

Worship under the new covenant

The replacement of the temple

The Gospels give various indications of the way in which Jesus replaces the Jerusalem temple in the plan and purpose of God. For example, Matthew records his claim that 'one greater than the temple is here' (12:6). As the incarnate Son of God, Jesus represented God's royal presence and authority more fully than did the temple. Moreover, his cleansing of the temple expressed God's imminent judgment against those who abused it (*cf. particularly Mark 11:12–21). At the end of the Gospels, the resurrected Jesus indicates that he will continue to draw many into relationship with himself through the witness and teaching of his disciples, thus becoming the centre of salvation and blessing for the nations (Matt. 28:18–20; Luke. 24:46–49; cf. John 12:20–33). The prophetic hope of the nations' uniting with the faithful in Israel to acknowledge and serve the LORD is being fulfilled in Christ. The tearing of the curtain of the temple from top to bottom at the moment of his death (*e.g. Matt. 27:51) further suggests the opening of a new way of access to God.

Jesus' cleansing of the temple in John 2:12–22 more explicitly reveals him as the one sent to replace the institutions of the Mosaic covenant. 'Destroy this temple' he claims, 'and I will raise it again in three days' (v. 19). The insight that this saying referred to his resurrection body came only after he had been raised and the disciples 'believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken' (v. 22). John indicates that Jesus' concern to establish the purpose of God for Israel, Jerusalem, and the temple will destroy him. Because of this zeal, the Jewish leaders will bring about his death, but Jesus will take up his life again. The temple is fulfilled and replaced in John's perspective by the death and resurrection of the incarnate Son of God, which secure the ultimate liberation from sin and bring believers to eternal life. The apostle Paul later extends this image to include the community of those who are united to Christ by faith and who are indwelt by his Spirit (*e.g. 1 Cor. 3:16–17; 2 Cor. 6:16–18; Eph. 2:20–22).

Worship 'in spirit and truth'

In John 4:20–24, a Samaritan woman inquires about the appropriate place to worship God, leading Jesus to speak more fundamentally about *how* to worship God acceptably. In contrast with Samaritan worship, Jewish worship was truly based on divine revelation and was therefore honouring to God (v. 22). However, 'the hour is coming and now is' (RSV), when the OT method of approaching God is to be fulfilled and replaced (vv. 21, 23). The coming 'hour' is the time of Jesus' return to the Father (*e.g. John 2:4; 7:30; 12:23; 13:1; 17:1). Through his cross and resurrection the new temple is raised up (2:19–22) and the Spirit is given (7:37–39). Thus, Jesus becomes the means by which the Father obtains 'true worshippers' (Greek, *alēthinoi proskynētai*) from every nation (4:23; cf. 12:32). This expression suggests that the OT pattern of worship prepared for the reality which was to come in Jesus.

Worship 'in spirit and truth' (4:23) involves acknowledging Jesus as the truth (14:6), who uniquely reveals the Father and his purposes (8:45; 18:37). It also means receiving from him the Spirit who is available for all who believe in him (7:37–39). Jesus is not the object of worship in John 4 but the means to a God-honouring worship under the new covenant. True homage and devotion to God is possible only for those who recognize the significance of Christ and yield him their allegiance. Furthermore, the relationship with God that Jesus makes possible is not tied to any earthly 'place' (4:20) or cult, for the prophetic hope of the temple as the centre for the universal worship of God in the End time (*e.g. Is. 2:1–4) has been fulfilled in the person and work of the Messiah. The exalted Christ is now the 'place' where God is to be acknowledged and honoured. The Father cannot be honoured unless Jesus is given all the honour due to him as the Son (*cf. John 5:22–23; 8:49).

The Greek verb *proskynein* is used elsewhere in the NT to show that the Son of God himself is to be accorded the homage and devotion due to the LORD God of Israel (*e.g. Matt. 14:33; 28:9, 17; Luke 24:52; John 9:38; Heb. 1:6; Rev. 5:9–14; cf. Phil. 1:9–11; Rev. 1:12–18). Even where the terminology is not employed, it could be argued that apostolic preaching aimed to bring people to worship Christ in the sense of yielding their allegiance to him as Saviour and Lord (*e.g. Acts 2:36–39; 10:36–43; cf. Rom. 10:9–13). 'Bending over to the Lord' in NT terms means responding with repentance and faith to the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Those who are

concerned about God-honouring worship will be pre-occupied with bringing people to Christ. Such worship also involves praying to him (*e.g. Acts 7:59–60; 1 Cor. 16:22b; 1 Thess. 3:11), calling upon his name as Lord (*e.g. 1 Cor. 1:2), and obeying him in all the affairs of life.

Pauline perspectives on new covenant worship

The worship that Jesus' sacrifice makes possible

The apostle Paul describes Jesus' death as 'a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood' (Rom. 3:25, NIV; cf. Eph. 5:2). Only by his sacrifice can the wrath of God be averted (*cf. Rom. 1:18–28; 2:5). Paradoxically, as in OT teaching about the sacrificial system, it is God who provides the means of forgiveness, cleansing and restoration. In Romans 5:8–9 Jesus' blood/death is again identified as the means by which sinners are justified and saved from the wrath of God. It is the sacrifice which secures for believers all the blessings of the new covenant and the kingdom of God.

In response to what God has done for believers in Jesus Christ, they are to present themselves to him as 'living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God' (Rom. 12:1). The sacrifice in question is their 'bodies', meaning themselves as a totality, not just skin and bones (*cf. 6:13, 16, 'offer yourselves'). Christ's obedience makes possible a new obedience for the people of God. As those who have been brought from death to life, through Jesus' death and resurrection (*cf. Rom. 6:4–11), they belong to God as a 'living sacrifice'. This is further described as their (literally) 'understanding service' (Gk. *logikēn latreian*), suggesting that the presentation of themselves to God in Christ is the essence of Christian worship. The mind is certainly central to Paul's teaching here, but his focus is not simply on rationality. The service for which he calls is obedience motivated by faith in Jesus Christ and what he has done for believers. The lifestyle of those whose minds are being transformed and renewed by God will no longer be conformed to the values, attitudes and behaviour of 'this age' (Rom. 12:2; cf. Col. 3:9–10; Eph. 4:22–24). Acceptable worship is the service rendered by those who truly understand the gospel and want to live out its implications in every sphere of life. In common parlance the word 'service' is so linked to Christian gatherings that the Bible's teaching on the whole of life as the context in which to offer 'divine service' is easily forgotten.

Worship and Christian ministry

The link between ministry to others and service to God is particularly obvious in what Paul says about himself. In Romans 1:9 he indicates that his service takes place specifically in the sphere of gospel ministry. Intercessory prayer is part of it (1:8–10), but gospel preaching is the focus and goal of all his activity (1:11–15). In Romans 15:16, Paul again describes his work using transformed worship terminology. As 'a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles', he is God's designated servant, bestowing benefits on the Gentiles with the gospel. Indeed, he is engaged on Christ's behalf in discharging a 'priestly' ministry. Sacral terminology is used in a transformed way to portray the work of preaching by which he enables the Gentiles to offer themselves to God as an acceptable sacrifice, 'sanctified by the Holy Spirit'. Gospel preaching brings about the obedience of faith through Jesus Christ, which is the 'understanding worship' that pleases God. Since preaching was not regarded as a ritual activity in Paul's world, he clearly gives that ministry a novel significance when he describes it as the means by which he worships or serves God.

The apostle uses another verb (Gk. *leitourgein*) in Romans 15:27 to describe the service offered by certain Gentile churches to 'the poor among the saints at Jerusalem'. The service to which he refers is financial support. The Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings and owe it to them literally 'to benefit them in material things'. Here, and in 2 Corinthians 9:12 ('this service that you perform'), the terminology refers to the bestowal of public benefits on those in need by those with means (*cf. also Phil. 2:25, 30). However, this is clearly a ministry that will glorify God (2 Cor. 9:13) and such gifts are 'a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God' (Phil. 4:18, NRSV). The notion of worshipping or serving God *by means of serving one another* is thus implied.

Worship and edification

Paul regularly uses the terminology of upbuilding or *edification*, rather than the language of worship, to indicate the purpose and function of Christian gatherings (*e.g. 1 Cor. 14:3–5, 12, 17, 26; 1 Thess. 5:11; Eph. 4:11–16). This imagery portrays the founding, maintaining and advancing of the church as God’s eschatological ‘building’. While all ministry must be understood as a response to God’s grace, and not in any sense as a cultivation of his favour, ministry to others is an aspect of our service or self-giving to God. Moreover, edification is really the exalted Christ’s work in our midst, through the gifts and ministries that he empowers and directs by his Spirit (Eph. 2:20–22; 4:7–16; see Spiritual gifts). When Christians gather together to minister the truth of God to one another in love, the church is manifested, maintained and advanced in God’s way.

It may be best to speak of congregational worship as a particular expression of the total life-response that is the worship of the new covenant. In the giving and receiving of various ministries, Christians may encounter God and submit themselves to him afresh in praise and obedience, repentance and faith (*cf. Col. 3:16; 1 Cor. 14:24–25). Worship and edification can be two different ways of describing the same activity. Ministry exercised for the building up of the body of Christ is a significant way of worshipping and glorifying God.

Drawing near to God through Jesus as high priest

Jesus’ high priestly ministry

Hebrews says much about how the ministry of Christ fulfils and replaces the priesthood and cult associated with the old covenant. ‘Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings’ are all set aside by ‘the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all’ (10:5–14, NIV). As the high priest of the new covenant, he has entered once for all into the heavenly sanctuary, ‘having obtained eternal redemption’ (9:11–12, 24–28). The writer several times insists on the unique and unrepeatable character of Jesus’ sacrifice, in contrast with the numerous and repeated offerings prescribed in the OT (*e.g. 7:27; 9:24–28; 10:10, 12, 14). The priestly ministry of Jesus is superior because it involved the offering of *himself* as a pure and unblemished sacrifice to God (7:26–27), securing all the benefits promised in Jeremiah 31:31–34 (*cf. Heb. 8:6–13). As a heavenly high priest, ‘he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them’ (7:25). He is willing and able to go on applying the benefits of his once-for-all sacrifice to believers, in the midst of all their trials and temptations (*cf. 4:14–16; Rom. 8:34; 1 John 2:1–2). In the argument of Hebrews, the sacrifices, altar and priesthood of the OT all find their fulfilment in the saving work of Jesus Christ, not in some ongoing activity in the Christian congregation.

Experiencing the benefits of Christ’s saving work

In two key passages of exhortation, Hebrews challenges Christians to hold fast to their confession and to keep on ‘drawing near’ to God with confidence (4:14–16; 10:19–23). This is another important worship term adapted from the LXX (Gk. *proserchesthai*, e.g. Exod. 16:9; Lev. 9:5; Num. 16:40). In both cases, the appeal is based on the fact that Christ is the perfected and enthroned high priest, who has entered the heavenly sanctuary by means of his death and heavenly exaltation and opened up ‘a new and living way’ into that sanctuary for us. Christians can approach God without the aid of human priesthood, because they rely on the priestly mediation of Jesus Christ. ‘Drawing near to God with confidence’ is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. It is the expression of an ongoing relationship of trust and dependence (10:22, ‘with a true heart in full assurance of faith’). In 4:16 it means specifically seeking mercy for past failures and ‘grace to help us in our time of need’.

Although believers must draw near to God individually, it is also true that those who turn to Christ come *together* into the heavenly presence, to join by faith in the celebration of the heavenly assembly (*cf. 12:22–24). The notion of collectively drawing near to God is similarly suggested by the context of Hebrews 10:22. Gathering together is an important means of encouraging one another to persevere in love and obedience (10:24–25; cf. 3:12–14). As Christians expose themselves to the ministries of others and to the word of God, they engage with God as the family of God together.

As in Romans 12:1, in Hebrews Christian worship is also the service rendered in everyday life (Heb. 9:14; 12:28, where *latreuein* is used). The motivation and power for such service is specifically the cleansing that comes from the finished work of Christ (9:28) and the hope which that work sets before believers (12:28). Gratitude expressed in service is the sign that the grace of God has been grasped and appreciated. However, the writer introduces a more serious note when he asserts that acceptable worship is characterized by ‘reverence and awe’, and supports his challenge with an allusion to the coming judgment of God (‘for our God is a consuming fire’). Hebrews 13:1–7 shows what this means in terms of practical lifestyle.

In 13:8–16 there is a restatement of the theme that the OT system of worship finds its fulfilment in the work of Christ, concluding with another reference to the worship that is ‘pleasing to God’ (vv. 15–16). The ‘sacrifice of praise’ Christians are to offer to God through Jesus is ‘the fruit of lips that confess his name’. This could involve the celebration of Christ as Saviour and Lord in personal or corporate acts of praise. However, the writer’s meaning here cannot simply be restricted to what might be called ‘church activities’. His concern in the immediate context is to exhort believers to acknowledge Christ *in the world*, in the face of opposition and suffering (vv. 12–14). In its widest sense, this sacrifice of praise will be rendered by those who confess Jesus ‘outside the camp’, in various forms of public testimony or evangelism. The offering up of praise to God is certainly not just a matter of singing hymns or giving thanks in a congregational context, though these activities can be a stimulus to effective proclamation elsewhere (*cf. Eph. 5:18–20; Col. 3:16–17).

The heavenly locus of new covenant worship

Like Hebrews, the Revelation of John focuses on the realm where Jesus the crucified Messiah reigns in glory. The whole of life is to be lived in relation to the new Jerusalem and the victory of ‘the Lamb who was slain’ (5:12). Visions of heaven portray the offering of adoration and praise to God and the Lamb, and the language of worship pervades the whole document. Most significantly, the Greek worship term *proskynein* is used twenty-four times, in ways that indicate the centrality of this theme to the author’s message. In most passages the word describes some form of homage to the living and true God by heavenly beings or by those redeemed from earth (Rev. 4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 11:1, 16; 14:7; 15:4; 19:4, 10; 22:9). Such homage is offered by gesture and by words of acclamation and praise.

However, despite this interest in the worship of the heavenly host, John’s apocalypse also concentrates on the earthly scene. Various forms of idolatry are portrayed (9:20; 13:4, 8, 12), together with prophecies of the awful judgment coming upon those who bow to false gods and refuse to acknowledge the living and true God. John effectively divides humanity into two categories, the worshippers of the dragon and the beast, and the worshippers of God and the Lamb (*e.g. 14:1–11). The vision of the new creation (21:9–22:5) portrays the future of the faithful in terms of a city where God himself dwells (21:22) and where his servants serve him unceasingly (22:3; Gk. *latreuein*, cf. 7:15). This fulfils the ideal of the OT, which was only partially realized for Israel in the prescriptions of the Mosaic law. Meanwhile, faithful service to God as ‘a kingdom and priests’ on earth is commanded (1:4–6; 2:1–3:22; 14:12; cf. Exod. 19:6; 1 Pet. 2:5, 9).

More than any other NT book, Revelation stresses the importance of praise and acclamation as a means of honouring God and encouraging his people to trust and obey him. The pattern of the heavenly assembly suggests that singing the praises of God and the Lamb is a way of affirming fundamental gospel truths and of acknowledging God’s powerful but gracious rule over nature and history. Together with teaching and various forms of exhortation, it can strengthen Christians to maintain their confidence in God and in the outworking of his purposes in a world devoted to idolatry and every kind of God-rejecting activity. Testifying to the goodness and power of God in the congregation of his people can be a means of encouraging faithful testimony before unbelievers in everyday life.¹

¹ D. G. Peterson, [“Worship,”](#) ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 859–863.