

Biblical Facts on Church Worship

A key problem amongst Christian interpreters is to dwell on OT scriptures and import these specific concepts into church life, ignoring the controlling NT scriptures which amend them. An extreme case would be to justify the employment of OT animal sacrifices. This is obviously avoided since it would be a blasphemous affront to the cross of Christ. Yet many churches use priestly regalia and robes, which are directly taken from the OT priestly garments, which have also been rescinded. This error of interpretation is frequently employed in teaching about worship.

This short study on worship in the church focuses upon the clear apostolic teaching in the NT letters, which represents the last words of Jesus to the church; words which he said he would bring by the Holy Spirit after his ascension. To understand worship, we must first get to grips with the apostolic content, and then apply these principles to the relevant OT scriptures. Hebrews, for instance, tells us that the whole Levitical worship system has been cancelled. There are no more: sacrifices (Jesus is the one and only sacrifice), priests and musical directors (we are all priests before God), external buildings (we are the temple of God), set rituals (we are free under the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit), and orchestras (we are a harmonic symphony to God).

The main emphasis of Jesus and the apostles is that worship is now a spiritual matter, based upon truth. OT worship was external, tied to certain buildings, fleshly, loud and frequently smelly (incense, smoke, dead and dying animals etc.). NT worship is nothing like this at all. This means that the place of music, behaviour and practices must be re-evaluated. For instance, instrumental music is never mentioned as accompanying NT worship because the contribution of the worshipper's voice, however weak, is more important than any backing music – now matter how emotional. Today, loud music dominates most church worship.

Too much contemporary church worship is basically old covenant in structure and expression. It is loud, uses many instruments, contains much singing and repeated choruses, is controlled by the actions of a few men at the front, is non contributory, involves lots of physical movements (including falling over and dancing) and is basically fleshly and soulish. The church must regain genuine spiritual worship.

Teaching passages where earthly worship is mentioned in the letters

Key word: Proskuneo – ('worship') to kiss the hand, like a dog licking his master's hand.
*And there was given me a reed like unto a rod: and the angel stood, saying, Rise, and measure the temple of God, and the altar, and them that **worship** therein. (Rev 11:1)*
*Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come: and **worship** him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters. (Rev 14:7)*
*Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name? For thou only art holy: for all nations shall come and **worship** before thee; for thy judgments are made manifest. (Rev 15:4)*
*And I fell at his feet to **worship** him. And he said unto me, See thou do it not: I am thy fellow-servant, and of thy brethren that have the testimony of Jesus: **worship** God: for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. (Rev 19:10)*

8 And I John saw these things, and heard them. And when I had heard and seen, I fell down to **worship** before the feet of the angel which showed me these things.

9 Then saith he unto me, See thou do it not: for I am thy fellow-servant, and of thy brethren the prophets, and of them which keep the sayings of this book: **worship** God. (Rev 22:8-9)

And thus the secrets of his heart are revealed; and so, falling down on his face, he [an unbeliever] will **worship** God and report that God is truly among you. (1 Cor 14:25)

By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and **worshipped**, leaning on the top of his staff. (Heb 11:21)

Secondary word: Latreuo – ('worship', 'service') service to God, to offer sacred gifts, religious service.

For we are the circumcision, who **worship** God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh. (Phil 3:3)

How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to **serve** the living God? (Heb 9:14)

Relevant teaching passages in the historical narratives (Gospels and Acts)

Proskuneo

Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to **worship** Him. (Matt 2:2)

Then Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall **worship** the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.' (Matt 4:10; Lk 4:8)

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Him with her sons, **kneeling down** and asking something from Him. (Matt 20:20)

And they **worshipped** Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. (Lk 24:52)

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, **worship** the Father. (Jn 4:21)

But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true **worshippers** will **worship** the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to **worship** Him. (Jn 4:23)

God is Spirit, and those who **worship** Him must **worship** in spirit and truth. (John 4:24)

First Conclusion

1. Proskuneo appears relatively few times.
2. Proskuneo is rare in the letters in connection with Christian activity and appears only once in connection with Christian worship, and then only by referring to unbelievers.
3. The activity of proskuneo is not described, other than being a form of obeisance. In one case it merely meant kneeling down as Jesus is asked for something.
4. Worship is mainly considered to be personal and individual. Even when mentioned in connection with the temple, that temple is the whole body of Christ not a special building. The Biblical emphasis regarding worship is the submission of the individual in honour to God.

5. In comparison, in Christian meetings the word 'edification' appears many times. The key NT reason for gathering together is not to experience some kind of emotional worship, but to edify one another.

Mutual Edification

Oikodome (edification, upbuilding)

Apostolic authority and leadership gifting is given for the edification of saints, not for personal use, domination of others, ministerial authentication or public spectacle:

- *For even if I should boast somewhat more about our authority, which the Lord gave us for edification and not for your destruction, I shall not be ashamed. (2 Cor 10:8)*
- *... the power which the Lord hath given me to edification. (2 Cor 13:10)*
- *... for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ. (Eph 4:12)*
- *... we do all things, beloved, for your edification. (2 Cor 12:19)*

Edification is the main reason for gathering together:

- *How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. (1 Cor 14:26)*
- The word 'edify' occurs in various forms seven times in 1 Cor 14 (seven is the number of perfection; 1 Cor 14:3,4,4,5,12,17, 26)
- *He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. (1 Cor 14:4)*
- *Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing. (1 Thess 5:11)*
- *... nor give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which cause disputes rather than godly edification which is in faith. (1 Tim 1:4)*

Christians should concentrate on edifying one another at all times:

- *Let each of us please his neighbour for his good, leading to edification. (Rom 15:2)*
- *Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies. (1 Cor 8:1)*
- *Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another. (Rm 14:19)*

Edification leads to strong saints, the fear of the Lord and evangelistic success.

Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied. (Acts 9:31)

Edification leads to realisation of unity with Christ and each other and growth in holiness

... in whom [Christ] the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. (Eph 2:21)

Second conclusion

1. Worship is mainly personal; edification is mainly corporate.
2. The goal of leaders is to edify saints and get them to minister to each other.

3. Edifying one another is the main reason for attending church meetings.
4. Believers should concentrate on edification even when they meet socially.
5. The practice of edifying saints leads to growth, true unity and success as truth takes hold of lives.
6. The life that loves is a life which edifies.

What are spiritual sacrifices? (1 Pt 2:5)

It is clear, from an examination of the OT, that worship itself is tied to the idea of sacrifice. This is partly explained by being a focus upon the atonement of the Lord Jesus, but worship also cost the OT worshipper. He had to provide the lamb, goat, bull etc. It was his best animal, in fact the first fruits of everything belonged to the Lord and had to be given up to the Levites.

The mention of spiritual Sacrifices to the converted Jews (whom Peter and the writer to the Hebrews were addressing) would bring to mind the OT liturgical concept and would imply: involvement, a real giving up, a selfless offering and a sacrifice to God. Spiritual sacrifices are not to merely be equated with a self-satisfying emotional jamboree on a Sunday morning which costs nothing and which gratifies the participants. What sort of costs are involved?

One result of edification is that the church is built up together and able to offer these spiritual sacrifices. Building up means that all have a part to play in the upbuilding. One personal cost is that people must contribute in an edifying way. They must give of themselves, share gifts.

You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:5)

The sacrifice of praise is the fruit of lips – not just singing but speaking, admonishing, saying praise, preaching, edifying etc. This is something which is not reserved for Sunday morning but is to be done at all times – ‘continually’.

By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name. But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased. (Heb 13:15-16)

One type of spiritual sacrifice is a very practical matter – giving of goods and money for the relief of the poor and needy. This is said to please God especially:

- *But I have all, and abound: I am full, having received of Epaphroditus the things which were sent from you, an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, well-pleasing to God. (Phil 4:18)*
- *Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased. (Heb 13:15-16)*

The main explanation of spiritual sacrifices is summed up in Rm 12:1, it is the giving up, the offering, the sacrifice to God of our entire lives to be used for his service. This is true worship.

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you all present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. (Rm 12:1)

This is the crucial controlling text to explain what worship really is.

- It is an action done by grace, ‘*by the mercies of God*’.

- *'Present'* is a technical term used for offering sacrifices. Paul has the image of OT worship at the back of his mind.
- *'Bodies'* – something real, worship is not mystical and esoteric. It involves real actions and work and is not just an intellectual exercise.
- *'A living sacrifice'* – i.e. in direct contrast to the slain animals used in OT offerings.
- *'Acceptable'* means: 'well-pleasing'. God enjoys real worship from his children.
- *'Reasonable'* – rational (*logikos* from *logos*). Worship is to be offered by the reason, with intelligence. The mind is employed not passive. *Logikos* means: pertaining to the speech, logic or reason; reasonable, logical, or pertaining to the soul (where the mind is situated). Irrational actions, passivity, loss of control or mindless behaviour are thus not to be equated with divine worship.
- *'Service'* = i.e. the temple service, divine service (*latreia*), 'worship'. In the Greek OT (LXX) the word is used in connection with the passover service: Ex 12:25; 13:5, and the service of burnt offerings, sacrifices and peace offerings. Jos 22:27. The thought in Paul's mind is OT divine worship which includes sacrifice.

Spiritual sacrifices are thus:

1. The fruit of the lips used in God's service in a multitude of ways, not merely singing.
2. The giving up of our bodies to God's service / worship.
3. Edifying our brethren spiritually by encouragement in the fear of God.
4. Edifying our brethren practically with gifts to meet their needs in the love of God.

All these things comprise worship, which should be going on continually day by day. Worship is essentially obeisance to a king. Since Jesus is the King of kings, and since we are his subjects, we should be worshipping him by one means or another all the time.

Third conclusion

1. Rm 12:1 is the most helpful description of what worship really is.
2. Worship is thus the yielding of our bodies to God for use in his service daily.
3. Worship uses the mind and is never irrational or creates passivity.
4. Spiritual sacrifice does not merely mean singing praise.
5. A life given over to God in testimony is a worshipful life. This type of life will include seeking to edify one's brethren and meet their needs.
6. The picture of this kind of life is the OT burnt offering, tied to the altar and wholly consumed for God. It is yielded submission.

Praise in the NT

The various words for 'praise' in the apostolic letters

- Is used of men as well as God, as when someone is praised for a good act (1 Cor 11:2, 17, 22). [*Epaineo* – approved, commended.] Men are never to be worshipped.
- Praise is an objective outward testimony. The church is chosen to demonstrate God's glory and thus is his praise (Eph 1:6, 12, 14). [*Epainos* – approbation, commendation.]
- The church is called to '*show forth*' God's praise. This means: to declare, tell out, publish, proclaim (1 Pt 2:9). [*Arete* – virtue, moral goodness.] It includes many forms but does not imply inward, introspective enjoyment, rather it is outward demonstration to unbelievers.
- Thus our character and behaviour is a praise to God (Phil 1:11). [*Epainos*]
- The truth of praiseworthy, godly character is most clear in persecution (1 Pt 1:7). [*Epainos*]

- Praise can be sung, thus demonstrating, commending the works of God (Heb 2:12). [*Humneo* – to sing a hymn.]
- Praise is to be continual (Heb 13:15) [*Ainesis* – praise, a thank-offering.] and was performed daily by the early church (Acts 2:46-47) [*Aineo*] This echoes the OT in Psa 35:28; 71:6.
- Spoken or sung praise should include thanksgiving (Heb 13:15). [*Ainesis*]

Praise in the transition period after the cross (end of the Gospels and Acts)

Aineo; to praise, extol, sing praises in honour to God.

Luke 24:53

Acts 2:47

Acts 3:8-9

Fourth conclusion

1. Praise is primarily an outward expression of testimony to declare the goodness of someone or something.
2. In believers, praise is the objective testimony to God.
3. This can be the demonstration of godly character, the spoken declaration of God's goodness or the sung praise of his glory.
4. It will usually include thanksgiving.

Overall Conclusion

It is impossible to establish a NT apologetic for the use of any music in church services as it is never mentioned. Neither did the early church use musical instruments for over 200 years and when they did, great leaders like Chrysostom condemned it as a fleshly development. Worship is primarily service to God and is most clearly seen in the presentation of our lives to God's use (Rom 12:1). It is something we do all the time (hopefully) and does not need music. Praise is pre-eminently the testimony of our lives to God, usually including thanksgiving; it is also expressed in sacrificial giving. We are to bring the sacrifice of praise (1 Pt 2:5) which is the fruit of our lips. Heb 13:15-16 and 1 Cor 14 make clear that this is not just singing, but the varied expression of speaking, teaching, exhorting, singing, testifying etc.

So, Biblically, worship is something pre-eminently done throughout our lives and is expressed by obeisance – we bow, or stoop to kiss God's hand, we manifest submission. Praise is mainly a testimony, firstly of the whole life, secondly by the voice in church services. These church meetings are founded upon mutual edification where everyone has the opportunity to share a word to build up or express praise to testify. This praise can be sung or spoken (Eph 5:19) and people can even be taught through singing (Col 3:16). Worship, praise and edification are intermingled in church gatherings. As we praise, we edify. As we edify we encourage others to praise.

Now, since western culture has lost its communal roots it is clear that spontaneous singing is a rare thing and many would struggle to initiate it. For this reason, some instrumental music is appropriate in order to assist the human voice in singing praise. This music should be minimal as the Biblical focal point is the human voice, not the background music. Music is a servant, and a stop gap at that. It should never overrule the singing – a basic piano or guitar is all that is required and no rhythm instruments are necessary. In fact, drums and percussion are a totally

pagan religious vehicle for inculcating passivity (breaking down natural, rational resistance) and softening up audiences.

This is the NT emphasis. We see nothing of a gradual ascent up a ladder to a greater sense of the divine. There are no gradual stages of 'worship' until we get 'lost in God'. Not only is there nothing like this in the NT church, but we see from Biblical and secular history that this type of worship is common among the occult and false, pagan religions. In fact the Bible places a great emphasis upon the mind in worship. Rm 12:1 shows that worship ('service' = *latreia*, worship, temple service, priestly service) is to be done 'reasonably', this means rationally, logically (*logikos* from *logos*). Passivity is exactly what the devil requires in order to get us to submit to his wiles. It is the objective of occult religious exercises and the basis of mysticism. When someone tells you '*don't think, just drink*' they are disobeying God and following an occult programme.

The notion of starting a service with exuberant praise, repeating choruses for effect, stringing songs together as one for intensity of feeling, gradually moving through to more reflective, subjective worship songs and ending with an intense emotional mood ready to hear from a preacher or prophet is pure, mystical flesh. This is exactly what pagan religions, in all cultures, have done for centuries. The process makes people amenable and receptive to suggestion, what's more – they actually enjoy the process. The more the mind is side-tracked and the emotions take over, the more easy it is for people to be manipulated; either by men or by Satan. Worship, praise, quiet reflection, consecration, rational teaching, exuberant singing and edification are intermingled in NT meetings, as the Spirit directs.

Biblical worship is rational, even while it employs the emotions and the will. The mind is never disengaged and the basis of it is always truth (Jn 4:24). It is knowledge of God which dominates and directs our praise, not emotionalism.

The picture emerging here is that there is a wide gap between the modern conception of praise and worship and the Biblical explanation and models. We need to get believers to be true worshippers day by day and more focused to edify one another in church meetings. 'Worship' services must be freed up from a focus upon external superficialities, emotionalism, the denigration of rationality, fleshly exuberance, the dangers of passivity, the dominance of leaders and a dependence upon loud music (whether old organs or youthful rock bands). Rather, the value of individual contributions to serve the flock and the importance of personal holiness must be emphasised. It is time for a better, worshipful testimony to be seen in the character of believers and the claiming back of corporate Biblical worship in Christian meetings.

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