

Biblical Theology of Worship

WORSHIP IN SPIRIT AND TRUTH

Introduction

- Worship is a dominant theme from Genesis to Revelation, because the God who created all things and redeemed us in Christ is worthy to receive all honour, praise, service, and worship (Gen 12:7-8; Rev 5:9-12)
- There are certain expressions of worship, which are unacceptable to God
- These include an attitude of unbelief (Gen 4:3-5), religious pretense (Isa 1:10-17), lack of gratitude and reverence (Heb 12:28-29), idol worship (Rev 9:20-21)
- It is important for us to know what pleases God and how he wants us to respond to him. Scripture must control and direct our forms of worship
- The Bible uses two groups of words to discuss about worship
- The NT shows how Jesus fulfilled for us the pattern of worship given to Israel

Worship as Submission to God

- The most common word for “worship” literally means “bend over” or “bow down,” describing a gesture of submission to humans, idols, or to God (Gen 18:2; Ex 18:7; 20:4-6)
- The term “bow down” came to be used for the attitude of respect that the gesture represented
- People can express submission to God in terms of prayer or praise (Gen 24:26-27):
- ²⁶ Then the man bowed down and worshiped the LORD, ²⁷ saying, “Praise be to the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not abandoned his kindness and faithfulness to my master. As for me, the LORD has led me on the journey to the house of my master’s relatives.”

Worship as Submission to God

- The book of Psalms contains many different expressions of worship, including lament, repentance, prayer, songs of thanksgiving, and praise
- In Israel, bowing down before the Lord as an expression of submission was associated with sacrifice and public praise (Deut 26:1-11)
- But such a gesture was meaningful only if it was motivated by a genuine desire to acknowledge God's majesty and to live under his rule
- The NT uses the term "worship" (*proskuneo*), meaning "prostrate" to show that Jesus is worthy of devotion (Lu 24:52):
- ⁵² Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

Worship as Submission to God

- In response to the Samaritan woman's question about the appropriate *place* to worship God, Jesus clarifies the Father seeks "true worshipers" who "will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth" (Jn 4:20-24)
- Here, Jesus speaks fundamentally about the *way* to worship, which is acceptable to God
- On the one hand, worship must be guided by biblical truths or principles, not by human preferences or what feels good
- On the other hand, worship must originate from the heart, engage human affections, and the totality of our being
- Truth and heart must not be dichotomized

Worship as Service to God

- Another group of words translate “worship” as “serve” or “service”
- The terms *aboda* (Heb) and *latreuo* (Gk) for worship are frequently not translated as worship
- The Hebrew term, in particular, means “service” associated with work done in the temple (e.g., Ex 12:25-27):
- ²⁵ When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. ²⁶ And when your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ ²⁷ then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.’” Then the people bowed down and worshiped.

Worship as Service to God

- In response to what God has done for us in Christ, it's no wonder that says: "Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship" (Rom 12:1)
- The service rendered to God in everyday obedience is the focus of Heb 12:28-29:
- ²⁸ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our "God is a consuming fire."
- Acceptable worship should be characterized by "reverence and awe"
- Practically, we are to offer to God "a sacrifice of praise" (Heb 13:15)

Worship and Congregational Gatherings

- Worship in the OT had a corporate expression, and this was meant to encourage God's people to serve him faithfully (Isa 1:10-17; Jer 7:1-29)
- The NT rarely uses the term "worship" for Christian meetings
- Nevertheless, prayer, praise, and teaching of God's word were central to congregational gatherings (Acts 2:42-47; 4:23-37; Eph 5:18-20)
- The NT is not prescriptive in how way we conduct our meetings, but it provides guidelines of Christians engaging with God together
- Paul regularly uses the term "edification" rather worship to indicate the purpose and function of Christian gatherings (1 Cor 14:3-5, 12, 17, 26; Eph 2:19-22)

Worship and Congregational Gatherings

- ³ But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort. ⁴ Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves, but the one who prophesies edifies the church. ⁵ I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be edified.
- This metaphor portrays the founding, maintaining and advancing of the church as God's "building" or holy "temple" (1 Cor 3:10-17)

Worship and Congregational Gatherings

- Edification involves serving others as an important aspect of our service to God
- Edification is the exalted Christ's work in our midst through the gifts and ministries that he empowers and directs by his Spirit (Eph 2:20-22):
- ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.
- Our task is to apply the truth of God in love to one another

Conclusion

- It may be best to speak of congregational worship as a particular expression of the total life-response that is the worship described in the new covenant
- In giving and receiving of various ministries, we encounter God and respond to him in praise and obedience (Heb 10:24-25)
- Singing to God is an important aspect of corporate worship, but it is not the only way of expressing devotion to God
- Ministry exercised for the building up of the body of Christ in teaching, exhorting, and praying is a significant way of worship and glorifying God

Presbyterian and Reformed Worship

- Presbyterian worship is distinguished by the principle: “Scripture regulates corporate worship”
- Reformed people and Presbyterians look to Scripture as our ultimate guide for worship that “transcends style yet at the same time is able to be expressed in local churches through a variety of valid worship expressions” (Lucas 2006, 116)
- “The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture” (WCF 21.1)

Presbyterian and Reformed Worship

- Presbyterian worship is marked by Word and Sacrament
- Movement from the world to God and back to the world to live for God's glory

Presbyterian and Reformed Worship

- Positively, we are to practice “the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath instituted in his Word: particularly **prayer** and **thanksgiving** in the name of Christ; the **reading, preaching, and hearing of the Word**; the administration and receiving of the **sacraments; church government** and **discipline**; the **ministry and maintenance** thereof, and **vowing** unto him” (LC 108)

Presbyterian and Reformed Worship

- Negatively, we are urged to put off “all devising, counseling, commanding, using and any wise approving, any religious worship not instituted by God himself; tolerating a **false religion**; the making of **any representation of God**, of all or of any of the three persons, either inwardly in our mind, or outwardly in **any kind of image or likeness of any creature** whatsoever; all worshipping of it, or God in it or by it; the making of **any representation of feigned deities**, and all worship of them, or service belonging to them; all **superstitious devices**, corrupting the worship of God” (LC 109)

Presbyterian and Reformed Worship

- There is a tendency within the Reformed and Presbyterian traditions to make “sacrosanct” the “style” of worship derived from the Reformation era or the age of hymnody in 19th century revivalism
- “We must be careful to discern what is an *essential element* commanded by God’s Word and what is a *circumstantial means* for accomplishing the element. And, above all, as we think about this, we must not forsake one biblical principle—love for our brothers and sisters in Christ—in order to preserve another—liberty of conscience. Rather, we must all commit ourselves to the lordship of Christ as he speaks by his Spirit through Scripture, trusting that, as we all mature in our faith, we will eventually come to the same views” (Lucas 2006, 120-21)