

A PRIMER ON CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

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This outline, based largely on prior writings, is for those who wonder what is behind the belief that Christians should worship God only in ways he has affirmatively indicated he desires or accepts. I tried to make it brief enough to be read but long enough to be helpful.

I. What Is Worship?

A. Worship of God is properly defined as an acknowledgement of his distinctive greatness that is expressed directly to him in an attitude of reverence and adoration. It is an act of interpersonal communion, a "face-to-face" engagement with him. It is different from obeying him and serving him in the world because those actions are not directed at him. They glorify him only indirectly by reflecting a conviction that he is worthy of being obeyed and served.¹ As expressed by theologian Edmund Clowney, "In private, as in public, a worship activity such as prayer is distinguished from the regular activities of life. Though we do all to the glory of God, not all that we do is the special activity of worship."²

B. Worship quintessentially involves praising, thanking, and petitioning God in prayer and song³ and engaging him with gratitude and reverence through participation in prescribed ritual.⁴ It includes affirming his excellence as expressed in praise given by others,⁵ and by analogy, affirming his excellence as revealed in the presentation of his word by others. We hear his word actively, ascribing to it the authority it bears as his word and putting ourselves under it.⁶

II. The Manner of Christian Worship

A. God cares about the way in which he is worshiped. It is not true that he cares only about the worshiper's heart or motivation so that the manner of worship is a matter of indifference to him. This is clear from the following:

¹ See, Ashby Camp, [Reflections on Worship](#).

² Edmund Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 126.

³ E.g., Gen. 24:48; Ezra 3:11; Ps. 29:1-2, 30:4, 66:1-4, 69:30, 99:5, 9, 100:2, 109:30, 119:108; Lk. 2:37; Heb. 12:28, 13:15; Rev. 4:9-11, 5:8, 8:3.

⁴ E.g., Ex. 3:12, 18, 5:3, 7:16, 8:1, 8:27, and 9:13 with Acts 7:7; 1 Chron. 16:29; 2 Chron. 25:13 (other gods), 32:12; Ps. 96:8, 116:17; Isa. 19:21; Jer. 1:16 (other gods); Acts 7:42 (other gods); Heb. 9:9, 10:1-2.

⁵ Rev. 7:9-12, 19:1-4. Robert Thomas remarks regarding 7:12, "The worship by the angels consists of an endorsement of the tribute of the multitude (7:10). . . . The first *Amēn* ('Amen') is their solemn confirmation of the tribute of the redeemed multitude to God because of the victory he has brought (cf. 1:6, 7; 5:14; 19:40)." Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 491-492. See also, David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, WBC (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 471.

⁶ The noted New Testament scholar C. E. B. Cranfield goes so far as to say, "This hearing of the Word of God, hearing what the Lord of the church wants to say to his church in its actual situation, is the primary task of the church, the basic human action in worship. It is the task not just of the clergy but of the people of God as a whole . . . and, as a task of tremendous urgency, is meant to be engaged in eagerly, seriously, and resolutely." C. E. B. Cranfield, "Divine and Human Action: The Biblical Concept of Worship," *Interpretation* 12 (October 1958), 387-98.

1. The second commandment (Ex. 20:4-5a; Deut. 5:8-9a) prohibits worshiping God *by means of images* in addition to prohibiting the worship of any false gods by means of images. It is an expression of God's particularity regarding the manner of his worship. The classic violation of this aspect of the commandment was the golden calf that Aaron fashioned in Ex. 32:4, which was intended to represent Yahweh, "who brought you up out of the land of Egypt" (see also, 1 Ki. 12:28; Neh. 9:18).⁷

2. In Deut. 12:4 and 12:31 God tells Israel expressly that they are not to worship him *in the way* the Canaanites worshiped their gods. He has his own way of being worshiped, his own desires for how his creatures are to worship him.

3. God continues to care about the way in which he is worshiped in the New Testament. For example, Jesus makes clear in Jn. 4:21 that in the new covenant God no longer wants worship to be at a centralized location, whether Jerusalem or Gerizim, and in 4:24 he makes clear that the manner of worship must be "in spirit and truth." Whatever "worship in spirit and truth" means, it is a New Testament limitation on *how* one is to worship. The manner of worship continues to matter to God. That is why the Hebrew writer exhorts us in Heb. 12:28 to "worship God in an acceptable way, with reverence and awe."

4. We see elsewhere in the New Testament that God continues to have objective desires regarding the manner of his worship. It is not the case that anything goes as long as the worshiper means well. For example, if a woman prayed in the Corinthian assembly without a head covering, she would be worshiping God contrary to his will, regardless of her heart or motives (1 Cor. 11:2-16). And if a tongues-speaker used his miraculous gift to praise God in an assembly in which there was no interpreter, he would be worshiping God contrary to his will, whatever his subjective intentions or state (1 Cor. 14:28). The worshiper's heart or motive does not baptize every form of worship; it does not trump God's desires for how he is to be worshiped.

B. God has revealed ways of worshiping that he desires or accepts from Christians.

1. Christians are commanded to worship God corporately with singing (Eph. 5:19-20; Col. 3:16; cf. 1 Cor. 14:15-16, 26; Jas. 5:13), praying (1 Tim. 2:1-2, 2:8; cf. Acts 2:42, 12:12; 1 Cor. 11:2-5, 14:15-16), observing the Lord's Supper (Lk. 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:17-34; cf. Acts 2:42, 20:7), and teaching/preaching (1 Cor. 14:26; Col. 3:16; 1 Tim. 4:13; 2 Tim. 4:2; cf. Acts 2:42, 20:7; 1 Cor. 14:19, 1 Tim. 2:11-12, 5:17), which includes Scripture reading (Col. 4:16; 1Thess. 5:27; 1 Tim. 4:13), and we see them doing so in the New Testament.

2. To the extent the bodily motions of kneeling and bowing to God are acts of worship, distinct and purposeful acknowledgements of his unique greatness and not merely postures of prayer, like uplifted hands (1 Tim. 2:8), their acceptability for Christian worship is indicated in the New Testament. We see there that Jesus received those who knelt (Mat. 8:2-3,

⁷ Douglas Stuart comments, "[T]here is little doubt that Israelites of all times believed that it was Yahweh, and no other god, who delivered them from Egypt. In other words, Yahweh was now being represented by an idol, the very sort of thing forbidden clearly by the second word/commandment." Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 665.

9:18-25, 15:25-28; Mk. 1:40-42) and who bowed before him (Lk. 5:12-13, 17:16), and he himself knelt before the Father in prayer (Lk. 22:41-42) and bowed before him (Jn. 19:30; Mat. 26:39).⁸ Peter and Paul also knelt in prayer on occasion (Acts 9:40, 20:36, 21:5; Eph. 3:14), and Paul acknowledged implicitly the propriety of bowing before God (all the way onto one's face) in the worship assembly in his remarks about the hypothetical case of the unbeliever who is convicted through the church's prophesying (1 Cor. 14:24-25).

3. Therefore, we can be certain that worshiping God in these ways is pleasing to him, assuming, of course, that it is heartfelt. He has revealed that he desires or accepts these forms of worship.

C. Christians are to exhibit utmost reverence toward God in their worship. This is implicit in the injunction to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus (Col. 3:17), to do it as he would do it, because Jesus prayed to God with utmost reverence (Heb. 5:7). The obligation is made explicit in Heb. 12:28-29: "Therefore, since we are receiving an unshakeable kingdom, let us have gratitude, with which *let us worship God in an acceptable way, with reverence and awe*, for indeed our God [is] a consuming fire."

D. Given that God (a) cares about the way in which he is worshiped and (b) has revealed ways of worshiping him that he desires, it is more reverent to worship him only in ways he has indicated he desires than to worship him in whatever ways he has not expressly prohibited. Put differently, it is more reverent, more respectful of God's greatness and glory, to stick with what he has revealed he wants in terms of worship than to risk giving him something he does not want by innovating, by worshiping in ways he has not revealed he wants.

1. The risk of displeasing God that is inherent in worshiping in ways he has not revealed he wants seems obvious, but it can be illustrated simply. If I ordered a hot dog with ketchup and mustard, and the vendor, acting according to his personal preference, gave me a hot dog with ketchup, mustard, *and* mayonnaise, I would not be pleased. I may appreciate that he meant well, but that would not alter the fact he had given me something I did not want.

2. To risk displeasing God *needlessly* (it being needless because he has revealed desired ways of worship) by worshiping him in ways he has not indicated he wants because one personally prefers those ways is to put one's personal satisfaction above pleasing God. That shows less reverence for God than foregoing one's personal desires regarding worship to ensure that he is pleased with the offering. For example, a woman who knowingly risked a miscarriage by insisting on behavior she enjoyed would be showing less respect and appreciation for her baby than a woman who abstained from such behavior to avoid that risk. The latter's abstaining would reflect a conviction that the baby's life and health were too valuable to be put at risk by her personal desires. A Christian who risks displeasing God for the sake of his personal worship desires treats displeasing God as too small a thing, and in doing so, fails to give him his due.

⁸ Andreas Köstenberger rightly remarks regarding Jn. 19:30, "Bowing his head was not a sign of weakness on Jesus' part but rather a deliberate act prior to giving up his spirit." Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 551. Gerald Borchert similarly comments, "Jesus, the obedient agent of God, died in a spirit of reverence with the bowed (*klinas*) head." Gerald L. Borchert, *John 12-21*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002), 272.

E. Since Christians are to exhibit utmost reverence toward God in their worship, they are to worship God only in the ways he has revealed he desires or accepts because that is more reverent than risking displeasing him for the sake of our preference. This excludes all human innovations in worship, such as offering God instrumental music,⁹ applauding him, flagellating or cutting oneself, burning objects or incense, sacrificing animals, shaking rattles, whistling, spitting, stamping feet, dancing, and countless other things.

F. In addition to the limitation on the manner of worship that is implicit in the requirement of reverence, God indicates in Scripture that he opposes human presumptuousness in worshipping him. He opposes humans worshipping him however they see fit, as though he is obligated to accept and be pleased with worship in whatever form we wish to give it.

1. You see that in his displeasure with Nadab and Abihu in offering fire "which he had not commanded them" (Lev. 10:1). They were killed not for violating a specific prohibition, though some claim that, but for presuming to worship God in a manner he had not indicated was acceptable.

a. As Timothy Ashley states:

Nadab and Abihu offered incense in an improper manner before Yahweh and were consumed by fire from God's presence. The problem was not that they offered incense when they were not qualified to do so. Chapter 8 relates their ordination as priests with all the rights and privileges of the priesthood. The problem was that they offered incense "that Yahweh had not commanded them" (Lev. 10:1). They made this offering on their own, of their own free will, not in response to God's command. Thus the fire was *unacceptable* or "unauthorized" (*zārâ*).¹⁰

b. Aaron and his sons were to offer incense on the altar of incense in the Holy Place (Ex. 28:42-43, 40:12-15; 1 Chron. 6:49, 23:13), and they are told, in the instruction given to Aaron, to burn the incense at morning and twilight (Ex. 30:7-8). Leviticus 16:1 says, "The LORD spoke to Moses *after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the LORD and died.*" In the next verse, the Lord says to Moses, "Tell Aaron your brother not to come *at any time [he chooses]* (see, NKJV, NAB, NRSV, CJB, HCSB, NJB, CEB, NABRE, NIV, NCB, CSB) into the Most Holy Place." This suggests that what Nadab and Abihu did that had not been commanded was to bring the fire at a time of their own choosing, a time other than morning and twilight as had been commanded.¹¹

⁹ Worship with musical instruments is not among the ways of worship that God has revealed he desires or accepts from Christians. (Two claims to the contrary – based on the use of *psallō* in the New Testament to refer to Christian singing and texts in Revelation – are without merit.) Using musical instruments is also excluded by the fact they were a commanded and integral part of the Jewish temple worship that was superseded by the higher worship of the new covenant. For a fuller discussion, see Ashby Camp, [Beyond the Argument from Silence: A Covenantal View of A Cappella Worship](#).

¹⁰ Timothy R. Ashley, *Numbers*, NICOT, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), 53.

¹¹ For a fuller discussion, see, Ashby Camp, [A Comment on Nadab and Abihu](#).

2. God's opposition to human presumptuousness in worship is also seen in the implied condemnation of Jeroboam for, among other things, establishing a religious feast "in the month that he had devised from his own heart" (1 Ki. 12:32-33). Dale Ralph Davis remarks, "That is the writer's point about Jeroboam's religion: it is sheer invention – why lend it any credence at all? Worship either rests on the prescription of divine revelation or on the preferences of the human heart. It sounds simplistic, but it's scriptural."¹²

G. If one accepts worship innovations on the theory that whatever is not expressly prohibited is acceptable, then all forms of worship not expressly prohibited are permissible. There is no logical basis for objecting to any of them. Those who go that route wind up leaving the form of worship to human arbiters. Only those forms of worship that the congregational leaders find acceptable are allowed; those they consider eccentric or unworthy are prohibited. For example, in the early 1990's a television preacher was asked what to do about a member of a church who was using a police whistle to worship God, claiming he was doing so "by the Spirit." The preacher simply declared that he would put a stop to it. The question he never answered is, On what basis?

III. Congregational Worship

A. The church assembles to worship God¹³ in the proper sense of the word, to acknowledge his excellence directly and adoringly in a face-to-face encounter.¹⁴ Congregational or corporate worship is a communal enterprise, something that is offered to God by an assembled body of believers. It is not the separate worship of individuals who happen to be in proximity to one another. We offer our worship to God as a whole, and thus we all share in what the congregation accepts and willingly practices in its worship. It is *our* worship. Therefore, a person who believes it is sinful to worship God in ways he has not indicated he desires or accepts (to engage in "unauthorized" worship) can find no solace in the fact he is not personally playing an instrument, applauding God, whistling, burning incense, dancing, etc. His conscience is implicated in what he believes is sinful worship through his membership and presence in the

¹² Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Kings* (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2002), 143.

¹³ Acts 13:1-2, 20:7. As recognized by many, "they" in 13:2 most likely refers to the church mentioned in v. 1a and not just the five prophets and teachers identified in v. 1b. I. Howard Marshall explains in *Acts*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 215, "Since the list of names in v. 1 is primarily meant to show who was available for missionary service, and since changes of subject are not uncommon in Greek, it is preferable to assume that Luke is thinking of an activity involving the members of the church generally." See also, John B. Polhill, *Acts*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 290; Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 555; Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 439; Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts*, Paideia Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 184. See also, 1 Cor. 1:2, regarding which Everett Ferguson states in *The Early Church and Today* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2012), 240:

First Corinthians is addressed not only to "the church of God that is in Corinth" but also to "all those who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place [ἐν παντὶ τόπῳ]" (1:2). "To call on the name" is Old Testament language for worship, and the assembly would be where the name of Christ was invoked. Τόπῳ is parallel to ἐκκλησία. Paul wants his instructions to apply to every Christian assembly or church, every meeting place that acknowledges Jesus as Lord and calls on him in worship (cf. 11:16; 14:33).

¹⁴ The fact worship in our assemblies is supposed to edify fellow worshipers (1 Cor. 14:5, 26) does not mean it is directed to them rather than to God. It means that our vertical expressions of adoration to God are intended to have a horizontal spiritual benefit. As Paul explains in 1 Cor. 14:15-17, one who comprehends the thanksgiving *directed to God* by a fellow worshiper will thereby be built up.

worshiping community. This is why corporate worship is a matter of such passion and so readily leads to division. As Howard Norton wisely observed decades ago:

The public worship assembly is critical to our unity as a brotherhood. It always has been. Because of this we must be exceedingly careful when we tamper with it in any way. We are very resilient in churches of Christ when the issues on which we disagree fall outside the public assembly of the saints. When controversial practices enter the public assembly, however, everyone is affected; and the possibility for division and shattering is scary.¹⁵

B. Though the church assembles to worship God, not everything done in that gathering is or needs to be worship. For example, Christians in the first century greeted one another in their assemblies (e.g., Rom. 16:16; 2 Cor. 13:12), sometimes (or often) shared a fellowship meal (1 Cor. 11:20-22; Jude 12), contributed funds for Paul's collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:1-2),¹⁶ and on at least one occasion commissioned and sent out missionaries (Acts 13:2-3). In assemblies today, information is rightly shared with the congregation via public announcements to keep the members apprised of family needs, service opportunities, leadership plans and decisions, and various matters of interest to the community. Song leaders provide instruction to facilitate the worship of God in song. Members request prayers, encourage and exhort one another in personal interactions, and greet visitors as an expression of Christ's love. And saints deserving honor are sometimes recognized and encouraged publicly. Such things are to be done and regulated in the wisdom of the shepherds, as they judge best for building up the body. But doing those things does not mean we are free to innovate regarding worship, that we are free to worship God in ways of our own choosing. That conduct is not worship; it simply is done when the church is assembled for worship.

¹⁵ Howard Norton, *Christian Chronicle*, Jan. 1993, C-16.

¹⁶ Giving money for the poor or for the benefit of other people or causes certainly glorifies God and is required of all Christians who are able, but I am not convinced it is properly classified as an act of worship. Unlike a divine call to contribute to building a dwelling place for God, it is given *for* God rather than *to* God. It lacks the kind of Godward orientation that I think defines worship proper. But either way, there is biblical precedent for it being done in the worship assembly on the Lord's Day.