

Chapter 1

Worship

THE BIBLICAL CHARACTER AND CULTURE OF WORSHIP

Simon Ponsoyby

Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430) is perhaps the greatest theologian of the Western church. He fought against heresies on several fronts; he articulated the great doctrines of the church in grand architectonic fashion to the glory of God. He is often quoted, from his autobiographical work *The Confessions*, as expressing the innate human longing for God: “you have made us for yourself and our heart is restless till it finds its rest in you.”

What is less well known is that this very statement, which defines human identity in terms of innate orientation towards God that is only able to find its fulfilment in God, is found in his reflection on worship:

Great are you, O Lord, and worthy of high praise. Great is your strength and of your wisdom there is no counting. Even man is, in his own way, a part of your creation, and longs to praise you... You stir us up to take delight in your praise; for you have made us for yourself and our heart is restless till it finds its rest in you.¹

For Augustine, to be a human is to long for God – a longing fulfilled only in the act of worshipping God. One cannot be fully human if one doesn’t worship God.

The prophet Isaiah declared that we were created to praise

¹ Confessions 1:1.

God.² Saint Paul thrilled at the thought that we were adopted and redeemed to praise and glorify God.³ Paul wrote that the archetypical sin was to withhold worship and glory from God, and to offer worship elsewhere to created things, to idols.⁴ The vision John the Beloved gives us of heaven is bursting with worship and the very songs that are sung around the throne declare God worthy of worship by all he created.⁵ The Protestant tradition picks up these themes and in the famous statement of faith, the Westminster Catechism, declares that “we are created to give glory to God”. In the twentieth century, C. S. Lewis (and, in similar vein, John Piper) mused over this theme of being created to worship and wondered, even worried, whether it suggested God’s sole purpose in creating us was to have sycophants.

But Lewis rightly saw that in our worship, in our giving to God, we receive – we are actualized, we become who we are, we are fulfilled:

I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed. It is frustrating to have discovered a new author and not to be able to tell anyone how good he is; to come suddenly, at the turn of the road, upon some mountain valley of unexpected grandeur and then to have to keep silent because the people with you care for it no more than for a tin can in the ditch; to hear a good joke and find no one to share it with... If it were possible for a created soul fully... to “appreciate”, that is to love and delight in, the worthiest object of all, and simultaneously at every moment to give this delight perfect expression, then that

2 Isaiah 43:7.

3 Ephesians 6:12.

4 Romans 1:18–25.

5 Revelation 4:11.

soul would be in supreme beatitude... To see what the doctrine really means, we must suppose ourselves to be in perfect love with God – drunk with, drowned in, dissolved by, that delight which, far from remaining pent up within ourselves as incommunicable, hence hardly tolerable, bliss, flows out from us incessantly again in effortless and perfect expression; our joy is no more separable from the praise in which it liberates and utters itself than the brightness a mirror receives is separable from the brightness it sheds. The Scotch catechism says that man’s chief end is “to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” But we shall then know that these are the same thing. Fully to enjoy is to glorify. In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him.⁶

The culture of worship

God’s first commandment, given through Moses to the people of Israel, is about worship.

Exclusive, God-giving worship:

I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of Egypt, out of Slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything... You shall not bow down or worship them, for I am the Lord your God.⁷

This worship is God’s due, for He alone is God, He alone is the deliverer. But the fact that He had to give this commandment shows that He knows the tendency of the human heart to worship just about everything other than God. We are made to worship God – we are saved to worship God, but as St Paul highlights in Romans 1:18–25, we will often choose to worship the created

6 “The Problem of Praise in the Psalms”, in *Reflections on the Psalms*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1958, pp. 90–98.

7 Exodus 20:2–5.

over the Creator, inanimate things rather than the very source of life. We create idols and bow down before them – an idol being anything we substitute for God.

As Augustine above said, we are all born worshippers. The issue is never whether we worship but what. Where I am in Oxford, often God is replaced by gods of intellect, the mind, academic success. The biggest and best brain is worshipped. We have the high priestly hierarchy of dons, fellows and professors and their Vestments of Hood and Gown, and we have their religious ceremonies of initiation, matriculation, confirmation, examination and graduation.

In the suburbs, millions get up on Sunday and worship by going to car boot sales, or washing their Mondeos or BMWs or 4x4s. Audi once had an advert for their Cabriolet which simply stated, “Worship here”. The new cathedrals are our shopping centres or the giant out-of-town shopping malls where millions pilgrimage and offer homage at the altars of the tills. On Christmas Day 2007, more people bought online than attended church!

In 1998, billions were glued to their TVs watching the World Cup. At the cathedrals (stadiums) the high priests (players) gave offerings (goals) on the altars (nets), with churchwardens (referees) in attendance. At the inauguration of that World Cup in France, a little girl read a poem entitled “Take us to a better place”.

Millions cheered, or were in tears!

Worship!

The music on the BBC to accompany the 2006 World Cup was the tune to the hymn “Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son”. Was this not close to blasphemy – attributing to a game what belongs to God alone?

The character of biblical worship

Romans 12:1 indicates that worship is a way of life – rather than

just the songs we sing in a church! Paul wants the believers to offer every aspect of their lives to God – in particular stressing holy living. Many people are quick to sing on Sunday and sin on Monday. But “worship” is our “walk” with God. Whatever we do, we do as unto the Lord. Whenever we step out in faith or sacrifice the flesh, we are worshipping – offering ourselves as a sacrifice to God.

In Scripture, however, the normative understanding of praise and worship words (occurring about 400 times) reflects speech expressing adoration, blessing and honour. Our word “worship” is from the Old English “worth-scipe”, meaning to give or declare something or someone’s worth, to give value.

Other words in the original biblical languages that are translated into English generally as “worship” or “praise” include:

- **Old Testament Hebrew:** *segad* (bow down), *abad* (serve), *shacah* (bow), *halal* (bless), *yadah* (praise; from the root *yad* = hand).
- **New Testament Greek:** *doxazo* (glorify), *eusebeo* (revere), *proskyneo* (bow/kiss), *latreo* (serve).

These convey a demonstrative aspect to worship alongside the vocal aspect.

The right response of creature to Creator (Psalm 95)

Worship is a recognition of who God is as Lord, Saviour, Master, King and Ruler.

We worship at God’s footstool, we worship at His feet, we acknowledge our dependence and creatureliness, we humble ourselves and we honour God. But even as we humble ourselves before God, we are also aware that we meet Him as the beloved before our divine lover. The psalmist understood this; hence his constant worship refrain, “his love endures forever”⁸

⁸ Psalms 106:1; 107:1; 118:1; 136:1.

Worship can be the whispers between lovers, an intimate expression of affection.

The splendid obsession of heaven

Worship is the preoccupation of eternity.

Whatever else we do, however else we will be occupied, in heaven there will be joyful, spontaneous, overflowing, uninhibited delighting in God. Revelation 4 shows the saints laying their crowns before Him and falling down. The Greek is iterative, a present continuous action of constantly laying down crowns and laying down ourselves before the throne. In order for this to occur, the Lord must constantly raise us up and crown us each time. What incredible extravagant grace! God gives us the very gifts we worship Him with.

The response to revelation

Those who worship little, understand little.

As we study God's word, understand His character, and experience His goodness, worship becomes our automatic response. The medieval saint, Julian of Norwich, would shout out loud praises to God in Latin after reading her Bible. John and Elaine Beekman went as missionaries to the Chol Indians in Mexico. After faithful sacrificial service for 25 years, there were 12,000 converts. Interestingly, when they arrived, no one ever sang; there were no songs, no singing in the Chol tribe's tradition. They didn't even have a word for "sing" in their vocabulary.

But when they were converted, when they were Spirit-filled, they began singing praises to God, so much so that they invented a new word and changed their name to become the "singing tribe".

The goal of our salvation

We are elected, chosen, redeemed and sealed, all to the praise of God's glorious Grace.⁹ But as C. S. Lewis points out, this is not

⁹ Ephesians 1:6, 11, 14.

because God desires sycophants, though worship is God's due; it also restores our fallenness and fulfils our humanity – it's what we were made for.

Paul in Ephesians 1:8–25 says that we were created to know and worship God. In turning away and worshipping idols, we lose the glory that God gave us as beings created in His image. Worship glorifies God but it also restores us to our right glory. When we worship, we become authentic, whole. The converse is also true, as Peter Schaeffer said in his play *Equus*: "If you don't worship, you shrink."

The conflict over worship

Jewish Tradition says that the devil was once an archangel who stood before God and conducted the worship being offered to God. Rather than being content with his role as a choir conductor, a conduit of worship, he became proud (beware, worship leaders!) and desired to draw that praise and worship to himself. And God threw him and the angels that adored him out of His presence. Ever since, Satan has continued to deviate worship from God to himself. Even as God was giving the first commandment – to have no idols and to worship no gods but Yahweh – the devil was at work in Israel's camp, causing them to create a golden bull-calf idol, worshipping it and engaging in licentious behaviour.

Idolatry and immorality have always gone hand in hand.

Paul clearly links the two in Romans 1, as if summing up Israel's history, where they worshipped the pagan gods Baal and Ashtoreth and indulged in the indecent sexual expression associated with these fertility gods.

Satan seeks to rob God of His due, and he seeks to corrupt humanity in their duty. Paul writes that behind every idol is a demon.¹⁰ All worship not given to God in Christ Jesus is worship that the evil one draws to himself. In Revelation 13, St John records that a key mark of the personified antichrist is robbing

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 10:20.

God of His worship and drawing worship to an image of the beast!

Long ago God said to Pharaoh: “Let my people go, that they might worship me”, but Pharaoh resisted, wanting to keep them to worship him by their subservient work, building buildings to his glory, not God’s.

Satan has always resisted the worship of God in Christ Jesus. Satan sought to deflect worship from Christ at His birth.¹¹ The Magi went to Herod and said, “We have come to worship the King of the Jews.” Herod, demonically inspired, tried to have Christ killed rather than worshipped.

Satan sought to deflect worship from Christ after His baptism.¹² Having been declared the Son of God, Jesus is tested by Satan and the climax of the tests is: “Worship me, and all this I will give you.” The devil is trying to buy true worship. Jesus rebukes him, saying, “It is written, worship God, and serve Him only.”

Satan sought to deflect worship from Christ at his triumphal entry, when the Pharisees were incensed at the worship being offered to Jesus, and told Him to rebuke the disciples for singing hallelujahs.

Elsewhere the term “rebuke”, meaning “to muzzle”, was used by Jesus against the demons – but here the demonic wanted to silence the worship. Jesus replied that the very stones would cry out if they tried to stop the praise.

In the early church, one major reason why the authorities persecuted and killed Christians was because of their “exclusive worship of Jesus”. The Romans would accept Jesus as a god within their pantheon, if Christians also worshipped the Emperor, but the exclusive worship of one God, Jesus, was to be exterminated.

Today, in church, the battlefield is often focused on the worship, and often on the mind of the worshipper. How many times has our mind been distracted from worshipping God to

¹¹ Matthew 2.

¹² Matthew 4.

thinking about anything but God – the person in front, the lunch, ourselves. John Donne, the English poet, once observed: ‘I throw myself down in my chamber, and I call in and invite God and his angels thither, and when they are there, I neglect God and his angels for the noise of a fly, for the rattling of a coach, for the whining of a door.’ The enemy wages war in every church over the worship; ask any pastor where the greatest area of criticism and conflict is, and it will invariably be centred around worship, and then finance, which is itself a form of worship. The enemy always takes a great interest in influencing the worship group, or the choir.

I remember ministering at a church weekend. My worship leader pulled out at the last minute; the rector challenged me over my choice of songs for the guest service; the choir were at loggerheads with the rector, utterly independent, insisted on robing and processing in at an evangelistic event, and sitting in their choir stalls, even though they had no part in the special service. Then the curate told me later that two members of the choir were having an illicit affair. The war for worship was also seen when I was speaking at a university chapel; afterwards, at supper, the choir discussed obscene sex acts! A year later I was invited back and the set lectionary reading was about the Pharisees; the text was: “they worship me with their lips but their hearts are far from me”. I preached strongly and faithfully on the passage, but days later I received a sharp rebuke from the chaplain. The choir had complained to him, rather than being convicted by my sermon.

The climax of worship

The most important thing we must grasp is that worship is about giving to God – it’s for *His* benefit, not ours. Nevertheless, when we worship and praise, we are blessed also. We have already noted that in worship, as we give God glory, we receive glory,

we are restored in our glory, *imago dei*. To worship is to be humanized, glorified. Furthermore, whenever we worship and praise, God comes.

Consider Psalm 22:3: “God inhabits [is enthroned on] the praises of his people.” This is the same idea that we find in 1 Samuel 4:4 and Exodus 25:22, which speak of God inhabiting (being enthroned above) the ark of the covenant. When we praise God, God draws near. Worship woos Him, it intensifies His presence, making more of the God who is with us; and when God is present, He is present in power and glory.

When the twelve tribes of Israel marched out, Judah (meaning “praise”) led the way (Numbers 12); and as they marched forward in worship, they were victorious over their enemies. Jehoshaphat defeated Moab by placing a worship team at the front of the army.¹³ When we worship, strongholds are broken and dark chains are released. It is precisely because worship is so powerful, because it is liberating, that the evil one opposes it so tenaciously. Luther rightly noted, “The Devil hates a singing Christian.”

Merlin Carothers wrote a powerful book entitled *From Prison to Praise* in which he showed how the life of worship transforms the believer, delivering them from self-pity and fears and strongholds, and putting them in the presence of God, of faith, of blessing.

When we worship, we encounter God. When we encounter God, we meet the one who can heal, deliver, save, bless. I suspect we could greatly reduce the hours spent in counselling, ministering and praying with and for those in our churches who are struggling, if only we could get them worshipping – turning their attention from themselves to God, entering His presence, experiencing His power. The Scottish saint, Murray McCheyne, used to argue that for every one look at ourselves in our sin, problems and struggles, we should take ten looks at Christ.

¹³ 1 Chronicles 20:22.

The power of God to heal released in worship

I have occasionally heard stories of God’s power coming down on a congregation in worship and healing and deliverance. I want to finish this chapter by quoting the testimony of a woman who was severely disabled, but who was remarkably healed during worship at a meeting I was at. I spoke to the doctor who interviewed her immediately following this and who believed it a miracle, and I have spoken to close friends of the lady and the lady herself, a year later, who had kept her healing. What stands out is that God spoke to her, and she was healed in worship – not during prayer ministry.

In February 2001 I had a stroke followed by a couple of TIAs or mini strokes. During that time we moved from Bolton to St Budeaux in Plymouth where for the next few years I underwent tests under a consultant neurologist at Derriford hospital. In March of 2007 I was diagnosed with a brain tumour. I underwent a form of radiotherapy called stereostatic radiotherapy which involves being fitted into a “halo” which enables the radiotherapist to fix your head to the table whilst the radiotherapy takes place; the treatment means that you receive all the radiotherapy all at once instead of over a period of time. Quite traumatic. Almost immediately we discovered that the treatment had done some damage. My vestibular nerve had been badly damaged and so my balance began to deteriorate. Two consultants got together to decide what to do – a neurosurgeon/consultant and an ENT consultant who specializes in balance problems. The ENT man proposed an operation of about ten hours in length where the pair of them would work together to remove the now dead tumour, the vestibular nerve and all the workings of my inner ear. However, the neuro man said it would be too

risky a procedure due to my stroke history. He proposed to leave things as they were for another twelve months to see if things would improve, even though week by week I was getting steadily worse... Praise the Lord for that decision!

I came to New Wine excited – we had brought thirty of our church family with us – and amazingly not even thinking of a healing. By now I was using a stick around the house, a three-wheeled walker during the day, and by around 4 p.m. I had to resort to a wheelchair. I hadn't been out of the house without a minder for four years and had really become a recluse, shunning company and stepping out of ministry – you do rather become a target for the healing ministry, and not always in the most helpful and sensitive of ways. So to be frank, I was all healed out and had come to sigh deeply when the next person came along to lay hands on me. I had no expectation of being healed, yet knew I was completely loved by God and was calmly trusting Him for my future. I actually felt that I didn't need to be healed to be a whole person. At the same time I was in a terrible spiritual desert place. I was being held up by the faithful prayers of others so had only the briefest of conversations with God – my stomach would literally drop at the thought of reading my Bible.

I sat through the worship in my wheelchair – singing rather than praising. If I did raise my arms, I rested them on the arms of my wheelchair, half-heartedly going through the motions.

Then Heidi Baker's indescribable opening to her preach: in the first few seconds I thought, "What an incredible voice..." Then it was as if the doors of heaven had opened and Jesus Himself was standing amongst us, thrilled by our worship and radiating love for and to us. What an incredible evening! Still, amazingly, I went

back to the caravan without any desire to be healed, not even for one second thinking about it; it never occurred to me even to ask for it. I did know, however, that I did have to deal with the "desert place". Greg Haslam's talks were immensely helpful, as was the sensitive, gentle and incredibly wise counsel I received from the couple in the pastoral care centre.

And so to Friday evening! Again I was singing rather than praising in my wheelchair. When the line "You heal all my disease" came (I never sang that particular line), I fleetingly thought, "You've not healed mine!" But I always sing "I trust in you, I trust in you". Immediately I felt a power pass through me from the top of my head to my toes, and with it came complete and utter certainty without doubt. I'm healed. Seconds later I heard the audible voice of God say, "If you want to go to the front and dance, you can!" I replied, "No thanks, I'd like to sit here for a moment; hope you don't mind!" I leaned over to Stephen my husband and said, "Stephen, I'm healed!" to which he replied, "Oh, right." Those who know Stephen know that he is so laid back he is horizontal, but is a deeply Godly man, and his "Oh, right" was the "Amen" to years of faithful prayer and longing.

So, there I sat all through Simon Ponsonby's pertinent preach. He asked in conclusion for people who felt that they were in the desert place to kneel to be prayed for. I asked Stephen to help me out of the wheelchair so that I could kneel whilst a lovely lady prayed for me. I remained sitting on the floor for a while until I badly needed to use the ladies! I also knew that I had to walk there unaided, so I got off the floor, on my own, stood for a moment to test my legs, on my own, and then walked round, over and through the crowd out into the very uneven roadway, up steps, down steps and back into

the meeting, every step a miracle. Only to be met at the door by two very amazed people who had prayed for me on the previous day. At no point had I asked for healing or to my knowledge been prayed for, for this specific healing. God arrived in the atmosphere of praise and worship and chose to lift me to my feet. I spoke to a doctor at the front of the stage who gave Mark Bailey the thumbs up, and the next thing I knew, I was up the steps (unaided) and onto the stage.

On returning, on foot, to the camp-site, my church family were all seated in a circle waiting for me; they had decorated our caravan with streamers, Chinese lanterns and candles. There in the centre was my wheelchair, all folded away and completely wrapped up. It went straight into the boot of the car, not to be used since.

I danced my way through worship on the last evening after walking from venue to venue all day, released, loved and protected. Praise the Lord!

We are created as worshippers. If we don't worship God, we will find some other object for our innate impulse to worship.

When we worship God, God comes – and when He comes He restores, heals, delivers, graces.

It is because worship is God's due, and our destiny, that worship is so contested by the world, the flesh and the devil.

Throughout this book, we will continue to explore the nature of worship, the obstacles to worship, the rewards of worship, and the one we worship.