

Church, SS, 2023, Purpose: The Worship of the Church

6/4/23

INTRODUCTION: Today, and again next week, the plan is to look at the **TWO-FOLD PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH.** A church has many responsibilities. But what is at the heart of its purpose here on earth? What are the overarching objectives that should be kept in focus? There are two: 1) WORSHIP; and 2) MISSION. This morning, we take up the first: **THE PURPOSE of the Church is WORSHIP.** I have Four Main Points.

Point number one (I) is that THE PRIMARY FOCUS OF WORSHIP is that GOD IS WORTHY. Our English word, “WORSHIP”, is derived from a word meaning, “WORTH-SHIP”. As fallen people, we have an idolatrous tendency to assign such WORTH, such VALUE to things and people here below that we in effect WORSHIP them. We cherish them. We pursue them with energy and determination. We elevate them highly.

In truth, however, there is only one being in and above the universe that is truly worth worship. And that is our Creator and Sustainer, who is the Redeemer of his people. God is magnificent. He is splendid in his PERSON. He is glorious in his WORKS. Our most basic response to God, given his majesty, is that we should worship. Our Triune God should be revered, cherished, and praised.

One of the basic words used in the Scriptures for worship is prostration or falling down. That should be the response of our hearts to the Lord. We should FALL DOWN before him. We see that literally happening again and again in scenes of heaven given in the book of Revelation.

We don't see that literally happening in the pictures that Acts gives us of the worship of the early church. But in SPIRIT, Acts portrays such falling-down before God. We see Christians eager for God, hungry for God, making much of God. When God revealed Christ to them through his Spirit, their response was one of worship.

The whole of our lives should affirm that God is deserving of great praise. Romans 12 begins an extended section of practical application with the words, *“I entreat you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice to God...”* In a spirit of worship, we say, *“Take my LIFE and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee, take my moments and my days, let them flow with ceaseless praise!”*

1Co 10:31 *So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*

In tasks as simple as eating and drinking, changing a diaper, or washing the dishes, the followers of Jesus aim to honor their God, and indeed they can, even in the most menial tasks.

In this class, however, where we are studying the subject of THE CHURCH, we're thinking about affirming God's worth in a more particular sphere. The church should gather regularly, on the Lord's Day, to proclaim and to nurture our conviction that God is WORTHY. We come together on Sunday to MAKE MUCH OF OUR GOD. A fundamental purpose of the church is to engage in public WORSHIP.

The word rendered "worship" is found most often in the New Testament, with respect to God, **in the book of Revelation**. The scenes of heavenly worship that are presented in Revelation are always CORPORATE in nature. Various personal beings are depicted as being ASSEMBLED TOGETHER in worship. And what dominates their hearts and repeatedly is expressed in their words is the recognition of HOW WORTHY God the Creator and Redeemer is. Note two examples.

Rev. 4:8 And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" Here we have a glimpse into pure worship. They are not lamenting their sufferings, or confessing

their transgressions, or lifting up petitions. They are AFFIRMING, without ceasing, that God is the SET APART ONE, “*infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth*”.

VERSES 9-11: *And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever,¹⁰ the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and WORSHIP him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying,¹¹ “WORTHY are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.”*

What is compelling and constraining the humble, reverent adoration of God in heaven is a profound and constant sense of how WORTHY he is! He “*created all things, and by (his) will they existed and were created*”. These heavenly beings, the 24 elders, while sinless, *FALL DOWN BEFORE HIM who is seated on the throne and WORSHIP him*. They have a deep awareness that he is vastly greater than them. They feel compelled to bend low in his presence. They don’t run away or draw back; they draw near, but with lowliness and reverence.

Rev. 5:8-14 *And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden*

bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹ And they sang a new song, saying, “WORTHY ARE YOU to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, ¹⁰ and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.” ¹¹ Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, ¹² saying with a loud voice, “WORTHY IS THE LAMB WHO WAS SLAIN, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” ¹³ And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” ¹⁴ And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” and the elders fell down and WORSHIPED.

Note again here, as in chapter 4, that the scene is one of CORPORATE WORSHIP. Personal beings in heaven are GATHERED TOGETHER IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD TO WORSHIP HIM. This is not private worship but public worship.

What compels the worship here depicted is the presence and work of one infinitely WORTHY! *“The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll”* (v5). The LAMB IS WORTHY! He was slain! By his blood, people were ransomed for God from every tribe, language, and nation!

Again, we see sinless creatures FALLING DOWN before the Lord, the Lamb of God. There is such a profound sense of his majesty that they prostrate themselves before him. They cannot be flippant. They cannot act as if they’re there just so they will get something out of the activity, as if it’s primarily about them. It is a thrilling scene, not a somber one. It’s lively, not boring. But it is sober, it is full of reverence, for the Lamb is magnificent. He is near and accessible, yet he is TRANSCENDANT.

We are told that they sang A NEW SONG. God had continued to work. Redemptive history was unfolding. God was no longer dealing with just Israel but with “every tribe and nation”. God’s ongoing work called for NEW SONGS of praise.

These inspired scenes of the corporate worship of heaven remind us that the Bible teaches that the ultimate end of all God’s works in creation, providence, and

redemption is “THE PRAISE OF HIS GLORIOUS GRACE”. That is the refrain of the apostolic hymn found in the opening verses of the book of Ephesians.

***Eph. 1:3f** Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸ which he lavished upon us...*

¹¹ In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, ¹² so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. ¹³ In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

QUESTION: Why does God so want his GLORY to be praised?

A: Because that is the chief end for which he made man. God so designed us that we find our greatest delight, not by focusing on ourselves but by focusing on one GREATER than ourselves. **ILLUSTRATION:** There's a difference between looking at a rut caused by a hard driving rain and looking at the Grand Canyon. The former may have some interest, but the latter is magnificent. We have more joy by focusing on the magnificent. And the magnificent, in itself, is more worthy of our attention and focus. So with God's glory!

QUESTION: Why does God especially want the glory of his GRACE extolled?

A: Because God finds great joy in having a relationship with hell-deserving sinners, and it is his GRACE that has brought about that relationship. Mt. Sinai showed forth God's holiness, but the implication for sinners was, "STAY BACK!" Mt. Calvary showed forth God's grace; the implication for sinners that trust in Christ is, "DRAW NEAR!" Given that the entire Bible is about the redemption and restoration of God's people, it seems clear that God is revealed most fully, not in the message, "STAY BACK!" but in the message, "DRAW NEAR!" God especially wants the glory of his GRACE to be praised.

TRANSITION: We have taken a good bit of time with the first point, **THE PRIMARY FOCUS OF WORSHIP is that GOD IS WORTHY.** Note second (II), **THE ESSENCE OF NT CORPORATE WORSHIP: MEETING WITH**

OUR GOD. When we assemble together as a congregation, in particular on the Lord's Day, the essence of our worship is that we are having fellowship with God in his special presence. We are meeting him as his house, where he lives in a special way here on earth. We, the church, are the temple of God.

He communes with us. He speaks to us through the reading and preaching of his Word and through the songs that we sing. The Spirit of God brings the truth of God to our hearts through the Scriptures and words that faithfully express the Scriptures.

We respond to God by offering up sacrifices of praise. We sing. We pray. We listen, not in a detached manner, but as children that love their Father, as servants that adore their Master.

Eph. 2:19-22** So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of **the household of God,**²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, **grows into a holy temple in the Lord.**²² In him you also are being built together into **a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Throughout the history of OT Israel, first the Tabernacle and then the Temple was the place of the special presence of God. Symbolically, the Holy of Holies, behind the sacred curtain, was the special dwelling place of God. In Christ, the veil was rent and the way opened into the special presence of God. And we, the gathered church are “*a holy temple in the Lord*”, “*a dwelling place for God by the Spirit*”!

Certainly, we can and should seek communion with God in private. The Lord is ready to draw near to his people seven days a week, even if they are otherwise isolated in a prison cell or an empty house. But there is something special about drawing near to God on his appointed day when the church gathers. **Note the language of Hebrews 12:18f:**

Heb. 12:18-29 For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest ¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. [MT SINAI]

...²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a

new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

As we gather for worship in Jesus' name, there are supernatural dynamics taking place that transcend what is happening here in this sanctuary in Mebane, NC. We are in some sense joining with the holy angels as they marvel at our great God and his wondrous Son. We are likewise mingling our praise with that of "*the spirits of the righteous made perfect*". God's temple in heaven is not entirely separated from God's temple on earth, his blood-bought church.

1Pe 2:4-5 says, "*As you come to him (Christ), a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, ⁵you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, **to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*** We have the privilege, Sunday by Sunday, to enter boldly into the holy of holies. He promises, "*Draw near to me, and I will draw near to you*" (*James 4:8*).

APPLICATION: The privilege of meeting with God in his special presence is the main reason we encourage our members to come again on Sunday evening. We recognize that there are providential factors that make it difficult if not impossible for some people to do so. We also understand that Sundays can be a

tiring day when you rise early to get here for SS and then come back for the evening service.

Nonetheless, God has given all of us 168 hours each week. The only two times our church gathers to worship is on Sunday mornings at 11am and Sunday evenings at 5:30pm. And we are persuaded from Scripture that the essence of what we are doing in those meetings is meeting with God in a special way.

“One thing I have asked of the Lord that I shall seek, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord and to meditate in his temple” (Ps. 27:4).

“In Thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures forevermore” (Ps 16:11).

III. THE PRINCIPLE WHICH REGULATES NT CORPORATE WORSHIP

“If man is ever to enter back into this fellowship with God, God must be the one who says it can be, and God must be the one who determines how it can be, in the very nature of the case, because man is a sinner. God has invited man back into his communion, and God has determined how and in what way this communion can be established. We must submit to the Lord’s determination in this regard. He has revealed his mind in his word. That is the principle which regulates worship.”

(Greg Nichols, lecture notes, quoting James Bannerman, The Church of Christ, vol. 1, pg. 341f).

The 1689 Confession states this principle in this way, in Ch. 22, para. 1: *But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God, is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imagination and devices of men, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures.*

I want to make one **observation about this regulative principle of worship.** It would seem to be more true to the New Testament to speak of what the Holy Scriptures WARRANT in worship rather than limiting it to what is PRESCRIBED. To prescribe is to *state [authoritatively](#) or as a rule that (an action) should be carried out.* Such actions are dictated or stipulated. They are imposed.

The NT, however, does not give the church anything comparable to the detailed, dictated regulations found in the latter part of Exodus and in the book of Leviticus re the worship ritual of Israel. Even the Pastoral Epistles do not provide a detailed directory of public worship. We have to discern the pattern and elements of NT corporate worship from the directives and examples given. There are clearly prescribed commands, but there are also important matters that are not prescribed.

Let me give you one example: giving financial offerings as an element of our public worship.

1Co 16:1-2 *Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. ² On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come.*

This passage does not provide a law dictating what every church in every age must do. The passage addresses a unique historical situation in which the saints in famine-stricken Judea were in need. A special, one-time collection was gathered for them. Paul directed the churches in Galatia and the one in Corinth to put something aside “on the first day of every week” for this one-time collection. In referring to the first day of the week, the Apostle is referring to the Day of Resurrection, Sunday, the day on which the early church gathered for worship.

Did they collect the offerings as part of their worship service, or was there simply a place, perhaps a box or bag in which the saints would place their offering? We don’t know. What we do know is that this weekly giving was for a one-time collection; it was not a prescription given for all churches in all places in all times. What we can say, however, is that it clearly seems to WARRANT the practice of taking a weekly offering as part of the public worship of God.

Heb. 13:15-16 *Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. ¹⁶ Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.*

Verse 16 commands Christ's followers to not neglect doing good and to share what you have. This is not imposing a requirement on what is done in the public worship of God. It may be referring more to how you behave during the week than what you do on Sundays.

Yet, the writer to the Hebrews describes such generosity as "sacrifices that are pleasing to God". That's the language of worship. Just as in v15, praising God is described as offering up a sacrifice. Does such language not WARRANT the practice of taking up offerings weekly as a part of our public worship of God? In doing such, we purpose to encourage an attitude and action of worship, offering up to God as a sacrifice a financial gift, for his glory and for the advance of his cause.

CONCLUSION: One of the foremost LONGINGS of NT Corporate Worship is that people who do not worship God would be brought to praise him.

John Piper has well stated that what drives MISSIONS in the church is the concern to see the worship of Christ established in places and hearts where that worship is presently not happening. Missions will not go on forever. Evangelism

will soon cease. But not worship. Worship is FOREVER. The 2nd major purpose of the church, in this age, is MISSION. We take the Gospel to those around us, near and far, in hopes that they too will become worshipers of our Triune God.

Ps. 67:1-3 *May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, Selah*

² *that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations.*

³ *Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you!*

