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“WORSHIP” AS SERVICE: THE NEW TESTAMENT USAGE OF *LATREUŌ*

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Over 25 years ago the venerable A. W. Tozer concluded, “Worship is the missing jewel of the evangelical church.”¹ In their 1982 volume on worship, R. Allen and G. Borrer reflect upon Tozer’s words, returning a very similar diagnosis for the contemporary evangelical arena. They write, “The situation seems not to have changed appreciably. . . .”² Happily, though, they do observe a growing sensitivity to the problem.³

This sensitivity has resulted in the publication of an impressive number of volumes on worship by evangelicals in the last few years.⁴ The various writers approach worship from different angles, making somewhat different points in their discussions, and arguing for their own particular solutions. Yet, these varied efforts still add up to an overall trend: a mushrooming interest and accelerating impetus by evangelicals addressing the field of worship.

¹ A. W. Tozer, *Worship: The Missing Jewel of the Evangelical Church* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, n.d.) 1.

² R. Allen and G. Borrer, *Worship: Recovering the Missing Jewel* (Portland: Multnomah, 1982) 7.

³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴ Some of the significant evangelical works since 1980 are: Allen and Borrer, *Worship*; L. Flynn, *Worship: Together We Celebrate* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983); R. P. Martin, *The Worship of God: Some Theological, Pastoral, and Practical Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980); R. Schaper, *In His Presence: Appreciating Your Worship Tradition* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984); R. Webber, *Worship Old and New* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), and *Worship is a Verb* (Waco: Word, 1985). It is noteworthy that most of the major evangelical publishing houses are represented in just this short list.

Out of this unity in diversity in regard to the renewal of evangelical worship some commonly-held points of interest have emerged. Two of the more prominent of these have to do with: 1) a necessary change in attitude toward worship, and 2) a focused pre-occupation with the church worship service.⁵

The first of these is the almost unanimous emphasis that worshippers must be, in R. Webber's words, "active participants and doers"⁶ not mere spectators. The strong focus on the worship service, while very helpful, has not seen the same level of agreement in detail, although significant similarities are present.⁷

Yet, while appreciation is due these authors for their contributions to the renovation of evangelical worship, one crucial point of concern should be voiced. Could it be that the spotlight on worship is focused too narrowly? Is it possible that our pre-occupation with the worship service could lead to harmful neglect of the broader concept of worship seen in the NT?

In an attempt to redress a balance in the relationship between the individual and corporate aspects of worship, this article will probe four key passages: 1) Phil 3:3, which provides crucial teaching on this subject that is often overlooked; 2) John 4:23-24; 3) Heb 13:15-16; and 4) Rom 12:1.

This study is not a comprehensive view of the NT idea of worship. However, the data is sufficient to demonstrate the need to restore a wider understanding of worship within the present worship-renewal movement.

I. *Phil 3:3: Reconsidering a Neglected Aspect of Worship*

Although there is little present consensus on the theme (and structure) of Philippians,⁸ Swift's recent proposal of "partnership in the gospel" (Phil 1:5, NIV) as the central and structuring theme of the epistle⁹ has much to say for itself. Following the formal prologue (Phil

⁵ The choice of these two themes is not to be taken as the excluding or overlooking of other significant concepts and needs that worship renewal writers are developing.

⁶ Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 199. It is interesting that Webber could state this conviction with force even though he is found at a highly liturgical end of the evangelical spectrum on worship.

⁷ See, for example, the books listed in n. 4 (above) for their varied individual prescriptions for public worship.

⁸ R. C. Swift, "The Theme and Structure of Philippians," *BibSac* 141 (1984) 234-36.

⁹ Swift, "Philippians," 237; For a more in-depth exposition of this theme, see A. Boyd Luter, Jr., "Philippians," in *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible* (ed. Walter A. Elwell; Grand Rapids: Baker, forthcoming).

1:3-11) and a vivid biographical prologue (1:12-26), in which Paul describes his own costly side of their gospel partnership (1:5), this theme is broadly applied in 1:27: "Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (NIV).

Swift contends rightly that ". . . what constitutes a worthy walk occupies the body of the epistle."¹⁰ He goes on to demonstrate from the following verses that this worthy "lifestyle" (1:27), in obedience to their partnership in the gospel (1:5), consists of Christian unity (1:27) and steadfastness against enemies of the gospel (1:27-30).¹¹ Seen from this perspective, it becomes clear that unity is the overarching concern of chap. 2 and steadfastness is the linking subject in 3:1-4:1.¹²

When it is seen that the section beginning with Phil 3:1 is picking up and developing another facet of the previous brief discussion on steadfastness in 1:28-30, the supposed rough or unexpected transition between 3:1 and 3:2 disappears.¹³ Earlier, Paul had spoken of the need to suffer for Christ in the face of the opposition provided by enemies of the progress of the gospel in Philippi (1:28-30). At this point, after his strong ironic description of the Judaizing legalists (3:2),¹⁴ the Apostle proceeds to expose the subtle seductiveness of this distortion of the gospel by presenting the striking contrast of the nature of true Christianity (3:3) and the "before and after" example of his own life (3:4-14).

The third of the harsh epithets in 3:2 penetrates to the "heart" of the matter. In calling the Judaizers "the false circumcision" (NASB; "mutilators of the flesh," NIV) Paul states in no uncertain terms that these false teachers have misconstrued the covenant sign of circumcision given to Abraham (Gen 17:10, 14). They fail to realize the need to internalize and apply the covenant relationship with the Lord (Deut 30:6), one of the prime benefits that Jer 31:33 (compare Ezek 36:26-27) said would be forthcoming from God in connection with the New Covenant (31:31).¹⁵ Their grasp of a proper relationship with the Lord and the corresponding lifestyle (Phil 1:27; cf. 3:9ff) is thus totally deficient.

The Apostle now asserts that it is Christians who are "the circumcision" (Phil 3:3, NIV; "the true circumcision," NASB). In saying

¹⁰ Swift, "Philippians," 243.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 243.

¹² *Ibid.*, 244.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 247; See R. P. Martin, *The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 37-39, 136.

¹⁴ H. A. Kent, Jr., "Philippians," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (12 vols.; ed. F. E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 11.137-38.

¹⁵ See the excellent discussion in C. L. Feinberg, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985) 218-20.

this he undoubtedly has in mind the same idea that he expressed in Rom 2:28-29 and Col 2:11, referring to believers "... who have received the circumcision of the heart, whether they be Jew or Gentile."¹⁶

The rest of v 3 "... enlarges upon this idea by a series of participial phrases."¹⁷ As the true spiritual circumcision, Christians "worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh" (3:3, NASB). In the first phrase we encounter the focal usage of "worship."

To better understand the sharp contrast Paul draws here between the spiritual and Spirit-led worship of the true circumcision (3:3) and the external focus of the legalists (3:2) and his own unregenerate self (3:4-6), it is insightful to consider some of the additional passages on worship in the NT. But, first, a comparison of the two primary words for worship will prove useful.

In a brief, but helpful, discussion of this subject, L. Perry writes, "There are two Greek words for worship. One means 'to fall down' and the other means 'to serve.' These imply that Christian worship is motivated by a sense of awe and of love."¹⁸

The first of these Greek words for worship is προσκυνέω, which can also be rendered as "do obeisance to," "prostrate oneself before," and "do reverence to."¹⁹ It is the more common in usage, appearing 60 times in the NT. However, it is used only once by Paul, speaking of literally falling on one's face in worship in 1 Cor 14:25.

The other Greek word is λατρεύω, which is more commonly translated "serve,"²⁰ but is understood as "worship" in Phil 3:3 by NASB, NIV, KJV, and RSV. It is rendered the same way in the articles in the Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich Greek *Lexicon* and the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*.²¹

This second word for "worship" is used three other times by the Apostle Paul. In Rom 1:9 and 2 Tim 1:3 it means "serve." In Rom 1:25 the flavor of "worship" is undeniably present, although it should certainly be translated as "serve" (so NASB, NIV, KJV, RSV). The cognate λατρεία is also found in Rom 9:4 of the Jewish "temple worship" (NIV; "service," NASB), as well as the significant usage in Rom 12:1, which will be discussed later.

¹⁶ Kent, "Philippians," 138.

¹⁷ G. F. Hawthorne, *Philippians* (Waco: Word, 1983), 126.

¹⁸ L. Perry, *Getting the Church on Target* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1977) 210.

¹⁹ BDF, 723.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 468.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 468; K. Hess, "λατρεύω," *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (3 vols.; ed. C. Brown; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 3.549-51.

Thus, it is seen that the Greek word which Paul more often uses for “worship” frequently includes the wider shade of meaning of service (Rom 1:9, 25; 2 Tim 1:3). It would seem that, for the Apostle, “worship” is a broader concept within which narrower formal worship is occasionally referred to (Rom 9:4; 1 Cor 14:25).

Of all the uses by Paul, Phil 3:3 speaks most directly to what is at the core of Christian worship. It is something of a crux statement on this subject. Yet, there is good reason to hold that this pronouncement is basically a brief, though important, commentary and application of Jesus Christ’s teaching about worship in John 4.²²

II. *John 4:23–24: True Worshippers, Spiritual Worship*

Z. C. Hodges has aptly expounded the importance of this passage for a proper understanding of the biblical concept of worship.

. . . The Savior’s reply was as pregnant a statement on this theme as had ever escaped the lips of man. Indeed, once He had uttered it, it would be impossible thereafter for any man intelligently to ponder this theme without returning to consider those priceless words. As an utterance on worship they were timeless and absolutely definitive.²³

Against the backdrop of the Samaritan woman’s misconceptions and maneuvering (John 4:9–20), Jesus explains who “true worshippers” are (4:22) and why (4:23). E. F. Harrison, D. Guthrie, and E. A. Blum all note that 4:20–21 teach that the place of worship is not the primary factor in the new phase of God’s economy which Jesus is inaugurating.²⁴ What the Father seeks is those who worship “in spirit and truth” (4:23). Such worshippers must

. . . Realize that Jesus is the Truth of God (3:21; 14:6) and the one and only way to the Father (Acts 4:12). To worship *in truth* is to worship God through Jesus. To worship *in spirit* is to worship in the new realm which God has revealed. . . .²⁵

As Guthrie observes, “These are genuine worshippers as opposed to those who merely appear to be so by participating only in outward

²² Martin, *Philippians*, 138–39; Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 126.

²³ Z. C. Hodges, *The Hungry Inherit* (rev. ed.; Portland: Multnomah, 1980) 18.

²⁴ E. F. Harrison, “John” in *Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (ed. C. F. Pfeiffer and E. Harrison; Chicago: Moody, 1962), 1081; D. Guthrie, “John” in *New Bible Commentary—Revised* (ed. D. Guthrie and J. A. Motyer; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 938–39; E. A. Blum, “John” in *Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* (ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck; Wheaton: Victor, 1983) 286.

²⁵ Blum, “John,” 286.

ceremonies.”²⁶ Thus, the form of worship is not primary to our understanding of true worship either. “The main emphasis is on spirit,”²⁷ as 4:24 makes clear.

It is important to realize that, throughout this epochal passage, John uses προσκυνέω for “worship.” That is in keeping with his normal choice. Of the 60 occurrences of the verb in the NT, 35 are in John’s writings (11 in the fourth Gospel and 24 in Revelation). Of the 11 uses in his gospel, nine are in 4:20–24. Also, the lone use of the noun προσκυνητής (“worshipper”) is in 4:23.

Thus, there is a highly significant concentration of the common NT term for worship in John’s Gospel, particularly in Jesus’ prescriptive words of worship. On the other hand, John uses λατρεύω only in Rev 7:15 and 22:3, and λατρεία, in a negative sense, in John 16:2.

It would seem that there are two possible ways of explaining why Paul, in his parallel pronouncement on worship in Phil 3:3, chose to use *not* προσκυνέω, as in John 4, but λατρεύω. The simpler possibility, as noted earlier, is that λατρεύω is the word Paul used much more commonly. However, it is also quite conceivable that he is seeking to broaden and flavor the overall concept of “worship.” Even though Jesus’ words about the priorities of genuine worship being “spirit and truth” (John 4:23–24) should have been clear, perhaps the Apostle consciously sought to apply this idea for worship to service in the power of the Spirit (Phil 3:3; cf. Rom 1:9).

III. *Heb 13:15–16: New Covenant Sacrifices and Worship*

Because of the Jewish background that the Savior and Apostle Paul (Phil 3:4–6) had in common, it should be helpful to observe how another Jewish Christian writer employs his terminology. The writer of Hebrews provides a classic case in point.

The only occurrences of προσκυνέω are in Heb 1:6 and 11:23, with no significant insight for the present study being provided by either verse. By comparison λατρεύω is found six times, and λατρεία twice. The bulk of these inclusions are in the section in which Jesus’ high-priestly ministry under the New Covenant is developed (8:5; 9:1, 6, 9, 14; 10:2). They generally employ the imagery of the Old Covenant tabernacle and temple service/worship in contrast to the present ministry of Christ. The use in 9:14 is significant because it

²⁶ Cuthrie, “John,” 939.

²⁷ Ibid., 939; For the option that “spirit” here (John 4:23–24) is the human spirit helped to worship by the Holy Spirit, see L. Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 270–71.

refers to having our consciences cleansed “from dead works to *serve* the living God” (NASB, emphasis mine), similar to Phil 3:2–6.

For the purposes of this investigation, the most helpful use of λατρεύω in Hebrews is 13:10. It initiates a final contrast between the obsolete Old Covenant set-up (8:13) and the new order of Christ.²⁸ The participle of λατρεύω, translated “those who minister” (NIV) or “those who serve” (NASB), could just as easily be speaking of “Jewish worshippers in general,” because it is so employed elsewhere in Hebrews (9:9, 10:2).²⁹

In sharp distinction from such worship/service (13:10), which is clearly inadequate under the New Covenant, the writer proceeds to list several “sacrifices” (13:15–16) that are offered “through Jesus” (13:15). While we normally associate praise and thanksgiving (13:15) with corporate worship, the same is not necessarily true of the actions mentioned in 13:16: doing good and sharing.³⁰ L. Morris understands the “sharing” (κοινωνία) here as “money, goods, and . . . those intangibles that make up fellowship.”³¹

If such “sacrifices” can be legitimately constituted as New Covenant worship, then it is seen that the worship concept is indeed broad enough to encompass all the believer’s life, as Phil 3:3 implies and Rom 12:1 clearly teaches. However, a beautiful balance is seen between such a wider understanding of worship and the memorable exhortation to continue to gather together for worship in Heb 10:24–25, as well as in connection with the spiritual “sacrifices” in 13:15–16.³² In their worship together (10:25) the Hebrews were to “spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (10:24, NIV), wording substantially similar in meaning to 13:16.

Unlike Paul (Phil 3:3) or Jesus (John 4:23–24), the writer of Hebrews does not directly utilize either λατρεύω or προσκυνέω to make his main point about New Covenant worship. However, the preparatory use of λατρεύω and λατρεία throughout the book and the climactic teaching of Heb 13:15–16, in connection with Heb 10:24–25, coincides with the previous evidence considered. It also brings the

²⁸ L. Morris, “Hebrews” in *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, 12.149–50; Z. C. Hodges, “Hebrews” in *Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, 812; P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 577; S. J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 418.

²⁹ Morris, “Hebrews,” 150.

³⁰ Kistemaker, *Hebrews*, 425, understands “sharing” as descriptive of “doing good,” based on the Greek construction.

³¹ Morris, “Hebrews,” 152.

³² Kistemaker, *Hebrews*, 424; Hodges, “Hebrews,” 812.

worship service into clearer perspective in relation to the wider concept.

IV. *Rom 12:1: Living Sacrifice, Spiritual Worship*

The final passage to be considered is well known. It occurs at the hinge of Romans, the breaking point between the primarily doctrinal section of the epistle (chaps. 1–11) and the notably ethical (applicative) portion (chaps. 12–15).³³ It also picks up the theme of offering oneself to God, introduced in Rom 6:13ff.,³⁴ as well as the imagery of the OT sacrifices (θυσία; cf. Heb 13:15–16) in connection with the temple worship, spoken of previously in 9:4 (where λατρεία is also used). Therefore, it is truly at a pivotal juncture for both understanding and application that the concept of “spiritual (“reasonable” or “rational” is the more accurate rendering, according to Murray³⁵) worship” (NIV; “service of worship,” NASB) is brought forward.

Cranfield understands the presenting of one’s body as a living sacrifice as becoming “wholly God’s property.”³⁶ This “self-surrender,” as with any type of worship, “has, of course, to be continually repeated.”³⁷ “A constant dedication”³⁸ is at the heart of this holy, God-pleasing worship (Rom 12:1).

In focusing on the use of the term for “worship” in Rom 12:1, Cranfield reaches the following conclusion:

It implies that the true worship which God desires embraces the whole of the Christian’s life from day to day. It implies that any cultic worship which is not accompanied by obedience in the ordinary affairs of life must be regarded as false worship, unacceptable to God. . . .³⁹

Such a perspective dovetails perfectly with the thought of the Apostle in Phil 3:3, as well as the teaching of Jesus in John 4:23–24, and that of the writer of Hebrews, in 13:15–16. However, Cranfield

³³ For further elaboration of the “hinge” idea, see, e.g., E. F. Harrison, “Romans,” in *The Expositors Bible Commentary* 10:126; J. A. Witmer, “Romans” in *Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, 487.

³⁴ J. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 2:110–11.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 112: However, C.E.B. Cranfield (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [2 vols.; Edinburg: T. & T. Clark, 1979] 2:602–5) argues strongly for the rendering “spiritual” for λογικός.

³⁶ Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:599.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 600.

³⁸ Murray, *Romans*, 2:111.

³⁹ Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:601.

also observes that Rom 12:1 “worship” is *not* rejecting the corporate sense of worship, but balancing it. He writes

Provided that such worship in the narrower sense is always practiced as part of the wider worship embracing the whole of the Christian’s living and is not thought of as something acceptable to God apart from obedience of life, there is nothing here to deny it its place in the life of the faithful . . . In fact . . . it ought to be the focus point of that whole wider worship. . . .⁴⁰

On the basis of Rom 12:1 and Phil 3:3, perhaps it is appropriate to propose a needed clarification in evangelical terminology. Would it be helpful to refer to something like the “congregational worship service” and broader “individual service worship?” While the exact terms used are not decisive, it is important to distinguish clearly between these two complementary aspects, that each might strengthen the other as we seek to live out our “spiritual service of worship” (Rom 12:1, NASB).

Conclusion

If worship is indeed still the missing jewel in the evangelical church, as Allen and Borrer contend,⁴¹ a portion of the problem would seem to be the neglect of several key NT passages on worship looked at in this article. If they were studied and applied more closely, it would surely help reinstate worship to the rightful place it deserves as the beating heart of the entire Christian life.

Let there be no illusion that this presentation represents an overall NT position on worship. However, it is successful if it has provided sufficient food for thought to cause a reappraisal of the popular misconception that worship is wrapped up in the Sunday “worship service” at a certain special location. A wider understanding of worship can link Sunday to the rest of the week and the gathered congregation to the scattered believers in interrelated ongoing worship.

If, as Perry says, “Worship functions for the glorification of God and the sanctification of man,”⁴² then worship is never-ending. Webber is certainly correct in saying, “God has called us to worship Him, and worship Him throughout all eternity we will do.”⁴³

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 602.

⁴¹ Allen and Borrer, *Worship*, 7.

⁴² Perry, *Getting the Church on Target*, 210.

⁴³ Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 199.

However, the balance in worship recommended in this article⁴⁴ is vitally possible *here and now* if the attitude recommended by Allen and Borrer is embodied: "May God grant us a hunger for Him which will cause us to pursue Him in worship as a way of life (Col 3:17), a hunger which will drive us to closer friendship with His people."⁴⁵

⁴⁴ See C. C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton: Victor, 1986) 428-29, for a compact, but significant, recent expression of such a balanced outlook.

⁴⁵ Allen and Borrer, *Worship*, 190.