

How far did the early Christians worship God?

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I. What do Christians do when they meet?

Two words are in common use for describing what Christians do when they meet together in church. They assemble for 'worship' or 'service'. These words are used in a fairly open-textured sort of way, as can be seen from the very varied logical characteristics of the adjectives which are used with them. 'Divine worship' clearly means worship *of* God, but 'morning worship' must mean worship that takes place *in* the morning, while 'family worship' is worship attended by people as families. A 'Christmas service' is worship expressing sentiments associated with a particular theme or at a specific time of the year, while a 'marriage service' is primarily a ceremony inaugurating the state of wedlock. One may even talk about a 'service of worship', and nobody finds this to be a tautologous expression, presumably because 'service' has come to mean little more than 'a gathering of Christians to perform certain rites'. It is in fact hard to find a synonym for 'service'; it has become a rather empty term meaning 'Christian meeting' while the term 'worship' retains more strongly the sense of some kind of rite done to or for God.

The same vocabulary is used in articles and books which describe what the first Christians did in New Testament times when they met together. There are plentiful discussions bearing such titles as 'Early Christian worship'.

The question which arises is whether these accepted terms are the best or the most appropriate ones to describe what Christians do, or what they ought to be doing, when they gather together. The character of anything we do is determined to some extent by the name which we give to it, and if the name is misleading the action itself may well not be what it ought to be. Despite their vagueness both the terms 'worship' and 'service' strongly suggest that the *central* thing that takes place when Christians gather together is that they *do* something which is addressed in some way to God. They meet primarily to worship God and to offer him service.

A couple of examples may suffice to indicate that this is the generally accepted understanding of what happens in church. In his recent book *The Worship of God* the Baptist scholar R. P. Martin offers an introductory definition: 'Worship is the dramatic celebration of God in his supreme worth in such a manner that his "worthiness" becomes the norm and inspiration of human living.'¹

There are possibilities in this definition which may lead us in the right direction, but when the author comes to a recapitulation at the end of the book the accent has shifted perceptibly: 'To put our definition in other terms, Christian worship is *the adoration and service of God the Father through the mediation of the Son and prompted by the Holy Spirit*.'² Here the accent is entirely on what *we* do in our adoration and service of God.

Exactly in line with Martin's definition is the older statement given in the standard Presbyterian work by W. D. Maxwell:

Worship consists of our words and action, the outward expression of our homage and adoration, when we are assembled in the presence of God. These words and actions are governed by two things: our knowledge of the God whom we worship, and the human resources we are able to bring to that worship.³

When it is expressed in this way, this definition is clearly open to the criticism of laying too much stress on the human aspect of what happens in church. Theologians in the Calvinist and Barthian tradition have rightly noted that the accent in this type of understanding of worship lies on what *we* do and that we ought to think rather in a christological way: Christ is the one who perfectly represents God to us and who perfectly represents us to God, so that Christian worship is our being taken up and incorporated into that perfect worship which Christ as our high priest offers to the Father.⁴ This is a preferable way of understanding the nature of what takes place in church. Nevertheless, it does not alter the fundamental problem. It is my thesis that this use of language incorporates a fundamental misunderstanding of what ought to be at the centre of Christian meetings and that it leads to a serious shift in practice from what ought to be happening when we gather together. When we compare the understanding of what Christians do when they meet together expressed by the scholars quoted with the account of the beliefs and practices of the first Christians recorded in the New Testament, then we become aware of a decisive difference. If we regard the New Testament pattern for Christian meetings as a normative one, then clearly we need to explore this difference with care and consider whether our understanding of Christian practice needs to be reformed in the light of the Word of God in Scripture.

II. The vocabulary of worship in the New Testament

Our starting point is the negative fact that in the New Testament the vocabulary of worship is used remarkably infrequently in the descriptions of Christian meetings. There are several word-groups which must be taken into consideration.

1. The verb *leitourgeo* and its cognates, which can be used of duties

performed towards God, occur some 15 times in the New Testament. The word-group is used cultically of the activities of the Jewish priests (Lk. 1:23; Heb. 8:2, 6; 9:21; 10:11) and of angels (Heb. 1:6). When used of people its scope is non-cultic. It refers to giving aid to poor Christians (Rom. 15:27) or to missionaries (Phil. 2:30), and in general to aid given by angels to men (Heb. 1:14) or by one Christian to another (Phil. 2:25). Secular rulers serve God by carrying out their duties (Rom. 13:6). The three remaining passages are closer to our theme. In Rom. 15:16 Paul thinks of himself as a servant of Christ with respect to the Gentiles, so that the converts he gains may be regarded as a kind of offering to God. Similarly, in Phil. 2:27 the service of the faith of the Philippians is seen as sacrificial service offered to God. In both cases the language of priestly service is being applied to what Christians do in missionary work and possibly in self-sacrifice. Only in the one remaining text, however, is the word applied to what goes on in a church meeting. In Acts 13:2 the members of the church at Antioch are said to have been serving the Lord and fasting when they heard the Spirit give the command that Barnabas and Paul were to be separated from the church for missionary work elsewhere. The context suggests that the service took the form of prayer or possibly of prophecy, but the implication is clearly that such 'service' was only one of the things that Christians might do in their meetings, and nothing suggests that 'service' could be used to refer specifically to the character of a Christian meeting as a whole.

2. A second word-group is formed by the verb *sebomai* with its cognates *sebazomai* and *sebasma*. The verb *sebomai* is used for the respect and reverence that men show towards God (Mk. 7:7 par. Mt. 15:9) and towards a pagan goddess (Acts 19:27). Hence there arose the use of the participle to describe Gentiles who worshipped the God of the Jews (Acts 13:43, 50; 16:14; 17:4, 17; 18:7), and the meaning is clearly that such people took part in Jewish religious ritual, especially in the synagogues, and revered God. The word was also used by the Jews to describe Paul as persuading people to worship God in what they regarded as an illegal manner (Acts 18:13); in other words, what went on in Christian meetings was regarded as worshipping God. The related verb, *sebazomai*, is used once of worshipping the creature rather than the Creator, and the thought is of the reverence due to God expressed in cultic action (Rom. 1:25). The noun is used twice of the objects of worship (Acts 17:23; 2 Thess. 2:4). It thus emerges that what Christians did when they met together could be described by using this word-group, but this use is found only once—and is placed in the mouths of Jews.

3. Service to God is also expressed by the verb *latreuo* and the noun *latreia*. The verb is used fairly frequently in Hebrews of Jewish worship (Heb. 8:5; 9:9, 14; 10:2; 12:28; 13:10) and in Revelation of

the adoration offered to God (Rev. 7:15; 22:3). It expresses worship of God shown in adoration and obedience in Mt. 4:10 par. Lk. 4:8 (cf. Acts 7:7; 26:7; Lk. 2:37; see Acts 7:42 for pagan worship). Paul as a Christian claimed to be worshipping God through his apostolic and missionary work (Acts 24:14; 27:23). The same field is occupied by the noun. Dedication to God is the way in which Christians serve him (Rom. 12:1). The Old Testament ritual expressed service to God (Rom. 9:4; Heb. 9:1, 6). Even persecuting Christians was regarded by some people as service to God (Jn. 16:2). For their part, Christians served God in their general way of life (2 Tim. 1:3; Heb. 3:3; 9:14; 12:28), but again the words are not applied specifically to Christian meetings in such a way as to sum up what was taking place.

4. The situation is no different with the verb *proskyneo* which is used of rendering homage and offering worship. This word is used of various forms of worship and cultic activity (Jn. 4:20; 12:20; Acts 7:43; 8:27; 24:11). Matthew especially describes the attitude of the disciples and others to Jesus as adoration; they prostrate themselves or adopt some kind of reverential attitude in his presence (Mt. 2:2 and frequently) both before and after the resurrection (for the latter see Mt. 28:9, 17; Lk. 24:52). The word is used frequently in Revelation to describe the attitude of various beings to God, the Lamb and their Satanic counterparts. Such an attitude is proper towards God, but not towards men or angels, still less towards Satan. In Jn. 4:20–24 Jesus contrasts the old worship with the new worship which will be offered to the Father in Spirit and in truth. Paul could describe himself as a Christian as going up to Jerusalem to worship God, but he says this in a context of going to the temple (Acts 24:11). Only once is the term specifically applied to what went on in a Christian meeting: in 1 Cor. 14:25 the outsider or unbeliever who is convicted by a word of prophecy will fall down on his face and worship God, confessing that God is truly in the midst of his people. It is noteworthy that it is the 'outsider's' word rather than Paul's own description of what took place, and again it does not describe the action of the Christians but rather the reaction of the outsider.

5. It is well known that the concept of *sacrifice* was not applied to Christian meetings. When Paul talks about making a living sacrifice of oneself to God in Rom. 12:1 he is clearly thinking of the total dedication of believers to God, and the same is true of the sacrificial language in Phil. 2:17. In Phil. 4:18 it is the gift sent by the Philippians to Paul which was regarded as the sacrificial offering made to God and approved by him. The two passages where sacrificial language is applied to Christian meetings are Heb. 13:15f. and 1 Pet. 2:5 where Christians are to offer sacrifices, but these consist in doing good to one another and in uttering continual praise to God. These texts show that there is an element of offering to God

in Christian meetings, but that the vocabulary of sacrifice is not used as a way of describing the general character of Christian meetings.

From this survey of the 'worship' language in the New Testament a firm result emerges. Although the whole activity of Christians can be described as the service of God and they are engaged throughout their lives in worshipping him, yet this vocabulary is not applied in any specific way to Christian meetings. It is true that Christian meetings can be described from the outside as occasions for worshipping God and also that elements of service to God took place in them, but the remarkable fact is that 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. To sum up what goes on in a Christian meeting as being specifically for the purpose of 'worship' is without New Testament precedent. 'Worship' is not an umbrella-term for what goes on when Christians gather together.

III. Christian group activities in the New Testament

In order to take the matter further let us now ask what did go on in early Christian meetings.

1. *Addressing God* Despite the fact that Christian gatherings were not described as being for the worship of God, it is of course obvious that they included activity that was addressed to God.

a. *Christians praised God* Yet it is surprising how infrequently the verb *aineo* is used; it is found only 8 times in the NT. It is used of early Christian gatherings in Acts 2:47 with reference to a characteristic activity of Christians (Rom. 15:11; cf. Heb. 13:15) which foreshadows the praise offered in the presence of God (Rev. 19:5). The verb *eulogeo* is used in a similar way. It is used of giving thanks to God for food and drink (1 Cor. 10:16, in a church setting) and also, more generally, of spontaneous praise (Lk. 1:64; Jas. 3:9). It refers to giving thanks to God when speaking in tongues (1 Cor. 14:16), a reference which suggests that the primary function of speaking in tongues was to praise God.

b. *Christians expressed thanks to God* A large number of references indicate that this was a common and important activity. Thanksgiving is especially associated with eating and drinking at the Lord's Supper and at other times (Acts 27:35; Rom. 14:6). Speaking in tongues was an expression of thanks (1 Cor. 14:17). Paul describes frequently how he gave thanks to God for his readers, and it would be reasonable to assume that he prayed in the kind of way he describes not only privately but also publicly.

c. *Christians prayed to God* Here the evidence is so copious that it would be tedious and unnecessary to rehearse it in detail. Prayer as a corporate activity of Christians is frequently mentioned directly (e.g. Acts 1:24; 6:6; 8:15; 12:12; 13:3; 14:23; 20:36; 21:5; cf. 1:14;

2:42; 6:4; 12:5). When Paul asked his friends to pray for him, he doubtless envisaged corporate as well as private prayer. Individuals might pray in a Christian prayer meeting (1 Cor. 14:14), but both the example of the Lord's Prayer with its address to '*Our Father*' and the pattern in Acts 4:24 show that people might recite a prayer in unison. Such prayer could be both thanksgiving and petition.

Thus it is clear that the element of prayer to God, both in praise and petition, formed an integral part of what went on in Christian meetings. Although we do hear of Christians coming together purely for this purpose (e.g. Acts 4:23–31; 16:25), it is manifest that this was not the only element in their meetings, and we cannot say that this was necessarily the primary purpose of them.

2. *God speaks to Christians* The second main element in Christian meetings was addressed from God to man. In various ways God spoke to his people when they gathered together. The two fundamental modes were prophecy and teaching. It is hard for us to disentangle these from each other and from the other types of discourse that are listed in 1 Cor. 12 and 14. There does seem to have been a basic distinction between these two activities. Prophecy was more the conveyance of a fresh direct revelation from the Lord to the hearers; whether it had previously been conveyed to the prophet who then passed it on to the congregation or whether it was received and conveyed in one and the same experience is a moot point. Both possibilities may well have existed. By contrast, teaching appears to have been more the exposition of existing revelation, both from the Scriptures and also from the tradition of the life and teaching of Jesus. In both cases the charismatic enabling of the Spirit was necessary. We should perhaps mention another mode of divine revelation which took place in Christian meetings: various references, especially in Gal. 3:5, indicate that signs and wonders, manifesting the power of the Spirit to heal and perform other miraculous actions, took place.

In all these cases the divine activity took place through the mediation of members of the church. When the Holy Spirit was at work, it was through specific individuals who acted as his spokesmen and agents. In the early days this activity was charismatic in the sense that individuals acted in virtue of the spiritual gifts which they possessed. Later, however, the emphasis shifted to persons who were appointed to specific offices, such as the eldership, but their activity was still carried on in virtue of the gifts of the Spirit with which they were endowed. It is significant that the descriptions of the church offices in the Pastoral Epistles lay most stress on the capacity to teach. Evidently teaching of the congregation was the primary function of these teachers, and special honour or remuneration was given to those who laboured in teaching (1 Tim. 5:17). Thus, when the NT describes the character of church leaders and their functions,

it is their ability to speak to men on behalf of God that is central; little if anything is said about their ability to represent men before God and to lead worship.

3. *Mutual Upbuilding* In view of what we have seen about the primary character of church leaders and functionaries, it is apparent that the main emphasis in church meetings lay upon what the members did for one another in virtue of their charismatic endowment from God. Two words sum up this aspect of church meetings.

The first is the concept of *ministry* or *service*. It is well known that the term *diakonos* was not used in the NT for the person whom we nowadays call 'the minister' as being usually the one ordained person in a congregation carrying out most, if not all, of the ministerial tasks. It is used generally of any and all kinds of service in the church, and also more specifically for a specific group of church functionaries who are mentioned alongside the bishops or elders. The objects of ministry, the causes of persons who are served, are various. Persons who work in the church are of course regarded as serving God or Christ and can be spoken of as God's servants (2 Cor. 6:4) or as Christ's servants (2 Cor. 11:23; Col. 1:7). They are engaged in the service of the gospel (Eph. 3:7; Col. 1:23) or of the new covenant (2 Cor. 3:6). But frequently it is people who are the actual objects of their service. Their service of God is expressed in serving one another. This rests on the principle enunciated by Jesus that disciples must not act as leaders, expecting to be served by others, but must act as servants (Mk. 9:35; 10:43). This principle of course has an element of paradox in it, since there can be no active service without persons who are being served. The point is that disciples must not look for and claim as their right the honour and respect expected by secular rulers. Thus Christians both give and receive service in the church, and in our present context the important point is that the service of the gospel was rendered by members of the congregation to other members (*cf.* Acts 19:22; Rom. 15:25; 2 Cor. 8:19f.; 2 Tim. 1:18; Phm. 13; Heb. 6:10; 1 Pet. 1:12; *cf.* Rom. 15:31; 2 Cor. 8:4; 9:1; 11:8; 2 Tim. 4:11; Rom. 16:1). All Christian activity can be described in this way as 'service' whether it be teaching or practical help (Acts 6:1, 4), and the term came to be particularly associated with the latter (1 Pet. 4:11). The common assumption that the 'deacons' in Philippians and the Pastoral Epistles were involved in practical help rather than in teaching may well be justified. In any case, the important point is that Christian 'ministers' were people who did things for their fellow-believers precisely because they were God's servants. And it is worth emphasising in passing that in principle any Christian believer could be engaged in such ministry in accordance with the particular gifts which he had received, gifts which were not confined to prophecy and speaking in tongues but included other abilities primarily associated with helping other individuals or the congrega-

tion as a whole. Thus a central aspect of the early Church meeting was not addressed to God but took place as service to the members of the congregation.

The other word used to describe this activity is *building up* (*oikodome*), which is the stated aim of the use of all the charismata in 1 Cor. 14:5, 12, 26. The same thought reappears in Eph. 4:12, 16, where the purpose of ministry is the building up of the body of Christ, and in 1 Thes. 5:11 where one believer is to build up another. The metaphor was also current with Luke who uses it in Acts 9:31 and 20:32. The point is that the function of church meetings and the activities which take place in them are now clearly seen to be directed towards the congregation itself and only indirectly towards God.

4. *The Sacraments* Similar considerations apply to the so-called ritual activities which took place from time to time in the church meetings. Baptism should be understood primarily as the dramatic, visual presentation of the gospel in the sign of washing with water. It signified God's act in cleansing his people from their sins, imparting his Spirit to them, and incorporating them in the body of Christ. All of this is God's action towards his people. It is true, of course, that the baptizand made his response to the gospel by submitting to baptism and in particular made his confession of Christ as his Lord, so that the sacrament was also directed towards God, but the primacy surely lies with the action of God in his grace towards the believer.

The significance of the Lord's Supper is if anything greater, since it can be assumed that it was celebrated much more frequently. Indeed, there is much to be said for the view that the Lord's Supper was the central act in the normal Christian meeting week by week. Again the action speaks of the Lord's provision for his people. The bread and the cup signify the offer and gift of salvation and point forward to the messianic banquet provided by God. They look backward to the action of Christ in letting his body be given and his blood shed. At the same time the human act of reception signifies not only faith in God but also the fellowship of all those who share together in the one loaf. There is thus a combination of elements, but the actions of participating in what God has given (1 Cor. 10:16) and of sharing with one another are central. The sacrament is thus primarily a witness to the grace of God and to the death of the Lord rather than to the human action of worshipping God. There is of course no suggestion of any offering made by man to God in the sacrament; the offering celebrated is that which Christ offered at Calvary, and there is no implication that the congregation is somehow made to share in this act of offering.

IV. The nature of the church and the ministry

The result of our discussion of the activities carried on in the church meetings has been to show that the action of God towards his people

is at least as important as, if not more important than, their actions towards him. This conclusion can be further substantiated by considering the ways in which the nature of the church and its ministry is described in the NT.

1. *The Church or Assembly* The church is basically—the church, the assembly of the people of God. The importance of the coming together of God's people is shown by the frequency with which words expressing coming together (*synago*, *synerchomai* and *homothymadon*) are used to describe the meetings of Christians; it is their actual coming together which is significant.⁵ This point is further substantiated by the use of the word 'church' itself. The thought of assembly is explicitly present, as in 1 Cor. 11:18, 14:19, 28, 35, where the expression is quite literally 'in church'. It is probable that the use of the word conveyed the idea of being the people of God, although there is little evidence that the OT usage of corresponding phrases was consciously present in the NT usage. Only once is the corresponding Jewish word 'synagogue' used for the church (Jas. 2:2), and here the idea of a meeting or assembly is uppermost. It may well be that the early Christians adopted the term 'church' as the nearest synonym to 'synagogue' that did not contain the strongly Jewish undertones of the latter.

It follows that the nearest contemporary analogy to the church meeting was provided by the synagogue and not by the temple. This is a more significant fact than is often recognised. The environment of Christianity in the hellenistic world was that of pagan worship conducted in temples and shrines, but there is no evidence that the Christians modelled their gatherings on temple worship. It appears rather that their inspiration was, as might have been expected, thoroughly and basically Jewish, and that the inspiration came from the synagogue. Only in respect of cultic washings and meals can we see analogies with pagan practices, but here too the resemblance is superficial and the basic influence is Jewish.

What, then, was the purpose of the synagogue? It was 'primarily the place of the Torah, which is to be read and taught, heard and learned here'.⁶ It is certainly true that the centre of Jewish religion up to AD 70 was the temple with its sacrificial offerings; the synagogue was thought of as additional to the temple, and after AD 70 it was regarded as replacing the temple, the thought of offering being in a sense 'spiritualised'. Nevertheless, this does not alter the fact that in the formative years of the church the synagogue was a place of instruction and of prayer which bore testimony to the one God and glorified him by these activities. To a certain extent the church might be regarded as 'the Christian synagogue', but this description does not fully account for all the features of the church, such as its common meals.

2. *Temple Imagery* To what extent, then, did temple-imagery affect

the character of what went on in church? In 1 Pet. 2:4-5 Christians are declared to be like stones built to form a spiritual house (or temple), to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices to God. Christians here are both temple and priests in a collective and personal sense. The function of the people of Israel as a whole is transferred to them. This function is not confined to their meetings together but is no doubt focussed in them. Again in Heb. 13:15 the church is to offer a sacrifice of praise to God. The church is the temple of the Holy Spirit in 1 Cor. 3:16f., a description that is also applied to the individual believer in 1 Cor. 6:19. This type of language brings out two facts. The first is that the church is more than a company of human beings. God himself is present when it meets, a thought which can be expressed in terms of the Father (1 Cor. 14:25), the Son (Mt. 18:20) and the Spirit (Gal. 3:5). The second thought is that the church is to praise God. There is no question of making an offering for sin; if the church has an altar, it is the cross, and the Lord's Supper has the character of a post-sacrificial meal. Thus the language of the temple can be used of the church and its meetings, but it is significantly infrequent in comparison with the language of ministry and upbuilding. It is through the use of this imagery that the inheritance of the Old Testament with its concept of the people of God offering sacrifice and service to him is taken up and incorporated in a broader understanding of the meetings of God's people.

3. *A Spiritual Fellowship* The concept of fellowship expresses the thought of a two-way relationship between God and man and between man and man. The presence of God is known in the gathering of his people. They experience his power and love both in their individual experience and in their corporate experience, and they respond with prayer and praise. According to Paul this fellowship is mediated in the Lord's Supper and by the Spirit, but his stress is more on the fellowship between believers as they share together in the one loaf and in the service of God. The concept is perhaps more characteristic of John. He writes explicitly of the fellowship which believers have with one another and with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ (1 Jn. 1:3), and the teaching in the Fourth Gospel about the unity of the disciples in love for one another and as part of the true vine implicitly makes the same point. Although the word 'fellowship' is not used all that commonly, the concept perhaps brings out best the relationship between God and his church. It expresses the way in which the church is the place where God's presence is known and experienced. He is present to serve and upbuild his people through his spiritual gifts, and his people respond to him in prayer and praise.

4. *The Body* No understanding of the church would be complete which did not include Paul's description of it as a body. In his earlier epistles (1 Cor. 12; Rom. 12) the accent is undoubtedly on the mutual

help of the members, which enables each member to function properly and the whole body to act harmoniously. Paul's point is that the individual members must each use their spiritual gifts, of whatever kind they may be, for the good of one another and of the whole. At the same time, the body is there to serve God, and it does this as the members carry out their divinely-intended functions. In Paul's later writings the thought is more of the organic growth and strengthening of the body as a whole from the divine life which streams through it from the Head. The concept of the body is not used to portray the church meeting as a means of worshipping God; the thought is of the parts of the body receiving strength from God and serving one another in an organic whole.

5. *The Household and Family of God* Finally, we need to take account of the way in which the church is sometimes described as a building—a thought linked with that of its being a temple—and as a household or family. This idea is obviously closely linked to that of the church as a fellowship. It brings out the thought of the brotherhood of the members who share together in a common life as the children of God. As Paul uses the terminology, it stresses particularly the loving relations which should exist between the members. It can also allow for the development of the idea of persons appointed by God to fulfil functions within the family structure. One gains the impression that in a sense the creation of this family is an end in itself. God's purpose is to develop a people whose loving relationships both vertical and horizontal are their own justification.

V. Conclusions

The significance of our discussion can now be summarised. A fundamental shift is called for in our understanding of what took place in an early church meeting. In Maxwell's definition worship is the outward expression of our homage and devotion to God. Let the definition be accepted for what it really is, a definition of the word 'worship'. The fallacy inherent in the use of the term is that Maxwell *assumes* that the content of the early church meeting can be summed up in terms of worship so defined, and his pattern for what goes on in the modern church week by week is based on this understanding. He knows of no other kind of church activity, whether on Sunday morning at 11 am or at any other time. But our examination of the NT evidence has shown quite conclusively that worship strictly so called was only one feature of the Christian meeting. While it is true in the broad sense that everything which the Christian does will be ultimately directed to the glory of God, it is simply not the case that the purpose of Christian meetings was understood as being primarily and directly worship, homage and adoration addressed to God. 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. As Robert Banks has put it:⁷

One of the most puzzling features of Paul's understanding of *ekklesia* for his contemporaries, whether Jews or Gentiles, must have been his failure to say that a person went to church primarily to 'worship'. Not once in all his writings does he suggest that this is the case. Indeed it could not be, for he held a view of 'worship' that prevented him from doing so ...

Since all places and times have now become the venue for worship, Paul cannot speak of Christians assembling in church *distinctively* for this purpose. They are already worshipping God, acceptably or unacceptably, in whatever they are doing. While this means that when they are in church they are worshipping as well, it is not worship but something else that marks off their coming together from everything else that they are doing.

Consequently, it is a mistake to regard the main or indeed the only purpose of Christian meetings as being the worship of God, a view which leads to their structure being determined in terms of what we offer to God in and through Christ. This view appears to rest on the continuing influence of the sacrificial ritual in Old Testament times on our understanding of the New Testament church. But the language used in the NT indicates that this was not the primary or the only understanding of what church meetings were for. In fact it has been apparent that there was a three-way movement in the early church's meetings, from God to man, from man to God, and from man to man. The primary element is the God-man movement, downward rather than upward, in which God comes to his people and uses his human servants to convey his salvation to them, to strengthen and upbuild them. He bestows his charismata in order to equip the members of the church to serve one another. Of course the effect of such service by God to his people will be to move them to praise, thanksgiving and prayer, but the point is that this is response and is secondary to what is primary, namely the flow of divine grace. When a specific function or purpose is ascribed to a church meeting it is not the glorification of God but the building up of the church and the ministry to its members. Church meetings are for the benefit of the congregation and so indirectly for the glory of God. Worship in the sense of giving praise to God is thus logically secondary to ministry in the sense of God's ministry to us. At the same time, since this ministry is exercised between persons, the church meeting has the character of fellowship in which the keynote is mutual love. The symbol of the church, therefore, is not simply an upward arrow from man to God, nor simply a downward arrow from God to man, but rather a triangle representing the lines of grace coming down from God to his people, the flow of grace from person to person, and the response of thanks and petition to God.

Some practical points follow:

1. 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, whether to the exclusion of any other constitutive motif, or by making it the primary motif. Worship is obviously an element in Christian meetings, but it is not the principal one. Of course worship is involved in all that we do in church, just as it is involved in all our activity as Christians, but it is misleading to take the fact that in all that we do we serve God and then make this the direct and particular description of what we should do in church. The NT shows that the early Christians did not do this.

2. We need an alternative name that will express better what we are doing. 'Service' would be a possibility, provided that it could be understood that it is primarily a case of God serving us and not vice versa; unfortunately the traditional associations of the word are probably ineradicable. Yet in a real sense the church is a 'service station' where Christians are 'serviced' so that they may serve God better. Perhaps 'church meeting' or 'assembly' is the most appropriate term, bringing out the fact that what is happening is that God's people are meeting together with him.

3. We need a fresh look at the structure of what we do in church. The example of the early church may suggest that their meetings were relatively flexible and unstructured. Nevertheless, there may be a structure in terms of various essential constitutive elements in a church meeting. Teaching and upbuilding are primary, and this suggests that the broad structure of proclamation of the Word leading to response to the Word is the right one, although this does not necessarily mean that these two elements must always be present in rigid chronological order. Rather proclamation and response should be the guiding principle. Martin's suggestion that celebration of God in his supreme worth is the essence of what we are doing has its place here, if we take it that ministry is the means by which God presents his grace and worth to us and we celebrate the revelation by our response in praise and thanksgiving.

4. Finally, the elements of fellowship and mutual upbuilding in love need to be brought to the fore. Here we are greatly hampered by the one-man ministry which is still so common. Somehow we need to give the individual members of the congregation the opportunity to exercise the gifts of the Spirit, to receive from one another and to show love to one another. It is not 'leaders of worship' that we need but people who have gifts to share with one another. This clearly does not mean that we do not want people trained in theology to function in the church or that there is no place for something corresponding to the present-day ministry. It is rather to suggest that we need far more people with some theological training and we need a far wider concept of ministry than is possible so long as we cling to the idea of

How far did the early Christians *worship* God?

the 'one-man' ministry. In this way we shall come to a fuller appreciation of the nature and activity of the church instead of distorting it by forcing it all into the unnatural mould that we know as 'worship'.

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NOTES

- 1 R. P. Martin, *The Worship of God* (Grand Rapids 1982), p.4. Some balancing thoughts are found in the same author's *The Family and the Fellowship: New Testament Images of the Church* (Grand Rapids 1979), but unfortunately the author has not let them influence his concept of 'worship' as the term to describe what goes on in church.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p.210.
- 3 W. D. Maxwell, *An Outline of Christian Worship* (Oxford 1936), p.1.
- 4 D. W. Torrance, 'The Word of God in Worship', *The Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 1, 1983, pp.11-16.
- 5 I am indebted at this point to an unpublished paper on 'Worship in the New Testament' by John E. Toews.
- 6 W. Schrage, TDNT VIII, p.821.
- 7 R. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in their Historical Setting* (Exeter 1980), p.91f.