

Once More: Is Worship ‘Biblical’?

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In a recent article John Richardson has returned to the question raised ten years ago by Howard Marshall *How Far Did the Early Christians Worship God?* which, according to Richardson, has evoked interest but little action.¹ Richardson has now taken up the cudgels to advance a more radical version of Marshall’s thesis, namely ‘there is no such thing as “worship” – or at least not as we know it’. In the first part of his paper he argues that the Hebrew and Greek words translated by ‘worship’ in our Bibles do not refer to what is generally meant by worship in church circles today.² He notes that προσκυνειν, for example, refers to the oriental custom of prostration as an act of homage or respect, and concludes that it does not therefore necessarily refer to cultic activity, and that even where it does (e.g. Gen 22:5) it does not describe expressing a feeling about God or doing something for God but acknowledging a relationship with God.³ Similarly, even though Richardson cannot deny that ‘serving God’ in the Old Testament included sacrifices offered in the Temple, and praise and prayer, the basic idea of serving God is ethical behaviour worked out in all of life, rather than cultic activity. In the New Testament, of course, the Temple cult is wholly abandoned by Christians, while Christian gatherings are not described in cultic terms but rather in terms of their beneficial effects on those taking part. Hence Marshall’s original claim that the early Christians did not meet so much to worship God as to build one another up.

In the second part of the article Richardson claims that our misreading of the biblical evidence goes hand in hand with a wrong view of worship itself. The modern Christian, it is suggested, increasingly and wrongly sees worship as something we offer to God, as the way we receive from God, and as the locus of a mystical encounter with God apart from hearing his word. All of this is wrong: we cannot offer anything to God, nor can we ‘soften him up’ by telling him how great he is, nor should we expect to receive grace apart from the word and sacraments. Modern ideas of worship feed the fallen human notion that God needs us, whereas ‘God is no worse off before our services and no better off after them’.⁴ They also divert our attention from serving God through ethical behaviour to cultic activity seen either as more important than obedience or at best as the essential ‘recharging’ to enable obedience to take place.⁵ His conclusion is that while we may continue singing and praying we should not call these activities ‘worship’, and ‘we should make it clear by our words and actions that the beneficiaries in our services are ourselves and not God’.⁶ The purpose of our meetings is meeting – one another!

There is much here with which Christians of a reformed bent might be expected to agree. Much modern worship does appear to neglect God’s word. There is a disturbing tendency to down-play the rational in favour of the experiential. Some of the claims made for ‘worship’ are extravagant, while much of what is presented is unworthy of God and an insult to the intelligence of the worshippers. Some forms of praise and prayer are a blatant attempt to manipulate the worshippers, even if not to manipulate God. Nevertheless it seems to me that much of Richardson’s article is implausible and his arguments fallacious.

In the first place Richardson’s interpretation of particular biblical passages appears tendentious. For example, in Genesis 22:5 Abraham, carrying the paraphernalia of sacrifice,

says to the servants, ‘Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you’. Richardson admits that the word ‘worship’ in that passage ‘envisages cultic activity akin to the modern sense of worship’, but then insists this is only a matter of acknowledging a relationship and not of expressing feelings or having a ‘worship experience’. One wonders how Richardson can possibly know this. The passage simply provides no word of Abraham’s feelings or experience one way or the other. Richardson approaches the passage with a (modern) agenda of his own and uses the silence of Scripture for his own purposes. Similarly, *pace* Richardson, the fact that Paul not only served God with his whole life (Acts 24:14) but also went out of his way to express this in Temple worship (Acts 24:11) seems to show the compatibility of life-service with cultic activity and to suggest that the one is the expression of the other. Again, while ‘worshipping’ (λειτουργούντων) in Acts 13:2 *might* mean no more than preaching and teaching, the fact that it is paired with ‘fasting’ (νηστευόντων) tends to suggest that the reference is to praise and prayer, and that unless we know on other grounds that Luke shares Richardson’s distaste for such an understanding of worship we should probably take it so.

More seriously, it seems that Richardson is in danger of confusing word and concept and of falling into the kind of error long ago exposed by James Barr.⁷ The concept of worship must be distinguished from the words used to express it, as also from the realities in the world to which those words refer. The word προσκυνεῖν in a given sentence denotes, perhaps, the worship offered in the Temple, but it does not of itself tell us either what was going on or what the worshippers thought they were doing. The concept of worship is capable of being expressed by many different words and pictures, so that a study of the concept must go much wider than a study of the use of certain words. Peter Cotterell and Max Turner helpfully illustrate this point by reference to the concept of love in the New Testament which is expressed not merely by certain words, such as ἀγάπη or φιλία, but also by ‘whole passages in the New Testament which are highly germane to the concept of love *even if they do not mention the word itself*. The parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11ff, for example, has more to teach about Jesus’ understanding of love than most passages which use the word!’⁸ In the present case, if we want to know about the biblical concept of worship, we are more likely to gain insight by studying the Psalms or even the books of Chronicles with their heavy emphasis on worship as praise and prayer than by confining ourselves to actual occurrences of the word ‘worship’.

Another danger of confusing word and concept lies in what Barr called ‘illegitimate totality transfer’ whereby the exegete illegitimately supposes that the whole range of meaning that attaches to a word in Scripture can be read into any and every occurrence of the word, as for example the word ‘church’. It would be quite wrong to suppose that all the ideas present in the concept of the church in Ephesians are also present when Paul writes to the Corinthians about their meetings or when Jesus speaks of founding ‘his church’ (Matt 16:18). In the same way it would be quite wrong to suppose that the whole biblical concept of worship is present every time προσκυνεῖν appears. Often it will simply mean ‘prostrate’ and refer to the respect shown by one man to another within the culture of the time.⁹ But the reverse is also true! As Cotterell and Turner say of Ephesians 5:27: ‘it would be equally misleading to affirm that “the *ekklesia*” here means only “the assembly of the people of God”, or the like (the minimal contribution); for the writer has built up a concept of “the church” in the progression of his discourse, which the reader is not expected to ignore’.¹⁰ The fact that ἐκκλησία originally meant ‘assembly’ does not mean that it always just means ‘an assembly’. The same applies to worship. When we read of people worshipping God we should be quite wrong to suppose that nothing more than the bodily posture is meant.

Finally, we should not ignore the way in which language is used metonymously, a part of the action standing for the whole. For example, if two people are said ‘go to bed together’ we should be quite wrong to infer that full sexual union is not thereby implied. In the same way, some Christians refer to the Lord’s Supper as the ‘breaking of bread’, referring to an important moment in the service, but we should be quite wrong to suppose that nothing more than the breaking of a loaf went on. In the same way προσκυνειν, ‘bowing down’, may once have had a strictly literal reference, but then have come to stand for the whole worship event of which it was still a significant part, and perhaps eventually to an event in which no literal prostration occurred at all.

All of this means that we cannot hope to write a theology of worship, or to answer the question ‘Is worship biblical?’, by studying particular words and drawing inferences from them. It is much better to start from the other end, with an agreed definition of worship in our language, and ask what is said of this in the Bible. This is the way followed by David Peterson, who employs the phrase ‘engaging with God’, and then asks how according to the Bible this can take place.¹¹ Or we might adopt ‘praise and prayer’ as a working definition of the subject we want to study and then ask what the Bible says about them, whether they are as important in the Bible as they are to us, and how and in what way they should be performed. Is it biblical to spend time singing and praying, how important is this relative to other activities, and for whose benefit should they be undertaken, would provide a more secure base from which to launch an inquiry. This leads us to the second fallacy.

Richardson argues that prayer and praise are not worship because they are not offered to God, but are rather spoken for our own encouragement and that of others.¹² The purpose of believers meeting, we are told, is to encourage one another, not to offer anything to God. But if we sing and pray, *to whom do we sing and pray?* According to Richardson:

The biblical writers praise God somewhat *indirectly*, referring to his works and attributes and addressing their praises horizontally to the community and the creation as much as vertically to God.¹³

However, this is not always so. A glance at the Psalms will show believers very often addressing God, whether in praise and thanksgiving, or prayer and confession. For example:

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! (Ps 8:1)

I love you, O LORD, my strength. (Ps 18:1)

To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul;
in you I trust, O my God. (Ps 25:1)

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions.
(Ps 51:1)

Surely it is implausible to suggest that these words are not being spoken to God, and therefore in some sense being offered to him? Such prayer and praise may also benefit those who speak it and those who hear it, but to suggest that it only *appears* to be offered to God, while in reality it is uttered for the building-up of the church, flies in the face of the words actually written and appears to attribute hypocrisy to the Psalmist. What is true of the praise

and prayer found in Scripture is also true of the best praise and prayer today. To take examples from traditional hymns by reformed writers:

Thou art the everlasting Word,
The Father's only Son;
God manifestly seen and heard,
And heaven's beloved one:
Worthy, O Lamb of God, art Thou
That every knee to Thee should bow. (Josiah Conder)

Jesus! my shepherd, brother, friend,
My prophet, priest and king;
My lord, my life, my way my end,
Accept the praise I bring. (John Newton)

In each case these words are clearly addressed to God, or Christ, and in the second case Newton explicitly speaks of bringing praise for Jesus' acceptance. Modern hymns like:

Lord, for the years your love has kept and guided...
Lord of the years, we bring our thanks today. (Timothy Dudley-Smith)

are thus standing in an honourable tradition. We may grant that hymns that directly address God are in fact comparatively rare both in ancient and modern hymnody. It is more common to find hymns that are grammatically speaking addressed to oneself or to other worshippers. 'Praise, my soul, the King of heaven', and, 'Praise to the Lord the almighty the king of creation', come to mind, but since, like the Psalms on which they are based, they instruct the hearers to offer praise to God, it seems idle to deny that such 'worship' is possible or appropriate for Christians. The fact that much contemporary singing and praying is unworthy of God, or based on false ideas of him, or is actually harmful to Christian faith and growth, in no way invalidates the notion that believers can offer praise and prayer to God in a way that reflects his nature and their own commitment to serve him in response to his grace.

In other ways too I suggest that Richardson is too easily impressed by the surface grammar of worship statements. Many hymns and songs employ the first person singular. They thus *appear* to be statements about the worshipper: 'I really want to worship you, my God', or 'I'll praise my Maker while I've breath', for example. In reality they are performative utterances: they enact what they describe, just as the words 'I declare them to be husband and wife', spoken by an authorised person in an appropriate context, do more than describe, they perform the action they refer to and effect a change in the situation.¹⁴ To give another example, 'I love you' is not, or not just, a statement about me; it is a declaration of love, which both acknowledges a person's loveliness and commits me to behaving towards them in a certain way. Love is in fact *given* through the utterance of the words. Similarly, 'I believe in one God...' is not simply a statement, but a step of faith. Songs of praise do not simply describe God, or describe the worshipper's feelings, but express a response of love and trust to God's goodness. This is worship, homage, if you will. Such praise leaves neither the one who gives it, nor the one who receives it, unaffected. It clearly affects the worshippers, who are changed by the sincere commitment of themselves to God, but God is also changed. It is a half truth to say with Richardson that, 'God is no better off after our services'. Of course, we cannot put God in our debt, and he does not need our praise to keep him going, but we do well to remember that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is not the God of the

philosophers. Scripture's many anthropomorphisms invite us to relate to God in ways analogous to our relationship to parents, brothers and friends. The heart of Christian prayer is the word 'Abba!' Clearly, this word is not addressed to oneself or to the congregation. It is the cry of a child to a father, and while all language about God must be metaphorical, it is not therefore devoid of truth. As fathers delight to be addressed in love and trust by their children, and are not unchanged thereby, so we may suppose that God is not unaffected (because in his sovereign will he has purposed not to be unaffected) by the stammering declarations of love and trust made to him by his worshippers, be they ever so imperfect.

In the end, our answer to the question whether worship is biblical will depend on what we mean by worship. If we mean by worship the attempt to earn God's favour by anything that we do, then of course the answer is that such 'worship' is commended neither by the New Testament nor the Old. If we mean by worship the offering of sacrifices in a cultic setting, then the answer again is that while this was provided by God as a way for human beings to approach him in the Old Testament, this is no longer God's way for us to approach under the new covenant, a fact borne out both by the absence of reference to any such activity on the part of New Testament Christians and by the explicit teaching of Hebrews. On the other hand there are at least two distinct meanings we might accept for the word 'worship', both of which are witnessed to by the New Testament. The first is worship as the total response of a person to God, acknowledging God to be God, trusting, loving and obeying him, which I propose to call 'worship^L', and the other is worship as that which happens when people gather for a religious purpose, worship as cultic, ceremonial or congregational activity. It will not do to attempt to pre-empt the discussion by declaring that 'worship' cannot mean that; it clearly can and does in many discourse situations, so that the question whether worship is biblical becomes the question whether New Testament Christians engaged in cultic, ceremonial or congregational activity, and whether this was directed toward God. I propose to distinguish this meaning of worship by calling it 'worship^C'.

When we approach the New Testament with this distinction in mind, we notice, with Marshall and Richardson, that the main Greek words for worship, προσκυνειν, σεβεισθαι, λατρευειν and λειτουργειν, are all found in the New Testament, but do not usually refer to 'worship^C'. Either they refer to 'worship^L', or they are used metaphorically of something else altogether. Examples of their use with reference to 'worship^L' include the following. In Matthew 4:8-10 Satan offers Jesus dominion over the world if he will fall down and worship him. This is clearly a matter of allegiance, not cult, though we notice that the heart attitude may be expressed physically by prostration. In John 4:23 Jesus contrasts cultic activity on Mount Gerizim or in Jerusalem with the true worship in Spirit and in truth, and again this is surely not a better way of going to church, or an alternative to going to church, but a reference to that encounter with God by his Spirit that Jesus has come to make possible, the inward reality of which 'worship^C' can at best be an outward expression. The classic 'worship^L' passage is of course Romans 12:1: 'present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, which is your spiritual worship', a reference to a person's total response to the Gospel. We may note also the scene described in 1 Corinthians 14:23 where the unbeliever coming into the Christian meeting is so convicted by the inspired words that he hears that he falls down exclaiming 'God is truly among you!'. In other words, he is converted, the physical, and cultural, expression of this being of secondary importance. Finally we may note how in Revelation worship refers primarily to the giving of allegiance, whether to God or to Caesar symbolised by the Beast, and yet cultic activity is never very far away. On the one hand worshipping the Beast will be expressed in burning incense before the statue of Caesar, or the goddess Roma or whatever (13:15), and on the other hand heaven

itself is pictured in terms drawn from the cultic activity of the church on earth (4:10). In other places the standard worship vocabulary is used metaphorically of missionary service (Rom 1:9, 15:16; Phil 2:17-18), Christian witness (1 Pet 2:4-10), or daily living (Heb 13:15-16).

If we ask what the New Testament has to say about ‘worship^C’, the question is harder to answer. Obviously, we have no liturgies preserved from the first century, or cultic instructions of the kind found in the Didache, and lacking these we cannot assume later practice to be relevant. Even where we have a reference to something that might be ‘worship^C’, we cannot assume that what was done somewhere on some occasion was done everywhere and always. Attempts to reconstruct early Christian worship by analogy with the practice of the Synagogue come to grief on the fact that we know as little about the worship of the Synagogue in the first century as we know of the meetings of the churches.¹⁵ However, such evidence as there is permits us to say with reasonable confidence, first, *that the early Christians sang hymns to God*. There are references to their doing so (1 Cor 14:26; Col 3:16), and there are songs and fragments of songs in the New Testament that probably reflect Christian liturgical practice (e.g. Luke 1:46-55; Phil 2:6-11; 1 Tim 3:16 and Rev 5:12). Second, we may affirm that *Christians offered prayer together*. Again there are references to their doing so (1 Cor 11:5; 1 Tim 2:8), and examples of such prayers (Acts 4:23-31). Nor should we forget the evidence of Paul’s use of the Aramaic words *Abba* (Rom 8:15) and *maranatha* (1 Cor 16:22), which can have been familiar to Greek-speaking Christians only through their use in the liturgy of the churches. Both words, we may note, are addressed to God. Third, *Christians instructed one another* by preaching and teaching, and through the reading of Scripture. Fourth, *Christians baptized believers and broke bread together*, and while primarily manward in their significance these activities also involved prayer to God (1 Pet 3:21; 1 Cor 10:16-17). In all this, of course, there is a startling lack of any sacrificial language with reference to anything done in the meeting, something which must have made the early Christian meetings quite remarkable for their time, but they were not for that reason devoid of Godward activity.

Rather than say then that the early Christians did not meet for ‘worship^C’, it would seem better to say that while there was Godward activity in the early meetings which qualifies for the description ‘worship^C’, everything that went on in such meetings is consistently *evaluated* by the New Testament writers in terms of its manward benefits (or lack of them). In 1 Corinthians 14, for example, various activities are referred to, but the meeting is evaluated in terms of its effect on those taking part. The key idea is οἰκοδομη ‘upbuilding’, and that which builds is that which is intelligible. In 1 Corinthians 11 similarly the Corinthian conduct at the Lord’s Supper is criticised not because it falls short in reverence to God but because of its loveless disregard of the poorer members. It is most likely that the body which is not discerned (11:29) is the body that consists of the members of the church, not the body symbolically present in the elements of the table. Even the singing of hymns is said to be ‘to one another’, which does not I think exclude the Godward reference of the words sung, but does stress that congregational hymn singing benefits the congregation by encouraging and evoking faith. Finally in Hebrews when we assemble together, it is to draw near to God (10:22), but also to spur one another on to love and good deeds (10:24). The lesson is plain; worship is offered to God, but it can be evaluated only by reference to men and women. Practices that do not help those assembled cannot be justified by reference to their supposed reverence nor excused by saying that they were offered to God and not to man. The one who does not bless the brother or sister whom he can see, will not bless God whom he cannot see!

In conclusion then the early Christians did indeed meet for worship, but on the one hand their meetings contained more than worship, since they also contained much that was directed to the benefit of those present, and on the other hand their worship involved more than meetings, since it also involved the obedience of faith. ‘Worship^C’ is to be distinguished from ‘worship^L’, but it is reasonable to suppose that there was some relationship between the two, the one being most naturally understood as the focused expression of the other. Nobody disputes that ‘worship’ divorced from obedience is worthless, but the New Testament never rejects the idea of praise and prayer as offered to God, so that we may say that the early Christians worshipped God not only with their lives, but with their lips.

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Endnotes:

- 1) John P Richardson ‘Is “Worship” Biblical?’ *Churchman* 109/3 1995 pp 197-218; I H Marshall ‘How far did the early Christians worship God?’ *Churchman* 99/3 1985 pp 216-29
- 2) The main Hebrew word is *histah^awâ* and the main Greek word in both LXX and NT is προσκυνειν.
- 3) Richardson p 201
- 4) Richardson p 214
- 5) Richardson p 216
- 6) Richardson p 217
- 7) J Barr *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: OUP 1961)
- 8) P Cotterell and M Turner *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove III: IVP 1989) p 119 emphasis mine
- 9) Sometimes the biblical writer will use it ironically or with added meaning as when men and women are represented as honouring Jesus, with no thought of his divinity, but the reader is meant to see that they are acting more wisely than they know and giving to Jesus the worship which the reader is invited to give him.
- 10) P Cotterell and M Turner *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove IVP 1989) p 123
- 11) D Peterson *Engaging with God: a Biblical Theology of Worship* (Leicester: IVP 1992)
- 12) Richardson p 217
- 13) Richardson pp 211-12
- 14) G B Caird *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Duckworth) pp 20-1
- 15) P Bradshaw *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship* (London: SPCK 1992) pp 13-29