

THREE ESSENTIALS OF BIBLICAL WORSHIP

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Summary:

This paper proposes a Trinitarian model of worship that includes a focus on the historic four-fold structure and a communitarian emphasis. Discussion around the meaning of “spirit and truth” in John 4:24 is also addressed with a suggestion that this passage identifies a Trinitarian theology of worship.

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Scripture tells us that “true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him” (John 4:23).¹ We are also told that the “heavens declare the glory of God, the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (Psalm 19:1). If creation takes part in this activity and the Father seeks people to worship him in spirit and truth, then we must stop and pay attention to this divine purpose designed for the cosmos. The church of the twenty-first century knows its part in this divine purpose; consequently, the ripples of a re-emphasis of worship as the church’s singular purpose can be seen throughout all the denominations in Christendom.² This worship renewal, in the twilight of modernism, has sent many searching the Scriptures to find answers and guidelines to what biblical worship is. Because many of our churches and institutions have been colored by modernism, we inherently look for propositional truths, three points and a poem, or outright how-to passages on the subject of worship. While many texts do teach about worship in a pastoral fashion – namely, the Pauline epistles – we seem to run those truths through the qualifier “does it feel worshipful?” The explosion of a consumer culture in the West coupled with a booming “worship music” market has magnified the subjective qualities of our participation in worship and placed an emphasis on knowing what worship is existentially. David Peterson questions this approach in examining worship theology:

Is worship, then, essentially an experience or feeling? Is it to be identified with a special sense of the presence of God, or with some kind of religious ecstasy or with expressions of deep humiliation before God? Are there special moments in a Christian meeting when we are truly ‘worshipping’ God? Are church services to be measured by the extent to which they enable the participants to enter into such experiences? Such a subjective

¹ All scripture quotations taken from The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003).

² See Chris Alford, *Worship: The Purpose of the Church – Theological Reflections on ‘Purpose’ and ‘Task’*. www.chris-alford.com/local/documents/purpose.pdf, 2003.

approach is often reflected in the comments people make about Christian gatherings, but it has little to do with biblical teaching on the matter. . . . Worship must involve certain identifiable attitudes, but something is seriously wrong when people equate spiritual self-gratification with worship!³

Truly, “worship is a whole-life response, expressed publicly and privately, to God’s relational initiative”, so we must regain a sense of objectivity in order to immerse the life of worship in truth: we must seek to ascertain what worship is based on the witness of scripture.⁴ Robert Webber has said that “the story of God initiating a relationship and of the people responding in faith . . . comprises the very essence of worship”.⁵ And so, this discussion of worship calls for a biblical perspective which, for our purposes, can be summed into three essential components that comprise our covenant relationship with God Almighty: biblical worship is Trinitarian in content and function, it is based on and rooted in God’s Story of the world, and it is a community event.

The foundation of our discussion will be God’s triune nature and how this indispensable facet of God shapes our worship in both content and function. First of all, worship is itself a re-telling of and a participation in the gospel of grace,⁶ and the Triune God must be the subject of these activities – the content of our worship is “unabashedly Trinitarian”.⁷ James Torrance expounds: “[worship] is our response to our Father for all that he has done for us in Christ Therefore, anything we say about worship – the forms of worship, its practice and procedure –

³ David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 16.

⁴ Eric Bolger, “MWS 501 A Biblical and Theological Understanding of Worship” (lecture notes, 2006), 2.

⁵ Robert E. Webber, *Worship Old and New*, rev. edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 19.

⁶ James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 15.

⁷ Robert E. Webber, *Planning Blended Worship: The Creative Mixture of Old and New* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 20.

must be said in light of him to whom it is a response”.⁸ To appropriately respond to God “for all he has done for us in Christ” necessitates recounting those real, historical events and doing so in a Trinitarian manner. For example, in celebrating the Lord’s Supper Christians do not simply eat bread and drink wine. Rather, remembrance and re-telling play a vital role in this celebration of Christ’s sacrifice and triumph so that we may respond to the Father in thanksgiving by the power of the Holy Spirit. As we do so the Trinity becomes the “grammar of this view of worship” and the content of our worship celebrations.⁹ With content less than such, the worship we participate in falls short of the divine mandate and short of God himself. So, our worship must have as its subject the Triune God: we cannot separate the “*who*” of worship from the “*what and how*” of worship.¹⁰ Furthermore, the nature and content of our response must take into account who God is – our “doctrine of God” must be faithful to God himself.¹¹

Inherent in the Trinity is his action throughout history – that of “creation, incarnation, and re-creation.”¹² Thus, the story through which God has guided the world is intimately tied to the God who has guided it. Therefore, our worship must embody that story in order to celebrate the Triune God as its subject. Our songs and hymns, prayers and sermons, sacred actions such as the Lord’s Supper and baptism must be Trinitarian in turn reflecting who he is and what he has done. One might ask, “How do we celebrate baptism in a Trinitarian manner?” The first step is to recognize that we baptize in the name of the triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We do so “not just because of our Lord’s missionary command in Matthew 28:19, but because these

⁸ Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹² Robert E. Webber, *Mystical Theology IWS Presidential Address Outline*, Presidential Address, June 2005, The Institute for Worship Studies Florida Campus Alumni Web site: www.iwsalumni.org/resources/Mystical_Theology%20outline.htm.

words enshrine the good news of grace. The mission of the church in the world is grounded in the mission of the Son and the Spirit from the Father to bring us to sonship and communion”.¹³ This is accomplished through baptismal classes for candidates and appropriate exhortation by the pastor in words surrounding the baptism. So as we recognize and celebrate this sacred action in such a way, our practice remains inextricably linked to our faith, our “doctrine of God”.

The other side of the Trinitarian coin concerning biblical worship is the fact that our worship functions by way of the Triune God himself. In other words, we approach God the Father, through the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit. David Peterson summarizes this idea in light of Paul’s well-known exhortation found in Romans 12:1-2: “We are sanctified or consecrated to God because Jesus Christ died and rose for us, and because the Spirit enables us to believe the gospel and yield ourselves to God”.¹⁴ The Father’s consecration of our sacrifice by the once for all perfect offering of Christ is our basis and ability for worship – thus, we worship “by the mercies of God”. All the while, we are utterly dependent upon the Spirit for the faith to believe and submit ourselves to God. In this aspect the gospel is not just a one-time conversion message, but a Trinitarian, worshiper-enabling message. It is the “confession of our hope” that we are to “hold fast . . . without wavering” (Heb. 10:23); moreover, it helps the worshiper to draw near to God with a clear conscience for cleansing, renewal, and a continued life of service. As mentioned above, the Trinity in this view is truly the “grammar of worship”.¹⁵ The book of Hebrews has more to say about Jesus Christ mediating our approach to the Father by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, “the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself

¹³ Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 75.

¹⁴ Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship*, 177.

¹⁵ Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 30.

without blemish to God, [purifies] our conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (Heb. 9:14). Again we are told in Hebrews 4:14-16 that “we have a great high priest who passed through the heavens”, who is not “unable to sympathize with our weaknesses”, and who commands us to “draw near to the throne of grace with confidence.” In scripture God sets forth terms of engagement by which the believer is to approach him, and it is clear that God has made himself in the person of Jesus Christ the believer’s means of engagement.¹⁶ So, God’s terms of engagement lined out in the gospel continually beckon us to the Father’s throne by the Spirit. In fact, John 4:23 makes clear that the Father seeks worshipers that will worship him in spirit and truth.

In his June 2004 President’s Choice Address at The Institute for Worship Studies, the late Stanley J. Grenz made an interesting observation concerning the function of the Trinity.¹⁷ He claimed that when Jesus told the woman at the well that true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, he was referring to himself (truth) and the Holy Spirit (spirit); he was making an allusion to “worship that is Trinitarian”, and that “perhaps ‘spirit’ and ‘truth’ were to be capitalized”.¹⁸ Grenz went on to note that Trinitarian worship is a “participation”, that Jesus said very clearly, “*in spirit*” and “*in truth*” denoting our mutual involvement in the dynamic of worship.¹⁹ James Torrance sheds a similar light on the notion of Trinitarian worship in his book *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, when he says “Christian worship is, therefore, our *participation* through the Spirit in the Son’s communion with the Father, in his

¹⁶ Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship*, 20.

¹⁷ Stanley J. Grenz, *Trinitarian Worship – John 4*, June 2003, The Institute for Worship Studies Florida Campus Alumni web site: www.iwsalumni.org/mp3/Address%20June2003.mp3.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

vicarious life of worship and intercession”.²⁰ Here worship is described as an inclusion and participation in the Trinity’s eternal community of grace which calls us forth to “become partakers in the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4). In this glorious description of worship, Torrance no doubt had the Greek *koinonia* in mind which denotes “fellowship, community, communion, and joint participation”.²¹ This communion with the Trinity is the essence of all worship whether corporate or private, and so we too can declare as the Psalmist did, “a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere” (Ps. 84:10). Though a pilgrimage psalm, the text has implications for our participation within the glorious communion of the Trinity through Christ the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit. All in all, God is the one moving toward humanity through the Son and Spirit inviting us to participate in his life of loving community. Our response and participation in the Trinity is merely “a response to the response already made for us and continually being made for us in Christ”, and as we realize and in turn actualize this Trinitarian view of worship, we will truly be shaped by the Triune God himself.²²

As mentioned above, biblical worship must have the Triune God as its subject and God’s story, his action in and throughout history, cannot be separated from him. Our discussion brings us to the second essential component of biblical worship which is the truth that worship must be based on and rooted in the biblical story. “The Bible provides us with the basic story that we need in order to understand our world and to live in it as God’s people”.²³ Therefore, the witness of both Old and New Testaments are fundamentally valuable and foundational to our worship, which is itself a re-telling of the biblical narrative having the Christ event as its most important,

²⁰ Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 15, emphasis mine.

²¹ *The Dictionary of the New Testament*, from www.studylight.org/lex/grk

²² Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 30.

²³ Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 21.

central action. Primarily, we must understand God’s story found in scripture as *one* meta-narrative or “grand story”.²⁴ This is of utmost importance because the story of which we are a part is truth – it is *the* reality. Thus, for our worship to be grounded in reality we must see history as God has revealed it to our forbears. We must understand that in the creation narrative God made a “good” world for humanity to dwell (cf. Gen. 1:4). We cannot deny that Adam and Eve disobeyed God and deviated from his intended path for creation.²⁵ But in Christ, God has brought restoration to humanity and creation, indeed the cosmos, and is “reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor. 5:19). At this point in the story, humanity has regained the ability to get back on the intended path but not without utter dependence on the Spirit and the intervention of Christ’s regenerating work. The goal of the intended path is “consummation” – this is the new heavens and new earth, the recapitulation of the cosmos, when God will make his dwelling with man.²⁶ This is the grand story of which we are a part, and Jesus did not deny this. As pre-eminent with the Father and empowered by the Spirit during his earthly life, Jesus knew the nation of Israel and her history as recorded in the Law and Prophets; moreover, he knew history had been leading up to his appearance in flesh. Jesus himself in his post-resurrection conversations with the disciples spoke of the Hebrew scriptures and their significance because they pointed towards him and were fulfilled in him (Luke 24:44). Mark Futato points out that even the entire “Book of Psalms is a portrait of the life of Jesus Christ”.²⁷

One of the most interesting phenomena in scripture that compels us to take into account the Old Testament in our worship today is the presence of typology. This is a “method of

²⁴ Ibid., 18.

²⁵ Bolger, “MWS 501 A Biblical and Theological Understanding of Worship”, 3.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Mark D. Futato, *Transformed by Praise: The Purpose and Message of the Psalms* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2002), 20.

biblical exegesis [that seeks] to establish historical correspondence between Old Testament events, persons, objects, or ideas and similar New Testament events, persons, objects, and ideas by way of analogy”.²⁸ A significant occurrence of typology is the relationship between the Exodus event and the Christ event. In both of these instances God initiates a relationship with his people by sending a servant. To the Israelites, God sent Moses, and he sent Christ to Israel and eventually the world.²⁹ Both events are a deliverance from and a conquering of evil through sacrifice. The blood of the Passover lamb stayed the hand of the death angel from killing the firstborn of the covenant community in Egypt, and the perfect obedience of Christ culminating in his atoning death and victorious resurrection delivers the Christian from a life of sin and death. And, both events contain a covenant ratification which is ultimately an act of worship.³⁰ The Sinai covenant “is sealed as the people are sprinkled with the blood of the *sacrifice* and the elders ascend Sinai to eat and drink the *covenant meal* . . . In the same manner, the Christian covenant meal [is] the Lord’s Supper” and ratifies the covenant for the participant every time she partakes of the meal by virtue of Christ’s once for all sacrifice.³¹ Though the Exodus event is of great importance to the history of Israel and the church, it is not ultimate because Christ accomplished and fulfilled those ideals and stipulations that the Law and the Sinai covenant pointed towards – the Exodus event “implicitly foreshadow[s] the Christ event” and compels us to purposefully re-tell the whole story in our worship.³²

²⁸ Andrew E. Hill, *Enter His Courts with Praise: Old Testament Worship for the New Testament Church*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 234.

²⁹ Robert E. Webber, ed., *The Complete Library of Christian Worship* (Nashville: StarSong Publishing Group, 1993), vol. 1, *The Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship*, 61.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Hill, *Enter His Courts with Praise: Old Testament Worship for the New Testament Church*, 234.

The worship we engage God in corporately is itself a re-telling of the biblical story through songs, signs, symbols, and Word.

The content of worship is the story of God's redeeming his creatures from the Evil One... The voice of the Gospel is heard in preaching, in baptism, in the Lord's Supper, in hymns, psalms and spiritual songs, in prayers, in anointing and in every conceivable act of worship... *A true biblical worship is this story of God's initiating a relationship with fallen creatures, a story that is remembered by God's people and for which they give thanks.*³³

As we participate actively in re-telling the story through these different actions, God's saving and redeeming work in the world is proclaimed again and again, and it is through this re-telling or re-presenting the gospel that we encounter God in a renewing and redeeming way. The concept of worship as re-telling the biblical story may be foreign to many in the free church tradition; nevertheless, the philosophy behind this practice of worship is fundamentally biblical.

Webber comments insightfully on the subject:

In the divine side of worship, the God who has acted in history continues to act within the worshiping community in a saving and healing way as the community remembers, proclaims, enacts, and celebrates with thanksgiving . . . As God's saving action is recalled and enacted, God is worshiped through the response of thanksgiving.³⁴

By describing God as one "who has acted in history", and one that "continues to act within the worshiping community", Webber implies that God, by virtue of acting on behalf of Israel and the church, continues to work actively amongst his people in a "saving and healing way".³⁵ It is in the Christ event that we see God acting on our behalf these two millennia later, and it is in our re-telling and enactment of the gospel in our songs, preaching, prayers, and supremely at the Table that we actualize Christ's work for us in the here and now. An example from Israelite

³³ Webber, *Worship Old and New*, 262.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

worship that sheds greater light on the subject is the historical recitation found in Deuteronomy 26:5-10. In this liturgical instruction, the Israelite worshiper was to present their offering of first fruits before the priest and then make the response:

‘A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. Then we cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O LORD, have given me’ (Deut. 25:6-10).

By taking these words on his lips, the Israelite worshiper is making God’s saving history present – “I was in Egypt, I cried out to you” – and by saying “the Lord brought *us* out of Egypt with a mighty hand” he is identifying himself with the covenant community and re-telling the story of the covenant community’s deliverance. Ultimately, “the worshiper should encounter anew the historical elements of [his] faith, and in some sense, experience the sacramental contemporaneity of [the] Lord” which “culminates in active response”.³⁶ The concept of remembering as related to the Greek word *anamnesis* - “do this in *remembrance* of me,” (cf. Luke 22:19) – is a strong corollary to this concept and carries with it the meaning of making past events present through the action of remembering.³⁷ Someone unfamiliar with worship as re-telling might say, “how is it biblical to re-tell the story of God’s action in history? How does that glorify God? Aren’t we just supposed to sing to him, to ascribe the glory due his name?” To answer that valid question we can look to the first song sung after the Israelites’ deliverance from Egypt. Exodus 15:1-18

³⁶ Webber, ed., *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 1, *The Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship*, 90.

³⁷ Laurence Hull Stookey, *Eucharist: Christ’s Feast with the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 28-29.

records the “Song of the Sea” which provides us with a good example of worship as re-telling. Moses begins with a series of acclamations: “I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously . . . The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation . . . the Lord is a man of war, the Lord is his name” (Ex. 15:1-3). Moses continues his song by re-telling the mighty deeds God has just accomplished: “Pharaoh’s chariots and his host he cast into the sea, and his chosen officers were sunk in the Red Sea . . . the floods covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone . . . at the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up; the floods stood in a heap” (Ex. 15:4-5, 8). So, Moses’ act of worship consists not only of acclamation but of re-telling those real events of God’s salvation, and by following the same pattern of historical recitation in remembering and re-telling the gospel, our worship can be rooted in the biblical story.

The central event of the story that we remember and re-tell in our worship is the Christ event. In Christ’s life, death, and resurrection the Old Testament portion of the story finds its fulfillment, and it is through the Christ event that God has initiated a relationship with humanity. The prophets looked forward to this time of special union with God in the midst of Israel’s idolatrous tendencies and religious syncretism:³⁸ “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel . . . I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jeremiah 31:31-33). Just as this new covenant, inaugurated and enacted by the Christ event, is central to the story of which we are a part, so also it is central to the worship which proclaims, re-enacts, and re-tells the gospel.

³⁸ Hill, *Enter His Courts with Praise: Old Testament Worship for the New Testament Church*, 24.

In his monumental work of worship renewal, Robert Webber has done much for evangelicals in recovering the historic four-fold pattern of worship. A “narrative quality” is achieved in this ancient church model of worship because inherent in its structure is the sense that the worshiper is headed somewhere – “the throne room of God’s kingdom”.³⁹ The four-fold order of worship is pertinent to our discussion because it holds the service of the Word and the Lord’s Supper as the dual climaxes of the gathering – the places to which the worshiper is headed to hear from God and respond in thanksgiving. Granted, the whole service is a “meeting between God and his people”, but for our purposes the service of the Word and the Table are supreme in that they celebrate and re-enact the Christ event.⁴⁰ In this way the central action of the story which we proclaim is the central part of our weekly gathering putting Christ at the center of our lives. In the service of the Word, the scriptures which comprise God’s grand story are proclaimed and read, and in this way Jesus Christ who is the Word made flesh is revealed to the gathering by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, “from the first instance of public worship described in Scripture and throughout the history of the church, the proclamation of the Word of God has been a central act of worship”.⁴¹ After hearing from God, the worshiper responds in thanksgiving at the Lord’s Table. As mentioned above, the Lord’s Supper is the covenant meal by which we remember Christ’s sacrifice, celebrate his victory over sin and death, and eagerly anticipate his coming when we will eat and drink it anew in his Father’s kingdom (Matthew 26:29; Mark 14:25). This act of thanksgiving, celebration, and remembrance is crucial in that it makes our worship Christocentric, for in it we “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1

³⁹ Webber, *Planning Blended Worship: The Creative Mixture of Old and New*, 21.

⁴⁰ Hill, *Enter His Courts with Praise: Old Testament Worship for the New Testament Church*, 157.

⁴¹ Webber, *Worship Old and New*, 163.

Corinthians 11:26). We re-present his saving action of passion on the cross and glorious resurrection through bread and wine; and, just as God makes himself present to us through historical recitation, so also he becomes present to us in this sacramental action of remembrance. Having Word and Table at the center of our corporate gatherings is necessary to rightly celebrate the gospel and re-tell the grand story. Furthermore, having our worship rooted in the biblical story truly forms us into the people of God – the image of Christ.

The final essential component in this discussion is the fact that worship is a community event. Though worship is basically a personal response,⁴² it cannot be separated from the community in which God designed us to work (*avad*) and keep our lives (*shamar*; cf. Gen. 2:15).⁴³ “Thus, individualized and privatized worship *finds its completion* in public and corporate worship (Hebrews 10:25)”.⁴⁴

Worship is a community event by token of God creating us to live in community. This is evident from the beginning of the biblical story: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’ . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:26-27). By declaring, “let us make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness”, God is revealing who he is – namely, that God is a “plurality”.⁴⁵ From a canonical viewpoint, the inspired author’s intent was to present the Trinitarian community as being mirrored by the community of man: “in the image of God he created him; *male and female* he created them.” Eric Bolger insightfully comments that, “the significance of this is that God, who is a community of persons, created humans *to reflect his*

⁴² Hill, *Enter His Courts with Praise: Old Testament Worship for the New Testament Church*, 26.

⁴³ Bolger, “MWS 501 A Biblical and Theological Understanding of Worship”, 5.

⁴⁴ Hill, *Enter His Courts with Praise: Old Testament Worship for the New Testament Church*, xxxi, emphasis mine.

⁴⁵ Bolger, “MWS 501 A Biblical and Theological Understanding of Worship”, 3.

nature by being a community of persons as well".⁴⁶ So, it is natural that the worship which re-tells the biblical story would serve to form God's people, the church, into his image which is best represented in loving community. The concept of *imago dei* (Latin for "image of God") is founded in this passage from the creation narrative and is important to the discussion of biblical worship in that we must understand that God's purpose for his church is to become more and more like Jesus Christ, the true *imago dei*.⁴⁷

To an Israelite in Moses' day, an image would be understood as a physical representation of a king or deity that was set up to mark off sovereign territory and could even be considered to manifest the presence of the king or deity.⁴⁸ Humans, therefore, are set apart to be Yahweh's representatives in the world, markers of his character; moreover, humanity is designed to image his community and represent him in community. It is clear to all that as a result of Adam and Eve's original sin, humanity deviated from the ability to rightly image God.⁴⁹ But through Christ, humans are restored and given the ability to image God – this may indeed be God's purpose in reconciliation. At any rate, the God who has created male and female in his image is greatly concerned with his church, Christ's body, being able to image him, and worship serves God in this purpose.

This is particularly evident in the Pauline epistles. So many times Paul is concerned with unity in the body (cf. Romans 12:3; Philippians 2:3-5; cf. Ephesians 4). He is not concerned with unity simply for the sake of *esprit de corps* but understands the concept of *imago dei* and that God is glorified as his people convey his image through loving community to the world.

⁴⁶ Eric Bolger, *Created In God's Image*, July 2005, The Institute for Worship Studies Florida Campus Alumni web site: www.iwsalumni.org/resources/GodsImage-Bolger.htm, emphasis his.

⁴⁷ Bolger, "MWS 501 A Biblical and Theological Understanding of Worship", 3.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Edification plays a major role in God building this community: “Paul regularly uses the terminology of upbuilding or edification, rather than the language of worship, to indicate the purpose and function of Christian gatherings”.⁵⁰ So, God uses the gathering of believers to build for himself a community of people that image him. In our times, the Christian gathering can sometimes be seen as a place for individuals to “work on” their communion with God or focus on their own experience. Maintaining a healthy relationship with the Trinity is paramount to one’s personal piety, but it is not the purpose of the assembly. Speaking frankly, I was taught that focusing on experience was the deepest way of worshiping God and that this was true edification. Peterson reminds us, though, that edification “regularly has a corporate reference in [Paul’s] teaching” and has more to do with “God building a people for himself” than “the spiritual advancement of individuals within the church”.⁵¹ In fact quite the opposite of popular belief is true:

Paul’s principle . . . challenges the common assumption that church services should simply be designed to facilitate a private communion with God, either by spiritual exercises or ritual. He envisages that believers will come together for the benefit of one another, drawing on the resources of Christ for spiritual growth by the giving and receiving of Spirit-inspired ministries.⁵²

An excellent example of this ideal is found in the twelfth chapter of the letter to the Romans. After explaining to the Romans the significance of the Christ event, Paul tells them how to live a worshipful life in Christ: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom. 12:1). In this command, Paul is urging the people to offer their bodies

⁵⁰ Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship*, 206.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 206-207.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 212.

“comprehensively”.⁵³ In other words, not only are they to give their whole lives, but they are to do this *together* in the action of edification. Paul’s intentions are evident here because the verses directly following the living sacrifice dictum give practical instruction on how to live out this command: “the exercise of gifts and ministries in the congregation is an expression of our service to God: we worship God by prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, contributing to the needs of others, exercising leadership and showing mercy to others in the fellowship of God’s people”.⁵⁴ Clearly, these acts of edification are classified as worship because they serve the purpose of forming Christ’s church into his image, thus bringing God glory in the world. Here we can see a parallel between God’s purpose for Israel and his purpose for the church. God’s purpose for Israel was to be a light to the nations and a kingdom of priests, thus serving a mediatorial role between the nations and Yahweh (Ex. 19:6). In the same way, the body of Christ is to be a royal priesthood so that the blessing God intends for all the families of the earth might come through the church, the community living in the image of the Triune God (Gen. 12:3; 1 Pet. 2:9).

For the ministry Paul has in mind to come to fruition, active participation by all members of the assembly is essential. There must be a purposed mutual edification, mutual encouragement, and an intention behind all these actions for the building up of the body. For a formal gathering this seems a bit difficult logistically, but opportunities can be provided for the members of the body to have contact with one another. The passing of the peace is a practical way to encourage and bless another brother or sister in the assembly. This action deepens the connection of fellowship and gives material expression to the “unity of the Spirit” and the “bond

⁵³ Bolger, “MWS 501 A Biblical and Theological Understanding of Worship”, 16.

⁵⁴ Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship*, 178.

of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). When leading up to the celebration of the Lord’s Table, the peace is extremely meaningful in that it assures full, God-imagining communion within the body of the Lord.

Active participation in congregational song can also accomplish the work of edification. Many songs and hymns have a horizontal focus in that they are sung to one another for the purpose of exhortation and upbuilding. Again, Paul’s teaching supports this: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Col. 3:16). The context of this exhortation is a communal one making it clear that song is used in the midst of the gathered believers for the sake of “teaching and admonishing.” It is true that song in any form can “unite the whole assembly”.⁵⁵

By active participation the word of Christ can dwell in the church richly through formal and informal preaching, prophecy, teaching, and exhortation. The proclamation of the word by various methods is the most pronounced form of edification found in the New Testament and is a distinctive way in which the entire community can engage with God.⁵⁶ Yet, this simple gift of sharing the word cannot bless the church unless there is a sense of freedom and the knowledge that the ministry of edification is ultimately an interaction between God and his people. “Such mutual ministry is often confined to the home group, or to times of personal interaction after church services. Why is it not also encouraged in the public gathering of the whole church?”⁵⁷ Peterson rightly questions this because the activity of this ministry is of utmost importance:

⁵⁵ Webber, ed., *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 1, *The Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship*, 257.

⁵⁶ Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship*, 198.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 197.

“Paul actually expects Christ to be encountered as his people share with one another a whole range of verbal ministries in the congregational gathering”.⁵⁸ As each one hears the spoken word by various means, the collective body is built up. First Corinthians 14 records Paul’s discourse with the church concerning spiritual gifts. His conclusion here is harmonious with other instruction to the New Testament church: “What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. *Let all things be done for building up*” (1 Cor. 14:26, emphasis mine). Every action done in the gathering of the people is to be done for the building up of the church. God’s purpose for the church in the world is to be a loving community, the *imago dei*, that is built up by the active participation of all members.

Worship is essential to the livelihood of the church. This was true in the first century and continues to be true in the twenty-first century. In an age of no absolutes and a culture with a multiplicity of worldviews, the church needs worship. Just as exiled Judah needed worship to survive and maintain her covenant identity,⁵⁹ so also the church needs Trinitarian content and communion; the church needs the whole biblical story to be the foundation for its worship; and, the church must actively worship together. Providentially, God has guided his bride through these last two millennia. All the while, worship has served to sustain the church’s identity and energize her missional purpose in the world.⁶⁰ Continuing by the objective ideal set forth in the witness of scripture and by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, the church’s worship will help

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ James F. White, *Christian Worship in Transition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976), 12.

⁶⁰ Alford, *Worship: The Purpose of the Church – Theological Reflections on ‘Purpose’ and ‘Task’*. www.chris-alford.com/local/documents/purpose.pdf, 2003.

her be the church triumphant. Indeed, she will continue in God's story. Journeying into history unwritten, she will move towards consummation realizing her divine purpose.

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