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SORTING THROUGH THE CONFUSION ABOUT WORSHIP:  
AN APPRAISAL OF TWO PARADIGMS

By Allan J. McNicol

The following story is told about a once well-loved professor at one of the theological schools in Austin. There had occurred in chapel something that many of us who gained our theological education in the sixties remember that passed under the euphemism of experimental liturgy. It involved a young lady doing a dance in the assembly. Later in the day, still bothered by the event, the professor came into class. "Let us pray," he said somewhat abruptly. "Lord, please forgive us -- for we sure do not have any idea what we are doing."

This incident well captures the sentiments of many who have watched views about worship ebb and flow in the churches of Christ over recent years. Ranging from such diverse areas as the architecture and furnishings to what we do on Sunday evenings or Wednesday nights, or whether our worship should be "low-church" or "high-church," we seem to be frustrated about our practices of worship.

Indeed, there are some who call into question the very terminology which we have traditionally used to describe our assembling together to praise God. For example, even our use of

the term "the worship service" has been criticized because it is said to promote the idea that Christian worship may be thought of as being confined to certain places and times; and this is contrary to the New Testament understanding of worship which cannot be limited to a particular place or time (John 4:21-24).<sup>1</sup> Given this level of confusion over the nature of worship it is clear that we have no consensus as to what we are doing, or ought to do, when we gather to praise God in our assemblies.

### Two Paradigms of Worship

At a more substantive level it seems to be the case that, at present, we are undergoing a paradigm change in our understanding of the nature of worship. We seem to be moving from one paradigm that may be described as keeping "the five acts of worship" to a new paradigm which can be called "all of Christian life is worship." As in all paradigm changes the process of transition is not smooth. Even now it is not clear which model will be the dominant one that will guide the thinking about worship in churches of Christ in the next decade.

Under the old paradigm it was argued that the worship service consisted of performing a set of distinctive acts commanded by God (singing, prayer, proclamation of the word, observance of the Lord's Supper, and the contribution). Without the regular and precise performance of these acts the will of God was not being followed and worship was illegitimate.

A central idea informing this paradigm was that just as God had given detailed descriptions as to how he should be worshipped under the provisions of the Old Covenant, and that minute varia-

tions from the precise pattern of obedience were subject to harsh punishment, so also under the New Covenant a similar standard of obedience was demanded in keeping the five acts of worship. These acts thus constituted a set of sacred rites that had an importance in and of themselves over and above anything else done. It was a matter of utmost importance that one attend "the worship service" and do everything in the correct manner while there ("decently and in order").

A corollary to this paradigm is the emphasis which has been placed on the need for authority for the acts of worship. Only those acts of worship clearly prescribed in scripture were considered to be legitimate activities for the worship of the church.<sup>2</sup> This has been interpreted to mean that not only is an additional act of worship (such as a sacred dance in the assembly) unwarranted but also that the procedure for observance of the acts of worship themselves must be warranted in scripture by either command, example, or necessary inference.<sup>3</sup> This paradigm for thinking about worship has been dominant in the churches for the past century.

During the past decade a new paradigm on worship has surfaced and come to preeminence in some churches of Christ. The new paradigm is still in a state of development and consequently only its general contours are clear. In the words of one of the framers of this paradigm

the concept of worship in the New Testament is in no way restricted to special acts but rather encompasses the believer's whole life offered as a sacrifice to God. Consequently whatever he does should be performed as an act of worship, to God's honor and glory (cf. Matt. 5:16; Col. 3:17).<sup>4</sup>

Here, evidently, is a position that is almost the direct opposite of the old paradigm. Instead of giving special weight to five carefully delineated acts of worship the adherents of this model argue that in a proper reading of the New Testament there are no limitations on our worship to time, place, or number of acts. Indeed, the central theological idea which informs this paradigm asserts that since God's special presence is no longer confined to a place (Jerusalem temple) but now resides in the heart of the believer, Christian worship thus takes place wherever and whenever the believer obeys Christ.

An obvious corollary of this position is that the function of the Christian assembly is very different under the new paradigm. For the adherents of this model the purpose of Christians gathering together is not to perform special acts but primarily to attain mutual edification or spiritual building up of the community (1 Cor. 14:26). The emphasis on the need to observe special acts in order to be pleasing to God disappears. It is far more important that the horizontal dimension - the Christians encouraging and edifying one another - be emphasized than the vertical dimension of our need to praise God.

The purpose of this paper will be to show that both paradigms, as they are popularly conceived, have major flaws and difficulties in providing an adequate model for worship in the church today. As we critique the paradigms an alternative to the two paradigms will emerge. Procedurally, we will analyze and assess the strengths and weaknesses of the two paradigms. The results of our study will be set forth in our conclusion.

## The Five Acts of Worship: An Assessment

It is seldom realized by those who hold observance of the five acts to be their foundational paradigm for worship how much this model is derived from developments within church history. The fact remains that a large amount of the form and structure of the worship service in the average church of Christ today is directly dependent upon developments that ensued in Western Church history since the Reformation. Especially relevant for our understanding of the emphasis that Restorationists place on the five acts would be knowledge about the history of worship in England in Puritan and Believers' church circles during the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Indeed it must be underscored that our present practices are influenced as much by the Puritans and their successors as by the first-century church.

As evidence for this claim it should be noted that the foundation of the Puritan movement was respect for the authority of the word of God.<sup>5</sup> As the radical Protestant party in Elizabethan England who were supplemented with exiles returning from Geneva after the Marian persecutions, the Puritans welcomed Calvin's teachings about worship. Calvin held that the human ordering of the worship of God was mere presumptuousness, since only God could dictate how he should be worshipped. This led the Puritans and their successors to a rigorous study of the Bible which they considered to be the infallible source on doctrine and a blueprint for everything that was to take place in worship.

The Puritans believed that the worship of the apostolic church was characterized by six ordinances: prayer, praise, proclamation of the Word, baptism and the Lord's Supper,

catechising, and the exercise of discipline. The terminology of "ordinances" seemed to be preferred over the medieval "sacraments" because it connoted, in connection with the Bible, the idea of a divine command or decree placed in writing in the text. This was important because the Bible was the only authority to which the Puritans appealed in their debates with the Roman church and its sympathizers. Based on this well-substantiated outlook it is understandable that the nineteenth-century Restorationists, who came directly from this heritage, also put the identification of the ordinances at the center of their concern to discover the worship and practice of the church. Robert Milligan's Scheme of Redemption, one of the most influential biblical theologies produced by the nineteenth-century Restorationists, gave center stage to the ordinances and listed them as: prayer, praise, preaching the Word, fasting, baptism, Lord's Supper, and the Lord's Day -- a very similar list founded on similar hermeneutical principals as the Puritans. Twentieth-century Restorationists have refined this number into the five acts which are routinely listed in literature and handbooks.

Moreover, in respect to worship, this view that the scriptures provide certain ordinances which must be obeyed is also dependent in its particulars upon the Puritans and their successors. So, as far as singing is concerned, the Puritan view that the praise of the church should be unadorned, unaccompanied by instruments, and simple enough to enable joint participation by all, was heartily endorsed by the Restorationists. The emphasis of the early Puritans in singing only Psalms because

they were scriptural (and thus approved by God) has its analogue in the constant Restorationist concern to determine that the hymns which we sing must be scriptural. The habit in Restorationist churches of using spontaneous prayers in worship is a direct legacy of the Puritans who hated the formalism of the Anglican prayerbooks.<sup>11</sup> The strong emphasis of the Puritans on the centrality of preaching from the text of scripture, and the concern to keep the Lord's Supper precisely as a divine ordinance, has also clear analogues in our Puritan religious heritage.<sup>12</sup> Thus, formally and structurally, traditional corporate worship in churches of Christ with its strong emphasis on keeping certain acts of worship as ordinances are remarkably similar to the Puritan and Believers' church traditions.

Nevertheless, it must be remembered that the Puritans and their successors, despite their professed intent to ground their worship in the practice of the early church, were, in essence, Reformers of the medieval or Constantinian church. Thus, their study of the scriptures to discover the biblical blueprint for worship was always done with an eye toward reform of abuses in an existing liturgy that was a perversion of New Testament practice.

The Puritans were good at compiling chapters and verses to serve as an impetus to make changes but were not so resourceful in reconstructing the ethos and theology of early Christian worship in its original setting as a means of getting the record straight. Since they understandably theologized on the bases of their immediate battles with the established church, it should be no surprise that the worship practices of the Puritans and their successors bore faint resemblance to that of the early church.

For example, their prayers of spontaneous utterance had little in common with the prayer forms of the early Christians who were heavily dependent for the structure and content of their petitions, on the Jewish synagogue of their era.<sup>13</sup>

The hymns of the early Christians were not the psalms of the Old Testament (as used by the Puritans) or the gospel songs of the nineteenth century, so loved by the Restorationists, but hymns of their own composition sung in praise to God or Christ their Redeemer. Furthermore, the way in which the Lord's Supper was observed also bore only passing resemblance to the practices of the early church. Reflecting the heritage of the past few centuries we never today take the Supper in the context of a meal. In the first-century house churches, the Lord's Supper was eaten regularly in the atrium of the home as part of a festive meal.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, the setting and function of preaching in the early church was vastly different to what we are accustomed today. The fact is that the observance of the five acts of worship, as is commonly carried out in the modern era, bears only passing resemblance to the form and substance of what we can determine that took place in early Christian assemblies. In itself, after nineteen centuries of mammoth changes in customs and languages have passed, this is to be expected. But, since the Restorationists have made such a point out of viewing what takes place in the assembly as the observance of prescriptive ordinances which must be performed according to letter, it is somewhat disquieting to find how selective they have been in following the practices of the New Testament church. My explana-

tion for this state of affairs is that Restorationists have been more reliant on the Puritans and their successors for the form and structure of the worship than the New Testament.<sup>15</sup> The true Restorationist today must critically explore the milieu of early Christianity to determine the actual practices of early Christian worship. Then and only then will he be in a position to theologize carefully upon the results of his investigation. If he does that he will quickly discover that the kinds of questions about which we have been so often concerned were probably never asked by the earliest Christians. That should give us some pause as to the adequacy of the old paradigm.

#### All of Christian Life is Worship: An Assessment

Within the Restoration Movement it has been observed for some time that whatever early Christian worship was it was something more than one culture system (the Christian ordinances) replacing another (the rituals of the Jewish temple). The terminology and structures of worship dependent upon the highly developed cultic rituals of post-Constantinian Christendom often have led us astray. They have dubious warrant in the New Testament or earliest Christian practice and should be carefully scrutinized before being used in our assemblies today. It is a fact that after several centuries elapsed in the history of the church major changes were made in the practice of Christian worship. By the time of Constantine, in many quarters, the Lord's Supper was perceived as a sacrifice and the ministry of the church as the New Testament equivalent to the Old Testament priesthood (viz. Christian worship had become cult).<sup>16</sup> This is a

major departure from New Testament Christianity, and we should be aware of the great influence in Christian history of liturgies based on this perspective. Thus, we applaud the call of some to purge these relics of the post-Constantinian era from the Church.<sup>17</sup>

It is in this context that advocates of the new model for understanding early Christian worship came forward to present their case. At the heart of their position is the understanding that Christian worship is not a cult wherein the sacred and secular are radically separated but is something that embraces all elements of Christian existence.<sup>18</sup>

The fundamental axioms of the new paradigm are two-fold. First, it is a given of this view that early Christian worship was radically disjunctive with the Hebrew worship of the Old Covenant. Under the Old Covenant, throughout the history of Israel culminating in the temple cult of Judaism, God approached his people and revealed his will to the elect in special places and times. But upon the impact of Jesus' life God's special transcending presence, first in our Lord, and then later in the believer through the Spirit, rendered inoperative both the ancient Jewish and Hellenistic rites and places.<sup>19</sup>

For the Christian, worship is not a set of acts or rites anymore, but the day-by-day, situation by situation, living out one's dedicated life to God. Whenever language about cultic service is used with reference to the Christian life it must refer to all of it (Rom. 12:1).<sup>20</sup> Second, since the Old Testament cultic rites have been obliterated by the New Covenant a new role must be found for the assembly of the people of God. An

appropriate model for what should take place in the assembly is 1  
Corinthians 14:26, "Let all things be done for edification."<sup>21</sup>

Hence the conclusion that the proper function of the assembly is not for the believer to seek grace from or to be judged by the One of Absolute Worth (after all this can take place anywhere at anytime), but simply to be encouraged to live the Christian life by our mutual association and teaching of one another.

### The First Axiom

Since both of these axioms are important theological statements we will now proceed to examine them in some detail.

Given the fact that within the bounds of this paper we cannot survey the whole Old Testament concept of worship, we will commence our discussion by paying special attention to one crucial aspect of it: the cultic sacrifices of the second temple era. At the heart of temple worship was the cultic idea of service. The idea goes back into prehistory in the Ancient Near East. Service to the gods in ancient temples was modeled after service given to human sovereigns in their palaces.<sup>22</sup> Especially in pagan religions the image of the deity was the central focus of the temple and had servants (priests) who supplied food (sacrifices) in analogy with what took place in the palaces of ancient kings.<sup>23</sup>

In Judaism, of course, there was no image of the Divine One. But in the second temple era great stress was placed on the belief that the glory or presence of Yahweh rested in the holy place in a special way. Only the priests (the high priest in the case of the holy of holies) could come into the direct presence

of Yahweh through the bringing of a sacrificial offering as a statement of homage or dedication to him.<sup>24</sup>

It is important to note that the ideas of service, worship, sacrifice, the bringing of praise and thanksgiving, and dedication of oneself to God are all intermingled in Judaism in the concept of bringing a sacrifice. As Hartmut Gese has pointed out, in his analysis of Deuteronomy 21:1-9, when the ancient planted his hands on the sacrificial victim, he was not so much transferring his sin to the victim but identifying himself with the life of the offering which was to be offered up as a dedication to God.<sup>25</sup> In short, to bring a sacrificial offering was to bring oneself as totally dedicated to God. Only by destroying one's old life and giving it over to God could one live and survive in God's holiness where alone there is a state of well-being (Lev. 19:1-2).<sup>26</sup>

Thus the offerings that were brought to Yahweh (Lev. 1-6) as sacrifices represented the dedicated service of the worshipper. The priest, the guardian of the place of the holy, was important because he was the one who was designated to take the offering into the direct presence of the Holy One. This, in essence, was what was involved in sacrificial worship in second temple Judaism.

With the translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek in this era two general terms were used to describe this worship. They were latreia (worship or service) and leitourgia (priestly service or worship). These terms are found many times in the Greek translations of the Old Testament and are very important in discussions about worship in the New Testament era.<sup>27</sup>

In the Old Testament only a priest could stand at the altar and in cultic holiness raise the offering of the dedicated one to Yahweh. But for the Christian community, after the death of Christ, the cultic role of the priest was transferred exclusively to Christ. As leitourikos, Christ by his death has gained access to the heavenly temple and has offered the perfect dedication and obedience of his own life, and proleptically, of his followers who were to come (Heb. 3:1; 4:11; 5:9-10; 6:20; 8:2-3; 9:14; 10:10-14). Thus, since Christ has offered the perfect sacrifice of his life at the altar of the heavenly sanctuary the whole earthly cult carried on at the second temple was rendered inoperative. Therefore the altar was conspicuously absent from the sparse furnishing at early Christian assemblies. Its absence, as compared to its vital role in Judaism and the Hellenistic cults, spoke volumes as to early Christian belief in the all sufficiency of the death of Christ.

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But in place of the altar and its service there was one very important item of furniture in an early Christian assembly. This was the table. What was its significance? To put it simply, it was thought that when the one presiding at the table took the loaf of bread and broke it (as Christ's body was broken) the one body (i.e., the church) was spiritually joined in vital union with her Lord jointly to praise God in thankfulness for the wonder of redemption.

Paul describes this activity at the table as an anamnēsis (remembrance - 1 Cor. 11:24-25). By this he does not mean a mere remembrance of the historical event of Christ's death in the past but a concrete re-experiencing of the perfect service of Christ

and dedication of ourselves in Christ's holiness before God. At the table, by eating the bread and drinking the cup, the believer is able to bring his dedicated life directly into God's presence through sharing in the benefits of the death of Christ (1 Cor. 10:17). This is Christian service (worship) at its most essential level; because, through his action at the table, the Christian is brought into a vivid union with the heavenly service of his Lord that mutually excludes any other cultic involvement on his part (1 Cor. 10:15-18).<sup>29</sup> As one who stood exclusively and directly under God's claim, as the priest functioned in the Jewish temple, all of the life of the Christian now is to be lived in holy service (latreia) to God.<sup>30</sup>

As the new priesthood (priesthood of believers), the Christians would go out from their household assemblies and demonstrate their holy calling in other ordinary settings in the world. Paul, who was very conscious that both pagan and Jewish intellectuals had taken the central terms (e.g., latreia and leitourgia) from the cultic service of ancient temples and applied them to one's spiritual praise to God in prayer and thanksgiving, was now able to refer to himself as a priestly minister (leitourgon) in his service to God among the Gentiles (Rom. 15:16; Phil. 2:17).<sup>31</sup> And, of course, in keeping with this thinking he considers that this holy service extends to all areas of our lives (Rom. 12:1). As such, the visible body of Christ constitutes a massive spiritual temple of God in the world where the service of the holy life is performed continually to God (1 Cor. 3:9; 1 Pet. 2:5,9). The cultic service of God's people (temple) is not confined to a particular place or time anymore.

It exists wherever believers live in conformity to God's claim.

As a result of this analysis of the biblical material we find ourselves in basic agreement with the first axiom of the paradigm that "all of Christian life is worship," namely: that early Christian worship marked a radical disjunction from the cultic service of the Jewish temple. But an important qualification to this agreement must be stated. Our analysis indicates that there are, as well, important continuities between the Old and New Testaments in their respective understandings of worship. For example, there is the idea, present in both Testaments, that the essence of worship is to offer oneself as totally dedicated to God. Under the Old Covenant the culminating point of dedication to God was localized at the altar in Jerusalem. But it should be remembered that for the early Christian the culminating point of the offering of oneself in worship takes place at a table - albeit that it may be found in diverse places scattered around the Greco-Roman world. In short, the new temple is the spiritual body of Christ: the church scattered throughout the world, but visibly present to an ancient each time a local assembly met at table.

#### The Second Axiom

On the basis of our analysis of the context of worship in the scripture we are now in a position to assess the second axiom of the new paradigm on worship, "the central purpose of the assembly is to edify one another." We will argue that this axiom is founded on a misconstrual of the function of an early Christian assembly. In place of this distorted view, we will defend the position that the central purpose of an early

Christian assembly was to present oneself before God in dedicated praise and service to him as a result of his redemptive act in Christ.

The issue is joined when we observe a comment on the purpose of the Lord's Supper made by an advocate of the new paradigm.

It should be noted that all of its purposes, as they are presented in the New Testament, are directed not to God, but are rather aimed toward the edifying of "the body."<sup>32</sup>

At best, this gives a minimalist view of the central role of the Lord's Supper for early Christian worship. It entirely misses the point that the Supper was for early Christian believers a concrete re-presentation and participation in the once-and-for-all perfect service of Christ. As Paul tells us what happened in the household assemblies, the one presiding at the table would break the loaf (1 Cor. 10:16) thus concretely, picturing the death of Christ. After the prayer of thanks (to God) the broken pieces were eaten by the many believers. Thus, by eating the bread and drinking the cup, they were spiritually nourished by their common participation in the perfect service of Christ.

As 1 Corinthians 10:17 indicates, the many believers, by all participating from the one loaf constitute the one visible body which is the earthly correspondent to the heavenly action of Christ. Here, pledging the same commitment to God as Jesus showed in going to the cross, the eschatological community awaited the final triumph of God's rule over his creation. As "the assembly of the first born who are enrolled in heaven" (Heb. 12:23), where it was believed the angels to be present, it seems preposterous to assert that what takes place in the assembly

primarily is "directed not to God." Indeed Paul claims that the presence of the Divine was so powerful that some in Corinth, who acted in an unworthy way at the table, became sick and died (1 Cor. 11:30). He charges the Corinthians to "discern the body," which contrary to a number of exegetes, does not refer to relationships between believers but to the crucified Christ.<sup>33</sup> Clearly, what took place in the early Christian assembly was done with a sense of the direct presence of God.

This view is substantiated when we examine other activities which took place at an early Christian assembly. When they met together they sang poems of their own composition (psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs)<sup>34</sup> in praise to God or Christ for bringing salvation.<sup>35</sup> Acts 2:47 refers to this as praising God. In the Pauline communities, with their strong emphasis on the presence of the Spirit, the songs inspired by the Spirit become the functional equivalent to use of the Old Testament psalter in the synagogue. The Christians sang their hymns as praise to God (1 Cor. 3:16-17; Eph. 5:18-20) as well as using them to exhort one another. Since they were inspired by the Spirit (1 Cor. 14:26) it was fitting that they be sung in the assembly where the sense of transcendence was most evident in the experience of the community.<sup>36</sup>

Besides observance of the Lord's Supper, singing of songs, and the offering of prayers, a number of other things also took place when the early Christians assembled. These ranged from such things as the holy kiss and the saying of Maranatha (1 Cor. 16:20-21) to the exercise of discipline and instruction to

believers from the scriptures on the true meaning of the coming of the Messiah.

A small glimpse of what went on in the Pauline churches may be taken from 1 Corinthians 14:26. Under the deep conviction that they had received gifts from the Spirit various believers would present a lesson, speak an ecstatic utterance, or say something that had been revealed to them by the risen Lord. In reference to this Paul exhorts the believers to use all these special gifts (panta) to attain the edification of the community.<sup>37</sup> Evidently, an important contributing role of the Spirit in providing these gifts was to produce spiritual growth (1 Cor. 14:3-5; 12, 17, 26; Rom. 14:19; Eph. 4:29).

But, of course, this did not mean that the edification of believers was the dominant purpose or goal of everything that took place in the assembly. When Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:26 that "all things should be done for edification" this is no more an absolute statement about the entire purpose of the assembly than when he says in Colossians 3:9 that a believer who "has died to all things" (panta) after baptism must therefore renounce everything that took place in his life before becoming a Christian. In both cases (1 Cor. 14:26 and Col. 3:9) the context indicates clearly that "all things" must be modified. With the latter Paul modifies "all things" by saying he means that the Christian should renounce wrath, anger, and similar things from his past. In the case of the former the exercise of the various gifts (all things) are not to hinder but contribute toward the edification of the community. The context of 1 Corinthians 14 indicates that this had not always been the case in the past.

Thus, we conclude that the goal of edification of believers was an important complement to what took place in the assembly -- but it was dependent upon the fundamental purpose of gathering: to meet around the table and participate in the once-and-for-all perfect service (latreia) of Christ.

Finally, as evidence of this point, we need to look at Hebrews 10:19-25, a passage that is quoted in favor of the view that the central purpose of the assembly is to promote mutual edification.<sup>38</sup> Yet, when one looks at the passage it turns out to favor the position that the point of the assembly is for the believers to gather together to praise God. The central argument of the unit is that through Christ the believer has free access to God and therefore we should not neglect the opportunity to draw near to Him.<sup>39</sup> For the writer of the epistle God dwells in his heavenly sanctuary surrounded by his ministering angels (1:6-14; 8:1-2,5; 9:8-10, 23-24; 12:22-25). The believer has been given permission to enter this sanctuary on the basis of Jesus' death who, by the shedding of his blood, consecrated and inaugurated the way for our entrance into heaven (10:10-20).

Consequently, the Christians were exhorted to "draw near" to God (10:22). This term (proserchesthai) comes from the Old Testament cult and referred to entrance into the temple to do service or worship.<sup>40</sup> Hebrews argues that those who have their "hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and their bodies washed with pure water," that is having been baptized,<sup>41</sup> have permission to enter the heavenly sanctuary or direct presence of God. The means by which the believers may draw near to God come through those things which take place in the assembly whereby God is

spiritually thanked and praised (4:16; 7:25; 9:14; 12:25-28; 13:16).

As a result of what our heavenly High Priest has accomplished the believer may now participate in the heavenly worship and, proleptically, experience the wonders of the age to come (12:22-29; 13:10-16). The point that is important is that for Hebrews, the setting and context of "drawing near" to God is worship in the assembly (10:25; 13:10).<sup>42</sup> To forsake the assembly is to leave behind the place where our salvation is provisionally experienced (6:4-8; 12:12-17, 25). Therefore, Christians are to exhort one another not to forsake the assembly; and, it should be noticed, that the exhortation is not the province of the assembly itself (although that is not precluded) but is something to be done at all times.

It is a total distortion of Hebrews 10:19-25 to claim that this passage teaches that the central role of the assembly is for the edification of believers. Rather, upon analysis, the unit confirms other passages in the New Testament which indicate that when Christians gather together to praise God they engage in the praise and worship of the Transcendent One as a result of the perfect service of Christ.

Therefore, the second axiom of the new paradigm that the central role of the assembly is edification is not confirmed. Manifestly, nothing should be done at the assembly that discourages the mutual edification of believers. But, in the end, Christians can only have a basis for edifying one another after they have come before and jointly submitted to the claims of their risen Lord in praise.

## Conclusion

In this essay we have assessed two paradigms for worship which are widely held within the churches of Christ. Both have been shown to be inadequate.

The first paradigm "the five acts of worship," as it is popularly conceived, has very thin warrant in the practices of the early church. Such a view often comes close to viewing Christian worship as a set of cultic acts analogous to those of the Old Testament and thus does not give full recognition to the radical new understanding of worship that came with the New Covenant.

The second paradigm adequately accounts for the radical newness of Christian worship but does not give enough attention to continuities with the Old Testament. The net result is a total misconstrual of the role of the assembly wherein edification of believers is given greater prominence than the praise of God when the reverse should be the case.

Perhaps adherents of both paradigms have become victims of failing to escape the banal effects of the shifting sands of history. Those who follow the first paradigm have not taken sufficient account of how dependent they are upon the Puritan reforms of liturgy that still left intact many questionable assumptions about worship held within the post-Constantinian church. Adherents of the second paradigm appear to have succumbed to the very prevalent modern tendency to give much more prominence to matters of interaction between believers rather than focus on transcendence.

At any rate, the churches of Christ need to get several

foundational points clear about worship. Foremost, our coming together, on the basis of our common Story, around the table each first day for the purpose of joining in spiritual praise to our Lord and God, is the most central and important contributing factor in giving us identity as the people of God today. This is worship par excellence. In order to facilitate the importance of these assemblies for worship we should rethink our view about both the facilities in which we assemble and the theologies and practices that inform what takes place in them. With regard to the former, to be closer to the practice of the early church, we should meet in places that accentuate the fact we are gathered around a table--not sitting before an altar. And with reference to the latter, we should give a lot more attention to fulfilling the intention of the early Christians when they gathered at the table. This has been beautifully stated by our late English brother G.Y. Tickle.

Jesus our great High Priest, our Sacrifice,  
Our Passover, rich gift of love divine,  
With thee we would into the Holiest rise  
Communing with thee in the bread and wine.<sup>43</sup>

Manifestly, when the early Christians met around the table, they were on earth, but they also entered into the spiritual world as well.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>  
Ervin Bishop, "The Christian Assembly," Restoration Quarterly 18 (1975) 222.

<sup>2</sup>  
Jack P. Lewis, "New Testament Authority for Music in Worship," The Instrumental Music Issue, Bill Flatt, ed., (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1987) 14-15.

<sup>3</sup>  
Ibid., For example, this has been the essence of the claim of those within the Restoration Movement who have argued

strenuously against the use of musical instruments to accompany the approved act of singing in the assembly. Playing an instrument was an act of corporate worship in the Old Testament (1 Chron. 23:6). As something that is not intrinsic to the act of singing the instrument appears not to have been used in early Christian worship and it is claimed, on the basis that it is an additional act of worship not warranted by the New Testament, that it should not be used today. As Lewis, alluding to an earlier writer says," either show where is New Testament authority for the use of an instrument or show why New Testament authority is not needed."

4

Bishop, "The Assembly," 224.

5

Horton Davies, The Worship of the English Puritans (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1948) 49.

6

Ibid., 51.

7

Richard Harrison, "Early Disciples Sacramental Theology: Catholic Reformed and Free," Classic Themes of Disciple Theology, Kenneth Lawrence, ed., (Fort Worth: T.C.U. Press, 1986) 90.

8

Robert Milligan, An Exposition and Defense of the Scheme of Redemption as it is Revealed and Taught in the Holy Scriptures (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 14th printing of the 1868 edition) 361-442.

9

A good example is Everett Ferguson, The New Testament Church (Abilene, Texas: Biblical Research Press, 1968) 54-56.

10

Horton Davies, Worship and Theology in England 1: From Andrewes to Baxter and Fox, 1603-1690 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975) 259.

11

Ibid., 191.

12

Harrison, "Early Disciples," 71-83. An interesting case in point noted by Harrison is the emphasis by Campbell and Stone on the Fraction, (i.e., the breaking of the bread) by the one presiding at the Lord's Supper. This reflects a direct continuation with an important emphasis in Reformed eucharistic theology. This emphasis appears to be forgotten in modern day churches of Christ.

13

Roger T. Beckwith, "The Daily and Weekly Worship of the Primitive Church in Relation to its Jewish Antecedents," Evangelical Quarterly 56 (1984) 69-80.

14

It is worthy to note Paul's condemnation of the abuse of this practice. Perhaps an elite group ate in the dining room while others had to eat leftovers in the atrium. This presumes the regular custom of eating the Lord's Supper with a meal. Wayne Meeks, The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) 158-159

documents this custom as being widespread in the early church despite Paul's objection to what was taking place at Corinth. J.A. Jungmann, The Early Liturgy to the Time of Gregory the Great, E.A. Brunner, Trans. (London: Darton, Longmann and Todd, 1959) 15 gives good information about ancient residences but goes too far when he claims that the clergy used the tablinum (dining room) and the ordinary believer was confined to the atrium.

15

Perhaps because of the strong use of the Old Testament by the Puritans Restorationist preachers have picked up many examples from this material to illustrate their view that worship involves obedience to a set of prescriptively demanded ritual acts. The cases of Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:1-2) and Uzzah (2 Sam. 6:3-8) are well known cases in point.

16

J.D.G. Dunn and J.P. Mackey, New Testament Theology in Dialogue: Biblical Foundations in Theology (London: S.P.C.K. 1987) 122.

17

As with any new movement in the church this view is being put forward today mainly in sermons and seminars. Bishop, "The Assembly," 219-228 is the most important statement of this position that I know of in the literature.

18

Bishop, "The Assembly," 221-222,225.

19

Walter Harrelson, From Fertility Cult to Worship: A Reassessment of the Worship of Ancient Israel (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1970) 36-37; Franklin W. Young, "The Theological Context of New Testament Worship," Worship in Scripture and Tradition, Massey H. Shepherd Jr., ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963) 93.

20

Young, "Theological Context," 81-99.

21

Bishop, "The Assembly," 226.

22

Harper's Bible Dictionary, Paul J. Achtemeier, ed., (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985) 1143.

23

Ibid.

24

Roland de Vaux, Ancient Israel: Religious Institutions 2 (New York: McGraw Hill, 1965 paperback edition) 415.

25

Hartmut Gese, Essays on Biblical Theology, Keith Crim, trans. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977) 94-107.

26

Paul D. Hanson, The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986) 228.

27

In the inter-testamental period a major change in understanding the role of sacrifices occurred. Fueled by widespread intellectual criticism of the idea that a spiritual being could

be appeased by a material offering, many Jews began to reinterpret the cultic language of the Bible. For example, Philo of Alexandria, who lived about the time of Christ, considered that the Jewish sacrifice in the temple was a major symbolic system which parabolically expressed the offering of the dedicated prayers and lives of the Jews to God. Building on earlier tendencies to spiritualize the cult (Hos. 6:6; Isa. 1:11-17; Ps. 51:14-19), writers in the Hellenistic and Roman eras argued that keeping the Torah, almsgiving, prayer and praise, that comes from the Spirit, is the functional equivalent of the dedication of oneself to God through offering a sacrifice at the temple (Sir. 35:1-10; Let. Arist. 169-170; 234. T. Lev. 5:5-6; Jud. 16:16). Thus the latreia and leitourgia of the temple took on a broader meaning of "spiritual worship." This understanding of Old Testament cultic terminology clearly was a contributing factor to early Christian thinking on the subject of worship.

28

Bernard Cooke, Ministry to Word and Sacraments: History and Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 528-529.

29

Krister Stendahl, Meanings: The Bible as Document and Guide (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 189.

30

Cooke, "Word and Sacraments," 528-530.

31

Cooke, Ibid, puts it well, "Christians are a priestly people because they are the Body of him who is the one high priest; in joining their lives and persons to his sacrifice they are giving to the Father the worship that is his due."

32

Bishop, "The Assembly," 226. Bishop's interpretation of the Supper as edificatory follows strongly in the Zwinglian tradition. At the Supper one reflects on the past salvific death of Christ, proclaims the death of Christ in the present, and for the future reflects on the eschatological hope of the return of Christ.

33

As well stated by I.H. Marshall, Last Supper and Lord's Supper, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 114. Clearly in 1 Corinthians 11:27 the reference to body is not to the church but to the crucified Lord. The close proximity of this verse to 11:29 must govern the meaning of the latter and not the various meanings of body in other places in Paul.

34

I agree with Martin Hengel, Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity, John Bowden, trans. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 80 that the threefold term psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs does not refer to different genres of song but to one and the same kind. The most important Greek translations of the Old Testament for religious songs are simply picked up and used here.

35

Frances Young, Sacrifice and the Death of Christ (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) 61-62.

36

Jack Lewis, "New Authority," 41-42, gives a good list of commentators who see Colossians 3:16-17 and Ephesians 5:18-20 as emerging from a description of what happened in an early Christian assembly. To his list one should add the influential Catholic commentators, Schnackenburg and Schlier. Note Rudolf Schnackenburg, The Church in the New Testament, W.J. O'Hara trans. (New York: Crossroad, 1965) 40-47 for details.

37

Cf. "oikodomeō" in The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology 2, Colin Brown, ed., (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 251-253.

38

Bishop, "The Assembly," 225. The argument that is made is as follows: Hebrews 10:23 sums up the paraenetic theme in the letter by exhorting the community to "hold fast the confession of our hope." This is linked to 10:24 with another injunction encouraging the Christians to spur one another to love and good works. It is argued that the call not to forsake the assembly (10:25) is important, because it is at the assembly where the encouragement takes place.

39

Nils Dahl, "A New and Living Way: The Approach to God According to Hebrews 10: 19-25," Interpretation 5 (1951) 401.

40

Ibid., 408.

41

Ibid., 406-408. Dahl points out that in later Rabbinic exegesis the sprinkling of blood on the people to ratify the covenant at Sinai was juxtaposed with ritual washings for the initiation of priests to purify them to enter the sanctuary, and various other ritual baths. Hebrews seems to draw a similar linkage between the inauguration of the New Covenant with the death of Christ and "the application of the work of Jesus to the individual, who in baptism is sanctified and consecrated by his blood."

42

Ibid., 409.

43

Great Songs of the Church (Revised) (Abilene, Texas: A.C.U. Press, 1986) 370.

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