

COS  
Worship Commission

# Biblical Theology of Worship & Its Implications for Worship in the NT

“Declaring God’s Glory...  
Meeting the Living Jesus Christ...  
Honoring God First...”

## Introduction:

*"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come."  
"You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you  
created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."*

*"Then I saw a Lamb... "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals,  
because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe  
and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to  
serve our God, and they will reign on the earth."*

*"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom  
and strength and honor and glory and praise!"*

*"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory  
and power, for ever and ever!" The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell  
down and worshiped." Revelation 4-5*

Until we abide in, bask in, and move toward this kind of worshipful, awe  
inspiring, and all consuming glorious vision of God, we will not understand what our  
lives are fueled by and what they are for. This vision of God reveals that the goal of our  
lives is the glorification of God and the enjoyment of him forever. Only in worship will  
God as well as humanity be satisfied in the most comprehensive sense of the word.  
Worship therefore is the purpose for which we were created. Worship is the only human  
activity that can properly be understood as timeless. Worship is the key aspect of life.  
John Piper begins his book about missions, *Let the Nations be Glad*, by rightly  
acknowledging that missions (the primary subject of his book!) is not ultimate, but rather  
worship is ultimate. He states,

*"Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists  
because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not  
man. When this age is over, and millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the  
throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides  
forever."<sup>1</sup>*

Could we not also, along with Piper, agree that every activity of humanity,  
missions and including every aspect of the ministry of COS, ought to be seen as  
subservient to and existing for the worship of God? If we at COS are to set our hearts to  
minister in any way, ought not the goal and guiding principle be the glorification of God?  
If worship is the key aspect of our lives and if we at COS worship the Lord improperly  
we have therefore gone about our entire purpose as a church incorrectly! Our purpose to  
Declare God's Glory, Prepare God's People, and Share God's Love will never be rightly  
accomplished until we fully understand what worship is and how we at COS are called to  
worship God.

***We at COS must therefore gain a proper biblical vision and understanding of  
the worship of God and participate in it as a church.***

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<sup>1</sup> Piper, John, *Let the Nations be Glad*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI: 1993. Pg.

## **Section 1: Biblical Theology of Worship in the Old and New Testaments**

### **Overview of Worship in Scripture: All of Creation is the Theater of God's Glory...**

The Bible portrays the account of God's glory through the moving drama of Creation, the Fall / Rebellion of humanity, and God's Redemption of his creation by forming a New Creation in Jesus. Scripture reveals to us the account of God's relationship with humanity. It describes a relationship that was not simply lost and restored, but a relationship recreated in such a way that it moves quantum leaps beyond the original intimacy of Creator and his creatures and expands and enriches it in such a way that was unimaginable to us. We have moved from stewards of the earth to heirs of God's house: royal members of his family, Rom 8, 1 Jn. 3, 1 Pt. 2:9, and Children of God. We could never have imagined something so great, and so the origin and purpose of this story must only be found in the imagination and plan of God himself, Eph. 1:4-6. The entire story then focuses our attention on God and his glory, causing us to praise him in love because of his wonderful character and actions. Yet, Scripture also includes the balance of our joyful participation and part within that story. Indeed our redemption gives God glory while it brings us joyful and abundant life! Our lives of worship are in fact the display of the wisdom of God, 1 Cor. 1:21 and Eph. 3:10, and in conjunction with this Calvin rightly notes over and over that we behold and have become participants in the "Theater of God's Glory."<sup>2</sup>

### **1. Guiding Principles of Worship for the Old Testament:**

#### **1.1 The person and work of God in Jesus Christ is the lens through which we understand all of worship, especially that of the OT.**

The story of Creation, Fall, and Redemption begins in the Old Testament, but finds its ultimate context and completion in the New Testament. The Old Testament, with its account of Creation, Fall, and the seeds faith toward God's Redemption, begins the story of the community of God's people Israel. Israel foreshadowed and initiated the movement toward the worshiping of God in purity that came about in fullness with the Redemption through Jesus. This Redemption for worship was ultimately realized through Jesus Christ and the New Creation/ New People he made possible through the Covenant of his blood. "God's redemptive purposes take his people to the perfect worship of the new heaven and the new earth (Rev. 21:22) Thus the theology of the Old Testament must be placed in the largest canonical context... From... the end of the period of the Old Testament, the developing and growing self-disclosure of God must be understood in light of its ultimate focus, which is the decisive work of redemption by Jesus Christ as revealed in the New Testament. Christian worship, we maintain, is necessarily shaped by this framework."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the lens by which we will understand the worship of the OT is the person and work of Jesus. Jesus said in Luke 24:44-45 that the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms were fulfilled in him. Therefore, as we

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<sup>2</sup> Calvin, John, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA: 1960. § 2.6.1. etc.

<sup>3</sup> David Peterson, "Worship in the New Testament" in Carson, D.A., *Worship: Adoration and Action*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI: 1993. Pg. 48-49.

begin our exploration on worship in the Old Testament, we will bear in mind that it is an account that is moving toward a fulfillment.

## **1.2 God has seen fit to work through developing historical and cultural elements to communicate himself and to render acceptable praise to his Name.<sup>4</sup>**

History and culture are two unavoidable contexts within which God has met his people and they have worshiped him. Within the Old Testament we essentially find 5 different historical/cultural settings: 1. Creation 2. Pre-Exodus/Law 3. Exodus / Law 4. Temple 5. Exile/Return. Within the movement of history and culture of these periods we see a development of theology of worship and developmental adaptations along changing historical / cultural contexts. Rather than delve deeply into the nuances and developments of worship within each of these periods, we simply acknowledge them and recognize their presence and approval in the Canon.

## **1.3 A God-revealed Theological Framework provides direction for Worship, outlines it's unique features, and guards against syncretism or hyper-spiritualizing.**

*-On the one hand we do not adapt the cultural forms without giving them new theological meanings that are different from their original meanings within pagan contexts, i.e. syncretism, and on the other we do not set up currently used or past elements of worship as though they were never cultural and as somehow “dropped from heaven,” timelessly spiritual, and a-cultural, i.e. hyper-spiritualization.*

We cannot therefore worship God in anyway that we see fit, but in the way he directs our worship within each historical/cultural context. What that will come to mean in the NT will be remarkably free and culturally flexible, but within the scope of the OT the elements of worship were specifically laid out for the people of God. However, it would be foolish to think of the elements of OT worship as not arising out of the culture and historical situation of the ancient Israelites. Any in depth study of ancient cultures will show that there are extensive parallels between the elements, structure, and even the architecture of the Israelite's religious practices and those of other nations and religions. What is special about the worship of the Israelites is the theological framework within which the elements and forms of their worship operated.<sup>5</sup> The Israelites had three unique theological ideas revealed to them that distinguished their theology from those of pagan nations: 1. God was one. 2. God was personal, and made a historical connection with his people through Covenant(s). 3. No idols or images of God were permitted.<sup>6</sup> From *that* theological structure, God communicated to the Israelites how he was to be worshiped.

## **2. Worship in the Old Testament**

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<sup>4</sup> Carson, pg. 49. Yoshiaki Hattori sums up this thought well, “Almost inevitably, as ‘the covenant of redemption’ unfolds, the people of God responded in patterns of worship that changed over time. At any given point there are at least two axes to observe: the redemptive-historical axis (and therefore what God *required* of his people at this point), and the historical-cultural context (and therefore what forms of corporate worship were judged admissible, appropriate, not improperly syncretistic and so forth.”

<sup>5</sup> Peterson, David. *Engaging with God*, W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. Grand Rapids, MI: 1992. Pg. 26-27.

<sup>6</sup> Carson, pg. 49-50.

## **2.1 God is Creator and we are his creation: this fact mandates his creatures to worship him in submission and service of our Creator.**

*-We are Created as Worshipers and the object of our worship is God alone.*

The OT begins with the account of Creation, establishing through story our relationship with God. God's role is to be Creator-God and our role is to worship him in submission and service as such. This means that we were created to worship God as God. It is of vital importance to understand that it is God's initiative as Creator that determines his relationship with us: we as creatures do not determine the relationship but submit to it. By virtue of God being Creator, only He is worthy to be worshipped, and by virtue of us being his creatures, we ought to *submit to him* and *serve him* in worship. These two themes of *submission* and *service* drive the worship of the people of God in the developments of the OT and the NT. God as the creator is a dominant theme in the OT that reaches a climax of worship of the people of God in the NT through the New Creation in Jesus. This simple fact of God-as-Creator-and-we-as-creatures is the chief feature of why we worship God and nothing/no one else.

Within the account of Creation in Gen. 1-3, we are given precious few details of the nature of Adam and Eve's relationship with God before the fall and what their worship of him was like. However, what we do know is that they did not have the interference of sin and spoke with him freely as their Creator. We also know that their chief responsibility was to care for and rule over the earth as God's servants. Thus we see that Adam and Eve *submitted* to God and that they *served* God in purity.

## **2.2 The Fall and Worship in the Old Testament**

*-The Fall introduced sin into our relationship with God and the aspect of our sin did three things:*

- 1. Sin broke our relationship with God and made strife between us.**
- 2. Sin separated us from the holiness of God, thus changing our free worship of God and our ability to approach God in worship.**
- 3. Sin caused us to want to worship incorrectly, thus we worshipped "idols" and practiced "idolatry."**

### **2.2.1 Sin broke our relationship with God.**

After the time of the fall our relationship with God was significantly changed. Because of our sinfulness, our open relationship with God was broken. In order to reconnect with God, a sacrifice or offering was needed, thus in Gen. 4:3-4 we see Abel performing the first recorded formal act of worship to God that was *acceptable* to him in our sinfulness. God provided through a sacrifice direction and assistance in order to properly reconnect with him. Cain on the other hand did not follow the direction of God,

and his worship was *not acceptable*. Because of sin we cannot live lives pleasing to God, nor can our thoughts devise ways of formal worship that approach his holiness. Therefore, throughout the remainder of the OT we find sacrifice, *as directed by God*, as a vital element of worship for it to be *acceptable* to God.

### 2.2.2 Sin separated us from God's holiness.

Another significant change that occurred with the fall is that God was separated from us. A popular OT theme to communicate this truth was the heavenly dwelling of God, i.e. his holiness, and the earthy dwelling of humans. We no longer could draw near to God, because we were separated from him by an insurmountable gap. Places of sacrifice became increasingly important throughout the OT because it was there that God came down out of heaven and met with people.

### 2.2.3 Sin caused us to worship incorrectly.

The last significant change that occurred with the fall is the introduction of idolatry. Only God is worthy of our worship because he created us, and we were created to worship him. *The most heinous aspect of our sinfulness is that we are bent in our hearts, minds, and actions toward inappropriate forms, desires, and objects of worship.*

#### 2.2.3.a. We worship "idols," i.e. things that are not God.

Because of our sinfulness, we no longer worship God, as we were made to, but we have become bent to worship things that are by their created nature *not God*, things like ourselves, physical objects, ideologies, etc. Our *desires* have been changed by sin as well and we follow them rather than God, *submitting* and *servicing* our desires rather than desiring God the Creator.

#### 2.2.3.b. We worship our way not God's way, i.e. a form of idolatry.

The story of Abel and Cain, as we have seen, illustrates that sin causes us to worship God incorrectly by adopting elements in worship that are unacceptable to God. This issue becomes a major theme in the OT as the people of God do not worship him correctly and are punished severely for it. Because we are sinful we will invent ways of worship, including ways to try and worship God, that are not in line with the way God has revealed as proper worship. The only way for us to understand what ways are acceptable vs. unacceptable is to understand the theology given by God, which will drive our elements in worship within each historical and cultural context. This feature is one of the most thorny issues of worship and requires tremendous mediation on God's word to listen to him and understand God in the way he has communicated himself. Interestingly this also requires and a profound understanding of the cultural and historical contexts of the worshipers, not only those within the Bible but also as we will see within our own contemporary context.

## 2.3 Redemption and Worship in the Old Testament

### **2.3.1 Redemption is the process by which God restores the ability of people to worship him in *service and submission*.**

*-We worship God because we have been redeemed to worship him.*

Redemption is the reconciliation of God and his people so that they can worship him. Often redemption is thought of primarily in the legal terms of Justification and Sanctification. However, it is important to realize that redemption is not to be understood in legal terms only but *primarily in relational terms*. Nor is redemption to be understood in merely sociological terms of liberation from political or ethical bondage. The liberation of God's people is not for the simple sake of personal freedom from corrupt politics, immoral ethical behavior, etc. but for freedom to be who they were created to be, worshipers of the living God. God restores our roles as his creatures in relationship with him through redemption in order that we might worship him as God. At every step of the way in the OT story of God's redemption, the purpose was the blessing of the people through bringing glory to God as their God. Abraham was called so that God would be the God of his people, Gen. 12-17. Through Moses, God led the people out of Egypt to free them from *service and submission* to Pharaoh for worship in *service and submission* to himself as their God, Ex 8:1. Therefore, understanding the redemption of God begun in the OT and culminating with Christ in the NT ought to be understood as a driving motive for our worship of him.

### **2.3.2 The 3 aspects of the Fall: *broken relationship, separation, and idolatry* are reversed through redemption so that we can rightly *serve and submit* to him.**

*1. God restores our relationship with him by providing a means of atonement through sacrifice so that he can be worshiped.*

Very early in the OT God's people are able to reconnect with God, but this happens only through sacrifices. We have seen the example of Abel already, but others are note worthy. Noah for example communes with God in worship through a sacrifice, Gen. 8:20-22. Abraham, as well as the other patriarchs, worship God via sacrifice on the altars that they built. This theme is continued through the period of the Exodus with the Passover Lamb in Egypt, Ex. 12, which caused God judgement against sin to be overt, and leading to the sacrificial system ordained by God with the Tabernacle in the time of Moses, Lev. 1-7. Finally this same system of sacrificial worship was permanently installed with the building of the Temple of Solomon, 1 Ki. 6.

*2. God bridges the gap of separation so that he can be worshiped.*

*- God accomplishes this through Covenant and through Drawing Near.*

God bridges the gap to his people by taking the initiative to reestablish a relationship with his people through the promise of a Covenant. The Covenant was an established means of relationship, which the people of the ancient near east would have recognized, sometimes between two parties, but even more often between a King and his subjects. As noted above the action of God bridging the gap of separation between us is

closely associated with the sacrificial system of atonement because God cannot draw near in his holiness without dealing with our sin. Therefore it is quite common for Covenants to be connected with sacrifice because it is through sacrifice that God can draw near to his people. We see this example throughout the OT during the Patriarchal times right up through the Covenant with Solomon at the dedication of the Temple.

God also bridges the gap by drawing near to his people at particular geographic locals. Throughout the OT places of sacrifice were understood as places where gods would come down from heaven and commune with people, often on mountain tops. Thus it make sense that God would commune with his people at their places of sacrifice. God promised to dwell with his people in the Tabernacle on the Atonement Seat of the Ark of the Covenant, Ex. 25, and this action on God's part was reaffirmed when he promised to dwell in the Temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem by the Covenant he made with Solomon, 1 Ki. 6.

### *3. God reveals the proper way to worship, removing idolatry from his people.*

We have already seen glimpses of how God revealed the proper way to worship through our discussion of sacrifice leading up to the official worship of the Temple. But even before that time God was already moving and restoring his relationship with his people through the prescription of proper worship.

God revealed himself to Abraham and the Patriarchs, Moses, David, and the prophets and made Covenants with them. He stipulated various signs of these covenants as essential elements of their relationship, and communicated himself in such a way as to distinguish himself and the worship of him as God from other gods.

God made a covenant with Abraham to be his God and to give Abraham a promised land. The chief element of worship under the Abrahamic Covenant was circumcision, announcing that the children of Abraham belonged to God and would worship him alone.

Under Moses, the Covenant of the Law was established so that the entire people of God could be made his special people and they would serve him in a way that was acceptable to him. Under that Covenant, the Passover, and the entire system of the Tabernacle, with its priests, sacrifices, and place for God in the holy of holies Atonement Seat, was established and the Law was given to direct the people of God in the land of Israel. These laws were culturally and historically determined, but the theological relationship with God that was contained in them directed the elements of their worship toward God in a way that was pleasing to God and accomplished his purposes in the process of redemption.

Finally under David, Solomon, and the Prophets God stipulated that he was to be worshiped at his holy Temple, the place of the dwelling of his Name, under the administration of the Mosaic Law. During this time God's people developed their worship of God within their cultural context, in a way that was fitting to him. Large portions of that worship has been preserved for us in the Psalms, and smaller portions in the stories of the monarchical period and the prophets. The worship of God was characterized by singing, musical instruments of that day, and choirs, 1 Ch. 15:16. Appropriate responses of worship to God included dancing, 2 Sa. 6, Ps. 149; 150, clapping of hands, Ps. 47, shouting, Ps. 33:3, bowing down and kneeling, Ps. 95:6. Their

worship was characterized by participation of the people along culturally appropriate lines of response within the theological structure of the OT revealed by God. One chief way we know that God approves of these aspects of worship is that they are found in Scripture as positive commands as how to worship God in a culturally appropriate way.

However, the people did not always worship God in ways that were acceptable to him during that time. They often rebelled against his revealed theological structure and specific commands by moving the place God would be worshiped, 1 Ki. 12:28-31, by worshiping other gods, Mic. 5:13-15, and by syncretism of every variety adding the traditions of men and not that of God (that is elements of worship loaded on to the “worship of God” without proper theological reflection or meaning within those elements), Is. 29:13. One grievous aspect of their worship was that though their actions seemed correct, their corrupt lives displayed that their hearts were far from God and showed that they did not really understand the Law or proper theology worship of God. It is interesting to note that often the “form” of worship was technically correct but the lives and attitudes of the people was sinful, and thus the worship was unacceptable. Prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel go to great length to show these worship failures. They also prophesy how God was going to meet this sinfulness in his people by radically altering the way they would worship him, and moving their relationship with him a quantum leap forward, Jer. 31 and Ezk. 36, and that would happen through a New Covenant, through God’s messiah Jesus and the power of his Holy Spirit.

### **3. Redemption and Worship in the New Testament**

#### **3.1 Jesus Christ fulfills the Old Covenant methods of worshipping God establishing a New Covenant, ushering in a connected but yet better way of worshipping God.**

When the Messiah, Jesus Christ, came into the world he declared the gospel of his coming and the joy and freedom that this would bring humanity in worship. Jesus began his work by fulfilling the human and OT requirement of worship of God by *submitting to and serving* God in the wilderness of Judea, (Mt 4:8-10), thus beginning the process of becoming the perfect man/Israelite on behalf of God’s people. Jesus then turned his attention to the people and preached the gospel: the process of God coming to save his people was at hand with Jesus’ person and work for them. In this salvation the “good news” was that God was now going to be permanently united to his people, or “with” his people, thus “Immanuel.” (Mt. 1:23) Jesus was the fulfillment of the promises of God to make his dwelling with the people in a new and permanent way because Jesus was God incarnate, (Jn. 1, Joel 3:17, Zech. 2:10, Ezk. 37: 26-8, 43:7). The totality of Jesus’ life, as well as his death, resurrection, and pouring out of his Holy Spirit are to be understood as the fulfillment of the Old Covenant worship prescriptions, the Psalms, and the promises of God in the prophets ( Lk. 24:44f, Heb. 1:1-2). Jesus fulfills all of the Law, Mt. 5:17, including all of its regulations and prescribed *forms of worship*, such as sacrificial system and the Passover, and even the *place of worship*, the Temple on Mt. Zion, because Jesus *is* God’s presence with the people and the sacrifice that is necessary for that to occur. It is important that we see the insoluble connection with the gospel and that of proper worship of God. The system of God’s dealings with his people in the OT were explicitly for the purposes of him Covenanting and Drawing Near to them *so that they could*

worship him. Now in the NT, God draws near to his people in a new and radical way in the person and work of Jesus Christ – so that we can worship him in a new and radically close way *in Jesus*.

### **3.2 Jesus is the Means of our Worship of God**

The means of worshiping God in the OT was through the sacrifices of the Old Covenant. Jesus offers us a fulfillment of the Old Covenant by becoming a sacrifice for us and by also performing the priestly duty of offering that sacrifice to God under a New and better Covenant *in his life and death*, (Heb. 8-10). During his earthy ministry Jesus clearly communicated this through his predictions and interpretation of his death and most explicitly during the Passover meal with his disciples. Jesus ushered in a new way of worshiping God through the Covenant and Sacrifice of *his* blood, (Mt. 26:28, Mk. 14:24, Heb. 9:11-14), as well as bringing a new and more intimate way of Drawing Near to God on the basis of Jesus' death and thus fulfilling and replacing the Passover Feast, (Lk. 22:29-30, 1 Cor. 11:26). David Peterson sums up the deep theological significance of this by stating,

“ Jesus' death functioned to *re-establish the underlying relationship with Israel on a new basis*, making possible the fulfillment of God's ancient promise to bring blessing to all the peoples on earth (cf. Gen. 12:2-3). The implication of this saying is that the priesthood, the sacrificial system, and all the rites and festivals given to Israel under the old covenant are fulfilled and replaced by the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>7</sup>

The theological significance of Redemption of God's people in Jesus cannot be understated. Because of the once for all atoning work of Christ, and his continued priestly intercession for us in heaven before God, Heb. 10:10-14, Rom. 8:34, Eph 2, we can now worship God as a redeemed people permanently brought near to God in Jesus.

### **3.3 Jesus is the Place of our Worship of God**

We now worship God on the basis of Jesus' death and his priestly ministry in heaven, rather than at a earthly sacrifice altar, the Temple, a Synagogue, or any other earthly location. Jesus understood that he had now become the place of God's meeting with the people and Jesus was the holy Temple of God by virtue of his person and work of sacrifice on our behalf, Jn. 1:29, 36; 3:14-18, 8:34-6. Jesus was to replace the Temple through the destruction of his body and his exultation into heaven, Jn. 2:12-22, Acts 7:55-56, Heb. 8-10, Phil. 2:6-11. However, we are connected to that ministry through the power of *his* Holy Spirit in faith. Jesus announce this most clearly in Jn. 4:21-24 when he declared, “Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.” Therefore, we now worship at the feet of God in heaven by being united with Christ through his Holy Spirit poured out for us, Acts 2, Phil. 3:3, Eph 2:6, 13. Consequently, our whole lives become a context of worship on the basis of Christ's sacrifice, Rom. 12:1-2, and when we gather

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<sup>7</sup> Carson, pg. 57.

together for corporate worship we image his body in the unity of the Holy Spirit of Jesus, Heb. 10, Rom. 8 and 12, Phil. 2, Cor. 12-14. Our whole lives of worship begin with the Covenantal connection with God by being baptized into the Name of Jesus, Col. 2:10-11; 3:17, Acts 2:38, Phil 3:3. And we continue that worship in Jesus' Name, especially within corporate worship as we come to the Heavenly Sanctuary of God's Throne in Jesus as a holy people and royal priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices of praise, 1 Pt. 2:9. Christian worship is to be understood as the worship of the body of Christ, unified and glorious, as it enters the Sanctuary of God in Heaven, Heb. 7:23-25; 9:25; 10:19-22; 13:15.<sup>8</sup> The unity, power, and connection of Christian worship comes through Jesus in his Holy Spirit. Christian worship is thus exclusively empowered by the Holy Spirit of Jesus, Rom. 8:15-27, Acts 4:25, Eph. 5:19-20, Phil. 3:3. "Christian worship is inspired by the Spirit, empowered by the Spirit, directed by the Spirit, purified by the Spirit, and bears the fruit of the Spirit. Christian worship is Spirit-filled."<sup>9</sup>

### **3.4 Jesus is the Object of our Worship**

"The worship of the [age of the Spirit] is essentially a relationship with God on the basis of the redemptive work accomplished by Christ. Paradoxically, however, there are also indications in the Gospels that *Jesus himself is worthy of divine honours*. He is not simply the means by which a new allegiance to the Father is initiated and maintained. The Son himself is to be accorded the homage and service due the Lord God of Israel." says David Peterson.<sup>10</sup>

We see this exemplified for us through the language of calling Jesus "Lord," that Jesus should be called God, Rom 9:5, and that he is worthy of adoration and praise through our submission and service of him, Phil 2:6-11 and Rev. 5.

## **Section 2: Worship Practices in the New Testament Age of the Spirit**

### **Introduction:**

We live in the very same "day of Salvation" and "age of the Spirit" that the Apostles did, thus our worship practices will be in keeping with those of the early Church described in the pages of the NT. Because we live in the same theological age of the New Creation through the power of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, we are a part of the NT church, Rom. 6:1-5, 1 Cor. 15, 2 Cor. 5:17. Although we may not share the same historical and cultural context as the early church, we all share the same theology and relationship with God in Jesus through the Holy Spirit, thus our worship practices will share some of the same aspects of worship described in the NT. Such as: Signs of the New Covenant, Praise to God in the Spirit of Jesus, and Edification of the Body of Christ, but they will be different in the culturally determined expression of those aspects.

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<sup>8</sup> Old, Hughes Oliphant, *Guides to the Reformed Tradition*, John Knox Press, Atlanta, GA: 1984. Pg. 5-6.

<sup>9</sup> Old, Pg. 5-6.

<sup>10</sup> Carson, pg. 64.

**1. The New Testament *never prescribes* a set form of worship but communicates a New Covenant Relationship with God in Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.**

*-It will take wisdom to know when, if, and how we should practice the aspects of worship found in the details of the NT.*

Contrary to what is often taught or communicated, *there is no NT prescribed form of worship* other than worshiping God through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. Just as in the Old Testament God saw fit to use the various cultural elements of that particular historical period to worship him, so now also in Christ God sees fit to do so in the Holy Spirit. This *does not however allow for everything to be fitting for worship* or for the mass sanctification of culture.<sup>11</sup> What it does allow is an extremely free and open way of worshiping God through Jesus under the rubric of the *theology of the NT*, which we have already fully discussed above.

Because Jesus fulfilled the sacrifice necessary to re-connect us with God, performs the duty of our high priest in the heavenly sanctuary of God, and through his Holy Spirit unites us as a living house of priests as his body on earth, we no longer need to focus on some ongoing ritual or *forms* of worship in order to please God! In fact to try and set forms of worship that are not culturally flexible would never have fit into the way God has prescribed his people to worship him, not only in the general sense of the OT, but now even more so in the NT. Jesus fulfilled the OT obligations of service and we are now set free to worship God in a new and free way in the Holy Spirit.<sup>12</sup> Often we look to the pages of the NT to *describe* for us what Christian worship should look like and then we seek to emulate it. This can often be described as “Trying to be a New Testament Church,” or “Getting back to the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Christianity.” Although this practice certainly has its benefits because it gives us a feel for what Spirit-filled worship was like, if followed rigidly it actually can do more damage than good in understanding what true Spirit worship was like then and what it should be like for our day. We will miss not only what happened during the cultural context of the first century, but also what the Bible actually *prescribes* for worship that moves across cultural bounds. Because the NT was written in the first century, the worship *described* in the NT simply shows us, and in scant detail at that, what the early church was doing to worship God in Jesus *within their cultural context*. It does not provide for us a prescriptively normative form of worship that is timeless and that did not interact with the current culture significantly. Thus if we simply seek to emulate the 1<sup>st</sup> century practice described in the NT we will quite frankly simply transplant anachronistic cultural forms of worship. And “an archaeological reconstruction rarely meets the need of the time.”<sup>13</sup> Therefore when we read in Acts 2:42, or any other detail of worship in the early Church, we are not being given an account of prescriptive worship but merely the activities that the early Church adopted. It will take *wisdom* to know when, if, and how we also should practice these aspects of worship.

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<sup>11</sup> NT worship re-affirms the theology of the proper worship of God’s people foreshadowed in the Law of Moses in the unity of the Trinity: God is One: Father, Son, and Spirit, God meets with his people historically in covenants: Jesus’ blood, and God cannot be worshiped as a man-made image: Jesus is God’s image made in the flesh so that we can have salvation, Heb. 2:3, 2 Cor. 4:4, Col. 1:15.

<sup>12</sup> Carson, pg. 71-72.

<sup>13</sup> Old, Pg. 158.

Because, as Robert G. Rayburn states, “To insist on a fixed order of worship, however, seems to go beyond the liberty which I believe the Holy Spirit gives us in Christian worship.”<sup>14</sup> And church historian and theologian Ralph Martin summarizes, “... there is no extant ‘Church Order’ within the pages of the New Testament Canon.”<sup>15</sup>

## **2. God is Creator and Jesus his Son is initiator and head of the New Covenant people of God and the Lord of the New Creation.**

*-We are called to submit and serve God through Jesus as Christ’s body on earth in 3 main ways.*

### **2.1 We submit and serve God through the signs and seals of the New Covenant.**

Just as in the OT God allowed ways for his people to draw near to him by he first drawing near to them by a Covenant and the Sacrifice that was offered with it, so now in the NT we are given signs of the New Covenant in Jesus as his New Creation people. These two signs given by Jesus are The Lord’s Supper and Baptism, Lk. 22:20, Mt. 26:27-28, 1 Cor. 11:25, Mt. 28:19, Col. 2:11-12, Rom. 6:3-5. Perhaps for now we need not argue about *when* (infants or adults) God’s people should be baptized or take the Lord’s Supper, but we should be united in that they *ought* to be baptized in the New Covenant of God’s holy people and share in its meal together. It is therefore fitting for God’s people to glorify God in these signs and recognize them as tangible and visible seals of their permanent covenant with God in Jesus. Just as husbands and wives wear their wedding rings as a real sign and seal of their permanent bond, thus we also should glorify God as a community by celebrating *together* the signs and seals he has given us of our reconciled and glorified relationship with him and each other in Covenant of Jesus’ Blood.

### **2.2 We submit and serve God through the culturally relevant Sacrifice of Praise.**

Within the 1<sup>st</sup> century and especially within culturally Jewish Christian churches, the Temple and Synagogue provided the cultural aspects of their Praises of God in Jesus.<sup>16</sup> Typical aspects of Temple worship were readings, prayer, singing, and sacrifice. The first three were adopted by the early Church in at least some form but the sacrifice was fulfilled in Jesus. Within the Synagogue were reading and teaching the Scriptures, praises, and prayer. All of the Synagogue aspects seem to have been adopted by early Church in their gatherings together, because they could affirm these aspects within the theology revealed to them in Jesus. It has been argued that because the early church did not adopt the elaborate style of worship within the Temple of rich aesthetics and creative music but “chose” the simplicity of the Synagogue therefore the aspect of austere services is the kind worship prescribed by God for the NT Church.<sup>17</sup> This is historically inaccurate because the plainness of the Synagogue was a cultural development due to the

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<sup>14</sup> Rayburn, Pg. 117.

<sup>15</sup> Martin, pg. 135.

<sup>16</sup> Martin, Ralph P., *Worship in the Early Church*, W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. Grand Rapids, MI: 1964. Pg. 19. See also Old, pg. 43.

<sup>17</sup> Old, Pg. 42-43.

loss of the Temple and limited resources rather than from divine prescription. Scripture nowhere commands austere worship, and if within certain cultures art, music, and various symbols are incorporated in such a way as to show the beauty of God and give glory to his Name it is fitting, Is. 33:17, Ps. 96:6.<sup>18</sup> However, the early Church did not do so for historical/cultural reasons and limitations.

The early Church offered songs of praise to God both from the Psalms and also creating their own new compositions within direction of the Spirit of Jesus. Internal and external evidence suggests that the early Church wrote new hymns to Jesus based on the OT, because they were worshiping God as their Creator and Redeemer in Jesus.<sup>19</sup> And the early Church was encouraged to sing praises to God in the Spirit that glorified him and edified one another, Eph. 5:19. Thus culturally appropriate worship that reflects the OT, celebrates the New Covenant in Jesus, and offers a creative sacrifice of praise in the Spirit of Jesus can be participated in heartily. Just like the early Church, we can look to the Psalms, Prophets, (and now that the canon is complete the NT itself) for our theology of worship, examples of appropriate practice and posture, and inspiration to understand the glorious redemption God has provided!<sup>20</sup> Our songs also need to be culturally appropriate because they should be intelligible and attractive to the Nations, Ps. 47:1; 100:1-5. As we sing praises to Jesus in Heaven the whole world will be drawn to glorify God with us, Isa. 2:2-4; 56:6-8, Ps. 102:18, but that worship should be meaningful within our cultural context, orderly, and intelligible, 1 Cor. 14.

Because God is a God of order it is also fitting to have a worship leader(s), as long as the believers being lead in worship never lose sight of their *essential participation as a body of priests called to praise God*, 1Pt. 2:9. 1 Cor. 14:40 is the summary of Paul's comments about corporate gatherings of worship, "But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way." The size of the gathering of the Corinthian church made it so that everyone, *women and men*, could participate in "leadership" at one time or another of the service in prayer and praise but they needed to be concerned for order in the Spirit. Now, given the size of our corporate gatherings and our cultural place in history, a worship leader(s) seems to be fitting, especially with musical aspects of the service.<sup>21</sup>

### **2.3 We submit and serve God in the edification of the Body of Christ**

The category of edification is so large that it encompasses almost every aspect of NT worship. The Apostle Paul regularly employed the term *edification* to describe the worship gathering in the NT, 1 Cor. 14:3-5, 12, 17, 26, 31; 1 Thes. 5:11; Eph. 4:11-16. Paul expects that we will meet with God when we gather together and edify one another in the unity of the Holy Spirit and preaching and teaching of the gospel.<sup>22</sup> The NT activity of worship focuses on the edification of God's people so that his purposes for the redemption of the whole world may be accomplished. Now when the people of God gather in Jesus they praise him for his work of redemption and live that redemption out in

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<sup>18</sup> Frame, John M. *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Phillipsburg, NJ: 1996. Pg. 73. and Rayburn, Robert C., *O Come Let Us Worship*, Baker Book House Co., Grand Rapids, MI: 1980. Pg. 111.

<sup>19</sup> Old, pg. 45. Internal: Col. 1:15-20. External: Letter of Trajan to Pliny.

<sup>20</sup> For an extensive list see section 2.3.2.3.

<sup>21</sup> Frame, pg. 63ff.

<sup>22</sup> Carson, pg. 77.

every aspect of their lives. This gathering reflects and fulfills the OT image of God's people gathering to worship God and hear the law. However now the God is always near us through Jesus and we are united to Jesus in the Holy Spirit and his word lives in our hearts. Therefore our whole lives become a perpetual context for worship. Now in the whole life of a Christian we live out the commands of God: we love him and each other.

God is building a New Creation and holy temple of worship in the body of Christ. We are united to Christ *together* in the Holy Spirit. Through that same Spirit and the Word of God revealed by him we are being built up toward glorious perfection. In Jesus we have been cleansed before God once for all, but in the Spirit that cleansing becomes realized over time through the edification of the body in worship. Anything then that aids the presentation of the body as a holy sacrifice to God in Jesus is considered a part of NT worship. In this sense our whole lives become acts of worship to God, especially with regard to the edification of the entire body of Christ in everyday life, but equally so should the corporate worship service glorify God by edifying the people. Now in Jesus we present our bodies as living sacrifices of worship to God in Jesus, Rom 12:1-2, and the mutual edification of that body of Christ, Rom 12:4ff. Some aspect of this edification have been covered already in our discussion on praise. Other aspects of edification include: Prayer, Preaching of Scripture (the gospel of Jesus), Offerings of Money, Exercising Spiritual gifts, Discipline, Vows, and Fellowship of believers – greetings, benedictions, and announcements, which may include missionary reports, testimonies, etc.

### **3. Obstacles to proper worship in the NT: sin in our hearts and culture.**

The chief hindrance to the worship of God in the NT age of the Spirit is that we still live in a world full of sin and are constantly bombarded and tempted by it. Although we have been provided with redemption in Christ Jesus and the Scriptures direct us in the proper theology to “hang our culturally appropriate worship hats on,” we still have sinfulness within us, and are still being transformed into the image of Christ. Part of this transformation confronts elements of our culture that are sinful. It would be naive to assume that culture is neutral. It would be dangerous to assume one culture is inherently better than another, without closely scrutinizing what aspects of it have come into conformity with the image of Christ. Nowhere in Scriptures is culture assumed to be neutral. Rather through the common grace of God, every culture has some idea of the divine because it is plain to them, although they actively suppress God's revelation and cultivate in some way a sinful milieu of practices, traditions, and ideas, Rom. 1. If cultures in general, and consequently our American culture and the sub-culture of the Main Line, has sinful ways and ideas woven into it, we need the gospel to root that out.

However, the problem is that we are often blind to the aspects of our culture that corrupt our worship of God in Jesus. Often when we are presented with a Christ focused theology that would make demands on our culture we balk and try to side step it, thus creating an essentially non Christ-transformed culture. This is what Paul calls the *Scandal of the Gospel*. Jews demanded a sign and Greeks wanted wisdom, but God gave us Jesus: The Suffering of the Cross, The New Covenant Creation, and the Community of his Body. Just as the Jews and Greeks rejected the aspects of the gospel that graded against their culture and tried to establish their own versions of Christian theology and worship, so also today we are in danger of doing the same. We must ask: what is within

our culture that would reject the gospel and twist it into our likeness and not that of Jesus? What demands does it make that rubs against the gospel, or better put what aspects of our culture does the gospel rub? What areas have we unconsciously and consciously set up as “God honoring” that are simply how we would worship God? What areas of worship ought we be flexible in and be willing to explore because in the Spirit of Jesus we are free to express them? What sinful *idols of ideology* have we set up as the lens for understanding worship in place of Jesus Christ? Are we too controlling? Do we hold back on giving *all* of ourselves to God in submission and service – including the two most precious of American idols: money and entertainment. Are we too austere: afraid of the glorification of God in the arts? Are we rigid: we do not clap, dance, kneel, and bow down because in our culture that is not acceptable but it should be. Are we willing to expand our idea of “weaker and stronger brothers” beyond the pedantic evangelical notion of drinking, dancing, smoking and the like and understand them with regard to worship practices? Are we willing to gradually and within the guidance of the Holy Spirit have more faith and be culturally scandalized by the gospel, touching and cleansing the areas of our cultural sin, and freeing us to the worship it allows?<sup>23</sup>

Possible elements needed:

1. Table of Contents
2. Executive Summary
3. Appendix on Money and Time: A Sacrifice of Praise and Edification of the Body.
4. Appendix on Entertainment and the glory of God.

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<sup>23</sup> Conn, Harvie M. *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds* Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Phillipsburg, NJ: 1984, pg. 235-238.