

WORSHIP, THE EARLY CHURCH, AND US
ACTS 2:42

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Singer-songwriter John Fischer wrote several years ago, **“Never before, at least in my lifetime, has worship been more important to Christians; and never before has it been so complicated and tentative, as people shuffle from church to church seeking the right blend of worship experience for their families in what seems like an endless zero-sum game.”** (*Moody Magazine*, July/August 2002)

The term “worship wars” was coined to describe the struggle that many churches have had over worship styles. The kind of music used is often central to this discussion. A George Barna survey found that three of every ten church attendees report that music is the single most important factor in their choice of a church. In 2020 George Barna surveyed practicing Christians and found that 66% of older Christians prefer hymns. Boomers, my generation, still by a slight plurality, also prefer hymns. Younger generations tend to prefer more contemporary music. The encouraging thing, at least from the perspective of us pastors, is that Barna also found that only 17% of church people would change their attendance pattern if there was a change of music style in a congregation.

The larger, and perhaps more complicated and confusing issue, is: What is Biblical worship? Robert Webber was a seminary professor who thought and wrote a lot about worship. He argues that Biblical worship is a performance in which God is the audience, the congregation is the performer, and those who stand up before the congregation are the prompters. Too often the mentality of evangelical Christians is that preachers and musicians are the performers and the congregation is the audience. Robert Webber says that most Christian congregations are functional blasphemers in that they come to Sunday morning worship as an audience. May that not be true of us.

What is Biblical worship? What should it look like? What are the parameters, the boundaries, that mark off worship that pleases God? The passage before us this morning serves as a springboard for consideration of these questions.

In our study so far of the Book of Acts we have looked at the birth of the church at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon the first Christians in a miraculous way. We have considered Peter’s sermon that was a response to the question of the Jews in Jerusalem about what was going on. We have seen that there was an excellent response to that message. Last time we saw that those people who responded, who repented of their sin and put their faith in Christ, were baptized in water. The church now begins to grow, both in terms of numbers and maturity. We are going to consider this morning the activities that characterized these early Christians and contributed to the success of the early church.

I.

We are going to begin then by looking at THE MEETING OF THE EARLY CHURCH. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE MEETING OF THE EARLY CHURCH) According to Acts # 2 v. 42, **“And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”** The original term for “continually devoting” is one word. It refers to a steadfast, single-minded commitment to a certain course of action. The people with this commitment were Jews who had previously been complicit in the rejection and death of Jesus. They had experienced a dramatic conversion. Now they were committed to Jesus as the Messiah.

This new commitment was demonstrated first by devotion to “the apostles' teaching.” At this early stage that teaching came directly from the apostles of Christ and was communicated by mouth. These Jewish Christians were well versed in the Hebrew Bible. They needed to learn more about the details of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus and about the theological implications of those things. They were eager to get the story. This teaching was foundational to the development of the church.

John Stott was a famous British preacher. He says, **“All worship is an intelligent and loving response to the revelation of God because it is an adoration of his Name. Therefore, acceptable worship is impossible without preaching. For preaching is making known the Name of the Lord, and worship is praising the Name of the Lord made known.”** (Stott, *Between Two Worlds*)

These new Christians were also committed to “fellowship.” Literally the text calls it “the fellowship,” which implies that this was a distinctive group. They were bound together by their commitment to Christ. Paul would later expand upon the implications of this when he wrote about the church as the body of Christ and the family of God. He would explain how this fellowship would entail responsibilities of Christians to love one another, to encourage one another, to rejoice with one another, to comfort one another, and to stimulate one another to love and good deeds.

There is no conjunction in the text of v. 42 following “fellowship.” Some scholars conclude that breaking of bread and prayer further describe the nature of this fellowship. The bigger question has to do with the meaning of “breaking of bread.” Was the author Luke talking about Christians simply eating together? Was he referring to church pot lucks? Or was he talking about observance of the Lord's Supper? The fact that the other three activities in this verse have obvious religious meanings has prompted many commentators to conclude that Luke was describing meals taken together that included the remembrance of the Lord's death.

Then finally Luke speaks of “prayer.” Literally it is “the prayers,” suggesting perhaps some kind of organized prayer gathering.

These four elements that are described in v. 42 are generally associated in our minds with worship. The passage does not use that term. In fact the meetings of the church in

the New Testament are never called “worship services” or “worship meetings.” The New Testament writers use descriptions of what we commonly call “worship services” like this: They “gathered together to break bread.” They “came together.” “...when you assemble.” We tend to think of this as worship. Just how does the Bible use the term “worship?”

II. A.

(II. THE OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND OF WORSHIP) Let’s consider for a moment THE OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND OF WORSHIP. I would like to begin by looking at THE MEANING OF THE HEBREW TERM for worship--- *haveh*. (II. THE OLD TESTAMENT... A. THE MEANING OF THE HEBREW TERM---*HAVEH*) The word most often translated as “worship” in the Old Testament is *haveh*. It originally meant “to bow down.” It was used of people bowing down before someone in a superior position in life, like a king.

Archaeologists years ago discovered an illustration of this when they found this stone pillar. (BLACK OBELISK 1) It is called the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser. It depicts scenes from the life of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser who is mentioned several times in the Old Testament. Jehu was king in the northern kingdom of Israel in the 800s BC. His reign is described in 2 Kings #9 & 10. (BLACK OBELISK) This particular scene shows King Jehu bowing down before Shalmaneser. His kingdom was overpowered by the Assyrians. So he had to bring tribute to Shalmaneser. He also had to bow down to him in a public acknowledgment of the superior position of the Assyrian king.

The word *haveh* is used this way a number of times in the Old Testament. (GENESIS 42:6) In Genesis #42 v. 6 we read, “**Now Joseph was governor over the land. He was the one who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed themselves--- *haveh*--- before him with their faces to the ground.**”

The term was also used to describe the actions of people who bowed down before idols. The Second Commandment declared that God’s people were not to worship, or bow down, to these idols. But they were to do this before the true God. At times God’s people are called upon to literally do this. (PSALM 95:6) Thus in Psalm 95 v. 6 the psalmist declares, “**Oh come, let us worship--- *haveh*--- and bow down;/ let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!**”

The followers of Islam have carried on this ancient literal tradition of worship in their daily practice of prayer. They are required to down with their forehead touching the ground as they point toward Mecca and utter their prayers.

The Old Testament also comes to use our word for “worship” in a more figurative and general sense, in a way closer to what many of us think of as worship. (GENESIS 22:5) In Genesis 22 v. 5, for example, we read, “**Then Abraham said to his young men, ‘Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.’**” The use of *haveh* here seems not to focus on bowing down. Instead there is an expectation of some kind of sacrifice. Isaac is carrying wood for a

burnt offering, and he raises the question about where the animal is for sacrifice. Worship here seems to focus on animal sacrifice. The story also includes willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his special son.

B.

Let's consider then THE GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS of worship that we find in the Old Testament. (II. THE OT... A. THE MEANING... B. THE GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS) Jewish worship was focused on a place. First, it was the tabernacle, or moveable tent, that was the center of worship. Then it was the temple in Jerusalem. Eventually the Jews would utter their prayers while facing toward Jerusalem.

Animal sacrifices had a central role in Jewish worship. Also there were certain festivals and feasts that played an important part in the worship of Israel. Three times a year all Jewish men were supposed to show up at the tabernacle or temple. Worship was supposed to be both individual and corporate.

Music was involved in some aspects of worship, but not in all. Some Levites were tasked with the responsibility of making music in the temple in Jerusalem. Psalm 150 gives us a flavor of what that music included. The first part of the psalm is a call to worship God in His sanctuary and in His world. (PSALM 150:3-4) Then the psalmist says, **“Praise him with trumpet sound;/ praise him with lute and harp! 4 Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe!”** (PSALM 150:5-6) **Praise him with sounding cymbals;/ praise him with loud clashing cymbals./ Let every thing that has breath praise the Lord!’ Praise the Lord!”** The Lord seems to be pleased with a diversity of voices and a diversity of sounds in praise directed toward Him. Our music leader Don does an excellent job of providing us with that kind of diversity.

III. A.

(III. THE NEW TESTAMENT PRACTICE OF WORSHIP) Next we want to consider THE NEW TESTAMENT PRACTICE OF WORSHIP. The first thing that we want to do is look at the use of the most common Greek word for “worship” in the New Testament. So we shall consider THE MEANING OF THE GREEK TERM--- *PROSKUNEO*. (III. THE NEW TESTAMENT... A. THE MEANING OF THE GREEK TERM--- *PROSKUNEO*) *Proskuneo* in classical Greek meant “to kiss.” In early Egyptian pictures on the temple and tomb walls worshippers are pictured as throwing kisses to the gods. Perhaps that is how the Greek word came to be associated with worship.

By the time of the New Testament, however, the Greek word had come to have a meaning and usage of “bow down,” in much the same way that *haveh* in Hebrew was used. Like the Hebrew word, *proskuneo* was used at times of bowing down to rulers and of bowing down to the gods. We see this literal sense used in Matthew #2 v. 11 where the wise men come to see Jesus. (MATTHEW 2:11) Literally the text says, **“And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped--- *proskuneoed*--- him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered**

him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.” Falling down the wise men prostrated themselves before Jesus in an act of worship.

In Matthew #4 the devil appears to Jesus in a series of three temptations. In the third temptation the devil takes Him to a mountain and shows Him the kingdoms of the world. (MATTHEW 4:9) According to v. 9, **“And he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship--- *proskuneo*--- me.’”** Again worship is associated with bowing down on the ground before someone.

More often in the New Testament *proskuneo* has a figurative sense. (ACTS 8:27) In Acts #8 v. 27, for example, we read, **“And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship--- *proskuneo*...”** This Ethiopian had come to Jerusalem to participate in the various activities that were associated with Jewish worship. Luke did not mean simply that the Ethiopian came to fall on his face in the temple. The author is implying more than that.

B.

Consider then for a few moments THE RANGE OF APPLICATION. (III. A. B. THE RANGE OF APPLICATION) The term “worship” in the New Testament has a range of meaning. It has a general sense such as that in Acts 8:27, which we just looked at, and Acts 16:14. (ACTS 16:14) In Acts #16 v. 14 we are told, **“One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.”** Luke is describing Lydia as a woman whose life was characterized by devotion to the God of Israel. She prayed to Him, observed the feasts, followed His laws, and associated with other Jews.

In Acts #18 v. 13 Luke refers to Jews bringing accusations against Paul before a Roman judge in Corinth. He quotes them as saying, **“This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law.”** What did the Jewish accusers mean by their use of the term “worship?” They meant that Paul was demonstrating commitment to Jesus. He was teaching about Him and persuading others to follow Him. Paul was claiming that Jesus was God’s Son and the means by which people could be rightly related to the God of Israel. That constituted their understanding of worship in this context.

But also in the New Testament there is a more specific meaning given to the term “worship” at times. (REVELATION 4:10) Look at Revelation #4 vv. 10 & 11. The Apostle John describes a vision that he has of the future: **“...the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship--- *proskuneo*--- him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying,/ (REVELATION 4:11) ‘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.’”** So “worship” here has a specific reference to verbal praise of the God of the Bible. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Given this usage of the word for “worship” in the New Testament it seems reasonable to understand that worship has a broad and a narrow meaning. At times we Christians can talk about worship in a general sense. Worship refers to those activities that demonstrate that we are followers of Jesus. It can include our attendance at church, the code of life by which we live, the use of our time and money, our reading of the Bible, our prayers, and our conversations about God.

It is also legitimate to speak about worship in a specific, narrow sense. As in Revelation #4 we can speak of worship as an act involving verbal praise of the Triune God. That praise may involve the spoken word or words that are sung.

In considering the New Testament meaning of worship we should also note that the Christian understanding of worship has many similarities to Old Testament worship. The church, after all, has its roots in Jewish Old Testament practices. Worship in the New Testament, in the general sense, includes prayer and music and proclamation of God’s Word and praise and obedience to God’s Word. Worship may be individual or corporate.

A couple of significant differences are that worship is no longer related to a place. Worship in the New Testament is not focused on a building or on one geographical location. It also does not involve animal sacrifice. The death of Jesus is regarded as the final and sufficient sacrifice. The biggest difference, of course, is that Jesus is central to Christian worship.

Most of the elements described in our passage in Acts 2:42 do not relate to worship in the narrowest sense. Yet they seem to describe activities that occurred in the meetings of the early church. The apostle’s teaching seems to have been central to the entire life of the church. But teaching is not of itself worship in the narrow sense. Likewise fellowship seems to have been central to the life of the church. It seems to have occurred in conjunction with the meetings of the church. But fellowship is not in itself worship in the narrowest sense. The breaking of bread may have involved the remembrance of the Lord’s death in what we call “communion,” or “the Lord’s Supper.” That was commanded by Christ. Perhaps it would fall into the narrow sense of worship. Prayers may indeed involve praise and direct worship of God. Prayers of confession and thanksgiving and requests, however, would not seem to me to fall into the narrow category of worship. While our communication is with God our prayers here focus on our needs or on our sins or on specific good things that have happened.

Music is seldom mentioned in descriptions of synagogue services in this early time period. So worship is possible without music. Music is not mentioned in our passage in Acts 2:42. The epistles, however, speak about singing, and many scholars suspect that there are a number of quotations from early hymns in the New Testament. So at an early time music was probably incorporated in the meetings of the church. Some songs focus on praising God. They are examples of the narrow sense of worship. Others may

be songs of encouragement or may tell a story about our Christian experience. But all of these kinds of music are legitimate things to include in the meetings of the church.

IV. A.

(PROJECTOR ON--- IV. THE MODERN APPLICATION) We come finally to THE MODERN APPLICATION. There are a couple of points to consider here. First, there is OUR PERSONAL AND CORPORATE WORSHIP. (IV. THE MODERN APPLICATION A. OUR PERSONAL AND CORPORATE WORSHIP) As individual Christians we are responsible to worship the God of the Bible. It is perhaps helpful to keep in mind the meaning of the English term "worship." That word actually comes from "worthship," meaning "worthy of reverence." In a general sense worship can refer to any activity that reflects reverence or devotion to the God of the Bible. It can include reading the Bible, prayer, care for other people, obedience to Christian standards, giving our financial resources to charitable and Christian causes, and church involvement. In a narrow sense, as we have seen from the Biblical usage, worship also refers to praise of God. That may involve spoken words or words that are sung. It may involve a physical position of kneeling or prostration or even standing.

Christians also have a corporate responsibility to worship. Part of our responsibility before God is to worship as a group. (HEBREWS 10:24) In Hebrews #10 vv. 24 & 25 the author says, "**And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, (HEBREWS 10:25) not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.**" There are some Christians who have physical disabilities and health situations that make it hard for them to be present in the congregation. But there are other Christians who are just negligent in not being physically present. If that is true of you, it is important that you realize that you are missing out on our presence, and we are missing out on your presence. The Bible says that we need to be connected in person to the meetings of the church.

So in our service we have some elements that are worship in the narrow sense. We have songs of praise to God. We have prayers of praise to God. Perhaps communion could also fall into this category. Other parts of our service are worship only in the broader sense. We have fellowship when we greet one another during the service and before and after the service. Preaching is not directly worship, but it is essential to it. We have reading of Scripture and encouragement of one another and prayers. We provide an opportunity to give financially. While these things may not all be worship in the narrow sense, we find from our passage today a Biblical basis for making them part of our Sunday meetings.

B.

Think then for a few moments about THE KEY INGREDIENTS of worship. (IV. THE MODERN APPLICATION A. B. THE KEY INGREDIENTS) In John #4 Jesus has an encounter at a well with the Samaritan woman. As a Samaritan she was part of a religious system that accepted only the first five books of the Bible. Furthermore, the Samaritans claimed that Mt. Gerezim was the place where God's people were

supposed to meet for worship rather than Jerusalem. Jesus also reveals that this woman has had five husbands and that the woman with whom she was currently living was not her husband.

(JOHN 4:23) In John's gospel #4 vv. 23 & 24 Jesus says, **"But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. (JOHN 4:24) God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."** God is looking for people who will worship Him in spirit and in truth.

This woman's worship was off on both counts. It was not worship in truth because it said that Mt. Gerezim was the proper place to worship. Also the Samaritans did not accept the entire Hebrew Bible. Worship that is pleasing to God must be based on the whole Bible. It must have the right content. It must have the right God in view. It must have a correct understanding of the way to relate to this God.

This woman was also not worshipping in spirit. She was sinning. She was living in violation of her own religion's standards. She was involved in immorality. Worship that is pleasing to God must have right content and must come from a right spirit. It involves objective content and a right subjective response. It involves the head and the heart. We are all sinners. Our worship will always be imperfect because of that. But when we are in flagrant violation of God's standards, our worship is unacceptable. Is your worship being offered in spirit as well as in truth?

There is forgiveness. The Samaritan woman repented. She accepted Jesus' claim to truth. She turned from her sin to faith in Jesus. She became a worshiper in spirit and in truth.

Worship in spirit and in truth assumes that the primary audience is the Triune Godhead. (PROJECTOR OFF) Much of the discussion about worship styles has to do with personal preferences and what we get out of worship. There should be some benefit, some dividend that comes to us when we are involved in Biblical worship. But the primary focus in Biblical worship should be God. Is He pleased by our worship? Is He pleased by our lifestyle, by our music, by our fellowship, by our teaching, by our prayers, by our giving, by our treatment of one another?

One specific thing which Jesus requested us to do is to remember His sacrifice for us by observing the Lord's Supper. It is one way of worshipping Him. It is a practical means of ascribing worth to Jesus Christ. In just a moment we are going to do that. But first let's have a word of prayer.