

IMMANENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE OF GOD IN WORSHIP

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Summary:

This paper outlines a theology of worship that is oriented around the tension between the immanence and transcendence of the divine and related areas of presentation and participation. It includes a brief summary of personal impact the study has had on the writer.

Length: 10 pages

OUTLINE

Thesis: Biblical worship involves both revealing and responding to a transcendent and immanent God in a way in which the church both presents and participates in the Christ event.

- I. Introduction
- II. Transcendence – Immanence tension
 - A. Transcendence
 - 1. Scripture
 - a. Revelation
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 - B. Immanence
 - 1. Scripture
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Worship has been considered to be both “the summit toward which the activity of the church is directed,” and “a fount from which all the church’s power flows”.¹ With this in mind, there is a great need for us as the Church to reconsider our current understanding and expression of worship. In this, we need to allow ourselves to be shaped by biblical worship which involves both revealing and responding to a transcendent and immanent God in a way in which the church both presents and participates in the Christ event.

Biblical worship must include revealing and responding to the transcendence of God, for throughout Scripture God has revealed himself to be a transcendent and holy God. He is revealed as the creator of all things and one who holds all things together (Gen 1-2; cf. Col 1:15-17). Scripture also reveals that God is holy and intolerant of sin. He is a God of great wrath: destroying the earth with a great flood (Gen 6-8), raining down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorra (Gen 19), plaguing Egypt (Exod 7-12) and destroying their army (Exod 14), consuming Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10:1-3) and the outskirts of the Israelites with fire (Num 11:1-3), plaguing Ashod and Ekron with tumors (1 Sam 5), exiling Northern Israel (2 Kgs 17) and Judah (2 Kgs 25), and killing Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-10). God’s transcendence has also been revealed by his splendor when he passed by Moses (Exod 23-24), showed Isaiah a vision of heaven (Isa 6), revealed Jesus’ glory to the disciples at the transfiguration (Matt 17), and showed John a vision of heaven (Rev).

Whenever God is revealed as a transcendent and holy God, people can’t help but respond with a sense of fear and awe. When God was revealed on Mount Sinai the

¹ Robert E. Webber, *Worship is a verb* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992), 203-204.

Israelites “trembled with fear” and thought that they were going to die (Exod 20:18-19)², and when he consumed their burnt offering with fire they “fell facedown” (Lev 9:24). When God gave Isaiah a vision of heaven he responded with “Woe to me!” (Isa 6:5). When Jesus calmed the storm, his disciples were “terrified” (Mark 4:41) and “in fear and amazement” (Luke 8:25). When Peter, James, and John were with Jesus at the transfiguration and heard God speaking, “they fell facedown to the ground, terrified” (17:6). When God struck down Ananias and Sapphira, “great fear seized the whole church” (Acts 5:11). When Saul-Paul encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus, he “fell to the ground” (Acts 9:4). In Revelation, when John saw Jesus, he “fell at his feet as though dead” (Rev 1:17), and the twenty four elders and four living creatures “fell down and worshiped God” (Rev 19:4), and a great multitude responded to God’s transcendence with what sounded like “the roar of rushing waters and the loud peals of thunder” (Rev 19:6). Hebrews 12:28-29 reminds us that this should be our response as well, writing that we are to worship God “acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire.’”

The Church has revealed and responded to God’s transcendence throughout history in a variety of ways. Robert Webber writes “the architecture of our church is shaped by our concept of worship, which in turn shapes our experience of worship.”³ With this, one can observe the prevalence of a transcendent view of God in the architecture of churches in the Middle Ages, for they were filled with a sense of power

² All Scripture citations are from the New International Version (unless otherwise indicated).

³ Webber, *Worship is a verb*, 196.

and awe.⁴ Worship in the Middle Ages also portrayed the transcendence of God through services that were “impressive, mysterious, and at times breathtaking”.⁵ They portrayed God as holy, other, and beyond our understanding.

Along with the need to portray God as transcendent, biblical worship must also include revealing and responding to the immanence of God, for throughout Scripture God has also revealed himself to be an immanent and loving God. In the Garden of Eden, God is revealed walking and talking directly with Adam and Eve (Gen 2-3). In Exodus he reveals his desire for immanence with Israel saying “I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God” (Exod 6:7). When Moses saw the glory of God and his grace on the Israelites, he wrote “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness”, and it followed its way throughout the Old Testament (Exod 34:6: cf. Neh 9:19; Ps 86:15, 103:8, 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). David even asks God “where can I go from your spirit?” in realizing that God is intimately close and always with him (Ps 139:7). Jesus ends up being the ultimate revelation of God’s immanence, where God “became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14), coming into the world as a baby and being called “Immanuel – which means God with us” (Matt 1:23). Jesus even tells his disciples of the Holy Spirit who “lives in you and will be in you” when he leaves (John 14:17). Paul talks again and again about how we are “in Christ” and “with Christ”, and even goes as far as stating that our “bodies are members of Christ himself” (1 Cor 6:15). In Revelation, God is revealed living and dwelling with men and wiping the tears from their eyes (Rev 21:3-4).

⁴ Keith Drury, *The Wonder of Worship: Why We Worship The Way We Do* (Marion, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2002) 166.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 104.

Whenever God is revealed as an immanent and loving God, people can't help but respond with love and joy. When God rescued the Israelites from Egypt they burst into joyful song (Exod 15). When he allowed the ark to be brought into Jerusalem, David could not help but respond and he "danced before the LORD with all his might" (2 Sam 6:14). The Psalters responded to the immanence and love of God with great joy, writing things such as "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is Good" (Ps 136). In response to Jesus' love and grace, Mary poured expensive perfume "on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair" (John 12:3). Jesus told a parable of a man responding to the discovery of God's grace, where he "in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field" (Matt 13:44). In light of God's magnificent love and extravagant grace, Paul can not help but "consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus"(Phil 3:8) and he "joyfully gives thanks" (Col 1:12). And because of God's immanence and grace, Paul writes that "we may approach God with freedom and confidence" (Eph 3:12).

The Church has also revealed and responded to God's immanence throughout history in a variety a ways. The early church has been described as a "fellowship of intimacy" and had a practice of greeting one another with a "holy kiss" to symbolically represent that they were brothers and sisters in the body of Christ.⁶ The Quakers emphasized the immanence of God by doing away with all that was mysterious and impersonal like clergy, sermons, and all of the sacraments. They rather focused on the presence of God amongst them.⁷ Currently the church has been on a pendulum swing of

⁶ Ibid., 96.

⁷ Ibid., 233-234.

focusing on the immanence of God, and with that there is a growing movement towards the intimate architecture of house churches.⁸

As one can see, God is both transcendent and immanent, and biblical worship is born out of a response to both aspects of God. Although it often feels like a contrasting tension, without acknowledging both aspects of God we greatly misunderstand who he is. Kelley writes that the “worst flaw of Eliphaz’s (Job’s friend) position is that he divorces divine transcendence from divine love, thus reducing the former to little more than ‘divine indifference’”.⁹ As the Church we need to reveal Christ as both a lion and a lamb (Rev 5:5-6) to truly respond to who he is. For “worship proclaims Christ”¹⁰, and we are called to proclaim that God had “all his fullness dwell in him” (Col 1:19) and yet also made “peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Col 1:20). For Christ was fully God, and fully man. Marva Dawn suggests “one of the best aids to creating worship that portrays the dialectical attributes of God... is the liturgical year” where each season brings us into a fuller understanding of the character of God.¹¹

As one might have already noticed through our previous look at scripture, worship involves a dialogue of God being revealed and his people responding. In the same way that we need to include the tension of both God’s transcendence and immanence in worship, we also need to include the tension of worship involving both

⁸ Ibid., 168.

⁹ Page H. Kelley, “The Speeches of the Three Friends,” *Review and Expositor* 68 (2004): 484.

¹⁰ Webber, *Worship is a verb*, 16.

¹¹ Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995) 96.

presentation and participation. Without one or the other worship can not genuinely exist. This provides a great need for the church to grow in embodying both.

In many ways our current embodying of this tension in the church has been mistakenly blurred and misguided by the cultural trends around us. Marva Dawn speaks against much of this, writing how the church has been infected with “the modern compulsive ‘need’ to be entertained”.¹² How our TV and pop-culture generation has developed Christian celebrities in the church, who she harshly writes “are not heroes; they foster instead narcissistic idealization, spectacle, and passivity”.¹³ With this, the church has sadly, in many ways, become passive and only an entertaining presentation, missing much of what it is to worship, for “worship cannot take place without our response to God himself”.¹⁴

On this, Robert Webber writes that “it is the utmost urgency that the church break through the obstacle of a passive worship”.¹⁵ He proposes that the church comes back to a fourfold structure which provides a context for both presentation and participation in an authentic way.¹⁶ He suggests that our worship involves a general structure of preparing for worship, the presenting of scripture in which God reveals himself, responding by participating at the Lord’s Table, and then being sent forth into the world.¹⁷ This goes along with D.A. Carson writing “new covenant worship... is gospel-inspired worship; it

¹² Ibid., 47.

¹³ Ibid., 51.

¹⁴ Webber, *Worship is a verb*, 110.

¹⁵ Ibid., 136.

¹⁶ Ibid., 135.

¹⁷ Robert E. Webber, *Ancient Future Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 109.

is Christ-centered worship; cross centered worship”¹⁸, for Webber writes that through the fourfold method “we tell the story of Israel and Jesus in the service of the Word and we reenact the story at the Table.”¹⁹ He writes that through this revelation and response “worship is the Gospel in motion”.²⁰ I agree with Webber’s suggestions and believe that they can help the church today come back to a better balance between presentation and participation. Although it is a hard thing to move towards in many churches, it should graciously be sought after to help bring the congregation to a fuller embodiment of worship.

Personally, this study has greatly influenced my view of worship. It has exposed my need for a greater realization of the transcendence of God, for I grew up only really knowing God to be immanent and loving. I have found there to be so much more depth and authenticity in my response when I realize that I am before a transcendent and holy God. I am beginning to find, through the mystery of Christ, that the more I realize God’s transcendence the more I am also overwhelmed with his grace and immanence.

This study has also led me to adopt the Christian year into my life. Previously I have never practiced or even heard much about it, but through reading for class, Webber, Dawn, and Drury have really helped me understand its significance and the role that it has played in the church throughout history. Our time in class and visit to the Anglican Church also played a large role in helping me see and hear of it being embodied.

As I try to grow, think, dream, and be faithful to our mission as the church, I have found this class and its reading to provide a solid foundation for further thought and

¹⁸ D. A. Carson, *Worship by the Book* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 37.

¹⁹ Webber, *Ancient Future Faith*, 102.

exploration. I have found the understanding that worship involves a dialogue, which is well embodied in a fourfold structure, to be very transformational in the way I view worship in church gatherings, especially as I begin to play a role in shaping them. I have never considered that the order of our services can lead us through the Christ-event. I find that to be very impacting and significant.

I also don't think I will ever view communion and its role in the church the same again. I have found that going back to viewing it as a sacrament rather than simply an ordinance has really enriched my practice and understanding of it. I really wish that it was practiced more in the church.

Overall the greatest impact this study has had on me is how it has brought me back to realizing the need for us to extend grace within the church. To not put strategies or ideas first, but rather live like Christ in a community of faith. It has helped me see the need for myself to be dedicated to a community, even when it is hard and when I don't always agree with everything. It has helped me to find beauty in the diversity of the Church and realize the need for that, rather than separating with bitterness.

As we begin to reconsider our current understanding and expression of worship in the church today we need to allow ourselves to be shaped by scripture. The more we look throughout the Bible, the more we notice that worship is initiated by God revealing himself to be both transcendent and immanent, which is then followed by his people responding. In a reflection of this, the church must grow into more fully incarnating both a presentation and participation in both God's transcendence and immanence.

²⁰ Webber, *Worship is a verb*, 16.

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