

Christian Worship

Churchman 76/2 1962

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The basic idea in worship appears to be a proper recognition of the place of the creature *vis-à-vis* the Creator. Worship takes place when the worshipper ascribes “worthship” to the Being he worships. This is an inward state but it is normally expressed by means of appropriate ritual acts. As O. Hardman says in his *History of Christian Worship*, “Worship may be held to consist primarily in a creaturely awareness of God, and secondarily in the expression of aspiration towards God by means of religious exercises and moral obedience. Religious exercises alone may indicate religiosity rather than worship. Moral obedience alone is morality but not worship. But when a sense of supernatural Presence, however vague in its intellectual definition, finds expression in acts of reverent approach and of dutiful obedience, then there is worship.” Worship may be offered in private, but more usually the term refers to a corporate activity. It reminds us of an obligation we share with others.

Worship has a very important place in Christianity, as in other religions. But Christians assign a special place to the Bible and therefore Christian worship, as distinct from other types of worship, is worship carried out according to principles laid down in Holy Writ. Scripture never sets out to prescribe how worship is to be performed. But it has many references to worship and a consideration of these enables us to see some of the basic principles on which all true worship must be based. This paper aims at setting out some of these principles. Of course, it makes no claim to being exhaustive, and probably others would prefer a different selection from the wealth of scriptural teaching. All that is claimed is that the following points are important and we do well to direct our attention to them.

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In some quarters today there is a suspicion of doctrine. Men think that religious experience is all-important and put their stress on “the life of the Spirit”. Theologians are held to be dry-as-dust fellows who do their best to fossilize living religion. With their finicky rules and hide-bound definitions they do little but endeavour to cramp the free movement of the Spirit of God. They try to express the inexpressible in neat formulas. So there is a reaction. Men take up the position that the deep things of worship can never be reduced to doctrinal propositions. The knowledge of God is too great for words. Approach to God need therefore not be trammelled by doctrinal shibboleths.

There is truth here and error. The truth is that to know God is more than to give correct utterance to any doctrinal formula. The knowledge of God cannot be fully expressed. The sweetness of communion with God is something that can be felt, but not described. We may agree that there are feelings too deep for words.

But there is also a tragic error here. Worship is not a matter doctrinally indifferent. Nor is it a matter of aesthetics alone. Worship, expressing as it does the deep things of man’s soul as man approaches his Creator, can be engaged in only in accordance with the revelation God has made. Jesus Himself complained of certain people in words quoted from the prophet Isaiah, “This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. But in vain

do they worship me, teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men” (Mk. 7: 6f.) Worship dominated by “the precepts of men” is thus according to our Lord “in vain”. If anyone knows the truth of the matter it is He. And He says plainly that the merely human approach to worship is all wrong.

God has revealed Himself and our worship must be on the basis of that revelation. We do not worship an unknown god. Indeed, when Paul found some Athenians doing just that he proceeded immediately to correct them (Acts 17: 23). And when he wrote to the Corinthians on the matter of the exercise of the “spiritual gifts” he insisted on a rational approach to worship. “I will pray with the spirit,” he said, “and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also” (1 Cor. 14: 15). The thrust of this argument in this section of his Epistle is that men must worship not in an ecstatic, unreasoning fashion, but in a rational manner. He longs that “all things be done unto edifying” (1 Cor. 14: 26), and “that all may learn, and all may be comforted” (1 Cor. 14: 31).

Or we might refer to the words of our Lord Himself. When He spoke with the woman of Samaria, He blamed the Samaritans in the words: “Ye worship that which ye know not” (Jn. 4: 22). John Calvin commented on this passage: “We ought not to attempt anything in religion rashly or at random; because, unless there be knowledge, it is not God that we worship, but a phantom or idol. All good intentions, as they are called, are struck by this sentence, as by a thunderbolt”. It is imperative that when we worship we should offer not only good intentions but our best thought. Worship is no excuse for intellectual laziness. It is not an entertainment, something performed by minister and choir while others watch. It requires a congregation, not an audience. It is active, not passive. It is something we do, not simply something we attend. And as we do it, we must understand what we are about. Enough has been revealed for us to worship in a rational manner. E. L. Kendall can go so far as to say: “In its widest sense worship may be defined as the response of the creature to its Creator. With men and angels this involves conscious, rational worship, for they are conscious, rational creatures”.

We cannot forget when we worship that we are rational beings. We must worship as rational beings. It is our inescapable obligation to conform our worship to what God has let us know of His good and perfect will. Too often men content themselves with aesthetic criteria and the like when assessing the value of a particular way of worship. But genuine worship springs out of our basic theological convictions and expresses them. If we divorce worship from theology, then worship becomes meaningless, and there is the danger that our theology will become sterile, leading nowhere and producing nothing. The Reformers fully understood the importance of making liturgical forms express sound doctrine, and in a day when liturgical reform is in the air, their successors do well to heed their example.

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In the Old Testament the usual word for worship has the meaning “prostrate oneself”. Thus, when Abraham received his three visitors, he “bowed himself to the earth” (Gen. 18: 2). The word is used fairly often in contexts of this kind. And of course prostration in the literal sense took place in the worship of God. The worshipper bowed himself down in the presence of his God. The significant thing about this way of designating worship is that it means a deliberate acceptance of a lowly place in the presence of the great and mighty God.

It is this recognition of the great gulf which separates God from sinful man which lies behind a number of Old Testament statements linking fear with worship. For example, we read: “The Lord, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a stretched out arm, Him shall ye fear, and unto Him shall ye bow yourselves, and to Him shall ye sacrifice” (2 Kings 17: 36). Even when the main thought is that of God’s grace, the idea of fear may not be far away. The psalmist can say: “As for me, in the multitude of thy lovingkindness will I come into thy house: in thy fear will I worship . . .” (Psa. 5: 7). In contexts like these fear, of course, is not a state of terror. It denotes being filled with awe rather than being afraid. But if we should not exaggerate the fear aspect, we should not minimize it either. The choice of word is a salutary reminder that men may not presume on the holiness of God. In the presence of God man should feel a deep religious awe. Rudolf Otto has taught us to speak of the “numinous”, and this points us to a reality. He speaks of “the emotion of a creature, abased and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures”. In every deeply felt moment of religious experience there is a genuine sense of the greatness of God and the littleness of men. Thus when Abraham pleaded with God for Sodom and was heard, when God agreed to spare the city if some righteous men were found in it, Abraham did not congratulate himself on his wonderful piety. He said: “I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes” (Gen. 18: 27). Job, at the time of his great vision, said: “I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42: 6). Isaiah saw “the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up”, and heard the seraphim cry, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts”. His reaction? “Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts” (Isa. 6: 1-5). Always those who are very near to God realize their own littleness and unworthiness. Worship is a humbling albeit thrilling experience. It is an awareness of the sublime. It is ineffable. It is this proper sense of creatureliness which actuates the psalmist when he speaks of worshipping at God’s footstool (Psa. 99: 5; 132: 7), or when he refers to God’s “holy hill” (Psa. 99: 9), for holiness reminds us of the separateness of God from man, and is a warning not to presume.

We so often miss all this and reduce our services to the level of entertainment. Notice the way we talk about church. “Was it a good service?” “It was wonderful! The choir sang like angels”; or, perhaps, “It was just terrible. The Vicar preached abominably!” We tend all the time to measure worship by what we get out of it, by its worth for us. But it is the “worthship” of God that is in question. We are to worship God for what He is, and not for any benefit, real or imaginary, that we derive from it. Colin Dunlop stresses this in his book *Anglican Public Worship*. He shows that churchgoers often play into the hands of their opponents by accepting the tacit assumption that men worship on account of what they get out of it. By accepting the basic assumption of our opponents we find ourselves ultimately in an indefensible position.

Thus, when we try to defend churchgoing we may defeat our purposes by assuming that worship is concerned primarily with our own personal benefit. We may say, for example: “Worship on Sunday fits us for life on the other six days”. This is to accept worship simply for what we get out of it, and as a matter of fact this approach defeats itself. If we worship simply in order to be better men and women on the other days of the week we find that worship soon loses its effect. True worship does, in fact, make us better people, but true worship is not designed to do this. Whenever it is man-centred, worship is powerless.

Or we may say that to worship is to show where we stand. May I illustrate this from an incident that occurred in my own country. The Vice-chancellor of the University of

Melbourne, returning from a visit to the rival city of Sydney, said that over there he had noticed outside a church a notice-board reading, "Give your vote for God. Come to church on Sunday." The Vice-chancellor added, "There was no mention of any alternative candidate. But, it being Sydney, I consider it unlikely that the election was unopposed!" Be that as it may, we like to think that when we go to church we do give our vote for God. The very fact that we go proclaims that, as far as we are concerned, God matters. But if this is our primary reason for church going we can immediately be met by saying that there are other and better ways of giving our vote for God. We might, for example, spend our time in feeding the hungry, or in caring for the distressed. Obviously to go to church does mean in one aspect that we vote for God. But this is not its primary meaning. Worship is concerned with other things than voting for God.

Sometimes we try to trick out our Sunday to make it attractive. Thus, the local parson, worried by poor attendances, may decide to hold, say, an Industrial Sunday. He decorates his church with the products of industry. He gets a Trade Union leader to read the first lesson and an industrial tycoon to read the second. He uses a series of prayers nominally addressed to the Almighty but actually prayed at the congregation. And he delivers a little homily on the virtues of right relations in industry. Then, as he stands at the door saying goodbye to the congregation after the service, it is almost a certainty that some misguided person will say to him, "Thank you very much for that service. It was wonderful! If only the Church did this kind of thing more often there would be many more people here."

And so the parson goes off thinking what a success it has all been and trying to dream up another one. And if he is not careful he finds himself leaping from stunt to stunt. And in the end this, of course, results in frustration and defeat. Now and then you can arrange a service along lines such as this. But as a regular diet it simply will not do. It rests on a false premise, the premise that worship is primarily a means of entertaining and interesting people. But worship is not primarily man-centred at all. True worship is and always must be God-centred.

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There is a profound insight in the call to worship made in the familiar words of the Venite: "O come, let us worship and fall down: and kneel before the Lord our Maker". Why should we do this? The Venite answers: "For He is the Lord our God: and we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand". Ultimately there is no other reason for worship.

Yet we must bear in mind that this awe-inspiring aspect of worship must never be understood in such a fashion as to obscure that other great idea that worship depends on God's grace. We could not approach God at all were it not that He is graciously willing to be approached. "I will worship toward thy holy temple," sang the psalmist, "and give thanks unto thy name for thy lovingkindness and for thy truth" (Psa. 138: 2). The God we worship is a God of majesty and grandeur, a God to be approached with lowliness and fear and awe. But He is also a God of truth and kindness, a God of love and grace and mercy. It is only because He is such that we may approach at all.

There are many passages, particularly in the Old Testament, which insist that those who worship the Lord must worship Him only. "Thou shalt worship no other god: for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" (Exod. 34: 14). Israel is given repeated warnings that if she worships other gods she will perish. The worship of Jehovah is incompatible with other worship. He is a great God, a mighty God, the Almighty. If this is accepted (and there is

no other basis on which worship ought to be offered than an acceptance of what God has revealed about Himself), then it is manifestly impossible to combine the worship of God with the worship of the gods of the heathen. Such a God cannot be put on a level with other deities.

There is an interesting commandment preserved in Deuteronomy, where Moses says, "Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and ye turn aside, and serve other gods, and worship them" (Deut. 11: 16). It is assumed that anyone who knows what he is doing will not serve other gods. He must be "deceived" before he will "turn aside" to engage in false worship. A recognition of the realities of the situation will preserve him from this fatal mistake. At the present day there are some who try to combine a worship of the Lord with the worship of some other god, the god of respectability, the god of the State, the god of success, the god of riches, the god of pleasure, or some other. But we must deceive ourselves before we can do this. If we know what God is like, then we know that we can worship Him only. To worship some other god is to refuse Him that worship that is His due. It is, in fact, to fail to worship in the full sense of that term. The French writer, R. Martin-Achard, reminds us that "sooner or later, the faithful imagine that they can contain God within His own revelation, tie Him down to certain objects or to certain persons, making themselves master of Him and finally, under the pretext of serving Him, serving themselves. The people of God, whether Israel or the Christian community, tend to want to make use of their God, and it happens all too often that in their splendid religious festivals, their manifold offerings, their abundant prayers, they are seeking only their own satisfaction and adoring themselves under the cover of a religion which appears outwardly edifying." We must be on our guard against regarding worship as a means of manipulating God, of persuading Him to carry out our purposes. He is a great God. This means that we must subject ourselves entirely and only to Him.

It is always the temptation of religious man to engage in the outward act of worship and to feel that he has done what has been required of him. This is not confined to any one religion or to any one age. It is universal. Ritualism is easier than whole-hearted service of God. And therefore it is natural that the half-hearted fall into this snare. By going through the motions of worship, by saying the right words and performing the right actions, they feel that they are serving God. And at the same time they are relieving themselves of the weightier matters. We ought to be very clear that the Bible does not countenance this sort of thing. When King Saul pleaded on one occasion the importance of offering a sacrifice, the prophet Samuel rebuked him in the notable words, "to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams" (1 Sam. 15: 22). There is no substitute for obedience. The worshipper must base his whole manner of living on God's commandments, and not simply his conduct in the holy place. The right attitude for worship includes a proper state of heart as well as correct posture and form of words. True worship and life are linked in the closest possible fashion. It is no accident that throughout the Old Testament: "worshipping" God and "serving" God are often intimately connected. Thus it is significant that a writer like J. S. McEwen can begin an article on worship by saying with regard to the Old Testament, "The general word is '*abodah*, from '*abad*, to labour, to serve, and usually translated 'the service of God'." He goes on to note that: "To describe the specific act of worship, the word commonly used is '*hishtahawah*, from '*shaha*, to bow, to prostrate oneself". It is interesting to see the word for service put before that for worship when the subject is actually worship. But it is certainly true that the service of God and the worship of God are connected in the most intimate fashion in the Bible.

The prophet Jeremiah registered a notable protest against over emphasis on the merely outward in his great Temple sermon. “Hear the word of the Lord, all ye of Judah, that enter in at these gates to worship the Lord”, he said, and proceeded immediately: “Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Amend your ways and your doings . . . Trust ye not in lying words, saying, The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, are these. For if ye truly amend your ways and your doings; if ye truly execute judgment between a man and his neighbour; if ye oppress not the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and shed not innocent blood in this place, neither walk after other gods to your own hurt: then will I cause you to dwell in this place . . .” (Jer. 7: 2ff.).

The people trusted in the outward. Jeremiah insisted that without a radical change of heart their worship was useless. True worship demanded that they execute judgment, cease from oppression, and so on. Similarly the psalmist could say: “Thou delightest not in sacrifice; else would I give it: thou hast no pleasure in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise” (Psa. 51:16f.; cf. also Micah 6: 6ff.).

The warning is never out of date. We, no less than the men of earlier generations, need this emphasis on the inner state of heart. We find it easy to reduce Christianity to the things we do, or the things we do not do, to the words we say, and the pounds (or pence!) we give. We have our own form of “lying words” in which we are prone to trust. But our lives show the sort of men we are, and true worship must still be accompanied by radical reformation of character. This does not mean that worship is nothing but ethics. That would be to substitute moralism for worship. Ritual acts have their place and they are not to be replaced by ethical actions. But neither are they to be separated from them. Rather they should express them. If the life is not given over to the service of God, then, no matter how beautiful it may be, worship is a sham. It expresses nothing. It is valueless.

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Typically, the act of worship in Old Testament times centred round sacrifice. The worshipper came to the holy place with his offering and in a solemn ceremony laid his hands on its head (probably confessing his sins as he did so), slew the beast, and watched while the priest manipulated the blood and burnt various parts of the animal on the altar. For most men the offering of an animal in sacrifice was a great strain on very limited resources. Except for the very rich, the offering of a lamb meant a substantial expense. While sacrifice could be carried on in a completely external fashion (that was the constant temptation), yet for the man who used sacrifice meaningfully, one of the lessons that was constantly being brought before him was that true worship costs. This lesson was repeated in other ways. Thus, on a certain occasion the Israelite was bidden to take a basket of fruit, bring it to the holy place, and give it to the priest who would set it before the altar. The Israelite was then to say: “And now, behold, I have brought the first of the fruit of the ground, which thou, O Lord, hast given me.” The instructions went on: “And thou shalt set it down before the Lord thy God, and worship before the Lord thy God” (Deut. 26: 10). The offering of the gift and the worship before the Lord are intimately connected. It is as he makes his gift that he is able to worship.

There is a very interesting story told in the last chapter of 2 Samuel. King David wanted to offer a sacrifice, and wanted to offer it quickly. He was near the threshing floor of Araunah, the Jebusite, and David asked that he might buy the threshing floor to build an altar unto the Lord. With a truly lordly gesture Araunah offered to give the king the threshing floor and

more: "Let my lord the king take and offer up what seemeth good unto him", he said, "behold, the oxen for the burnt offering, and the threshing instruments and the furniture of the oxen for the wood: all this, O king, doth Araunah give unto the king" (2 Sam. 24: 22f.). This was a very generous action, and one which, we think, David might well have accepted. But he did not. Instead he said to Araunah: "Nay; but I will verily buy it of thee at a price". Then he added the significant words, "neither will I offer burnt offerings unto the Lord my God which cost me nothing" (verse 24). A number of outstanding commentators think that Araunah's offer was not meant seriously, being merely an oriental way of conducting a sale. This may well be the case, but our point still stands. The question at issue is not whether the Jebusite was sincere in his offer or not, but the ground on which David refused it. In his answer David showed that he had grasped a most important principle. True worship is at cost. This is something that still needs to be learned on a day when men take churchgoing lightly, when they will go to church only if it is easy, if the church is near, if the choir is good, if the preacher is approved, if the congregation is socially acceptable, if the weather isn't bad, if friends haven't dropped in for a visit, and if any one of a hundred and one other things haven't stopped them. If worship means a real effort, then men today are often most disinclined to make it. Our generation needs desperately to learn that worship that costs us nothing is worth precisely what it costs.

During the conversation between our Lord and the woman of Samaria, there comes a very notable pronouncement on the subject of worship. "The hour cometh," Jesus said, "and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth: for such doth the Father seek to be His worshippers" (Jn. 4: 23). Then our Lord went on: "God is a Spirit (better 'God is spirit'): and they that worship Him must worship in spirit and truth". These words sound the death knell of mere ritualism. They indicate that the outward is completely unimportant in comparison with the inward. True worship is not a matter of postures and words. It is a matter of the spirit and of truth. The attitude in which we worship matters far more than the forms by which we worship. The forms may indeed be various, but there is no substitute for the completely sincere attitude, for devotion to God's truth, for lowliness of heart and subjection of spirit.

Notice, also, that these words in their insistence that worship must be conformable to the nature of God restrict worship to the way God prescribes. G. S. Hendry draws attention to a common error. He says: "It has commonly been taken to mean that God, being Spirit, is present everywhere and can be worshipped anywhere; the important thing is not where men worship but how they worship". Hendry denies this, maintaining that the saying "means the precise opposite; it means that God is present in his own realm, to which man as such has no access. To worship God in spirit is not a possibility that is always and everywhere open to men . . . But this is just the gospel of Christ, that this possibility has now been opened to men . . . The meaning is that the location has been redefined, and God is now to be worshipped in the place where He is present, i.e. in him who is the truth incarnate." Worship is not a right inherent in man, it is a boon, a good gift of God. We cannot do as we will in this matter. It is imperative that we exercise God's gift in the way he directs.

And if Jesus tells us about the way of worship, it is also true that He makes true worship possible. He came to reveal God to us, and the God we worship is "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ". There is no substitute for worship which is grounded in Christ. Raymond Abba maintains that the first principle is that Christian worship depends upon the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Worship, that is to say, begins not from our end but from God's; it springs from the divine initiative in redemption. We come to God because God, in Jesus

Christ, has come to us . . . Worship is essentially a response, man's response to God's Word of grace, to what He has done for us men and for our salvation.

Worship must be grounded in Christ partly because He alone has revealed to us God as He is, and we have already seen that worship must be conformable to God's nature. And partly, also, this is due to the fact that we can approach God only on the grounds of what Jesus has done for us. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of having "boldness to enter into the holy place by the blood of Jesus" (Heb. 10: 19), and there is no other way. It is on the basis of what Jesus has done, and only on this basis, that we may draw near to God. We are sinful men, completely unworthy and unwilling to draw near to God. It is only as we are forgiven and cleansed and transformed by Christ's atoning work that we may offer any worship. But we have been saved in Him and by Him. So Paul can assure the Philippians that "we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God, and glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3: 3). Worship is not an unaided human activity but one engaged upon in "the Spirit of God", and it is accompanied by a glorying in Christ Jesus. "Christian worship" is a meaningful expression.

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There may well be other important aspects of worship, but these are the ones I wish to stress. We must be on our guard against thinking that the only criterion to be applied to a suggested rite is whether it is aesthetically pleasing, or whether it conforms to what are believed to be the practices of the early church, or whether it leaves us with a pleasant feeling. Worship is too important for that. While the Bible does not give a set of rules it does give us clear guidance about the essential nature of worship. In days like these it is incumbent on us all that we give good heed to this guidance and ensure that we have a firm grasp on the intimate connection between sound doctrine and upright living and true worship.

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