
What is worship?

Some biblical principles of public worship¹

(First of three articles)

By C. Van Dam

The subject for this evening is a vast one and we have to be very selective. Let us, therefore, reflect together on some of the important principles and themes that affect our public worship. The main issues can be put in the form of 5 questions. Whom do we worship? Where do we worship? When do we worship? Why and how do we worship? And within what perspective do we worship?

So let's begin with the question: "whom do we worship?"

Whom do we worship?

The One True God, the Holy One

the God who has revealed Himself

Did you know that most worship that has transpired and is taking place on this planet earth is, to put it bluntly, an exercise in self-deception (cf. Rom 1:18-23)? Take, for example, the ancient Egyptians. They made fancy images of their gods, which could take the form of a bull or a human, dressed them, washed them, took them out for boat rides along the Nile, and even took them hunting. But, when push came to shove, they had to admit that these gods were indeed only figments of their imagination. After all, there was always lots of food left over after the gods had supposedly taken their share and so the priests never went hungry! Also – another example of the self-deception – when they sought the guidance of the gods, it was always human beings that provided the answer, either through ventriloquism or by manipulating the statue to nod "yes" or "no" depending on what the desired answer was. Now what happened in Egypt also happened in slightly different ways in all the pagan cultures of the ancient Near East.

Of course, what happened in ancient pagan culture is still today, in principle, taking place with modern pa-

gan religions of whatever strip or colour. The basic characteristic of false worship is that man creates a god after his own image, models him or her according to the human needs present, and then proceeds to manipulate that god as the worshiper sees fit. That manipulation can take many forms. To move closer to home, not all that is called Christianity is *really* Christianity. To worship truly we have to know *whom* we worship.

"The basic characteristic of false worship is that man creates a god after his own image."

In the Old Testament, the church thought they knew whom they worshipped, but they were sometimes more influenced by their culture than they realized. For example, at a certain point while Israel was at the Sinai, they felt forsaken by Moses and really wanted to have God close by and so feel safe. They therefore made an image of Him. But how did they picture God? The best they could come up with was a golden calf because, according to their culture, that was a flattering form in which to be pictured! How they partied for joy to have God so close to them! In their self-deception they imagined that they were worshipping Yahweh (Ex 32:4-5). However, a moment's reflection on how God had revealed himself only days earlier on

the Sinai would have exposed their action not as worship, but simply as meeting in a sinful way their need for a tangible presence of God.

Such delusionary image substitutions for the true God are also possible today. For example, some people think they worship God whose name, in essence, is Santa Claus. Their God never gets angry, never punishes, and is always ready to hand out presents. They manipulate this god, whom they have made according to the image that suits them, to soothe their conscience and need for worship. Such people, too, do not fully realize that they are more influenced by their culture than by Scripture. But when push comes to shove, they will have to admit that they are involved in self-deception, but simply do not want to hear of a God who prepares hell for the ungodly.

And so our first task tonight then is to be clear about whom we worship. Simply put, we worship the one true God who has come to us in saving grace in Jesus Christ. We have not discovered Him or come up with Him, but He has revealed himself to us in the Scriptures, and worked faith in our hearts by his Word and Spirit. This is the same God who revealed himself to Adam and Eve, to Abraham, and to Israel. There is only one true God. The God we worship must be the One who has revealed himself, and who continues to speak to us in the Word and in the Word preached. Our object of worship is not to be the product of our imagination. We may only worship the God of Scripture who has come to us in saving grace!

God is sovereign and holy

There are two characteristics of God that I would like to mention briefly in regards to our topic. First, this God is

sovereign. He is king and supreme ruler of heaven and earth. He determines what is right and wrong. His Word is law, and he is not answerable to anyone. In the words of 1 Timothy 6:15, he is the “only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords” (cf. Ps 104:19; Rev 19:16). His is the kingdom and the power and the glory (cf. Matt 6:13). Clearly, this God, who is in full control as Lord and King and thus knows all things (cf. Ps 139; Heb 4:13), cannot be manipulated or fooled. To Him obedience, worship and praise must be given (cf. 1 Chron 29:10-13). He is *God*, the only one!

The other attribute of God that needs to be mentioned briefly is that God is holy. This sets God apart from all creation. He cannot be compared with anyone or anything else. He is “the Holy One” (Isa 40:25; cf. Hab 3:3), the transcendent one. God’s holiness thus testifies to the distinction between the Creator and creation, but it also speaks of his being separate from sin. God is absolutely free of all blemish of any kind (cf. Ps 89:36[35]; Isa 30:1). Both of these features of God’s holiness were demonstrated when God comes to his people at Sinai to renew the covenant with them. When God came down, then indeed *God* came down, the holy one, the transcendent one! God’s coming down was accompanied by thunder, lightning, and a very loud trumpet blast (cf. 1 Thess 4:16). God’s people, who

had been warned to consecrate themselves to God and not to touch the mountain, came forward to meet with God by going to the foot of the mountain. Then we read in Exodus 19:18-19a

Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder.

Awesome is God in his holy majesty! The people were warned again to respect God’s holiness lest God “break out against them” (Ex 19:24). Israel witnessed the holiness of God in a very obvious and physical way. This God is for real. He cannot be manipulated!

Another good example of God’s holiness is the occasion of Isaiah’s being commissioned by God. Isaiah saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted.

Above him were two seraphs, each with six wings: with two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty,
The whole earth is full of his glory.”

At the sound of their voices the door posts and thresholds shook and the

temple was filled with smoke. “Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty!” (Isa 6:2-5)

Isaiah was assured that his guilt was taken away, but his response to God’s holiness is telling. It is no small thing to be in the presence of God!

What is worship?

If we know whom we are to worship, then we can also understand why those who worship Him must be consecrated and holy, separated from a world of sin and iniquity. Think again of the smoking Sinai and God’s warnings, and think of Isaiah’s call. To be able to worship God we must be claimed by God who has revealed himself to us. He claims us to be holy. And therefore, in order for us to worship God, we prepare ourselves. We must cleanse ourselves, consecrate ourselves. It is no small thing to come into God’s presence!


We are now ready to give a working definition of the public worship service for the purposes of our discussion tonight. What is public worship? For our purposes tonight:

Public worship is the communal attitude and activity of God’s people gathered together in holy assembly to pay homage to God, to serve Him and to praise Him, who has revealed himself to us in saving grace in Christ Jesus, and who still continues to speak to us in his Word and in the Word preached. In this way He works in us by his Holy Spirit.

That’s a mouthful. Put more briefly, one can say that public worship is an attitude and activity of homage, service, and praise directed to God in response to his revelation of himself in Christ and his ongoing work in our lives by his Word and Spirit.

Notice that public worship is only possible because God has revealed himself to us and still speaks to us through the Word. His Word must, therefore, set the content, tone, and direction of our worship.

(To be continued)

¹This series of three articles is an abridged version of what will appear in annotated form in a forthcoming publication of my lectures given in Australia (and partly New Zealand) in June and July of 1999, viz. *Perspectives on Worship, Law and Faith: The Old Testament Speaks Today*. (Kelmscott, WA: Pro Ecclesia Publishers). 

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Personal opinions are not official positions

I am following with interest the discussion in *Clarion* about the length of days in Genesis 1. I take exception to the statement of Dr. John Byl in his article in Reader’s Forum, on p. 201, Vol. 49, no. 9, when he says, “As is well known, both the OPC and the URC tolerate non-literal views of Genesis 1.”

What is well known to Dr. Byl is not so well known to members of the URC. We tolerate non-literal views of Genesis 1 the way the Canadian and American Reformed Churches tolerate non-literal views of the days of Genesis 1. The reality is this: Personal opinions have been expressed. Some debate about these opinions has ensued. More will undoubtedly follow. However, no church body in the URC has endorsed them, nor has any made a decision to “tolerate” them. When “URC ‘leaders’” – who are the leaders of the URC but the elders of the churches? – “plead for the toleration of non-literal views of the days,” that does not yet constitute official toleration. For that matter, it doesn’t even necessarily mean that those who plead hold those views.

Dr. Byl should speak more carefully, and “do what he can to defend and promote his neighbour’s honour and reputation.”

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Wyoming, Ontario

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By C. Van Dam

WHERE DO WE WORSHIP?

If someone asks you, “Where do you worship?” you give him the address of your church. Right? The question I am raising is, however, somewhat different and lies behind the answer we generally give: “we worship in church.” It is good to go back to the Old Testament to get some perspective on this.

A consecrated place

The Old Testament tabernacle and temple

When people in the Old Testament worshipped, it was before God, in his presence. *The* normative place of worship par excellence was the tabernacle and later the temple. It will be helpful to consider the principles and implications of the tabernacle and temple for us today.

The tabernacle, and later the temple, was to be the focal point of Israel’s worship because that is where God chose to dwell in the midst of his people. There He was enthroned on the cherubim. The tabernacle spoke of the miracle of God with man. Yes, a miracle not to be underestimated. The sovereign holy God wanted to come down from his glorious habitation in heaven to live in the midst of a people – a people that had nothing loveable about them. He came to them and redeemed them of grace alone.

It was only because of his great love for them (cf. Deut 7:7-9) that He made a place for himself where there normally would not be a place or room for the Holy One of Israel. And so God made plans for a tabernacle and passed them on to Moses and eventually the

tabernacle was built. And then the sovereign holy One, GOD, came down, down from heaven’s glory, to live in the midst of his people (Exod 40). Now public worship before the face of God was possible in an official and regulated way. God with man!

There are several things we need to note here. The desire of God to be with his people and to “walk with them,” so to speak, through the desert and through life, calls to mind the marvel of paradise. How perfect and full of bliss that paradisiacal communion of God must have been. How perfect and beautiful must worship have been there! Sin destroyed that, but God did not give up on his creation. Indeed, if

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you study the tabernacle carefully you notice that God in essence created a piece of paradise there inside that tabernacle. Like paradise, God was there and this was holy ground. No sin or uncleanness was to be found here. This was the Holy of Holies. And like paradise it was guarded with the cheru-

bim (Gen 3:24) – the cherubim embroidered on the curtains, the curtains of the tabernacle walls and especially the cherubim on the curtain separating the holy of holies from the holy place. God is holy, holy, holy! Cherubim filled the tabernacle – they are also elsewhere in Scripture associated with God – and here they symbolically guard the Holy One of Israel!

This brings us to another point we need to note. It appears to be human to consistently underestimate God’s holiness. Israel had been at the Sinai, and they had heard God speaking to them with his own voice, and yet they had disobeyed that voice by making a golden calf and calling it their God (Exod 32). Israel had seen the Lord come down in glory to the tabernacle and officially occupy his dwelling place in their midst and yet, they so easily underestimated his holiness. Think of how Nadab and Abihu were struck down with death because they used strange fire to bring the incense offering (Lev 10:1-3). Or think of how much later King Uzziah was struck with leprosy for attempting to bring the incense offering against God’s command (2 Chron 26:16-20). But, God does not allow people to fool with his holiness. *Holy* is He! This is also reflected in the stringent demands of how the priests should dress in his presence. It is an awesome thing to be in God’s presence.

This brings us to a third point. God needed to protect his people from his holiness, otherwise He could not dwell in their midst. And so around the tabernacle God instituted the insulating service of the sacrifice for atonement. Blood had to be shed for atonement – all pointing to the blood of *the* lamb,

Jesus Christ. Blood had to be shed so that the fellowship of God with his people could rest on a good and just basis (cf. Lev 17:11).

The sacrifice of atonement however brought obligations to God's people. They must cleanse themselves. The camp must be clean and holy for God is in their midst. Awesome is God! But, when the people do not obey, or do not appreciate God's holiness and sin wilfully, then the Lord breaks out against his people and punishes them with death. God's presence demands holiness. Small wonder that God's Word in the Old Testament warns: "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God." (Eccl 5:1). Worship brings one into the presence of God and he is holy!

The present dwelling place of God

Now the Old Testament tabernacle is only a shadow of better things to come! With the coming of God in the flesh in Jesus Christ the dwelling of God in a tabernacle and temple is fulfilled. Christ came and "he tabernacled" among his people (John 1:14). When his work on earth was finished and the atonement sacrifice had been brought (Heb 7:27; 9:11-10:25), the temple was vacated. The curtain between the holy of holies and the holy place was ripped down from top to bottom (Matt 27:51). It was no longer necessary. God had come to be with his people, and his people could go directly to God through The Way, Jesus Christ (John 14:6). The miracle of atonement had been accomplished. God with us – Immanuel.

The fuller implications of what that meant became evident on the day of Pentecost. Again God, the Holy One, came down in sovereign grace. The Spirit was poured out (Acts 2). This was a momentous event. No longer was the focal point of God's dwelling to be found in Jerusalem, in the temple holy of holies (John 4:21-24), but now the congregation is the temple and dwelling place of the living God (1 Cor 3:16-17; Eph 2:22). God's people is now the new creation, holy ground, where God is pleased to dwell in this world. God with us (cf. 2 Cor 5:17). This is a staggering truth and has enormous implications for our communal worship.

For one thing it means that, when the church of Christ comes together in

public worship, it is in a most intimate way in the very presence of God. When we go to worship, we do not go "to the house of God" as is sometimes said. No, we are the house of God! The congregation is that consecrated and holy place where public worship takes place. And therefore a congregation saving up for a new building has nothing to be ashamed of if it worships in a gym or community centre. The critical ingredient for coming into God's presence is not the physical building, but the assembled people of God in whose midst God himself is.

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This makes worship a very joyous experience. God with us! We can sing his praises and rejoice in his presence. But it also means that there is danger involved! God is holy! God is a consuming fire who punishes iniquity (cf. Heb 12). We need to remember this for we live in a culture that disdains God and has no sensitivity for his holiness.

When we go to church, we go to meet our God. We should therefore take time in church prior to the official service to reflect on that momentous fact, to ponder the solemnity of the occasion, and to mentally continue to prepare ourselves for worship. We occupy holy ground when we are assembled for worship in church. In a real sense, the congregation is the holy of holies! O, the grace of God in coming near to us in the Spirit! But let us remember: "Guard your steps when you go to church" to paraphrase Ecclesiastes 5:1 for today. "Be careful."

When you enter a large cathedral as can be found in Europe, you are spell-bound. You cannot help but be. The stone arches soar upward, to heaven as it were, and the enormous dimensions of the building cannot but evoke awe and wonder. In this way the medieval architects forced the human spirit to look up to heaven and to remember, you come into God's presence. He is here, and how great he is! One becomes quiet and subdued, and even tourists going through speak softly.

Well, if a stone building can evoke such respect, how much more must we be in awe in our home church when gathered for worship. Then we are indeed in God's very presence.

Do we know or realize well enough what that means? When the people assembled at the Sinai, God reminded them that they had to be consecrated, and their clothes had to be washed. They had to come in their best form (Exod 19:10). The priests who were to minister to him received very specific instructions as to what to wear (e.g., Exod 28 and see above). It is no small thing to come into his presence! "Guard your steps!" Yes, also how we dress is important. In light of the greatness and holiness of the Lord of Lords and the king of kings, the trend to dressing down when going to church is not a good one. As a well-known Old Testament scholar put it: "The way in which one appears physically before God frequently betrays one's attitude of mind (cf. Matt 22:11-14)."² Let us not lose our sense of awe and wonder at being in the presence of God.

WHEN DO WE WORSHIP?

When do we worship? On the Lord's Day, on Sundays. Yes, but what is involved in one day a week being set apart? What is the message from God in this? Let us once more go back to the Old Testament. It will have to be very brief in our present context.

The meaning of the Sabbath

Shortly after the Lord gave the Ten Commandments from the Sinai, the Lord summarized his covenant will in the so-called Book of the Covenant (Exod 20:22-23:33) which Moses

passed on to Israel. It is striking that, when God summarized his teaching on the sabbath days and years, then the key element is that these are times of refreshing and rest for his people and even for the land. It is this point of rest that is also emphasized when a shortened form of the fourth commandment is given. As we read in Exod 23:12:

Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest and the slave born in your household, and the alien as well, may be refreshed.

The main point is clear: rest! Seen within the context of the ancient Near East, this is a most remarkable command. No other civilization had such a privilege. To stop work every week in order to be refreshed! And not just man but also the animals. God did not want an overworked people. His people have been redeemed and freed from all bondage, also from slavery to work.

The Sabbath, established at creation, became part of God's preliminary redemptive answer to the curse of Genesis 3:17-19, where man's labour is toil and sweat, which ultimately leads to man's returning to the dust. God provides rest. At no time must man work seven days in a row. There must be time for weekly celebration. This principle of rest is strikingly shown, for example, in the sabbatical year. Israel could then live by grace, without having to work the land.

There is a second, related point. This time of repose afforded by the sabbaths and feasts points to the future rest from all sin and misery. For Israel the first stage in that future hope was the redemption and rest that would be found in entering the promised land. Once they were in the promised land, they were to experience rest and relief from enemies and live in peace given by God. We in turn may look forward to the promised land. As Hebrews 4:1,9,10 puts it:

Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. . . . There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.

The point of all this is that the gift of rest given to Christians, especially in this dispensation on Sunday, is full of redemptive overtones and therefore joy. We have so much more than Israel did. How much more do we have reason to rejoice in the Lord!

After all Christ has in principle led us out of all bondage and dominion that enslaves, and He has set us in the freedom and joy in the Lord. Sunday is a day to celebrate!

Celebrating Sunday today

At the same time it is clear that Sunday is not just a day off. It is a holy day, sacred time, a sign of the Lord's work of renewal in our lives (Ezek 20:12,20). The Sunday is a day set aside by God himself so that we may savour his rest and the redemption that He brings to this broken world and to our stressed lives. It is a day in which to

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savour the renewal of life in Christ, the re-creation of oneself and one's continual rebirth, as one thinks of the rest that comes in the new creation. It is for all these reasons that the fourth commandment says “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.”

“To remember” is not just an intellectual recall of information. It is in this context an act of worship in which we are mindful of, and savour, God's redemption and love. Worship in Scripture, therefore, always involves recalling the great deeds of God's redemption and judgment. That is the beauty of using the Psalms in worship. It gives one a necessary sense of continuity with the



Declined the call to Smithers, British Columbia:

Rev. P. Aasman

of Grand Valley, Ontario.

* * *

Called to the church of Smithville, Ontario:

Rev. R.A. Schouten

of Abbotsford, British Columbia.

past people of God and the great deeds of God's deliverance, deeds fulfilled in our Lord Jesus Christ and still continuing today until the great and final perfection of his kingdom arrive.

So what should characterize our Sundays? Rejoicing that God has set us free from being dominated by our sins and misery. He has set us free from the rat race that life often is. We are not to be slaves of our work. We can step out of it once every week. More positively, the Sunday is to be a day unabashedly focussed on the Lord our God who has had mercy on us in Christ, and who has set us free from all that entangles and enslaves, especially our sinful flesh, the world, and Satan. It is a day to savour the triumph of Christ on Easter morning. A day to worship – in church and in our homes. A day not just for recreation but for the re-creation of all things, starting with ourselves.

This brings us to the next questions. Why and how do we worship?

(To be continued)

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²R.K. Harrison, *Leviticus* (1980), 75. Matt 22:11-13 speaks of the king in the parable of the wedding banquet who throws out a man who was not wearing wedding clothes.

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(Third of three articles)

By C. Van Dam

WHY AND HOW DO WE WORSHIP?

These two questions are closely related and in a sense these questions have already been answered at least partly. But, let us note a number of things.

Why do we worship?

The obvious reason is of course because God demands it from us. The Old Testament church received clear instruction in worship, and we read in Hebrews 10:25 “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing.” These meetings are worship services. But why does God demand worship from us as congregation together?

In the first place, we do not worship for ourselves, because it is good for us. It is of course profitable for us, but that is not the reason for worship. *The* reason for worship is to bring praise, thanksgiving and honour to God. He is the focal point and object of our worship. He is at the centre. After all, we are not on earth for ourselves, but to glorify God. This means that in worship our needs are not at the centre. Our wishes are not in the foreground. But God is. He is the object and reason for worship.

This priority of God has two immediate consequences in our thinking about worship. First, ultimately the question to ask respecting worship is not, what did I get out of it, but what did I give to God in praise and thanksgiving, in listening and learning, in presenting our sacrifices and offering our prayers. Not what did I get out of it, but what did I give to God, is the critical point. And it is in giving to God that we receive. But God first, and then we benefit. For example, if we give God our adoration and praise, we will also con-

fess our sins and uncleanness, for these diminished the glory we were able to give to God. But in being sensitive to God’s untarnished holiness having to be reflected in his children, we certainly benefit from the forgiveness of confessed sins. But our need for confession is subordinate to giving glory to God.

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Secondly, if *God* is the primary reason for worship, we do well to realize that we do not worship in order to evangelize. To avoid misunderstanding, the point is that we are asking the wrong question if we *start* with the problem: how do we make the worship services more attractive for outsiders. If we seek to give to God our utmost in worship, in giving and in listening, and show clearly and unambiguously that we worship GOD, the Holy One, then we will convey the necessary message to those who come from outside. In worship there must be the clear sense of the holiness of God, who is deeply offended by our sins, but who in undeserving grace has provided the solution for our sins in Christ. Worship must never cater to the needs of the unregenerate so he feels comfortable, for the unregenerate’s greatest need is to be confronted by the awesome holiness and greatness of God. Unbelievers also need cleansing from sin, and so they have to

be confronted by God. That ultimately is the point of the apostle Paul’s writing to the Corinthians when he tells them to keep their worship understandable and lucid. Then, the apostle notes, the unbeliever “will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, ‘God is really among you!’ (1 Cor 14:25).

The second major reason for worship is closely related to the first. Public worship takes us from the hustle and bustle, and open sin and strife, of a fallen and filthy world to place us in the holy presence of God who gives his blessing and speaks his gospel of cleansing and reconciliation to us. What a joy on the Lord’s Day to go to church and to close the door, as it were, to the blatant degeneration and curse of the world and its propaganda, and to enjoy and savour the blessed presence of the LORD, and marvel at his holiness as He addresses us in his Word! It is like an oasis at which to rest and be refreshed, encouraged, exhorted, and admonished regarding God’s will and ways and holiness, and to be confirmed in the message of the Word by the use of the sacraments.

So, the two main reasons for worship are, first, to bring praise, thanksgiving and honour to God, and second, to place ourselves in God’s presence as congregation and listen to his Word and use the sacraments.

Now, if we go to church for the right reasons we will be able to reorientate our lives constantly to God and his cause and kingdom, and so be equipped to be pure and holy in a world lost in sin. The point is that true worship should enable us to live in the presence of God all the days of our life so that the oasis of his presence in church also fills our homes and goes with us on the job. Then we demonstrate God’s holiness and power in our

lives. Although we live in the world, we are not of it.

How do we worship?

In answering this question we need to be brief. We cannot, for example, go through the first four commandments or our liturgy. Let me mention the following points.

If God is the primary reason for worship, then we must worship in the full realization that we are confronted by *God*, and that it is to *Him* that we relate in adoring and praising Him and in listening to Him. How do we do that?

We must begin with the reminder that to worship God is not without danger. God is with us as never before in the history of God's people. Now if Israel was severely warned at Mount Sinai about approaching God correctly lest they die (Exod 19:10-25), then how much more must we be forewarned! We *can* approach God and come into his presence, but ultimately only in Christ. He is the way and it is through Him that we are ushered into the presence of God himself (cf. Heb 10:19-25). Because we are speaking of *God*, Scripture warns us not to think lightly about worship. Indeed, we are exhorted in Hebrews 12:28-29 to "worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire." Now obviously God does not tell us this to discourage us, but to make us aware of what worship involves. In our godless age which mocks all things holy, this reminder is in its place for us.

So, how do we worship? First we worship only after properly preparing ourselves. This cannot be stressed enough. In view of the gravity and the momentousness of meeting with God in worship, we must adequately prepare for the Sunday worship. That includes recognizing the greatness of God and our creatureliness and natural depravity. We can only go to church with great humbleness in the realization that we must be holy as He is holy. In this connection we are reminded of the fact that before the Old Testament priest could enter the tabernacle and so come into God's immediate presence, he had to wash with water lest he die (Exod 30:20-21). If we take our identity as believers as priests seriously, we must be no less conscientious in making sure we are clean, body and soul. As the Psalmist said:

Who may ascend the hill of the LORD?

Who may stand in his holy place?

He who has clean hands and a pure heart (Ps 24:3-4).

Or, in the words of Hebrews 10:22:

...let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

All this requires preparation. It means that we separate ourselves more and more from the sins of this age and be holy, a separate people. That means as people of God we will spend the Saturday evening differently than the world does. The world goes to movies or watches videos that are not God-honouring and so often relishes in the sins of others. The church should reflect on the coming Sunday and prepare to meet their God! It is a horrible thing if a child of God comes to church with a head full of worldly entertainment from the night before. Such a person is not ready to meet God, the holy one.

"Worship can never be reduced to the outward parts of the worship service."

And so the first step that should be contemplated for good worship, or for improving worship, is to prepare oneself. That starts by practicing holiness and godliness all week long, and certainly on Saturday evening. One must be able to go to church with a clear conscience. If that is not the case, we must make sure that our heart and life have at least been made right with God, or at least are open to hear the Word of admonition and encouragement. It is no small thing to go to church. "Guard your steps when you go to church." (to paraphrase Eccl 5:1).

There is a second point. How do we worship? We worship with an incredible sense of gratitude because God in high heaven has come down to us here on earth (cf. Isa 57:15) and has had mercy on us in Christ. The Heidelberg Catechism is absolutely right in summarizing Scripture by saying that to know the joy of the only comfort in life and death, we must know how great

our sins and misery are (Q.A. 2). Spirit-generated gratitude for salvation impels us to worship. Again this presupposes a life of close communion with God. We can only see our sins when we stand in his holy presence.

Thirdly, Christ says we must worship "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23-24). Much could be said of this passage, but let me only say this. It means that we must be totally committed to this worship with our whole being involved, and it must be done in communion with the Spirit of Pentecost and in harmony with the truth of God. Worship is never just going through gestures or forms. Our spirit must be involved in it. It must come from the heart. But it must also be in truth. We cannot just invent an entertaining liturgy. It must be in harmony with the Word of God. The liturgy of the Reformation is one that we can justly be very thankful for because it stresses that we worship in the realization of the covenant bond, listening to our covenant God and responding to Him. But, as just mentioned, we must realize that worship can never be reduced to the outward parts of the worship service. Also our going to church must never be a drag and forced routine. It must be in spirit and in truth.

We must go in faith, in great expectation (cf. Heb 11:6; Rom 14:23). Someone has rightly said:

Genuine faith generates an emotion of expectancy in worship: we trust God to keep his promises, to meet with us, to bless us in accordance with the gospel, to change our lives by the power of his word. A faithful worshipper will not go to church saying, "Oh, it's just going to be the same old thing again." And faithful worshippers will have their expectations fulfilled.²

Coming now to more specific elements of worship in answering the question of how we worship, we note the following. In our covenantal liturgy, the preaching is an important and central element. God speaks as the Word is administered. The minister speaks as a servant on behalf of his majestic Sender. He's not just the nice guy with a soft message moulded according to the latest congregational opinion polls. The man in the pulpit is not there to entertain and be humorous. No, he is a steward of the Word of God and he is to preach the whole counsel of God, whether that be popular or not. We go to church to hear GOD. And therefore,

our response is also important. We respond by listening to the Word read and preached. We also respond in singing, prayer, and offerings. Let us touch on these last three responses one by one, be it briefly.

Singing, one could argue, is an intensive form of speaking. Singing enhances the word, makes it easier to memorize, and so brings it closer to our hearts and lives. Singing Scripture parts, like Psalms and hymns, is therefore a great gift of God.

Singing and music making was a big part of the liturgy of the temple as organized predominantly by David. It was professionally and lavishly done. Four thousand Levites played instruments and a choir of 288 sang (1 Chron 23:5; 25:7). A wide variety of instruments were involved. Scripture mentions 15, the rabbis speak of 36. It appears that the role of the congregation was somewhat limited given the massive choir and instrumentation involved. This changes in the New Testament. The official temple service is given to the congregation, the temple of God. It is striking that in the New Testament all the stress is on the congregation participating in singing and praising in worship and elsewhere. Instruments are not even mentioned in the New Testament church. This silence in itself does not prove that musical instruments were absent from worship services, but it does underline the old Reformed principle that the organ, or whatever instrument is used in our worship service, is in the service of the singing of the congregation and not an end in itself. The congregation produces the music in singing.

As far as the contents of our singing is concerned, we can justly be very thankful for the *Book of Praise*. Synod Fergus of the Canadian Reformed Churches has happily decided that the music of every song should always be visible when singing any part of the psalm or hymn in question. This should help and encourage singing in the homes and in church. The Psalms and Hymns derived directly from Scripture are, as God's revelation, in a class by themselves. At the same time, the Psalms point beyond themselves and exhort us to sing a new song to the LORD (cf. Ps 33:3; 96:1; 98:1; 149:1). That points ahead to New Testament hymns, but also leaves freedom for the making of new songs and hymns such as we have in the *Book of Praise* (cf. 1 Cor 14:26; Rev 5:9; 14:3; 15:3).

Prayer and offerings can be taken together for in the context of worship both are sacrifices. What really is a sacrifice? The basic idea of sacrifice is that of a gift. Thus the motivation for sacrifice is to give a gift to God. When you think it through, when we sincerely offer a gift to God, we show our dependence on God and we recognize God's pre-eminent place. In the sacrificial gift is the expressed wish to be a child of Father. Have you ever noticed how often children give, and they give so freely? That is inherent in being a child. You recognize your dependence, and you easily give gifts and acknowledge God's right to such gifts and to receive the best. By giving gifts and by sacrificing for God one also shows sorrow for sin done in rebellion against God. So our gifts can be a "fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice pleasing to God" (Phil 4:18; cf. Heb 13:16). Indeed, our whole life must be characterized as a thank offering to God (cf. Rom 12:1-2).

“Worship covers all of life, and our Sunday worship must spill over into a week of service, adoration, and praise to God.”

Today giving and offering is also part of our worship – in giving monetary gifts and in giving our prayer. According to Scripture, prayer is the sacrifice of our lips, a sacrifice of praise (Heb 13:15; cf. Hos 14:2). In Ps 50 we read, “He who brings thanksgiving as his sacrifice honours Me” (v.23, cf. v. 14; cf. Isa 60:6). Prayer is also the sacrifice of the broken-hearted in sorrow for sin (Ps 51:19 [Eng 17]). Prayer is the giving of ourselves to God in gratitude as we seek communion with the living God (Ps 42:6-9 [Eng 5-8]). Do we not pray in thankfulness for his redemption, recognizing God's pre-eminent place and our dependence?

More specifically, Scripture also calls prayer an incense offering. In Ps 141:2 we read:

Let my prayer be counted (as) incense before Thee,
and the lifting up of my hands (as) an evening sacrifice.

One can also think of Revelation 5:8 where the 24 elders have “golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints” (cf. Rev 8:3-4). Incense offering therefore pictures prayer. It is a beautiful image for incense speaks of the sweet savour of fellowship between God and his people. Such incense must be offered continually. “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17). Such prayer is the chief part of thankfulness and is integral to worship.

A final comment regarding how we worship. Worship demands the participation of all the congregation. It cannot be left to just the minister who “does his thing”. One cannot just “be there” and let the rest happen – a one man show. No. We are all priests to God (cf. Rev 1:6) and we must participate in worship and not be onlookers only. How should we all participate? By all having a turn at being at the front of the church and “doing a number”? No. To involve all in the worship service means that all are ready to participate with an open Bible, an open ear, a pen and paper if necessary. Congregational participation can also involve responsive “amens,” confession of faith and other forms of congregational participation. However, there is no need to have congregational participation in the form of getting as many people as possible on the podium to make their contribution, as seems to be happening more and more in evangelical circles. After all, the purpose in participating is to keep the worship service God-centered! Let us not forget why we go to church. It is not to be entertained, but to worship . . . *God!!*

THE PERSPECTIVES OF WORSHIP

At the beginning of this speech we defined worship as “an attitude and activity of homage, service, and praise directed to God in response to his revelation of himself in Christ and his ongoing work in our lives by his Word and Spirit.” It is obvious that with such a definition, worship covers all of life, and our Sunday worship must spill over into a week of service, adoration, and praise to God. Worship is really everything in the life of a Christian (cf. Rom 12:1-2; 1 Pet 2:9).

Having said that, it is helpful to know “where we are at” in terms of

worship. What characterizes our place in the history of God's deeds and the church's service of worship? We have noted that in our corporate worship we as Pentecost congregation come into the very presence of God. What does that really mean in terms of the significance of our worship? Hebrew 12 speaks of that in a beautiful summary. It says to the church that when you draw near to God in worship,

then you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven (Heb 12:22-23).

Much could be said of this and the verses that follow. Let me only say this. The Old Testament people of God had at the centre of their worship the earthly Jerusalem or Zion (Heb 12:21), but we may have the heavenly Jerusalem as our focal point! Every time we worship, we are in Christ (Heb 10:19), in faith entering heaven as it were. In true worship, we get a taste of heaven's glory. Yes all worship is in anticipation of that perfect glorious worship that is awaiting the children of God. What an awesome assembly of thousands of angels! What a tremendous open space of worship and praise that must be! The song "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty!" fills the air (cf. Rev

4:8). And there to see God, the Judge, the Holy One and the Lord Jesus Christ! Our praise and worship of God now, in spirit and in truth, will then find its climax. But already in this life, we can have a foretaste of that joy. May our worship on the Lord's Day indeed be experienced that way!

¹This series of three articles is an abridged version of what will appear in annotated form in a forthcoming publication of my lectures given in Australia (and partly New Zealand) in June and July of 1999, viz. *Perspectives on Worship, Law and Faith: The Old Testament Speaks Today*. (Kelmescott, WA: Pro Ecclesia Publishers).

²Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (1996) 81. 