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Some Basic Principles

What Is Worship?

Worship is *the work of acknowledging the greatness of our covenant Lord.*

In Scripture, there are two groups of Hebrew and Greek terms that are translated “worship.” The first group refers to “labor” or “service.”¹ In the context of worship, these terms refer primarily to the service of God carried out by the priests in the tabernacle and the temple during the Old Testament period. The second group of terms means literally “bowing” or “bending the knee,” hence “paying homage, honoring the worth of someone else.”² The English term *worship*, from *worth*, has the same connotation.

From the first group of terms, we may conclude that worship is *active*. It is something we *do*, a *verb* (as well as a noun), to borrow from the title of a recent book by Robert Webber.³ Even at this early point in our study, we can see that worship is far different from entertainment. In worship we are not to be passive, but to participate.

From the second group of terms, we learn that worship is honoring someone superior to ourselves. It is therefore not pleasing ourselves, but pleasing someone else. Immediately the question How can worship be made better? has a focus: better not primarily for ourselves, but better for the one we seek to honor. It may be that worship that is better for him will also be better for us. But our first concern must be to please him; any benefits for us will be secondary.

So, worship is performing service to honor somebody other than ourselves. It is both “adoration and action,” to quote from the title of another recent book.⁴

Scripture uses all of these terms on the human level, referring to relationships among human beings. We serve one another, and we honor one another. But there is a special sense in which God alone is worthy of worship. The first of the Ten Commandments says, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3). God, who is called Yahweh (“LORD”) in the Decalogue, is entitled to a unique honor, one that is not to be shared with anybody else. The fifth commandment, “Honor your father and your mother,” makes it plain that human beings also deserve honor. But that honor may not compete with the honor we owe to the Lord himself.

The Ten Commandments are the written constitution of a *covenant* relationship between God and Israel. That covenant is a relationship between a great king (the Lord) and a people he takes to be his own. As the Lord of the covenant, God declares Israel to be his own people and himself to be their God.⁵ As their God, he speaks to them with supreme authority and thereby governs every aspect of their lives. Their chief responsibility is to honor him above all others. There is to be no competition for Israel’s loyalty and affection: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:4–5).

Jesus reinforces this teaching: “No one can serve two masters” (Matt. 6:24). It is not only that we are forbidden to worship Baal or Jupiter; we also must not worship money! God claims lordship over every area of our lives. As the apostle Paul says,

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“Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

One of the most amazing things about Jesus is that he demands for himself the same kind of exclusive covenant loyalty that the Lord God demanded from Israel. Jesus upholds the fifth commandment against the Pharisees and scribes, who dedicated to God what should have been used to support their parents (Matt. 15:1–9). But Jesus also teaches that loyalty to him transcends loyalty to parents (Matt. 10:34–39). Who is Jesus to demand such service and homage? Only loyalty to God transcends loyalty to parents in God’s covenant order, and so Jesus in Matthew 10:34–39 is making a clear claim to be God. Like Yahweh in the Old Testament, Jesus presents himself as the covenant Lord, the one to whom we owe our utmost allegiance (see Matt. 7:21–29; John 14:6).

In worship, we do familiar things—things we often do with one another. Praise, for example, is, or should be, a part of everyday life. Parents praise their children for significant accomplishments and good character. Employers praise their employees, and vice versa, which makes for good morale in the workplace. And God calls us to praise him in worship. But that praise is on quite a different level. To praise God—indeed, to praise Jesus!—is to recognize him as unconditionally superior to ourselves in every respect, as one whose true greatness is beyond our poor power of expression. He is the ultimate object of praise.

In worship, we also express affection, joy, and sadness. We confess our faults; make requests; give thanks; listen to commands, promises, and exhortations; present gifts; receive cleansing (baptism); and eat and drink (the Lord’s Supper). These are things we do all the time in our normal relationships with other people. But when we do them in worship, there is something special: we do them for the Lord, the ultimate one, the Creator and ruler of the heavens and the earth; and we do them in Jesus, our Savior from sin. In worship, these common actions become unique, mysterious, and life-transforming because of the one whom we worship. These actions become the priestly service by which we acknowledge the greatness of our covenant Lord.

God-Centered Worship

As we have seen, worship is *homage, adoration*. It is not primarily for ourselves, but for the one we seek to honor. We worship for his pleasure foremost and find our greatest pleasure in pleasing him. Worship must therefore always be God-centered and Christ-centered. It must be focused on the covenant Lord.

In an earlier book,⁶ I analyzed three aspects of covenant lordship: control, authority, and presence. The Lord is the one who controls the entire course of nature and history, who speaks with ultimate, absolute authority, and who takes a people to be his own, to be with them. These three aspects of divine lordship are prominent in biblical worship.

In worship, we adore God's covenantal *control*, his sovereign rule over creation. The praises of God's people in Scripture are typically praises of his "mighty acts" in creation, providence, and redemption (see, for example, Ex. 15:1–18; Ps. 104; Zeph. 3:17; Rev. 15:3–4).

To worship God is also to bow before his absolute, ultimate *authority*. We adore not only his power, but also his holy word. Psalm 19 praises God first for revealing himself in his mighty acts of creation and providence (vv. 1–6) and then for the perfection of his law (vv. 7–11). When we enter his presence, overwhelmed by his majesty and power, how can we ignore what he is saying to us? So, in worship we hear the reading and exposition of the Scriptures (see Acts 15:21; 1 Tim. 4:13; Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27; Acts 20:7; 2 Tim. 4:2). God wants us to be doers of that word, not hearers only (Rom. 2:13; James 1:22–25; 4:11).

And, in worship, we experience God's *presence*. As the covenant Lord, he comes to us in worship to be with us. The tabernacle and the temple in the Old Testament were places where God himself met with his people (Ex. 20:24). The worshiper shouts with joy that God is in the midst of his people (Zeph. 3:17). The name of Jesus, the name in which we worship, is Immanuel, which means "God with us" (Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:23). In New Testament worship, the presence of God may impress even a visiting unbeliever, so that "he will fall down and worship

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God, exclaiming, ‘God is really among you!’ ” (1 Cor. 14:25).

Therefore, true worship is saturated with reminders of God’s covenant lordship. We worship to honor his mighty acts, to hear his authoritative word, and to fellowship with him personally as the one who has made us his people. When we are distracted from our covenant Lord and preoccupied with our own comforts and pleasures, something has gone seriously wrong with our worship. As my former pastor, Dick Kaufmann, says, when we leave worship, we should first ask, not What did I get out of it? but How did I do in my work of honoring the Lord?

Gospel-Centered Worship

Adam and Eve enjoyed a wonderful friendship with God. God had created them in his image, and he had declared that they were “good” (Gen. 1:31). Eden was a kind of temple, in which Adam and Eve regularly rejoiced in God’s mighty works of creation, heard and obeyed the word of the Lord, and delighted in his nearness to them. But they disobeyed God’s word (Gen. 2:16–17; 3:1–6) and defiled their worship. He cursed them and cast them out of their temple (Gen. 3:14–24).

Yet God did not abandon them. Even amidst the curses, God gave to Adam and Eve the promise of a deliverer who would destroy Satan (Gen. 3:15). God continued to speak to them and to seek fellowship with them. He sought worshipers (John 4:23). In Genesis 4:3–4, both Cain and Abel bring offerings to the Lord. In the time of Seth, people “began to call on the name of the LORD” (Gen. 4:26). Worship continued after the Fall.

God blessed worship after the Fall, but he wanted his people to worship him with a consciousness of their sin and guilt, and of what he had done to free them from that guilt and power of sin. Prominent in Old Testament worship were animal sacrifices, which prefigured the death of Christ, “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). As we have seen, God’s people praise him, not only for his mighty acts in creation, but for redemption as well. In Exodus 15, the Israelites praise God for delivering them out of their slavery in Egypt. That de-

liverance foreshadowed God's greater deliverance of his people in Christ from that death which is the wages of sin: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain" (Rev. 5:12).

As in Eden, God's people hear his word in worship. But now it is somewhat different, for God's word now tells us of our sin and God's provision for our forgiveness. Again, we fellowship with God by eating and drinking with him, but that eating and drinking sets forth the Lord's death until he comes (1 Cor. 11:26). Everything we do in worship, therefore, now speaks of sin and forgiveness, of Jesus' atonement and resurrection for us. Worship following the fall of Adam should not only be God-centered, but also Christ-centered and gospel-centered. In all our worship, the good news that Jesus has died for our sins and risen gloriously from the dead should be central.

Trinitarian Worship

Scripture presents a history of redemption, a narrative of what God has done to save his people from sin. As that history progresses, Scripture presents gradually clearer teaching about the Trinitarian nature of God: that he is one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We learn of the Trinity, not just as an interesting fact about God, but because it profoundly concerns our salvation. At God's appointed time, the second person of the Trinity became a man—Jesus—to live a perfect human life and to die as a sacrifice for sin. Then, after Jesus' resurrection and ascension to heaven, the Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, to empower the church in its mission to bring the gospel to all the earth. The Spirit applies the work of Christ to our hearts, he enables us to understand and apply the word of God, and he fills us with divine gifts, empowering our ministry and testifying of Christ.

When Jesus told the woman of Samaria that "a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John 4:23), he was not merely predicting a more sincere or heartfelt worship among his people. Rather, he was referring to the new things that God was prepar-

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ing to do for our salvation. The “truth” is the truth of the gospel, the good news of salvation in Jesus (compare John 1:17; 14:6). The “spirit” is the “Spirit of truth” (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13), who comes to bear powerful witness to that gospel.⁷

Worship “in Spirit and truth,” then, is Trinitarian worship—worship that is aware of the distinctive work of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit for our salvation. It is Christ-centered: when we “call on the name of the Lord,” we call on the name of Christ (Matt. 18:20; John 14:13; 16:24; Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:9; Col. 3:17). Christ is the Lord in his control, authority, and presence. He is the power of God (1 Cor. 1:24), the authority of God (Matt. 28:18–20), the presence of God tabernacling in the midst of his people (John 1:14; Matt. 18:20; 28:19–20; Rom. 15:9). He is the sacrifice that fulfills all the sacrifices of Old Testament worship (Mark 10:45; John 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:7; Heb. 9:26; 10:12). He is the high priest who intercedes in prayer for his people (Heb. 4:15–16).

Such worship is also worship in and by the Spirit. By the Spirit, we come to “glory in Christ Jesus, and . . . put no confidence in the flesh” (Phil. 3:3). The Spirit is the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9). He does not speak on his own initiative, but speaks only what he hears from Jesus (John 16:12–15). He persuades us that we are children of God (Rom. 8:16), and that the gospel is God’s truth (1 Thess. 1:5). As Jesus intercedes for us, the Spirit utters to God the unspoken groanings of our hearts (Rom. 8:26–27).

God-centered worship, following the richness of the New Testament revelation, is always worship in the name of Christ and by the Holy Spirit. The only name by which we may be saved is that of Christ (Acts 4:12), and we can come to know him only by the sovereign working of the Holy Spirit (John 3:3; Rom. 8:14–15; 1 Cor. 2:12). God-centered worship is Trinitarian worship. Our worship should be clearly directed to God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Vertical and Horizontal

Evidently, then, Christian worship is “vertical,” directed to our triune God for his pleasure. The focus of our effort in worship

should be on pleasing him. From this principle, some might conclude that we should not pay any attention to human needs in worship. Talk like that can sound very pious, but it is unbiblical. The God of the Bible is not like the false god Moloch, who demanded human sacrifices from his worshipers. Rather, our triune God wants to bless his people when they meet with him. There is no opposition between worshiping God and loving people. Loving God involves loving our neighbors as ourselves (Matt. 22:37–40; Mark 7:9–13; 1 John 4:20–21).

In worship, we should not be so preoccupied with God that we ignore one another. For example, worshipers should not ignore the needs of the poor (Isa. 1:10–17; compare 1 Cor. 11:17–34; James 2:1–7). And we should make sure that our worship is edifying to believers (1 Cor. 14:26). First Corinthians 14 emphasizes the importance of conducting worship, not in unintelligible “tongues,” but in language understandable to all. Even an unbeliever, when he enters the assembly, should be able to understand what is taking place, so that he will fall down and worship, exclaiming, “God is really among you” (v. 25). So, worship has a horizontal dimension as well as a vertical focus. It is to be God-centered, but it is also to be both edifying and evangelistic. Worship that is unedifying or unevangelistic may not properly claim to be God-centered.

How can we maintain a horizontal focus that is properly biblical without creating man-centered worship? We should remember that a proper concern for worshipers does not mean catering to their wants. Worship is not, therefore, a program to provide entertainment, or to enhance self-esteem, or to encourage self-righteousness. The best way for us to love one another in worship is to share the joy of true worship without compromise—a joy focused on the good news of salvation. God-centeredness and edification, therefore, are not opposed, but reinforce one another. Worship is a time to care for one another, to build up the unity of our fellowship in Christ (Heb. 10:24–25). We love because God in Christ first loved us (1 John 4:19).

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Broad and Narrow

The biblical terms for worship apply to various stated occasions of public worship, particularly the worship at the tabernacle and the temple during the Old Testament period. But they also have a broader meaning, characterizing the believer's life in all its aspects. In Romans 12:1, the Greek term *latreia* (which elsewhere designates the service of priests in the temple) describes the believer's offering of his own body in service to God: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship."

In the Old Testament, God condemned formal worship that was not accompanied by a concern for compassion and justice (see Isa. 1:10–17; Mic. 6:6–8). In Hosea 6:6, God says, "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings." God did, of course, desire sacrifice; this is a rhetorical exaggeration or hyperbole. But the point should not be missed that authentic worship includes a life that is obedient to God.

Therefore, it is not surprising that in the New Testament, the vocabulary of worship takes on a broad, ethical meaning. This is to be expected also because the New Testament regards the temple worship as coming to an end. When Jesus died, the veil of the temple (which separated the people from the presence of God) was torn in two, from top to bottom (Matt. 27:51). And the temple priesthood, based on descent from Aaron, gave way to the eternal priesthood of Christ "after the order of Melchizedek" (Heb. 5:6; 6:20–7:28). In A.D. 70, the temple itself was destroyed. Now, in Christ, all believers are priests, offering spiritual sacrifices (1 Peter 2:5, 9). Those sacrifices include "a sacrifice of praise" (Heb. 13:15), but also "to do good and to share with others" (Heb. 13:16; compare Phil. 4:18). Greed is idolatry (Eph. 5:5; compare Matt. 6:24). The apostle James says,

If anyone considers himself religious [*threskos*, "observing religious rites"] and yet does not keep a tight rein on

his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion [*threskeia*] that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. (James 1:26–27)

This broadly ethical concept of worship I shall sometimes call “worship in the broad sense.” Although it does not consist of formal rites, it is quite important to the overall biblical concept of worship. We can see already that worship in the narrow sense without worship in the broad sense is not acceptable to God.

It is true in one sense to say that all of life is worship. This is not to deny the importance, indeed the necessity, of attending church meetings (Heb. 10:25). But our Lord wants us to live in such a way that everything we do brings him praise.

The Importance of Worship

Worship, as I have defined it, including both broad and narrow senses, is tremendously important to God. In Ephesians 1:1–14, the apostle Paul presents a breathtaking vision of God’s sovereign purpose. He begins before time: God “chose us in [Christ] before the creation of the world” (v. 4). Then God “predestined us to be adopted as his sons” (v. 5), redeemed us through the blood of Christ (v. 7), and revealed to us the mysteries of his will, which will be fulfilled at the end of history (vv. 9–10). The conclusion of all, the goal to which all history proceeds, is praise—the “praise of his glory” (v. 14).

“Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever,” we learn in question 1 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. This statement of the goal of human life is a scriptural statement (see 1 Cor. 10:31). But to glorify God is to praise him.⁸ The book of Revelation presents us with a heaven and an earth filled with praise as the culmination of God’s redemption (Rev. 5:13; 7:12).

We have been chosen as God’s special people so that we can

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“declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). God has called Gentiles into his body along with believing Jews so that the Gentiles might join in the songs of praise (Rom. 15:8–11).

Throughout the whole Bible story—from eternity past until the new heavens and the new earth—God “seeks” worshipers (John 4:23). It is unusual in Scripture to read of his seeking human beings. Seeking in Scripture is usually done by human beings, not by God. In the usual sense, God never seeks, for there is nothing hidden from his eyes (Heb. 4:13). But the metaphor of seeking is appropriate, for in the Bible we read of God’s going to enormous trouble over many centuries, culminating in the sacrifice of his own Son, to redeem a people to worship him.

Redemption is the means; worship is the goal. In one sense, worship is the whole point of everything. It is the purpose of history, the goal of the whole Christian story. Worship is not one segment of the Christian life among others. Worship is the entire Christian life, seen as a priestly offering to God. And when we meet together as a church, our time of worship is not merely a preliminary to something else; rather, it is the whole point of our existence as the body of Christ.

It is therefore important for us to study worship. In evangelical churches, it is widely recognized that we should study evangelism, Bible books and characters, systematic theology, counseling, preaching, and many other things. Too rarely do we consider the importance of studying how our God wants us to worship. Worship is something we tend to take for granted. I trust that this book will help us to grow in our knowledge of the subject and to take the business of worship more seriously.

Questions for Discussion

1. Two basic concepts emerge from the biblical terms translated “worship.” What are they? How do they help us to define *worship*?
2. What does it mean to say that God is “Lord”? What are the implications of God’s lordship for worship?

3. What are the main differences between worshiping God and honoring human beings?
4. How did Adam's fall into sin affect worship?
5. Should we receive benefits from worship? Should we enjoy it? Should we receive blessings from it? If so, what kind of blessings?
6. How can worship be both God-centered and attentive to human needs? Does the worship of your church need to recover a biblical balance in this area? What changes need to be made to recover that balance?
7. How does the doctrine of the Trinity affect our worship? How does each of the three persons help us to worship God? May we worship together with Jews or Muslims who reject the Trinity?
8. What does it mean to worship "in Spirit and in truth"?
9. Is it true that all of life is worship? Give a biblical basis for your answer. Some people say, "All of life is worship, so I can worship God on the golf course on Sunday morning." Reply.
10. "Sometimes when I'm tired on Sunday morning, I come late to church. I skip the worship and arrive in time for the sermon." Reply.

Notes

¹Particularly *abodah* in Hebrew and *latreia* in Greek.

²*Shachah* in Hebrew and *proskuneo* in Greek.

³*Worship Is a Verb* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987).

⁴Donald A. Carson, ed., *Worship: Adoration and Action* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993).

⁵The concept of covenant lordship has parallels in the secular literature of the ancient Near East. Documents called suzerainty treaties have been found, in which a great king made a treaty with a lesser or vassal king, promising various benefits and demanding from the vassal exclusive loyalty, a loyalty sometimes called love. The vassal was forbidden to conclude any similar treaty with a rival king; he had to serve one king only. The concept of God as covenant Lord is central to the biblical message. For more on the subject, see Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) and my

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own *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987).

⁶Ibid., 15–18.

⁷Compare 2 Thess. 2:13: “God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.”

⁸*Doxazo* in the Greek.