

The Biblical View of Worship

Concordia Theological Quarterly 58/4 (1994): 225-254

John W Kleinig

A. Tuning in

1. Imagine a colour 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 let its owners push in its plug and switch on the electricity. 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 clear, 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.

Well, that's how people are who never worship God. They do not fulfil 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 that are spiritually frustrated and unfulfilled.

2. There is only one activity which we do here on earth that 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 lasts forever and will occupy us through all eternity. In fact, we rehearse this for as long as we live and even then we never get it completely right. 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, like attending school to prepare for our job, like going steady to get ready for married life. It's a heavenly activity which is done perfectly only in heaven.

3. Worship then is something supernatural, and it is supernatural in three ways. First, it does not come naturally to us human beings. If we were left to our own devices, we would never worship God properly, as 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 doesn't just show us how it is done; he actually does it together with us, so that we get the hang of it from him. It is then a divine activity, and we join in with it, like a rider who rides a racing horse. But more about that later.

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 and that's what makes it so important. Now that is something that those who aren't Christians can't understand. The ordinary, secular person is utterly bamboozled by worship. It is unlike anything else we do. It isn't useful for anything else. It seems a waste of time and energy. It is rather boring as nothing much seems to happen in it. In short, it makes no earthly sense to anybody who is merely an earthling. So, since they can't 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 realising 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 (Heb 7:25; 9:25) and by representing God the Father to us in proclamation and praise (Heb 2:12). By his service in the heavenly sanctuary he leads us together with the angels and the whole communion of saints in the performance of the heavenly liturgy (Heb 2:11; 8:2; 12:22-24; 13:15).

4. Since it is supernatural, Christian worship is a matter of mystery. Now a mystery differs from a secret in that it remains hidden and inexplicable, even when you are let in on it and know a lot about it. St Paul sums it up in Colossians 1:24 as 'Christ in (or among) you, the hope of glory'. It has to do with the mysterious, 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 bodily into the presence of his heavenly Father. So in worship we come into contact with the Holy Trinity. We come into the presence of the Triune God and share in the ongoing work of Jesus here on earth.

But worship 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' (Col. 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!' So by faith we get 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, a Lutheran theologian of the nineteenth century, says 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 a 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 and our risen, ascended Lord Jesus.

5. When we worship, we begin to do what we were created for. We fulfil 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. That's why 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 a lot about 'orthodoxy'. Now we normally define orthodoxy as correct teaching about the triune God, but it also means 'correct worship' or 'right praise'. Both 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 in with Jesus in his ministry as the great high priest in the heavenly sanctuary.

B. Receiving

1. We call worship 'divine service', but we usually get it 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. But that is not really what worship is all about; 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 comes out most clearly for me 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. This is what happens then:

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.**

The last sentence interests me here. Note the present tense of the verb. 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 fulfils 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. Just let the enormity of that sink in for a moment! Jesus serves you in worship. He works for you; he ministers to you. Unless you see that, you won't make any sense of the architecture of our churches, our orders of worship, and the whole business of worship itself! Here your Lord Jesus rolls up his sleeves, lends a helping hand and puts himself to work for us.

2. Well, what does he do for us in the divine service? There are two simple ways of looking at God's service of 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.

Take the common order of worship. It bears witness to the mysterious presence and activity of the triune God with us. It begins with the *invocation* that announces the presence of the triune God. After that the main accent falls on what God does. He makes us his children in baptism, forgives our sin in the *absolution*, and receives us as beggars of favours from him in the *introit* and *kyrie*. In the *salutation* we acknowledge our Lord Jesus as the chief celebrant and liturgist in our worship. After that our heavenly Father speaks powerfully to us in the *readings* from the Scriptures and in the *sermon*. He listens to our requests for his help in the *prayer of the church*, gives us the body and blood of Jesus for the healing of our bodies and souls in *holy communion*, and dismisses us with the blessing of his Son. So 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 happens for us as we receive a portion of God's measureless grace. Here we are encouraged and invigorated, healed and helped, revitalised 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 also tell us how Jesus serves us in worship. That's why they were remembered, retold, and included in the New Testament which reports only a small fraction of all that Jesus said and did. They don't just tell us what Jesus did for people some 2,000 years ago, but also inform us about what he continues to do right now in the church through the operation of his holy word and the life-giving sacraments. His ministry, his work, you see, did not end with his death, resurrection and ascension. That was merely the inauguration of it. St Luke makes that quite clear in his two-volumed history of the early church. In his gospel Luke had shown how Jesus served people by teaching the good news and healing the sick in body and soul. When he begins Acts, the second part of this history, he refers to what he wrote in the gospel. He says: '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 good news of God's grace and to heal broken people in his hospital, the church. So then, 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 (Matt 18:20).

3. 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 daily 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. Well, 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 his people as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride (Isa 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 then has instituted the divine service, 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.

C. Transmission

1. A television set does not remain inert as it receives its transmission. The same electricity that transmitted the vision helps it receive and reflect the transmitted vision. We, too, cannot remain passive and inert in worship. We are affected by God's impact on us. We are, in fact, bound to react and respond either negatively or positively to God's dealings with us. That's rather obvious, even though the priority of divine activity does not always receive enough emphasis in our understanding of worship. We tend to emphasise 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 don't take the initiative in this, but merely go along with Jesus; we follow his lead. He's our leader in worship, our chief celebrant. What's more, we can't do this 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.

2. Our order of worship makes this 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 great *gloria* 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 *song of Simeon*; 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.

3. We aren't left to our own devices in all this. 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 (Eph 2:18). 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's 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. So 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 don't get anything out of it. I guess we've all felt that way at times. What we forget is that the work of God is invisible to us. We don't notice 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 our nourishment from breathing and eating, but we don't see it happening. I

feel that it is just as silly to complain about how boring, useless, and unpleasant church worship 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, like broccoli or liver. Like sleep, worship may seem dull and its benefits often escape our attention, as they can be as much physical as mental or emotional. After all, God instituted the Sabbath in the Old Testament for physical, and not just 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. So, though I, for one, am always grateful if I feel that I have got some blessing from worship, I am not unduly disturbed if I feel that I've got nothing. The benefits of worship are a matter of faith and not of sight.

5. 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 won't be able 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

To conclude, let me tell three stories to illustrate the purpose, nature and importance of worship.

1. First a story about the purpose of worship. The story is told about Prince Vladimir of Kiev in Russia. At about 1000 AD he decided that the ancestral religion of his people was no longer good enough. So he sent ambassadors around the world to assess the claims of various great religions. First they went to Mecca where they examined the worship of Islam. But they found it too severe, drab and gloomy for their liking. Then they went to Rome where they learned about Roman Catholicism. They found it better than Islam, but it lacked a sense of heavenly mystery and beauty. Then finally they went to Constantinople where they experienced Orthodox worship in the great Cathedral of Holy Wisdom. They came back from there, all excited, and reported to their King:

We did not know whether we were in heaven or on earth, for surely there is no such splendour 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.

So Orthodoxy became the religion of Kiev and Russia. I like that legend, because it reminds me about what worship is, the mystery of God's heavenly presence with us on earth.

2. The second story comes from Luke 24:13-35. It is the story of the appearance of Jesus to two disciples on the road to Emmaus. You remember how Jesus joined them as they travelled from Jerusalem and discussed the events of Good Friday and that Easter

morning. They did not at first recognise 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 catch on. They only recognised him when he took over the meal in their home, as if he were their host, took bread, blessed, broke, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and he disappeared from their sight. Luke calls this the breaking of bread, which is his name for the Lord's supper in the book of Acts. He does this, because he wishes to suggest that 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 from the holy Scriptures and reveals himself to us in holy communion. So every time two Christians meet together in the name of Jesus, the risen Lord comes to them and makes himself known to them. Every act of worship is an Easter celebration where we meet with our Lord and get to know him as he sets our hearts aflame by his speaking to us and opens our eyes to his presence with us by hosting his meal for us. Every Sunday the risen Lord appears to us as he did to them.

3. Lastly, an incident which illustrates the importance of worship and the folly of its neglect! Some time ago my wife met up with an old friend whom she hadn't seen for years. In the course of their conversation my wife discovered 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 mostly apart. It occurred to me that many Christians are like that. They are like a married couple that refuses to live together after marriage and so does not share a common life. These Christians are baptised and confirmed but seldom worship, pray, or receive the Lord's supper, because they regard all that as an unnecessary business and burdensome obligation, rather than a marvellous privilege and the highlight of the Christian life. Surely a Christian who doesn't interact with God and doesn't enjoy the lively intimacy with him that comes from worship is as stupid as a married man who lives apart from his wife.

Ultimately, worship is 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.