



Methodist Church
Discipleship & Ministries Learning Network
Worship Leader & Local Preacher Training Pathway

Reading excerpt: Susan White *Groundwork of Christian Worship* (Epworth: 1997) p2-16

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Course of Study: 'Worship: Leading & Preaching' Module 1
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Worship as an Aspect of Christian Theology

The study of Christian worship is partly a study of how Christians worship. But before we can address questions of how we worship, a more basic question needs to be asked: 'Where does worship fit in the larger pattern of Christian life and thought?' Or, to put it in another way, 'What is our theology of worship?' Christians through the centuries have answered this question in different ways, and have used different models, different theological approaches, to help them understand what happens in worship. Here we will discuss six basic theological models which Christians, past and present, have used to explain what Christian worship is.

Worship as service to God

Many Christian communities have understood public worship as a service to God, a duty which God's human children perform in grateful obedience to the One who is the source of their life and their salvation. Indeed, the English word 'worship' itself (from the Middle English 'weorth-scipe') carries with it this sense of ascribing to God the honour and worth which is due by right. And when we say that we are attending a worship 'service', this same idea is being expressed; that we are undertaking common worship as a way of serving Almighty God.

In many of our traditions, we pray that God will accept our worship as a 'sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving', and this language of sacrifice is yet another way of talking about worship as a service to God. The Torah bears witness to the belief that God had established a system of sacrifices (the offering up of animals, birds, and fruits of the harvest) which would be an effective sign of Israel's devotion and obedience, and a way of maintaining the covenant relationship between God the Provider and humanity. And today when we speak of our ordinary worship as a 'sacrifice', we are suggesting that it functions in a similar way, as a sign that we offer to God all that we have and all that we are: heart and mind and possessions, body, and soul. In our hymns and our prayers, in our preaching and in our creeds and affirmations, we discharge the debt we owe to God for all the blessings bestowed upon us.

But this theology of worship raises a number of questions. Why does God need anything from the creatures made in God's own image? Is it not the height of presumption to suggest that we frail human beings have anything at all to offer God? This was precisely the difficulty that the great sixteenth-century reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546) had with worship as he knew it in the late-Middle Ages: that by seeing worship as duty and service Christians had gradually come to interpret their common prayer as a human 'work' which appeased God and earned the worshipper merit.¹ Do we not come to God in worship with empty hands, and is not any sort of language of 'offering' or 'sacrifice' a denial of the absolute sovereignty and self-sufficiency of God?

John and Charles Wesley recognized this difficulty, and many of the hymns they wrote and translated for the Methodist people address it directly. One such hymn asks the question:

What shall we offer our good Lord,
 Poor nothings, for his boundless grace?
 Fain would we his great name record
 And worthily set for the his praise.

But for the Wesleys, and for many of their spiritual descendants, the answer was straightforward. We have nothing to offer to God except that which God has given us first: our lives, our talents, our ability to know and to praise God.

Great object of our growing love,
 To whom our more than all we owe,
 Open the fountain from above,
 And let it our full souls o'erflow.²

And it is this overflowing of God's blessing that allows us to return to God in worship that which God has already given to us.

Worship as the mirror of heaven

For many Christians, worship that takes place in church is an attempt to duplicate, to recapitulate, the worship of God that takes place eternally in heaven. Although this theology of worship is particularly associated with the Orthodox and Eastern Rite traditions,³ one can see strains of it in many other

groups as well, and especially among Christians suffering under oppression. This model of Christian worship rests on the idea that ceaseless praise of God is the ultimate human destiny, the activity that human beings were created for, and that in giving ourselves over to worship here on earth, we are preparing ourselves for our eternal vocation.

When we enter into Christian worship, then, we enter into a different dimension of time and space, a cosmic dimension, where we can gradually attune ourselves with the ceaseless praises of the heavenly hosts. In the chants, the prayers, the hymns, and in the glory of the physical surroundings, we are taken out of ordinary space and ordinary time (this is why, for example, no clocks are allowed in Orthodox churches). We step into a 'heavenly geography'. But worship in this kind of model is not a way of avoiding the harsh realities of the world as it is; it is rather a way of participating in God's redemption of the world, by revealing the true meaning of time and space in God's eternal purposes. If we enter into worship fully, desiring only to praise God with all our heart and mind and strength, then we will understand that time and space are not for us to use, selfishly and wantonly, but for God alone to use for the good of the world. This is what is meant when we say that worship has an 'eschatological' dimension, because it points forward to the time when 'God will be all in all'.

You can see this idea at work in the hymn called the Sanctus, which most Christians say or sing as a part of their celebrations of the Lord's Supper. In its most usual version it says:

And so, with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify your holy name, ever more praising you and singing:

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory, Hosanna in the highest.

This hymn takes as its inspiration the vision of the final consummation of all things in the book of Revelation. For those who hold this view of public prayer, worship gives us a foretaste of the great banquet in heaven at which all creation will join in the praises of its Maker and Redeemer. Keeping the Christian Year is another way of ensuring that our lives as worshippers on

earth are in tune with heaven. A good example of this theology at work is found in the Christmas hymn 'Songs of Praise the Angels Sang', which first speaks of the rejoicing in heaven that occasioned the birth of Jesus, and then goes on to say:

Saints below, with heart and voice,
 Still in songs of praise rejoice,
 Learning here by faith and love,
 Songs of praise to sing above.⁴

Because our worship on earth is seen as mirroring the worship of heaven, we often find that the various parts of the service are interpreted symbolically, or mystically in this theology of worship. (This is especially true in the Orthodox traditions of Christian worship.) The altar represents, for example, the throne of Almighty God, the choir is the angelic chorus of seraphim and cherubim, the ceiling of the church building is the vault of heaven, the candles represent the light of the Risen Christ, and so forth. These images are not simply designed to 'remind' us of deeper realities, but are true 'epiphanies', or revelations of God. They draw us into a worshipful relationship with the things that they symbolize.

Many critics of this theology of worship argue that since we have no idea at all what the worship of heaven entails, to try to dramatize it on earth is a futile exercise at best; at worst it is audacious and prideful. It may indeed be the case that there are some hints in the book of Revelation about the worship of heaven, but that is a vision of the end times, and not a blueprint for our Christian worship in the present. Critics also say that to enter into an otherworldly or mystical realm in worship is simply a way of anaesthetizing the Christian conscience, and that such essential Christian undertakings as mission, evangelism, and social action are rooted in the deep recognition of world as it is, not in a dream of heaven as it might be.

But there is a real sense in this theology of worship that in fixing our eyes on God's future, we may obtain a vision which can move us toward saintliness. If worship can provide us with a vision of the world as God intends it to be, it can sustain and uphold us in the human struggle, as well as in the work for justice and peace on the earth. In the Black South African churches, for example, worship which reminded Christian people that God

has an alternative vision for the earth sustained those suffering under the weight of the apartheid system. This theology of worship reminds us that our true home is the 'new heaven and the new earth' that God will establish, and that to worship rightly is to catch a glimpse of our true identity as citizens of heaven.

Worship as affirmation

If the previous theology of worship was focussed on the end times, the theology of worship we will look at now is fixed on the interim, on the meantime. Many Christians are convinced that the primary purpose of Christian worship is to affirm, inspire, and support believers in the Christian vocation. To be a true disciple of Jesus Christ is difficult, if undertaken seriously and with dedication. It sets Christians against 'the world, the flesh and the devil' and puts them in situations of sustained risk. Like the Jesus they follow, they may be misunderstood, insulted, betrayed, or even murdered for their faith in God. But in Christian worship, we touch again and again the ground of our belief, and in so doing we are enabled to renew the struggle against the forces of darkness which prevail around us. Worship, in this view, is an oasis of peace and refreshment.

The essential function of Christian worship, then, is to reinforce the Christian ethic, to convince beleaguered Christians that God is fighting with them, and to provide a forum for sharing testimonies of the victories already won for God. In this way, it can inspire us to new heights of service and witness. Very often the psalms are a significant part of the worship that rests on this theology, since in many of the psalms the writer speaks of being 'assaulted on all sides' by enemies, and begs to be vindicated by God in the presence of the wicked. A good example is Psalm 56, which begins:

Be gracious to me, O God, for people trample on me;
all day long foes oppress me; my enemies trample on
me all day long, for many fight against me.

O Most High, when I am afraid, I put my trust in you.
In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust;
I am not afraid; what can flesh do to me?

Worship in this model is primarily intended for the 'insiders', for those committed Christians who feel keenly the assaults of the world as they attempt to live out the various forms of Christian discipleship. Because they are 'insiders', worshippers are familiar with the images and the stories of hope from the scriptures and from the Christian tradition, these images and stories can be employed in the various media of Christian worship: preaching, prayer, and song. In this way, our sense of the dependability of God is deepened, and we know that we can call upon God to answer us in time of need or trouble. Much of the church music which comes out of situations of oppression and injustice reflects this theme. Look, for example, at the Black spiritual, which was written during the period of slavery in the United States:

Swing low, Sweet Chariot,
Comin' for to carry me home.

I looked to heaven and what did I see,
Comin' for to carry me home,
A band of angels comin' after me,
Comin' for to carry me home.

Critics of this view of Christian worship say that while affirmation is a necessary ingredient in Christian worship, it runs the risk of glorifying the *status quo*. Human beings, even faithful Christian believers, have many things about them that need challenging and setting right. Christian worship that is constantly giving the message that God will step in to make life go smoothly runs the serious risk of anaesthetizing the Christian conscience. If we are certain that God is always going to intervene, then our own work for justice and peace on earth will surely atrophy. They also argue that this view tends to turn worship into a spiritual ghetto, as a haven for the broken and bruised, a 'life-boat without anyone strong enough to row'.

But those who speak of worship as primarily an experience of affirmation say that it is only by receiving from God, only by seeing our worship as a time for humble, patient and expectant waiting for God's healing and life-giving power, can we act in the world with any sense of conviction and strength. It is through an

acknowledgment of our radical dependence that we are lifted up and empowered.

Worship as communion

Many other Christians believe that in their common worship they are making their relationship with God and with the Christian community a visible, audible, and tangible reality. In this theology, worship is a way of forming and sustaining essential relationships (both divine and human), and for this reason the word 'communion' is often used to describe what happens in Christian worship. The English word 'communion' translates the Greek word *koinonia*, which in the New Testament means 'fellowship', or 'sharing', or 'participation'. It is used in descriptions of worship in the earliest Christian communities, which met to devote themselves to 'the apostles' teaching and fellowship (*koinonia*), to the breaking of bread and to the prayers' (Acts 2.42).⁵ Like those who work from the model of worship as service, those who see worship as communion would affirm that part of their relationship with God indeed involves our responsive self-offering to the God who created and sustains us. They are aware, however, that their experience of God is also one of receiving the gifts of God, and that that experience needs visible and tangible expression as well. But in this theology of worship our common prayer is not only a 'vertical' movement between Christian believers and God; it is also a 'horizontal' movement between and among the members of the Christian community. Both fellowship with God and fellowship with other Christians are necessary components of Christian worship.

Many would use the analogy of the incarnation to describe and explicate their experience of worship. In the incarnation the fullness of human responsiveness to God and the fullness of God's self-revelation met in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and became 'embodied'. In a similar way, our human response and God's self-giving to us become 'embodied' in Christian worship, they take shape and form. So, in this model, speaking to God is balanced with listening to God; offering to God is balanced with receiving from God, and giving and receiving from our fellow Christians is also a significant feature. This model implies that

worship is not simply something we do with our brains, but with our whole selves. We were created by God with bodies and desires, as well as minds, and all of these must come into play when God and human beings enter freely into loving communion with one another in worship.

Any love relationship seeks self-expression, and the love relationship between God and human beings is no different. In worship, according to this way of thinking:

I come with joy to meet my Lord,
 Forgiven, loved, and free!
 In awe and wonder to recall,
 His life laid down for me.

I come with Christians far and near,
 To find, as all are fed,
 The new community of love
 In Christ's communion bread.⁶

In this view, all material things are potential revelations of God's love to those who see with the eyes of faith, and, conversely, faithful people can use all material things to express their love and gratitude to God. This understanding of the inherent holiness of the created order is carried over into Christian worship, and worship in this model is usually rich in visual, audible, tangible, and even olfactory elements. The fellowship of Christian believers is equally a visible sign of God's love, and so the formation and maintenance of communities of faith is also highlighted.

Critics of this theology of worship say that although we are indeed called into communion with God, this communion is wholly dependent upon God's initiative, and they argue that there is a danger here of suggesting an equality between the partners in the divine-human relationship. Others would wish to be more reticent about the degree to which the transitory material creation can communicate eternal truths. Ideas and ideals, they say, are the highest form of Christian revelation, and the things of this world are susceptible to misuse and misinterpretation. There is also the danger here of idolatry, of the material things themselves becoming the object of worship instead of the God who has created them.

But there is in this model the overwhelming sense that we were created for relationship with God, and to express that relationship in every way possible is both God's deepest desire and our highest human calling. God does not want our servile obedience, but wants us to use our God-given freedom to become full partners in the creation and re-creation of the world. In worship that creative partnership is honoured, strengthened, and given true and joyful expression.

Worship as proclamation

In many strands of Christian thought, the true Christian vocation is to announce the Good News of God in Christ, to declare the gospel of the workings of God in and for the world. Those who think of worship primarily as proclamation wish to highlight the idea that worship is the principal place where Christians gather together to make their public affirmation and witness. In worship, like-minded Christians meet together to say who and what they are and, in so doing, to reinforce their own Christian identity. Indeed, the proclamation of Christ, crucified and risen (the Christian *kerygma*) is the power that creates the worshipping community itself. As the First Letter of Peter says: 'You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light' (I Peter 2.9).

Christians 'declare the mighty acts of God' in different ways in their worship: in the use of creeds and affirmations of faith, acclamations, and in preaching and testimony. In addition, of course, many of our best-loved hymns are used to make the event of worship a kerygmatic event:

A safe stronghold our God is still,
 A trusty shield and weapon;
 He'll help us clear from all the ill
 That hath us now o'ertaken.
 The ancient prince of hell
 Hath risen with purpose fell;
 Strong mail of craft and power
 He weareth in this hour;
 On earth is not his fellow.

With force of arms we nothing can,
 Full soon were we down-ridden;
 But for us fights the proper Man,
 Whom God himself hath bidden.

Ask ye: Who is this same?

Christ Jesus is his name.

The Lord Sabaoth's Son;

He, and no other one,

Shall conquer in the battle.⁷

This hymn does one thing and does it well. It tells the story of the victory of Christ over sin and death, and it tells that story with conviction. This is the proper work of the Christian people, to express fully and firmly their Christian faith so that the world might believe. Indeed, the word 'liturgy', which is a common synonym for public worship, comes from this idea of worship as a 'public work'. It originates in two Greek words, *laós*, meaning people, and *ergon* meaning work, and in the New Testament *leitourgia* is used to describe the general ministry of all Christians. Paul, for example, tells the church at Corinth (II Cor. 9.11-12): 'You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry (*leitourgias*) not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.' This implies that the 'liturgy' is a ministry of the whole congregation, and further that it is a ministry not only of thanksgiving and praise, but of service to the community as well. Unlike the previous model, Christian worship is not something which is done for the benefit of the worshippers themselves, but done by the worshippers for the sake of others.

There are those who would say, however, that Christians need more from their worship than an opportunity for proclamation, even when that proclamation is conjoined with service. Christians need comfort in times of trouble and reassurance in times of anxiety. They need to listen to God as well as to speak of God. They need a place to express their doubts and fears as well as their confidence and trust, and a place to join with other Christians to ask God for answers to their prayers. Other critics say that if our worship is seen primarily as proclamation we are simply 'preaching to the converted'. Those in need of hearing

the healing and reconciling word of God proclaimed are not in our churches, but in our back-streets and office buildings and schools, and it is there that proclamation belongs.

But those who hold to the proclamation model of worship argue that the power of remembering what God has done and retelling it in the gathered community goes beyond mere self-congratulation. It is a ritual of remembering without which the community of faith is threatened with extinction: in this model 'to forget is to die'. To support this idea, they look back to the worship of the Jewish synagogue, which became in times of exile and distress the primary place for the remembering and recitation of God's mighty acts in history. Day after day the people gathered to recite the Benedictions of God:

Blessed is the Lord our God, Ruler of the universe,
 who has given us a Torah of truth,
 implanting within us eternal life.
 Blessed is the Lord, the Giver of Torah.⁸

And so they went on: 'Blessed is God for this', and 'Blessed is God for that', until the story of God's deeds is told, and so continues to be told to the present day. In this way the community has survived to tell the story to future generations. There is a very real conviction undergirding this theology of worship that the power of remembering what God has done and proclaiming it publicly in Christian worship is the only thing that will keep Christianity alive into the twenty-first century.

Worship as the arena of transcendence

Many Christians would say that all of the previous models suffer from a common defect: they make Christian worship seem much too safe and predictable. To enter the presence of the Living God in worship, they argue, is a highly dangerous enterprise, in which the awesome holiness, majesty, and power of God may at any time break into our experience and transform us. 'Come no closer,' God says to Moses (Ex. 3.5), 'Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground', and many Christians are convinced that same power with which God created the world may at any moment be unleashed again. And just as Moses 'hid his face, for he was

afraid to look at God' (v. 6), so too should we come into the presence of God with a sense of reverence, awe, and expectation.

Certainly one key word in this view is 'transcendence', with worship seen as the arena within which our encounter with the transcendent God takes place. This emphasis on divine transcendence leads to an equal emphasis on the activity of the Holy Spirit, who acts as the mediator between the 'wholly-other-ness' of God and the 'this-world-ness' of humanity. In one sense, of course, the most appropriate response to the encounter with the Living God is silence:

Earth from afar has heard thy fame,
And babes have learned to lisp thy name;
But O the glories of thy mind
Leave all our soaring thoughts behind.

God is in heaven, we dwell below;
Be short our tunes, our words be few;
A sacred reverence checks our songs,
And praise sits silent on our tongues.

The typical Quaker Meeting is an example of this sort of silent waiting upon God's transforming revelation. It operates on the conviction that any set forms of prayer or ritual action will distract the worshipper from a total attentiveness to the workings of God, and obstruct the human-divine encounter. And so members of the Society of Friends (Quakers) gather every Lord's Day to keep a holy silence, as they wait expectantly for the Spirit to move within the community. For the Quakers, the community's principal responsibility in worship is to set up the conditions which will facilitate this encounter between God and humanity.

For other Christians who think of worship as the arena for encounter with God, waiting in silence is not the only way of encouraging our receptivity. Prayer, singing, and preaching can all be ways of opening the heart and mind of the believer to the presence of God. In many of the very earliest services of worship for which we have evidence (from the second and third centuries), calling upon the Holy Spirit to come into the gathering was an important component, and this 'invocation' of

the Spirit is still a significant feature of our worship. At the ordination of ministers, we still sing a hymn which was first sung in the ninth century:

Come Holy Ghost, our souls inspire,
 And lighten with celestial fire;
 Thou the anointing Spirit art,
 Who dost thy sevenfold gifts impart.¹⁰

There is also a concentration here on the signs by which we can be assured that our encounter with God has taken place: the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Various communities of faith emphasize different gifts of the Spirit: some will value speaking in tongues (Acts 10.45–46),¹¹ and the interpretation of tongues (I Cor. 14.13); others look for the gifts of healing and prophesy, for uncontrollable physical movements such as falling, shouting, laughing and dancing, and even on occasion the power to handle deadly serpents and to drink poisons (Mark 16.18) without coming to harm. But in every case, these gifts of the Spirit are testimonies to a face-to-face encounter with the Living God.

The building of the Christian community is also emphasized in this model. ‘Since you are eager for spiritual gifts,’ says the apostle Paul to the church at Corinth, ‘strive to excel in them for building up the church’ (I Cor. 14.12). This can be the most intensely democratic way of looking at worship, since all members of the Christian community have an equal opportunity to encounter God in worship, and have access to the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Critics of this theology of worship would argue that its strengths are also its weaknesses: that spontaneity can result in chaos, radical democracy can lead to lack of discipline, and independence can promote an unhealthy individualism. They would ask the same question of a Christian community working from this theology of worship that Paul asked of the church at Corinth: ‘... If you say a blessing with the spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say the “Amen” to your thanksgiving, since the outsider does not know what you are saying?’ (I Cor. 14.16). Is there not a danger here of isolation from the needs and demands of the world as people bask in their own spiritual experiences? Critics also warn that in opening worship to the spontaneous we may lose touch with the rich

treasury of prayers, hymns, creeds and acclamations which have arisen during the first twenty centuries of Christian history, and miss the important lessons which Christians throughout the ages have to teach us about the liturgical 'diet' which is most healthy for the well-nourished Christian. They also say that the Good News of Jesus Christ is that 'the Kingdom of God has come near to you' (Luke 10.9), and that to understand worship as an experience of intimacy with God the Father is more in line with the New Testament witness than to view it as the experience of a distant and fearsome deity.

But the power of this theology of worship is that it refuses to 'domesticate' the holiness of God, and affirms the necessity of an experience of that holiness for the Christian life. The religious (or 'mystical') experience is not simply a 'high' for the spiritual elite, but should be the quest of all Christians who are seeking to be 'perfect . . . as your Heavenly Father is perfect' (Matt. 5.48). To see Christian worship as the potential meeting-place between human beings and the God who is 'wholly other', between creature and Creator, is one way keeping before us the necessity of reaching toward the transforming power which is the *mysterium tremendum* (overwhelming mystery) of God. And quite often that transforming power leads to heroic Christian acts directed at overturning the 'principalities and powers' which defy the will of God. The unrelenting quest for world peace undertaken by the Society of Friends, for example, derives its essential energy from a form of worship in which the Spirit (what Quaker theologian Robert Barclay called 'the pure breathings of God which is Inner Light') was available to all.

These, then, are six principal ways in which Christians have understood what it is they are doing when they gather for worship. Of course, these models are not mutually exclusive. Each affirms something basic and necessary to our understanding of Christian common prayer. Worship is at the same time service and affirmation and proclamation, it is a place to encounter transcendence and it is a place to renew and celebrate our communion with God. If we collapse the tension between and among these images, we become narrow and myopic in our vision of what Christian worship can be. But the various Christian worship traditions can often be identified by their

emphasis on one particular theological approach to worship over the others. As individual Christians we also may find that one or the other of these approaches to Christian worship is a more natural part of our theological approach. But all of them declare the necessity of seeing worship as a part of the shared world which God graciously sets up with us, and of taking worship seriously as an essential part of the Christian life and calling.

It is also important to remember that for many people worship is the primary context for the development of their own theology. The theology implicit in the hymns and prayers, the theology that is proclaimed and preached gives worshippers 'food for thought' as they form their Christian world-view. This is why the decisions made by worship leaders about the details of services are so crucial, since these details are the carriers of contemporary 'orthodoxy'. Unfortunately, orthodoxy is often understood as a word that refers to thinking the right things about the Christian faith. However, 'orthodoxy' came originally from the Greek words *orthos* (meaning 'correct' or 'true') and *doxa* (meaning 'praise' or 'prayer'). And so orthodoxy stressed not so much the importance of thinking aright, but of praying aright.

Therefore it is always important for participants in Christian worship to ask themselves, 'What is this service really saying? What is it saying about God, about redemption, about the Christian life, sin, death, and so forth?' and 'What am I saying when I pray these prayers and sing these hymns and make these affirmations?' There is an old Latin saying from the fifth century which is often abbreviated '*Lex orandi, lex credendi*': 'The law of believing stands on the law of praying.' In other words what we pray and what we believe are mutually interdependent, and praying is not only a way of expressing, but also a way of forming our Christian beliefs.

The Biblical Foundations of the Study of Worship

What does it mean to say that we ground our study of Christian worship on the Bible? To the extent that the material in the Old and New Testaments is the foundation of all Christian living and believing, we may mean only that Bible is therefore necessarily the foundation of the study of worship as well. It may mean that