

WORSHIP: ESSENCE AND FORM IN SCRIPTURE AND TODAY

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The purpose of this paper is to survey the *main lines* of biblical teaching on worship and to consider how they apply to us today. It begins with the widest possible definition of 'worship', noting the various different ways in which the word may be used, but eventually homes in on the *corporate* worship of Christians.

No attempt has been made to provide an exhaustive list of biblical references or to include more than a few quotations from modern authors. Inevitably, there are aspects of the topic that could not be covered in this relatively brief treatment.

THE ESSENCE OF WORSHIP

The meaning of worship

In English, the word 'worship' is both a noun and a verb. It derives from the Old English word *weorthscipe* which meant the recognition or ascription of *worth*. The two main ways in which the word is used in English are: (a) to express and/or have feelings of adoration, devotion, admiration, respect, etc, for things or people, but especially for divine beings; (b) the formal expression of religious adoration in individual and corporate acts, rites, words, services, etc.

Although the idea of 'worth' is not actually involved in any of the biblical *words* for worship, it is a thoroughly biblical *concept* to see worship as an acknowledgement of the worthiness of God (Rev 4:11; 5:12; cf Psa 29:2). Sometimes this idea is conveyed by the use of the word 'honour' (1 Sam 2:30; Isa 29:13; 43:20,23; Mark 7:6; John 5:23). It is also implied in 2 Samuel 22:4; 1 Chronicles 16:25; Psalm 18:3; 48:1; 96:4; 145:3, where the NIV translates 'worthy of praise' but the Hebrew simply reads 'to be praised'. (Similarly, in Deut 32:21; Psa 31:6; Jer 2:5 and many other

places NIV translates 'worthless idols' where the Hebrew reads 'vanities [lit 'breaths'].)

In the Bible, the verbs are basic. There are three main sets of Hebrew and Greek verbs which, in appropriate contexts, may be translated 'worship'.

To bow down

The Hebrew verb *hishtahawāh* means to bow down, prostrate oneself, do homage, normally to God (Pss 95:6; 96:9; etc) or gods (Exod 20:5), but sometimes to a human being such as the king (1 Sam 24:8). These references show that other words for 'kneel', 'bow down' or 'prostrate oneself' are often used along with *hishtahawāh*.

The corresponding Greek verb is *proskyneō* which also means to do obeisance to, prostrate oneself, reverence, and may (apparently) be directed to a human person (Matt 18:26; Rev 3:9)¹ or to idols and demonic beings (Rev 9:20; 13:4), but is normally reserved for the worship of Jesus (Matt 2:11; etc) or God (John 4:20f). Again, it is often associated with other verbs such as 'fall down'. (Some expositors make a great deal of the fact that *proskyneō* literally means 'kiss' or 'kiss towards'. It is true that its ancient pagan use would have been for stopping to kiss the earth or the image, but it is doubtful whether readers of the New Testament would have thought of 'kissing' when they read *proskyneō*.)

To serve

The Hebrew word *ʿābad* is used not only of a slave 'working' for his master (Deut 15:12) and an official 'serving' the king (2 Sam 16:19), but of a worshipper 'serving' his god (2 Kings 10:18). Israel is called on to 'serve' the Lord and not other gods (Exod 23:24–25; Psa 100:2). In particular, the priests and Levites are 'servants' of the Lord as they 'stand' in his presence and lead the worship of God's people (Psa 134:1–2). However, the Old Testament normally uses other words, like *shārath* ('to minister') and *kāhan* ('act as priest'), when it describes the work of priests and Levites as they perform a variety of cultic actions (including offering sacrifices) in the sanctuary (Exod 28:1; 30:20; 1 Chron 16:4; 2 Chron 29:11).

There are two words in the Greek New Testament which correspond to the Hebrew words for 'serve', 'minister', etc. In non-biblical Greek *latreuō* meant 'to work for reward/wages'; in biblical Greek it normally means 'service to God', especially in priestly or cultic actions (Heb 8:5; 9:9,14; 10:2; 13:10), but also the worship or service of God or gods generally (Acts 24:14; 26:7; Rom 1:25; Heb 12:28; Rev 7:15; 22:3) and even worship in the heart (Rom 1:9). In classical Greek *leitourgeō* meant 'to do public

work', but could also be used for performing priestly or cultic actions. This is its normal meaning in biblical Greek (Heb 10:11; cf 8:6; 9:21), but in the New Testament it is also used in a non-cultic way of various forms of worship or service (Acts 13:2; Rom 15:27; cf 2 Cor 9:12; Phil 2:17, 25, 30).

To reverence

The Hebrew Bible contains a large number of verbs which convey the idea of 'fear' in its various forms, ranging from terror to awe and reverence which induce love or worship. The most common word is *yārē*. To 'fear' God is to reverence him in such a way that he is not only served in public and private worship (Psa 22:23, 25; Mal 3:16) but also in obedience in everyday life (Deut 5:29; 13:4).

The New Testament uses the Greek verb for 'fear', *phobeō*, in much the same way as the Old Testament words are used (Luke 1:50; 18:2; Acts 9:31; 10:35). More specifically, it uses the verbs *sebomai* (lit to fall back before, shrink from) and *sebazomai* to describe the respect and reverence that is shown to God or the gods (Mark 7:7; Acts 19:27; Rom 1:25). The participle *sebomenoi* is used for Gentiles who took part in Jewish religious ritual, especially in the synagogue (Acts 13:43, 50; 16:14,17; 18:7). The noun *sebasma* is used of objects of worship (Acts 17:23; 2 Thess 2:4). These words are not normally used of Christian worship (but cf Acts 18:13). The word *eusebeia* referred to 'piety' (respect for relatives, judges, emperors, gods) but also to cultic worship (cf Acts 17:23). In the Pastorals and 2 Peter it denotes a way of life ('godliness') that arises from reverence for God (1 Tim 4:7-8; 6:3,11; 2 Pet 1:3,6f).

Two things need to be noticed here. First, most of the words we have looked at are not intrinsically 'religious' words: they can be used of actions and attitudes directed towards human beings (and even objects) as well as towards God or gods. Nevertheless, the Bible insists that 'worship' in its highest sense should be given only to God for he is the only one who merits it (Exod 20:3ff; Deut 6:13; Matt 4:10; Acts 10:25f; Rev 19:10). (The fact that Jesus is also to be worshipped is a clear indication of his deity [John 5:23; Phil 2:9ff; Heb 1:6].)

Second, in the Bible 'worship' usually refers to *outward* acts (kneeling, bowing, speaking, singing, performing ritual actions, obeying, etc), so much so that occasionally the outward acts *without any inward intention* are still described as 'worship' (Matt 20:20; Mark 7:7; 15:19). Nevertheless, it is normally assumed that the *external* actions correspond to and express *internal* attitudes and feelings (Isa 29:13; John 4:24; Rom 1:9; Eph 5:19).

To summarise so far: worship (in the Bible) means *to bow before God* (both outwardly and inwardly), acknowledging his worthiness and

submitting to his will; *to serve God*, both in 'religious' or 'cultic' acts and in everyday obedience; and *to reverence God*, recognising his holiness and responding to it not only in special acts of 'piety' but also in a life of 'godliness'.

The scope of worship

We may distinguish three main uses of the word 'worship' in English. These, in turn, can be paralleled in the biblical usage of one or more of the basic words mentioned above.

Adoration

In its narrowest sense, 'worship' refers specifically to the *adoration* of God, addressed directly to God, telling him how wonderful he is and how much we appreciate him. In fact, it does not necessarily involve words; it can simply be the feelings of awe, wonder, love, praise and thankfulness which arise in response to the revelation of God. So Tozer defines worship as 'to feel in the heart and to express in some appropriate manner a humbling but delightful sense of adoring awe and astonished wonder'.²

This kind of worship is well expressed in the words of a modern song:

When I look into Your holiness,
 When I gaze into Your loveliness,
 When all things that surround
 Become shadows in the light of You;
 When I've found the joy of reaching Your heart,
 When my will becomes enthroned in Your love,
 When all things that surround
 Become shadows in the light of You:
 I worship You, I worship You.
 The reason I live is to worship You.³

In addition to the basic words 'bow down' and 'kneel', this sense of worship is conveyed in the Bible by a wide range of words such as praise, bless, magnify, glorify, exalt, extol, rejoice in, thank, etc.

Obviously, distinctions can be made between some at least of these activities, but many of these words are used as synonyms in the psalms. Some commentators make a distinction between 'praise' and 'worship'. Praise is speaking well of God, recounting his attributes, telling what he has done (cf 1 Pet 2:9). It is an *outward* expression, addressed to others, whether believers or unbelievers. Worship, on the other hand, is the *inward* response of the heart, addressed directly to God (cf 1 Pet 2:5). This is a helpful distinction providing it is not pressed too far. Clearly some of our hymns and songs are *descriptive* or *ascriptive* praise (eg 'How good is

the God we adore'; 'Jesus is Lord'), whereas others are *responsive* praise (eg 'Jesus, Thou joy of loving hearts'; 'Father, we love You, we worship and adore You'). But Ephesians 5:19 actually combines both aspects when it directs Christians to 'Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord . . .'.³

A careful analysis of the Psalms suggests a distinction between *descriptive* praise (eg Psa 111), which praises God for who he is and what he has done in general, and *declarative* praise (eg Psa 34), which praises God for a specific experience of deliverance.⁴

Acts of worship

In this sense, 'worship' can be used to denote the public activities ('services') of a religious community gathered together in the presence of God and also the private religious exercises of a family or an individual.

This wider sense of 'worship' will include not only ascriptions of adoration, praise, thanksgiving and blessing, but also supplication, intercession, confession, reading of scripture, teaching, prophecy, exhortation, words of knowledge or wisdom, testimony, speaking or singing in tongues, interpretation, healing, laying on of hands, baptism, the Lord's Supper, the collection and (even) the notices. It is *all* 'worship' because it is all done in honour of and in submission to God.

A number of recent writers⁵ have queried whether this usage of 'worship' is entirely biblical. They would agree that the Old Testament words for 'worship', 'bow down' and 'serve', are used to describe both the work of the priests and Levites in the sanctuary and the response of the congregation (2 Chron 29:11,20-30) and that they included both the offering of sacrifices (Gen 22:3; 2 Kings 17:36; Psa 96:8-9) and ascriptions of praise (2 Chron 29:30; Psa 95:1-2). But they question whether the New Testament justifies describing a Christian meeting as a 'service' or an 'act of worship'. Banks writes, 'Of course, in the New Testament the word "worship" is never applied to what Christians do when they meet together.'⁶ And Marshall writes, 'To speak of a Christian meeting as being "a service of worship" with the implication that everything which takes place must somehow be related directly to this primary purpose is to depart seriously from the NT pattern.'⁷

Both writers are making valid points. Banks wants to emphasise that 'worship' should be a description of everything Christians do, not simply something they do 'in church' (see the next section and the essay by Peter Cousins later in this review). Marshall wants to stress that a Christian meeting involves much more than 'worship' (in the sense of addressing God); in particular it includes God addressing people and people ministering to one another.

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All this is true. Nevertheless, the biblical concept of 'worship' as submission to God surely justifies our use of the word as a description of *everything* that goes on in a Christian 'service', providing it is all done for the glory of God and in submission to him, and providing it does not prevent us from using 'worship' in its narrower sense of 'adoration' and in its widest sense as the whole of a Christian's life and activity regarded as service to God. R P Martin tries to broaden the scope of congregational worship when he defines it as 'the dramatic celebration of God in his supreme worth in such a manner that his worthiness becomes the norm and inspiration of human living.'⁸

Total life-style

Ultimately, we cannot be satisfied with any use of the word 'worship' which confines it to particular times, places or activities. In its widest sense it must denote the whole life of the community or of the individual viewed as service to God, orientated towards God, submitted in obedience to his will, with everything being done to glorify him (1 Cor 10:31; Col 3:17).

In the Old Testament the verb 'serve' is used with wider reference than simply performing cultic actions. In Deuteronomy 10:12f it takes its place as one of a number of synonyms (including 'fear') which describe the total response that God demanded from Israel: 'And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his way, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD's commands and decrees . . .?'

In the New Testament, this inclusive concept of 'worship' is very prominent. It is particularly denoted by the words *latreuō* ('serve as a priest'), *latreia* ('priestly service'), *leitourgeō* ('do priestly work'), *leitourgia* ('priestly work') and *thusia* ('sacrifice'), rather than by *proskyneō* ('bow down'). Paul saw not only his missionary work as priestly service (Rom 1:9; 15:16f), but the whole of his life (Acts 24:14). In addition to the continual 'sacrifices' of *praise* (Heb 13:15; 1 Pet 2:5), the Christian is called on to offer the 'sacrifices' of *acts of kindness and generosity* (Heb 13:16; Phil 2:17; 4:18; cf Rom 15:27; 2 Cor 9:12; Phil 2:30). This total view of worship comes to its clearest expression in Romans 12:1 where the apostle appeals to Christians to 'offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—which is your spiritual worship'.

The words of Gerard Manley Hopkins may have a Victorian flavour, but they epitomise this concept of worship:

'It is not only prayer that gives God glory but work. Smiting on an anvil, sawing

a beam, whitewashing a wall, driving horses, sweeping, scouring, everything gives God some glory if being in his grace you do it as your duty. To go to communion worthily gives God great glory, but to take food in thankfulness and temperance gives God glory too. To lift up the hands in prayer gives God glory, but a man with a dung fork in his hand, a woman with a slop pail, give him glory too. He is so great that all things give him glory *if you mean they should* [my italics]. So then, my brethren, live!⁹

And what is true for the individual Christian should also be true for the Christian community: everything a church does should be seen as its 'worship' to God. There is ultimately no distinction between 'worship' and 'service': all true service is a form of worship. That is how it will be for the people of God both in heaven (Rev 7:15) and in the New Jerusalem (Rev 22:3).

The purpose of worship

For God

The primary purpose of worship (in all its various meanings) is to bring pleasure, satisfaction and delight to God (cf Num 28:2; Lev 1:9; Psa 149:4; Rom 12:1; Eph 5:19f; Phil 2:11; Heb 12:28; 13:16; 1 Pet 2:5). God does not *need* our worship (cf Psa 50:9ff) but he *desires* it (John 4:23).

This is recognized in modern songs like the following:

I love You, Lord, and I lift my voice
To worship You, O my soul rejoice.
Tak joy, my King, in what You hear.
May it be a sweet, sweet sound in Your ear.¹⁰

Help us now to give You
Pleasure and delight
Heart and mind and will that say:
'I love You Lord'.¹¹

The Bible does not *explicitly* answer the question, Why did God decide to create human beings? or even, Why did God create anything at all? What it does tell us is that everything God created derives from his will and exists to bring him pleasure and to serve his purposes (cf Rev 4:11). Thus the universe worships God by reflecting his glory (Psa 19:1; Isa 6:3; Rev 5:13). The angelic beings worship God by declaring his holiness (Isa 6:2-3; Rev 4:8) and carrying out his orders (1 Kings 22:19ff; Psa 103:20; Matt 26:53; Heb 1:14). But the Bible *implies* that God was not satisfied just with the worship of the universe and the angels, he created human beings to stand in a unique relationship with him as his image (Gen 1:26f; Psa 8:5), to represent him and to serve his purposes on this

earth (Gen 1:26, 28; Pss 8:6ff; 115:16). For the first human beings, this involved not only practical activities—tending the garden for God (Gen 2:15)—but also times of intimate, personal communion with God (cf Gen 3:8f). Thus (as we saw earlier) everything a person does, can and should be an act of worship, in so far as it is done in obedience to God, out of love for him, to bring him glory and give him pleasure (cf 1 Cor 10:31; Col 3:17). Nevertheless, God desires not simply our ‘service-worship’ but also a more deliberate and intimate form of fellowship in which we respond to him in words and actions which express our adoration of, devotion to, and dependence upon him (cf Gen 4:2ff).

God seeks not only the response of individuals but also the *united* worship of his people—all hearts beating as one in his presence (cf Rom 15:5f). He chose Israel to be a special people who would bring him particular pleasure and satisfaction (Exod 19:5–6; Deut 7:6; Jer 13:11) as they worshipped him in the way that he directed (cf Exod 25:8f), served him in an obedient life-style (cf Deut 6:1–5) and spread the knowledge of him throughout the world (cf Isa 42:1–7; 43:10, 21).

God has brought the church into being (in both its total and local forms) in order to achieve the purpose that mankind as a whole and Israel as a nation have failed to fulfil (cf 1 Pet 2:9f). The church is now intended to be the sphere in which God receives the worship which his creatures owe him (cf Rom 15:6; 2 Cor 4:15; Eph 2:12f; Jas 1:18) and the instrument through which he fulfils his purposes of grace and salvation for a fallen world (cf Matt 5:13–16; Acts 1:8; Eph 1:10ff; 2:10; 3:10). Thus the church has both a priestly (1 Pet 2:5) and a prophetic (1 Pet 2:9) function. Everything it does should be done for God and for his glory (Eph 1:12), and this constitutes ‘worship’ (cf Rom 12:1; 15:16; Heb 13:16). But it must also deliberately give time to occasions of corporate worship (Eph 5:19f; Heb 10:22; 12:28; 13:15) in which the overall orientation of the life and work of the church is focused and expressed. Corporate worship must, therefore, be given priority on the church’s agenda because it answers to the desire of God’s heart to receive his people’s adoration and submission; not simply in isolated acts of individualized worship, but in a united response to him, like a polyphonic anthem from a vast choir, or a symphony from a large orchestra, with each member contributing a different but synchronized and harmonious part.

For human beings

When people worship they fulfil the purpose for which they were created. As we have seen already, God has made us for worship; and if we do not worship God, we end up worshipping someone or something else (cf Rom 1:23,25). Worship is not only the *highest* occupation of human beings, in its widest sense it is the *only* occupation in which they should be engaged.

It is not surprising, then, that when we worship God we find it both a beneficial and an enjoyable experience. As we direct our attention to God and concentrate on him (rather than on ourselves and our own desires), our faith is strengthened, our motives are purified, our aspirations are lifted, our joy is increased; above all, the process of spiritual transformation is facilitated (2 Cor 3:18; cf Psa 135:18).

This is where William Temple's justly famous quotation fits:

Worship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by his holiness; the nourishment of mind with his truth; the purifying of imagination by his beauty; the opening of the heart to his love; the surrender of will to his purpose—and all this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable and therefore the chief remedy for that self-centredness which is our original sin and the source of all actual sin.¹²

And there is no need to restrict the beneficial effects of worship to the *spiritual* sphere. Consciously to put God at the centre of everything we do, say or think will bring not only spiritual benefits but *mental* and (even) *physical* well-being (cf Phil 4:6–7; 1 Thess 5:23). Worship has healing properties. Praise is positive: it lifts us above the difficulties and problems of life and banishes the negativism of discouragement, depression and despair.

So when God asks us to worship him, he is not being selfish: he knows that worship is also for our good. As C S Lewis put it, 'In commanding us to worship him, God is inviting us to enjoy him.'¹³ There is no need for us to be frightened of the word 'enjoyment' in connection with worship (cf Psa 147:1). Enjoyment can be 'spiritual' as well as 'carnal'. The famous words of the answer to the first question in *The Shorter Catechism*, 'Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever', apply not only to life in heaven in the future, but to life on earth now. There is something wrong when we do not enjoy worshipping God, when it is seen simply as a necessity or duty. On the other hand, there are dangers in *aiming* at enjoyment or 'thrills' in worship. Joy, like happiness, is a by-product which comes when we forget about ourselves and are absorbed in adoring and serving God.

For the church

Obviously, a church consists of individuals, and what has been said about the beneficial effects of worship on the individual applies to the members of a church when they meet together for worship. But there is also a corporate dimension to their worship. Worship builds up the church.

When the Body of Christ meets consciously in the presence of God, all its activities constitute acts of worship because they are intended to glorify

God. Thus worship includes not only the words and actions (and the thoughts and feelings) addressed directly to God, but also the words and actions communicated by God through the members of the body: in reading scripture, teaching, exhorting, prophesying, giving 'words of knowledge' and 'words of wisdom', speaking in tongues (interpreted), singing, laying on of hands, healing, etc (cf 1 Cor 12:7; 14:26; Eph 5:19; Col 3:16). In these ways the time of worship not only brings pleasure to God but also strengthens the congregation (cf 1 Cor 14:3,12,26; 1 Pet 4:10f). In particular, the celebration of the Lord's Supper constitutes not only an act of worship but also a means of grace (cf 1 Cor 10:16; 11:24–29).

The worship of the church constitutes a witness both to angelic beings (cf 1 Cor 11:10; Eph 3:10) and to unbelievers (cf 1 Cor 14:24f). In addition, praise and worship should play an important part in the spiritual warfare of the church. It is true that we have to go to the Old Testament for the clearest expressions of this function of praise (Psa 149:6–9; 2 Chron 20:21f). The classic treatment of spiritual warfare in the New Testament (Eph 6:10–18) speaks of 'prayer' rather than 'worship', but 'all kinds of prayer' (v 18) must include ascriptions of praise and worship. If Satan 'trembles when he sees the weakest saint upon his knees', surely the confident praises of a group of Christians setting out to attack the strongholds of the evil one in evangelistic outreach are going to strike fear into the enemy! Such praise is not a psychological technique (people 'psyching themselves up' or 'singing to keep up their spirits'), but an expression of faith in a God who has already won the decisive battle and will give his people victory in each subsequent skirmish. The church needs to worship if it is to take the initiative in pushing back the frontiers of the kingdom of darkness. Praise is an essential weapon in the armoury of the Christian. This was well understood by the author of 'Onward, Christian Soldiers' (Sabine Baring-Gould) when he wrote:

At the name of Jesus,
Satan's host doth flee;
On then, Christian soldiers,
On to victory!
Hell's foundations quiver
At the shout of praise:
Brothers, lift your voices:
Loud your anthems raise.

Through worship the church is reminded that it exists solely for God's glory (Eph 1:12) and that it owes everything it is and has to the grace of God and the cross of Christ (Eph 1:3–8). Through worship the church allows God to speak: to instruct, challenge, encourage, direct, rebuke, etc (cf Acts 13:1ff; Rom 15:4f; 1 Cor 14:26; 2 Tim 3:16). Through worship

the church remembers that it is the Body of Christ (1 Cor 10:17; cf 11:29) and that each member needs the contributions of the others (Rom 12:4-8; 1 Cor 12:7-11; Eph 4:7,11-16). Through worship the church is strengthened and equipped to go out into the world to serve the Lord in the power of the Spirit and to defeat the opposition (Acts 4:23-31; Rom 15:30, 16:20).

The bases of worship

The possibility of worship rests not with us but with God. If God seeks worshippers, he must take the initiative and make worship possible. Three things are necessary.

The self-revelation of God

We could not worship God acceptably and appropriately unless he revealed his nature and his ways to us. You cannot really worship an 'unknown god' (cf Acts 17:23; John 4:22).

God graciously revealed his name (Exod. 3:15) and the character that that name signified (Exod. 34:6-7) to Israel through Moses, both in words and actions (Psa 103:7). Worship is, therefore, a response to the self-revelation of God: not simply to 'information' about God but to the self-disclosure of God encountered in the experience of his presence (cf Gen 28:16-17; 1 Kings 8:10-13; Pss 26:8; 27:4). As Donald Bloesch puts it: 'Worship is not a social get-together but a state of being grasped by the holy God.'¹⁴

The full and final revelation of God came in human form in the person of Jesus (John 1:18; 14:9; 17:6; Heb 1:1-3). He revealed the 'Father' not only by words but also by actions and character. Christians now worship 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Eph 1:3; cf Luke 11:2; 1 Cor 8:6; Eph 3:14). But because Jesus is the divine Son of God, present in a special way when they meet together (Matt 18:20), Christians also worship him (John 5:23; 20:28; Phil 2:9-11; Rev 5:8-14).

The work of Christ

As sinful people we could not worship a holy God acceptably unless the barrier of our sins were removed. Only God could do that. So God gave his people Israel a sanctuary where they could approach him without infringing on his holiness and being consumed (Exod 25:8; Deut 4:24) and a system of sacrifices which 'atoned for' their sins and fitted them to live in covenant relationship with himself (Exod 24:5-8; Lev 17:11; Isa 6:5-7).

The once for all sacrifice of Jesus on the cross was both the counterpart

and the basis of those Old Testament offerings (Rom 3:25; Heb 9:11–14; 10:5–14). The finished work of Christ is the basis of our acceptance before God (Rom 5:1–2; Eph 1:7; Heb 10:19ff) and his continuing high priestly intercession is the basis of our assurance that we will never be refused entry into the presence of God (Rom 8:34; Heb 7:25; 9:24; 10:21), even though it is still true that ‘our God is a consuming fire’ (Heb 12:29). Jesus, then, is the mediator of a new covenant which enables Christians to join in with the incessant worship of the heavenly hosts (Heb 12:22–24).

The activity of the Holy Spirit

We could not worship God while we were spiritually ‘dead’ (Eph 2:1ff). It is through the work of the Holy Spirit that we have been made ‘alive’ to God (John 3:5–8; Tit 3:5f) and made members of God’s family, with the right to call God ‘Abba’ (Rom 8:14–16; Gal 4:6). Moreover, communication with God can take place only through the mediation of the Spirit (cf Rom 8:26; 1 Cor 2:10ff; Phil 3:3) and that is why it is essential that all worship is inspired and prompted by him (cf John 4:24; 1 Cor 12:7; 14:26; Eph 5:18f; 6:18). It is the Spirit who takes the things of God and makes them real to us (cf John 16:13–15) so that we are impelled to respond in worship.

THE FORM OF WORSHIP

In this second part we narrow down our consideration of ‘worship’ to the *corporate* aspect of the worship of the people of God, to the things they do when they consciously meet together in the presence of God.

Biblical practice

The following brief summary makes no attempt to be comprehensive. As far as Jewish practices are concerned, it deals largely with worship in the sanctuary (taking together the whole period from Moses to 70 AD) and the synagogue. It hardly notices the aspects of individual worship at other times and places, nor does it deal with practices in the time of the Judges (eg Judg 17:5) and the place of worship on the battle field (cf Exod 15; 1 Sam 7:5ff; 13:8ff; 2 Chron 20; Pss 20;44;74).

Patriarchal worship

Pre-Mosaic worship is depicted as largely individual (cf Gen 4:3ff; 8:20) or representative, with the clan father offering sacrifices and prayers on

behalf of his family (cf Job 1:5; Gen 22:5; 35:2–7). Altars, trees and pillars figure in this early worship (cf Gen 12:8; 21:33; 28:18): it seems that some use was made of contemporary modes of worship.

Tabernacle and temple worship

Design and details

The tabernacle was divinely prescribed (Exod. 25:8f); its structure and furniture, its personnel and their garments, the cultic actions they were to perform and the festivals to be celebrated, were all laid down by God (cf Exod 25–30; Lev 1–7; 16; 23; Num 8;9;28;29; etc). There were no regulations, however, regarding words and music to be used (but cf Deut 26).

By contrast, Solomon's temple was a divine concession (cf 2 Sam 7:5ff; 1 Kings 5:3–5; 6:11; 8:15–21). He was allowed to follow David's plans, basing the overall design on that of the tabernacle but incorporating considerable Canaanite and Phoenician influences. Nevertheless, God was prepared to accept it as his house (1 Kings 8:10f; 9:3). The organisation of singers, players and music seems to have been the result of human rather than divine direction (cf 1 Chron 15:16–24; 16:4–6; 23; 24:1–9).

Characteristics

Tabernacle and temple worship was a mixture of individual, family, corporate and representative actions, with the cultic personnel assisting and leading. It centred around the bringing of animal sacrifices and other offerings, with the priests being responsible for making 'atonement' with the blood (Lev 4:30f; 17:11) and disposing of the bodies (cf Lev 1–7). The offerings expressed penitence, adoration, thanksgiving, vows, reparation, etc.

There are relatively few descriptions of a temple 'service' (cf 1 Kings 8; 2 Chron 29:20–36; Ezra 3:10f). There is also an interesting example in the Apocrypha in Ecclesiasticus 50. None gives all the details we would like to know. The Psalms, however, provide a source from which we may infer further information. What is clear is that temple worship was varied, colourful, lively, exuberant, exhilarating and noisy.¹⁵ (What with the stench of burning bodies and the cacophony of sounds, it is unlikely that *we* would have found it conducive to worship!)

Other constituents

In addition to the bringing of offerings, temple worship seems to have included: prayers—individual, corporate and representative, liturgical and spontaneous—(cf Deut 26:5ff; 1 Sam 1:10f; 1 Kings 8:23ff); singing (choir only?) with instrumental accompaniment and 'breaks' (cf Ezra

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3:10f; Psa 150 etc and 'selahs'); shouting (Ezra 3:11); clapping (? cf Psa 47:1); dancing (cf Exod 15:29; 2 Sam 6:14; 1 Chron 15:29; Pss 149:3; 150:4; Jer 31:13); drama (cf Ps 48:9); processions (cf Neh 12:31ff; Pss 48:12f; 55:14; 118:27); historical and credal recitations (cf Deut 6:4ff; 26:5ff; Pss 105; 106); priestly instruction and prophetic exhortation (cf Psa 78; Jer 7); covenant renewal (cf Josh 24; Neh 10; Psa 50); fasts (cf Joel 1:14); vigils (cf Psa 134:1; Joel 1:13); silence (Pss 4:4; 46:10; 76:8); and priestly blessing (cf Num 6:22ff; 1 Kings 8:55).

Postures

Presumably the full range of possible postures and gestures were used in public as well as private worship: standing (2 Chron 20:9); sitting (2 Sam 7:18); kneeling (Psa 95:6); prostrating (Job 1:20); raising hands (Psa 134:2); and spreading out the hands (Ezra 9:5).

Synagogue worship

Whatever the origins of the synagogue, it became an alternative to the temple for those unable to travel to Jerusalem. It could never replace the temple (because only there could animal sacrifices be offered), but it developed into a centre for the reading and study of the Torah (Law) in a setting of praise and prayer (which was regarded as the equivalent of the temple sacrifices), and thus became the normal place of worship for the majority of Jews (even before the destruction of the second temple).

Its services were led by various lay officials with opportunity for any male to take part (although it appears that gradually prayers became less spontaneous and more liturgical). A typical service would include prayers; The *Shema* (Deut 6:4ff); a reading from the Torah (Pentateuch); a reading from the Prophets; translations and a sermon; singing of psalms; benedictions and a blessing.

Early church worship

The closest we get in the New Testament to a description of a Christian 'service' (or rather 'meeting', cf 1 Cor 11:17ff) is Acts 20:7–11. This and other passing references (such as in 1 Cor 11–16) are hardly sufficient to enable us properly to reconstruct or visualise early Christian worship. Outside the New Testament we have valuable evidence in the *Didache* (chs 6–16, probably late first century or early second), the *Apology* of Justin (I.65–67, c 150 AD) and Pliny's *Letter* to Trajan (X.96, c 112 AD).

It would seem that early Christian worship was largely influenced by the synagogue, with only marginal Gentile influence. It is also very likely that the example of Jesus and especially the form and content of the Last

Supper and the upper room ministry (Luke 22:7–38; John 13:2–18:1) exerted a considerable influence. In addition, we cannot assume uniformity and thus we must make allowance for the possibility of a variety of forms and practices in the early church.

The Jerusalem church

It would seem that the early Christians continued to attend the temple and the synagogue not simply as convenient meeting-places but in order to join in Jewish worship (cf Luke 24:53; Acts 1:15; 2:46; 3:1; 6:1; 21:24ff). Specifically Christian worship took place in homes (Acts 1:13; 2:46; 4:23–31; 12:12). Acts 2:42 may well describe the usual constituents of such worship: teaching; ‘fellowship’ (lit ‘sharing’—probably either a collection for the poor or—more likely—a common meal in which the better off shared with the less well off); ‘breaking of bread’ (probably the remembrance of the Lord at the beginning and ending of the meal); prayer (lit ‘the prayers’, probably both spontaneous and fixed and including the singing of psalms; cf Acts 4:24–30).

Baptisms presumably took place in public (cf Acts 2:41), but we have no detailed description of a ‘baptismal service’ (cf Acts 8:36ff). Of the conduct of marriages and funerals (they must have had them!) we have no evidence whatsoever: we assume that current Jewish practices were simply taken over and ‘Christianized’. Similarly there is little solid evidence as to whether the early Christians continued to keep the sabbath and the Jewish festivals or whether they began to develop a Christian calendar, with emphasis on the first day of the week.

The Pauline churches

The core of Paul’s converts were Jews and proselytes. It is unlikely that they were often able to continue attending the synagogue, but it is quite likely that their meetings for worship in each other’s homes (cf 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15) were modelled to a large extent on synagogue practice.

The Sunday (Saturday?) evening meeting in Troas described in Acts 20:7–12 included teaching (extensive!) and the Lord’s Supper (probably as part of a communal meal). 1 Corinthians gives further insight into Christian meetings for worship in which the Lord’s Supper formed part of a communal meal (cf 1 Cor 11:17–22) and in which scope was given for the exercise of various spiritual gifts (1 Cor 14:26), the use of which, however, could easily lead to chaotic conditions that called for some degree of control (by the leaders? cf 1 Cor 14:26–29). The extent of women’s participation is still debated (cf 1 Cor 11:5ff; 14:34ff; 1 Tim 2:9ff). Meetings apparently took place on Sunday (as well as at other times?) and included (if appropriate) a collection (1 Cor 16:1ff).

References in the Pauline letters point to the use of a variety of songs,

some traditional, some newly composed and some spontaneous (cf Eph 5:19; Col 3:16); and at times Paul may actually be quoting from early Christian hymns (eg Phil 2:5ff; Col 1:15ff; 1 Tim 3:16). We can be quite confident also that prayers were similarly both fixed and extempore (cf Eph 6:18f; Col 4:22ff; 1 Tim 2:1ff,8), and that we catch a glimpse of early Christian praying in the recorded prayers of Paul (eg Eph 3:14ff). Paul's use of the Aramaic 'Abba' and 'Marana tha' (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6; 1 Cor 16:22) may well echo ejaculatory words and phrases (including also 'Amen' and 'Hallelujah'?) used in worship.

The Johannine churches:

The heavenly songs in the book of Revelation may reflect the worship of the churches in Asia. It is also possible that John's Gospel throws light on the content and emphases of the worship in the circles from which it emanated.

Biblical principles

Having looked at some of the ways in which God's people have worshipped him in the past, we come now to consider how *we* should worship him. How can we be sure that our worship pleases God? Has he told us how he likes to be worshipped? Can we discover in the Bible a pattern for our worship?

Pattern or principles?

Old Testament

It is generally agreed that the pattern of worship ordained for or adopted by Israel is not binding on Christians. It is not simply that Jesus has fulfilled or superseded the ceremonial laws and especially the institution of animal sacrifice (cf Matt 5:17; Mark 7:18–19; Heb 7:18–19; 10:1–10), but that the church is not Israel. What was written in the Old Testament scriptures was written for our *learning* (Rom 15:4; 2 Tim 3:16), not necessarily for our *imitation*. What we learn from the Old Testament descriptions of worship, as well as from the exhortations to and expressions of worship (eg in the Psalms), are the basic spiritual principles that should govern our practice of worship.

New Testament:

In what way is the New Testament different from the Old? Is it written for our imitation as well as for our learning? If we could discover exactly how the early church worshipped, would that constitute a blueprint that we would be obliged to follow? Or should we distinguish between what is

described in the New Testament (eg in Acts) and what is *commanded* (eg in the epistles)? For example, fasting is described in Acts (13:3) but not actually commanded in the epistles; whereas singing is commanded (Eph 5:19) but nothing is said about musical accompaniment.

The main forms or expressions of worship which are actually commanded (as opposed to being described), either by Jesus himself or by the apostles, are: baptism (Matt 28:19); the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:19f; 1 Cor 11:23–26); singing (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16); praying (1 Thess 5:17); giving thanks (Col 3:17); using spiritual gifts (1 Cor 14:26); teaching (1 Tim 4:13); reading the scriptures (1 Tim 4:13); taking a collection (1 Cor 16:2); giving a holy kiss (1 Thess 5:26); and washing each other's feet (John 13:14).

In no case are there detailed instructions on how these actions or activities are to be performed, except that some guidance is given on the exercise of certain spiritual gifts (1 Cor 14) and on what is unacceptable practice in relation to the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 10;11). The main directions regarding the conduct of worship relate almost exclusively to the participation and clothing of women (1 Cor 11:5ff; 14:34f; 1 Tim 2:9ff). James 2, however, does deal with where people should sit in a church service!

The consequence is that if we look for a detailed pattern for Christian worship in the New Testament, we shall be disappointed. There is just not sufficient detail. If we adopt the approach that 'nothing is permitted unless it is commanded', we shall deprive ourselves of much that is helpful and conducive to real worship. If we try to copy all the procedures of the early church, we shall find that some of them do not fit our culture or circumstances. (It is ironic that some who have claimed to be basing their worship on the New Testament pattern have spiritualized 'feet-washing', reinterpreted the 'holy kiss' as a handshake and refused to acknowledge the validity of some of the gifts mentioned in 1 Corinthians 14:26, while using the verse as the justification for 'open' worship!) Worst of all, this approach leads to Pharisaism, an emphasis on externals, pride in being 'correct' and judgement of others who differ.

Although there are clearly a number of constituents which are essential to Christian worship (or at least, highly desirable), it would seem more realistic and appropriate to regard both the detailed instructions about and the more general descriptions of worship contained in the New Testament as contemporary applications of spiritual principles rather than as rules binding on the church for all time.

Acceptable forms of worship

Are we, therefore, free to express our worship in any form we choose or

that appeals to us? Are there any limits or is anything potentially permissible? There are three principles that seem to be fundamental.

Worship should be 'in spirit and in truth' (John 4:24)

Since worship is primarily for God, it should please him and bring him glory. The problem is: how do we know what pleases God? The scriptural answer is that God is interested primarily in *heart* worship, in the *inward* thoughts and feelings of a person, and is concerned about the outward forms only in so far as they express or enable true inward worship (cf Psa 51:17; Isa 29:13; John 4:23f; Eph 5:19). Thus, for example, God enjoys our singing only if it really expresses the feelings of our hearts towards him.

Worship should be 'in truth' not only in the sense that it is 'sincere' but also that it is in accordance with the truth about God, as revealed in the Bible. Acceptable worship is a response to and a mirroring of the nature and character of God (cf Heb 12:18f).

Above all, God has made it clear that no worship (however deeply felt) is acceptable unless it is the expression of a life lived in 'truth', that is, in obedience to him (cf Pss 15; 24; 50; Isa 1:10-17; Jer 7:22f; Hos 6:6; Amos 5:21ff; Mic 6:6ff; Matt 5:23f; 1 John 1:6; 2:4; 4:20; 5:3). As Augustine is supposed to have said, 'make sure your life sings the same tune as your mouth'.

Worship (normally) involves some physical expression

Since we are physical beings and normally express our thoughts and feelings by means of our bodies, worship (particularly corporate worship) will usually involve some physical activities. (That does not mean that someone who is totally paralysed cannot worship God!) In addition, it should be recognised that physical gestures may not only *express* feelings but also *generate* them (cf a kiss; 'making love').

How much or what kind of physical expression is felt necessary and appropriate will no doubt depend partly on personality, temperament, age, experience, cultural background, education and so on. (It cannot be accidental that the forms of worship that God imposed on Israel were so similar in many respects to those of its neighbours, though there were also significant differences.)

Because we find it hard to concentrate on one thing for long, and because we soon get into a routine, and worship can so easily become a mere formality, we need variety in the content and forms of our worship (cf OT worship in the temple).

Corporate worship should be an expression of unity (Rom 15:6; 1 Cor 10:17)

If God is looking for the *united* worship of his people, anything that

disrupts or destroys that unit renders the worship unacceptable (cf 1 Cor 11:17–22). It is, therefore, essential not only that there should be right relationships between Christians (cf Psa 133; Matt 5:23–25; Eph 4:2–6; Phil 2:1–4) but also that each person should be able to participate as fully as possible in the worship and use his/her gifts for the benefit of the others (Rom 12:3–8; 1 Cor 12:7–11).

Testing our worship

We close with a check-list of the kind of questions that we should ask about any proposed form of worship. The questions are based on the principles which scripture provides for testing the acceptability of our worship.

- Is it compatible with the revealed nature and will of God? (Cf Deut 4:15ff; 18:9ff; 1 Kings 12:26–33)
- Does it express and encourage a reverential attitude to God? (Cf Psa 22:23; Heb 12:28)
- Does it direct attention to God rather than to others or oneself? (Cf Matt 6:1–6; Col 2:18f)
- Does it foster an awareness of God's presence? (Cf 1 Cor 14:24f)
- Does it centre on the person and work of Christ? (Cf John 5:23; Phil 2:10f; Col 1:15ff)
- Does it increase people's appreciation of God-Father, Son and Holy Spirit? (Cf Eph 1:17ff; 3:14ff)
- Is it inspired and prompted by the Holy Spirit? (Cf John 4:23f; Eph 5:18ff)
- Does it allow freedom for the Holy Spirit to direct, modify or inhibit? (Cf John 16:13f; Gal 5:16,25)
- Does it enable God to communicate with his people? (Cf 1 Cor 14:19; Col 3:16; 1 Thess 5:19)
- Does it express what people actually think and feel about God? (Cf Isa 29:13)
- Does it facilitate united, corporate worship? (Cf Rom 15:5f)
- Does it leave room for individual response and decision? (Cf Rom 14:5,23; 1 Cor 14:29; Col 2:16; 1 Thess 5:21)
- Does it lead to intelligent (as well as felt) worship? (Cf John 4:24; 1 Cor 14:6–19)
- Does it strengthen people for service? (Cf 1 Cor 4:12; Eph 4:12)
- Does it involve cost or sacrifice? (Cf 1 Sam 24:24; Mark 14:3ff)
- Does it make use of *all* the gifts that God has given to this particular congregation? (Cf 1 Cor 14:26)
- Can it be done in a decent and orderly way, in submission to one another and to the leaders? (Cf 1 Cor 14:33,40; Eph 5:21; Heb 13:17)

- Is it morally acceptable? (Cf Deut 23:17f; 1 Cor 11:21ff)
- Does it lead to a life of obedience? (Cf Col 2:23; Jas 1:26f)
- Does it glorify God in the eyes of unbelievers? (Cf Matt 5:16; 1 Cor 14:24f; 1 Pet 2:9)

Worship is the greatest privilege that is granted to the people of God. We must do our utmost to ensure that it is as pleasing to God as we can make it.

We are here to praise You,
Lift our hearts and sing.
We are here to give You
The best that we can bring.
And it is our love
Rising from our hearts,
Everything within us cries:
'Abba Father.'
Help us now to give You
Pleasure and delight.
Heart and mind and will that say:
'I love You Lord.'¹⁶

Footnotes

- 1 Some would say that the NT uses *proskyneō* only in relation to a divine object, that the king in Matt 18:26 stands for God and Rev 3:9 refers to 'the angel' of the church.
- 2 A W Tozer, *Worship: The Missing Jewel in the Evangelical Church* (Christian Publications, Camp Hill, Penn).
- 3 Author unknown.
- 4 See C Westermann, *The Praise of God in the Psalms* (Epworth, London 1966).
- 5 Eg R Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: the Early House Churches in the Historical Setting* (Paternoster, Exeter 1980); R & J Banks, *The Home Church* (Lion, Tring 1986); I H Marshall, 'How far did the early Christians worship God?' *Churchman*, 99.3 (1985) 216–229.
- 6 Banks, *Home Church*, 255.
- 7 Marshall, op cit, 226f.
- 8 R P Martin, *The Worship of God* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1982) 4.
- 9 Source not known.
- 10 Laurie Klein (Word Music [UK] 1978, 1980).
- 11 Graham Kendrick (Thank You Music 1985).
- 12 W Temple, *Readings in St John's Gospel* (Macmillan, London 1939) 68.
- 13 C S Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (Bles, London 1958) ch IX.
- 14 D G Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (Harper & Row, New York 1982) 92.
- 15 H H Rowley describes it as 'organized noise making' in *Worship in Ancient Israel* (SPCK, London 1967) 206.
- 16 Graham Kendrick (Thank You Music 1985).