

TenthNew Members

Worship and Scripture

What Is Worship?

Opening Address for the 1994 Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology by Dr. James M. Boice

A number of years ago I came across a statement by John R. W. Stott that frequently comes to mind whenever I think of Christian worship. Stott said, “Christians believe that true worship is the highest and noblest activity of which man, by the grace of God, is capable.”⁴ I believe that is true. But at the same time, it highlights what is perhaps the greatest shortcoming of the evangelical church in America today, and that is that for large segments of the church, indeed the majority of churches, true worship is almost non-existent.

The sad reality is that in our day Christians have forgotten what true worship is and many churches have abandoned it entirely.

A. W. Tozer, a wise pastor and perceptive Bible student, saw the problem nearly fifty years ago. He wrote in 1948, “Thanks to our splendid Bible societies and to other effective agencies for the dissemination of the Word, there are today many millions of people who hold ‘right opinions,’ probably more than ever before in the history of the church. Yet I wonder if there was ever a time when true spiritual worship was at a lower ebb. To great sections of the church the art of worship has been lost entirely, and in its place has come that strange and foreign thing called the ‘program.’ This word has been borrowed from the stage and applied with sad wisdom to the type of public service which now passes for worship among us.”⁵ The situation is even worse today, of course.

It is my desire that we might begin to improve on this sad state of affairs through this conference. And to make a beginning I want to ask and attempt to answer some basic questions: 1) What is worship? 2) Why do we see so little of it today? And 3) What can be done to recover it for our own spiritual health and that of our churches?

A Definition of Christian Worship

It is not unusual to read in books dealing with worship that worship is hard to define, but I do not find that actually to be the case. I think it is very easy to define. The problems—and there are many of them—are in different areas.

Let me begin with the word “worship” itself. If we had been living in England in the days of the formation of modern English, between the period of Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare, we would not have used the word “worship” at all. Instead we would have spoken of “worth-ship.” We could have used it of noteworthy people, like members of the ruling class. If we used it of God we would mean that in worshipping him we were assigning to God his true worth. It would refer to knowing and praising God as he has revealed himself to be by his creation and through the Scriptures.

Or, to approach this another way, we might have spoken of “glorifying” God which, of course, we still do. What does that mean? In the early days of the Greek language, when Homer and Herodotus were writing, there was a Greek verb *doke* from which the Greek noun *doxa*, meaning “glory,” came. The verb meant “to appear” or “to seem.” Thus, the noun that derived from it meant “an opinion,” the way something seemed to an observer. From that meaning we have acquired the English words “orthodox” (meaning a straight or correct opinion), “heterodox” (meaning a different or incorrect opinion), and “paradox” (meaning a conflicting opinion).

In time *doke* was used only for having a good opinion about some great person, and the noun, which kept pace with the verb, then came to mean the “praise” or “honor” due to such an illustrious individual. In this way kings were assumed to

⁴John R. W. Stott, *Christ the Controversialist: A Study in Some Essentials of Evangelical Religion* (London: Tyndale Press, 1970), p. 160.

⁵A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Harrisburg: Christian Publications, 1948), p. 9.

possess glory in special measure and were “glorified.” This is why Psalm 24 speaks of God as the King of glory, meaning that he is the most praiseworthy of all potentates.

Lift up your heads, O you gates;
lift them up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
Who is he, this King of glory?
The Lord Almighty—
he is the King of glory (vv. 9, 10).

At this point we can discern the effect of taking the word over into the Bible and applying it to God. For if a person has a right opinion about God, it means that he or she is capable of forming a correct opinion about God’s attributes and thus praising or worshiping him correctly.

Now let’s go back to the word “worth.” This good Anglo-Saxon word might well have been used to express the essence of “glory” in the English language had not the French word *gloire* predominated. Glory was the Norman word, and the Normans were the new nobility. So we speak of “glorifying God,” rather than “worth-ifying him.” The idea of assigning worth remains in our word “worship.” *Nevertheless the two ideas are the same.* To glorify God is to acknowledge his worth-ship, which is also the same as praising him. Thus, philologically speaking, the glory of God, the worship of God and the praise of God are indistinguishable.

Since worship means “to attribute worth,” to worship God is to ascribe to him supreme worth, for he alone is supremely worthy. So the first thing to be said about worship is that it is to honor God.

Worship also has bearing on the worshiper, however. It changes the person, and this is the second most important thing to be said about it. No one ever truly comes to know, honor or worship God without being changed in the process. I think here of what is surely the best definition of worship I have ever come across. It is from the pen of the great former Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple: “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, to devote the will to the purpose of God.”⁶

In that definition the attributes of God are foremost: holiness, truth, beauty and love, and also God’s purposes. But these, rightly acknowledged and praised, impact the worshiper by: 1) quickening the conscience, 2) feeding the mind, 3) purging the imagination, 4) opening the heart and 5) devoting (or winning) the will. Thus, in defining worship, William Temple has also given us a splendid description of the true Christian life and has defined godliness.

“Mac-Worshippers”

John H. Armstrong, who is one of the speakers at this conference, is editor of a journal called *Reformation and Revival*, the winter issue of which (1993) was devoted to worship. In the introduction to that issue Armstrong calls what passes for the worship of God today “Mac-Worship,” meaning that worship has been made common, cheap or trivial. What is the problem? Why is so little of the worship that characterized past great ages of the church seem among us? I think there are several reasons.

1. *Ours is a trivial age, and the church has been deeply affected by this pervasive triviality.* Ours is not an age for great thoughts or even great actions. Our age has no heroes. It is a technological age, and the ultimate objective of our popular technological culture is entertainment.

In recent years I have been holding seminars in various parts of the country on the subject of developing a Christian mind, and I have written a small book on the same subject, based on Romans 12:1, 2, called *Mind Renewal in a Mindless Age*. In those seminars and in the book, I argue that the chief (though not the only cause) of today’s mindlessness is

⁶William Temple, *The Hope of a New World*, p. 30. Cited by Donald P. Hustad, *Jubilate! Church Music in the Evangelical Tradition* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Hope Publishing Company, 1981), p. 78.

television, which is not a teaching or informing medium as most people suppose it is but rather a means of entertainment. Because it is so pervasive—the average American household has the television on more than seven hours a day—it is programming us to think that the chief end of man is to be entertained. How can people whose minds are filled with the brainless babble of the evening sitcoms have anything but trivial thoughts when they come to God’s house on Sundays morning if, in fact, that they thoughts of God at all? How can they appreciate his holiness if their heads are full or the moral muck of the afternoon talk shows? They cannot. So all they can look for in church, if they look for anything, is something to make them feel good for a short while before they go back to our television culture.

2. Ours is a self-absorbed, man-centered age, and the church has become, sadly, even treasonously self-centered. I just defined worship as being concerned with God and his attributes. It is knowing, acknowledging and praising God. But we cannot do that if all we are thinking about is our own petty selves.

I do not hesitate to say that we have seen something like a Copernican revolution in the evangelical church’s understanding of worship in this area in our lifetimes. In the past, as in Tozer’s day, true worship may not have taken place all the time or even often. It may have been crowded out by the “program,” as Tozer maintained it was in his day. But worship was at least understood to be the praise of God and to be something worthy of being aimed at. Today we do not even aim at it, at least not much or in many places.

Pastor R. Kent Hughes, one of the speakers at last year’s Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology in Chicago, hit it right on target when he observed, “The unspoken but increasingly common assumption of today’s Christendom is that worship is primarily for *us*—to meet our needs. Such worship services are entertainment focused, and the worshipers are uncommitted spectators who are silently grading the performance. From this perspective preaching becomes a homiletics of consensus—preaching to felt needs—man’s conscious agenda instead of God’s. Such preaching is always topical and never textual. Biblical information is minimized, and the sermons are short and full of stories. Anything and everything that is suspected of making the marginal attender uncomfortable is removed from the service, whether it be a registration card or a ‘mere’ creed. Taken to the nth degree, this philosophy instills a tragic self-centeredness. That is, everything is judged by how it affects man. This terribly corrupts one’s theology.”⁷

And worship too, of course. For we cannot focus on God and his attributes, praising him for them, if what we are really thinking about in church is ourselves and if what we are coming to church for is to have our needs attended to, whatever they may be.

3. Our age is oblivious to God, and the church is barely better to judge from its so-called worship services. The tragedy here is not that Christians in our time deny basic Bible doctrines, certainly not the nature and existence of God. They are not heretics. The problem is that although they acknowledge Bible truth, it doesn’t seem to make a difference. Above all, the doctrine of God seems irrelevant to them.

Not long ago a number of us met in Philadelphia to discuss the deplorable state of contemporary evangelicalism. We had been stimulated to do this by David Wells’ profoundly disturbing book *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology*.⁸ His argument, elaborated over several hundred pages, is that American evangelicalism is either dead or dying as a religious force. He is not denying that it may retain a strong sociological presence, since it has money and numbers. But it is dying as a significant religious force because it no longer believes in or cares about truth. Because it does not care about truth it is drifting along with the surrounding secular culture and is mostly indistinguishable from it, which is of course only what George Gallup has been saying for years.

We met to discuss this and ask why churches that profess so much mean so little. The symptoms are all there. The decline is everywhere apparent. What is the cause? The answer we gave was the inconsequentiality of truth in our lives or, as David Wells maintained, the weightlessness of God in our experience. We do not reject God. He just doesn’t matter to us. We live as

⁷R. Kent Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Man* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1991), p. 106.

⁸David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993).

if he were non-existent. And what that must mean ultimately is that we really do not know God at all. If we do not know God, how can we possibly begin to worship him?

What Can Be Done?: Rediscovering Worship

A disaster such as the one that has overtaken the evangelical church in our day is not going to be cured overnight. But we ought to make a beginning, and one way to begin is to study what our Lord himself had to say about worship. Strikingly, he did it in what we would call a foreign or alien context, not at the temple of Jerusalem where we might have expected this to have taken place but in Samaria in the vicinity of Jacob's well.

Jesus had been traveling north with his disciples and had stopped at the well while the twelve went on into the city of Sychar to buy food. While he was there a woman came down the hill to draw water and Jesus got into a discussion with her. As the discussion progressed he touched on her loose moral life, revealing his insight into her way of living, and she tried to change the topic by asking him a "religious" question. "Sir," she said, "I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem" (John 4:20).

Jesus' answer is the classic biblical statement of what worship is all about: "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (vv. 21-24).

There are several important things to be noted.

1. *There is but one true God, and true worship must therefore be of this true God and none other.* Indeed, worship of any other "god" is idolatry. This is the point of Jesus' statement that the Samaritans did not know who they were worshiping but that the Jews did, and that "salvation is from the Jews." It was a way of saying that the true God is the God who had revealed himself to Israel at Mount Sinai and who established the only acceptable way of coming to him and worshiping him, which is what much of the Old Testament is about. Any other worship is invalid, because it is worship of an imaginary god.

We need to think about this very carefully today because we live in a relativistic age in which everyone's opinion about anything, especially his or her opinion about God, is thought to be as valid as any other. But that is patently impossible. If there is a God, which is basic to this entire discussion about worship, then God is what he is. That is, he is one thing and not another. So the question is not whether any or all opinions are valid but rather what this one true existing God is like. Who is he? What is his name? What kind of a God is he? That is a question well worthy of serious discussion. We are willing to hear arguments. But the Christian argument is that this one true God has made himself known through creation, at Mount Sinai, through the subsequent history of the Jewish people and in the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ. In addition, he has given us a definitive revelation of what he is like and what he requires of us in the Bible.

So that is the point at which we start. There is one God, and he has revealed himself to us. That knowledge has come to us through the people of Israel, which is why we too can say, "salvation is from the Jews."

2. *Today the only way this one true God can be truly worshiped is "in spirit and in truth."* Jesus was indicating a change in dispensations when he said this. Before this time worship was centered in the temple at Jerusalem. Every Jew had to make his way there three times annually for the festivals. What took place in the local synagogues was more like a Bible school class than a worship service. But now this was changing. Jesus had come. He was going to fulfill everything the temple worship symbolized and anticipated happening. Therefore, in the future (until the end of the new age) worship would not be by location, either in Jerusalem or Samaria, but in spirit and according to the truth of God.

Worshipping God “in Spirit”

Some Bible students have been led astray in looking at these verses by supposing that when Jesus spoke about “spirit” he was speaking of the Holy Spirit. This is not the case. The Greek does not have an article before “spirit,” which in that case would have indicated that Jesus was talking about *the* (Holy) Spirit. The words are only “in spirit,” which shows that Jesus was speaking of our spirits, which the New International Version (and most other modern versions) indicates by printing the word with a small “s.” What Jesus was teaching was that in the new age which he was inaugurating by his death and resurrection the place of worship would not matter, for a man or a woman would not worship merely by being in the right place and doing certain right things. The person would worship in his or her spirit, which could be anywhere.

Many people associate the worship of God with the body. That is, they think of themselves as having worshiped if they have been in the right place doing the right things at the right time. For many that means occupying a pew on Sunday morning and perhaps singing hymns. For others it may mean lighting a candle, crossing themselves, or kneeling in an aisle. It may mean taking communion or going to mass. But these things are not worship in themselves. They may be aids to worship. In some cases they may also hinder it. But worship is something more and better. It goes beyond them.

Neither should worship be confused with feeling. This is a bit harder to pin down, because true worship of the true God will always affect us, as I pointed out earlier. One thing it will affect is our emotions. At times tears will fill our eyes. But unfortunately, it is possible for our eyes to fill with tears and for there still to be no real worship simply because we have not come to a genuine awareness of God and a fuller praise of himself in his nature and ways.

True worship occurs only when that part of man, his spirit, which is akin to the divine nature (for God is spirit), actually meets with God and finds itself praising God for his love, wisdom, beauty, truth, holiness, compassion, mercy, grace, power, and all his other attributes. William Barclay has written well on this point: “The true, the genuine worship is when man, through his spirit, attains to friendship and intimacy with God. True and genuine worship is not to come to a certain place; it is not to go through a certain ritual or liturgy; it is not even to bring certain gifts. True worship is when the spirit, the immortal and invisible part of man, speaks to and meets with God, who is immortal and invisible.”⁹

Is Liturgy Good or Bad?

The fact that we are to worship God “in spirit” also has bearing on the various types of liturgy used in Christian churches, for it means that, with the exception of elements that suggest wrong doctrine, there is no liturgy that in itself is either inherently better or worse than another. For any given congregation, one type of service will presumably be more valuable than another at directing the attention of the worshipers to God. But the decision regarding what that type of service will be ought to be arrived at, not by asking whether one prefers contemporary or traditional music, extemporaneous or read prayers, congregational responses or silence—in short, whether one prefers Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Congregational or Quaker services—but by asking how effective the service is in turning the attention of the worshiper away from the service itself to God. In this respect an order of worship is to be evaluated on the same basis that we use to evaluate the preacher.

In thinking through this particular issue I have been greatly helped by the concepts of C. S. Lewis. Lewis was a member of the Church of England and was accustomed to various forms of what we might call a formal service. But he did not plead for formality. He asked merely for what he called “uniformity” on the grounds that novelty at best directs our attention to the novelty and at the worst turns it to the one who is enacting the liturgy.

In my judgment this is a point at which many contemporary services fail dreadfully and may be why so little worship actually takes place. They are trying to be so “creative” that the attender goes away impressed only with the vigor or novelty of what has been going on.

Lewis wrote, “As long as you notice, and have to count, the steps, you are not yet dancing but only learning to dance. A good shoe is a shoe you don’t have to notice. Good reading becomes possible when you need not consciously think about eyes, or

⁹William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), p. 154.

light, or print, or spelling. The perfect church service would be one we were almost unaware of; our attention would have been on God.”¹⁰ We should pray that God would use any service in which we happen to be participating to that great and essential end.

Worshiping God “in Truth”

The final thing we need to notice on the basis of Jesus teaching of the Samaritan woman is that worship must also be “in truth.” What does that mean? What does it mean to worship God in truth? I suggest several things.

1. *It means that we must approach God truthfully.* That is, we must come to him honestly. This is what Jesus was referring to when he said of the people of his day, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:

““These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.
They worship me in vain;
their teachings are but rules taught by men.””
(Matthew 15:7-9)

According to Jesus, there is no true worship unless there is honesty of heart on the part of the worshiper. We must not pretend to worship. We must worship honestly, knowing that our hearts are open books before God.

2. *We must worship on the basis of the biblical revelation.* This is implied in the verses from Matthew’s gospel which I just quoted, for the verse which begins “they worship me in vain” goes on to condemn those who have substituted “rules taught by men” for the only authoritative doctrines of the Bible. “Your word is truth,” said Jesus (John 17:17). So if we are to worship “in truth,” our worship must be according to the Bible.

When the Protestant Reformation first took place in the sixteenth century under Martin Luther and the doctrines and principles of the Word of God, long covered over by the traditions and encrustations of ceremony of the medieval church, again came forth into prominence, there was an immediate elevation of the Word of God in Protestant services. John Calvin particularly carried this out with thoroughness, ordering that the altars (long the center of the Latin mass) be removed from the churches and that a pulpit with a Bible upon it be placed in the center of the building. This was not to be on one side of the room, but at the very center, where every line of the architecture would carry the gaze of the worshiper to the Book which alone contains the way of salvation and outlines the principles upon which the church of the living God is to be governed.

3. *We must approach God Christo-centrally.* This means that we must worship God “in Christ” or with Jesus at the very center of everything, for it is only in Jesus that we have a right to approach God and it is only in him that we can understand who God really is. Jesus taught this when he said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

This is hard for many people today to accept, because it runs counter to our strange and distorted view of democracy that “every one is entitled to his or her opinion” and our “all deserve an equal chance” philosophy. It is for precisely this reason that God has taken such pains to teach that Jesus is the only possible way of approach to him. This is the consistent teaching of the New Testament, of course, but it is also the teaching of the Old Testament. It is what the instructions given to Moses for the design of the Jewish tabernacle (and later temple) signified.

What was the original tabernacle? It was not an edifice of great beauty or permanence. It had no stained glass windows or great arches. It was just made of pieces of wood and animal skins. Nevertheless every part of the tabernacle was meant to teach the way to God through the work of the Savior who should come.

Take that structure with its altar for sacrifice, its laver for cleansing, its Holy Place and its Most Holy Place, and you have a perfect illustration of how a person must approach God. The altar, which is the first thing we come to, is the cross of Christ.

¹⁰C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), p. 4.

It was given to teach that without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins and to direct attention of the worshiper to the Lamb of God who would come to take away the sins of the world. The laver, which comes next, is a picture of cleansing, which Christ also provides when we confess our sins and enter into fellowship with him. The table of showbread, which was within the first enclosure of the tabernacle, known as the Holy Place, speaks of Jesus as the bread of life. The altar of incense is a picture of prayer, for we grow by prayer as well as by feeding on Christ in Bible study. Behind the altar of incense was the great veil, dividing the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. This was the veil torn in two at the moment of Christ's death to demonstrate that his death was the fulfillment of these figures and the only ultimate basis of approach to the Almighty. Finally, within the Most Holy Place, was the Ark of the Covenant with its mercy seat upon which the high priest sprinkled the blood of a sacrifice once a year on the Day of Atonement. There, symbolized by the space above the mercy seat, was the presence of God into whose presence we can now come because of the mercy of God revealed in the death of Jesus Christ for our sins.

There is no other way to come to God. To come through Christ—the Christ of the altar, laver, showbread, incense, torn veil and mercy seat—is to come in truth. It means that you must come in God's way and not in any way of human devising.

The Inexhaustible God

The wonder of Christian worship is that when we come to the true God and come in the way he has established, we find him to be inexhaustible and discover that our desire to know and worship him further is increased. Bernard of Clairvaux was one who knew this. He wrote toward the middle of the twelfth century:

Jesus, thou Joy of loving hearts,
Thou Fount of life, thou Light of men,
From the best bliss that earth imparts
We turn unfilled to thee again.
We taste thee, O thou living Bread,
And long to feast upon thee still;
We drink of thee, the Fountainhead,
And thirst our souls from thee to fill.

When we worship in that way we find ourselves approaching what the compilers of the Westminster Shorter Catechism rightly called the chief end of man. The catechism asks, "What is the chief end of man?" It answers, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."¹¹

¹¹Parts of this lecture have already appeared as chapters in James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John: An Expository Commentary*, 5 vols. in 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), pp. 252-256; and in James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith: A Comprehensive and Readable Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill., and Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), pp. 586-593.