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VOLUME 4

# REFORMATION ANGLICAN WORSHIP

*Experiencing Grace, Expressing Gratitude*

MICHAEL P. JENSEN

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JOHN W. YATES III

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“I am thrilled with this clear, concise statement of the Reformation Anglican view of worship in language that is generous and accessible. Michael Jensen makes it clear that the Anglican Reformers simply wanted the prayer book to be God-centered, Christ-centered, and Bible-centered. I hope and expect that this volume will receive a wide readership.”

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“Michael Jensen’s contribution to the Reformation Anglicanism Essential Library brings into sharp focus the grace-filled gospel center of historic Anglican worship and makes a spirited case for the place and purpose of preaching, prayer, song, and sacrament in the contemporary Christian gathering.”

**Kanishka Raffel**, Dean of Sydney, Australia

*Reformation Anglican Worship*

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THE REFORMATION ANGLICANISM ESSENTIAL LIBRARY

VOLUME 4

# REFORMATION ANGLICAN WORSHIP

*Experiencing Grace, Expressing Gratitude*

MICHAEL P. JENSEN

 **CROSSWAY®**  
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*Reformation Anglican Worship: Experiencing Grace, Expressing Gratitude*

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For my sons





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# Introduction

Yet because there is no remedy, but that of necessity there must be some rules: therefore certain rules are here set forth, which as they be few in number; so they be plain and easy to be understood. So yet here you have an order for prayer (as touching the reading of holy scripture) much agreeable to the mind and purpose of the old fathers, and a great deal more profitable and commodious, than that which of late was used. It is more profitable, because here are left out many things, whereof some be untrue, some uncertain, some vain and superstitious: and is ordained nothing to be read, but the very pure word of God, the holy scriptures, or that which is evidently grounded upon the same; and that in such a language and order, as is most easy and plain for the understanding, both of the readers and hearers.

Thomas Cranmer, preface to the 1549 Book of Common Prayer<sup>1</sup>

## Uncommon Anglican Worship

On February 20, 1547, the nine-year-old Edward VI was crowned in Westminster Abbey. His archbishop, Thomas Cranmer, is reputed to have charged him with these words: “Your majesty is God’s

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1. Quoted in Joseph Ketley, ed., *Two Liturgies . . . of Edward VI* (Cambridge: Parker Society, 1844), 18–19.

vicegerent, and Christ's vicar within your own dominions, and to see, with your predecessor Josiah, God truly worshiped, and idolatry destroyed; the tyranny of the bishops of Rome banished from your subjects, and images removed."<sup>2</sup>

What Cranmer wanted to see in a Reformed Church of England—which he would institute over the next half-decade, with the king's help—was nothing less than a revolution in worship. Cranmer could have used these words before Henry VIII, for under the old king the idolatry of the saints' shrines had ended as the shrines were torn down. But now Cranmer was free to give his words a clearly Protestant meaning by applying them to the Mass, something that Henry would never have allowed. The evangelical gospel was a severe condemnation of the practices of medieval Catholicism and the theology of worship that it implied. The need for new forms of worship was urgent because the stakes were so high in Cranmer's mind: if the people were going to worship God rightly, then the unbiblical, distracting, and frankly idolatrous practices of the previous era needed to be repudiated and replaced with preaching and praying as means of fostering belief. Nothing less than individual salvation was in the balance.

What ensued was a complete renovation in the idea of worship along the lines of the Reformation gospel. In evangelical terms, worship was not the people offering something to God so that he would bless them but a means of preaching the gospel itself. Worship meant God giving to the people, and not the other way around. Liturgy was to be focused not on the work of the people but on their reception of the benefits of salvation. First in 1549 and then again in 1552, Cranmer gave the English people a pattern of worship that enshrined the priority of God's grace and gave voice to the people's response of gratitude in words they could understand. In these two editions of the Book of Common Prayer, Cranmer ensured that the word of God would not be silent among

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2. Henry Jenkyns, ed., *The Remains of Thomas Cranmer*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1833), 2:119.

the people of God. He presented to people the true character of God, the almighty and everlasting God “whose property is always to have mercy,” that they might worship him as he truly is.<sup>3</sup> And he ensured that the death of Christ for sin was at the center of an Anglican piety.

The forms of worship created by Cranmer have become for many Anglicans the distinctive mark of their church. For some people, to say “Anglican” or “not Anglican” means something about the form of worship that is being used in a particular congregation. And yet, some four and a half centuries after Cranmer, the reality is that the churches of the worldwide Anglican Communion are not as united in their habits of corporate worship as one might think. Happily, most, if not all, provinces have authorized significant revisions of the Book of Common Prayer, updating and translating the language as necessary.

Some liberty has been allowed—or taken—to experiment for the sake of reaching the lost, such that traditional forms of worship exist side by side with highly informal gatherings. As a matter of fact, Cranmer had already imagined a time when a diversity of forms of worship would be needed for cultural and evangelistic reasons. It is worth examining Article 34 at this point:

#### **XXXIV. Of the Traditions of the Church.**

It is not necessary that traditions and ceremonies be in all places one, or utterly like, for at all times they have been diverse, and may be changed according to the diversity of countries, times, and men’s manners, so that nothing be ordained against God’s Word. Whosoever through his private judgment, willingly and purposely doth openly break the traditions and ceremonies of the Church, which be not repugnant to the Word of God, and be ordained and approved by common authority, ought to be rebuked openly, (that others may fear to do the like) as he that offendeth against the common order of the Church, and hurteth

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3. Ketley, *Two Liturgies*, 92, 278.

the authority of the Magistrate, and woundeth the consciences of the weak brethren.

Every particular or national Church hath authority to ordain, change, and abolish, ceremonies or rites of the Church ordained only by man's authority, so that all things be done to edifying.<sup>4</sup>

The principles for instituting ceremonies and rites for each new era and place take into account “the diversity of countries, times, and men's manners,” so long as what is ordained by each church is “done to edifying” and is not simply a matter of the exercise of whim. The test is whether a particular form agrees with God's word or not, and whether the principle of order is upheld or upset by what is done as churches gather. In other words, there was, to the Reformers' way of thinking about it, a need for flexibility and even pragmatism about forms of worship—so long as the theological principles were not cast aside, and as long as any new form served the mission of the church to proclaim the gospel.

This is a matter of much greater concern in the churches of the Anglican Communion today. The current diversity of forms of worship represents not simply the practical needs of the gospel in each place but frequently a different theology of worship altogether. Without knowledge of the theological principles of Anglican worship, we are simply not able to discriminate between forms of worship that cloud or even dishonor God and forms of worship that proclaim his truth. Instead, we simply do what is right in our own eyes. In their various ways, the Anglo-Catholic movement, the charismatic movement, and Reformed evangelicals have pursued their own *theological* convictions about Christian worship above and beyond the words on the pages of the prayer book and into territory highly disputed by the other groups within Anglicanism. What are we to make of this diversity, and how can we evaluate it?

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4. Charles Hardwick, *A History of the Articles of Religion* (Cambridge: Deighton Bell, 1859), 319 (all quotations from this source have modernized spelling).

If the stakes are as high as Cranmer set them in his charge to the young king, this cannot be a matter of simple indifference. That does not mean that intolerance and inflexibility ought to be the aim. But it does mean that we need to recollect what Cranmer and the other Reformers were trying to do when they prepared the Book of Common Prayer and commanded its use in the churches. Furthermore, it does mean that we need to seek out once more a proper scriptural and theological account of worship so that “nothing be ordained against God’s Word.”

That is the principle task of what follows in the book before you. My objective is to uncover the roots of the Reformation theology and practice of worship. But I am doing this not because I think it is simply a matter of historical interest. Nor am I interested in playing that old Anglican game—namely, the search for the allegedly most authentic reset point for Anglicanism—or to establish such a thing as “Anglican identity,” which would be by extension a kind of imperial claim over other accounts of Anglican identity. While it is obviously my conviction that the theological commitments of Cranmer and the other English Reformers had, and still have, seminal significance for Anglicans and that the theology of this period has often been disregarded in a more than cavalier fashion (historical pun intended!), I am more interested in whether these theological convictions continue to be sound ones for today. That, it seems to me, is truest to the spirit of the Reformers, and indeed to orthodox Christian faith—that nothing be “repugnant to the Word of God.”

That was crucial for Cranmer as a liturgist. He was a genuinely *theological* liturgist, seeking to enshrine a particular gospel by means of his revision of English worship. If vagueness or ambiguity is a feature of the Book of Common Prayer, such that different parties have simultaneously claimed to find their own theological convictions expressed therein, then that is not Cranmer’s intention. Cranmer was clear about what he was repudiating, as his charge to King Edward demonstrates. He also clearly was



intending the Book of Common Prayer, the Articles of Religion (in his time, forty-two), and the Book of Homilies to be a complementary set, mutually informing one another. The origins of the distinctive Anglican worship—for which it is best known—lie in a clear step away from the worship of the medieval Catholic Church and the theological convictions that it represented. As Howe and Pascoe write:

If any Anglican prayer book is read in the light of the Articles, the thoroughly unique and Protestant nature of Anglicanism becomes obvious. Without this interpretative framework, prayer books can be seen as deliberately ambiguous at times. This is part of the genius of Anglican worship. Elizabeth made certain that the sharp lines drawn in the area of doctrine were blurred in the area of worship to accommodate as many people as possible. Sadly, in our day, the widespread neglect of the Articles has permitted such a diversity in the interpretation of the same liturgy that the worldwide Anglican Church has been thrown into much unnecessary and destructive confusion.<sup>5</sup>

In relatively recent times, the Latin slogan *lex orandi, lex credendi* (literally “the law of prayer is the law of belief,” but usually understood as “praying shapes believing” or “praying determines belief”) has been used to suggest that doctrine is subordinate to liturgy. Hence, *The Book of Alternative Services of the Anglican Church of Canada* (1985) says:

It is precisely the intimate relationship of gospel, liturgy, and service that stands behind the theological principle *lex orandi: lex credendi*, i.e., the law of prayer is the law of belief. This principle, particularly treasured by Anglicans, means that theology as the statement of the Church’s belief is drawn from the liturgy, i.e., from the point at which the gospel and the challenge of Christian life meet in prayer. The development of theology is

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5. John W. Howe and Samuel C. Pascoe, *Our Anglican Heritage: Can an Ancient Church Be a Church of the Future?*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010), loc. 780 of 4959, Kindle.

not a legislative process which is imposed on liturgy; liturgy is a reflective process in which theology may be discovered.<sup>6</sup>

A number of things ought to be said about this principle, not least that its alleged origins in the ancient church are certainly questionable. It was introduced into Anglicanism in the twentieth century, having been coined in the late nineteenth century by a French Roman Catholic monk named Prosper Gueranger (1805–1875). But even so, the principle is usually taken to mean (as it is in *The Book of Alternative Services*) that doctrine is derived from worship, and not the other way around; and that, as a result, theology is a groping to describe the inexpressible experience of worship: it is “a reflective process in which theology may be discovered.” That is both a mistranslation of the Latin and a poor description of the Reformation Anglicanism of Thomas Cranmer. The Latin phrase is of course reversible, such that “the law of belief is the law of prayer.” Cranmer was clearly in possession of a set of theological convictions that he hoped to express through his liturgy. He knew what he was—and wasn’t—inviting English churchgoers to believe as they worshiped. After all, the first major liturgical change that Cranmer instituted under Edward VI had been the preaching of the doctrinal homilies in the middle of the Latin Mass.

Perhaps this might be thought a somewhat distastefully combative start to the book. Don’t we live a world away from those old controversies? Do we twenty-first-century Anglicans not recoil from the violent outcomes of the disagreements of the sixteenth century? Certainly we do. But this does not excuse the theological fuzziness that besets contemporary Anglicanism. I would regard the liturgical confusion of our present time as a distinct echo of the controversies of the sixteenth century. Different *styles* of worship amount to nothing at all, as Cranmer knew. In which case, let as many liturgical flowers bloom as can be planted. But a different

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6. *The Book of Alternative Services of the Anglican Church of Canada* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1985), 10.

*theology* of worship is indicative of a different view of how people come to know God—how they get saved and how they live before him, in other words. That is something worth caring about if we are to be authentically Christian.

In this book, therefore, I will be less concerned to outline my preferences for a particular style of church meeting than to explore the theological convictions that made the Anglicanism of the Reformation what it was and is today—and what it could be in the future.

## What Is Worship?

But what is *worship*, in any case? At one level, people are generally sure that this English word means “what goes on in a church meeting.” We ask, “Where do you worship,” and expect the answer to be something like “St Botolph’s, at 10 a.m.” A more specific usage equates congregational singing with worship, such that there are “worship pastors” and “worship leaders” (who are usually musicians) and “worship albums.” These uses of the word reflect its dictionary definitions, which describe worship as the reverence offered to a divine power and the acts in which such reverence is expressed.<sup>7</sup>

But these common uses of the word *worship* are slightly misleading. For one thing, it is certainly the case that worship can be carried out by individuals who are not participating in a meeting in a church building. A believer can feed on Christ through his word, as Cranmer puts it, at any time or place.<sup>8</sup> For another, what constitutes an act or an expression of worship is actually broader than the common usage indicates. Both Testaments of the Bible push the people of God to regard worship not simply as religious activity but as a form of life. The Old Testament in particular is vigorous in its condemnation of false worship and worship corrupted by evil behavior.

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7. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines *worship* as “homage or reverence paid to a deity, esp. in a formal service.” A secondary meaning is “adoration or devotion comparable to religious homage shown towards a person or principle,” as in “the worship of wealth.” *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, ed. R. E. Allen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 1414.

8. Jenkyns, *Remains of Cranmer*, 3:319–20.

This is a point on which the English Reformers would absolutely insist in their theological thinking about worship.

It may also be dangerously misleading if, by using the word *worship*, we imply (even accidentally) that it is by our offerings of worship that we make ourselves acceptable to God. The Reformation insight was that this notion of worship was based on a horrifying self-delusion; for fallen human beings are, on their own merits, incapable of giving true worship to the one being who is worthy of that adoration. True worship is, in fact, opened up for Christian believers only by Jesus Christ's worship of the Father. For Christians, then, worship engages with God only as a response to the prior grace he shows us in Jesus Christ.

Nevertheless, as you can see from the table of contents of this book, I have accepted the common definition of *worship* as indicating what Christian believers do when they gather. The important thing for us, as it was for Cranmer, is whether or not this activity known as worship is understood biblically. I will be asking, if the Reformation formularies of the Church of England, along with the intentions of the evangelical Reformers, are taken seriously, then what do we learn about the biblical theology and practice of the gathered worship of the congregation? But I will be seeking to place this concept of corporate worship within the wider sense of worship that a properly Christian theology of worship demands.

The first two chapters of this book are an exposition of the Reformation Anglican understanding of worship, which of course stems from the Reformation Anglican understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The insistence of the Reformers on new forms of worship was not incidental or simply an updating of what had gone before. It represented a transformation of the previous habits of worship in light of a recovered theological understanding of salvation itself. For the English Reformers in Henrician and Edwardian England, human sin was far more intractable, and God's grace far more extraordinary, than they had previously understood it to be. They wanted people to know and express this as they worshiped.

Salvation was no longer thought to be mediated through the sacraments and servants of the church but was through the gospel of the crucified Christ revealed in the pages of Scripture.

That commitment to the authoritative voice of the Bible gives shape to this book. Thus, in chapter 1, I seek to lay out the kind of theology of worship that undergirded the Reformation by starting with Scripture itself. Since my purpose here is not simply antiquarian, it is vital to revisit the biblical sources of evangelical worship. Chapter 2 is an account of that journey in the sixteenth century, beginning with Thomas Cranmer and his prayer books. I will show that the theology—and yes, what we might call the “spirituality,” or the “piety”—of receiving grace with gratitude is the basis for a distinctive approach to worship. There is, as Charles Hefling has written, “not much question where on the larger theological map the book [Book of Common Prayer] belongs. It was put there by its principal writer, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, who deliberately fashioned the prayer book services so as to take one side rather than another in the theological controversies of his day.”<sup>9</sup>

The opening two chapters are then expanded as I investigate the various activities of the gathered church and how they spring from, or ought to spring from, an evangelical account of worship. We begin, in chapter 3, with preaching and the word, noting that Cranmer enshrined a very prominent place for the preaching and reading of Scripture in the vernacular in the English church. This was a result of his central theological conviction that, as Paul says, “faith comes from hearing” (Rom. 10:17). For Cranmer, the written word of God was the instrument by which believers were *told*, *turned*, and *tethered* (as Ashley Null explains).<sup>10</sup>

Chapter 4 addresses itself to the controversial matter of the sacraments. Without question, the sacraments had a cherished place

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9. Charles C. Hefling, “Introduction: Anglicans and Common Prayer,” in *The Oxford Guide to the Book of Common Prayer: A Worldwide Survey*, ed. Charles C. Hefling and Cynthia L. Shattuck (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3.

10. Dr. Null commonly uses these verbal adjectives about Cranmer’s understanding of Scripture when he gives lectures to churches.

within the theology of Reformation Anglicanism while providing the focus for some of its most deadly disagreements, even among the Reformers. The meaning and nature of baptism and the Lord's Supper have been contested by Anglicans ever since. However, the Reformation formularies (like Cranmer himself) were quite clear about what the sacraments were not. A Reformation Anglican view of the sacraments is distinctly Reformed without lapsing into mere memorialism. The chapter then addresses the place of the sacraments for Reformation Anglicanism today.

In the fifth chapter, I address the subject of prayer. That Cranmer called his book the Book of Common Prayer and not the Book of Common Worship should not escape our notice. The very structure of the prayers written for the prayer book and for its successors frames the congregation in its relationship to God. More recent liturgies have not simply modernized the language of prayer but frequently changed the nature of our address to God—which is as serious a theological development as can be imagined. A change in the names for God can in fact reveal a change in the identity of God—by which we may again note that a completely different doctrine of God is at play.

Lastly, in chapter 6, I discuss the place and purpose of music in worship and as worship. Corporate worship within Christianity is always marked by singing. Today, of course, there are massive controversies over the role and place of music, and the charismatic movement has led to a new emphasis on contemporary and more popular forms of music. There were no less intense discussions about the place of music in the sixteenth century, with the cathedral choirs surviving the attempts of more radical elements to dismantle them. The arguments about musical style are a distraction from the principles outlined in the Reformation, in which the word of God must be served by musical forms and not made subservient to it. The chapter contains a challenge to churches everywhere to make use of music in line with these principles.

The Reformers of the sixteenth century were convinced that the right pattern of corporate worship was essential for the spiritual health of the people of God, and even for the evangelization of the nation. We need not imagine that anything has changed on that score. My prayer is that the churches that share an Anglican heritage might be led by those who have considered carefully the theological convictions of that heritage in the light of Scripture, those who lead God's people in the exclusive and fervent worship of the Father in the name of Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. May this book be of use in achieving that glorious end.

## CHAPTER 1

# The Heart of Christian Worship

... the Church being both a society and a society supernatural, although as it is a society it have the self-same original grounds which other politic societies have, namely, the natural inclination which all men have unto sociable life, and consent to some certain bond of association, which bond is the law that appointeth what kind of order they shall be associated in: yet unto the Church as it is a society supernatural this is peculiar, that part of the bond of their association which belong to the Church of God, must be a law supernatural, which God himself hath revealed concerning that kind of worship which his people shall do unto him. The substance of the service of God therefore, so far-forth as it hath in it anything more than the law of reason doth teach, may not be invented of men, as it is amongst the Heathens, but must be received from God himself, as always it hath been in the Church, saving only when the Church hath been forgetful of her duty.

Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*<sup>1</sup>

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1. Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, ed. Arthur Stephen McGrade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 118 (1.15.2).



In chapter 2, I will sketch out the formation of a distinctively Reformed pattern of worship in sixteenth-century England. However, this pattern was not pulled out of thin air. It was derived from a rereading, in the original languages, of the true source of Christian faith: the Holy Scriptures. Hence, my first task is to outline in this chapter a biblical and theological rationale for Christian worship. Biblical faith is not, as we shall see, romantic about the human religious spirit. On the contrary, human beings face something of a crisis of worship. On the one hand, we are made for worship, but, on the other, we are predisposed to worship gods of our own making. In the Old Testament, we are taught that the holy God demands exclusivity in worship. He commands how his name should be honored and provides the means by which he can be rightly worshiped. But the tragic history of Israel prepares the field for the appearance of the one who will, on behalf of all humankind, truly worship: Jesus Christ, Son of David by lineage and declared “Son of God” by the Spirit. Christian worship therefore needs to be understood in the light of Jesus’s worship. That necessarily leads us to think about Christian worship in the light of the doctrine of the Trinity—not simply that it is worship of the triune God but also that worship of the triune God has a distinct shape which is a critique of alternative forms of worship. This Trinitarian worship, as we shall see, has implications for Christian mission and for a Christian view of politics.

## **The Problem of Worship**

If *worship* is the English term we use to describe the ways in which human beings seek to engage with God,<sup>2</sup> then one rather disturbing feature of the Old Testament witness is its blistering attacks on some worship and worshipers. There is no hallowing of the human religious spirit. False or corrupt or heartless worship is as great an evil as the Old Testament writers can imagine. Listen to Deuteronomy 29:16–20:

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2. This is David Peterson’s phrase in *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Leicester: Apollos, 1992), 20.

You know how we lived in the land of Egypt, and how we came through the midst of the nations through which you passed. And you have seen their detestable things, their idols of wood and stone, of silver and gold, which were among them. Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from the LORD our God to go and serve the gods of those nations. Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit, one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, "I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart." This will lead to the sweeping away of moist and dry alike. The LORD will not be willing to forgive him, but rather the anger of the LORD and his jealousy will smoke against that man, and the curses written in this book will settle upon him, and the LORD will blot out his name from under heaven.

Secular and biblical anthropologies seem to agree that human beings are predisposed to worship.<sup>3</sup> They are by orientation likely to seek a transcendent other or others to whom to express adoration. If we are to believe some paleoanthropologists, even the Neanderthals had some form of religious practices. From the biblical perspective, the story of the original couple in Eden depicts them as walking in the state of complete communion with God for which they were created. Their terrible lapse resulted in the permanent compromise of that fellowship with God but did not remove their desire for it. From the point of view of the Old Testament Wisdom Literature, "He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end" (Eccles. 3:11). Most poignantly, Paul outlines the human predicament in Romans 1:20–21:

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are

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3. The greatest study in this field is surely William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902; repr., New York: Modern Library, 1994).

without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Paul, who observed the blind religiosity of the Athenians in Acts 17, here explains that there is a kind of suppressed natural knowledge of God given to humankind. It amounts to a willful unknowing, a refusal to acknowledge what instinctively they know to be the case. Human beings are persistently religious; they seek to worship whenever they can.

Yet, according to the Old Testament, *it is possible to worship a false god*. “The nations” give devotion to gods like Baal or Asherah or Dagon—gods who did not create the heavens and the earth and are not worthy of worship. The famous challenge between Elijah and the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel, recorded in 1 Kings 18, is a pointed satire against the worship of a false god. The prophets of Baal dance and sing and even cut themselves in order to get the attention of Baal, but to no avail. Likewise, the statue of the Philistine deity Dagon falls flat on its face in a gesture of worship before the ark of the covenant in 1 Samuel 5. Worship of these deities is not simply wrong. It is foolish, since they are so obviously powerless.

In particular, the Old Testament reserves its greatest hostility for the practice of idolatry. Idol worship is ludicrous because the idol is impotent. In Isaiah 40–66, among the great declarations of the saving intentions of YHWH,<sup>4</sup> we read a fierce indictment of the practice of idolatry:

To whom then will you liken God,  
or what likeness compare with him?

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4. Y-H-W-H are the four Hebrew consonants in the personal name of the God of the Israelites and therefore properly known as the tetragrammaton (Greek for “having four letters”). Hebrew scribes thought this personal name too sacred to be pronounced by humans, so they wrote the vowels from the Hebrew word *Adonai* (my Lord) or *Elohim* (God) with the four consonants as a reminder that another word should be said instead of the personal name of God. The combination of YHWH with these vowels eventually lead the translators of the King James Bible to render the tetragrammaton as “Jehovah.” Modern Bibles usually translate the tetragrammaton as either “LORD” (with large and small capitals to distinguish it from the Hebrew word for “Lord”) or “Yahweh” (which uses what scholars believe were the original vowels for the tetragrammaton).

An idol! A craftsman casts it,  
and a goldsmith overlays it with gold  
and casts for it silver chains.  
He who is too impoverished for an offering  
chooses wood that will not rot;  
he seeks out a skillful craftsman  
to set up an idol that will not move. (Isa. 40:18–20)

In Isaiah 44, there is an extended passage in which the author heaps ridicule on those who would make an idol with their own human hands and then in some way consider it divine. “All who fashion idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit. Their witnesses neither see nor know, that they may be put to shame. Who fashions a god or casts an idol that is profitable for nothing?” (Isa. 44:9–10). The idol can do no good: it is simply dumb. Why would anyone do this? And yet, the habit is ingrained in human behavior. The idol-maker does not even seem to realize that the profane use he makes of the wood left over from his idol manufacture reveals the idiocy of his practice.

Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat; he roasts it and is satisfied. Also he warms himself and says, “Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!” And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, “Deliver me, for you are my god!” (Isa. 44:16–17)

Israel itself is not guiltless of this kind of worship. The most famous incident is, of course, the episode of the golden calf: “And [Aaron] received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” (Ex. 32:4). It is an absurd claim, and terrible consequences quickly unfold. The Old Testament is by no means syncretistic.

If it is possible to worship an entirely false god, *it is also possible to worship the true God falsely*. YHWH does not merely forbid worship of other gods. He also demands that he be worshiped as he

directs. He must be approached on his terms, rather than through the whims of human beings. In the description of the tabernacle cult with its elaborate construction and its provision for sacrifice in Exodus 25, there is no doubt that the direction for its creation comes from YHWH and not from the imaginations of the people. It is the provision for a visible means of engagement with an invisible Deity who, at the same time, does not compromise his invisibility or reduce his splendor.

The episode of Balaam in Numbers 23–24 is illustrative of a false worshiper of the true God. The non-Israelite Balaam recognizes YHWH but does not recognize or give due honor to his people. In 1 Samuel 13, Saul is condemned for his self-legislation with regard to sacrifices to YHWH. The mistreatment of the ark of the covenant in 1 Samuel 5–7—an attempt to use it as a talisman in battle—shows that simply identifying the true God is not sufficient to worship him rightly, for Israel clearly does not understand who YHWH is, even if they can name him. But the supreme example of this error is in the garden, where Adam and Eve do not seek to worship some other god but rather disobey the true God’s command.

These two forms of false worship were frequently combined in Israel’s history as they mixed worship of the nations’ pagan deities with worship of YHWH. This was Solomon’s great flaw—he allowed the gods of his many wives to turn his heart (see 1 Kings 11:3), and he built shrines to them alongside the extraordinary temple that made his name.

For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and did not wholly follow the LORD, as David his father had done. Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Molech the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem. And so he did for all his foreign wives, who made offerings and sacrificed to their gods. (1 Kings 11:5–8)

The prophets expressed their shock at Israel's and Judah's readiness to engage with a smorgasbord of gods in clear disobedience of YHWH, to whom they owed their very existence. They explained the historical disaster of the Babylonian exile as a divine judgment on the syncretism of the people of God. For example:

I will stretch out my hand against Judah  
and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem;  
and I will cut off from this place the remnant of Baal  
and the name of the idolatrous priests along with the priests,  
those who bow down on the roofs  
to the host of the heavens,  
those who bow down and swear to the LORD  
and yet swear by Milcom. (Zeph. 1:4–5)

The divine jealousy (*qin'ah*) is the lesson to be relearned from Zephaniah. An apparently sophisticated blend of worship practices and deities is, more than any other human activity, destined to provoke the ire of the God of the Bible.

However, a third form of worship is also subject to critique in the Old Testament. *It is possible to worship the true God truly but have that worship rendered null by corrupt behavior.* The rituals and observances of the temple, with its elaborate sacrifices and festivals, might all be performed in true order. But if the hearts of the people are not rightly tuned, then the outward observance of the cult is meaningless. The prophecy recorded in Ezekiel 34 against the “shepherds of Israel” critiques them for their exploitation of the people. Micah's thunderous revelation against the people focuses on the evil behavior of their leaders rather than their irreligion:

Hear, you heads of Jacob  
and rulers of the house of Israel!  
Is it not for you to know justice?—  
you who hate the good and love the evil,  
who tear the skin from off my people  
and their flesh from off their bones,

who eat the flesh of my people,  
 and flay their skin from off them,  
 and break their bones in pieces  
 and chop them up like meat in a pot,  
 like flesh in a cauldron.

Then they will cry to the LORD,  
 but he will not answer them;  
 he will hide his face from them at that time,  
 because they have made their deeds evil. (Mic. 3:1–4)

The punishment for the evil behavior is that the Lord will make himself absent—their worship, however earnest and accurate, will be rendered empty.

In Psalm 51, David's famous psalm of confession, he notes that it is possible to worship the true God in the directed way but without reality on account of a moral failing. He writes:

For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;  
 you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.  
 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;  
 a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.  
 (Ps. 51:16–17)

Sacrifice has no effect in the context of David's abuse of his power, his adultery, and his murder of the faithful Uriah the Hittite.

We shall turn to the New Testament's theology of worship in due course; suffice it to say here that the Old Testament critique of false worship is the significant backdrop against which Jesus's identity must be established. How is worship of him not false worship? How does the Hebrew theology of worship mesh with what follows in the New Testament if the two are not to be understood as substantially opposed to one another?

But the critique of false worship offered in the Old Testament is also a significant pointer to what true worship must be if it is to be worship of the true God. Worship is not simply good in and of itself.

It cannot be simply the invention of human beings. It cannot be a description of a human movement toward God. It cannot be shared or blended across a portfolio of deities. It cannot be a desperate plea for God's attention from the human side. It cannot presume, by its own devices, to overturn the divine judgment that stands against us in our fallen state.

### **Engaging with God on God's Terms**

What the attacks on false worship reveal is that, in biblical terms at least, worship of the God of Israel is exclusively on his terms. As the Anglican scholar David Peterson says in his magisterial work *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship*, "Worship of the living and true God is essentially an engagement with him on the terms that he proposes and in the way that he alone makes possible."<sup>5</sup> This is not simply an observation about the demands of the jealous God; it is also a statement about the human condition. True worship is not possible unless God himself enables it, because human beings are unable to truly worship him without his enabling.

If we are to understand it in biblical terms, the English word *worship* names what the people of God do in *response* to the divine initiative. Peterson explains how divine initiative leads to human response:

Acceptable worship in Old Testament terms involves homage, service and reverence, demonstrated in the whole of life. A common factor in these three ways of describing Israel's response to God is the assumption that he had acted towards them in revelation and redemption, to make it possible for them to engage with him acceptably.<sup>6</sup>

YHWH is the God who reveals himself to his people and, in revealing himself, redeems them. In redeeming them, he enables them to relate to him—something that was not previously possible.

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5. Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 20.

6. Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 73.



God initiates a relationship with Abraham almost out of the blue, as it were, calling him to leave his homeland on the basis of the great threefold promise: a great nation, in a great place, with a great blessing. The trajectory of this promise is, from the outset, global, for “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). This God reveals himself to be a covenant-making God—a deity seeking an ongoing relationship with humanity. The word of God comes to Abraham in the midst of many things that contradict it (including his great age), so that it is a struggle for him to believe it. And yet, this word is not simply about the present but about the future that God will bring to pass. Abraham and his descendants are taught the theological lesson that God is the God who creates and redeems out of nothing; and thus they depend on him absolutely.

The Abraham narrative is the prelude for the main movement, which is the encounter of the people of Israel with God in the exodus. In that event, YHWH both reveals his name and redeems his people—his acts of redemption and revelation are intertwined with one another. Under the leadership of the aged Moses, he brings them to the “mountain of God,” Mount Sinai. At Sinai, God tells Moses:

Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: “You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel. (Ex. 19:3–6)

The Israelites are the witnesses of God’s mighty act in defeating the Egyptians and of its extraordinary consequence: “I . . . brought you to myself.” What then follows is a description of the ongoing terms of the relationship with YHWH, along with all its stipulations and patterns. God himself lays out for the people the context for an ac-

ceptable response of worship to the almighty God—a pattern of life that distinguishes them as his but begins with their acknowledging him as Lord and Redeemer. At Sinai, God makes himself known to Israel and, in doing so, reveals his intention to be a special presence among them. They are to be known as the people among whom God himself dwells. His special character of holiness is to become a character that they share and to which they give expression in their manner of life.

They are to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” This signifies that the whole of Israel’s existence will be shaped by this relationship with YHWH. This will not be an occasional matter of observance. It is to be a distinctive, identifying mark of this people. They are in this way to be separated from the nations that surround them. But the notion of priesthood is significant here if we recall that the promise to Abraham was for the blessing of all the families on the earth. The Israelites were to be the people who demonstrated to all peoples what it was like to belong to YHWH, the Lord of heaven and earth. His character was to be embodied in their community life.

This then is the background to the giving of the Torah, or “the law.” The law was neither simply moral nor simply ritual. Both dimensions of the law were outlined as a matter of delimiting the boundaries for life together with God. Note that there was no sense of opposition between the notion of a divinely given word and the indescribable majesty and holiness of God’s character. As at the mountain, so in the tabernacle and in the sacrificial system, God was both hidden and revealed, both near and present, both concealed and other. What do I mean here? The people were to approach the mountain (or the tent of meeting) and encounter the real and present God. But to encounter him would in no way diminish his majesty or reduce him to simply containable categories. He was not in this encounter revealed to be manipulable or domesticated (in contrast to the idols of the other nations). And so, to meet God at Sinai was to hear the thunder and see the

lightning at the top of the mountain, and to hear his words through the mediation of Moses.

The entire system of Torah taught this lesson: that God was revealed to Israel but not contained by Israel. The Decalogue was and is itself a demonstration of this theological reality. The Ten Commandments are all about worship. In fact, worship is the key to understanding what they are really about. The first set of laws directed Israel's attention to the singularity and uniqueness of God and his demand for exclusive devotion—a devotion not in a manner that took his name “in vain” but as he directed. The hinge is the Sabbath command. It is the institution in the midst of the people's common life that recalls the divine work in the days of the creation—themselves a reminder of the saving acts of God.

The tabernacle and the Levitical code, with its system of priests and bloody sacrifices, became in time that remarkable symbol at the heart of the nation's life, the temple of Jerusalem. The notion of sacrifice and ritual was not unique to Israel, of course. Pagan cults of sacrifice abounded. Sacrifice was, in a sense, a familiar religious concept adapted for the expression of the particular theology of ancient Israel. To the pagan mind (illustrated amply by ancient literature—for example, in Homer's *Iliad*), sacrifice was the way by which the goodwill of the various gods was secured. Indeed, *security* was the underlying theme. Sacrifice was (to generalize) an act of taking out insurance against the contingencies of life in an uncertain world.

For Israel, sacrifice would be described as something else again. It was marked by a pattern of grace and gratitude: the pattern of rituals and festivals ensured that the narrative of the great acts of God for his people was not forgotten by them; and it enabled a response of thanksgiving for the blessings brought about by those acts. In addition, the sacrifices were a graphic illustration to Israel of the ebbing away of human life under the impact of sin. Being in the presence of God was not simply established by God moving closer; there was also the need for the atonement of sin. The shed-

ding of blood for sin on the annual Day of Atonement was to purify the tabernacle and the people (Lev. 16). Peterson explains: “The life of an animal, represented by its blood splashed over the altar, is the ransom at the price of a life. Animal blood atones for human sin, not because of some magical quality or life-power in it but simply because God chose and prescribed it for this purpose.”<sup>7</sup> Israel’s response to God was on the basis of his prior revelation of himself and his redemption of them. But what was Israel given *to do*? They were to do homage to God; they were to serve him, and they were to revere him. These three biblical concepts are all yoked together under our English word *worship*.

First, *they were to do homage to God*. To “do homage” to another person is often indicated by a physical gesture, such as bowing or curtsying. The Old Testament vocabulary contains the sense of “bending over at the waist.” But, of course, the outward gestures were expressions of an inner reality that could be expressed in all kinds of ways. The idea of the nations bowing down before YHWH (Ps. 22:27, 29) is a great vision of all the nations recognizing his kingly rule and authority. Thus the concept of worship as “doing homage” is not simply one of observing a physical gesture in a great display of submission to the rule of God but of actually enacting that rule as the reality in which one really believes. Nevertheless, this kind of worship *communicates*. It bears witness to a kind of relationship with God—to God and to others. It is an act, or a word, that speaks of God’s rule.

Second, *they were to serve him*. A word frequently translated “worship” is the Greek *latreuō*, which has the connotation of “serve.” The people of Israel were released from bondage to Pharaoh and called into the service of God (Ex. 3:12). The switch between these two kinds of bond-service is made clear in Deuteronomy 6:12–13: “Take care lest you forget the LORD, who brought you out

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7. Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 41.

of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. It is the LORD your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear.” This form of devotion to God involved the worshiper in an absolute sense.

And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good? (Deut. 10:12–13)

Every aspect of the community’s and the individual’s life was to be marked by wholehearted and affectionate service of God by observing his commands. God is a great King who demands faithful obedience from his people. When this notion of service was extrapolated in relation to the rituals and ceremonies of ancient Israel, it did not lose the sense in which it was an observance of the true and just rule of God the King.

In the notions of homage and service, as the Bible treats them, we see a pattern developing—namely, that the worship of God includes the whole of the worshiper’s life, but also specific acts and words of adoration. The one does not exclude the other, as if a life lived in a certain way were sufficient to embody true worship of Israel’s God. This was partly because worship is, as we have already noted above, *communicative*. It does not merely do things at God’s behest: it says things to him and about him. The literal act of offering homage becomes the metaphor by which a group of other activities is to be understood—and these activities can then be described as “worship.”

Third, *the people were to revere or respect God*. The Hebrew notion of “the fear of the Lord” is included under this heading. It indicates not simply the performance of a particular set of gestures but also an attitude of heart. This disposition opens up the individual to the voice of the Lord (1 Sam. 12:14; Hag. 1:12) so as to do his will

and to walk in his ways. In particular, the fear of the Lord is “the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10; see also 1:7). That is, the proper attitude to God, which respects his judgment on all people, inevitably leads to the wise human life.

A note of caution is advisable here, however. We are dealing with three overlapping concepts expressed in the vocabulary of the two biblical languages and placing them under the single heading of *worship*—an English word most often held to mean “pay homage to.” The notion of service has accrued the sense of “worship” (and is frequently translated as such) precisely because of its usage in the context of the rituals and ceremonies of Israel. More precisely put, we might say that service has the character of worship, such that we can call it, by extension, “worship.” In the right context, under the right conditions, a person’s or a community’s service can be an act of worship fully pleasing to God. But the primary sense of the English word remains the notion of adoration or homage.

### **Jesus Christ the One True Worshiper**

In this brief sketch of the Old Testament account of worship, we have been able to see something of the pattern of the worship of YHWH that made it distinct from the idol worship of other nations. In particular, I have noted the pattern of *response to the divine initiative in specific acts and in the whole of life* that characterizes the worship of God’s people. The problem with my account thus far has been that I have abstracted it from the history of Israel. The strong critiques of false worship with which we began should alert us to the fact that something is still incomplete in the account of worship given in the Hebrew Scriptures. Despite everything, Israel’s life of worship became corrupted and diminished by the failure of the people to attend to the distinctive characteristics of the pattern of life they had been given. The final exile of Judah to Babylon was surrounded by a flurry of prophetic activity in which Israel’s worship was both subjected to judgment and promised a renewal. The most terrible disaster of all was the utter destruction of the temple

at this time, which meant the end to the God-ordained worship at that spot. What would worship look like without the temple and its ritual practices?

This was a crisis of worship. Ezekiel, for one, spoke of an extraordinary new temple with supernatural dimensions—one that would, somehow, replace the one destroyed by the Babylonians (Ezek. 40–48). The word “somehow” is deliberately chosen: for while the prophets foretold an intervention by God himself to restore the worshiping community of his people and to judge his enemies, they were not specific on the details. Isaiah spoke with poetic vigor about the “servant of the LORD” who would suffer for the iniquities of the people (Isa. 40–66); and many prophecies recalled the commitment of the covenant with David, that his line would be everlasting (2 Sam. 7; see, for example, Jeremiah’s emphasis on Davidic kingship in Jer. 32–33).

Even given the divine initiative in engaging with people and the clarity of the pattern of response he demands—homage, service, reverence—the human response is inadequate. This is the point at which the New Testament claim is that in Jesus of Nazareth the history of Israel finds its fulfillment. Jesus is, of all human beings, the one who worships the God of Israel, the Creator of heaven and earth, as he demands to be worshiped—in purity and holiness. As the one human being who represents not simply Israel but all of humankind to the Father, he in himself enables a renovation of human worship. There is, following Christ, a significant continuity but a substantial discontinuity with Old Testament worship.

The notion of Jesus as the true worshiper is reflected across the New Testament but finds itself refracted in particular through the imagery of the new temple and the declaration of a new covenant. In light of these, the New Testament authors felt able still to speak of the Christian life, individually and corporately, in terms that echoed the worship language of the Old Testament. Jesus’s encounter with the devil in the wilderness, recorded in detail by Matthew and Luke, features an interchange over the subject of worship:

The devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written,

"You shall worship the Lord your God  
and him only shall you serve." (Matt. 4:8–10)

The devil offers global power and authority in exchange for Jesus's homage ("fall down and worship"). Surely there's an ironic element to the exchange: would Jesus really possess the right to rule if he had to bow down to another? Jesus's response, like his responses to the other temptations, is to lean hard on the word of God—in this case, the exclusive worship demanded by the Lord in Deuteronomy 6:13. Jesus's act of submission to God, or rather his refusal of submission to the evil one, is shown to us to establish his credentials as the true worshiper.

The disruption that Jesus's ministry causes, which apparently leads to his death, is chiefly the result of his operating from within the temple as a strong critic of the contemporary temple life. In Matthew, Mark, and John he is heard prophesying the destruction of the temple and claiming that he can rebuild it in three days. John, in particular, picks up the language of God's presence and his glory, which is reminiscent of what the Israelites expected from the tabernacle and the temple: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

Jesus takes the prophetic vision of the new temple and, extraordinarily, shows how he himself realizes that hope in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. The temple as the location for the encounter between God and his people is, in Jesus, relocated. In him, the need for sacrifice to prepare the people for meeting God is obviated. The source for the renewal and restoration of Israel and, by extension, "all the families of the earth" is now Jesus himself—which is the prompt for the inclusion of the Gentiles. Engaging



with God is now mediated to human beings in the person and work of Jesus Christ, which in turn shows that the temple was merely a foretaste of what has now appeared in human history.

At the same time, as Jesus is the means through which people are to come to worship God “in spirit and truth” (John 4:24), Jesus has also become himself the worthy object of homage. I hinted previously that this is, in many ways, the most difficult theological problem that the New Testament authors have to face. How can a strict monotheism such as Judaic faith give birth to, or be held to pave the way for, a faith in which veneration is offered to (apparently) more than one divine person? And yet, the heart of the New Testament gospel is the declaration “Jesus is Lord,” a statement of homage that ascribes an authority to him that only a divine person deserves (Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3). The New Testament answer is to speak about Jesus’s unity with the Father (1 Cor. 8:6; Eph. 4:4–7).

Jesus also portrays himself, and is portrayed as, the inheritor and fulfillment of the pattern of covenantal relationship with God that stretches back to Abraham. As with the temple, the ministry of Jesus is felt to be a critique of the law by his opponents, and they take great offense. Yet a more careful reading of his words and actions shows him to be a skilled interpreter and advocate of the law. He is not rejecting it; he is rather meeting its requirements and transcending it. He is, he claims, inaugurating a new covenant (something promised in Jeremiah’s prophecy—Jer. 31:31–34). At the Last Supper, he makes explicit the link between his sacrificial death and the notion of a new covenant (language picked up in Heb. 9:14–15)—pointing thereby to what worship will now mean: namely, that he will make true worship of God possible by means of his atoning blood, and that he will thereby be the focus of the homage of the new covenant people.

The theology of the book of Hebrews adds another aspect to the New Testament’s Christological account of worship. In particular, it places Christ as the present heavenly mediator of our worship. He lives forever to intercede for us (Heb. 6:20; 7:25–28;

8:6).<sup>8</sup> Hebrews takes the great Old Testament theology of atonement, as it was expressed in the Day of Atonement ceremonies, and uses it to explain the work of Jesus Christ for us in enabling our engagement with God. The high priest represented the people to God, consecrated and purified for the ministry of sacrifice by rituals of washing and bloody sprinkling. Then he offered the sacrificial victim as a substitute for the people as an object of the divine wrath against sin. In Hebrews, it is Jesus who is one with the people, “not ashamed to call them brothers” (Heb. 2:12); and it is he who is cleansed and made perfect in the course of his life: “one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). He offers a sacrifice for sin—this time not an animal, but himself, in order to bear in his own person the penalty for sin. But being vindicated by the God who raised him from the dead, he now is our forerunner into the presence of God—not only as the one who brings God closer to human beings by being the presence of God among us but also as the Spirit-filled and sanctified human who is able to bring human beings close to God. James Torrance explains:

It is supremely in Jesus Christ that we see the double meaning of grace. Grace means that God gives himself to us as God, freely and unconditionally, to be worshiped and adored. But grace also means that God comes to us in Jesus Christ as man, to do for us and in us what we cannot do. He offers a life of perfect obedience and worship and prayer to the Father, that we might be drawn by the Spirit into communion with the Father, “through Jesus Christ our Lord.”<sup>9</sup>

The great evangel, then, demands that those who hear the good news acknowledge Jesus as Lord—that they worship him. The gospel is a call to worship. And yet, it is also a declaration that, in Jesus,

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8. James Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace*, Didsbury Lectures (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), 35.

9. Torrance, *Worship*, 55.

we have one who represents us as worshipers—one who worships on our behalf in the throne room of God.

### **The Worship of the Triune God**

We find, then, in the New Testament a reminder that worship is a response to the gracious divine initiative and that it is enabled by God. But we find that the mediatory means of the Old Testament—the temple, the sacrificial system, the Torah—are now made redundant by the new and singular focus and locus for worship, Jesus Christ himself. The theological reflection already beginning in the pages of the New Testament about the unity of Jesus Christ with the Father flowers into the new and distinctively Christian identification of God as triune. This is naturally of considerable importance for an understanding of the notion of Christian worship since it relates to *who* is being worshiped. The Christian answer becomes *the one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*.

Worshipping the God who is triune makes a substantial difference to what true worship actually is.<sup>10</sup> The doctrine of the Trinity means that Christian worship is a sharing in the Son's union with his Father, through the Holy Spirit. Our union with Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit is the basis for this sharing of God's people together in the divine life of God. We stand to worship God by means of the mediatory ministry of Jesus before the Father, to which we are drawn by the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. As our great high priest, he sanctifies us by his blood, which he himself offered. This understanding of our relationship to the triune God was in part responsible for the Reformation's rejection of the medieval concept of priesthood—since Christ is our supreme and exclusive mediator before God. As Torrance puts it, "The doctrine of the Trinity is the grammar of this participatory understanding of worship and prayer."<sup>11</sup>

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10. For what follows, see Torrance, *Worship*, chap. 1.

11. Torrance, *Worship*, 9.

There are two faulty (but sadly common) alternatives to the Trinitarian understanding of worship. The first is that of Protestant liberalism as represented by such thinkers as the great nineteenth-century German historian of the church Adolf von Harnack and the twentieth-century British theologian John Hick. Essentially, on this view, religion is about each soul's individual and immediate relationship to God. Jesus, like Israel, had a direct encounter with the divine that is the model for our encounter with God today. Jesus does not mediate worship; he simply exemplifies it. He is certainly not the object of worship.

Naturally, this view of worship is a direct attack on the doctrine of the Trinity, since it has no place (and no need) for a representative or substitutionary act of atonement to reconcile human beings to God. It has no need to proclaim the church as a fellowship of the Spirit, since the emphasis is entirely on the individual's dealings directly with the divine. It results in a moralistic Christianity—noble in its aspiration for the human spirit but doomed to fall on the barbed wire of no-man's-land in World War I.

The second faulty alternative focuses instead on existential experience in the present day. The German New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann is an exponent of this view, although it has had its impact on Christianity at a popular level. The work of Christ for us is not denied; indeed, it is essential on this view. But it is connected to us through the event of faith arising in us, which becomes the emphasis. What Jesus did is more important than, or disconnected from, who he was. The doctrines of the incarnation and of the Trinity fade in importance, and my own religious experience surfaces. Much contemporary Christianity is fixated by the search for individual religious experience. The language of "a personal relationship with God" can be distorted in this direction, with talk about *my* conversion, *my* decision, and *my* response. The reduction of Christian worship to this two-dimensional system—meaning that it is just about me and God here now—communicates simply that our response is what really matters. What it overlooks, says Torrance, is

that, in Christ, God has “provided for us that Response which alone is acceptable to him—the offering made for the whole human race in the life, obedience and passion of Jesus Christ.”<sup>12</sup>

The witness of the gospels is to a very different form of worship. Jesus is, above all, depicted as having a unique relationship with the Father—signaled at his baptism by his anointing by the Holy Spirit and the declaration of the divine favor (“this is my beloved Son”—Matt. 3:17; see also Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22). This is the Spirit who is poured out on the people of God at Pentecost, so enabling them to share in the fellowship, or communion, between the Father and the Son. In the words of John, “Indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3).

Communion with God the Father in Christ by the Holy Spirit is thus the fundamental—and only—basis for a doctrine of the church, and by extension, the only basis for an understanding of its corporate practices of worship. Like Israel, the church is constituted and given an identity on the basis of nothing other than the work of God. The church is the church of the Holy Trinity: called by the Father, purified by the Son, and gathered together by the Holy Spirit. As Peter writes, “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Pet. 2:10). Note the parallelism: the basis for the common identity of the church is the mercy that comes through the grace of God in Christ Jesus and his mercy-bringing death. Peter’s opening address to the scattered believers illustrates their Trinitarian constitution: “. . . according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood” (1 Pet. 1:2).

If this is the theological architecture of the church, then what difference does it make for how we understand our acts of worship—or indeed, for how we decide what acts of worship in fact are? The people of God are still called, as of old, to “proclaim the excel-

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12. Torrance, *Worship*, 18.

lencies of him who called [them] out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9). They meet on the basis of the lordship of Christ articulated through his merciful sacrifice and in the knowledge that he stands as a perfect mediator between them and God. They are enabled, then, to draw near to God confident in the prior working of God in drawing near to them in Christ. They can view their adoration of God as a sacrifice fully pleasing to him (Heb. 13:15–16).

The distinction that we sometimes observe in English between “corporate” and “individual” worship is actually a false one, since worship of the triune God by definition brings the individual believer into communion with others. There is no non-church, non-corporate worship. And, while it is important to note the emphasis in the New Testament on all of life as worship (as in the Old), that worshipful life, indicative of membership in Christ, is therefore indicative of membership of Christ’s body. Romans 12:1 is a key text here, often used to argue that the New Testament emphasis is on individual acts as worship and not what is done in the church gathering: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

We should notice right away the use of sacrificial language to describe the activity of believers. Of course, we read this in the light of Paul’s emphatic description of Jesus’s atoning sacrifice in Romans 3:21–31; there can be no sense in which our sacrifice plays the role of establishing our relationship with God. But in Romans 12:1, Paul envisages a sacrifice of the believers’ bodies that is now in fact pleasing to God—something made possible by Christ’s prior atoning sacrifice.<sup>13</sup> And this “is your spiritual worship.” Almost all English translations deploy the word *worship* to translate *latreia* (not *proskyneō*). That is, the word for service rather than homage is here used. Since only one of the concepts usually contained under the linguistic domain of *worship* is here being used, it seems

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13. A similar thought pattern is found in Heb. 13:15–16.

a stretch to build an entire theology of Christian worship on the basis of this verse. Nevertheless, the verse uses cultic language to talk not about ritual activity but about behavior in a way that echoes Hosea 6:6:

For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,  
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

The language of cultic service/worship is now used to describe Christ's work and, secondarily, the mutual and sacrificial service of Christians for one another. There is no Christian form of the cult.

But we should also note how richly ecclesial Paul's exposition of his command is here, following as it does from his extraordinary account of the people of God in Romans 9–11. The pronouns in 12:1 are plural: the "spiritual worship" is "your" act in the sense that it is collectively the worshipful act of the entire community. The rest of chapter 12 moves on to an exploration of the unity-in-distinction of the body of Christ: "For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (Rom. 12:4–5).

The body motif is foundational to Paul's Trinitarian ecclesiology, and he repeats it in 1 Corinthians 12. The unity of the church is not simply a mirror of the divine unity but comes about through the enfolding of the members of the church into Christ by the Spirit of God. The worship of this people—which is an echo of, but not a replacement for, Christ's worship of the Father—includes their costly and forgiving love for one another. It is entirely appropriate, therefore, to call the gathering of the people of God "worship," since the earthly gathering of a congregation gives expression to the identity they have already received in Christ, and since in their meeting together they anticipate the final, heavenly gathering, in which the triune God is adored forevermore. In Christ, God's people meet together to meet with him: to adore him, to revere him, and to serve him as they give themselves in mutual service of one another

in anticipation of the final in-gathering of God's people. This eschatological theme is borne out in the depictions of heavenly worship in the book of Revelation (Rev. 4, 5) and in Hebrews 12:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Heb. 12:22–24)

The work of the Holy Spirit in the church is to point to this final consummation, as a “guarantee” (2 Cor. 1:21–22).

### **The Consequences of Christian Worship**

God's people are able to pay homage to him as a result of their union in Christ, who cleanses them by his blood and leads them in adoration of God. They are enabled to worship God because God has gathered them together and given them his name. They submit to him as Lord in listening to his word and seeking to encounter him there. Their adoration of the triune Lord is to be reflected in wholehearted and sacrificial service of one another—spiritual acts of worship now, in Christ, pleasing to him. In succeeding chapters, we will examine in turn how the various components of Christian worship—preaching, sacraments, prayer, and music—reflect the theological reality of the church as a worshipping community. For now, I shall take the opportunity to explore three substantial implications of Christian worship.

The first of these is *the edification of God's people*. In 1 Corinthians 14, which is one of the few passages of the New Testament where church meetings are actually discussed, Paul connects the gifts of the Spirit with the “building up” of the body. The gifts are given for that particular purpose, such that the gathering of God's people ought to be ordered accordingly: “What then, brothers?



When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up" (1 Cor. 14:26). Ephesians 4 is the other passage with a similar concern. "Building up" has the sense of the maturing and strengthening of the whole, particularly (in Eph. 4) in unity. The leadership offices of apostle, teacher, and so on are (once more) provided for this purpose. As the believers meet together in the fellowship of the Spirit to engage with the Father by the blood of the Son, they are built up, collectively, in love for one another (Eph. 4:16).

The second consequence is that Christian corporate worship is *political*. One author puts it this way:

In the celebration of worship the congregation is transposed into a particular social order. . . . Christ is the head of the Church, and the life of the communities of his people follows the law of his Spirit. In this respect it is inescapably political—aligned towards the recognition of the good that comes from God, towards the common exploration of the good in the world and towards the common exploration of that good in shared action.<sup>14</sup>

Here is a strong case that in the celebration of worship Christians become a social order of a particular kind: the body of the risen Lord. Life in this community is definitely ruled—that is, by (the word of) its Lord. It then has a pattern of life that it learns in response to this rule. The Spirit of God gathers the congregation, which then pays homage to Jesus *specifically as Lord* in its common activities. It is at this point that the political dimension arises: this particular sharing forms a specific kind of community in which "believers find their basic political existence."<sup>15</sup>

The gathering of the Christian community in worship has a specifically political character; it is the formation of a political form of life. This runs counter, of course, to the contemporary secular

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14. Bernd Wannenwetsch and Margaret Kohl, *Political Worship: Ethics for Christian Citizens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 9.

15. Wannenwetsch and Kohl, *Political Worship*, 7.

view that seeks to privatize faith as “spirituality,” and specifically to depoliticize it. The experience of membership in the church, with all it entails, must inevitably (as it has historically) inform the Christian’s citizenship—over against the totalizing claims of liberal society, if necessary.

Gathering together in the name of the Son of God, Christians foreshadow the final rule of God in Christ. This immediately relativizes the absolute claims of worldly powers, which frequently see this as a threat. The court tales from the book of Daniel are a case in point, stories that were often cited by the martyrs of the early Christian era. For example, the great image of gold set up by Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 2 is raised as an object of religious worship, but the political ramifications are clear. This is the tyrant’s statue, and refusal to worship his statue is not simply blasphemy but treason. When the three young Jewish men Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refuse to worship the statue because of their exclusive commitment to worship the God of Israel, the rage of Nebuchadnezzar reveals how threatened he is. Their refusal is a direct challenge to his supreme authority.

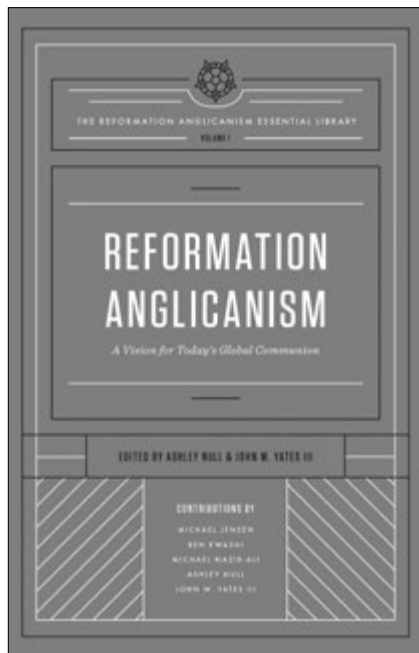
In all kinds of ways, the practices generated by Christian worship form a new, redeemed way of being a people. Since Christ is Lord, human authority is seen as derived from him and ultimately subject to him, and we learn to respect but not to fear it. Since Christ is Lord, we learn to live a life rich in thanksgiving and generosity in a world full of the worship of mammon. Since Christ is Lord and since we participate together in him, we learn by painful practice what suffering for another’s sake means. Since Christ is Lord, we learn that ethnic and class distinctions do not form the measure of humankind. These are all directly political lessons that spring from Christian worship.

The third ramification of Christian worship is *mission*. Christian worship is *missional*. As I have already indicated, worship is a *communicative* or *expressive* act. It expresses the allegiance and submission of the worshiper to the worshiped one. Christian

worship, enabled by God himself and empowered by the Spirit, is not simply for the sake of God's pleasure. It exists as a testimony to call those who do not yet worship. First Peter 2:9–10 is instructive: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9). In this verse, which applies categories by which Israel was described at Sinai (e.g., "a kingdom of priests"—Ex. 19:6), Peter casts the new covenant people of God in the role of those who proclaim the mighty acts of God to the world. Just as they had once existed in darkness and nonidentity, so now they speak of the glory of God to those who are without hope in the world. They are "priests" in the sense that their form of life mediates God's character to the outside world, and they become in their form of life the location at which those far off may now be drawn near. By observing their form of life, the nations are to be led to pay homage to God: "Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation" (1 Pet. 2:12). In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul urges the Corinthians to value the intelligibility of prophecy in their corporate worship over the cacophony and confusion of tongues-speaking: "But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you" (1 Cor. 14:24–25).

The outsider's worship springs as a consequence from the gathered activity of the congregation. The worship of God's people, directed to the God who saved them and made them what they are, takes place in and before the watching world. It has a secondary audience. The great acts of God are rehearsed not simply for his sake but also for the sake of those who have never heard them told.

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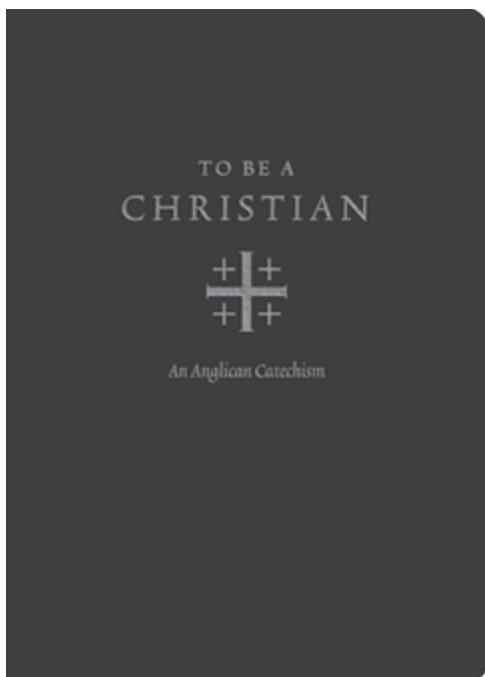


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