

The Wonder of Worship

Introduction

Charles Wesley concludes his hymn 'Love Divine, all loves excelling' with the line 'lost in wonder, love and praise'. He anticipates the rich and full worship (= service) of the Church, as the recipient of grace and glory. Yet he also bears witness to the present, ongoing service of the Church.

This study considers the Biblical understanding and expressions of worship, together with their expectations that we are called to worship, not merely talk about worship. Part One traces the experience of man as worshipper, while Part Two looks at the call to worship addressed to both Jews and Gentiles—to all the nations.

Part One: 'His Servants Shall Worship'

INTRODUCTION

The Biblical witness is clear that man, as created in the image of God, is both commanded (Exod. 20:1ff.; Deut. 5:6) and structured to worship and serve his Creator. This worship includes the acknowledgement of worth, the ascribing of honour, and giving glory: these obtain within the Trinity, and for man towards God. Hence, worship which is consistent with the true order (reality) involves the practical outworking in creation of relationships, in holy love, under the Word of God.

What is the essence of this worship? It is 'the descent to man of the Father's love in the Word, and the ascent to the Father, in the power of the Holy Spirit, of the filial response to that love, fulfilled by the Incarnate Word in the humanity which He took, which is also our humanity, so that the response is ours as well as His' [W. Nicolls, *Jacob's Ladder: The Meaning of Worship*, John Knox: 1958, page 66].

To trace the import of this definition, Part One surveys the Biblical terminology of 'worship,' the worship of the created order, the impact of the Fall with its sequel in idolatry, the call to worship given to and through Israel, and the advent of the 'suffering servant.'

1. Terminology

The Old Testament uses two words to denote worship: *histahaw*, which means to bow down or prostrate the body in homage (Gen. 22:5; Exod. 4:31; 24:1; Deut. 26:10), and *bad*, which means service (this may be both daily work or Temple worship).

The New Testament uses four terms:

proskunein, meaning ‘to bow down’ (John 4:20–24; I Cor. 14:25; Rev. 4:10),

latreuein, ‘to worship’ (Rom. 1:25; 12:2; Heb. 9:14),

leitourgein, a cultic term relating to priestly ministry (Rom. 15:16; Heb. 8:2)

and

diakonos, for ‘service’ (initially for ‘waiting on tables’).

The New Testament discards any distinction between the priestly (and cultic) action and worship, as well as the common dichotomy between ‘worship’ and ‘service’.

Our English word ‘worship’ is derived from ‘worth–ship’. It is the proper acknowledgement of honour, and the relationship which obtains between the Creator and His creatures.

2. ‘Thou Art Worthy’

The worship by the creation is noted in Revelation 4 and in Psalms 19, 145:10, and 148. Each shows the constant, spontaneous acknowledgement of God as Creator–Father, and Redeemer. This is the proper action of all creation–doxology and thanks (man could even thank God for having been made in the image of God). God’s response to this is observed in Genesis 1:31, where He announced that ‘it is very good’.

Not only is the original or initial act of God in creation worthy of praise, but His ongoing providential care calls for such recognition and response (Acts 14:15). For a stunning example of man’s place in God’s creative purposes, see Psalm 139:13–18.

We understand that Adam’s experience of God issued in doxology and gratitude (cf. Rom. 1:21). Knowing his vocation, he joined with, and led creation in its worship/service of the Creator. His was a rich, simple and joyous worship, issuing from the beauty of innocence. Further, it expressed his relationships with God, in holy love, and a purposive knowledge of God’s will.

3. ‘they worshipped and served the creature’

In Romans chapter 1 Paul recounts that, although knowing God, man refused to give God due glory (honour) and thanks (Romans 1:21ff.). Furthermore, man substituted idols for God. This exchange is inexcusable (1:20), irrational (1:21–22), and radical in implications (1:24–32).

Paul argues that knowledge implies responsibility, so that the experience of God requires the proper interpretation and response–worship, here glory and thanks (cf. 15:6; James 1:17). However, in the face of such revelation, man refuses to ascribe to God His proper place and honour, and is destitute of gratitude. In fact, he willfully establishes a foreign and perverted order—he exchanged the object of adoration, and

set up idols in the very place of God. Boasting of his wisdom, man cannot diagnose his dilemma, as he is deceived by the false system he has 'invented' (1:30). Whereas Paul breaks into a doxology at the thought of God (1:25, cf. 11:33; I Tim. 1:17; 6:15–16), the idolater does not even see fit to acknowledge Him (1:28). His veneration of idols (Deut. 4:19) takes him into religion, sexual immorality, and social dislocation.

Note that the suppression of the truth (1:18) works itself out in thought and deed with religion (man cannot avoid worship!): the idol stands for revolution, insult, and the deliberate confusion of truth and falsehood. The knowledge of God so threatens man that he finds religion (even atheism and agnosticism) more comfortable than the truth. Man and his offensive worship are given up by God.

Not only did man reject God as God, he exposed himself to the deceit and manipulation of Satan and his allies (Gal. 4:6; Col. 2:18). Satan (having exalted himself: see Isa. 14, Ezek. 28; and Rev. 12) demanded worship and service from all men (Matt. 4:9–10): here is a system of worship set up to oppose the true, yet appear as the true. He is the counterfeit god (II Thess. 2:3–4). See also Revelation 9:20, and chapters 13 and 14.

For the outworking of this, see Adam's experience (Gen. 3–5), followed by Cain and Abel (Gen. 4; I John 3:11–12; Heb. 11:4), Noah (Gen. 6–9; Heb. 11:7), and then the Patriarchs (Gen. 11ff.; Acts 7:2; Heb. 11:8ff.). For the Patriarchs the vocation call necessarily involved worship/service.

4. 'let my people go, that they may serve me'

Israel, the Elect and First-born Son, was liberated from Egypt, with the intention of serving God and the nations as the 'royal priest' (Exod. 19:5–6). Israel received the 'gift' of worship (Rom. 9:4).

Within this gift we note three elements—protocol, the regulative principle, and covenantal reprisals. Torrance gives the thrust of these, for God 'provided them with a covenanted way of responding to him, a vicarious way in the covenant might be fulfilled in their midst and on their behalf....thus no unprescribed oblation, no uncovenanted offering, no strange fire, no incense of their own recipe, and no ritual of their own inventing, were to be intruded into their worship of God' [T. F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, Paternoster Press: 1983, page 84].

By protocol we mean the manner of approach, or the way in which God's people were to enter His presence. Such protocol is determined by the regulative principle, which states that only what God appoints and gives (or requires and provides) are allowable. Where there are any breaches of the Covenant, God is free to execute reprisals.

The sacrificial provision offered atonement for sins (Exod. 29:35–37), together with forgiveness (Lev. 4:20, 26, 31, 35; 6:7) and acceptance (Exod. 28:38). It assured

Israel that God would dwell with them, and promised that He would be their God (Exod. 29:43–46). The initial ‘worship’ was the Passover (Exod. 12:25–27), and this was fulfilled in the New Passover (I Cor. 5:7). [Just as in the Old Testament, worship was the prerogative of Israel, so its fulfilment was effected within the Jewish matrix, and this was declared to the Jews first.]

Israel’s worship was therefore orderly, educational, and expressed grateful obedience: it gathered up the past (the memory of the creating and saving acts of ‘the living God’) as well as the future (the hope of the promises awaiting fulfilment, as in Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 36:22–28), in their present active trust. Israel was, however, plagued by idolatry (see Jer. 10:10ff.), and looked to the coming of the ‘suffering servant’.

5. ‘behold, my servant, whom i uphold, my chosen’

With the advent of Christ, the long-awaited fulfilment of true worship became possible and imminent (John 4:20–24). This was attested at His birth (Luke 2:20), and His constant service evoked worship (Luke 7:16; 5:25–26; Matt. 15:31).

In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, we note the worship of Jesus: in the Synoptic Gospels Jesus regularly attends synagogue worship, He honours God in all things, and serves His neighbour as Himself. In John’s Gospel Jesus attends the Festivals in Jerusalem, teaches in the Temple, acts as High Priest for His disciples (ch. 17), and glorifies (and honours) the Father in all His works. The Letter to the Hebrews shows the fulfilment of all the Old Testament cultus in the person and works of Christ: as minister and High Priest He has, once for all, perfected all that God required.

Furthermore, Jesus is the focus, locus, and nexus of worship. By focus, we mean that He has become the concentration of all elements of worship. He has fulfilled and so ‘governs’ all worship. He therefore is worthy of, and receives worship (John 20:28; Heb. 1:6; Rev. 5:12). He is the locus in that He has become the Temple of God (John 2:13–22, for the replacement of the Tabernacle and the Jerusalem Temple).

Finally, He is the nexus of worship. He alone is the mediator between God and man: God reveals Himself, and reconciles man, in Christ. Again, as the incarnate Word, Jesus is the means for God speaking to man, for man hearing, and for man speaking in response to God (this is the outworking of Isaiah 55:11 and Heb. 4:12–13). In Christ’s humanity, another ‘exchange’ (or substitution) has taken place: the rejection of the lie and idolatry, and the replacement with the truth of worship (cf. Rom. 1:25). This is ‘reconciliation’ (II Cor. 5:18–21: Paul uses the same word root for ‘exchange’ and ‘reconciliation’), effected at the Cross (as the ‘suffering servant’ of Isaiah 53), confirmed by the resurrection. Now Christ is the mediator of the Holy Spirit, faith, worship, the gifts—in fact, the new creation.

The early Church worshipped and witnessed in the name of Christ, prompted by the Spirit (John 14:13–14; Acts 3:6; Phil. 3:3). They knew the God and Father of the Lord Jesus (I Cor. 8:6; Eph. 3:14) and took the message of grace to ‘all the families of the earth’ (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; Gal. 3:8ff.).

Part Two: 'To Serve The Living God'

INTRODUCTION

Christ sent the Church, equipped by the Spirit, to all the nations (Acts 1:8). The offer of the Gospel was made to the Jew first, and then to the Gentiles (Acts 3:26; 13:46; 18:6; 28:28). This pattern may be traced through the book of Acts, where after the initial ministry in Jerusalem, the Gospel is taken to the Samaritans, and then to the Gentiles. There is a further application of this in Paul's ministry. His first approach in a new setting is within the synagogue, but after the rejection recorded in Acts 13, he concentrates on his vocation as apostle to the Gentiles.

This section will consider the coming of the Gospel to both Jews and Gentiles. While noting certain parallels, we will concentrate on the Epistle to the Hebrews (acknowledging their Jewish background) and Paul's First letter to the Thessalonians. Both letters remind the readers that they have come to 'serve the living God' (Heb. 9:14; I Thess. 1:9), and exhort them to continue in this worship and service. Finally, we will note the worship in the Revelation, as man is exhorted to 'worship God'.

6. 'to the jew first'

The letter to the Hebrews contains the most thorough treatment of worship in the New Testament. In 9:14 he argues that Christ's offering has purified the human conscience, from dead works, 'to serve the living God'. A number of key elements are to be noted: the living God, the covenant, the Word, and perfection.

That God is the 'living God' is affirmed in 3:12; 9:14; 10:31; and 12:22. The Old Covenant is rendered obsolete by the fulfilment of the promise to Jeremiah of the New Covenant (8:8–13; 10:16–17; cf. Jer. 31:31–34). The Word theme dominates the first section of the letter, 1:1–4:13, and is later used as citations from the Old Testament, as a rebuke for failure to understand the Scriptures and the Gospel message, and finally as an exhortation. And perfection is used to reassure the readers that what has taken place in the Son, and so been offered to all, is no mere shadow, or preliminary work, but the final and complete salvific action.

Two main sections deal with Christian worship: 10:19–25 and 12:18–13:21. The first section speaks of the new access to God afforded to the 'brethren' by the Cross, the thrust to good works (cf. 9:14), and the responsibility to meet together for mutual exhortation (cf. 3:12).

The second deals with the contrast between the old and new worship: Christians have free access to Mt. Zion and the heavenly sanctuary; they are assured of a secure kingdom; now offer acceptable worship; live by love and good works; join with Jesus

in a threefold sacrifice; are expected to honour their leaders, to pray, and are granted a covenantal blessing.

7 ‘this salvation has been sent to the gentiles’

Paul’s ministry in Thessalonica is outlined in Acts 17:1–9. Certain features are also noted in I Thessalonians, the first Church to receive an Apostolic Epistle: a reception of the Gospel as God’s word (I Thess. 2:13; 4:1–2), the operation of the Spirit (1:5–6), the persecution by the Jews (2:14–16), and their radical rejection of idolatry, and the subsequent worship of ‘the living God’, with great hope (1:9–10).

The bulk of the Church was Gentile, and they had repudiated idolatry, and come to know the truth, to known reality in the place of falsehood. They now worshipped and served the true (I John 5:21) and living God (I Tim. 3:15; 4:10): they now had hope (cf. Eph. 2:11ff.)—the past dealt with, the future assured, the present lived in faith and holy love.

Paul, as the apostolic mediator for the Church coming to the appearing of Christ (2:17–20; 3:9–13), insists that love issues in holiness and hope (4:1–8 concerning sexual conduct; cf. Rom. 1:26). Again, peace leads to holiness and harmony, as he argues in 5:1–22.

The letter concludes with a treatment of worship (5:16–28). In what appear to be the ‘headings of a Church service’, Paul commends constant rejoicing (cf. Eph. 5:19ff.; Col. 3:16ff.) and prayer, the freedom of the Spirit to work (with the caution to test, as in verse 21; cf. I John 4:1ff.), the abstaining from evil together with the adherence to the good. This is followed by the affirmation that God will effect harmony (cf. 4:9–10; 5:12–15), that He hears prayer and keeps His promises (5:9). Paul’s prayers for the Church are to be matched by the Church’s prayers for him and his ministry (2:16–17; 3:3, 7; cf. Eph. 6:18; Col. 4:2). Finally, the brethren are to be greeted, the apostolic exhortation (Acts 14:22) is to be read (cf. Col. 4:16), and the blessing of grace to be known.

The Thessalonian Church, in the midst of suffering, was called to worship and service. The paradox of the Christian life was evidenced: their affliction and testing was part of the loving purpose of God, and so was an occasion for thanksgiving. They were given a certain hope, which enabled them to live life as standing prayerfully before God, punctuated by consciously turning to Him.

8. ‘worship god’

A brief survey of the worship in the Book of the Revelation shows the reasons for this worship. In chapter 4 the elders join the four living creatures in praising God for His creation; in chapter 5 God and the Lamb are acclaimed for the work of redemption; the elders feature again in chapter 11 as they sing of God’s reign of equity; in 15:3–4

God's deeds and judgements elicit praise, and in 19:1–2 the execution of justice together with God's reign and the Marriage of the Lamb prompt the adoring exultation (19:6–8). [Note too the angelic directives to worship, as in 14:7; 19:10; 22:9. This angel refuses to be carried away into falsity and perversion, even by the writer of the Revelation.] Finally, the nations (with all their glory) are ushered into the presence of God, and serve the living God (22:3; cf. 7:15–17).

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John, the faithful recorder and keeper of the book of the Revelation, was exhorted to 'worship God'. May we join with all the Church, not merely knowing about worship, but ever engaged in the 'wonder of worship' as we too 'serve the living God'.

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