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The Biblical View of Worship

John W. Kleinig

By way of introduction to a discussion of worship, one may profitably imagine a television-set which has never been used. There it sits in the living room of a house, sheltered from the sun and rain. Since it occupies such a prominent place in the living room, it has developed rather inflated notions about its own importance. It has met all the visitors that have come to the house; it has eavesdropped on all the conversations in the room; it has watched everything that has happened in the house. But it has never been used. It has never been plugged into the electrical circuitry. No one has ever turned on its speaker, so that it could sing and speak properly. No one has ever adjusted its vision, so that it could display a clearly coloured image. And so it has sat there undisturbed and has never functioned as a television set. It has lived all its life in that room and has never discovered what goes on elsewhere outside its immediate range. It has never caught a vision of the world outside and has never brought it back into its home. It has never become a receiver and so could never become a transmitter of words and visions. It is nothing but a useless piece of furniture.

Of a like nature are people who never worship God. They do not fulfill the purpose for which they were created. They never become receivers and transmitters of God's heavenly transmission to us in this world. They lead lives which are spiritually frustrated and unfulfilled.

I. Tuning In

There is only one activity which we do here on earth which will also be done in heaven. Whatever else we do lasts only for a while or, at best, for as long as we live here on earth. But this activity lasts forever and will occupy us through all eternity. In fact, we rehearse it for as long as we live and even then we never do it completely correctly. This activity is *worship*, which is the beginning of a heavenly life here on earth and a preparation for our life with God in heaven. Our worship here is practice for the real thing, like learning to play a musical instrument or like attending school to prepare for a vocation. It is a heavenly activity which is done perfectly only in heaven.

Worship, then, is something supernatural, and it is supernatural in three ways. In the first place, it does not come naturally to us human beings. If we were left to our own devices, we would never worship God properly, since it goes against our grain. We would rather worship ourselves or some homemade idols than the living God. So God Himself has to teach us how to worship. In fact, He does more than show us how it is done; He actually does it together with us, so that we learn it from Him. It is, then, a divine activity, and we join in with it like a horseman who rides a racing-horse.

Secondly, worship is supernatural because it has to do with what is out of this world. It has to do with God and what connects us with God, just as an umbilical cord joins the baby to its mother and nourishes the life of the baby from its mother. Worship is the divine lifeline of the church, which is what makes it so important. Now this situation is something that those who are not Christians cannot understand. The ordinary secular person is utterly mystified by worship. It is unlike anything else we do. It is not useful for anything else. It seems a waste of time and energy. It is rather boring since nothing much seems to happen in it. In short, it makes no earthly sense to anybody who is merely an earthling. Thus, since they cannot appreciate the great importance of worship for the Christian, atheists sometimes commit monumental blunders. For example, the Russian Communists banned all Christian activities except worship without ever realizing that they thereby helped the church survive and even thrive in Communist Russia.

Thirdly, worship is supernatural because it is at core a divine activity. The chief celebrant is Jesus, our great high priest in the heavenly sanctuary. He leads us in our worship by representing us before the Father in intercession and thanksgiving (Hebrews 7:25; 9:25) and by representing God the Father to us in proclamation and praise (Hebrews 2:12). By means of His service in the heavenly sanctuary Jesus leads us, together with the angels and the whole communion of saints, in the performance of the heavenly liturgy (Hebrews 2:11; 8:2; 12:22-24; 13:15).

Since it is supernatural, Christian worship is a matter of mystery. Now a mystery differs from a secret in that it remains inexplicable, even when one knows a good deal about it. St. Paul sums it up in

Colossians 1:24 as "Christ in [or among] you, the hope of glory." It has, then, to do with the hidden presence of Christ who is with us and among us. We are in Him and He is in us. He comes to us and does things for us when we gather together in His name. He brings the Holy Spirit with Him and ushers us into the presence of His Heavenly Father. In worship, then, we come into contact with the Holy Trinity. We come into the presence of the Triune God and share in the ministry of Jesus.

Worship, however, also has to do with our hope of glory, that is, with our life as sons and daughters of God in heaven. This life is not yet apparent to us. It is "hid with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3). The wonder of it is that in worship heaven comes down to earth in Jesus, and we earthlings are taken up together with Him into heaven. We join in with the angels and saints in heaven as they gather round God's throne and sing: "Holy! Holy! Holy!" By faith, then, we have a foretaste of heaven; we anticipate the glory we shall share as children of our Heavenly Father and members of God's royal family. Wilhelm Loehe said this about the mystery of worship:

In its worship the congregation feels closest to its Lord.
There as close to the Bridegroom as it can get, it leads an
heavenly life on earth, an earthly life in heaven.

Worship, then, is a mysterious tuning into heaven here on earth. By it we human beings become receivers and transmitters of heavenly life together with other Christians.

When we worship, we begin to do the thing for which we were created. We fulfill God's ultimate purpose for us and His whole creation. We become fulfilled with the fullness of God. It is, therefore, the chief thing that we ever learn in this life. It is for this reason that the first three of the ten commandments cover various aspects of it. Apart from worship our Christian faith remains notional, theoretical, and ultimately unreal.

The early Christians spoke much about "orthodoxy." We normally define "orthodoxy" as correct teaching about the Triune God, but it also means "correct worship" or "right praise." Both ideas belong together. Correct doctrine is teaching the right worship of the living

God. All doctrine achieves nothing, no matter how good and correct and inspiring, unless it comes from worship and leads back to worship of the Triune God. For when we worship properly, we let God be our God and have His way with us. In orthodox worship we join with Jesus in His ministry as the great high priest in the heavenly sanctuary.

II. Receiving

We call worship "divine service" but usually put back to front when we do so. We, naturally enough, dwell on what we have to do when we come to church or hold our devotions, which is not really the essence of worship. It is more a matter of receiving than doing; it is first and foremost what God does for us, not what we do for God. The activity of God lies at the heart of Christian worship. Human activity is secondary and dependent on God's initiative with us in it.

This relationship appears quite clearly in Luke 22:24-27. The context here is important for the understanding of this passage. The story is set on the Thursday night before the crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus has just instituted His holy supper and has just announced His impending betrayal by one of the twelve. What happens then is noteworthy:

A dispute arose among them, which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And He said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For which is the greater, one who sits at the table, or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at the table? But I am among you as one who serves."

In the last sentence the present tense of the verb is to be noted. It indicates continuous activity. The service of His disciples is based on their ongoing service by Jesus. In holy communion Jesus is present as the servant of His disciples. Even though He is their host and they sit as guests at His table, He waits on them and serves

them. He attends to them; He sees to their needs; He fulfills their wishes; He nourishes them; He puts Himself at their disposal—and not just then. As our risen Lord He continues to serve us whenever we visit Him as guests in His house. Yes, Jesus serves us in worship. He works for us; He ministers to us. Unless one sees this trust, he will make no sense of the architecture of our churches, our orders of worship, and the whole business of worship itself. Here the Lord Jesus rolls up His sleeves, lends a helping hand, and puts Himself to work for us.

What, then, does He do for us? There are two simple ways of looking at God's service to us in worship. First, our order of worship is designed to show what God does for us there. Secondly, the gospel-stories tell us how Jesus ministers to us in worship as He once ministered to the people in Palestine.

The common order of worship as a whole bears witness to the mysterious presence and activity of the Triune God with us. It begins with the invocation which announces the presence of the Triune God. The main accent then falls on what God does. He makes us His children in baptism, forgives our sins in the absolution, and receives us as beggars of favours from Him in the introit and the Kyrie Eleison. In the salutation we acknowledge our Lord Jesus as the chief celebrant and liturgist in our worship. Then our Heavenly Father speaks powerfully to us in the Scripture readings and sermon, listens to our requests for His help in the general prayer, gives us the body and blood of Jesus for the healing of our souls in holy communion, and dismisses us with the blessing of His Spirit. Thus, worship is always first and foremost God's gracious doing. He does, to be sure, judge us, but only in order to give us more of Himself and His blessings. Here the gospel strengthens us as we receive a portion of God's measureless grace. Here we are encouraged and invigorated, healed and helped, revitalized and enriched by God. God is the doer and we are the objects of His activity; God is the giver, and we are the receivers of His spiritual gifts to us.

The gospel-stories, in particular, tell us how Jesus serves us in worship. It was for this reason that they were remembered, retold, and included in the New Testament, which reports only a small fraction of all that Jesus said and did. They do more than tell us

what Jesus did for people some two thousand years ago; they inform us about what He continues to do even now in His church through the operation of His holy word and sacraments. His ministry did not end with His death, resurrection, and ascension. These events are merely the inauguration of it. St. Luke makes this point quite clear in his two-volumed history of the early church. In his gospel Luke has shown how Jesus served people by *teaching* the gospel and *healing* the sick in body and soul. When he begins Acts, the second part of this history, Luke refers to what he has written in the gospel in this way: "In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus *began to do and teach*, until the day when He was taken up, after He had given commandment through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom He had chosen." In other words, Jesus continues His ministry through the means of grace in the church. He continues to teach the gospel of God's grace and heal broken people in His hospital, the church. Thus, each gospel-story has its obvious point of application in worship, for we believe that the same Jesus is now physically present and active in worship as He was then in Palestine (Matthew 18:20).

With Christ's service of us in our worship comes a most remarkable reversal of roles. In the Old Testament God had commanded David to institute the Levitical choir to sing His praises as the burnt offering was presented on the altar in the temple. The choir announced His presence, proclaimed His acceptance of His people, and rejoiced in His grace. This order is reversed in the worship of the new age. According to Zephaniah 3:17, God delights in His people and rejoices over them with singing. The prophecies of Isaiah come true wherever the Gospel is proclaimed. God rejoices over new Jerusalem as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride (Isaiah 62:5; 65:19). Whenever we meet for worship God is overjoyed to have us with Him. He rejoices in us and expresses His approval of us. He voices His delight in us and enjoys our company. And His enjoyment of us doubles our enjoyment of Him, so that our joy is full. He has instituted divine worship, so that He can rejoice in us as His dear children.

Worship is God's service of us. It is what the Triune God does for us and gives to us who have confidence in Him. In worship He

gives us as much of Himself as we can receive this side of heaven, so as to prepare us for eternal intimacy with Him in heaven. It is the place where He communicates His wonderful grace to human beings.

III. Transmission

A television-set does not remain inert as it receives its transmission. The same electricity which transmitted the vision helps it receive and reflect the transmitted vision. We, too, cannot remain passive and inert in worship. We are affected by it. We are, in fact, bound to react and respond either negatively or positively to God's dealing with us. This case is rather obvious, even though the priority of divine activity does not always receive enough emphasis in our understanding of worship. We tend to emphasize the human side of worship too much to the detriment of the divine side, which should, however, always receive most weight. What we do in worship stems from what God does and corresponds with it. We take no initiative, but merely go along with Jesus; we follow His lead. He is our leader in worship, our chief celebrant. What is more, we cannot worship by ourselves without the help of the Holy Spirit, any more than the television-set creates its vision by itself without the help of the electricity which can alone enable it to receive and transmit its vision. Our service of God in worship depends on His service of us. It is empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Our order of worship makes these facts quite clear to us. In it we first react to God's invitation by gathering in His presence. Then we react to the offer of forgiveness by confessing our sins. We react to God's acceptance of us by singing the Gloria in Excelsis and other hymns of praise. We react to God's speaking by listening faithfully to Him and confessing our faith. We react to God's generosity by offering ourselves and some of our money to Him. We react to God's offer of help by asking Him for help in prayer. We react to our entry into the presence of our Heavenly Father by joining together with the heavenly hosts in singing the Sanctus. We react to the gift of Christ's healing body and cleansing blood by gratefully receiving these gifts and surrendering our lives to Him in the *Nunc Dimittis*. We react to God's blessing by going out into the world

and serving Him in our daily lives. So our order of worship not only tells us how to respond but also helps us to respond appropriately to God's presence and grace.

We are not left to our own devices in all these things. We join in with our fellow Christians and are led by the Holy Spirit, who prompts us and empowers us in our worship of the Father through the Son. The Holy Spirit helps us react appropriately and respond properly. He directs our worship, so that it lets God be God and is rightly attuned to the ongoing ministry of Jesus. What is more, He turns our whole life into a single act of worship, a continual song of praise about our gracious Heavenly Father for the whole world to hear. Thus, by helping us receive God's heavenly transmission, the Holy Spirit makes us into living transmitters of that transmission.

There are many people who participate faithfully in worship but complain that they obtain nothing out of it. Probably we have had such feelings at times. What we forget is that the work of God is invisible to us. We do not see it, but only know about it because He Himself tells us about it in His word. We may sense the results of it, as we sense the results of breathing and eating, but we do not see it happening. It is just as silly to complain about how boring, useless, and unpleasant the worship of the church is as to complain about how boring good food is, or how useless sleep is, or how unpleasant medicine is. Like good food, proper worship is not meant to entertain but to nourish us, and we can often be best nourished by what we most dislike (broccoli or whatever). Like sleep, worship may seem dull and its benefits often escape our attention; they can be physical as well as mental or emotional. (After all, God instituted the Sabbath in the Old Testament for physical as well as spiritual rest, refreshment, and fellowship). Like medicine, worship is at times unpleasant and uncomfortable just because it attacks, destroys, and heals the evil in us. God does not necessarily give us what we want but what we need in worship. Thus, although one may always be grateful if he feels some tangible blessing from worship, there is no reason to be disturbed by the lack of such feelings. The benefits of worship are a matter of faith and not of sight.

Our worship of God here on earth is unfortunately always rather

clumsy and inadequate. Our reception is poor and our transmission is poorer. Our worship is more like learning to play a musical instrument than playing a symphony. But that does not matter. The validity of it does not depend on our ability and performance but on Christ's expertise and skill. What matters is that He gets it right for us. We shall be unable to get it all right this side of eternity. Our whole life then is a matter of learning, bit by bit, how to appreciate, enjoy, and worship God. None of us is an expert in worship; we are all beginners. At best we can support and encourage each other as we learn to worship by worshipping together.

Conclusion

Three stories which illustrate the purpose, nature, and importance of worship may suitably conclude this discussion of the topic. The first story concerns the purpose of worship. The story is told about Prince Vladimir of Kiev in Russia. Around the year 1,000 A.D. he decided that the ancestral religion of his people was no longer good enough. He sent forth ambassadors, therefore, into the surrounding lands to assess the claims of the several great religions. First they went to Mecca where they observed the worship of Islam; they found it too severe, drab, and gloomy for their liking. Then they went to Rome where they found Roman Catholicism to be better than Islam but still lacking. Finally they went to Constantinople where they experienced worship in the great Cathedral of Holy Wisdom. They came back from there with excitement and reported to their king:

We did not know whether we were in heaven or on earth, for surely there is no such splendor or beauty anywhere upon earth. We cannot describe it to you. Only this we know, that God dwells there among men and their service surpasses the worship of all other places.

Thus, Orthodox Christianity became the religion of Kiev and so of Russia. This legend reminds us of what worship is—the mystery of God's heavenly presence with us on earth.

The second story comes from St. Luke 24:13-35. It is the story of the appearance of Jesus to two disciples on the road to Emmaus.

Jesus joined them as they travelled from Jerusalem and discussed the events of Good Friday and Easter morning. They did not at first recognize Him. Even when He showed them from the Old Testament that the Christ had to suffer and die before His coronation as the heavenly King of the world, they still did not see fully. They only recognized Him when He took over the meal in their home, as if He were their host, taking the bread and blessing it, breaking and giving it to them. Then their eyes were opened and He disappeared from their sight. In a way we are in the same boat as those two men that Easter Eve. Like them we have heard about the resurrection of Jesus but are unaware of His presence with us until He teaches us about Himself and reveals Himself to us. Thus, every time Christians meet together in the name of Jesus, their risen Lord comes to them and makes Himself known to them. Every act of worship is a celebration of Easter where we meet with our Lord and come to know Him as He sets our hearts aflame by His speaking and opens our eyes to His presence with us. Every Sunday the risen Lord comes to us as He did to them.

A final story illustrates the importance of worship and the folly of its neglect. Some time ago the author's wife met up with an old friend whom she had not seen for years. In the course of their conversation the friend revealed that she was living with her two children in Adelaide, while her husband lived more or less permanently in Canberra. They saw each other occasionally but they lived apart most of the time. In relation to God, in fact, many Christians are just like a husband or wife who lives apart from his or her spouse and so lacks the common life of marriage. These Christians are baptized and confirmed but seldom engage in worship because they regard it as unnecessary business and a burdensome obligation rather than a marvelous privilege and the highlight of Christian life. Worship is ultimately nothing but our enjoyment of God. The Westminster Catechism begins with the question: "What is the chief end of man?" The answer is apt: "The chief end of man is to worship God and enjoy Him forever." In the final count they amount to the one and the same thing.

The Rev. Dr. John Kleinig serves as professor of theology in Luther Seminary of Adelaide, Australia.