

Towards a Theology of Worship

Recently there has been much talk about what is new in worship; seems the winds of change are blowing. I would like to argue that there is nothing new in worship, well maybe one thing, and that is most people across the land have forgotten what worship is. If you would ask most people, most religious people, the answer you would hear would have something to do with going to church. Pressing the issue and asking them why going to church is worship, seems the answer is, just because . . . If you were to ask non-religious people, what is worship, the best you could hope for is, something religious people do on Sundays.

I said that there is been much talk about what is new in worship lately, and most of the talk has to do with making worship fun, relevant or entertaining. People want good value for their time, and for their money. If one hopes to be successful, at least according to the world, then you need to give the people what they want, and put people at the center of worship. It easily happens if you don't know what worship is. When it happens, perhaps the only warning is an uneasy voice in the back of your mind saying: Shouldn't God be at the center? (Man centered things are idolatry.)

People may want to be entertained, but that does not make it worship. Going to church at least has a hint of what worship is. Most people still look at church as the house of God, so going to church is about approaching God. Since God's house is set apart for this special purpose, we begin to see that worship is about respect, reverence and holiness.

If we are to answer the question what worship is, it seems that two Old Testament concepts are carried forward not just into the New Testament, but into our time as well. The concepts are Hodayot and Berakoth, which are generally translated as Praise and Blessing. The first thing we should note then, is that neither praise nor blessing is much practiced in our culture today.

Perhaps this is one reason why people are looking for something new, because they know neither how to praise, nor to bless. I said that Hodayot, was generally translated as praise, but it might be more accurate to translate it as confession. It is translated praise, because the most common thing that was confessed in the Old Testament was the Mighty Deeds of God, His love, His mercy His grace and His salvation. When you confess these things about God, they do sound like great hymns of praise. But that's not the only thing that is confessed. The other thing that is confessed is the nature of man, and his character. The words we are no doubt familiar with: ISA 64:6 *"We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away."*

If we by nature are sinful and unclean, then our approach to God needs be one of fear and trepidation. Throughout history this is how man has sought to approach God, looking for a way to pay our debts appease God, and find forgiveness. God, in His Word, brings to us the good news of peace and forgiveness, accomplished in Jesus death and resurrection. Through his Word, God moves us from our confession of sin, to salvation and forgiveness. God moves us from sin, into grace. This moves us to the praise of God for His wondrous love, mercy, and salvation.

It is interesting that in the New Testament, the language separates the confession of faith from the confession of sins. For the confession of faith we use ὁμολογέω as in Romans 10: 9 *That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* While when we confess sins we use ἐξομολογέω as in James 5:16 *Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each*

other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. It is somewhat more complicated than that, but the principal distinction is present. There are 2 kinds of confession in the New Testament. I believe the etymology of the word has some bearing on the distinction; for if we break it into parts ὁμο [same] λογέω [say], our sin is clearly something that should remain the same; but by adding the prefix εκ we indicate motion from sin toward grace, or confession with a view towards absolution.

If worship is something that transforms, rather than reflects, then the power of the transformation is to be found in Berakoth. Berakoth is the only thing that can make people feel good, that's what makes a blessing a blessing, its power to transform. Blessing, like cursing is an effective word, and calls to mind Isaiah 55:11 *"so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."*

Now in our day we are not accustomed to effective words, and this may explain some of the difficulty we have with worship. Often we look at the words "create in me a clean heart of God" more as a weak, almost faithless, "wouldn't it be nice if;" rather than an already accomplished fact. Blessing, though often cast in the future, stresses not only what God has done, but also what God is doing, and further, what God will yet do. Blessing is thus tied into the very nature of the eternal God, the one who is, who was and who is to come. Blessing is connected with God, for man lacks the power of himself to utter effective words for good. Therefore while man, thanks to a fallen nature, can have effective curses, by the power of evil, when it comes to effective words for good, blessing, the power comes from God and His Word. Blessing has power because the Spirit works through the Word. When we bless we bring to others a word which has the power to transform, but the power is not ours but God's. The dangerous thing is that neither blessing nor cursing depend on faith, because the word is effective in and of itself. So we read Numbers 6:27 *"So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them."* The benefit of faith is that it enlightens us that we may recognize the giver, and regenerates us, that we may give thanks. Blessing can thus be seen both as receiving grace and as giving thanks for the gifts received.

We have seen that worship is an approach to God characterized by Praise and Blessing. We have seen a glimpse of what blessing is. On the one hand, blessing is the power of the Word of God transforming people, while on the other hand blessing is the people praising God for all that he has done for them; often summarized under the mighty theological words of justification, sanctification, redemption, salvation. The praise of God is part of blessing, our response to God's gift. Looking at blessings as worship, we see it to be antiphonal, and responsive, God's act, our response, God's invitation, our acceptance.

One of the great themes of both Testaments is that of promise and fulfillment. God promised a Savior in Genesis 3:15, the New Testaments witnesses how God fulfilled the promise. If much of the Old Testament is preparation for the coming of the Messiah, does the arrival of the Messiah signal a major change in what worship is? No, there is a shift, but the theme of Hodayot & Berakoth seem to continue not only through the New Testament but well into the early Church. The language, of course changes, for we move from Hebrew to Greek. The language shift also explains a shift in thought patterns, for Hebrew is quite comfortable with a logic that moves in overlapping circles, while Greek logic tends to be linear. This is no small change.

I said the New Testament continues the themes of Hodayot and Berakoth. But Greek minds work differently, so the concepts of Hodayot and Berakoth are carried forwards to an expression of the logical consequences of praise and blessing. For example, the reverence and ritual coming out of praise and blessing is captured in σέβουμαι and its cognates. The

aspect of allegiance to God worshipped in praise and blessing can be seen in προσκυνέω. And the profound respect and awe of the God we praise and bless is found in the φόβος του Θεου.

Looking to modern linguistic study, especially in the work of Louw & Nida [*and particularly their Greek Lexicon*] this is exactly what we find. For they group words according to meaning [*semantic fields*], and the words relating to Religious Activity are one such grouping. Under this category is a subgroup [*domain*] of words relating to worship which contains σέβομαι, προσκυνέω, φόβος του Θεου, and related words. [*see appendix*] A detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this paper. However such analysis is necessary before a comprehensive Biblical Theology of Worship could be attempted.

We return now to the distinction between ὁμολογέω and ἑξομολογέω previously mentioned. In Hebrew, the circular thought patterns permit overlapping types. Greek, with its linear thought, seeks to make sharp distinctions. So not only does Greek distinguish between confession of sins and the confession of faith, but Greek would also distinguish between types Religious activity; separating things which are done from things that must be communicated. So when we look at worship in the New Testament we need to consider both Religious Activity and Communications. For while many of our New Testament worship words are found under the semantic field Religious Activity, if we stop there we miss words like: praise δοξάζω and bless εὐλογέω and even curse ἄρα which occur in the semantic field of Communication. I believe this is a good example of what I have referred to as logical, linear thought, for praise and blessing are things which must be communicated.

Finally, the distinction between ὁμολογέω and ἑξομολογέω may also serve as a basis for a principle of church fellowship. I believe that the chief reason why we must practice close communion, and observe strict fellowship principles can be seen here. It is undeniable that there are other Christians in the world. It is undeniable that Christians can sing hymns of praise to the same God. So also Christians may all pray to the same God. However, there seems some difficulty when it comes to confessing sins, for some Christians seem to have a blind eye, when it comes to certain sins. The problem is perhaps even worse when it comes to confessing one faith, we lack a common confession. This then is the theological reason why we cannot worship with them.

There is much more that could be said, unfortunately, we must stop here, but we pray that we have shared some thoughts which may guide you towards a theology of worship. We hope that the appendix on "Worship as Religious Activity," will help guide those who wish to explore further how the New Testament continues the theme of Hodayot and Berakoth.