

**Christocentric Worship:** A study of the biblical bases of Christian worship

*By Jim Fowler, contributing writer*

**Part 1**

For many years, voices have been decrying the decline of a proper sense of worship in the Western churches. Several decades ago A.W. Tozer wrote,

"The Church has surrendered her once lofty concept of God and has substituted for it one so low, so ignoble, as to be utterly unworthy of thinking, worshipping men." <sup>1</sup>

"We have lost our spirit of worship and our ability to withdraw inwardly to meet God in adoring silence." <sup>2</sup>

"I wonder if there was ever a time when true spiritual worship was at a lower ebb. To great sections of the Church the art of worship has been lost entirely, and in its place has come that strange and foreign thing called the 'program.' This word has been borrowed from the stage and applied with sad wisdom to the type of public service which now passes for worship among us." <sup>3</sup>

"The shallowness of our inner experience, the hollowness of our worship, and that servile imitation of the world which marks our promotional methods all testify that we, in this day, know God only imperfectly, and the peace of God scarcely at all." <sup>4</sup>

"If Bible Christianity is to survive the present world upheaval, we shall need to recapture the spirit of worship." <sup>5</sup>

More recently Leslie Flynn has lamented,

"In many churches the art of worship has markedly declined. The so-called hour of worship has become a time when mind and emotions are anesthetized into neutral. Out of habit, church obligation, affection for the minister, peer pressure, family togetherness, patriotism, or community expectation, people sink into their usual pews." <sup>6</sup>

In similar manner, John MacArthur, Jr. explains,

"The Church has slipped into a philosophy of 'Christian humanism' that is flawed with self-love, self-esteem, self-fulfillment, and self-glory. There appears to be scant concern about worshipping our glorious God on His terms. So-called worship seems little more than some liturgy (high or low) equated with stained-glass windows, organ music, or emotion-filled songs and prayers. If the bulletin didn't say 'Worship Service,' maybe we wouldn't know what we were supposed to be doing." <sup>7</sup>

The suggested solutions to this perceived decline of worship range from encouraging a renaissance of ritual and liturgy, to the repudiation of all structure. Perhaps the most prevalent emphasis is that which advocates "contemporary worship" styles, which supposedly relate better to our modern culture. These are usually patterned after the worship styles of the "charismatic movement," which has flourished since the 1960's in the United States and around the world. These public worship assemblies feature an energetic, enthusiastic, and exciting spontaneity, which is alleged to be the free-working of the Holy Spirit, but can also be an emotional and subjective experientialism. The attendees at these "services of worship" are often physically involved by the raising and clapping of hands, as well as touching and hugging one another. The music features modern instrumentation of guitars, drums, keyboards, and large electronic amplifiers. Such a "renewal of worship" is used as a drawing-card to involve more and more people in the church.

We must question whether the variety of styles and forms employed in public assemblies actually constitutes Christian worship. Has there not been too much emphasis on the activities and their psychological effects upon people, rather than upon the reality that is the essence of Christianity?

Our starting point must be to define worship within a biblical theology that is Christocentric.

### **Words for "Worship"**

The Hebrew language of the old covenant literature had several words that indicated worship. The most prevalent Hebrew word was *shachah* which referred to "bowing down before an object of honor." When Ezra read the Law, after their return to Jerusalem, the Israelites "*bowed low and worshiped the Lord*" (Neh. 8:6). The Psalmist implores, "*Come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord our Maker*" (Ps. 95:6). A second Hebrew word was *abad*, which indicated "service or work for God." Moses told the Israelites, "*You shall fear only the Lord your God; and you shall worship Him*" (Deut. 6:13). The Psalmist encourages rulers to "*Worship the Lord with reverence, and rejoice with trembling*" (Ps. 2:11). A third Hebrew word, *segid*, is used in Daniel to indicate "showing respect" or "doing homage" to the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar had constructed (cf. Dan. 3:4-18).

In the new covenant literature of the New Testament, several Greek words are employed to refer to worship. The Greek words *gonu* and *gonupeteo* refer to "bending the knee." From these, we get the English word "genuflect." Paul refers to his willingness to "*bow my knees before the Father*" (Eph. 3:14), and the recognition that "every knee should bow at the name of Jesus" (Phil. 2:10). The Greek word *sebo* is derived from *sebas*, the word for "fear" or "reverence." The Jews tried to convince Gallio that Paul was persuading men "*to worship God contrary to the law*" (Acts 18:13). The composite Greek word *eusebeo*, combining *eu*, meaning "good," and *sebo*, is used by Paul when he refers to the idolatrous "unknown god," which the Athenians "*worshipped in ignorance*" (Acts 17:23). *Proskuneo*, which combines *pros*, "toward," and *kuneo*, "to kiss," is used by Jesus during His temptation, when He responded to the devil, saying, "*You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only*" (Matt. 4:10). Jesus also used this word when He told the Samaritan woman, "*God is Spirit; and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth*" (John 4:24). This is the predominant Greek word used for "worship" in the New Testament. Another word, *latreuo*, is derived from the word *latris*, referring to "a servant." To thus "serve in worship" is the word Paul uses of our "*spiritual service of worship*" (Rom. 12:1) and for "*worship in the Spirit of God*" (Phil. 3:3). The Greek word *leitourgeo* is the word from which we get the English word "liturgy." It is a combination of the word *laos*, "people," and *ergeo*, "to work." It refers to the work of the people in priestly service or

temple worship. The Christians of Antioch were "*ministering to the Lord*" (Acts 13:2) in worship. And, Christian giving can be a "*ministry of service*" (2 Cor. 9:12). One other word, *therapeuo*, meaning "to heal," is translated as "worship" in the King James Version of Acts 17:25, where Paul indicated that God is "*not worshipped*" by human hands.

Our English word "worship" is derived from the old Anglo-Saxon term, *weorthscipe*, meaning "worth-ship," which gradually evolved into the word "worship." It refers to the attribution or expression of worth or value toward any object.

Word studies, of themselves, do not bring us to a clear definition of worship. Such can only be derived from a comprehensive understanding of the New Testament and the new covenant awareness of the Person and Work of Jesus Christ.

**NEXT TIME:** Beginning, then, with the inadequate general and religious concepts of worship, we will proceed to differentiate "Christian worship" from all other concepts of worship.

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## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Tozer, A.W. *The Knowledge of the Holy: The Attributes of God, Their Meaning in the Christian Life*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), pg. 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Tozer, A.W. *The Pursuit of God*. (Harrisburg: Christian Publications, Inc., 1958), pg. 9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Tozer, A.W. "The Art of True Worship" *Moody Monthly*, April 1952.

<sup>6</sup> Flynn, Leslie. *Worship: Together We Celebrate*. (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983), pg. 11.

<sup>7</sup> MacArthur, Jr., John. *The Ultimate Priority*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), Preface, viii.

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