

Worship and Service: Community Responsibility

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“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is true worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” (Romans 12:1-2)

Christian Worship: Introduction and Assumptions

There is probably no other subject upon which Christians disagree so strongly than on the subject of worship – whether in terms of style, formality, length, language, liturgy or music. At least in terms of public practice, it is our understanding of worship that so often delineates the various Christian denominations.

The two words most commonly used to describe the activity of Christians when they meet together are ‘worship’ and ‘service’.^[1] Both are coincidentally found in the title of this Panel.

We speak of ‘Divine worship’ meaning the worship of God, while ‘morning worship’ or ‘family worship’ denotes when or whom is involved. Titles like ‘Orthodox service’ or ‘Charismatic worship’ identify the genre. Similarly, a ‘Christmas service’ is worship associated with a specific time of the year, while a ‘marriage service’ is self explanatory.

So common is the assumption that when Christians meet they do so for a ‘service of worship’, it is rare to find the idea questioned. While ‘service’ has come to mean little more than ‘a Christian meeting’ the term ‘worship’ has with it the sense of something done to or for God.^[2] This paper will question these commonly held assumptions and show that:

- a. The early Church did not meet together primarily for worship.
- b. Christian worship is first and foremost a response to God’s initiative in and through the mediating work of Jesus Christ.
- c. Christian worship is demonstrated more in action than in word or song.

In the Scripture quoted, the apostle Paul defines ‘true worship’

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is true worship.” (Romans 12:1)

In Christian terms, worship is not about you or me, or what I like or dislike, or even what I do to, or for, God. Howard Marshall describes worship in these terms,

“Christ is the one who perfectly represents God to us and who perfectly represents us to God, so that Christian worship is our being taken up and incorporated into that perfect worship which Christ as our high priest offers to the Father.”^[3]

David Peterson asks these penetrating questions:

How can God be known and approached?

What must God do to enable his people to meet with him?

What difference has the coming of Jesus made?

“...the worship of the living and true God is essentially an engagement with him on the terms that he proposes and in the way that he alone makes possible.”^[4]

In this paper, under the title, “Worship and Service: Community Responsibility”, I want to unpack this scripture and these definitions by considering:

1. Christian Worship: The New Testament Vocabulary.
2. Community: The Purpose of Christian’s Meeting.
3. The Four Dimensions to Christian Worship.

1. Christian Worship: The New Testament Vocabulary

The first observation we can make regarding worship in the New Testament, it is rare to find it associated with Christians meeting together.

1. The verb *leitourgeo* (*liturgy*), which can be used of duties performed towards God, occur some 15 times in the New Testament. When used of people it refers surprisingly to giving aid to poor Christians (Romans 15:27); giving support to missionaries (Philippians 2:30); or the care given by one Christian to another (Philippians 2:25). In Romans 15:16 Paul describes those who come to faith in Jesus Christ through his ministry as a ‘liturgy’ or offering to God. Similarly, in Philippians 2:17 Paul describes the faith of the Philippians as a sacrificial offering to God.

“But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.” (Philippians 2:17-18)

In both cases the language of priestly service is applied to what Christians do in missionary work and possibly in self-sacrifice. Only in the one text, is the word applied to what goes on in a church meeting. In Acts 13:2 the Christians in Antioch are said to have been serving the Lord and fasting when the Holy Spirit commanded Barnabas and Paul be set apart for mission work elsewhere. Nothing in the context, however, suggests that the word ‘service’ describes their primary purpose in meeting, or the nature of the meeting as a whole.

2. The verb *latreuo* and the noun *latreia* also describe Christian service. The word is used to express the worship of God shown in adoration and obedience in Matthew 4:10 (*cf.* Acts 7:7; 26:7; Luke 2:37). The Apostle Paul claimed to worship God through his apostolic and missionary work (Acts 24:14; 27:23). When used as a noun, Christians are said to serve God through the full dedication of their lives which is their “spiritual act of worship” (Romans 12:1; *cf.* 2 Timothy 1:3; Hebrews 3:3; 9:14; 12:28).
3. The same observations can be made of the verb *proskyneo* which is used of rendering homage and offering worship. Matthew portrays the Magi as offering adoration to Jesus – when they prostrate themselves before him (Matthew 2:2) as do the disciples after the resurrection (Matthew 28:9, 17; Luke 24:52). The word is also used frequently in the Book of Revelation to describe worship of God in heaven (Revelation 7:9-17).

This brief survey of the language associated with “worship” in the New Testament shows that the term is never used to describe what Christians did when they met together. Rather it describes the activity of Christians in offering their lives to God as living sacrifices. This was their “spiritual act of worship” (Romans 12:1).

“Although the whole activity of Christians can be described as the service of God and they are engaged throughout their lives in worshipping him, yet this vocabulary is not applied in any specific way to Christian meetings. ...the remarkable fact is that Christian meetings are not said to take place specifically in order to worship God and the language of worship is not used as a means of referring to them or describing them.”^[5]

Let us therefore consider the real purpose of Christians meeting.

2. Community: The Purpose of Christians Meeting

Acts 2:42-47 describe the principle activities of the early Christians when they met together:

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:42-47)

From this passage we can draw out six distinctive reasons why Christians met together.

2.1 Christians listened to God

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42). The primary reasons Christians met was to hear God’s word taught. Paul instructs Timothy,

“Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.” (1 Timothy 4:13).

The initiative in worship, as we shall see shortly, always rests with God and his saving acts revealed in the Scriptures.

2.2 Christians strengthened one another

Fellowship or *koinonia* (lit. common) is expressed especially in, “...to fellowship... All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together.” (Acts 2:42, 44-45)

They met to encourage one another – literally to give courage to one another and build one another up, especially in the face of opposition and persecution.

“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” (Hebrews 10:24-25)

This is related to the idea of the church being built into a living Temple of God (Ephesians 4:12-13; 1 Peter 2:4-10)

“you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.... That you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:5, 9)

2.3 Christians remembered the Lord’s Supper

“...to the breaking of bread... They broke bread in their homes and ate together...” (Acts 2:42, 46)

The definite article indicates this was a remembrance of the Last Supper and not just the eating of a meal, although they did share in meals together regularly also. Jesus said “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24-25).

Christians met together to eat – formally and informally, in the Temple courts and in their homes. The term “agape meal” or love feast also describes these special occasions although the references in Scripture warn of its abuse (1 Corinthians 11:17-34; Jude 12; 2 Peter 2:13). The Lord’s Supper is known as a ‘sacrament’ (along with baptism and marriage) which speaks of God’s provision for his people.

“For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” (1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

The bread and wine are in no sense a sacrifice (or literally the body and blood of Christ) offered by the Christian leader, but rather signify the gift of salvation and point forward to the Messianic banquet to be shared in heaven.

2.4 Christians prayed to God for others

“...and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). Prayer as a corporate activity of Christians is frequently mentioned directly in Scripture (Acts 1:24; 6:6; 8:15; 12:12; 13:3; 14:23; 20:36; 21:5).

This would have been both individual prayer as well as corporate prayer. When his disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray he gave a model or pattern beginning “Our Father” (Matthew 6:9). Significantly, the word Jesus used for “Father” was “Abba” meaning “Daddy” There are at least four aspects to prayer:

Adoration (praise) for who God is (Matthew 11:25-26; Acts 2:47)

Confession for our sin (Matthew 6:12; Luke 18:9-14)

Thanksgiving for what God has done (Acts 27:35; Romans 14:6)

Supplication (petition) for the needs of others (Ephesians 4:18-20) Occasionally Christians met explicitly for prayer (Acts 4:23-31; 16:25), although this was not the only element of their meetings.

2.5 Christians praised God

“...praising God.” (Acts 2:47) Here we finally come to activity that people typically associate with Christian worship.

Surprisingly, the verb *aineo* appears infrequently in the New Testament – just 8 times. It is used, as here in Acts 2, to describe an aspect of what Christians did when they met together (see Romans 15:11; Hebrews 13:15).

The verb *eulogeo* (eulogise) is similarly used to describe giving thanks in the context of the Lord’s Supper and the remembrance of the sacrifice of Jesus (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). It is also used of spontaneous praise (see Luke 1:46-55; 64; 67-79).

2.6 God enlarged the Church

This passage in Acts 2 also highlights the intended consequences of Christians meeting together: “... praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:47)

Evangelism – that is the proclamation of the good news is often associated with Christians meeting in community. (Romans 15:7-9) Worship and witness so often go hand in hand. Jesus said, “In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16) We have observed six reasons the early Christians met together. We have considered the New Testament vocabulary for worship and the purpose of Christians meeting together – to build community. What has been implicit, I now want to summarise and make more explicit in defining three dimensions to worship.

3. Three Dimensions to Christian Worship

3.1 Downward: Worship is God’s sovereign initiative

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy...” (Romans 12:1)

The word “therefore” is therefore a reason. In Romans 1-11, Paul has summarised how God’s love, grace and mercy have been revealed fully and finally in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God’s grace in giving us what we don’t deserve. God’s mercy in not giving us what we do deserve. Chapter 12:1 is the hinge verse in Paul’s argument. “Therefore, I urge you... in view of God’s mercy.” Chapters 12-15 go on to detail how we should respond to God’s grace and mercy.

Until we are gripped by God’s mercy revealed in the death of Jesus, Christians cannot truly worship him. Jesus not only died and rose again for us, he also ascended to heaven and there intercedes on our behalf. The writer to Hebrews compares and contrasts the perfect mediating role of Jesus with that of the Temple priests. Vaughan points out, “The priests of the old covenant were hampered, not just by their mortality~ but also by their own sinfulness. They were part of the problem, so they could never achieve a solution and bring people to God. But Jesus was different.”

“...because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.” (Hebrews 7:30-31)

“The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord not by man.” (Hebrews 8:1-2)

Worship is about God’s sovereign initiative.

3.2 Upward: Worship is about human sacrifice

“...in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is true worship. (Romans 12:1)

Before Christ came, God called his people to bring animal sacrifices to him in the Temple. These were only a temporary provision. Vaughan Roberts puts it like this:

“They pointed beyond themselves to the one, perfect sacrifice which Christ offered when he died on the cross. The cross put an end to animal sacrifices; there was no need for them anymore. Christ’s sacrifice of himself achieved all that those previous sacrifices had merely anticipated. ... So we do not have to offer a sacrifice to help us stay in the right with God. Christ has done all that is necessary to achieve that. ... But there is still a sacrifice that I am called to offer: the sacrifice of myself. In a sense, Paul is saying: ‘Don’t bring a sacrifice, be one. In response to God’s mercy, offer your body to him.’ ... Such a sacrifice, says Paul, is ‘holy and pleasing to him’ -‘this is your spiritual act of worship’.”^[6]

Worship flows from the heart

“One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” (Matthew 22:35-37)

With all your heart. Your whole heart. Spontaneously, joyfully, thankfully. With all your heart.

Worship engages the mind

The word 'spiritual worship' or 'true worship' is better translated 'reasonable' or 'rational'.

“The Greek word Paul uses is *logikos*, from which we get our word 'logic'. It implies that our worship is connected with our minds. ... In many religions, worship and the mind are divorced. In much Eastern religion, the aim is to encounter the divine on a sub-rational level. We are encouraged to switch off our minds with the help of bodily exercises and the repetition of mantras, for example... If I switch my mind off, I break the connection with the truth that prompts my worship. So worship must be rational. But it can never stay just in the mind.”^[7]

Paul makes this explicit in verse 2 which speaks of us “being transformed by the renewing of the mind.” (Romans 12:2). Worship must involve the mind.

Worship involves the body

“Paul's use of the word 'body' tells us that he does not understand worship to be a purely intellectual, mental activity. It is not a mystical experience, inward and abstract. It is very earthy. It is about what I do with my body as I offer it, not to myself for my own gratification, but to God in his service. It is about what I say with my tongue, what I watch with my eyes, where I go with my feet, what I do with my sexual organs and my hands... Offering my body to God is not just something I do as I sing on a Sunday and can then forget about for the rest of the week. It must be worked out in practice, day by day, hour by hour. A friend of mine has put it like this: 'To say, "I'm going to church to worship", is about as silly as saying, "I'm off to bed to breathe for a while". 'Worship should define the whole of my life.’”^[8]

And this leads us naturally to the third dimension of worship. Downward, upward and

3.3 Outward: Worship is demonstrated in witness

Having urged us to offer our bodies to God, Paul spells out what that will mean in practice. J.B. Phillips translates verse 2: 'Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God remould you from within.' The word used for 'transformed' means transfigured. It also means metamorphosis. We are literally being transformed, becoming like Jesus Christ.

This will inevitably lead to radical interaction with the world. Witness so very often leads to martyrdom. Sometimes living sacrifices also become dead ones. The Apostle Paul uses the language of worship to describe his impending death at the hands of the Roman authorities like this “For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure.” (2 Timothy 4:6). That is why in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul urges them,

“Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” (Ephesians 5:1-2)

Again, in his second letter to the Corinthians Paul uses the imagery of sacrificial offerings to describe the effect of their Christian witness on others.

“But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?” (2 Corinthians 2:14-16)

The Apostle James similarly leaves us in no doubt as to the kind of worship acceptable to God.

“Religion 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 1:27)

The word James uses for ‘religion’ is rare in the NT (Acts 26:5; Colossians 2:18). It is a general word meaning worship, and in particular to the outward practice of ceremonies in honour of God.^[9] This is consistent with the message of the Old Testament prophets like Amos:

“I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” (Amos 5:21-24)

The Apostle John helps us see the clear relationship between these three dimensions to worship. First - God’s initiative; Second - our response to God; Third – demonstrated in our response to others.

“We love because he first loved us. If we say we love God yet hate a brother or sister, we are liars. For if we do not love a fellow believer, whom we have seen, we cannot love God, whom we have not seen. And he has given us this command: Those who love God must also love one another.” (1 John 4:17-19)

Conclusions

Let me summarise what we have found out about “Worship and Service: Community Responsibility”. I trust I have been able to convince you that it is a fundamental mistake to regard the main or indeed the only purpose of Christian meetings as being the worship of God, or indeed to view worship as essentially a human activity directed toward God. Howard Marshall notes:

“This view appears to rest on the continuing influence of the sacrificial ritual in Old Testament times on our understanding of the New Testament church. But the language used in the NT indicates that this was not the primary or the only

understanding of what church meetings were for. In fact it has been apparent that there was a three-way movement in the early church's meetings, from God to man, from man to God, and from man to man. The primary element is the God-man movement, downward rather than upward, in which God comes to his people and uses his human servants to convey his salvation to them, to strengthen and upbuild them. He bestows his charismata in order to equip the members of the church to serve one another. Of course the effect of such service by God to his people will be to move them to praise, thanksgiving and prayer, but the point is that this is response and is secondary to what is primary, namely the flow of divine grace... Worship in the sense of giving praise to God is thus logically secondary to ministry in the sense of God's ministry to us. At the same time, since this ministry is exercised between persons, the church meeting has the character of fellowship in which the keynote is mutual love. The symbol of the church, therefore, is not simply an upward arrow from man to God, nor simply a downward arrow from God to man, but rather a triangle representing the lines of grace coming down from God to his people, the flow of grace from person to person, and the response of thanks and petition to God."^[10]

I'll leave the last word of summary to Vaughan Roberts:

"No worship we offer, whether in praise or in the sacrament, can bring us to God. We depend entirely on the worship Jesus offered when he died on the cross, offering his life as a sacrifice. In Christ we are already in God's presence. (Heb 12:22) There is nothing for us to do except draw near with faith. We do not have to offer the mass or sing for half an hour to draw close to God. We are already close to him if we have trusted in Christ - in fact, we could not be closer to him."^[11]

That is why although Christians may not always agree on their understanding of worship, that really doesn't matter. What matters is what we are found doing when Jesus Christ returns. Until then, let us "make it our goal to please him. (2 Corinthians 5:9)

^[1] The inspiration for this paper is largely drawn with thanks from an article by Howard Marshall, 'How far did the early Christians worship God?' *Churchman* 099/3 1985.

^[2] Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

^[3] Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

^[4] David Peterson, *Engaging with God: a biblical theology of worship* (Leicester, IVP, 1992), p. 20.

^[5] Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

^[6] Vaughan Roberts, *True Worship* (Carlisle, Paternoster, 2002)

^[7] Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. x.

^[8] Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. x.

^[9] Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James: The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2000)p. 96.

^[10] Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

^[11] Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. x