

Worship in the Bible and in Church History: Some Observations**Introduction**

“Worship is the supreme and only indispensable activity of the Christian Church. It alone will endure, like the love for God which it expresses, into heaven, when all other activities of the Church will have passed away. It must therefore, even more strictly than any of these less essential doings of the Church, come under the criticism and control of the revelation on which the Church is founded.”¹

Evangelical churches in the late twentieth century often find themselves torn apart by disagreements over worship. Should we have a contemporary service or a more traditional one? What do we mean by contemporary? What do we mean by traditional? Is it only a difference in music? Should each sermon close with an invitation of some kind? When and how should we share in the Lord’s Supper? In the midst of such conversations, many are asking a more basic question—What is worship? Are there Biblical expectations for the corporate worship of the church?

As we attempt to assess our worship practices in the light of Scripture, we need to recognize the difference between precepts and examples. If directed to the church, biblical precepts are always normative for church practice. However, since biblical examples may or may not be normative, believers have often disagreed as to their applicability in the contemporary church. For example, should we always do evangelism the way the early church did it, or are we free to abandon their forms in pursuit of new approaches? Taking that principle a step further, can we say that the silence of the New Testament (as a negative example) either allows or disallows a given practice? Some have argued that Christian churches should not employ musical instruments in worship because the New Testament does not mention it the practice, let alone command it.

Methodologically, I would argue that we should (1) obey biblical precepts directed toward the church; (2) take seriously (and possibly follow the pattern of) biblical precepts directed toward others (the Old Testament law, for example); (3) take seriously (and possibly follow the pattern of) biblical examples of Christian practice; and (4) exercise wisdom within the will of God as revealed in Scripture when considering practices that are foreign to the biblical text. Since each of these points demands a knowledge of both Scripture and one’s own tradition, we need to survey the principle and practice of worship both in Scripture and in history. Our common forms of worship have specific historical roots, and we need to be aware of those roots if we are to evaluate our worship appropriately.

Worship in the Old Testament

One of the most common expressions for “worship” in the Old Testament is the Hebrew word *hishtahawah*. It means to bend over at the waist, or perhaps to cast oneself on the ground. This posture need not be directed toward a deity—individuals may bow down before other persons as an act of homage (Gen. 27:29; 1 Sam. 25:23). Bowing down is a public statement of submission through a posture of physical vulnerability. It is a demonstration of respect with the implication of promised obedience. The Israelites were expected to *bow down* before God and no other (Ex. 33:10; Ps. 95:6). Indeed, all creation is to

¹W. Nicholls, *Jacob’s Ladder: The Meaning of Worship* [London: Lutterworth, 1958], 9, in David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992], 15.

submit to Him in this way (Ps. 86:8–9). “To worship God is to ascribe to Him supreme worth, for He alone is worthy.”²

Because He alone is worthy of worship, God forbids bowing down before other deities (Ex. 20:5; 23:24; 34:14; Ps. 115:2–8). However, even bowing down before God is unacceptable if the worshiper comes in a way that has been forbidden (Lev. 10:1–2; 1 Sam 13:8–14) or with a wrong attitude (Isa. 1:11–15; Mal. 1:6–2:3). Pseudo-piety, in which physical postures of submission are accompanied by injustice, is regarded as lawlessness (Amos 5:11, 21–24), for God desires submission from the heart (Ps. 24:3–6). That kind of submission comes from a sense of God’s holiness and is associated with godly “fear” – the healthy respect for God that produces obedience (2 Kings 17:35–36). Thus reverence is not a matter of one’s demeanor in worship services, but a submissive lifestyle. As David Peterson wrote, “Adoration was not a form of intimacy with God or an indication of special affection towards him, but rather an expression of awe or grateful submission – a recognition of his gracious character and rule.”³

Another concept associated with the worship of God is *service*, seen in the Hebrew word *ebed*. Israel was called to serve the Lord as a pattern of life, and the Levitical priests, in particular, were the servants of both God and the people in the rituals of worship. God told Moses that he would “serve” Him on the holy mountain (Ex. 3:12), and the nation continued to serve Him through ritual sacrifice (Ex. 7:16). Service is obviously closely associated with submission, and Israel was warned not to serve other gods (Ex. 20:5; 23:24; Deut. 4:28; 5:9). Peterson summarized these themes in the following way.

Thus, acceptable worship in Old Testament terms involves homage, service and reverence, demonstrated in the whole of life. A common factor in these three ways of describing Israel’s response to God is the assumption that he had acted towards them in revelation and redemption, to make it possible for them to engage with him acceptably. By contrast, the worship activities of the nations are considered to be offensive to God, because they are human inventions, arising from misconceptions about God and ignorance about what pleases him.⁴

Peterson’s summary overlooks one more vital theme of Old Testament worship – the *remembrance* of God’s acts in history (Hebrew: *zakar* and its derivatives). The remembrance of these acts constituted worship and inspired faith, a pattern frequently seen in the Psalms and in festivals that reenacted His acts of deliverance (especially Passover). Noting passages such as Deuteronomy 6, Gene Merrill has written, “Virtually every activity of every day was calculated to conjure up memories of the past so that the children of the present and future could reflect on their God and celebrate his mighty acts on their behalf.”⁵

With regard to the form of worship in the Old Testament, it almost goes without saying that the proper procedures for sacrifices and festivals were carefully prescribed in the Law. The psalms contain only a small percentage of the songs written by the wisest of Israel’s leaders and teachers (2 Sam. 23:1; 1 Kings 4:31–32), but in them one may perceive some of the patterns of temple worship. They include corporate calls to worship, declarative praises (recounting specific acts of God), descriptive praises (describing the character of God), petitions, laments, vows of obedience, words of confession, and exhortations. It also appears as though the priests may have given words of assurance to the congregation or to individual worshipers at particular times in response to prayers offered. Andrew Hill summarized several aspects of Old Testament worship forms in the following way:

²Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 10.

³David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 73.

⁴David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 73–74.

⁵Eugene H. Merrill, “Remembering: A Central Theme in Biblical Worship,” 13.

The Old Testament anticipates Christian worship in theological principle, in that Hebrew worship: (1) required conscious preparation on the part of the worshiper; (2) encouraged private and family worship as a complement to corporate public worship; (3) demanded the response of the whole person to God as Creator and Redeemer; (4) encouraged congregational worship that was active and participatory; (5) focused on the redemptive acts of God in human history (i.e., the Passover/exodus event); (6) employed symbolism to enhance worship aesthetically and improve worship didactically; (7) observed a liturgical calendar that heightened the worshiper's anticipation of and participation in ritual reenactment; and (8) assumed that a lifestyle of obedience in service to God completed the integrity of worship.⁶

Worship in the New Testament

The New Testament continues the same essential emphases as the Old when it comes to worship, but the concepts of submission, service, and remembrance are now specifically focused on the person of Christ.

The Greek word describing the *submissive* act of bowing down is *proskuneo*. The magi honored Christ in this way, falling down before Him though He was only a child (Matt. 2:2, 11). In the same way, many of those who encountered Christ in His earthly ministry bowed down before Him in submission and respect (Matt. 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25; 18:26). After the resurrection, the women who had come to the tomb "worshiped" Him, bowing so low before Him as to take hold of His feet (Matt. 28:9).

As in the Old Testament, it is possible to bow down before false deities (Matt. 4:9; Acts 7:43; Rev. 14:9) or to bow with wrong (and unacceptable) motives before the living God (Mark 15:19). By contrast, Jesus said that those who worship God must worship "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23-24). In the end, all will bow before Him in recognition of His authority, even if they do not bow in adoration (Rev. 15:4; Phil. 2:10).

The concept of *service* is expressed through the Greek words *latrevow* and *letourgeow*, the latter providing the foundation for the English term "liturgy." Continuing to overlap with the idea of worship as submission, worship as service is not a special ceremony, but a way of life. In Romans 12:1-2, self-presentation to God for obedience is itself an act of "service" which takes place continually. In fact, since the continuing context describes the manner in which each member of the church *serves* others through the use of spiritual gifts, it is likely that our faithful service toward the body of Christ constitutes an act of worshipful service toward Christ Himself. This appears to be Paul's point in Romans 15:16, where he treats the product of his ministry as an offering to the Lord, and in Philippians 2:17-18, where he sees his own life (and impending death) as an offering of praise to God. If service of Christ and His body through the exercise of spiritual gifts constitutes worship, it helps explain the reference to the teachers and prophets in Antioch who were "serving the Lord" when the Spirit told them to set aside Paul and Barnabas for a different sort of ministry (Acts 13:1-2). David Peterson reached a similar conclusion: "The evidence assessed so far suggests that the exercise of gifts in any context may be regarded as an expression of worship, if the ministries are genuinely for the benefit of others and for the glory of God."⁷

Finally, the theme of *remembrance* is most prominent in the Lord's Supper, instituted as a ceremony through which the gathered church would regularly recall the substitutionary death and resurrection of Christ (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24-25). The church also remembered these essential features

⁶Andrew E. Hill, "Worship," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, edited by Walter A. Elwell [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996], 842.

⁷David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 219.

of the gospel through creeds and hymns, some portions of which have been retained in the New Testament (see below).

As in the Old Testament, worship is not a “feeling.” It is something that the people of God do regardless of their feelings. “Something is seriously wrong when people equate spiritual self-gratification with worship.”⁸ Acceptable worship, as submission and service to Christ with full remembrance of His saving work, demands the proper orientation of one’s heart (Heb. 10:22). As always, pseudo-piety or hypocrisy is rejected (Matt. 6:2, 5, 16; 23:13–29). William Temple wrote, “To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, and to devote the will to the purpose of God.”⁹ That definition rightly encompasses all of our faculties, but it seems too anthropocentric to capture the biblical pattern of true worship, which is directed toward God, not us.

Actually, it might be better to say that Temple’s definition is overly individualistic. Worship within the New Testament church is a corporate act. It is something we do together, not something we do separately (though simultaneously) in the same room. Ralph Martin wrote, “The dominating concern in public worship is to glorify God and to seek the welfare of the whole fellowship of the church.”¹⁰ The clearest example of this emphasis is Paul’s instruction to the worshiping church in 1 Corinthians 12–14. It may edify oneself to practice certain gifts, but if those gifts do not edify the others in the congregation, they have no place in public worship. Peterson wrote regarding this principle,

At the heart of Christian gatherings there should be a concern to proclaim and apply the truths of the gospel, to keep the focus on God’s gracious initiative, to stimulate and maintain saving faith and to elicit appropriate expressions of that faith in the assembly and in everyday life. Prayer and praise are clearly worship when they are faith responses to the gospel. Even prayer and praise, however, must be conducted in church in a way that will edify the congregation. They cannot be purely private, God-directed activities when others are present.¹¹

As a corporate expression of submission, remembrance, and service, the worship of the gathered church enables each member to worship throughout the rest of the week (Heb. 10:22, 25). It also strengthens us in hope, giving us a foretaste of the experience we will enjoy when the people of God are in the presence of God (Heb. 13:14–16).

Forms of Worship in the New Testament Church

The New Testament never refers to the corporate meetings of the church as “worship,” but they apparently did worship the Lord together on the first day of each week (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2). Evidence from the New Testament shows that they used prescribed prayers (1 Tim. 2:1–2), creedal confessions (1 Cor. 15:3–5; Rom. 1:3–4; 4:24–25; 8:34), psalms (Matt. 26:30; James 5:13; Rev. 15:3–4), and other songs (Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:19). It is difficult to distinguish between their creeds and their hymns, for the purpose of both was largely catechetical (1 Tim. 3:16; Phil. 2:6–11; Col. 1:15–20; Heb. 1:3). Reflecting the corporate emphasis of New Testament worship, Paul directed that “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” be

⁸David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 17.

⁹William Temple, quoted by John MacArthur, Jr., *True Worship* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982), 84

¹⁰Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 135.

¹¹David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 219–20.

expressed both as praise to the Lord and as an encouragement to other believers (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), so they evidently used music. There is, however, no mention of musical instruments.

The Lord's Supper appears to have been a central part of their gathered worship (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:19-34; perhaps also Acts 2:46). Peterson summarized well its significance as a link between the "already" and the "not yet":

With one eye on the past and what Jesus has done for us, we need to express our gratitude to God for his grace towards us and reach out together to experience afresh the forgiveness and restoration he has promised us. With another eye on the future and what it will mean for us to share with Christ in his coming kingdom, we need to encourage one another in this hope and to learn what it means to live as the redeemed community in the present.¹²

The ministry of the word followed the forms made familiar in the synagogue (Acts 13:4-5) as well as the non-traditional structures of a school (Acts 19:9 – there perhaps even meeting at odd hours when the building was available). Associated with this was the exercise of charismatic gifts, in which the church members were very active (1 Cor. 14). The churches read the Hebrew Scriptures publicly (1 Tim. 4:11-13) along with the writings of the apostles (Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27), and sometimes teachers or prophets would bring them an additional (perhaps even lengthy) message (Acts 20:7, 9). (Note: since such "preaching" of the Word to the congregation could be thought of as a call to submission, an act of service, and an expression of remembrance, it is not to be divorced from "worship.")

Forms of Worship throughout Church History

Worship in the synagogue apparently had three main parts: praise, prayers, and instruction.¹³

1. Corporate praise (cf. perhaps 1 Cor. 14:26)
2. Prayers – these were prescribed and corporate. We might think of it as the recital of a creed or confession (such as the *shema*). Next selected individuals offered prescribed prayers on behalf of the gathered people.
3. Instruction – this consisted of the reading of the Law and the Prophets (prescribed in regular cycles), translation of the text for those who needed it, a brief homily on the passages read, and a blessing.

NOTE: Since New Testament times, the most common form of corporate Christian worship has fused the pattern of worship from the synagogue with observance of the Lord's Supper. This pattern, which placed the sacrament at the center of the church's corporate worship and complemented it with the public reading of the Word, has only been replaced fairly recently, and only within particular Protestant traditions (like ours).

Though Zwingli evidently treated the other components of gathered worship as peripheral to the sermon, the other Reformers clearly believed that "the Lord's Supper, restored to its biblical purity, remained at the heart of the church's worship. This explains why it was the

¹²David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 130.

¹³See Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964).

most divisive issue for them. Differences mattered supremely.¹⁴ The Reformers called for frequent communion – once a week as the ideal. Civil authorities sometimes overruled them on that, preferring the late-medieval practice of infrequent communion, in which the sacrament was received only once a year, usually at Easter.

The Westminster Confession (21.5) reads, “The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear, the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith and reverence, singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ, are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God.”

Through the critique of the Enlightenment and Christian responses to it, the sacraments (already somewhat weakened through the Reformation) were “desacralized,” after which they were commonly regarded as “ordinances.” Many came to see the Lord’s Supper as something that should be done periodically because Jesus commanded it, not as something that had intrinsic worth as a means of grace.

The English Separatists believed that the Reformers had not carried the Reformation far enough. These “Puritans” wanted to do away with the Anglican patterns of worship (the Book of Common Prayer), advocating a more rigorous biblicism that laid aside “papist” ceremonies. Still, they maintained the Lord’s Supper as an important part of their worship, as did John Wesley, who preferred frequent celebration of the Lord’s Supper, adherence to the Book of Common Prayer, and observance of the church year.

With regard to the ministry of the word, “The Reformers’ principal change in worship was the restoration to prominence of the systematic public reading of the word, in vernacular translations, and of preaching, the exposition of the word (the two activities continued to be distinguished as they typically had been).¹⁵ Thus the combination of “word and sacrament” survived for centuries of the church’s history, through schism and reformation, and it continues to this day in most branches of Christendom. However, it did not survive in the context of American revivalism.

The nineteenth century revival on the American frontier produced a new form of corporate worship. The Lord’s Supper was neglected both out of respect for the ordinance – there were not enough qualified ministers to administer it, so the people did not receive it – and out of pragmatism – Charles Finney and other revivalists conducted their services in ways they thought were more appropriate for the *unchurched*. The Revivalists also used music to prepare the audience for the sermon and to reinforce the service climax – the evangelistic invitation.

Nineteenth century American Revivalism was generally a very Arminian (perhaps even Pelagian) movement, stressing the adequacy of human responsibility in conversion and salvation. That theology helped the revival preachers justify new and unusual means of persuasion in their meetings. They advertised in the public press, warmed up the audience with talented musicians, used harsh and colloquial language, called potential converts to come forward to the “anxious bench” (often after a protracted invitation at a late hour, or perhaps even an extended prayer mentioning the names of prominent sinners in the community). They regarded it as their duty to bring about the immediate conversion of their hearers, and they found ways to be persuasive.

¹⁴Stephen R. Spencer, “Remembering the Forgotten: Part 5: Subsequent Changes in the Pattern” (unpublished paper presented to the faculty of Dallas Theological Seminary), 1.

¹⁵Spencer, “Remembering the Forgotten,” 1.

Unfortunately, such evangelistic meetings had a huge impact on the corporate worship of believers.

The chief change in the last two centuries was movement not in a more scriptural direction but in a more practical one: worship was made useful. Time after time in the history of the Church Christians have tried to find a practical purpose for worship instead of worshiping for its own sake. Worship has been used to teach doctrine, improve morals, even entertain. In the nineteenth century worship in America was put to work, in this case the work of making converts. There was a great need in a largely unchurched nation to convert people to Christianity. Worship was used to do just that. Worship became a means to an end rather than an end in itself.¹⁶

The great attraction of this new Frontier Tradition was that it worked. It had completely substituted pragmatism for traditionalism (unlike Wesley) and Finney had a great scorn for previous forms of worship. Frontier-style worship worked in the sense that it made converts, snatching them from darkness into the blinding light of conversion, and it could rekindle that fire again and again. The normal patterns of worship came to be tripartite: prayer and praise, preaching for salvation, and harvest of converts. Music played a great role in the first portion, often caricatured as ‘preliminaries.’ So attractive did this style of worship become that like a liturgical black hole it pulled many a Lutheran, Reformed, Methodist, Puritan, and even Quaker congregation into its orbit. As such it is the dominant worship tradition in the United States.¹⁷

This is the tradition in which most American evangelicals stand. If our people say they want more “traditional” worship services, they may well be thinking of a tradition that is no more than a century or two old, one that was more controversial in its early days than the modern “seeker” movement it has spawned. Because we have so little familiarity with anything else, we tend to associate our modern revivalistic heritage with worship as it was practiced by the New Testament church. If that connection appears too remote, we as American evangelicals would like to think that we stand in continuity with the Reformers when it comes to the worship services in our churches. We do not.

“You are here” – Finding Our Way Home

This very brief survey of forms of worship in the church should not obscure the basic lessons of our biblical analysis. Instead, it should provide the context for our application of the biblical standards. Here are some comments about a few false paths, then some more positive suggestions.

- **Worship is not just music.** Evangelicals tend to equate music with worship, leaving out the traditional aspects of word and sacrament as non-vital elements. We have our “worship team,” our “worship time,” and our “worship leader,” all distinct from instruction, mutual encouragement, and participation in the Lord’s Supper. This emphasis is not justifiable biblically or historically.
- **Music is not just a means of preparing the audience for the important stuff.** Worship is not just music, but music is a vital part of worship. It is *commanded* as a means of worship and mutual

¹⁶James White, *Christian Worship in North America: A Retrospective: 1955–1965* (Collegetown, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 104.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 28.

edification within the gathered church. The biblical command to use music in instruction and exhortation must not be ignored (Col. 3:16). The spiritual leaders of the congregation **MUST** carefully scrutinize the content of the songs employed to this end.

- **True worship does not result from technique, for it is a matter of the heart.** The task of church leaders is not to manipulate the congregation into particular emotions, but to expose them to the living God and provide an appropriate means of corporate response to Him. That exposure takes place primarily through the reading and exposition of God's written revelation, but it does not have to take the form of a forty minute sermon. The corporate response should be participatory, for the gathered congregation is not an "audience," but the church in worship.

- **The church should not reinvent its forms of worship.** In a postmodern world, it is particularly important that believers understand and appreciate their place in the long tradition of the church. If we have arrived at this relativistic state through the demise of tradition (in the Reformation), revelation (in the Enlightenment), and reason (in postmodernity), then we are left with no common language beyond experience and power. That may be an appropriate language to use in evangelism, but it is inappropriate for the "restoration job" needed within the church. If we do not rediscover the "grand, shared story" (what philosophers call the "metanarrative") of our Christian tradition, we are too easily set adrift. Connections to that story (and an understanding of our place in it) are best established through common forms of worship.

- **The church gathered in worship should glorify God while promoting the unity of the body and the edification of individual members.** I fear that attempting to satisfy personal preferences may honor selfishness while further destroying the unity of the church. Further, I fear that gearing the "worship service" toward unbelievers who may be present will perpetuate the revivalistic confusion between the church in the world and the church in worship. Our focus is not on the "unbeliever in the audience," but on the edification of the church and its corporate submission to God.

- **The worshipping congregation should involve the "service" of worship through the use of diverse gifts and mutual encouragement.** I am not encouraging the use of "charismatic" gifts that many of us have regarded as questionable. I am encouraging what David Peterson calls "a real engagement with other believers in the context of mutual ministry, shared prayer and praise, not simply a friendly chat over a cup of coffee after church!"¹⁸ If church members can participate as much by watching the "service" on television as by joining in the assembly, they are not really serving God in worship.

- **The worshipping congregation should incorporate means of "remembrance" on a regular basis.** "Remembrance" would likely involve the Lord's Supper, creeds, and confessional hymns. For congregations in the revivalist tradition, this will demand considerable reeducation.

Fear of 'rote worship,' of 'rituals' as almost necessarily leading to *ritualism*, continues to be an almost instinctive response. Almost no case for the increased emphasis on or the increased frequency of the Lord's Supper is sufficient to overcome our fear that it will lead to dead ceremonialism. We are selective, though, in our rejection of ritual, or perhaps selective in what we label as ritual. Not all things which we do in *every* service are described in those terms nor treated as suspect.¹⁹

¹⁸David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 214.

¹⁹Spencer, "Remembering the Forgotten," 4.

- **The worshiping congregation should practice and encourage corporate and individual submission to God.** This process may not be pleasurable or easy, for submission to God does not appeal to our natural affections, but it is essential to genuine worship. This is not simply a matter of physical posture, but bowing before God does seem to demonstrate submission in a way that is universally recognizable.

Worship is more about the heart than about the forms employed, but some of our forms may not give adequate consideration to biblical commands or historical patterns. In our consumerism we seek a “worship service” that we will enjoy, often failing to ask whether it is also enjoyable to God. As you lead your churches in worship, may you ask and answer the *right* questions, not just the pragmatic ones.