

# STUDY ON WORSHIP

Reflections on This & That

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## ENOUGH ABOUT WHAT WE'RE DOING

What Christians do must be personal—that is, our faith must be ours. Just the same, at their best, Christian attitudes, behavior, worship and ordinances are more than personal responses to God—their existence and shape reflect God at work; they reflect his presence, heart and purposes.

Again, at their best, their treatment of each other and people in general, their confession, liturgy and ordinances, their hope and praise and scriptures are a conscious claim that they see themselves as "the body of Jesus Christ".

The Spirit of God through scripture and life shapes the church so that it profiles Jesus who is the image of the invisible God. This means that what we see is not only our human response but God's self-witness that what he purposed and is bringing to completion in Jesus Christ is underway and will be fulfilled.

This means that Christian existence, life and worship is not just about us; it's about God who has come to the human family in and as Jesus Christ.

What a sight we'd have seen from a high vantage point looking down into the wilderness where Israel was camped. There's a central large tent around which is a circle of tents and then outside those there are tents on all four sides of the central tent. There are twelve tribes in formation, three tribes at each point of the compass.

This is harmony and form in the wilderness—defying the chaos

This is a people in the wilderness—living as a community

This is personal response to God's leading—noting but defying hardship

This is a nation going through the wilderness—on their way home

This is God making his presence known in the wilderness—claiming Lordship

On their way home they tell people around them that they would like their help and company and: "If you come with us we will share with you whatever good things the Lord gives us." See Numbers 10:29-32.

So it was and so it is!

## INSTRUMENTS IN CORPORATE WORSHIP

To keep this short and as simple as I can would mean I wouldn't really be very helpful. To develop my reasons for saying churches of Christ should leave the instrument alone would 1) take a prolonged discussion, and, 2) wouldn't settle the question to everyone's satisfaction. So I'm not sure how to work with this.

This much is clear to me: I know of no scripture or set of scriptures that settle the matter. I know of no acceptable hermeneutical approach that settles the matter. So as far as the exegesis of texts goes I know of nothing that settles the matter as to the right or wrong of instrumental music in worship.

This means to engage or not to engage must for me be based on other considerations. This is where a long discussion would come in that satisfies me but wouldn't satisfy many others. The major reason for the debate is the nature of our hermeneutical approach to Scripture and that involves not only how we deal with specific verses and sections, but also how we view the Bible as a whole!

[If for example we view the Bible as an exhaustive blueprint for behavior under God then we'll look for specific guidance about every question that could be asked about life and worship. But then if we believed we had to find specific authorization for everything then we'd have to find authorization for taking the view that the Bible is an exhaustive blueprint. Where or how are we told we are to have 66 books in the Bible? Where or how are we told the 66 we have are the 66 we're supposed to have? Just imagine how many questions those two questions lead to! How to interpret scripture is not an easy question to settle--I don't care who has told you otherwise.]

Moving on. Keeping this piece within range means there's an ongoing argument about how God "authorizes" things in scripture? That's the leading question in this specific area.

Crediting all of us with good hearts for the sake of the discussion let me say that if there were explicit verses or sections that settled the issue we wouldn't have the debate. If an indisputable interpretative approach existed that fairly yielded a yes or no we wouldn't be having the debate. Neither of these indisputables is open to us. At least neither of them is open to me.

There's nothing new in biblical debate. Such debates have been going on for centuries back into ancient Israelite times (when God gave judges as well as texts, which in itself should warn us against thinking there are texts on everything in scripture that preclude honest disputes). If you read, for example, G.F. Moore's *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era* or Emil Schurer's work you'd find a section on "halakah" which tells us how they faced the same difficulties we face on a host of issues. In fact you'd think that you were reading some of our modern discussions when you read how they went about working with questions they couldn't settle with an explicit text. The Bible (Old or New Testament) is no exhaustive blueprint so the way to honor God in some areas must be "worked at" more than worked out. Without prolonging the issue I think the instrument is one of those questions.

Honorable people on both sides of the question seeking to please and honor God differ on this matter because (in my view) there's no definitive word about it. This is where "halakah" enters (you'll see that word spelled in different ways). These ancient scholars couldn't come up with an issue-settling text or section to justify their practice on numerous things but they didn't want to debate the issue forever. So they worked at it, drew a conclusion, which while it wasn't indisputably true would be something they could act on in each community or village or area. It meant they could stop arguing every time they got together and that they could have a united witness for God on the other issues that were fundamental and clear. The halakah in some areas would differ from that in other areas. When a visitor came to a new area [assuming he

had a good heart and loved the unity of the believers] he simply asked what the halakah was on this matter or that and willingly submitted himself to it rather than bring in disease and unrest over something that had been settled not by an explicit text. He was willing to acknowledge that this community had settled the issue to its satisfaction and enjoyed peace in the unity that was to the honor God.

We developed our halakah because we thought/think that this was/is the drift and direction we should go to please God and so we practice a cappella worship. I fervently believe we should maintain the peace, which is more important on God's list of priorities than congregational agreement on a non-jugular issue that can't be definitively settled. (Of course that means that I take it to be true that instruments in worship is not a jugular issue and that the question can't be definitively settled.)

Now this raises other questions. I recognize that, but as far as I can see there's nothing else for it. But since this is how I see it (right or wrong) I would suggest that we become rich in areas that are clear in scripture and are obviously of profound importance—things that for us as a fellowship are simply non-negotiable—and agree to differ for now on matters that intelligent and God-honoring men and women disagree on. We then could share the saving message while we prayerfully study and reflect about fine-tuning our understanding of and obedience to the “rule of faith” and act in heartfelt biblical unity.

I understand that if some of us believe the use of instruments is a salvation issue and therefore a fellowship issue that they will withdraw from the rest of us. I can see that and it makes sense within its boundaries. [This doesn't mean that dialogue should be shut down.]

A desire for “freedom” or a hunger for “change”?

What complicates things and adds tension to the issue is the tide of individualism that is swamping all the religious communities. Many believers in all the various communities of faith now see themselves as virtual “consumers” and (as David Buttrick would call them) preachers and church leaders have become “ecclesial entrepreneurs” who compete for souls in the religious marketplace.

But to treat them as “consumers” says something about our view of God and a lot about us that is spooky!

For non-instrumentalist groups this adds unease to their already settled conviction that the instrument is unacceptable on biblical grounds. Many religious communities that have no objection to the instrument in worship are nevertheless lamenting the growing demand for entertainment and fine-tuned catering. Add to the protest against that consumer mentality the vexing issue of “biblical authorization,” pastoral and historical objections to instruments in corporate worship and the issue is starker for those of us who are a cappella in practice.

Some that read this will wonder why we even bother with such a question but the debate rises out of serious concerns and a genuine desire to honor God. Those who believe that instrumental worship is unacceptable to God are sometimes dismissed as obscurantist; silly people who have no more sense and nothing better to do with their time than to beat their gums over foolishness.

That's far from the truth and only the ignorant can take such a view. People can't act with integrity beyond their own perceptions and the continued stance that instruments should be excluded from worship is fed not only by how the biblical witness is understood but by established custom—centuries old—millennia old—custom that bears witness to and expresses unity held precious.

To dismiss all that so that we can deepen the pleasure of the worship experience of a lot of people or to dismiss all that so that we can get more visitors into our meetings is debatable in the extreme. To bring the instrument into an established assembly that is a cappella in practice so we can make friends of others in other fellowships while alienating devoted people

in our own fellowship is very often seeking the “additional” at the expense of the “indispensable”.

I would not deny that using instruments in worship might well be a “freedom” but there are some freedoms that should be happily bypassed for love’s sake (compare Exodus 21:5, Romans 14:1—15:14).

I’m one of those that think (right or wrong) that the use of the instrument in worship is not a fellowship issue because it is not a salvation issue. (That’s part of the debate, isn’t it?)

I would say that God went to a lot of trouble to get us into the church—which is the body of Christ—and if someone wants to exclude us from it (say, for using an instrument) they need to be very sure of their grounds.

I don’t think the use of the instrument is as serious as the motives for bringing it in where the established custom has long excluded it and unity and peace is enjoyed.

I find it difficult to imagine God at judgment saying to someone that “worshipped with an instrument” that he had a serious matter he wanted to talk to him/her about. But I have no difficulty at all in imagining him wanting to speak to some leader or leaders about their underlying motives for introducing something that generated dismay, disunity and loss of a united witness on God’s behalf.

I hear talk about people being “enslaved” if they aren’t allowed to use the instrument or if a woman cannot be a bishop [elder, shepherd]. Galatians is quoted a lot about “freedom” as over against “slavery”. It doesn’t seem to matter to these talkers that Paul’s use of freedom and slavery in Galatians was a rage against the perversion of the gospel. He raged about an approach to scripture that would in the end destroy the entire Christian edifice. To use Paul’s “freedom” and “slavery” speech about issues such as our rights in the areas we’re talking about here is an absolute misuse of Scripture.

In addition, such speech is used in a nation where “freedom” is everywhere proclaimed and enjoyed. We are “enslaving” people if we don’t allow them to freely bring the instrument in or have women elders? “Slavery” speech generates images of evil Pharaohs, images of Afro-Americans being humiliated, discriminated against, abused and murdered.

I’ve already expressed my view on the right/wrong of the instrument in worship question but I’ve got to confess that I see more and more of what looks like entertainment than open joy. Not too long ago I watched a song-leader and thought I was in a Vegas show with a performer used to swinging it with the big band sound.

A few years back I heard a fine Christian gentleman, a world-ranked Church historian say something that stuck with me. In his irenic way he remarked that he visited an assembly where the praise team moved the table on which the bread and the wine had been placed. They moved it right out of the way, this gentleman said, “So we could see how much they loved the Lord.”

For some years now various assemblies of various faith-communities, on and off, have offered ballet presentations of this or that section of scripture. This is “freedom” also? What other “freedoms” are we denying to fellow-Christians? Is the kingdom of God ballet, playing, swing-time with the big-band sound, utilitarian attempts to please the greatest number of those who want to exercise their “rights”?

Sick as I am of the move to “entertainment” and the democratization of the Body of Christ [that’s being noted and worried about all across the religious spectrum], I’m sicker still about the absence of a throbbing Gospel, sicker still of the same old sermons about the same old things at the same old level—“Let’s all be nice people, nice to one another and let’s all be friendly.” Sick of it! Sick of those on the other end of the spectrum whose only business it seems is to prove again and again and again and again how it is that everyone else is wrong and we’re right! Sick of it! Sick of a ceaseless call for us to pursue moral excellence—to be honest,

generous, patient, pure and kind, and so forth, and so little talk of God and his cosmic purpose and of his love of the entire human race that in which multiplied millions are tormented and ravaged. So little talk about and then actually doing something about the needy all around us!

Our young are bored spitless. They're made for war and we offer them the banal. They know nothing of adventure in Christ, nothing of waging battle against the powers, nothing of [in John's words in Revelation] of warring against dragons, seven-headed beasts, riding on horses and following into battle the One who rides ahead, leading them into war to save a world!

And we offer what as a cure? A muted Beatles gathering, a Garth Brooks toe-tapping soiree. What is it, we can't tear the roof off with joy-filled song if we don't have Vegas crooners up front?

The first question, as far as I'm concerned, isn't the instrument, it is the leaders who insist on bringing it in—and often in that “wise” way—by introducing it to the “children's worship”—the “children's church”.

There are God-honoring Christians who met the Lord Jesus while attending assemblies that have used instruments right from their beginnings. They have known no other practice, didn't know there was a debate about it and so they worship God in the corporate worship in the only way they've known. To pretend that such are in the same boat as people in an assembly where the leaders introduced the instrument to an a cappella assembly over the conscience of large numbers of people is out of order.

And then the reasons for introducing the instrumental practice are sometimes simply ludicrous. The issue of authorization is wider than the question of instruments in worship and it affects religious communities of all kinds. There's little point in denying that. It's a matter of genuine concern and to do what we choose to do on the basis of mere feelings or what we like or on logic or on some no sense “reason” can hardly promote unity among those who seek to follow the drift of scripture where there may be no explicit biblical warrant. A few years back an assembly decided to move from two thousand years of Communion in the Lord's Supper on the Lord's Day to a Saturday Suppering because their building wasn't large enough to accommodate the size of the congregation. Apparently it didn't occur to the leadership that they might have planted vibrant assemblies in other areas where non-Christians would have the opportunity to come in and hear the gospel if they so chose. The leadership defended the introduction of the instrument at that time also.

Some years back I was invited to Supper on Saturday. I politely declined but asked why it was practiced. I was told it started the previous year and those who engaged in it “felt blessed”. It had nothing to do with the size of the building or the number of believers who could be accommodated though it was said that some NT passages weren't clear on what was required regarding the frequency of Lord's Suppering and on what day. The texts “weren't clear” so Saturday night was in! The texts “weren't clear” so what was clear was that Saturday night Suppering was clear! Two thousand years of Lord's Day Suppering is ignored, Saturday is in even if it closes doors to happy and conscience-free fellowship with other congregations.

It must be wonderful to be so large, so powerful, that you can easily dismiss the need for the fellowship from so many brothers and sisters. So large and popular and “successful” that you don't feel the need of others to begin with. “We'll go it alone if we have to.” I can hear Paul and others say that when faced with downright heresy. But this? “Though they dispute it we know it's our 'right' so we're going alone. By God's help we will have our liberty.” That? That's what powerful leaders and powerful congregations see and hear in, say, Romans 14:13, 16-19 or 1 Corinthians 8:2-3, 9, 13 10:23-33?

Can you imagine what might happen if the powerful leaders and congregations that have introduced the “contentious issue” announced that for the sake of Christ and out of love of the brotherhood and sisterhood that they would withdraw the move and forfeit a liberty?



Can you imagine what even the non-Christian people would think? Can you imagine what a shocked and often cynical media might do in the face of such a lovely and Christlike move? Can you imagine the thanksgiving that would go up to God? No one crowing about a victory—just all these sisters and brothers running to meet one another with glad hearts; hearts that had learned something that rose above debate on an important matter that in the end was resolved in light of the self-denial of God in Christ.

Can you imagine what effect that might have throughout the ENTIRE brother and sisterhood, perhaps ending generations of staying apart?

I don't say that all the answers are clear! I don't say there's no room for honest dispute on some issues. I do say, right or wrong and while, hand on my heart, I'm trying to remain open to the voice of God in the biblical witness, that leaders with charisma and power get carried away and drag the impressionable with them, giving congregations "reasons" to do what these powerful leaders want to do.

Okay, I don't know how to finish this piece. I know I don't know how to settle this question. Never thought I could.

Let the church hear!

It's said of Charles Finney, a man of great fervor and strong views, that on one occasion when the choir was done singing he was to lead the assembly in prayer. Greatly vexed he prayed; "O Lord, we do not doubt that thou hast known and understood all that thy gifted servants have sung but we haven't caught a blessed word."

I'm half afraid to say what I'm about to say because if my reading and listening experience over the years is typical, what we hear from most pulpits and lecterns is the same tired moralizing week after week after week; the kind of thing we're familiar with since childhood. There isn't a lot said that challenges us to reflect deeply on our faith. Points are taken from it here and there, ceaselessly; but there's no holistic treatment of the gospel, no development of the meaning and grand drift of the good news about God (Romans 1:1). I don't wish to sound pompous or come across as a "know it all" but, to some at least, I will. Nevertheless, the church is in dire need of hearing the whole rich counsel of God taught and proclaimed over the long haul.

Surely we should take Finney's response to the splendid but not intelligible performance of the choir as more than a hint if we are speakers or authors or if we are leading an assembly in public reading or prayer.

Who can say "amen" to a prayer muttered into the prayers shirt-pocket or take as heresy or orthodoxy, helpful or a hindrance, what a speaker has prepared if it's understandable only to theology professors?

Colin Morris tells us of a young Oxford curate who transfixed his congregation of farm-laborers and chambermaids with this rhetorical question, "Some of you are probably saying, 'So much for Cyril of Jerusalem, but what about Theodore of Mopseustria?'" Certainly, as Morris insists, the congregation (assuming he had one the following week) would never accuse this preacher of "talking down" to them but at some point "relevance" and "congregational ability" must enter.

If we are to lead an assembly in prayer we should see to it that the assembly hears it. If we are to sing our faith before an assembly we should see to it that the assembly can hear what we are confessing. If we are to preach/teach with a congregation we should see to it that it is within their reach. Challenge is right—essential—but the wise preacher or teacher will take into account the limitations of his hearers (John 16:12). However we go about getting the whole rich Story to the church those who lead must believe it's their business to do that and if it's their business to do that they need to pay the price of prayerful and serious reflection, a serious and eager listening to God and then a faithful bringing of the message to a hungry church.

The event actually happened in South America, told by a minister who worked there. He sat in his vehicle waiting for the return of some friends and a poor woman came asking him to come see her dancing dogs—one way to get a few pennies. He didn't wish to but she was so insistent that he gave in. To her little ramshackle house, out to the back where four or five dogs were kept, skin and bone they were, pleading by their very body language they were, and she, with a piece of hard bread held always just above them, out of their reach showed her "dancing dogs". Poor woman, poor animals—distressing at it is we can understand it.

"Come see my dancing congregation."

## REFLECTIONS ON WORSHIP [1]

### What do I mean by "worship"?

If we ask what "worship" is we're really asking what the word worship means; what the English word worship means. When we ask what the English word worship means we're really asking what the general public means by it. No individual determines what a word means—it's a collective, cultural process and dictionaries like Webster's or the Oxford English [OED] merely report to us how a word is currently understood and used by the general public. What the word might have meant in earlier generations is important and shouldn't be forgot but we don't live in earlier generations so our speech is shaped by current use.

There's more to be said about that but moving on...

The OED tells us that "worship" is homage or reverence paid to a deity, especially in formal services and formal rites. The acts of homage performed in such gatherings are also called "worship" because they're aimed at expressing homage or reverence to a deity. There are secondary and not unimportant uses of "worship". ["She simply worships the children" by which we mean that the level of her devotion is so deep that it is like the devotion paid to a deity.] These secondary uses don't serve our purposes at this moment so we're moving on.

Dictionaries are invaluable but they can be dangerous tools. They can be dangerous if the work is shoddy and mislead people in areas that matter a great deal but they can be even more dangerous in another way. When we're using dictionaries we need to know they have very definite limits—they can't possibly give us all the help we need because we often need to know more than how the public currently uses a particular word.

In the Hebrew and Greek Bibles there are many different words rendered by many translations by our single word "worship". That's probably not a bad thing and yet, those Hebrew and Greek words have their own background and usage and stresses and we cover them all with a single word. If a friend tells us she "went to worship" on Sunday there's little mystery about what she means but did Jesus mean what she meant when he said to Satan, "It is written, 'you shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve' "? Was Jesus talking about [as we'd put it] "going to worship"?

Some serious Christians think "going to worship" is misleading speech because a full and correct understanding of "worship" should mean the entire enterprise of life. Still, though he wrote Romans 12:1, Paul said he went up to Jerusalem to worship so "going to worship" is probably an acceptable use of the word [Acts 24:11, and see Luke description of what the eunuch did in Acts 8:27].

Lexical work is indispensable if we're to do serious study so we need scholars in that field to teach us but lexical work is not the end of the matter and at some points it becomes tedious and in some ways it only muddies the water for the rank and file of us.

Let me in a few sentences summarize what the linguistic experts in this area tell us about the Bible words. When the linguistic work is done and the smoke clears, they tell us that our English word "worship" is used to cover an attitude of homage and reverence toward God that

sets the tone of a true worshiper's entire life and leads that worshiper to please God by "serving" him in all that he/she does in life and that one expression of that "service" will occur in formal "religious" activities. [The kind of thing that occurs in "church services".] This conclusion is not controversial among scholars. It is "just the facts".

It won't do to dismiss this conclusion unless we are able to show that their lexical work misrepresents the biblical witness. We might as well argue with the OED or Webster's when they tell us, "this is how this word is used in current English." We might say, "Yes, but the current English usage is wrong." The question to follow might be, "Wrong in what sense?" We might say, "That's not what the word means in the Bible!" The next question might be, "How do you know what the word means in the Bible?" Hmmm, we have to go to the scholars, don't we!

Once more: The Bible's use of various words that we cover with the English word "worship" speaks of an attitude that leads the worshiper to live his/her entire life in all its relationships in homage and service to God and his purposes. Such a life will express itself at times in public "religious services".

This is how I will be using the word in the reflections that follow.

The above "definition" of worship is a generalized thing and needs to be developed. Percy Ainsworth somewhere said to his students, "I want you to understand this so I won't define it for you." A wise remark because even good dictionaries can be dangerous.

## **REFLECTIONS ON WORSHIP [2]**

### **A growing admiration of God**

Worship is an underlying attitude that reveres God and results in behavior that's meant to please him. That underlying view of God will become richer and purer—at least, in our better moments that's what we want—and as that happens we will experience a deepening sense of joy and satisfaction in our worship of and service for God. That will happen because it's hard to see how we can love and admire someone without finding pleasure in him or her.

[I purpose to make a few brief remarks later about the times we feel disappointed in God for not coming to our aid and those times when we think God has been positively unfair. We hear devout worshipers in Scripture complain to and about God so I'll say something about the tension between felt joy and distress as it relates to our worship.]

### **Getting to know God better**

If we're to experience a deepening sense of joy and contentment in our worship God our understanding of him will have to continue to deepen. Peter has this kind of thing in mind when he speaks this blessing on his fellow-disciples: "Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and our Lord Jesus Christ..." [2 Peter 1:2-4]. Peter lays great stress on knowing the Lord and in 3:8 he makes knowing our Lord the equivalent of the believer's entire life with him. I need hardly say that "knowing" involves more than having information that enables us to answer questions about Jesus—more about that later.

### **Getting to know God better through the Scriptures**

If we admire God and know that he is worthy of our praise and devotion it is because we have learned of him; first in Scripture and then in life. I say first in Scripture because it is our coming to know God through the biblical witness from those who learned it from others who learned it [finally] from those who witnessed God's redeeming and revealing actions [see 2 Timothy 2:1-2] that shapes our lives and enables us to see life's experiences in a fresh and productive way [see this in Romans 5:1-5].



If we admire and worship God it must be the God who revealed himself both in actions and in truth down through the ages; it will be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus in whom God's self-disclosure has come to its highest point; it will be the God whose "biography" is revealed in the Hebrew—Christian scriptures.

### **Getting to know a "personal" God**

What we will admire and model our worshipful lives on will not be a list of moral maxims or a list of virtues and values—we will devote ourselves to a "person"—to a personal God. We will not try to bring our lives into line with a lovely code of conduct; no, we'll want to live in the image of the God who has revealed himself to us. We don't pray to or serve a list of fine qualities—we pray to a personal God. We won't spend all our energies and thoughtfulness on talking about "qualities" and "values"—we will reflect on the personal God and seek his likeness. When we devote ourselves to someone we admire and love [let's say a family member or dear friend] we don't isolate or abstract the virtues and qualities they clearly have—we admire and love the person. So it will be when we worship God. We will recognize in him qualities that are admirable and altogether worthy of praise, of course, but we won't abstract those qualities and worship them. Those qualities are bound up in a personal God. Qualities and virtues don't hear prayers—a personal God does! Qualities, values and virtues don't feel compassion, show faithfulness and redeem us from sin and trouble—a personal God does! Values and virtues don't show mercy and forgive us of our sins—our God does! Virtues, values and qualities don't have a purpose to bless and redeem the human family—the God and Father of the Lord Jesus does!

### **Leadership responsibility in this area**

This should have something to say about those who lead us and help us toward richer, purer worship both as a life orientation and as it is expressed in our corporate worship as congregations.

Whatever they personally believe, if leaders were to teach and preach ceaselessly on virtues and the pursuit of moral excellence they would simply by default be dragging the virtues out of the soil that sustains them and gives them their worth. Virtues and moral excellence severed from God, whatever else they are, are sub-Christian at best and sheer humanism at worst. Those who lead us to rich worshipful lives need to take their cue from how the Hebrew—Christian scriptures shape the worship of God's people.

ES Jones was right when commenting on 1 Corinthians 4:15. Paul tells the Corinthians they might have ten thousand trainers but in Christ they had only one father—Paul himself, and he became that through bringing the gospel to them. Jones said if we preach a philosophy—ideas about life, or principles or practices on which life can be lived, or religious techniques, we never become fathers of spiritual children. It's only through the gospel that we become creative and lead people to worship God and say, "Abba Father." More on that later, God enabling.

## **REFLECTIONS ON WORSHIP [3]**

### **Worship made possible by God's self-revelation**

Our capacity to pay God homage in life and in our formal "religious services" grows as we learn more of the worthiness of God and this comes to us peculiarly through the Hebrew—Christian scriptures. If that's true—and we're certain it is—then the Scriptures should be our central source for instruction and shaping in life.

We rightly speak of God's unparalleled "worthiness" but we learn what his worthiness is by what he has revealed of himself in blessing and redemption. We praise him because he's worthy of it but we know he is worthy of it only by what he has done and why he has done it. If that's true—and it clearly is—we need to go to the Scriptures and think God's thoughts after him. Awe and glad astonishment will grow as we learn of him and with that understanding our worship will be enriched.

Apart from and before his creation God was what he was and continues to be but we could not have known his glory and goodness without his creating and without his revealing himself. The truth is, we couldn't know what "glory" or "goodness" is without God teaching and showing them to us. We can only use such terms of him because he gave them to us by being what he is and expressing himself as he has done.

We cannot praise a God who has never acted in self-revelation for we wouldn't have known him nor would we have known he was worthy of praise. This means that our entire response in worship rises out of God's gracious initiative. He shows himself and gives us someone to admire and praise and because he has given us life, redemption and purpose we gladly praise him.

Now and then for discussion purposes it makes sense for us to speak of God "in and of himself". When we do that we're speaking of God prior to his creating all things, when God "was all alone". That's no bad thing; but thinking in that way about God doesn't take us very far. We know nothing about him if we insist on talking about him without the biblical witness. It's only because he has acted in relation to us that we're able to know truths about him. We know he is "good" and "gracious" and "righteous" and "holy" only since he brought us into the picture by creation and redemption with the promise of ultimate conformity to the glorious Lord Jesus [see 1 John 3:1-3].

We have come to admire and devote ourselves not to an unknown God but to one who has revealed himself and his intentions toward us in the person of the Lord Jesus.

Our worship as a life-orientation that expresses itself in how we relate to our fellow-humans and in our public and corporate worship during our gatherings is fed and shaped by the God who has acted toward us and on our behalf.

### **Israel's worship in life and in cultic practices.**

The OT describes the worship history of Israel. Sometimes it condemns it and this implies that there was a normative worship known to the prophets and those leaders who were faithful to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. There was worship that was false and an insult to God [the Golden Calf affair in Exodus 32 and the Baal worship at Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 18 illustrate this]. There was worship that was correct in form but heartless and so it was mere ceremony but what we're interested in at this point is normative worship carried out as an expression of glad-hearted allegiance to God—worship that honored God and was called for by God.

How was normative and true Jewish worship shaped? God shaped Israel's worship. He shaped it by revealing himself in creation and redemption and giving them feasts and festivals and ordinances to rehearse the truths about him; his actions and purposes.

One of the reasons God gave Israel Sabbath observance was that they might rehearse the truth that God created all things in "six days and on the seventh he rested". In keeping the Sabbath Israel was rehearsing God's creation week [they worked six days and rested the seventh] and in doing that they proclaimed that God had provided all that mankind [and Israel in particular] needed. A second reason [and there are others] God gave Israel Sabbath observance was that they might proclaim his work as a redeemer as shown by his liberating them from Egyptian bondage. See Deuteronomy 5:15 and Exodus 20:8-11. Israel kept The

Passover, which reminded them of God's gracious deliverance of Israel on that awful night that began the exodus. The Feasts of Tabernacles, of Firstfruits and other rites of worship all had stories to tell of God's mighty works of blessing and rescue.

No one saw God create the world and only the original generation saw the miracles at Egypt, the Exodus and the Wilderness wanderings. From that generation onward the worship of Israel was based on the Story and on parents re-telling it to the children [see Deuteronomy 4:9-10; 6:4-9; 11:18-20 as examples and note how the Psalms and the prophets rehearse in songs and sermons the foundational truths on which Israel's faith was based].

Israel's treatment of one another and of the aliens that lived among them was also based on the actions and attitude of God. Aliens were to be treated well because Israel knew what it was to be aliens and how God treated them well [see Exodus 22:21; 23:9]. Hebrew servants who worked for six years to pay off debts were to be set free in the seventh year and sent away loaded with needed things just as Israel left Egypt loaded down with wealth for a new start [see Exodus 12:35-36 and Deuteronomy 15:12-15]. A long series of rules and regulations in the Leviticus "holiness code" is based squarely on the fact that the one who laid down the laws said, "I am the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt." See Leviticus 19:9 for example, where the "edges" of the fields were to be left for the poor. "Edge" is not defined, nor is the "poor". The law could be observed only on the basis of the character of the God who blessed them in their need. Note this throughout the chapter: the constant repetition following each commandment, "I am the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt!" That's the spirit in which obedience was to be carried out—in the image of God.

I'm sure it was Elgar. Some years ago in the UK scholars came across a number of works by the composer Elgar; works he never lived to finish. One of the scholars who knew Elgar's work inside out and who loved his work decided he would put a finish to a number of them. He knew better than anyone else that no one could know exactly how Elgar would have finished them but he insisted on completing them. Because of his love for and profound understanding of Elgar's work and way this man would produce a finish that would honor the composer and it would be an Elgar-like ending.

This is how much of the OT and NT call to obedience is carried out. "Don't work" [on the Sabbath] understood by those who knew and loved God and his people would be worked out in a God-honoring way. "Leave the edges" would be worked out in a God-honoring way by the generous souls who knew God and what he had done for them.

All this means that along with some explicit instructions on what Israel was to do, God acted toward Israel in such a way as would shape their views of him, his character, his promises, his faithfulness so that they would know what would please him [compare Romans 12:1-2 where a transformed heart would help Christians to determine the good and perfect will of God].

In addition to his stated promises, his character and, at times, explicit instructions, God gave Israel teachers; people who were known to love God and his nation; wise people who could teach Israel to know and love God better so that they would bring him honor and further his overarching purpose toward the human family.

## **SATURDAY OR SUNDAY?**

In accordance with the Torah ancient Israel bore witness to God as creator by rehearsing the Genesis 1 record in terms of a seven day week. Six days they worked and on the 7<sup>th</sup> they rested and that day was called "the Sabbath". The Sabbath proclaimed numerous truths but this creation truth was one that was not to be forgotten. The 7<sup>th</sup> day proclaimed that God had provided all, there was no more for him to do and so he "rested" and took pleasure in his work

(see Genesis 1:31 and 2:2-3). This truth was true for all mankind and all mankind benefited from the creative work of God but only Israel, God's chosen people, bore witness to that truth before the eyes of the world.

Genesis 2:3 tells us that God declared the 7<sup>th</sup> day holy and while that's true the passage doesn't say when he made it holy and for whom he set it apart. The truth of the meaning of the 7<sup>th</sup> day I'm not disputing but we learned that from Israel; I'm simply making the point that the text doesn't say when that truth was formalized and "made holy".

There are numerous texts that tell us plainly that God laid it on Israel to hold the 7<sup>th</sup> day as different from the rest and in particular to see it as holy because on it God rested (Exodus 20:8-11) but this is part of the reason many (including me) think that the sanctifying of the 7<sup>th</sup> day was a privilege and responsibility of Israel and not the nations of the world.

Nehemiah 9 is a chapter of confession of sins, a confession that is underscored by a rehearsal of God goodness to Israel and his gifts to them. Verses 13-14 tell us, "You came down on Mount Sinai...you gave them regulations and laws...you made known to them your holy Sabbath...through your servant Moses." This would refer to passages like Exodus 20:8-11 where the 7<sup>th</sup> day was embodied as part of the covenant God made with Israel. When the Levitical leaders in Nehemiah 9:5 spoke of God "making known" the 7<sup>th</sup> day Sabbath at Sinai with the giving of the Torah, they were not saying that the creation truth was not previously known because Exodus 16:23-30 shows that they had knowledge of the sabbatical truth prior to Exodus 20; but the Levites would have known that better than we. No, God "made known" the Sabbath as part of the covenant law he established at Sinai at which point many things were regulated as part of that covenant that were not regulated earlier. The regulating of manna collection served the same purpose as the covenant Sabbath; it showed that provision was all of God.

The 7<sup>th</sup> day Sabbath was not just a command—far from it—it was a privilege (especially when we see its other purposes, as in Deuteronomy 5:12-15) and Israel was given the privilege of witnessing to the creative and redeeming work of God (as baptism and the Lord's Supper are observed by the NT elect).

The 7<sup>th</sup> day Sabbath proclaimed (more than) two things—God as creator and God as redeemer but the redemption the Sabbath proclaims is one that only Israel experienced—see again Deuteronomy 5:12-15 and elsewhere—so I'm certain it would be inappropriate for us to relate it to all nations. Israel was God's witness not only of his redeeming power but of his creative power and purpose. God sanctified it in regard to Israel and made it part of their witness.

The NT elect in Jesus Christ rejoice in all that God did before the coming of Jesus, all that Israel kept before the eyes of the human family down the centuries but they witness to something that Israel's witness pointed to—the new creation in Jesus Christ. When God created in Genesis 1 he completed a first phase of his eternal purpose and Christians believe that is true because of passages like Colossians 1:15-16. Christians insist that creation was made for Jesus as well as by and in Jesus. When God was creating the first Adam and the people that would descend from him he had in mind the last Adam and all who would come from him.

That "new creation" in Jesus is accomplished by his life, death, resurrection to immortality. Not only does Jesus redeem in that way, he confirms and brings to fulfillment God's creation purposes.

Christians rejoice in the creation but they bear witness to the new creation in Jesus by making the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the week a day of special significance. The 1<sup>st</sup> day of the week is also the 8<sup>th</sup> and since the established 7<sup>th</sup> day was named Saturday (the names of the days are of no consequence—it's the numbering and Christians learned that from Israel), the 1<sup>st</sup> day is Sunday. Cyprian rightly called Sunday the 1<sup>st</sup> day and the 8<sup>th</sup> and it was on that day that Jesus rose from

the dead. The 1<sup>st</sup> day begins the week but seen as the 8<sup>th</sup> it is also the day of a new beginning. In the Sibylline Oracles Jesus is given the number 888. The Year of Jubilee was the 50<sup>th</sup> year, following seven sevens and was the year when everything and everyone was given a new start.

The NT church began on the 50<sup>th</sup> day after Passover (seven sevens and then the 8<sup>th</sup> day) and those who are in Jesus are said to be a new creation (see 2 Corinthians 5:17). Since Christ was resurrected on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the week it became known as the Lord's day—*kuriake hemera* and while in the NT we have no express statement such as, "Remember the 1<sup>st</sup> day to keep it holy," it's no surprise that that's what the early church did.

It isn't hard to see why devout Jews would continue to hold the 7<sup>th</sup> day special—it was given to them! It told a truth that remains true! Still, the Christian believes that what the Torah was bringing Israel and the nations to is fulfilled in Jesus and the new creation which has begun in him and will be completed by him. So for them, Sunday rather than Saturday has been set aside as special.

## **WORSHIP, BUILDINGS AND PREACHERS**

It's easy to get angry with leaders and the general policy decisions they make. It's difficult for us to remember that our leaders used to be the "rank and file" that we as communities shaped into leaders. They are "us" and generally express our aims and deeper concerns—such as they are. If it happens that some individuals among us are seized by a purer and wiser view of what we are to be about as Christ's body here on earth they will outgrow our leaders. Ideally leaders are the people that outstrip the rest of us in seeing and pursuing the central concerns of Christ for the church and the world, but it doesn't always work out that way.

We sometimes come across leaders whose main concern is with keeping a building comfortable, hiring a good speaker and catering to the interests of the majority of the assembly, especially those that contribute most of the money that makes the whole church enterprise possible. (No doubt they could not and should not be able to confess that this is their conscious aim, but it may run deeper than that and, in some respects, that would be even more tragic.)

Whatever there is about the life of Nehemiah that raises our eyebrows, most of us would see him as devoted to God, practical to the core, hard working, straight as a die and possibly a bit insecure (suggested by his repeated prayer that God would remember the good he did for him). But for all his business-like way he believed that the people should financially support the temple structure and the things that went on there. Priests and singers whose chief business centered around the temple building were to be fed by the assembly so that the things that are essential to corporate worship would be given serious attention. So he established a temple tax that Jesus himself was willing to pay even though (as he said) being God's Son he was exempt. There's a lot to be learned here! Having a building need not be a luxury and giving financially to a certain group ("staff") need not be money poorly spent.

To use the comfort (heat, light, cooling, pews, staff and whatever associated with a building as a centre for corporate worship and service) and not offer to give something to offset the expense of it is a bit of a cheat.

But beyond such considerations, some among us become uneasy when we see buildings that are a lot more than functional. They begin to wonder about our priorities when they see basketball or volleyball courts, game rooms, very plush offices, gargantuan foyers and preaching/teaching staff that are paid huge fees (on the grounds that we live in a capitalist society and that they could earn huge fees if they "left the pulpit" and went to work in "Babylon"). N.T. Wright recently remarked that people who forget God build concrete jungles



and cardboard cities and those that remember God build cathedrals. He has a point, particularly when we keep in mind that cathedrals aren't games rooms or volleyball courts with a "sanctuary" attached.

I don't think the case for and against grand buildings can ever be settled to everyone's satisfaction. I think that the setting up of stones as a witness to God's grace and help has merit (as it did in the OT) so arguments in favor of a fine building that is an architectural witness to God can make some sense. To build a building to God's glory may not be the best use of his money (especially if vast human needs stare us in the face) but given the right occasion, it might well be a good thing to do. Money spent on feeding the hungry immediately strikes us as a much better use of God's money but that doesn't mean that to use some of it otherwise is a bad use of it. It might be too much to say that feeding the hungry is the only way it should be used, especially if in the course of our ministering to the hungry and ill-housed the vertical connection is lost. It wasn't that long ago when we heard the cry, "Let's talk less about mansions in heaven and more about houses here on earth." This kind of talk has real and legitimate appeal when we see rivers of money pouring into the pockets of well-paid staff and little or nothing spent to deal with raging troubles all around us.

Still, we can dismiss the idea if we wish but something happens to a heart that goes and stands before the statue of Lincoln in Washington DC or enters Westminster Abbey and reads the names there. Something reaches out and sets the soul on fire or reminds us that there is Someone greater than us. I think we dismiss the power of architecture to our detriment and because we know the truth that the church is not the building we can underestimate the importance of a centre of meeting. Corporate worship fires up mission and benevolence and our view of God shapes our worship. Our gathering together is of God and its purpose—among other things—is to energize us for outreach and witness.

If indeed an assembly decides to use God's money in the building of a fine building to God's glory I don't think we should debate the matter beyond some serious probing questions and remarks. But I'm sure that if we found that the "architecture" consisted of little more than reclining seats, well cushioned, an auditorium and class rooms well heated against the winter chill and well cooled against the summer heat that we'd wonder who we were worshipping. If there was a facility for every conceivable activity (from six-a-side-soccer to ballet) but no room strictly for prayer we might wonder about stewardship and where our hearts lie. When almost all our money goes to providing ourselves with good speakers and comfortable meeting houses surely it's time to take another look at the God of both Testaments and what he means us to do with the blessings he gives us.

This I'm sure of, the more an assembly grasps and is grasped by the Story and the central truths and drift of that Story the better they'll use their money. Their assessment of what a "gospel" preacher is, their judgment about the need and preferred nature of a meeting house, where the needs of the poor mesh with the needs of a central base from which the Story flows in a corporate way—all these issues will become clearer to them.

So what is it that our "prophetic" teachers and preachers are speaking about? If they are really worth the huge fees they generate as "gospel" teachers, what will they talk about?

## **WORSHIP: BEYOND PERSONAL RESPONSE**

What Christians do must be personal—that is, our faith must be ours. Just the same, at their best, Christian attitudes, behavior, worship and ordinances are more than personal responses to God—their existence and shape reflect God at work; they reflect his presence, heart and purposes.

Again, at their best, their treatment of each other and people in general, their confession, liturgy and ordinances, their hope and praise and scriptures are a conscious claim that they see themselves as "the body of Jesus Christ".

The Spirit of God through scripture and life shapes the church so that it profiles Jesus who is the image of the invisible God. This means that what we see is not only our human response but God's self-witness that what he purposed and is bringing to completion in Jesus Christ is underway and will be fulfilled.

This means that Christian existence, life and worship is not just about us; it's about God who has come to the human family in and as Jesus Christ.

What a sight we'd have seen from a high vantage point looking down into the wilderness where Israel was camped. There's a central large tent around which is a circle of tents and then outside those there are tents on all four sides of the central tent. There are twelve tribes in formation, three tribes at each point of the compass.

This is harmony and form in the wilderness—defying the chaos

This is a people in the wilderness—living as a community

This is personal response to God's leading—noting but defying hardship

This is a nation going through the wilderness—on their way home

This is God making his presence known in the wilderness—claiming Lordship

On their way home they tell people around them that they would like their help and company and: "If you come with us we will share with you whatever good things the Lord gives us." See Numbers 10:29-32.

So it was and so it is!

## **WORSHIP: SOME OF ITS FACES**

The instructions God gives about sacrifice, priesthood and tabernacle makes it clear that "worship", however 'natural' it feels to worshipers is something that God crafted, shaped and even initiated. In that sense, worship is God's idea and while it may feel perfectly natural, almost instinctive, to us, it's nevertheless true that God is in it at the beginning and through to the end.

But what was it all about? How many purposes did it serve? Was it for God more than people or people more than God? Was worship something people did or did worship do something to people? Was it confession or promise? Were worshipers rehearsing what God had done or promising what they would do? Was worship meant to be something done as a substitute for what they could not (did not) do or as a symbolical expression of how they lived outside the Tabernacle? Was it meant to be one of the ways people placated God, kept him from angrily destroying them for not living right or was it one of the ways people were to wheedle their way into his good graces so he would give them things and protect them?

Did the people "go to church" so God wouldn't stay mad at their ugly lives? I'm sure they did. Did they "go to church" to bribe God on to their side in some dispute or some personal agenda? The prophets said they did. Did they go to church because it was "what we do"? Prophetic texts make it clear that happened. But whatever people did with the experience, it's clear that worship was intended to be and do certain things. "When your sons asks you, 'What do these things mean?' you will tell them..." God taught Israel.

Worship was addressed exclusively to God. Behind and beyond, over and above, at the beginning and end of all the butchering, burning and bleeding of the animals, or the waving and heaving of the grain, the pouring and anointing, after all the soul-searching and motive-assessment of the worshiper there was God! The programs and procedures, the method and ministering, the verbal recitations and the bodily prostrations all found their ultimate object in

communion with Yahweh. No details, no rituals, no verbal rehearsals were to cloud this truth: we approach Him who is the center and heart of our life!

Worship was the divinely appointed rehearsal of foundational and gracious acts of God. The three great festivals, Yom Kippur, the Tabernacle service and priesthood were all to keep alive the memory of the events in which God redeemed Israel from the brickyards of Egypt in faithfulness to his promises to the fathers. These events (though not in isolation) created and defined Israel in the beginning and it was in the ongoing acknowledgment of this by each generation that Israel remained 'Israel'. Worship reminded Israel of and gave each generation an opportunity to bring itself under the meaning of those gracious, creative events.

Worship was the national/personal response of gratitude and commitment to Yahweh who was their Redeemer and Lord. When the worshiper brought his basket of firstfruits (Deuteronomy 26) he came thanking God out of a heart that was aware and grateful. To no other god was thanks given for the blessedness of the worshiper's life and the firstfruits given to God, as God's 'share,' was the confession that all was God's and that the worshiper was simply a guest at God's table. What was true of crops and herds was true of all that counted for shalom in the life of the worshiper.

Worship was the heartfelt offering of himself by the worshiper by giving what was representative of himself. In the end, what God wanted was the worshiper. In offering a sin-offering, for example, to cover his sins, the worshiper was giving to God in the sacrifice what he could not in fact give God--himself. A spotless sacrifice stood in his place as a confession that the self had not been spotlessly given to God. It was a confession that the whole person of the worshiper and nothing less than the worshiper was due to God. In offering a part of anything (of time the 7th day; of space--holy ground; of family--firstborn; of herds--firstborn, etc), the worshiper confessed that all belonged to God. What belonged to God couldn't be treated as 'profane' and must be withdrawn from 'public' or profane use (see Exodus 3:5). If that was completely carried out, nothing could be used in 'ordinary' life so God was pleased to receive what represented all.

Worship was the revelation of the character of Yahweh. The structure and laws of the Tabernacle, the separation and institutions of a special priesthood, the system of sacrifice, these all said things about the God Israel worshipped. Worship was not simply something Israel was to do, it was something they were to understand and to be taught by. Yahweh was awesome, 'other' than the worshipers, removed from them and different ('holy').

Worship was the revelation of the worshiper's place before the Almighty. All the "obstacles" placed in the way of the worshiper, the "difficulties" which he had to overcome, the forbidden places, the substitutions which had to be made for the worshiper to approach God acceptably all these were constant reminders of the unapproachableness of God, of the difference between God and the worshiper, of the profound holiness of Yahweh.

Worship was a way Yahweh assured Israel that he was present and available. For all his awful holiness he was there! For all the curtains, washings, incense, special persons and rituals, Yahweh was there in their presence and pleased to be so. Worship was a wonder of grace! At once it spoke of God's unapproachable person and of his gracious approachableness. It wasn't just awe that struck an enlightened Israelite in worship it was the grace that allowed him to approach that filled his eyes and heart with wonder.

## **WORSHIP: THE SOUL'S OXYGEN**

Harry E. Fosdick rightly reminded people, again and again, that worship was no substitute for a socially useful life. He said God was no vain being who insisted on our telling him how wonderful he is while refusing to carry out his desires in this life. Would Lincoln, he

asks, have preferred that his socially redeeming policies be carried out or hear himself be praised as 'America's most loved president'? We know the answer to that. Really great people would rather be forgotten if their grand and humanitarian schemes were remembered and acted on. Can we think less of God? Didn't the Christ himself say: "Why call me 'Lord, Lord' when you won't do what I say?" It's too easy to substitute emotional hymns and fervent prayers for doing God-imitating justice. Worship, however fervent, sincere and correct is no substitute for "doing the truth".

Nevertheless, at the heart of the Israelite encampment was the "worship house". The God who knew the difference between mere worship and social usefulness still planted the tabernacle in the centre of the nation. When they were finally and fully freed from Egypt, they built the tabernacle and established the priesthood as God commanded. The Exodus culminated with the building of a place where the nation can meet and worship God. ["Let my people go that they might worship me in the wilderness."]

The instructions for the construction of the house for worship and what is related to it are not passed over in a few verses—thirteen whole chapters in Exodus alone. A couple of verses is spent on the building and worship of the golden calf and thirteen chapters on the building of the Tabernacle—what does that tell you? Precise instructions are given on a multitude of things necessary to the worship of Yahweh and that makes it clear that if worship means little to us it only shows how much we differ from those ancients who were fresh from a great deliverance. If we dismiss it easily, we do something no enlightened Israelite would do. And when we remember that these instructions and this purpose to worship are laid down by the Lord God himself we can't, in our better moments, make light of the worship experience or obligation.

Who and how we worship not only reveals our inner working, it shapes our inner world and working as well. Worshipers bear witness to the existence of a world beyond the senses or at least, to the truth that reality is more than what the senses can grasp. To worship is to act out our conviction that there is more to the rainbow than an optical phenomenon resulting from the refraction of light by water droplets. Yes, the rainbow's that but there's also Genesis 9:11-17 and a covenant that, if anything, is more real than the rainbow that signifies it. Drawing aside and entering, in a peculiar way, into a "house of God" allows us time to be in his presence, to realize our relationship to him, to recognize his sovereignty, praise his goodness, marvel at his "personalness" and honor his majesty. During these periods we not only do something, something is done to us.

Outside the Tabernacle, of course there was life and service (which is worship), but God still called for the Tabernacle. Something happened there that was peculiarly worship even though it was of one piece with their whole lives. To insist that the whole of life is to be and can be worship is biblical and right but not to recognize that there are times when worship takes on it a peculiar complexion and expression is a serious blunder. In practice, to hold all days equally precious or holy doesn't result in every day being dignified and lifted. In practice to hold that "all of life is worship" doesn't make life more worshipful except, I suppose, for some grand souls who are unlike the rest of us. So it seems to me. I think it takes special times of worship to remind us that all of life should be offered as a living sacrifice Romans 12:1). Special days, like Thanksgiving, anniversaries and the like, bring into focus our every day blessedness which we should gratefully acknowledge. In the daily round of "getting" and "doing" and "giving" and "saying" and "seeing" and "planning" and "executing" and "learning" and "teaching" we can be seduced and lose contact with a world beyond the senses, a world that makes all that "busyness" meaningful, a commonwealth in which we're citizens together even while we're aliens here. It isn't our business to withdraw from human society (the truth of the Incarnation

forbids that) but it's important that we remember that humans (believers or unbelievers) do not live by bread alone and that's what "worship" is all about.

All healthy worship has at its heart a sense of awe and reverence. An unalterable conviction that there is Someone infinitely greater than we. Healthy worship has a central feeling of dependence; we aren't "self-made"; we owe our blessings to Someone higher and beyond ourselves. Part of worship is that kind of confession; it humbles us and deepens our humility.

Great worship leads us to acknowledge the majesty of the Lord God. However anxious God is to befriend and bless us, he's not our "Chum" or our cosmic "Pal". It won't do to lose sight of the fact that God is God and we are his creatures. Kierkegaard was right, it's only infants who tug on the dress of a queen or pull the spectacles off a king. When they mature they lose some of their ignorance and acknowledge greatness. It is not to our credit that we cannot recognize majesty. One cartoonist shows us a man reading a sign which says: PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD. The next box shows us the man in front of a mirror straightening his tie. A graphic summary of a "worshipless" human. An aspect of healthy worship reminds us that "God is in heaven, thou art on earth, let your words be few."

All healthy worship strengthens our trust in him whom we can't see. The bowed head and bent knees in the presence of the unseen anchors us more firmly in the realities beyond this life of tangible and visible things. It underscores for us the existence of timeless relationships which are beyond our handling or control. In worship we acknowledge the existence of truths and mysteries beyond our power to explain. Norman Dalby has said: "Bad religion answers the unanswerable. Good religion cherishes the mystery." He's absolutely correct! Change "religion" to "worship" (says Robert Davidson) and the same truth emerges. All worship leads us into a realm of healthy mystery. A realm about which we have some answers but more mystery. A realm about which the answers we have give us sure grounds for hope and rejoicing but a realm of glorious mystery just the same. And puny little people are made punier by reducing everything to what they can explain. Healthy worship carries our hearts and minds into that glorious world which is bigger and finer and purer than the one we construct in our heads each day and having breathed that exhilarating and mysterious air we leave our places of worship invigorated and more socially useful in the realm of the visible.

In light of the fact that Jesus took his apostles aside on the last night of his earthly ministry and engaged them in worship to, among other things, prepare them for the tough road but redemptive work ahead the rescue of a world, must give us a hint that worship and "life in the real world" (as some put it) come into contact somewhere.

When Christians gather together purposing to worship as a community of God's people everyday and personal/individual truths become corporate. Now confession becomes the confession of a nation, of communities that are local manifestations of the nation. We go together purposing to express our oneness with brothers and sisters. It's more than another occasion when each person offers up his/her personal worship in the presence of others who are offering up their personal and individual worship. No, this is the worship of "the people" which expresses something that a lone individual can't express!