act of worship: 'I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship' (Rom 12:1 RSV).

Unfortunately, the reason we are so sure the Bible is full of 'worship activities' is partly linguistic habit, partly bad translation arising from those same habits and partly the result of reading with a prior expectation. A closer examination reveals a different picture. It is useful at this point to refer to the Authorized Version which continued and further established the convention of using 'worship' as a translational term. It is also relatively consistent in its restriction of 'worship' to translating *hištaḥwâ* or *proskunein*.

The AV and Old Testament Worship

In the Old Testament of the AV we find there are only five verses where 'worship' does not translate *hištaḥwâ* (or its Aramaic equivalent in Daniel).⁸ Four of these are in the same passage (2 Kings 10:19,21,22,23) where 'worshippers' translates literally the 'servants' of Baal.⁹ In *virtually every other case* 'worship' specifically refers to or is connected with either the act of bowing down or the attitude associated with it. This includes frequent references to 'bowing down *and* worshipping' which expresses both the specific action and the attitude prompting the action. In the cases

8 There is a sixth reference, 1 Kings 12:30, where 'worship' is not present in the original text but is added in the English.

9 It must be admitted that it is hard to see why this departure occurs here. In v 19 and elsewhere in the AV exactly the same word is consistently translated as 'servants' and in v 23 the noun form is translated as the 'servants of the LORD' (*contra* the 'worshippers of Baal'). We can suggest only that the choice reflects a tendency in the meaning of 'worship' to *incline* towards describing the practices of the cultus. It still remains curious, however, that this usage occurs once only and in such a compressed group of verses – perhaps to distinguish true 'service' from false 'worship'. The other isolated instance is in Jer 44:19 where 'worship' translates *'āṣab* which the RSV renders as 'bearing the image'.

where 'worshipping' could not be understood as referring to the physical action of 'bowing' or 'prostrating' it could nevertheless be helpfully translated by 'honouring' or similar expressions which describe the attitude involved.

Even so, there are some parts of the Old Testament where it is obvious from the context that activities connected with the cultus are implied by the use of *hištaḥwâ*. Thus Genesis 22:5 reads 'And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you' (AV cf 1 Sam 15:30f). This would seem to suggest that *hištaḥwâ* (or *proskunein* in the LXX) envisages cultic activity akin to the modern sense of 'worship'. However, Mark Harding, in a survey of New Testament terminology, suggests the expression 'to pay homage' to describe what Abraham intends.¹⁰ Abraham is not about to have a 'worship experience' but to demonstrate his recognition that Yahveh is God, even at the cost of sacrificing his own son. We are certainly not compelled to infer from this that 'worship' generally referred to all other aspects of the cultus. Moreover, understanding 'worship' as 'paying homage' helps us keep in view the true *purpose* of Abraham's action. It is not to express a feeling *about* God, nor to do something *for* God, but to acknowledge the nature of his relationship *with* God.

The AV and New Testament Worship

In the New Testament of the AV, 'worship' is used rather more freely, particularly to translate terms (such as the *sebesthai* group) which express an attitude of religious devotion. However, it is still the case that 'worship' generally translates *proskunein*, frequently (and misleadingly to the modern reader) when it refers to the social convention of bowing or prostrating oneself to a human superior (eg Matt 18:26). In these and other instances we can see a strict parallel with Old Testament passages or use. We could substitute either terms such as 'bowing' or 'prostrating' to describe the action, or 'honouring' or 'paying homage' to describe the attitude, without any loss to the sense of the text. Specifically, as with *hištaḥwâ*, *proskunein* does not refer to the performance of the cultus in general.

Serving: The Goal of the Exodus

Where, then, does 'worship' in the biblical sense properly fit into the life of the believer? The controlling framework for our response to God is stated negatively in the second Commandment, which the AV translates as follows:

10 M Harding 'Two New Testament "Worship" Terms' *Personhood, Sexuality and Christian Ministry – Explorations 1* B G Webb ed (Homebush West: Lancer Books 1987) pp 15-30. Harding is translating from the LXX which uses *proskunein* at this point, reflecting the close affinity between the Hebrew and Greek terms.

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not **bow down thyself** to them, nor **serve** them [...] (Ex 20:4-5).¹¹

Here, to 'bow down thyself' refers to the physical action or posture, prompted by the mental attitude of honour or respect. The semantic range, however, *extends no further than this action and attitude*. Every other activity in response to idols is comprehended by the expression to 'serve them'. As with *hištat'wā*, 'to serve' (*'ābad*) is again a term with a common secular meaning, including 'to work', 'to work for', 'to work on' and, more particularly, 'to serve out of duty or compulsion'. But it also includes the performance of those aspects of the cultus which we commonly think of as 'worship'.

The significance of this must be grasped from a 'salvation-historical' consideration of the progress of the Exodus towards the giving of the Commandment at Mt Sinai. When we first meet the Israelites they are in Egypt where:

... the Egyptians **made** the children of Israel to serve with rigour. And they made their lives bitter with **hard bondage** [*'ābōdā* – service], in mortar, and in brick, and in all manner of **service** in the field: all **their service**, wherein **they made** them **serve**, was with rigour. (1:13–14 AV)

This situation must be set in contrast to the promise of God to Abraham in Gen 12:2: 'And I will make of you a great nation, and I will **ble**ss you ...' (RSV). Though at the beginning of Exodus Abraham's descendants are now a great nation, the lesson is unmistakable – God's own people are not serving their true King but the King of Egypt, and they are not experiencing blessing but 'hard bondage'! However, when Moses is raised up as a saviour for the Israelites, the nature of their 'service' is challenged but the concept itself is not abandoned. Thus God says to Moses, 'Certainly I will be with thee; and this shall be a token unto thee, that I have sent thee: When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye **shall serve** God upon this mountain' (3:12 AV). And the essence of the message Moses takes to Pharaoh is 'Let my son go, **that he may serve me**' (4:23 AV).¹²

11 Although stated negatively and in relation to false gods, the context of the Commandment clearly implies it is also to be interpreted positively – 'You *shall* bow down to and serve the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt', cf Calvin, 'That the opposite duties are enjoined when evil things are forbidden will also be willingly admitted in common judgment' (*Institutes* II viii 9).

12 We may note at this stage that being a son and being a 'server' are not exclusive categories, cf Phil 2:22. Nor, *contra* John Wesley, need we imagine that the Christian life involves a progression *from* being a servant *to* being a son.

The response of the Israelites when they heard this reported was that 'they bowed their heads and worshipped' (4:31 AV). That is, they acknowledged and honoured the God who was to save them. However, the terms of their *service* had not yet been defined. Thus, when Pharaoh was finally prepared to let the people go he attempted to set conditions, but (bearing in mind what God first said to him) Moses replied, 'Our cattle also shall go with us; there shall not an hoof be left behind; for thereof must we take to serve the LORD our God; and we know not with what we must serve the LORD until we come thither' (10:26, AV). It is clear from this exchange that cultic sacrifice was understood to be an element of 'service', and thus all the work of the Temple may be thought of under this heading. But the contrast, implicit in the narrative structure, between the 'hard bondage' of the King of Egypt and the forthcoming service of God indicates that the work of the Temple is far from encompassing the *whole* of what is meant by 'service'.¹³ Just as the 'service' of the King of Egypt had involved building cities for him (Ex 1:11), so the 'service' of Yahweh would include distinctly 'non-cultic' activities.

This understanding of 'service' means that the Exodus transfers the people of Israel not merely from one form of service to another but from one sphere of rule to another.¹⁴ The narrative structure also renders more pathetic the demand of the Israelites that they should be allowed to return to Egypt: 'Is not this the word that we did tell thee in Egypt, saying, Let us alone, that we may serve the Egyptians? For it had been better [*lit* for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness' (14:12 *et pars* AV). The narrative also shapes our understanding of the second Commandment, for as the people of Israel *need not* return to serve the Egyptians (cf 14:5) so they *must not* serve other 'gods' than the one who brought them 'out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage' (*'aḥādīm* – 'serving') (20:2 AV). The Commandment is not merely a prohibition against a misdirected cultus but a warning that this would result in a return to unwelcome service ('bondage').

It is also in this context of deliverance from serving Pharaoh to serving God that the third Commandment states 'Six days shalt thou labour [*ābad*, serve], and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work ... etc' (20:9f AV). The Sabbath is not the day of *servicing God* but the day of '*not servicing*' in terms of mundane 'work' as a result of the saving action of God. It is therefore

13 Indeed, the justification that the animals must be taken along for the 'service' of sacrifice reads at this stage more like an inspired excuse than a comprehensive theological statement.

14 Cf the reference to the kings who 'served Chedorlaomer' until 'in the thirteenth year they rebelled' (Gen 14:4 RSV).

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supremely the symbol of Salvation, as is made clear in the explanatory sentence attached to the same Commandment in Deuteronomy:

But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work ... And remember that thou wast a **servant** [*'ebed*] in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord thy God brought thee out thence through a mighty hand and by a stretched out arm: *therefore* the LORD thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day. (5:14f AV)

The Sabbath is a foretaste of the final deliverance by God from all 'hard bondage' into the 'rest from work' which is the result of his perfect rule. The 'service' of God is thus ultimately a 'political' rather than a 'religious' concept, referring to the establishment of his kingdom rather than the development of a cultus.

Service as Covenant Life

The immediate significance of the Exodus for the Israelites is that the service of God extends well beyond the bounds of what we would call 'worship'. It *includes* the cultus, so that the work of the Levites is 'service' (Num 3:7ff), as is the choral singing in the Temple (1 Chr 6:32) or caring for the Temple vessels (1 Chr 9:28). But 'serving' can refer to anything from building cities (Ex 1:11), through fighting in war (Ezek 29:18) to herding cattle (Zech 13:5). The service of God involves submission to his rule in every area of life. By contrast, the great threat held out against the Israelites if they succumb to idolatry is that having *bowed down* to other gods they will indeed find they are *serv*ing them, but against their will and outside the land and the Covenant framework (cf Deut 4:28 *et freq*). In terms of the Exile, 'serving' clearly does not mean 'performing the cultus' of foreign gods but 'living under their rule'.

Ultimately, the 'service' of God refers to life lived in a Covenant relationship with him, obeying his rule on the one hand and receiving his blessing on the other. Thus in presenting the Law to the Israelites, Moses can ask them,

And now, Israel, what doth the Lord thy God require of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to **serve** the LORD thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, to keep the commandments of the LORD and his statutes, which I command thee this day *for thy good*? (Deut 10:12-13 AV)

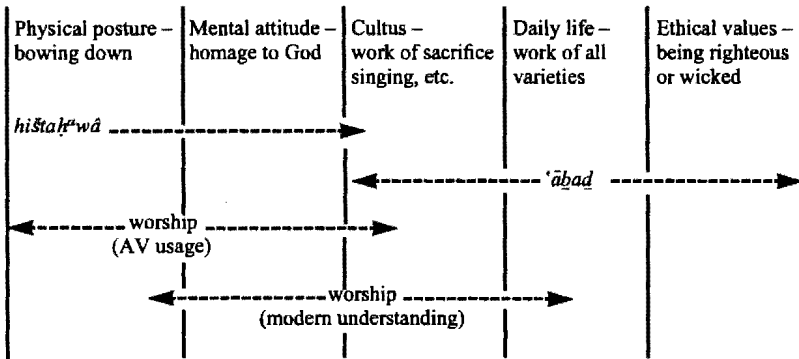
However, given that God is a holy God, his service is finally defined by *ethical* (as distinct from *cultic*) considerations:

Then shall ye return, and discern between the *righteous* and the *wicked*, between *him that serveth* God and *him that serveth him not*. (Mal 3:18 AV)

The servant of God is thus ultimately the righteous one, and the form of his service is the doing of righteousness.

The Dynamic of the Believer's Life

We may now demonstrate the semantic overlap between *hištaḥʷā* (to bow down), '*ābad* (to serve), 'worship' as a translational term in the AV and 'worship' as a modern concept by using the following diagram:-



It can readily be seen that whilst the AV sense of 'worship' corresponds fairly precisely to the Hebrew *hištaḥʷā*, the modern sense falls between that of *hištaḥʷā* and '*ābad* and is furthermore heavily weighted towards the cultus. On these grounds we would justify our earlier claim that 'worship' can no longer properly be said to translate . . . *hištaḥʷā*'.

However, this diagram also helps us understand the dynamic of the life of the ideal Old Testament believer. The believer would be distinguished as a *believer* by the exclusive honouring of Yahweh as God, both in attitude and in practice. As the revelation of God in word and act unfolded, so the direction – if any – for this bowing became the Temple in Jerusalem as representing the throne of the Great King (Jer 3:17).¹⁵ But the essential feature was not so much the bowing as that Yahweh, and only Yahweh, was honoured in this way.¹⁶ It would be unnecessarily pedantic to insist that this bowing down was never accompanied by other activities such as prayer. Nevertheless, it would be accurate to say that it *required*

15 A major development in Islam was the changing of the *qibla* – the direction of bowing during prayer – from Jerusalem, as shared with the Jews, to Mecca, when it became clear that the Jews would not accept Mohammed.

16 Cf the example of both Daniel and his three companions, where 'bowing down' was a key issue.

no other physical expression and that whatever activities took place were focused on the acknowledgement of Yahweh's rightful and exclusive claim to deity. The honouring of God is not elaborated through further actions or ritual which we would recognize as 'worship' in the modern sense.

Out of this honouring of Yahweh as God, however, flowed his *service* by the believer. One aspect of this service was the offering of sacrifice, along with its accompanying ritual. But only a small section of the people, namely the male Levites, were fully involved in this activity. For the rest, as for the Levites themselves, the service of God consisted of obedience to his Law but, beyond even this, the open-ended demand of righteous living, summed up as 'the way of the LORD'.

Expressions of individual and collective piety, through the praise of God, prayer, reading and meditation on the Scriptures, or participation in the festivals, formed a further matrix of activities which consciously reinforced, developed and expressed the relationship of the believer with Yahweh. However, these activities were woven seamlessly into the total fabric of daily life rather than forming a distinct category of 'spiritual activities'. Specifically, they are not described or defined as 'worship' in the Old Testament. Nor is there any suggestion that they are uniquely important compared to the demands for service expressed in ethical behaviour. Equally, there is no suggestion that the performance of these actions *as compared with ethical behaviour* wins any special hearing or blessing from God. On the contrary, the terms of God's blessing are laid down in his words to Abraham before the cultus was elaborated:

The LORD said, 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by him? No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to *keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice*; so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.'
(Gen 18:17-19 RSV)

The New Testament Picture

When we consider more briefly the New Testament, the picture is slightly modified but is basically consistent with that of the Old Testament. As previously mentioned, the AV uses 'worship' to translate not only *proskunein* but also other words, principally of the *sebesthai* group. However, in the underlying Greek a clear distinction is maintained between the two classes of activity represented in the Old Testament by *hištalʿwā* and *ʿābaq*. On the one hand *proskunein* is used in exactly the same way as *hištalʿwā* to indicate 'honouring' of any kind (whether

secular or sacred) and its accompanying physical expression. On the other hand a variety of other words are used indicating 'service', some of which have a more habitually 'sacred' usage than others, but which all basically correspond to *abad* and, in the same way, can also refer to 'service' of any kind. Thus Harding shows that *latreuein* and *leitourgein*, along with their cognates, had a wide range of references to service in the social and political aspects of life, not merely to religious service.¹⁷ Similarly, *diakonein*, *douleuein* and their cognates are not exclusively 'religious' though they are heavily used in a 'sacred' context in the New Testament.

It can readily be seen that though there is a greater variety of vocabulary with respect to terms for 'service' (some of which are occasionally rendered by the AV as 'worship', eg Acts 7:42; 24:14; Phil 3:3 etc translating *latreuein*) there are no major departures from the framework established by the Old Testament.¹⁸ God is still honoured as God and, where possible and appropriate, the corresponding bodily posture is adopted (1 Cor 14:25, cf Matt 4:9). Similarly, he is served both through the cultus and Temple ministry (Luke 2:37; Heb 9:6) and through the whole of life lived under his rule (Luke 1:74; 4:8).

The one fundamental difference between the New Testament and the Old Testament, however, is the dramatic erosion of the cultus in the community of God's people following the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Donald Gowan writes:

Much that was associated with awareness of the presence of God in Old Testament worship is missing from the New Testament. Places . . . and times . . . have lost their holiness. All things have become clean [. . .]. Free access to God through the Spirit was possible for all without need for a priesthood [. . .]. Sacrifice was no longer needed, since Christian worship involved participation in Christ's perfect sacrifice. The Christian's offering is that of oneself.¹⁹

Though we may disagree with Gowan's use of the term 'worship', his observation is manifestly correct. The religion of the New Testament is almost entirely stripped of cultic expression. Yet, as he immediately observes, 'the church did not thereby lose its awareness of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, for nowhere is that sense more effectively expressed than in Heb 12:18-24'. The Christian community of the New

17 M Harding 'Two New Testament "Worship" Terms' *Personhood, Sexuality and Christian Ministry - Explorations* / B G Webb ed (Homebush West: Lancer Books 1987)

18 The frequency with which the AV uses 'worship' to translate 'service' words in the New Testament, however, may again indicate the 'weighting' of the English term 'worship' towards a narrowly 'religious' use which was gradually to supplant the wider secular meaning.

19 D E Gowan 'Worship as Divine-Human Encounter: in Scripture and in Contemporary Experience' *Ex Auditu* vol 8 1992 pp 73-84

Testament was not a 'mystical' community, but neither was it devoid of a sense of awe. However, the sense of awe was not an end in itself, and, as Gowan acknowledges, it arose principally out of hearing the *word* of God declaring his nature and his deeds.

Service and 'Worship' in the New Testament

The reason for this trend is not hard to find. The cultus known to the early church was that of the Jerusalem Temple and its associated priesthood and sacrifices. But as the writer to the Hebrews demonstrated, the service of the earthly cultus was only ever symbolic. The service of the true, heavenly, cultus on the other hand had been perfectly performed by Jesus.²⁰ Thus though the earthly form might remain it was only a matter of time before this, too, disappeared (Heb 8:13). But if the New Testament community looked to the demise of the cultus as service, what happened to the wider notion of the service of God?

It has regularly been noted that the New Testament uses 'service' terms such as *leitourgein* and *latreuein*, which frequently have a cultic application, to describe non-cultic activities. Thus in Rom 15:16 Paul describes himself as a *leitourgos* of Christ Jesus and his evangelistic work as performing a 'priestly service' (RSV, translating *hierourgounta*). It is then typically claimed that 'the language of worship has been transposed . . . to the sphere of manward activity'.²¹ However, our argument is that the 'language of worship' is more a feature of English than it is of Hebrew or Greek. When, in Acts 24:14, Paul says 'I serve (*latreuō contra* AV, RSV 'worship') the God of our Fathers', he is making what is, in Old Testament terms, a (theo)logical statement about his whole life (cf 2 Tim 1:3; 2 Chron 34:33). Paul's service is simply the result of, though distinct from, that attitude which underlies his earlier intention, referred to in v.11, to pay homage to God in the Temple: 'I went up to worship (*proskunēsōn*, 'for bowing down') at Jerusalem' (RSV).

The 'service' language of the New Testament, although frequently drawing on a *socio-domestic* metaphor of slavery, needs also to be considered within the *salvation-historical* framework established by the Old Testament. Where the socio-domestic metaphor is to the fore, particularly where *douleuein* and its cognates are used, the emphasis is on humility and the thankless performance of duties (cf Luke 17:10). In other contexts, however, 'service' clearly indicates a privileged and righteous

20 It is important to note that Hebrews follows the vocabulary of the OT by referring to the work of the Temple as 'service' (9:1,6,21 cf 8:6). This pattern is maintained in the AV, but the RSV uses 'worship' in 9:1,21, presumably reflecting more recent assumptions about the nature and significance of the cultus.

21 M Harding 'Two New Testament "Worship" Terms' *Personhood, Sexuality and Christian Ministry - Explorations 1* B G Webb ed (Homebush West: Lancer Books 1987) p 22

relationship with God (cf 1 Thess 1:9, where *douleuein* is used, also Rom 9:4 and – mistakenly – John 16:2). The great hope of the Covenant people, expressed at the start of the New Testament, is 'That [God] would grant unto us, that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear' (Luke 1:74 AV). This same thinking clearly lies behind Galatians 4:8–10:

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were in bondage [*edouleusate*] to beings that by nature are no gods; but now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits, whose slaves you want to be once more [lit *whom yet again you wish to serve*]? You observe days, and months, and seasons, and years! (RSV)

Here the parallels with the Exodus are striking. Paul contrasts the former condition of his hearers with 'bondage' from which they have been set free but to which they now seem determined to return, as the children of Israel wished to return to Egypt. However, this bondage is now couched in terms of cultic observance. The service of God which results from the New Covenant has no place for the old cultus. On the other hand, to introduce a *substitute* cultus is also to return to spiritual bondage in defiance of the freedom Christ has obtained for us!

All this explains the absence of an interest in 'worship activities' originally noted by Marshall. Even the often-quoted example of 'serving the Lord' in Acts 13:2 does not *require* a cultic interpretation. The people concerned are described as 'prophets and teachers' and their 'serving' (*leitourgountōn*, not 'worshipping', RSV) might indicate no more than that they were prophesying and teaching.²² Of course, the church of the New Testament does not eschew prayer, song and praise. However, these do not form a special category of activities called 'worship' but are referred to simply for what they are, namely praying, singing and praising. As in the Old Testament, they are no more nor less 'spiritual' than other forms of service such as helping the needy or spreading the gospel, and it is only our neglect of the overall concept of 'service' in favour of the cultus which makes us surprised to see the two latter activities referred to by 'service language'.

It is entirely consistent with this that the life of the church in the New

22 M Harding 'Two New Testament "Worship" Terms' *Personhood, Sexuality and Christian Ministry – Explorations* I B G Webb ed (Homebush West: Lancer Books 1987) p 23 quotes this as the opinion of B F Westcott but prefers the opinion that they were praying and fasting. Peterson *Engaging With God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Leicester: IVP/Apollos 1992) p 151, however, quotes F F Bruce to the same effect as Westcott.

Testament is not focused on activities 'in church'. The 'reasonable service' (AV, *contra* RSV 'worship') of Romans 12:1, whilst consequent on the 'sacrifice' of our bodies, is the proper conduct of anyone who has chosen to 'serve the Lord' (cf Josh 24:14). What is remarkable about this and the next chapter of Romans is not that this service is described in terms of 'service in a social context' but the entire failure to mention what we would customarily regard as 'worship'. Similarly, the summons of Hebrews 12:28, that 'we may serve God [*latreuōmen* – again *contra* RSV 'worship'] acceptably with reverence and godly fear', is elaborated in chapter 13 in terms of godly living.²³ Though the context of 12:18-27 seems to have in mind the gathering of Christians, the only mention of the cultus is in connection with the death of Jesus on the cross (13:14) and the sacrifices we offer, which are confessing him and showing kindness (13:15f).²⁴ As Marshall and others have demonstrated, where activities performed 'in church' are mentioned in the New Testament, the concern is with considering what has been received from God and how that can be used to build up one another. Not only is there nothing in the New Testament to indicate that 'worship activities' were the key reason for Christian gatherings, there is nothing to indicate they shared our own concept of or emphasis on 'worship' as an activity in itself.

The Unimportance of 'Worship'

Yet does this really matter? Is there any harm in us continuing to talk about 'worship', even if we acknowledge it is not strictly a biblical concept? My conviction in writing this paper is that there is, and that the current attitude to worship is distorting our understanding of God and of the Christian life. The remarkable truth is that, as far as the use of *proskunein* is concerned, 'worship' is mentioned only three times in the New Testament outside the Gospels, Acts and Revelation, and only once in a church context (1 Cor 14:25).²⁵ If 'worship' is as important as modern Christians deem it to be, we have to ask why the New Testament does not apparently share the same perspective. At the same time, we need to recognize why the present emphasis on 'worship' has arisen and the impact it is having.

- 23 The reader will be aware by now of RSV's tendency to be far more liberal than the AV in its use of 'worship' to translate 'service' terms in the NT thus (like the AV in its day) reflecting - but also reinforcing - current usage and presuppositions.
- 24 The reference here to 'acknowledging' or 'confessing' God's name, whilst it does not exclude prayer and song, need not be cultic and could, indeed, be evangelistic (Matt 10:32)!
- 25 One reason for the concentration of references to 'worship' in the Gospels, Acts and Revelation (51 out of 54 verses) is that these are predominantly *narrative* and *description*. Thus where the action of 'bowing down' in homage or honour takes place it is described.

Even within the New Testament itself, we have observed the difficulty of living with 'religionless Christianity' and the craving to return to the familiar 'bondage' of a recognizable cultus (Gal 4:8-10). In modern Christianity 'worship' performs this function, so that the contemporary understanding of 'worship' is moving us from a biblical understanding of our relationship with God. 'Worship' is increasingly regarded as the thing we offer to God, the means by which we receive *from* God and the context for an encounter *with* God. All of this is leading us away from biblical Christianity into mysticism and, potentially, idolatry.

Offering to God

One reason for the present emphasis on worship is surely as old as religion itself, namely the natural, but false, assumption that there must be something we can or should do for God on a *quid pro quo* basis. Human nature is such that this tendency will always threaten to replace our reliance on God's grace. It is seen in Paul's constant need to set faith in its right relationship to works. However, it is also seen in the frequent assertion that worship means 'giving worth to God'.²⁶ This latter definition might, of course, be arguable on the basis of the original meaning of the *English* word, but it is clearly not true of the Bible's Hebrew or Greek vocabulary, nor is it true of the Bible's presentation of our response to God.

In the Bible, and particularly in the New Testament, the initial response of 'worshipping' God is associated with *conversion*. Hence the effect of prophecy on the unbeliever may be that 'falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you'. (1 Cor 14:25 cf Rev 14:6-7).²⁷ True, God is given his 'worth' insofar as the unbeliever turns from false gods to him. However, this leads not to further and repeated acts of 'worship' but to a life of obedience to God's rule: 'you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God' (1 Thess 1:9 RSV). In contrast, the modern understanding of 'worship' is a repeated activity addressed directly to God whereby through the cultus, and particularly through singing, he is appropriately extolled and exalted. Unfortunately, where the exhortation, 'Let's worship the Lord' means 'Let's tell God how marvellous he is', as opposed to the more biblical meaning of 'Let's commit ourselves (again) to God', the effect is to reinforce the image held by many unbelievers of God as an egoist who needs regular doses of praise to bolster him up. That this notion is inadequate is seen in the paucity of words used in supposed 'worship' songs. The vocabulary of praising God *directly* is soon exhausted. By contrast, the biblical authors praise God somewhat *indirectly*, referring to his works and attributes and addressing their praises

26 The 1995 Anglican Evangelical Assembly *Papers and recommendations from the five track working groups*.

27 Notice the entirely biblical connection of posture, attitude and confession.

horizontally to the community and the creation as much as vertically to God. The difference from the modern notion of 'worship' is that biblical praise is rooted in a humble acknowledgement of what God has done and is not an attempt in itself to do something for God.

At its crudest, modern 'worship' becomes part of a 'softening up' process directed at God. There is a particular danger of this when prayers of supplication are deliberately preceded by 'a time of worship'. Whilst instinctively it seems right that we should praise God before we ask from him, it actually overturns the biblical order. The New Testament says 'we have confidence to enter the sanctuary *by the blood of Jesus*' (Heb 10:19 RSV). Our humility is maintained by the fact that we need not offer 'worship' before we approach God with our needs since the way to him has been opened up for us by the service Jesus offered. Indeed, the essence of prayer is asking and the 'Lord's prayer' is basically a series of petitions based on a humble confidence in God as the Father who hears us.

Receiving *from* God

A similar difficulty is present when 'worship' becomes the means by which we receive from God. The greatest danger of the modern attitude to 'worship' is that it becomes a mechanism through which God is made to act. This approach is represented in a book by Jack Hayford, pastor of the internationally famous 'Church on the Way' in Van Nuys, California. For him, 'worship' is 'an opportunity for man to invite God's power and presence to move among those worshipping Him' and 'a means by which God's presence [can] be realised consistently'.²⁸ Implicit in statements of this sort is, of course, the notion that without 'worship' God will not act, indeed that he will not be able to act for although 'He truly wants to be present in power and bless His people at worship services' it is 'worship' alone which is 'the source of this mighty moving of the Holy Spirit'.

It may readily be seen that this sets aside the traditional Christian understanding that God works in us through word and sacrament. Indeed, the back cover of a recent IVP booklet by Ben Patterson declares boldly, 'Our deepest need can be filled *only* as we come to our Creator in worship'.²⁹ Hayford also acknowledges this openly:

. . . tradition must be confronted, questioned, and adjusted if God's maximum benefits are to be realised during worship. I had been ignorant of worship [. . .] Consequently, I had grown to depend on preaching alone as the instrument bringing people to repentance.

28 J W Hayford 'Worship – the key to new life' *DEO Today's Music and Worship* Summer 1995 pp 26-27, quoted from Hayford *Worship His Majesty* (Texas: Word Books)

29 B Patterson *Serving God with our Praise* (Downers Grove: IVP 1994) emphasis added

Instead of Jesus opening the way to God and the gospel conveying the benefits of this to us, the 'pathway'³⁰ in both directions is something we do. It is therefore neither biblical nor reliable. The same author talks of the benefits 'when worship is warm', but what about when it is not? To sing 'I really want to worship you my Lord'³¹ expresses not only a desire but an inadequacy and ultimately a hopelessness, for in these terms we can never be sure that God has 'really' been worshipped. We may compare this uncertainty with the confidence expressed in Article XXVI, *Of the Unworthiness of the Ministers, which hinders not the effect of the Sacrament*, that even in the worst of church situations God's grace is greater and reaches the believer because the word and sacraments are God's means, not ours.³²

Encounter with God

The modern understanding of 'worship' is finally an expression of mysticism – the notion that God is best encountered through means other than the union of the believer with Christ at a supra-(or sub-)rational level other than that of our daily walk with him. Karl Barth referred to mysticism as 'esoteric atheism', on the grounds that whilst mysticism shared with atheism an unbelief in the God of the Bible, it had a subtle appeal to those who liked their unbelief in a 'spiritual' guise.³³ And we can indeed see in modern attitudes to 'worship' a desire for a supra-biblical and non-rational experience of God which relies on extra-biblical and non-rational means. Thus in Patterson's booklet the essence of 'worship' is the detachment of the individual from himself in order that his individuality may be 'lost' in the experience of 'worshipping' God who 'reveals glimpses of himself in Christian worship'.³⁴ Worship is defined as an activity where 'God is the audience, the congregation is the performer'³⁵ and the ideal 'performance' is one where 'we find ourselves when we lose ourselves for him'.³⁶ The ideal worshipper is one who can say, 'I was so emptied of myself and full of the Spirit that I was lost in adoration and thanksgiving'.³⁷

At this point we see most clearly that 'worship' has become a theological chimaera which, linked to human sinfulness, is leading us

30 Hayford's own term.

31 Noel Richards 'You laid aside Your majesty' (Copyright © 1985 Thankyou Music UK)

32 We should never forget that the sacraments also derive *their* effectiveness from the word. Thus Luther wrote, 'If the mass is a promise, as has been said, then access to it is to be gained ... by faith alone. For where there is the word of the promising God, there must necessarily be the faith of the accepting man.' (*The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* LW 36 [Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1970])

33 K Barth *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1958)

34 B Patterson *Serving God with our Praise* (Downers Grove: IVP 1994) p 18

35 p 19

36 p 19

37 p 24

away from a true encounter with God. Instead of an apprehension of God through his word, which aims to be 'effective' in producing obedience, modern 'worship' aims to be 'affective' in producing feelings which lead to an encounter with God. This is seen in the fact that in the Bible 'worship' is a verb which can be used as a noun but not as an adjective. God can be 'worshipped' by 'worshippers' but they cannot 'worship' God 'worshipfully'.³⁸ The modern 'worshipper', by contrast, aims through being 'worshipful' to achieve an encounter with God which 'a merely objective exercise demanded by theological posturing' could not produce.³⁹

The Biblical Perspective

Over against all this, we need to set the biblical perspective. Not only does the language of the Bible, properly understood, not allow the modern understanding of 'worship' but the explicit theology of the Bible also denies it. In every church which is proceeding down this path, the words of Paul spoken at the Areopagus should be prominently displayed:

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything. (Acts 17:24-25 RSV)

The word translated 'served' here is actually *therapeuetai*, which normally means 'healed'. The implication is that God somehow benefits from our religious exercises – that he is, as it were, 'massaged' by our ministrations. It is a concept which Paul clearly expects his audience to regard as self-evidently ridiculous since God has no needs, nor could we meet them if he did.⁴⁰ This verse, if no other, makes it quite clear that the service of God is not cultic service directed *toward* God, yet it challenges many of the activities and much of the language we use 'in church'. When we say that we have 'come into God's presence' or that 'God wants us to worship him' we are in danger of being more Athenian than Christian. The 'God' suggested by this language is contained in a building (or, just as improbably, an event) waiting to be pleased by his 'worshippers'. Yet the church is not the situation where God receives his 'therapy'. We need to be quite clear that God is no worse off before our services and no better off after them. A fully 'incarnational' theology allows that there is a proper service 'of God' represented by the Temple cultus, but in the end God serves *himself* in and through Jesus Christ on our behalf. Even here we are the humble recipients of grace.

38 This is simply a result of grammar. God can be 'bowed down to' by 'bowers-down' but they cannot bow down 'bowing-downfully'.

39 J W Hayford 'Worship – the key to new life' *DEO Today's Music and Worship* Summer 1995

40 D Peterson *Engaging With God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Leicester: IVP/Apollos 1992) pp 68-9

Too easily 'worship' slips into the Hindu concept of *puja*, where the 'worshipper' attends the shrine to meet the needs of the 'gods'. Some will argue that this caricatures Christian 'worship'. 'Surely,' they will say, 'our "worship" is simply praising God? And the benefit to us is in the way we are affected by reminding ourselves of his greatness and love.' But simply to equate 'worship' with 'praise' overlooks all that has been said above, and indeed overlooks the reason why the word 'worship' is retained at all in this sense. The unfortunate truth is that 'worship', like 'priest', is an English word with two theological inflections, the one valid, the other unhelpful. The Christian minister may properly be called a 'priest' insofar as the word itself derives directly from 'presbyter'. But, by coincidence, the same word translates *hiereus* and therefore carries with it quite inappropriate associations from its links with 'sacerdotal priesthood'. In a similar way, 'worship' translates a proper response to God which issues in praise and service, but by usage it also carries associations which lead to quite a wrong theological position.⁴¹

Moreover, we need to be far more realistic about the demonstrable tendency of human nature to reintroduce those features of religion, particularly the contribution of human effort, from which the gospel ostensibly frees us. As Gowan observes, 'Eventually the church restored in Christianized forms most of the [cultic] elements which are missing from the New Testament'.⁴² A truly critical look at Christian 'worship' today would suggest that there is far too *little* to distinguish it from the practices of other religions. Indeed, the 'comparative' approach of religious education in schools is able to find a Christian parallel for almost every 'cultic' aspect of the other 'world religions'. Would the apostle Paul feel that he had laboured in vain over us as well? Our need is to question not the traditional evangelical reliance on the word, but those elements, even within evangelical tradition, which put other things than Christ and the gospel between us and God. In spite of our liturgical heritage, not even the 'Lord's Prayer', the 'Prayer of Humble Access' or the 'Confession' pave the way for us to God. Rather, as Martin Luther emphasised, in our approach to God 'we are all beggars'.

The Biblical Dynamic

At the same time we need to recover the biblical dynamic of the believer's life. The Old Testament believer was driven from bowing down to God to

41 I am told that in the Russian language there is no equivalent to 'worship'. Russian believers speak of conversion as when they began to 'serve' God. The concept of a 'time of worship' therefore has to be explained to them. Similarly in Finnish the term 'praise' is used but not 'worship'. Part of our (Anglo-American) emphasis on 'worship' indeed seems to be an accident of the English language.

42 D E Gowan 'Worship as Divine-Human Encounter: in Scripture and in Contemporary Experience' *Ex Auditu* vol 8 1992 p 80

servicing him in every aspect of daily life. The cultus formed only a small part of this service which ultimately issued in ethical behaviour. For the New Testament believer Jesus had fulfilled the cultus with the result that the emphasis in serving God fell entirely on issues of practical righteousness. Hence the Epistles are hardly at all interested in 'worship', but are very interested in holiness. Unfortunately, the emphasis on 'worship' as a unique and fundamental part of the Christian life means that we are blind to much of this teaching. We may even suggest that the evangelical bugbear about the relationship between the gospel and 'social action' is an illusion created by our misunderstanding of this dynamic. The New Testament knows nothing of 'social action' in the sense of programmes or projects. It simply reiterates that conversion (ie 'worshipping' God) should lead to service expressed as righteousness at every level of life. Contrary to most modern pronouncements, it is not the cultus but *this* service which identifies the believer. The church is ultimately not a 'God-worshipping' community but a 'God-serving' community.

It is also for this reason that attempts to extend the semantic range of 'worship' are misdirected and unsuccessful. Current usage ensures that the word remains anchored firmly to the cultus and thus to say that 'all of life is worship' inevitably maintains the cultus as *central to the life of faith*. Our concept of the life of faith typically involves three stages, moving from conversion via worship to daily life. In the process, the link between faith and ethical values is lost and the cultus once again becomes a means by which we unconsciously placate God without taking full account of his demands on our lives. *The biblical dynamic moves directly from conversion to practical holiness, without the need for either the believer or God to be 'recharged' by 'worship'.*

Conclusions

The first translators of the Bible into English innocently used the contemporary expression 'worship' to translate the concept and practise of paying homage. As a result of distortion and misuse, however, the modern believer imagines there is a particular range of activities subsumed under the term which form the focus of the life of faith. As a result, current Christian living is a distorted parody of the godly life found in the Bible.

During the writing of this article I have become aware how much of our current activity derives from an implicit assumption that in 'worship' we perform actions for God. I am left uncomfortable by some part of almost every service.⁴³ This does not mean that we need to give up singing or

43 Even to speak of our meetings as 'services' implies that God is 'served' through them, which, when they are consciously directed towards him, suggests he requires such service or benefits from it.

praying (surely the most common 'worship' activities) when we meet together. It *would* be helpful, however, if we stopped calling them 'worship'! The Bible calls these activities 'singing' and 'praying' and there is every reason why we should follow its example. We could also eliminate from our songbooks those songs which do not speak clearly of what God has done for us. Such songs tend, by default, either to reflect our own emotionalism or to emphasize what we are doing for God. We should make it clear by our words and actions that the beneficiaries in our services are ourselves, not God. Although Marshall tends to use 'worship' in his article counter to the way we have suggested, his emphasis on teaching and upbuilding one another when we come together is surely correct.

But equally, this need not mean that our meetings are devoid of emotion. Gowan argues finally that the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* should be evoked in our meetings through the hearing of God's word:

In order to avoid . . . the self-deception of thinking that emotional or aesthetic or intellectual 'highs' are worship, I follow the Reformed emphasis on the Word of God, read and preached, as central to worship, believing (knowing from experience) that this does produce divine-human encounters similar to those described in various ways . . . in the materials that have been surveyed.⁴⁴

There is no reason why we should keep a stiff upper, or even lower, lip when confronting what God has done for us in the context of edifying and encouraging one another. Tears, laughter, joy and sorrow may all form an overt part of our meetings. But they should all be as a *response* to our encounter with God, not the means to or the content of the encounter itself. I myself have laughed at parts of the Bible which are genuinely funny. I have (more frequently) been moved to tears by other parts of the Bible, as well as during hymns and sermons. But though these are emotional responses they are also, properly speaking, *rational* responses to God since they flow out of the content of his word. They are also *objective* responses, rather than mystical experiences, being prompted by external events which could be shared (even if not responded to in the same way) by others.

In the long term the entire content of our meetings needs to be overhauled so that they are no longer 'performances' – either by the leaders towards the congregation or by all of us towards God. We do not meet as Christians to focus on God, as if he were more 'present' in church than anywhere else, but to encourage and be encouraged by one another,

44 D E Gowan 'Worship as Divine-Human Encounter: in Scripture and in Contemporary Experience' *Ex Auditu* vol 8 1992 p 82. We would still take issue with Gowan's second use of the term 'worship', however!

Churchman

using the multiplicity of gifts in the body of Christ to supplement those which others lack. In many situations this will mean that the meeting needs to spend less time addressing God and more time addressing one another. This may take place through the sermon, the songs, the Bible reading or the conversation over coffee, but without it we will not be able to 'stir up one another to love and good works' (ie the service of God) by 'encouraging one another' which is the biblical purpose of our meeting (Heb 10:24-25). We need to act on the recognition that the focus of the Christian life is the service of God expressed in righteousness of life, particularly in relation to others. However, we will only serve one another, and thus express our proper service of God, when we truly 'assemble and *meet* together'.

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