

# WHAT REALLY IS WORSHIP?

## Rethinking worship from a biblical-theological perspective

*David Peterson*

### 1. THE PROBLEM OF DEFINITIONS

a. *Some are too general*

'Worship, in all its grades and kinds, is the response of the creature to the Eternal . . . an acknowledgement of Transcendence.'<sup>1</sup>

b. *Some are too narrow*

Worship is 'the dramatic celebration of God in his supreme worth in such a manner that his "worthiness" becomes the norm and inspiration of human living.'<sup>2</sup>

c. *Even more narrow*

Worship is 'the gateway to knowing God and his mind,'<sup>3</sup>

- Consequences

- A way forward

---

<sup>1</sup> E. Underhill, *Worship* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., London: Nisbet, 1937), 3.

<sup>2</sup> R.P. Martin, *The Worship of God: Some Theological, Pastoral and Practical Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 4.

<sup>3</sup> P. Fulton, 'The heart of Worship',  
[www.vineyardusa.org/publications/newsletters/cutting](http://www.vineyardusa.org/publications/newsletters/cutting).

## 2. SOME KEY WORSHIP TERMS

### a. **Worship as homage or adoration to God**

(Gk. *proskynein* [Heb. *hwh*]) - lit. 'bow down, bend over to' - expressed in acts of devotion, closely linked to praise

- Gn. 24:26-27
- Ex. 4:31
- Ps. 95:1-7

### b. **Worship as service to God**

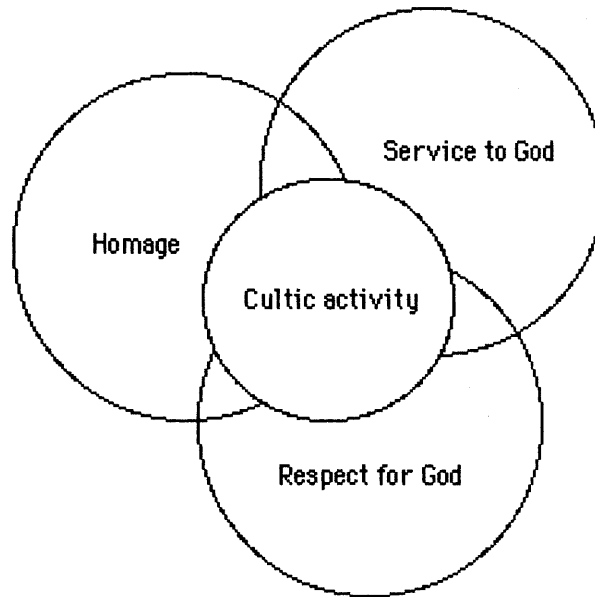
(Gk. *latreuein/douleuein* [Heb. 'bd]) - cultic service and the service of everyday life

- Ex. 3:12
- Dt. 6:13-15
- Josh. 24:14-18

### c. **Worship as respect for God**

(Gk. *sebomai/phoboun* [Heb. *yr'*]) - reverence or fear expressed in cultic acts and everyday obedience

- Job 1:1, 8
- Jon. 1:9
- Eccles. 12:13



### **3. GOD'S PROVISIONS FOR ISRAEL'S WORSHIP**

#### **a. Revelation at Mount Sinai: the giving of the law through Moses**

- Not all worship is acceptable to God (e.g. Gn. 4:3-5; Ex. 20:4-16; Is. 1:10-17)
- God must reveal himself and show what is pleasing to him (Exodus 19)
- The pattern of devotion he requires embraces every sphere of life (Exodus 20-24)

#### **b. Tabernacle and temple: the symbols of God's continuing presence and commitment to his people**

- The cult enabled Israel to engage with the God of the covenant continually (Ex. 25:8)
- Tabernacle worship transferred to the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 8-9)

- This enabled Israel to fulfil her covenant role (Ex. 19:4-6)
  - Despite these provisions, the OT is the story of Israel's failure to worship God properly
  - Nevertheless, Jerusalem and the temple remain at the centre of God's purposes for Israel and the world (e.g. Is. 2:1-5; Ezekiel 40-48; Mal. 3:1-4)
- c. Priesthood and the sacrificial system: the way of continuing approach to God**
- Priests were consecrated to offer sacrifices, to make it possible for God's glory to dwell amongst a sinful people (Ex. 29:42-6)
  - The sacrificial system made possible *atonement* (= sin/guilt offerings), *consecration* (= burnt offerings), and *fellowship* (= offerings of well-being)

### **Conclusion**

From the perspective of Biblical Theology:

Acceptable worship is 'an engagement with God on the terms that he proposes and in the way that he alone makes possible.'<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> D. Peterson, *Engaging with God. A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Leicester: Apollos; Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1992), 20.