

“Holy Ground”: A Theology of Christian Worship

A Study and Discussion Guide for Digging Deeper

by Keith Stanglin

In this guide, each lesson is summarized in a couple of sentences. Then a longer outline helps viewers follow along some of the main points. Discussion and reflection questions are also provided. Embedded in the discussion questions are instructions for outside reading. Readings without hyperlinks may be downloaded separately.

Episode 1. Introduction: In Search of True Worship

Summary

A good way to examine Christian worship is to ask good questions such as, “What is worship?” and, “Who is worship for?” Reflecting on these questions will lay the foundations for our study of worship.

Outline

Extraordinary encounters:

- 1) Are not encouraged or sought much in our culture.
- 2) Are analogous to the feelings evoked by the worship of God.

Word studies: English “worship” comes from the same root word as “worth” or “worthy.” What do you regard as worthy? Where people spend their time and money indicates what is of utmost worth; it is what they worship.

Greek words for worship: *Proskynao* literally means to “bow toward and kiss” (as in Jn. 4:20-24). *Latreuo* can also be translated simply as “worship” or “serve” (as in Heb. 12:28).

Discussion Questions:

1. What words come to mind when you hear the word “worship”?
2. Have you ever complained about the worship service? What was your complaint?
3. How would you define worship? What is worship? Who is worship for?
4. What is the goal/purpose(s) of worship? Should we get something out of worship?
5. Read “Worshiping the Triune God” (in course materials). Discuss and edit the document (in a group or groups, if possible), as if to use in your own church. Which points would really resonate with your church? Would any statements be controversial or not as well received?

Episode 2. Trinitarian Worship: A Uniquely Christian Practice

Summary

This episode considers the relational nature of God. Because of his nature, worship is primarily theocentric, directed ultimately to God the Father. Worship is also through the Son, the Word made flesh. The Word points to the unbegotten Father, and word is the primary means through which the worship encounter occurs. Finally, worship is in the Holy Spirit, who lifts the people of God into the presence of the Son and Father.

Outline

Who is this God that we worship? What can or should we say about this God who is the object and the focus of Christian worship or liturgy?

I. God is holy love. 1 Jn. 4:8: God simply is love. It is a relational attribute. It is the communication of goodness to the other.

II. God is a Tri-unity. We worship God the Father through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.

A. Theocentric/God-centered: 1. The Father is worthy of praise before anything or anyone else. Rev. 4:8-11. 2. True worship points to the Father. 3. We may contemplate God and his divine attributes.

B. Christocentric: 1. Jesus Christ is a proper object of worship. Rev. 5:9-13. 2. Worship informed by Christology is logocentric, word-centered. Jn. 1:1-2. 3. Worship is incarnational or embodied.

C. Pneumato-centric/Spirit-centered: 1. The Spirit is also worthy of all our praise and adoration. 2. Pneumato-centric worship signals the importance of God's presence. 3. We are brought around full circle again to God's holiness.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do think God created?
2. Can you think of any analogies that help you understand the relationship between God and creation?
3. How would you describe the one we worship? How should our understanding of God's nature affect our worship of this God?
4. Do you think your church properly balances emphasis on the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in its worship assemblies?
5. Read John Witvliet, "The Trinitarian DNA of Christian Worship" (in course materials). What are some ways to make worship more explicitly Trinitarian?

Episode 3. The Foundation of Worship: God's Gracious Initiative

Summary

The divine initiative precedes and grounds worship, a theme that runs throughout Scripture. The history of redemption is a history of God seeking worshipers. True worship, therefore, is a humble response to grace that begins and ends with God. The recognition that God is active in worship is expressed well in the prayer for illumination.

Outline

Working definition of worship: Worship is the church's humble response of gratitude for God's grace, a life-transforming encounter with the Holy Trinity, by which the church is drawn near to God through praise and is mutually built up through service. True worship entails the experience both of God's transcendence and of God's immanence.

A. God seeks worshipers. Worship does not begin with us. Why is it important to acknowledge this? We do not worship what we do not know. There is an assumed context, a prior relationship. ("I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt.") We know God because God comes to us first. See John 4:20-24. How has God sought his people?

B. Creation. See Rev. 4:11.

C. Redemption. See 1 Chr. 28-29. The books of Chronicles provide an excellent case study, since worship is so central to the narrative; much of it is focused on worship in the temple. E.g., see 1 Chr. 28:9. God is said to *דָּרַשׁ* (*daresh*) every heart; and we can *דָּרַשׁ* in return. God seeks our hearts, so that we might seek and find him. The command to Solomon is clearly relational. He is not commanded to know about God, but to know God. God "causes to understand," gives understanding, or teaches. Solomon's seeking God is a response to God first seeking Solomon's heart and giving him understanding. If Solomon chooses to reciprocate, then God will be found.

The people met God in his word, in prayer, in song, and in the meal.

D. Christ's and the Spirit's continual mediation. See Rom. 8:27, 34.

E. Worship as our humble response. Our worship is preceded and accepted by God's grace.

Discussion Questions:

1. Read 1 Chr. 28:9-20. What principles for worship do you see here?
2. What do you think about this idea of God helping us in our worship?
3. How can we open our hearts to God's activity and operation in the context of worship?
4. How should the good news of the gospel—what God has done for us in Christ—affect our worship?

Episode 4. “Watch Your Step”: Worship as Divine Encounter

Summary

We have described worship as an encounter with God. The biblical words generally translated “worship” imply a meeting in the presence of a superior. A survey through biblical examples of such encounters reveals their extraordinary nature, producing both fear and joy in the human subject. Once the initial servile fear is accompanied by joy, it is transformed into filial fear, a disposition of reverence and awe that must be central to the human heart as it approaches God’s presence.

Outline

Liturgy is an Anglicized form of the Greek word *leitourgia*, which literally means the people’s work or public service. It came to mean religious service, and is used this way in the NT, in passages like Acts 13:2.

Included in our definition is the claim that worship is a life-transforming encounter with the Holy Trinity.

A. Meeting with God

B. Life-Altering

See, for example, Genesis 32:30-31; Exodus 3:5-6; 24:9-11; 40:34-35; Joshua 5:13-15; Judges 13:22; 2 Samuel 6:9; 1 Kings 8:22-66; Psalm 96:4, 9, 11-13; 98:4-9; 99:1; 100:1-2; 149-150; Isaiah 6:1-5; Ezekiel 1:28; 3:15; Matthew 8:26-27; Luke 1:11-13; 1:29-30; 2:8-10; 24:30-35; Acts 4:31; 9:31; Hebrews 12:18-29; Revelation 1:17.

1. Fear.
2. Joy

Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe a meeting with God? How would you feel at such a meeting? What analogy would you suggest?

2. How do people in Scripture react to such a meeting, and why?

3. How is such a meeting with God similar to worship?

4. Can you think of moments in life when two or more very different emotions co-exist simultaneously?

5. Read Dan Sheffler, “A Vocabulary for Worship,” at

[https://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=33-01-022-](https://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=33-01-022-v&readcode=&readtherest=true#therest)

[v&readcode=&readtherest=true#therest](https://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=33-01-022-v&readcode=&readtherest=true#therest). Which three Latin words does he discuss, and what does this have to do with worship?

Episode 5. Holiness, Transcendence, and Immanence

Summary

God's holiness is a central feature of encounters with God. Holiness includes both the difference characteristic of God's transcendence and the embracing characteristic of his immanence.

Outline

Isa. 6:1-7

Holiness is the fundamental tone that sounds through the whole literature of the OT. Set apart, but not separated from, as much as distinct. With holiness, there is an emphasis on God's distinction and transcendence. One reaction to God's holiness is fear.

But with holiness, there is also an emphasis on God's immanence. Those who draw close to God's holiness will either be made more holy or will be destroyed. God is the one who makes us holy (cf. Lev. 20:7-8, 26).

Fear and joy, distinction and attraction, separation and embracing.

If we truly understand who God is—wholly other, holy love, infinite beauty—and we understand who we are in his presence—miserable sinners, but eternally loved—then emotions and affections will probably follow. When we properly understand God and ourselves, then we don't have to manipulate anything.

God says, "You are my sons and daughters, and I love you." But we cannot skip over the initial fear of the Lord.

Even after Isaiah was forgiven and spoke to God as a friend, I don't think he ever forgot the terror of "Woe to me!" or got over the fear. If Isaiah was ruined, and if the sinless and blessed seraphim are so humbled in God's presence that they cannot praise God without hiding, then may we, too, seek God's face always, here and in eternity, with reverence and awe—for our God is a consuming fire.

Discussion Questions:

1. What does the word "holy" mean? How does it relate to worship?
2. What are proper fear and proper joy in worship? In what ways do we hinder them?
3. Read Arie Leder, "Holy God, Holy People, Holy Worship" (in course materials). Which biblical texts has this reading helped you understand better? Are there points in the article that you agree and/or disagree with?
4. Have you ever thought about worship being "dangerous," as Leder says? What does that mean?

Episode 6. Two Dimensions of Worship: Vertical and Horizontal

Summary

There are two dimensions or directions of worship. In its vertical aspect, worship is praise and adoration directed to God. In its horizontal aspect, worship includes edification of one another and service and love directed toward human neighbors, which is regarded as service to Christ himself.

Outline

A. Relationality of Worship

We have two relational responsibilities—one to God, the other to neighbor (Mt. 22:37-40).

B. Biblical basis

1. Vertical.

2. Horizontal.

3. Examples of the two dimensions intertwined in worship contexts. OT sacrificial system; Isa. 58:3-7; Mic. 6:6-8; Mt. 5:23-24; Ac. 2:42-47; 1 Cor. 11:27-29; 1 Cor. 14; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; Js. 1:27.

C. Priority and Interdependence

1. Priority of vertical.

2. Interdependence between vertical and horizontal.

D. Purposes and Results of Worship

1. Vertical.

2. Horizontal.

Discussion Questions:

1. How is service to other people also worship to God? What do you think about the expression, “All of life is worship”?

2. Read Isaiah 58:3-7 and Micah 6:6-8. What do these passages imply about the relationship between the vertical and the horizontal?

3. Which of these aspects—the vertical or horizontal—has priority? Why?

4. What are the goals or purposes of the worship assembly?

5. What sort of words, songs, and worship activities help us meet those goals?

Episode 7. Theological and Practical Meaning

Summary

This episode considers the connection between the vertical direction of worship as an experience of God's transcendence and the horizontal direction of worship as an experience of God's immanence. Let's think about how these can be expressed and reinforced in worship.

Outline

1. Vertical- God's transcendence, holiness as separation.

Worship, as an encounter with God, is a life-transforming experience of his transcendence.

2. Horizontal- God's immanence, holiness as participation.

Worship is in continuity with daily, mundane life. And so worship extends beyond the walls of the sanctuary and assembly.

What does this look like in practice, on the ground?

1. As an experience of God's transcendence, worship must express and symbolize the vast discontinuity between our sinful, finite existence and the holy, infinite being of God. The church is in the world, but not of it. In every aspect of the lives of God's people—their knowledge, thought, behavior, proclamation, and yes, their worship—God's people may be influenced by culture, but they must never be radically determined and dictated by secular culture. The line is not always clear. When the line migrates too far in one direction, other believers are there to pull it back. Where do we draw the line when it comes to worship? God's holiness as transcendence means there should be something different about worship.

2. As an experience of God's immanence, the church's service as worship should express the involvement and care of God in everyday life. Just as there may be a certain discontinuity between worship and everyday life, there is also continuity. For most contemporary churches, this is a call for a renewed and elevated perspective of service. As the body of Christ, the church's service to its neighbors is evidence of the presence of God's reign. This is what it means for us to be sent. We may not be of the world, but we are certainly in it.

Discussion Questions:

1. Where is the line between being inevitably *influenced* by culture and being radically *determined* by culture? Do you think our worship has become determined by culture or secularized in any way?
2. Read Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down*, 279-96 (in course materials). What does she mean that the church's worship must be both "alien" and "resident" (292-93)? What other insights did you gain from this chapter?
3. How can we express the transcendence and the immanence of God in worship?

Episode 8. Worship: Gathered and Sent

Summary

Worship is the heartbeat of the church. The rhythm of being gathered and sent is vital to the Christian life. The liturgy is the primary activity of God's people, from which flows the "liturgy after the liturgy," the work and witness of God's people in the world.

Outline

A. Focus on "gathered"

1. Gathered (passive voice). Called out from the world. It is by God's grace that we are here.

2. Purposeful. Usually, when you gather things or people together, it is for a reason or purpose. What is the goal or purpose of communal worship? Once we determine the goals, we can better evaluate the means and practices we implement.

3. Communal aspect. "We" are gathered, a group of many called out to come together. "In *ekklesia*" (1 Cor. 11:18; 14:19, 28, 34). The communal aspect is reflected in different metaphors: Body (1 Cor. 12:12-13), Temple (1 Cor. 3:16-17). Rom. 15:6.

4. Gathered to God. Transported to the throne room.

B. Focus on "sent"

1. Sent (passive voice). Sent by God. *Missio* = sending. Not my 167 hours of the week now.

2. The sending flows from the gathering. The gathered assembly is the center from which everything else in life flows. Isaiah 6 exemplifies the archetypal worship. Isaiah is given a mission.

3. Purposeful. The task or mission is the "liturgy after the liturgy." Romans 12.

4. Both in the assembly and outside the assembly, there is a vertical and a horizontal aspect to worship. In the assembly, the vertical predominates; outside the assembly, the horizontal.

Discussion Questions:

1. How should we think about God gathering and sending the church? In what way is God the agent?

2. Does viewing earthly worship as a participation in heavenly worship change the way you look at the assembly? Does the assembly feel like such participation?

3. How can we enhance or highlight that worship is an intentional gathering and sending—through, for example, words spoken or written, architecture?

Episode 9. Tradition and Ritual in Worship

Summary

Many Christians assume there should be little or no place for ritual and tradition in sincere worship. Yet tradition is central to being human and Christian. A look at the Old Testament, New Testament, early church, and everyday life confirms the importance of ritual in worship.

Outline

Ritual: a practice that is deliberately repeated either individually or in a community.

According to Gail Ramshaw, there are 4 types of religious rituals, based on their purpose:

1) Reminder of the cycles of nature. 2) Connect the present community with the past. 3) We have rituals, or rites, of passage, celebrating pivotal moments in life. 4) Connect people with God. I would add a fifth: that rituals connect people with one another.

<i>OT Genres on Worship:</i>	<u>Law/Regulations/Manual</u>	<u>Narrative/Description</u>	<u>Worship Text/Prayer</u>
	Leviticus	1 Kgs/2 Chr.	Pss./Num. 6
<i>Christian Genres on Worship:</i>	<u>Worship Manual</u>	<u>Narrative</u>	<u>Epistles</u>
	?	Acts	1 Cor., Hebrews

Even “low-church” American churches have a liturgy. All churches have an order; it’s just a question of what kind.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the concern about ritual or tradition in worship? Is it a legitimate concern? Why or why not?
2. Have you ever been to a worship gathering of another religious group? Did they have noticeable rituals? What did you think about those practices?
3. Based on Pss. 100, 150, and 136, what would you say about worship? What about Lev. 1-10?
4. How should we think about the relationship between a) the heart that God seeks and b) worship regulations? Are they in tension or coherent together?
5. Read 1 Clement 40-41, at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/1clement-lightfoot.html>; Didache 6-10, at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didache-roberts.html>; Justin, *First Apology* 65-67, at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0126.htm>; and Hippolytus, *The Apostolic Tradition* 4-6, 9, 21 (in course materials). What do you think about these practices and guidelines? Is there any principle or practice here worth appropriating in our contemporary worship contexts?

For Further Reading

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