

## **A Review of *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship***

The central thesis of author David Peterson's work is that engaging with God or acceptable worship means coming to God on the terms He sets forth and in the way He alone makes possible. This worship is a response to God's initiatives and has both private and public dimensions. As we will see, in the OT God's terms or covenant with His people involved the tabernacle or temple, divinely ordained priests as mediators, and a ritualistic system of sacrifice for the atonement of sins. However, this covenant did not solve the heart issue of sin. In the NT, God sent Jesus into the world to replace the temple, reestablish God's covenant, and provide complete cleansing and forgiveness of sins, opening the way for everyone to draw near to God through faith. I'll begin with Chapters 1 and 2 and move through this review following the book's chronology, with my own comments mixed in where relevant.

Even in the OT, it was ultimately only because of God's grace and provision that the Israelites could approach Him. God initiated in grace by revealing Himself to certain people in certain places at certain times, as with Moses and the burning bush. God rescued Israel from Egypt for the purpose of worship and drew them to Himself by defining the terms of His covenant relationship with them at Mount Sinai. If Israel obeyed and kept the covenant, then they would be God's "own possession," "a kingdom of priests," and "a holy nation" (Ex. 19:5-6). Through the tabernacle (later the temple) and ark, God's presence and rule were represented and expressed at the very core of the life of His people. Through the consecration of priests and daily burnt offerings, God met with Israel, manifesting His glory (though in limited ways) and word to them. In extraordinary mercy and grace, God continued the covenant commitment even after the golden calf rebellion.

Still, Israel struggled to preserve their distinctiveness from pagan religions, such as worship of Baal, which presumed that nature could be controlled by human rituals. This type of idolatry still affects us today as it appeals to the fleshly desire to want to be independent from a sovereign God. As time progressed, God sent prophets to condemn the continued abuse of the cult – the idolatry, hypocrisy, lack of obedience, and lack of the right attitude of faith and repentance. This continued

desecration of God's holiness led to the destruction of the temple in 587 BC, but Ezekiel prophesied that God in His sovereign grace would put into place a new temple, leading to restoration of all the land to paradise.

Some of the words used in the OT for worship, from the LXX, are *proskynein*, "to kiss towards," *latreuein*, "to serve," *douleuein*, "to serve as a slave," *leitourgein*, which is the verb for priestly service, and *sebomai*, "to reverence, to respect." *Proskynein* referred to kneeling down, bowing low, or bending over. While its literal sense was an actual posture, it also reflected an inward attitude of homage, awe and submission to God, often motivated by gratitude. This action was typically immediate and spontaneous, in response to God's character or mighty works, and not for supplication. This posture is still appropriate for worship today. However, in OT times, it was a culturally accepted way of responding to greatness; we might ask today what other norms could be used to respond to God in this way. One further comment on *leitourgein* is that the people were enabled by the priests' mediation to offer their own sacrifices; now, we can offer acceptable sacrificial worship to God through Christ.

In Chapters 3 and 4, we see how Jesus Himself replaced the temple and reestablished God's covenant through His shed blood. In the OT, the temple was the connection point between heaven and earth, where God expressed His kingly presence and manifested His glory. In the book of Matthew, we see that when Jesus came to earth, He was "God With Us," the promised messianic ruler come to deliver His people from their sins. "Something greater than the temple" had come (Matt. 12:6). As "Son of Man," Jesus was now "Lord of the Sabbath" (Matt. 12:8). God's glory was now in the Son of God incarnate, and His three closest disciples were briefly allowed to behold it in the transfiguration. The old temple was abandoned, including the relationship with God that it symbolized; Israel's (and everyone's) fate now depended on what they did with Jesus. Christ, in union with His church, was the new temple where God's Spirit would dwell.

The book of John further develops the idea that the crucified and resurrected Son of God was the new temple. In John 4, we read about the new worship of God "in spirit and truth," which has replaced the old way of Jewish worship at a designated place. True worshipers now come to

God through Jesus, the new temple, and the new life available by being born of His Spirit, the Spirit of Truth (John 15:26-27; 16:13-15).

Through the forgiveness of sins that He provided by His shed blood, Jesus gave us the greatest gift ever possible, reestablishing the covenant relationship of God with Jews and, for the first time, Gentiles; He provided ultimate fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham that through him all nations would be blessed (Gen. 12:2-3). Jesus did not criticize the Law, but like the prophets He did speak out against the corruption of cultic practices, which were unable to deal with the heart. Christ accomplished what the Law could not through His life of devotion, service, and dependence on the Father, culminating in His death. Jesus exemplified a life of worship in His commitment to the Father – denying the temptation to worship Satan, personal communion with the Father in prayer, and ultimate obedience to death on a cross.

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). In essence, Christ was the ultimate guilt offering for sin and a ransom to redeem us from judgment and death. His service and submission challenged the norms. He drank the “cup of wine,” a metaphor for suffering divine judgment for sin. His death was a baptism (Luke 12:50). I think this imagery can provide a fresh understanding through the sacraments we observe today into how Christ led the way in suffering and death so that we could share in His fellowship, being crucified with Him, dead to our fleshly passions and to the world. In the Last Supper with His disciples, Jesus left all of us the beautiful and unifying sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Through the Passover meal, Jesus reinterpreted His death as the new exodus from Egypt and Himself as the sacrificial Lamb, poured out for many. His “blood of the covenant” (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24) was the seal of the covenant, and this “new covenant” (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25) was the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy (Jer. 31:31-34). Through experiencing the Eucharist together, we are reminded of the basis of our relationship with God and look forward with hope to our future redemption and God's coming kingdom.

In Chapter 5 on Acts, we see Christ Himself as the center of true worship, and worship as an expression of faith in Him as Lord and Savior. In Stephen's bold stand for Christ, we learn that

Jerusalem as a whole still preferred to stick with the old temple as the way to gain God's favor, rather than turning to Jesus. I believe this history parallels with many people today as they seek to earn God's favor instead of putting their faith in Christ. Americans – including myself and other Christians – have especially struggled with the performance mindset, coming from a legalistic upbringing and/or an overly capitalistic culture, which says that what we do, determines our status or who we are. However, as Paul preached to the Gentiles on many occasions, justification is not by works of the law but by faith.

In Acts, specifically just prior to Peter's Pentecost sermon, the Holy Spirit was first given to the witnesses of Jesus' resurrection. Thus, all who called on Jesus as Savior and Lord would now receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, who would provide power to witness to the living Jesus. Acts also supports the key idea that those concerned with worship that honors God will also be concerned with proclaiming the gospel of Christ. This worship involves a response of one's whole life to the divine kingship of Jesus, and is something brought up again in Romans. However, before leaving Acts, we see several elements of the early gatherings (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-5:16), which are important for today as well: 1) apostolic teaching – teaching of the Word, 2) fellowship – joint participation in Christ, meeting needs, caring for one another, 3) breaking of bread – eating meals together, and 4) prayer and praise. I think that many churches in America need to place more focus on caring for one another, eating meals together, and prayer.

In Chapter 6, we get a very basic theology of worship through looking mainly at Romans. There, Paul focuses on the death of Jesus as the means of reconciling both Jews and Gentiles with God for a life of service, adoration, and consecration to Him. In Romans 1, we learn that knowledge of God should lead to appropriate worship and obedience. In 5:19, it is only by “the obedience of the One,” Christ's perfect worship and self offering, that we may relate to God and worship Him acceptably. In Romans 6, we learn that as believers we have been baptized into His death, our old self has been crucified, and this produces sweet communion with God. In Romans 12, we learn that because of God's mercies we are to offer our bodies as living sacrifices as our acceptable worship to God; that is, we are to yield ourselves totally to the service of God, which is already made holy

through Jesus. This service should involve exercising our gifts and ministering in the congregation – not to gain God’s favor but to respond to His grace. Finally, in Philippians, we “who worship in the Spirit of God” (Phil. 3:3) are to worship through glorying in Christ Jesus and putting no confidence in the flesh.

In Chapter 7, elements more specific to the worship gathering are addressed, mainly from 1 Corinthians and Ephesians. One of these elements is prophecy, which is “revelation” prompted by the Spirit of God for the strengthening, encouragement, and comfort of the body, often spoken to the needs of the moment. Another element is tongues, which are to be done in an orderly fashion and require an interpretation. Other elements are psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, given with thanksgiving (Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:15-21), and prayer, expressed for one’s own needs, the needs of others, open doors for the gospel, and faith and obedience. All these elements together seem to suggest that there should be opportunity for many different members of the church to contribute in a gathering, including room for spontaneity. However, this should all be done with a vertical orientation, towards God.

In 1 Cor. 3:16-17, we see that the church is the temple of the Holy Spirit, built by God on the foundation of Jesus Christ. More, in Ephesians we learn that we are also an expression of the heavenly church and the body of Christ. Therefore, as members of the body, we need to be concerned about the life and health of the congregation, avoiding divisiveness and quarreling, and guarding unity. I can’t stress the importance of this concept enough as I have experienced it firsthand. We need to minister to one another and love one another in a way that cherishes the church as the bride of Christ, and we need to realize what a difference our acts of love make.

In Chapter 8, the author delves into Hebrews, which is rich with worship theology. Once again, the focus is on Christ. Through His ordained priesthood, authentic sacrifice, and complete cleansing, we can offer acceptable worship to God. I love the picture of Jesus, the High Priest, who offered a perfect sacrifice once for all so that He could enter heaven and continually intercede for us (Heb. 7:25). In the Old Covenant, the worshiper could not enter the inner sanctuary where God’s blessing flowed, and their conscience was not cleansed of sin, but now through the blood of Jesus

we have gained access to the heavenly sanctuary and have received a cleansed conscience, ending the sacrificial system. Further, this wonderful work of our High Priest enables us to draw near (together) and effectually share in the Son's relationship with the Father! Acceptable worship here is then serving God and participating in His kingdom, heeding His voice and remaining faithful, publicly praising and acknowledging His name, and doing good and loving others; these things are to be done primarily in the world.

In Chapter 9 on Revelation, the focus is on the heavenly realm and on Jesus, the crucified Messiah, resurrected in glory. Here, unlike most of the other NT books, we see *proskynein* used 24 times, as part of the adoration and praise of God and the Lamb, through gesture and words. There is also a distinct theme of idolatry, which ends in the Fall of Babylon, versus true worship, culminating with the New Jerusalem. The reasons for worship are generally God's creation and redeeming grace in Christ. More specifically, we see praise of God the Creator (Rev. 4:11; 7:11-12), praise of Christ the Redeemer (Rev. 5:9-10), praise for the working out of God's purposes (Rev. 11:17-18), and praise for the fulfillment of OT prophecy and hopes (Rev. 15:3-4; 19:6-8). The priestly service of God's people includes serving God, maintaining their distinctiveness as a "holy nation," and sounding the praises of God!