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# WORSHIPPING BIBLICALLY

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The term 'worship', as it is generally used in contemporary theological and ecclesiastical discussion, can refer to any of the following:

1. The activity of individual people in acknowledging the greatness of God as a superior being by appropriate attitudes and actions.
2. The activity of a group of people in doing the same thing.
3. By extension, whatever is done in a meeting of such a group.

These three definitions show that 'worship' may have a narrow sense of some kind of human activity that acknowledges God's greatness, or it may have a broader sense that encompasses all or some of what goes on in what we often call a church 'service'. Further, although the term can very properly be applied to the activity of an individual, it tends in practice to be used mostly for the activity of a group.

We thus have an umbrella term before us for investigation, and in this paper we shall consider it particularly from a biblical angle, by which I understand that we should be looking at how worship was understood and practised in the biblical period and what this investigation might have to say to us for our theology and practice. In view of the width of the subject thus opened up, attention will be focussed on the New Testament rather than upon the Bible as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I first developed the thesis defended in this article in 'How far did the early Christians worship God?', *Churchman* 99:3 (1985), pp. 216-29. The major work on the subject is D. Peterson, *Engaging with God: A biblical theology of worship* (Leicester, 1992); the material is summarised in D. Peterson, 'Worship in the New Testament', in D. A. Carson (ed.), *Worship: Adoration and Action* (Carlisle, 1993), pp. 51-91, pp. 223-33, and more briefly still in D. Peterson, 'Worship', in T. D. Alexander and B. S. Rosner (ed.), *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Leicester, 2000), pp. 855-63. See also D. E. Aune, 'Worship, Early Christian', in *ABD* VI, pp. 973-89.

On worship in the Old Testament see H. H. Rowley, *Worship in Ancient Israel* (London, 1967); Y. Hattori, 'Theology of Worship in the Old Testament', in Carson, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-50; Peterson, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-54.

THE PLACE OF WORSHIP IN CHRISTIAN MEETINGS

In the New Testament the verb *proskuneo* (with the noun *proskunesis*) is the characteristic term used for worship. It comprehends the attitudes of submission, respect and reverence that may be expressed by bodily posture, such as kneeling (Mark 15:19) or bowing with one's face to the ground,<sup>2</sup> and by appropriate forms of words before somebody who is 'greater' than the worshipper. Such respect may be shown simply to a superior human being, such as a king or master (Matt. 18:26), or to a person respected because of their piety or some outstanding quality. Such an attitude is properly adopted towards God, and it is improper to display it towards something or somebody who is not entitled to it or is unworthy (e.g. an idol, Acts 7:43; Baal, Rom. 11:4; the devil, Matt. 4:9f. par. Luke 4:7f.). It may be shown towards a person who has superior powers, such as a reputation for healing diseases, without the supplicant knowing precisely who the person is or what their status is (Mark 5:6). Such remarkable powers may confirm that the person has a more than human status or ability (Matt. 14:33). So worship was offered to Jesus during his earthly life and immediately after his status has been confirmed by the resurrection (Matt. 28:9, 17; Luke 24:52). One important expression of worship is prayer, which may be the expression of thanks to a superior for his/her benefactions (Luke 17:16) or the expression of a request for such attention (Matt. 20:20).

One of the functions of religious festivals, or rather the principal function, is to facilitate the worship of God, and visiting buildings such as temples and the places where they are situated is specially important in this regard. This is because the God who is worshipped is deemed to be present in these places. They can be called 'holy' because of this; the temple is the 'holy place' (Acts 6:13) and Matthew in particular can refer to Jerusalem as the holy city (Matt. 4:5; 27:53; cf. Rev. 21:2, 10; 22:19 of the new Jerusalem).

An analysis of the New Testament material shows that activity of this kind occurs in three contexts.

1. Worship is offered to God on earth. While worship was especially appropriate in the temple, prayer could be offered to him anywhere, e.g. by

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<sup>2</sup> Matt. 17:6 (Transfig.); 26:39 (Gethsemane); Luke 5:12 (Peter); 17:16 (leper); 24:5 (women at tomb before angels); 1 Cor. 14:25 (stranger in church); Rev. 7:11; 11:16; contrast with seeing the face of God, Matt. 18:10 (angels); Acts 2:28; 1 Cor. 13:12; 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:6; Heb. 9:24; Rev. 22:4.

Jesus in Gethsemane (Luke 22:41) or by the disciples on the shore at Tyre (Acts 21:5), or wherever a person happened to be. There is a particularly important discussion in John 4:19-24 where the Jewish belief that God should be worshipped in Jerusalem and not elsewhere, such as on Mount Gerizim, is attacked by Jesus who insists that God is to be worshipped in spirit and in truth, and who disqualifies both Jerusalem and Gerizim as exclusive places of worship.

2. Similar activity is described as taking place in the presence of God *in heaven* or at the last judgement (Rom. 14:11). Revelation contains more uses of *proskuneo* than any other book of the New Testament (24, but 11 of these are of worshipping the dragon, the beast, demons, and an angel).

3. The term is used of worship or reverence shown to Jesus *during his earthly life*, especially by people seeking his help, but also by people who recognise his super-human status, and after his resurrection. There is also a significant prophecy in Philippians 2:9-11 of worship being offered to him by all creation.

The negative that is implied by this list of three contexts must be noted. It is quite remarkable that *proskuneo* is scarcely found outside the Gospels and Revelation. Cornelius falls at the feet of Peter, doubtless because he is a messenger of God, but God's messengers are not to be treated in this way (Acts 10:25). In 1 Corinthians 14:25 the outsider who comes into a Christian meeting and hears words of prophecy falls down on his face and worships God, saying 'truly God is among you'. But that is the one and only place where this verb is used for something that happened in a Christian meeting.<sup>3</sup>

We should perhaps not be surprised that the language of worship is not used in the New Testament for what went on in a Jewish synagogue. The

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<sup>3</sup> An analysis of other 'worship' vocabulary would confirm this finding. *Leitourge\** is used only once of an activity in a Christian meeting (Acts 13:2) and is used to cover giving aid or service to fellow-Christians (Phil. 2:30) and missionary work as service to God (Rom. 15:16). *Sebomai* is used of the activity of Jewish proselytes and once by analogy of persons who convert to Christianity (Acts 18:13). *Latreu\** is used of Jewish worship in Hebrews and of heavenly worship, and can be used both of Christian activities and of the Christian way of life. Similarly, the language of sacrifice is used of Christian meetings in Hebrews 13:15f. and 1 Peter 2:5 but also of the total response of believers to God (Rom. 12:1; Phil. 2:17). See more fully 'How far...', pp. 217-20.

characteristic activities of Jewish worship, principally the offering of sacrifices, were reserved for the temple. Perhaps, then, insofar as the early Christian meetings were modelled in part at least on the synagogue, it is equally unsurprising that the term 'worship' is simply not used for what regularly went on in them.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, prayer, which is closely related to worship, was a regular part of synagogue activity. The synagogue was pre-eminently a place where the law was read and expounded in the context of prayer (Matt. 6:5) and confession of Yahweh as the one God.

We have, then, the remarkable situation that the activity of Christians gathered together in their meetings is generally not described in terms of worship, despite the fact that we regularly use this word for our meetings in such phrases as 'morning worship', or we begin them in some traditions by saying 'Let us worship God'.

Confirmation of this conclusion may be gained by considering the names or self-descriptions used by Christians. The Christian group can be described in terms of its make-up as 'believers', 'disciples', or 'saints', terms which say important things about its characteristics; but the term 'worshippers' is not used as a self-description; only in Acts 18:13 is the verb used by outsiders trying to define the Christians by contrast with themselves.

Collectively the believers form the *ekklesia*, a term which arouses echoes of the body of citizens of a Greek city met together to transact their common business, but more importantly was used in the Old Testament to refer to the people of Israel in a somewhat idealistic sort of way as a company of people who could be gathered together, like a citizen-body, under their leaders. Alternatively they could have been called a *sunagoge*, like a Jewish meeting, but this term occurs only in James 2:2 for a Christian group. Neither of these terms calls up the word 'worship'. The significant point is that the believers meet together as the people of God.<sup>5</sup>

However, we must not ignore the significant fact that the Christian group is also described as a temple (1 Cor. 3:16f.; 2 Cor. 6:16). The temple is the locus of God's presence, and therefore it is where people meet with him. It is the place where sacrifices are offered to him, but in the New Testament the concept of sacrifice is spiritualised and understood to refer to the offering of praise and the doing of good to other people. Here the

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<sup>4</sup> It is true that proselytes were regarded as 'worshippers' (Acts 13:43), but this seems to be shorthand for 'worshippers of [the Jewish] God', the point being that they revered him rather than any other god.

<sup>5</sup> 'New Wine in Old Wine-Skins. V. The Biblical Use of the Word "Ekklesia"', *Expository Times* 84 (1973), pp. 359-64.

thought is probably of thank-offerings and perhaps the sharing of food with needy people (*cf.* the celebrations in the OT). Yet the language is used only rarely. Moreover, it does not become a technical term for an assembly of Christians in the way that the phrase 'in the meeting' is used (1 Cor. 11:18); there is no corresponding expression 'in the temple'. There is a very clear understanding that there is no material sacrifice in the Christian assembly. The death of Jesus is understood as a sacrifice, but the actual death took place at Calvary and is over and done with; and the offering of the sacrifice to God is envisaged as taking place before God in Heaven, at least according to Hebrews where there is the concept of a heavenly, spiritual counterpart to the earthly, physical tabernacle/temple. Thus the characteristic activity of a temple is not part of the picture, and therefore the metaphor is not developed.

Likewise, when Christians are described as priests, their priestly activity is understood as praising God and announcing his mighty works (Heb. 13:15f.; 1 Pet. 2:4-10). The latter activity appears to take place 'in the world' rather than simply to one another 'in the meeting'. Paul can refer to his missionary activity as 'service' to God, using the term that refers to priestly service (*leitourgia*, Rom. 15:16). But only in Acts 13:2 is the term applied to a specific activity within a Christian meeting. Here it is associated with fasting and by implication with prayer, and in this context prophets are active.

With the exception, then, of the limited use of the imagery of temple and priesthood to describe some aspects of Christian activity, we find that the language of worship is almost completely absent for describing the content and purpose of Christian meetings. What, then, did they do in their meetings and what was their function?

#### THE CONTENT OF CHRISTIAN MEETINGS

Our knowledge of what happened in a Christian meeting rests essentially on two passages, Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 12-14. In Acts 2:42 four elements characterised the common life of the first believers: teaching by the apostles, fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers. Only the second of these elements is problematic, since it is not clear whether it refers primarily to the sharing of possessions in some kind of common life or to spiritual sharing and participation.<sup>6</sup> There is also debate as to whether

<sup>6</sup> In my commentary on Acts I held that it was 'more likely that here it refers to the holding of a common meal or to a common religious experience' (*The Acts of the Apostles*, Leicester, 1980, p. 83). There is, however, no

these four elements were the constituents of a Christian meeting or were simply four parts of their common life together and occurred at different times.<sup>7</sup> Although Luke is here describing the early life of the believers in Jerusalem, it may be presumed that these elements remained constant in Christian meetings as the church spread and developed elsewhere. The evidence makes clear that Luke saw these functions as continuing throughout Acts, and this is confirmed by other New Testament evidence.

So, for example, in Acts 4:23-31 there is prayer in a church meeting. In Acts 20:7-12 there is a lengthy piece of teaching by Paul followed by the breaking of bread, and in Acts 20:17-38 Paul speaks and prays. Again, in Acts 28 Paul teaches the people who come to him. In Acts 4:32-5:11 it would seem that the gifting of resources to the apostles and the distribution of them were done at meetings of believers. In Acts 6:1-7 it emerges that the apostles saw their 'service' as consisting in prayer and the 'service of the word', but the latter certainly included evangelism as well as teaching believers.

Outside Acts the sharing of possessions emerges in the material relating to the collection for the poor, and we may presume that the money was collected at meetings of believers (although 1 Cor. 16:2 does not mean that they brought it to church each Sunday). The breaking of bread is the focus in 1 Corinthians 10 and 11. 1 Peter 4:10f. confirms that there was a two-fold ministry of speaking and service.

As already noted, we should probably not draw too strict a line between a congregational meeting and the other activities of the congregation. When we read about the gifts of the Spirit and the various forms of ministry associated with them, it is quickly apparent that some of these would be more appropriately exercised in a meeting, while others would be more appropriate in other situations. So, for example, while prayer was carried on in the congregational meeting (1 Tim. 2), the elders would also visit the sick and pray with them (Jas 5). Ephesians and Colossians assume that believers will communicate with one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. The service of which Peter speaks would include charitable and helpful actions; such as the people who qualified to

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unanimity among commentators on the phrase, and I am less confident about its meaning than I used to be.

<sup>7</sup> I adopted the former view, *ibid.* See, however, D. Peterson, *Engaging*, 152. C. K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Edinburgh, 1994), Vol. 1, p. 162, argues that in this ideal description of the early church this is an unreal alternative; the church meeting was a focus of the church's life, and the same elements were found in both.

receive widows' benefit in 1 Timothy 5 had already been practising.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in Romans 12 the activities of prophecy, service, teaching, encouragement, giving, 'leading' and showing mercy (*i.e.* charitable actions in general) are a mix of things done in and out of the congregational meeting, and Paul has not separated them into these two categories.

In the second main passage dealing with what went on in congregational meetings, 1 Corinthians 12-14, Paul gives sample lists of things that happened in the meeting. The sample in 1 Corinthians 14:26-33 includes people who 'have' a psalm, teaching, revelation, tongue, interpretation, prophecy to share with the rest of the congregation. These are understood to be forms of ministry and they are exercised for the good of the congregation. If we go back into 1 Corinthians 12, we find that here there are also listed: saying of wisdom; saying of knowledge; faith; gifts of healing; power to do mighty works; discernment of spirit[ual utterance]s; helping; guiding; some of these could be exercised outside the congregational meeting.

The Lord's Supper, already discussed in 1 Corinthians 10 and 11 as an integral part of the congregational meetings, is not mentioned here because the concern here is with gifts of ministry. Similarly, there was no need to mention baptism at this point. Clearly it took place in a gathering of believers, but we are not told whether it was done at what we might call a regular congregational meeting or at a special gathering for the purpose. It will be best to assume that there was a variety of practice: the first converts in any locality are likely to have been baptised publicly, and this is what Acts suggests.

And how was the gospel preached? Open-air preaching to whoever would listen was probably the common practice; special meetings in suitable premises were also held (school of Tyrannus, Acts 19:9). But were congregational meetings used for the purpose? Here there are two views. On the one hand, Robert Banks has painted an attractive picture, based on 1 Corinthians 14, of non-believers coming into a congregational meeting and becoming acquainted with Christianity.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Brad Blue has

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<sup>8</sup> The list in 1 Tim. 5 is of actions that the widows were already doing and that constituted a claim for their recognition by the church. We may presume that they continued to do these things while receiving support from the congregation.

<sup>9</sup> He wrote an illustrated booklet entitled *Going to Church in the First Century: An Eyewitness Account* (Greenacre, 1980), that describes a visit to a Christian meeting by an outsider; unfortunately it is out of print.

strongly insisted that there is no indication of an evangelistic purpose (or of evangelistic results) in the gatherings of believers in house-groups in Acts.<sup>10</sup> But since the congregational meetings clearly were open to non-believers and to the household in general, it stands to reason that there must have been an evangelistic slant; so, for example, if a householder became a Christian, the house-meeting must have been shaped to enable the rest of the household to appropriate personally the faith that it was assumed that they would adopt.

*Illocution and perlocution*

Why, then, has the term 'worship' come to be attached so tightly to Christian meetings as if that was the characteristic activity that went on in them? Earlier I referred to a distinction between a narrow and a broad understanding of worship. We can make this more precise by availing ourselves of J. L. Austin's insights into the use of speech.<sup>11</sup> Austin was concerned with the way in which we do things by speaking, and therefore his terminology can be used of actions as well as of speech. He draws a helpful distinction between the illocutionary and the perlocutionary functions of a locution or utterance. The former is concerned with what is being done in a particular example of speech, and the latter is concerned with the effects that may be produced. Thus, if a person says 'You are great' to God, then the locution is the saying of these words; the illocution is worship. But if I am saying 'Repent and believe the good news', then the illocution here is preaching the gospel to sinners, but the perlocution is that through the hoped-for effect of the preaching people will acknowledge God and in so doing I myself am rendering service and worship to God. So my narrow sense of the term applies where the action is worship at the illocutionary level, but the broad sense applies where it is perlocutionary.

My contention is that a great deal of what goes on in a Christian meeting is not worship in the illocutionary or narrow sense, but only in the perlocutionary or broad sense. Therefore, to describe a Christian meeting as being for the purpose of worship, as if that adequately accounted for what actually goes on, is misleading and may indeed be dangerous, because people tend to understand the term in its narrow sense and try to make everything fit in under that heading. This may explain, for

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<sup>10</sup> 'Acts and the House Church', in D. W. J. Gill and C. Gempf, *The Book of Acts in its Graeco-Roman Setting* (Grand Rapids and Carlisle, 1994), pp. 119-222.

<sup>11</sup> J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Oxford, 1962).

example, why in some ecclesiastical settings the sermon, which is clearly not worship directed towards God, may be relegated to a tiny space of time; in some cases, notably at communion services, it may be omitted altogether; it may also explain the way in which in many churches the pulpit is either non-existent or is placed at the side of the church rather than being placed, as in Reformed usage, right there in the centre. It may also explain why in some Presbyterian churches it is customary to call the list of hymns to be sung the 'praise list', as if the function of all the hymns was to address God in praise, whereas our hymns, like the Psalms, contain many that are addressed to the worshippers themselves to give them encouragement and teaching.

### *Instruction and teaching*

Indeed, it is this last element which is of great importance. From the New Testament it is plain that Christian meetings were occasions for instruction of the congregation. We would expect this from the analogy of the synagogue. We have already noticed the importance of the Word in Acts. It is particularly evident from the Pastoral Epistles, where the congregation is pre-eminently a listening congregation: the primary task of Timothy and Titus themselves and of the elders is to teach, while the congregation listens. A wide vocabulary of 'teaching' words is used in these letters. Similarly in the Letter of James the main task of the congregation is to listen. But there is nothing different in principle here from what we find elsewhere. The letters of Paul and other Christian writers are meant to be read aloud in the meeting. Paul assumes that words of knowledge, wisdom, teaching, will be given in the meeting. Peter distinguishes between two forms of ministry, teaching and service, and both of these forms of charismatic activity are directed towards 'one another'. In Acts a similar distinction is made between the service of the Word (associated with prayer) and the service of tables.

Such activity is carried on by people who speak on behalf of God to his church, whether as prophets or teachers. So in addition to people speaking to God in the Christian meeting, there is this element of God speaking to people. Here a piece of evidence of great significance is the activity of travelling apostles and other 'brothers' (3 John 5-10); the brothers here are manifestly evangelists but at the same time they have a ministry in the congregation. If such people came to a church meeting the one thing that we can be sure happened was that they were invited to speak; probably their speaking was the high point of the gathering. The best-documented case is, of course, Paul himself. When he visits a Christian congregation the main thing that he does is evidently to talk to them, and the breaking

of bread and informal conversation are mentioned almost casually by comparison (Acts 20:11). Similarly, the sending of letters was a substitute for the actual presence and teaching of the apostle. The travelling ministry of preachers makes no sense if it was not central to the lives of the congregations visited.

Theologically, this makes good sense. It is a good biblical principle that what God says and does to us is more important than what we say and do to him. The central theme of Christianity is the action of God in Christ in saving us or establishing a covenant in which he takes the initiative. Our response to his initiative is not unimportant but it is clearly secondary to it. Consequently, to think of Christian meetings in terms primarily of our worship of God is to put what should be secondary into the primary position, and, as we have seen, to create the danger that the Word and action of God may be lost from sight or at least thrust into a corner. To think of a Christian meeting in terms of worship is to stifle the voice of God. Surely our Christian meetings should be patterned on the fundamental drama of redemption in which God acts and we respond: God speaks through his human agents and then the congregation respond to his Word.

### *Fellowship*

Alongside teaching, a second element that is endangered by thinking of our Christian meetings primarily in terms of worship narrowly conceived, is that they may also lose their essential character as occasions of fellowship. This element is not perhaps as heavily emphasised in the New Testament as is the element of teaching and learning, but it is crucial. We need to ask why it is that Christians should meet together at all. After all, worship can be carried on by individuals on their own, and people can read the Scriptures or expositions of them on their own. But Paul's analogy of the body makes it clear that individual Christians have specific gifts of the Spirit for ministry,<sup>12</sup> and by implication they lack the gifts that other Christians have; therefore in a Christian meeting there is a sharing of the gifts and the body as a whole is strengthened and built up by the mutual sharing of the gifts; collectively we can do what we cannot do as individuals. Thus the members of the body act as channels of the manifold grace of God, each giving to others and receiving from others. In this way the body grows, and, as Paul makes clear elsewhere, it grows in love and unity. It is apparent that part of God's aim for the church is the creation of

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<sup>12</sup> Although we tend to call them gifts of the Spirit, in fact God the Father and the Lord Jesus are equally involved in their provision (1 Cor. 12:4-6).

a society in which people love and serve one another.<sup>13</sup> The Christian meeting is the occasion where this mutual help is focussed and concentrated.

This understanding of the Christian meeting as an occasion of fellowship should spell death for the one-man ministry, and even for the one-woman ministry; we are still woefully weak in enabling the gifts of all the people of God to be used. Even a church which had Paul as its apostle, and which therefore might be thought to need nobody else to speak, had this rich variety of ministry from the members of the body. And the fact that a Christian group has a William Still or a G. B. Duncan or whoever as its pastor should not be allowed to stifle the development of the gifts of the congregation.

I have spoken of the perlocutionary function of what goes on in the Christian meeting. Now there is no doubt that the overall purpose of these activities is that they lead to the glorification of God and to thanksgiving to him. This is explicitly the case in 1 Peter 4:11 and similarly there is Paul's desire for praise and thanksgiving to be given to God as a result of the ministry of his people to one another (2 Cor. 9:12-15).

But worship is not the only function of this kind. An important perlocutionary function is expressed in Paul's criterion for the value of what goes on in the Christian meeting, namely whether it is 'edifying', *i.e.* whether it 'builds up' the congregation, a term that refers to enabling their growth in faith, love, hope and other Christian characteristics (1 Cor. 14:1-12, 26). Paul is not necessarily saying that this is the only thing that should be going on, the only test of whether a meeting is fulfilling its purpose. His concern was that whatever was meant to help the congregation to grow should in fact do so and not simply help the individual who was speaking in tongues. This does not exclude other purposes. Nevertheless, it may be significant that it is this purpose which is the one that gets mentioned and not any others.

To sum up thus far: I have distinguished between the perlocutionary function of what goes on in a Christian meeting as worship, and the illocutionary functions which are very various. I am claiming that the problem with referring to the purpose of the meeting as being 'worship' *simpliciter* is that it says remarkably little by way of definition of the meeting since we can rightly say that 'worship' should be the perlocutionary function of all that we do in every part of our lives; but at

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<sup>13</sup> For an understanding of the church against the pattern of the Trinity see M. Volf, *After Our Likeness. The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, 1998).

the same time the danger of using the term is that we may think worship is the illocutionary function of all that we do in the meeting, whereas we have seen that the New Testament scarcely ever describes what goes on in a Christian meeting in these terms and that much goes on, and should go on, which is not 'worship', but 'teaching', 'fellowship', and so on.

#### 'WORSHIP' IN THE CONGREGATIONAL MEETING

With all that clearly stated, we now have a context in which we can focus on the element of 'worship' in the narrower sense and explore it a bit further. A case can be made that in regard to both Christian meetings and personal religion the concept of worship is displaced and replaced by a variety of other terms which are expressive of prayer, praise, thanksgiving, petition, glorification. There is not a lot of worship as such in the sense of simply bowing down in awe before God, but there is a lot of prayer and praise.

#### *Fear and reverence*

In pagan religion asserting the greatness of a god or goddess is found: 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!' (Acts 19:27, 28, 34, 35; cf. Simon in Acts 8:9f.). Similarly, Mary can assert the greatness of God (Luke 1:46; cf. Acts 10:46; Titus 2:13), and people may be impressed by the greatness of God seen in his mighty acts (Luke 9:43; 19:17); Paul longed to see Christ 'made great' by what he did (Phil. 1:20). Greatness belongs to God and 'the greatness' can be used as a circumlocution for him (Heb. 1:3; 8:1; Jude 25).<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, in contexts of worship the greatness of God as such tends to be taken for granted, and the emphasis falls more upon his love and his mighty acts of salvation and negatively upon his judgement.

The vocabulary of attitudes to God includes the element of 'fear'. Fear is the appropriate reaction in the face of displays of divine power and supernatural happenings, even when these displays are salvific (Luke 2:9; Acts 2:43), but especially divine judgements (Acts 5:5, 11). So in Colossians 3:22 fear of the Lord is a motive for Christian behaviour and is positively commended in 1 Peter 1:17; 2:17; 3:2, 15 (cf. 2 Cor. 7:1; Eph. 5:21; Phil. 2:12). To live as a believer is to 'walk in the fear of the Lord' (Acts 9:31), and yet to be a believer is to be released from the old fear (Rom. 8:15). Such fear, however is part of an individual's personal

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Matt. 5:35. God's deeds are 'great', Luke 1:49; his 'day' is great, Acts 2:20; Rev. 6:17. 'Great' is a favourite word in Revelation, applicable to all kinds of things, both good and evil, divine and demonic.

relationship with God; it does not figure specifically in the normal life of a congregation, since hopefully Acts 5:1-11 and 1 Corinthians 11:27-32 refer to abnormal occasions. John can emphasise that there is no place for fear within a relationship of love (1 John 4:18). Fear should not be a problem for those who do good but only for the evil (Rom. 13:8); but an element of fear may remain because we are never sure that we may not be doing evil or be in danger of falling into temptation. A Christian relationship with God should take away that fear because there is now no condemnation, and yet a respect for God must remain lest we fall back into sin.

### *Obeisance*

Bowing the knee or putting one's face on the ground are the typical postures of obeisance. They can be used literally or also figuratively, the latter sense being probable in Ephesians 3:14 in a description of prayer. However, alongside these uses we also have a number of references to people seeing the face of God in Heaven (Matt. 18:10; Heb. 9:24; Rev. 22:4), and Paul regards this as the perfection of that which we now enjoy only in part (1 Cor. 13:21; 2 Cor. 3:18; cf. 4:6). Just as Christ appears for us, so we too have boldness to appear before God in prayer and have open access to him (Rom. 5:1; Heb. 4:16). Consequently, there is the paradox that both forms of speech are appropriate to stress different aspects of our relationship to God, but it is the thought of confident approach to God which is uppermost and more characteristic of New Testament faith.

### *Prayer*

The activity of confident prayer is clearly much more characteristic of what people do in the New Testament than fear and dread. By contrast with 'worship' here we have a word-group whose usage is spread fairly evenly across the New Testament. Praying is speaking to a God who is spiritually there rather than direct address to a being who is present in some other kind of way. It is practised both personally and in the Christian congregation.

For our purpose we should note that in the Pauline letters we often have prayer-reports in which the writer tells us what he prays about when he does pray, and it may well be that as he wrote the words he was in fact praying them. The language of Paul's prayer reports tends to be that of thanksgiving and petition/intercession, and he calls his readers to intercede for him.

A rare report of an actual prayer in a congregational meeting is found in Acts 4:24-30. The language is interesting in that it is worshipful; it begins

by acknowledging the sovereignty, creative power and revelatory activity of God and makes this a basis for a confident appeal to God for action.

Prayer in Acts is pre-eminently petition to God, whether it is concerned with the pray-ers own needs or is offered on behalf of other people for their needs; thanksgiving is of course not unknown (Acts 16:25!), but it is much less frequent.

Already here we see a widening out from worship as the expression or acknowledgement of the greatness of God to prayer as human speech addressed to God which may contain this element of acknowledgement, but moves on to thankfulness and petition.

### *Praise and confession*

Confessing what God does to the world is a form of praise (1 Pet. 2:9). Acts 2:11 is significant because here speaking in tongues is a form of expressing the mighty acts of God in a way that can be understood by the people at large. In the Christian meeting speaking in tongues appears to edify the speaker but not the listeners unless it is explained; it is commonly assumed that it was a form of praise, where a person is so overcome by the grace of God that human words do not suffice to express the resultant emotions. The references in the letters to singing (*psallo*) are to expressions of joy and thanksgiving (Rom. 15:9; 1 Cor. 14:15; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; Jas 5:13), and thus have a prayer quality.

Praise was characteristic of the first Christians (Acts 2:47), and specifically included both Jews and Gentiles (see Rom. 15:11, where it is the result of being part of God's people). It is a perpetual attitude in Hebrews 13:15. The frequent use of *eucharisteo* in the letters reflects the language and mood of actual prayers in the congregational meeting. The verb *eulogeo*, is used both of God 'blessing' people and also of humans blessing God, an expression which varies in meaning between thanking him for something (like food) or saying that he is blessed, which means that he is to be thanked.<sup>15</sup> This language is used in the letters and probably reflects actual prayers (Rom. 9:5; 2 Cor. 1:2; *et al.*).

Such praise is the fundamental recognition of God as giver and sustainer of life, which sinners withhold (Rom. 1:21) and hence it is a key term in prayer. It is, therefore, evoked by the benevolence of God rather than simply by his greatness and power.

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<sup>15</sup> On occasion the passive adjective is a statement of his actual bliss – *cf.* use of 'The Blessed' for God (Mark 14:61).

*Doxology*

A specific form of glorification is found in the doxological elements in which the worthiness of God is acknowledged for what he is and what he does.<sup>16</sup> There are some 18 such statements in the New Testament.<sup>17</sup> Such doxologies punctuate the epistles. They are also found in three places in Revelation (Rev. 1:6; 5:13; 7:12) alongside other statements in which God or the Lamb are addressed in terms that are broadly worshipful (Rev. 4:8, 11; 5:9f., 12, 13; 7:10; 11:15, 17-18; 12:10-12; 15:3f.; 16:5f., 7; 19:1f., 3, 4, 6-8). It is significant that these statements occur in the context of remarks that worship and thanks are being given to God and a specific command to do so (Rev. 19:5). One way of worshipping God in Heaven is to say a doxology.

It has been suggested that the worship offered to God in Revelation is patterned on, or reflects, what went on in early Christian meetings. This suggestion needs to be made more precise. On the one hand, it is clear that the statements in Revelation tend very often to be contextually appropriate and specific and would not be appropriate in an ordinary Christian meeting. They are composed for the occasion. On the other hand, it would seem equally likely that there was corresponding activity in the Christian meetings, as the occurrence of the doxologies in the epistles demonstrates.

*Glorification*

The overall aim of Christian activity is 'to the glory of God' (2 Cor. 8:19); as we have noted, a lot goes on in the Christian meeting and the lives of Christians which is not the glorifying of God as such but which has as its ultimate aim the glorification of God.

1. God's mighty acts of salvation and healing promote his glory (Rom. 15:7; 2 Cor. 4:15) and cause people to glorify him (Luke 2:14, 20). Glorifying God is closely linked to fearing him (Rev. 14:7), thanking him and praising him.

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<sup>16</sup> A Jewish parallel may be seen in the way in which in the Rabbinic literature a mention of God is often accompanied by a kind of doxology: 'the Holy One - Blessed be he!'

<sup>17</sup> I. H. Marshall, 'Romans 16:25-27: An Apt Conclusion', in S. K. Soderlund and N. T. Wright (ed.), *Romans and the People of God: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Fee on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday* (Grand Rapids, 1999), pp. 170-84.

2. The ultimate purpose of what believers do as individuals is to glorify God (1 Cor. 6:20; 10:31; Eph. 1:12; Phil. 1:11); even what they experience in suffering should lead them to glorify him (1 Pet. 4:16).
3. The aim of much that believers do is to cause other people to ascribe glory to God (Matt. 5:16; 2 Cor. 9:13; 1 Pet. 2:12). Other believers glorify God when they hear of Paul's conversion (Gal. 1:24). Even the Word of God can be glorified as it successfully proceeds through society (2 Thes. 3:1).
4. The immediate purpose of missionary work is to make converts, but the ultimate aim is the creation of a people composed of Jews and Gentiles together who glorify God with one voice (Rom. 15:6). Glory is given to him in the church (Eph. 3:21).<sup>18</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This rapid survey shows that the activities of believers in their meetings did include an important element of praise and glorification of God. Although there are significant elements of reverence and acknowledgement of God's greatness and power, nevertheless the accent falls overwhelmingly on praise, thanksgiving and confident petition. It is therefore a fair conclusion that, despite the lack of evidence for describing early Christian meetings as occasions for worship, nevertheless worship in this narrow sense was a part of what went on.

Consequently, my main thesis in this paper, namely that worship in the narrow sense is not the only activity in Christian meetings, must not be misinterpreted to suggest that praise and prayer had little or no place in them.

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<sup>18</sup> In this paper I have concentrated attention on what might be called the practice of Christian meetings and have not discussed the theology of the relationship to God thus expressed. Consequently, so important a matter as that all that Christians do in their meetings is done 'through Jesus Christ' or 'in the name of Jesus' has not been given the attention that it deserves. See D. Peterson, *Engaging*, pp. 238-46.