

Perspective Digest

Volume 6 | Number 1

Article 13

1-1-2001

Worship

C Raymond Holmes
Adventist Theological Society

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd>

Recommended Citation

Holmes, C Raymond (2001) "Worship," *Perspective Digest*. Vol. 6 : No. 1 , Article 13.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd/vol6/iss1/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Adventist Theological Society at Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Perspective Digest by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact repository@andrews.edu.

WORSHIP

Is what we see in our churches on Sabbath morning what John the Revelator had in mind?

Why do Christians go to church? For a variety of reasons. Because it's socially advantageous. Because it's expected in our cultural milieu. Because we want to set a good example for our children. Because the music is good. Because the preacher is entertaining. Or maybe because he or she gives good counsel. The list could be expanded. But the only biblically sound reason can be expressed in one word: to worship.

The one book in the Bible that speaks most directly to our day on the subject of worship is Revelation. This "Revelation of Jesus Christ," which directly addresses the end-time church, contains 24 references in which the word *worship* appears. In most instances it is derived from the Greek *proskuneo*, which means to prostrate oneself as a gesture of respect or reverence. The root of the

verb is *kunein*, meaning "to kiss." For the ancient Greeks who worshiped the gods or spirits of the underworld, it involved stopping to kiss the earth.

The first reference to the concept of worship appears in Revelation 1:17: "When I saw him [the resurrected Christ], I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: 'Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last'" (NIV).** This encounter between John and the Lord sets the tone for the whole book.

The Christian who uses one of the above reasons for going to church should note John's act of humble devotion and submission—that is, his worship—when about to receive

* C. Raymond Holmes is retired from the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. He lives with his wife, Shirley, in Wakefield, Michigan.

visions and instruction from the Lord (1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10). The 24 elders “fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship [*proskuneo*] him.” In a lengthy discussion on worship, Paul says an unbeliever whose secrets are laid bare by faithful believers will “fall down and worship God” (1 Cor. 14:25), implying the existence of this practice in the New Testament church. If likewise worshipful, we of the third-millennium church should expect to receive insight into the gospel and the Christian life. “Likewise” means, in this context, theocentric, that is, centering on or directed toward God, the first of four elements of worship we’ll consider.

God-Centered Worship

The most profound and dramatic portrayal of God-centered worship is found in chapters four and five of John’s book. All action, symbols, and sounds image the power and grace of God as revealed in the gospel. The worshipers in chapter four gather around the throne of God. The focus here is on God the Creator; in chap-



ter five the focus is on God the Redeemer. Father and Son, then, are mutually praised and glorified in what is the most sublime expression of theocentric worship ever to be performed.

Revelation, chapter 7, depicts the glorified church in another scene, its victorious members standing before the throne of God. They “have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” Therefore, they are before the throne, worshiping God and serving Him “day and night in his temple” (7:15). Dressed in white robes and holding palm branches in their hands, they cry out: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb” (7:9, 10). These are the same people identified in Revelation 15:1 to 5 as worshiping God while yet on earth!

These visions offer the church of the last days a stirring example of the kind of worship that should characterize its services. When the churchgoer experiences it, his or her needs will be met as God reaches out

in grace and mercy through the Word to the heart of the supplicant.

An often missed element in the worship revealed here is spontaneity. The singing is spontaneous, elicited by the environment of heavenly splendor and the presence of Deity. The 24 elders instinctively prostrate themselves in response to the *Sanc-tus*, which is sung by beings bearing little resemblance to anything on earth (chap. 4:9). A similar spontaneous response from the celestial worshippers occurs in chapter five, when the Lamb takes a scroll from the Father's right hand. To be sure, one may discern liturgical order and progression in the worship, but there is also a delightful spontaneity.

Majestic Worship

Worship in its most majestic form is depicted in chapter five, where the whole universe worships God. The "Amen" of verse 14 signals the end of the Great Controversy that has convulsed the cosmos. The work of the church is finished, and the universe, once again at peace and in harmony with its Creator, celebrates with a majestic doxology!

The key expression, "You are worthy," is directed to the Creator in chapter four and to the Redeemer in chapter five. First-century Christians would find this phrase familiar, for "*vere dignus*" were the first words of solemn acclamation directed to an emperor upon his entrance into a

city. In Revelation's majestic service, all created beings surrender their crowns to Father and Son (chap. 4:10). Creation and redemption, heaven and earth, are linked eternally in this glorious act of worship. The centrality of Father and Son in worship is established for Christians of all ages.

Submissive Worship

Intrinsic to worship of God is submission. The Lord through Christ created us, and the Lord through Christ redeemed us, so we give Him glory by submitting to His lordship. In chapters four and five, the Revelator depicts this and other elements through a dynamic interplay of word, action, and symbol that shapes the worshiper's perception, allowing for a creative and spontaneous response. It was not enough for God to declare His love for us; it needed to be acted out in history to have credibility. Similarly, it is not enough for us to simply declare our love for Him; to be credible our love must be demonstrated in the obedience of faith—submission—and in other acts of worship.

We express our submission to God—as well as our adoration—by song and prayer as we come before Him in His church. There we thank Him for what He is and what He has done for us; we confess our sin and repent in deep humility.

“The central thrust of the Jewish and Christian tradition is to take up the whole of life into praise of God, making Him central to everything and His glory the goal of the universe.” In the act of worship the believer joins his life with that of the Lord and Lamb and together with other believers constructs a “cathedral of sound.”

Through these acts we give glory to God. Failure to confess sin inhibits submission, just as confessing faith unleashes praise. Such Christian prayer may be called the “supreme moral act,” as Millard C. Lind has described it in *Biblical Foundations for Christian Worship*. He adds: “The discipleship of the early Christians was evident when in their gatherings they extol their Leader, acknowledge before Him their failures, listen to His words, and seek to know His will for daily living as they challenge and invade the structures of this world.”¹

Praise Worship

Praise is intrinsic to the quality of the relationship between the One worshiped and those worshiping. It involves recognition of God’s holiness, respect for His person, Word, will, and joy in His presence. Praise has been described as “an attempt to cope with the abundance of God’s love.”² Praise is voluntary and elicited by God’s love and grace.

Giving God glory is the most natural and proper response to His goodness. The One praised is intrinsically and demonstrably worthy. “The central thrust of the Jewish and Christian tradition is to take up the whole of life into praise of God, making Him central to everything and His glory the goal of the universe.”³ In the act of worship, the believer joins his or her life with that of the Lord and Lamb and together with other believers constructs a “cathedral of sound.”⁴

Paradoxically, the believer may also worship in a “cathedral of silence.” Words alone are often inadequate to express praise and adoration. Authentic Christian worship sometimes draws on the atmosphere of profound silence.

Mature Worship?

Revelation makes it clear that there are some things worship is not. It is not human-centered and narcissistic. It is not getting people to smile on Sabbath morning through en-

forcement of a kind of compulsory friendliness. William Willimon asks, "When is the last time you were afraid on [Sabbath] morning?" His perceptive response: "Our current backslapping conviviality and chumminess with God would seem strange to those who once stammered and shook before the divine, falling flat on their faces before God rather than shouting out a hearty 'Good morning!'"⁵

Some believe that contemporary worship is more mature than that of the ancients. The opposite may be the case. We seem to have altered our conception of God from that of the Almighty in the heavens to the "good old boy," not realizing how much we have contributed to the rotting of the religion of our time. A. W. Tozer has said:

"It is my opinion that the [current] Christian conception of God is so decadent as to be utterly beneath the dignity of the Most High God and actually to constitute for professed believers something amount-

ing to a moral calamity."⁶

The Lord and Lamb, not human feelings, experience, or needs, are at worship's center. Worshipers come to meet with Lord and Lamb, to hear them speak, and to respond in faith and obedience. □

** Unless otherwise noted, all Bible texts in this article are quoted from the New International Version.

REFERENCES

¹ Millard C. Lind, *Biblical Foundations for Christian Worship* (Scottsdale, Penna.: Herald Press, 1973), pp. 40, 50.

² Daniel W. Hardy and David F. Ford, *Praising and Knowing God* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985), p. 1.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 20.

⁵ William H. Willimon, *The Bible: A Sustaining Presence in Worship* (Valley Forge, Penna.: Judson Press, 1981), p. 89.

⁶ A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), pp. 9, 10. Though Tozer's observation was made in 1961, the current state of affairs indicates a worsening situation as we enter the third millennium.

GENUINE PREACHING

I think it was Goethe who said, after hearing a young minister, "When I go to hear a preacher preach, I may not agree with what he says, but I want him to believe it." Even a vacillating unbeliever has no respect for the man who lacks the courage to preach what he believes.—*Billy Graham* (No. 1, Oct. 5, 1956).