

REFLECTIONS ON WORSHIP

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The eminent philosopher of religion Nicholas Wolterstorff answers the question "What is worship?" as follows:

My *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (11th ed.) tells me that our word "worship" comes from the Middle English "worshipe," meaning "reverence paid to a divine being." It says that the Middle English "worshipe" comes, in turn, from the Old English "weorthscipe," which is a combination of the term "weorth," meaning worth or worthy, with the suffix "-scipe," which means the state of something. The term "worship" in present-day English remains true to its etymological origins: to worship God is to pay reverence to God for God's worth. It is a mode of acknowledging God's worthiness: the excellence of who God is and the greatness of what God has done, what God is doing, and what God will do. In Christian worship, we acknowledge the *distinctive* and *unsurpassable* excellence of God.¹

Though many apply the word "worship" to Christian living generally, to all that one does in obedience to the Lord, that usage conceals an important distinction. It lumps together expressions of reverence and adoration that are addressed directly to God, acts of interpersonal communion, with conduct that only indirectly redounds to God's glory by reflecting his nature and an awareness of his greatness. I think that is a mistake. As theologian Edmund Clowney states, "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 Wolterstorff concurs:

There are other ways of acknowledging God's distinctive excellence – for example, by obeying God's injunction to love our neighbors as ourselves and by participating in God's cause of bringing about justice. But these ways of acknowledging God's excellence are not worship of God. Why not? What is distinctive of worship as a mode of acknowledging God's excellence?

What is fundamentally distinctive, I would say, is the *orientation* that characterizes worship. In our everyday lives we are oriented toward our tasks, toward our fellow human beings, toward what they do and make, toward the natural world. In worshipping God, we turn around and orient ourselves toward God. We turn away from . . . attending to our neighbor, and so forth, in order to

¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Series Introduction" in Khalia J. Williams and Mark A. Lamport, eds., *Theological Foundations of Worship: Biblical, Systematic, and Practical Perspectives* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2021), xvii-xviii. Wolterstorff is Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at Yale University.

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

attend directly to God. We face God. In worship, our acknowledgement of God's excellence is *Godward* in its orientation.³

Worship quintessentially involves praising, thanking, and petitioning God in prayer and song⁴ and engaging him with gratitude and reverence through participation in prescribed ritual.⁵ It includes affirming God's excellence as expressed in praise given by others,⁶ and by analogy, affirming God's 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. 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."⁷

The attempt to expand worship to include all that one does in obedience to the Lord is based predominantly on what I consider a misreading of Rom. 12:1. Paul says in that verse, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, through the compassions of God, to present your bodies as a sacrifice – living, holy, and acceptable to God – which is your **λογικὴν λατρείαν** (*logikēn latreian*)." The question is how best to understand the bolded phrase, both words of which have multiple meanings.

Logikos may mean spiritual, rational, appropriate, or reasonable,⁸ and *latreia* may mean either service generally or worship specifically.⁹ Most commentators understand *latreia* in this verse as "worship," but I agree with Everett Harrison that "service" seems more appropriate

³ Wolterstorff, xviii. See also, Nicholas Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship: An Exploration of Liturgical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 24. Theologian Jack Cottrell similarly defines worship proper as "activities directed specifically and exclusively toward God in interpersonal adoration and communion." Jack Cottrell, *The Faith Once for All* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2002), 448. Another noted philosopher of religion, Brian Leftow, defines worship as "a form of address" to a deity. Brian Leftow, "Naturalistic Pantheism" in Andrei A. Buckareff and Yujin Nagasawa, eds., *Alternative Concepts of God: Essays on the Metaphysics of the Divine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 71. If "form of address" includes communicative acts, his definition is in line with that of Wolterstorff. See also, Ninian Smart, *The Concept of Worship* (London: Macmillan, 1972), 11 ("In worship one addresses the focus of worship"), 50 ("In worshipping God one addresses him").

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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.

⁷ C. E. B. Cranfield, "Divine and Human Action: The Biblical Concept of Worship," *Interpretation* 12 (October 1958), 387-98.

⁸ See, e.g., Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 231, fn. 8.

⁹ See, e.g., Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 434, fn. 11. The usage of *latreia* for service generally is evident in Jn. 16:2b, where Jesus tells the disciples that the time is coming when people who kill them will think they are "offering service to God," meaning doing his will.

because "it covers the entire range of the Christian's life and activity."¹⁰ David Peterson similarly states, "A better translation might be 'your reasonable service' or 'your understanding service.'"¹¹ Significantly, the standard Greek lexicon suggests "thoughtful service" as a translation for λογικὴν λατρείαν.¹² The phrase is rendered "reasonable service" in the KJV, ERV, NKJV, NET, 21st Century KJV, LEB, HCSB and the CSB footnote; "rational service" in the ESV footnote; and "spiritual service" in the ASV and WEB. CEV expresses the point with, "That's the most sensible way to serve God." I think "understanding service" best captures the intent.

Paul in Rom. 12:1 urges them, in light of the mercies or compassions of God, to present their *bodies* as a "living sacrifice," meaning they are willingly to offer in devotion to God consecrated lives, lives in which the sinful practices of the *body* have been put to death by the power of the Spirit (Rom. 8:13). They are to use their bodies honorably and direct them in paths of righteousness as an expression of gratitude and submission to God. Paul says that this kind of living is their "understanding (or reasonable) service" to God, meaning it is the appropriate response of rational or reasoning creatures to the God of mercy.¹³ There is something grossly inappropriate for rational creatures not to give God his due, not to serve him wholeheartedly as described in Deut. 10:12-13. As the Lord declared in Isa. 1:2-3: "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the LORD has spoken: 'Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me. *The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.*'"¹⁴

Paul characterizes the proper response to God by rational beings *metaphorically* as a "sacrifice," using the oxymoron "living sacrifice," because, as with literal sacrifices, that response is required by God and pleasing to him. I think it is a mistake to separate the word sacrifice from its modifier (living) and then use the worship connotation of a literal sacrifice to claim that Paul was describing all of Christian living as worship in a literal or proper sense. But if one goes that route, if one includes within worship the indirect ascription of worthiness to God that is implicit in all loving submission to him, the distinction between service and worship is not eliminated; it simply gets renamed. As Wolterstorff observes:

It is sometimes said that the Christian life as a whole is, or should be, worship. In this chapter I have assumed that that is not true. The Christian life as a whole is, or should be, an acknowledgement of who God is and of what God has done, is doing, and will do – an acknowledgement of God's unsurpassable excellence. But I have argued that worship has an orientation that sets it off from our work in the world, namely a *Godward* orientation. Of course, it is open to a writer to declare that he will use the word "worship" to cover everything that I call acknowledgement of who God is and of what God has done, is doing, and will do.

¹⁰ Everett F. Harrison, "Romans" in Frank E. Gaebelin, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 10:128.

¹¹ David Peterson, *Romans*, BTCP (Nashville: Holman, 2017), 439.

¹² Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 598.

¹³ H. Strathmann describes it as "a service of God which corresponds to human reason." H. Strathmann, "λατρεύω" in Gerhard Kittel ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 4:65.

¹⁴ See also, Jer. 8:6-7.

But that leaves us needing some other word to pick out what I have called *worship* – to pick out that Godward acknowledgment of God's unsurpassable excellence whose attitudinal stance is adoration.¹⁵

If one applies the word worship to Christian living generally, one is then forced to distinguish between broad or general or indirect worship and narrow or specific or direct worship, the latter being worship proper, those distinctively Godward acts done at specific times and places. Thus, J. Vernon Bartlet concludes, "Worship has two senses, a wider and a stricter. The wider, expressing a man's devoutness in all his living, is equivalent to piety; the narrower, denoting specific forms of devotion, personal or social, is nearly synonymous with cultus."¹⁶ A more current example is J. Richard Middleton, who contrasts worship "in the narrow sense of our focused attention given to God in praise and prayer" with "a broader sense of worship, corresponding to all that we do in obedience to God."¹⁷ Wayne Grudem likewise contrasts worship as "applied to all of a Christian's life," what he calls the "broad sense," with "worship in a more specific sense," which refers "to the music and words Christians direct to God in praise."¹⁸

The distinction must be preserved because it is conceptual not merely semantic. Worship in the more specific sense is not a continuous activity, a continuous attitude or state of submissiveness, nor is it everything we do that brings glory to God. Rather, the life of one submitted to God is punctuated with distinctive acts of worship. This is clear from the numerous examples in Scripture.

In Gen. 22:1-4 Abraham takes Isaac to Moriah in obedience to the Lord's command. In 22:5 he tells the servants he had brought with him, "Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go yonder; and we will worship and return to you." Abraham clearly saw worship as a particular expression of devotion or reverence that was distinct from the obedience he was rendering in taking Isaac to Moriah. It was something he planned to do at a specific place.

Likewise, when David learned that the child born to him by Bathsheba was dead, he bathed, changed clothes, and went into the house of God "and worshiped" (2 Sam. 12:20). Again, his worship was a distinct act done in a specific place. In Mat. 14:33, after Jesus walked on water, "those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, 'You are certainly God's Son.'" Similarly, Mat. 28:17 reports that when the disciples saw the resurrected Lord, "they worshiped Him," and Lk. 24:52 says that after the disciples witnessed Jesus' ascension near Bethany, "they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy."

The apostle Paul served (or worshiped) God with his entire life (e.g., Acts 24:14; 1 Cor. 10:31; Phil. 1:21), yet in Acts 24:11 he speaks of having gone "up to Jerusalem to worship." If

¹⁵ Wolterstorff (2015), 39-40.

¹⁶ J. Vernon Bartlet, "Worship (Christian)" in James Hastings, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), 12:763.

¹⁷ J. Richard Middleton, "A New Earth Perspective" in Michael E. Wittmer, ed., *Four Views on Heaven* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022), 74.

¹⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 1236.

the worship to which Paul referred was not a distinct act, a moment within his life of submission, it is hard to imagine how he could go to Jerusalem to do it. The examples could be multiplied.¹⁹

So even if Paul in Rom. 12:1 describes obedient living as "worship," which I dispute, he is not denying there is a more specific or direct worship. He simply means that, as was true in the OT, this more specific worship must be practiced as part of the wider worship or service embracing the whole of the Christian's life. Otherwise, it is unacceptable to God. As Cranfield states:

Paul's use of the word *latreia* implies that the true worship which God desires embraces the whole of the Christian's life from day to day. It implies that any cultic worship which is not accompanied by obedience in the ordinary affairs of life must be regarded as false worship, unacceptable to God. But it would be quite unjustifiable to argue that the logical implication of Paul's use of *latreia* here is that no room is left for a Christian cultic worship carried out at particular times and in particular places. Provided that such worship in the narrower sense is always practiced as part of the wider worship embracing the whole of the Christian's living and is not thought of as something acceptable to God apart from obedience of life, there is nothing here to deny it its place in the life of the faithful.²⁰

Likewise, Michael Thompson remarks:

The apostle urges a way of life as a whole, identified as a right-minded worship or service. In doing so, he no doubt expands our understanding of what kind of worship God values. True worship is inseparably connected with Christian behavior in general. But it is a logical fallacy to conclude from this text that he redefines worship as, or reduces worship to, Christian ethics – any more than Hosea's commendation of love and knowledge over sacrificial offerings (Hos. 6:6) proves that the prophet was calling for an absolute end to form and ritual.²¹

Those who include as worship all that one does in obedience to the Lord sometimes appeal to Jas. 1:27 as justification, but that attempt fares no better. The statement that religion (*thrēskeia*) that is pure and undefiled before God is to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unspotted from the world does not mean that for the Christian worship has collapsed into ethics. It means only that a religion that is hypocritical, that disassociates faith from life, is defiled and worthless in the eyes of God. Any worship offered by one who rejects God's call to righteous living is repulsive, as it was under the old covenant.²²

¹⁹ E.g., Ex. 33:10; Deut. 26:10; Judg. 7:15; 1 Sam. 1:19; 2 Chron. 7:3, 20:18; Job 1:20; Mat. 2:11; Jn. 9:38; Acts 13:1-2; 1 Cor. 14:24-25.

²⁰ C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), 2:601-602 (his parenthetical comments omitted).

²¹ Michael B. Thompson, "Romans 12:1-2 and Paul's Vision for Worship" in Markus Bockmuehl and Michael B. Thompson, eds., *A Vision for the Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 127.

²² E.g., Isa. 1:10-17, 66:2-4; Amos 5:21-24; Mic. 6:6-8.

The church assembles to worship God²³ in the proper (or narrow) sense of the word, to acknowledge his excellence directly and adoringly in a face-to-face encounter.²⁴ This is evident in the fact that in our assemblies we are to sing to God,²⁵ pray to him,²⁶ and share in the Lord's Supper, the prescribed ritual of grateful and adoring remembrance of the Lord and his saving work.²⁷ God speaks to his gathered people as his word is taught, preached, and read,²⁸ and we affirm his glory revealed in that word and consciously put ourselves under it.

Churches of Christ, with various Protestant groups, have historically rejected attempts to worship God, to express adoration of his excellence directly to him, in ways he has not indicated in Scripture that he desires or accepts.²⁹ Given that God cares about the way in which he is worshiped³⁰ and has revealed ways of worshiping him that he desires (as noted above), it is more reverent to worship him only in those ways rather than also to worship him in whatever ways he has not expressly prohibited. Put differently, it is more reverent, more respectful of his greatness and glory, to stick with what God 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

²³ 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).

²⁴ 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.

²⁵ Eph. 5:19-20; Col. 3:16; cf. 1 Cor. 14:15-16, 26; Jas. 5:13.

²⁶ 1 Tim. 2:1-2, 2:8; cf. Acts 2:42, 12:12; 1 Cor. 11:2-5, 14:15-16.

²⁷ Lk. 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:17-34; cf. Acts 2:42, 20:7.

²⁸ Acts 11:26; 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; Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27; 1 Tim. 4:13.

²⁹ Among Reformed Protestants, this is commonly referred to as the "regulative principle," which predates the American Restoration Movement by centuries.

³⁰ The second commandment (Ex. 20:4-5a; Deut. 5:8-9a) prohibits worshiping God, Yahweh, *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. 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. That God continues to care about the manner of his worship, that he continues to have objective desires in that regard, is clear from the New Testament (e.g., Jn. 4:20-24; 1 Cor. 11:2-16, 14:28; Heb. 12:28).

wants, for the sake of personal preference.³¹ And since God is due utmost reverence in worship,³² Christians are to worship him only in the ways he has revealed he desires or accepts.³³ This precludes worshipping him by flagellating or cutting oneself, burning objects or incense to him, giving him applause, offering him the sound of musical instruments or rattles, whistling, spitting, holy dancing, and countless other humanly devised forms of worship.³⁴

³¹ To illustrate, if a woman knowingly risked a miscarriage by insisting on behavior she enjoyed, she 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 behavior says the baby's life and health are too valuable to be put at risk by her personal preferences.

³² Heb. 12:28-29.

³³ In addition to the limitation on the manner of worship that arises from the nature of reverence, there are confirming indications in Scripture that God opposes this kind of human presumptuousness in worshipping him, 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. God was displeased with Nadab and Abihu in offering fire "which he had not commanded them" (Lev. 10:1), and he condemned Jeroboam implicitly for, among other things, establishing a religious feast "in the month that he had devised from his own heart" (1 Ki. 12:32-33).

³⁴ Regarding the use of musical instruments, see the additional argument set forth in [Beyond the Argument from Silence: A Covenantal View of A Cappella Worship](#).