

Faith Pulpit

Worship God: Comparing Worship Then and Now

Worshipping God is fundamental to God's people. God wants the redeemed of all ages to honor and serve Him with reverence and joy. Unfortunately, worship is one of the most controversial subjects in churches today. Instead of uniting the church, "worship wars" have scarred denominations and fragmented the church. These types of disputes are nothing new. The fault lines of worship controversies have marred nearly every turning point in church history. In this article I would like to compare the worship between Israel and the church. I hope that by drawing hermeneutical and theological distinctions between the Old and New Testaments, we might better understand the true nature of worship and God's expectations for the church.

The Nature of Worship

The English origins of the word worship refer to "worth-ship" or ascribing worth or value to something or someone. In relation to God, worship is the recognition of God's worth or value as the infinite, true God. The most basic idea of worship is the right response of humans to the one true God. Allen Ross states, "Thus, in general terms, 'worship' refers to the appropriate response to the revelation of the holy God of glory. More specifically, Christian worship, whether individual or collective, is the *structured and ordered expression of the proper response* of the people of God to the revelation of God in Christ."¹ The Hebrew (*hišta'wâ*) and Greek (*proskune?*) terms most often translated as "worship" convey the idea "to bow the knee" or "to prostrate oneself."²

Daniel Block's synthesis of Biblical worship is very helpful.³ He organizes worship into three basic dimensions: disposition, service, and life. *Disposition* refers to the heart attitude one must have to worship God, such as fear, reverence, and trust. *Service* refers to "cultic rituals" practiced by both Israel and the church. He defines these as "legitimate forms and systems of religious worship, especially external rites and ceremonies where homage is given to divine beings."⁴ *Life* refers to the

reality that a true worshiper must offer his or her entire life as a service to God (see Deut. 10:12, 13 and Rom. 12:1, 2). Ultimately, Block describes the phenomena of Biblical worship as the following: “True worship involves reverential human acts of submission and homage before the divine Sovereign in response to his gracious revelation of himself and in accord with his will.”⁵

When we compare Block’s three dimensions of worship between the Testaments, we see both continuity and discontinuity. With reference to dimensions of disposition and life, there is virtually no difference between Israel and the church. Believers in every dispensation must hold the right heart attitudes towards God. Whether a Jew brought his sacrifice to the temple or a Christian brings his offering to church, God expects worship to be given with reverence, fear, joy, thanksgiving, delight, and love. In the same way, both Jews and Christians must live lives of worship in every facet of their lives. For believers, dividing the sacred and secular only leads to hypocrisy. All of life is sacred and must be lived for God’s glory (1 Cor. 10:31). In other words, both Old and New Testament believers could only render true worship in corporate worship when they are living for God the other six days of the week.

The greatest area of discontinuity between the worship of Israel and of the church is in the dimension of service: the ritual forms of worship God required of each. Israel’s worship at the tabernacle or temple looked significantly different than the worship of the early church. We will explore these differences below. What is important to recognize is that just as God provided expectations for the dispositions and life of worship, He also provided clear expectations for corporate worship as well. God has revealed how believers are to approach Him. Some forms of worship are acceptable to God; others are not (Hebrews 11:4, 12:28). Fundamentally, all worship must be on God’s terms, not ours. It is about pleasing God, not ourselves. Therefore, Biblical worship is God-centered. God not only reveals Himself as the object of worship but also reveals the acceptable ways His people can approach Him.

The Authority for Worship

So how do God’s people know what kind of worship is acceptable to God? Thankfully, God reveals what pleases Him in Scripture. This God-centered approach to worship naturally leads to the theological and historical quandary concerning the “regulative principle” versus the “normative principle.”⁶ The regulative principle asserts that the only permissible elements in public worship are elements explicitly mentioned or inferred from Scripture. The normative principle asserts that anything is permissible in public worship as long as it is not prohibited by Scripture. While we need to avoid the extremes of its application, I generally affirm that the regulative principle supports a God-centered approach to worship. In other words, Scripture is the ultimate authority for us to know what pleases God. Unfortunately, many pastors and churches are tempted toward man-centered worship, that is, designing worship merely based on people’s tastes and appetites. The greatest influence in man-

centered approaches to worship is culture instead of the Bible.^{[7](#)}

For Israel, the primary authority for their corporate worship was the Law—the first five books of the Old Testament. At Sinai, God made a covenant with Israel which officially formed the nation (Exodus 19). This covenant is known as the Mosaic Covenant. At the center of the Law were the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20), which provided the foundation for Israel’s worship. In the Law, God reveals the regulations for all the sacrifices, feast days, and ceremonies that governed Israel’s worship. The rest of the Old Testament reflects Israel’s obedience and disobedience to the regulations of the Law.

For the church, the primary authority for our corporate worship is the New Testament. Jesus predicted the formation of the church during His ministry (Matt. 16:16–18) and founded the church at Pentecost (Acts 2). While Acts provides descriptive narratives of the church’s worship, the New Testament epistles provide the backbone of the didactic material. Kevin Bauder explains this Baptist distinctive: “Baptists consistently affirm the absolute authority of the New Testament in all matters of church faith and order. . . . Only the New Testament tells us what the church is. Only the New Testament tells us what the church is supposed to do. Only the New Testament tells us how the church is supposed to be organized.”^{[8](#)}

Of course, these assertions about authority need hermeneutical and theological nuancing. Bible-believing Christians affirm that the entire Bible is inspired and profitable for doctrine and Christian living (2 Tim. 3:16, 17). The entire Bible progressively reveals who God is and what He is like (Heb. 1:1–2). Both Testaments reveal God’s moral standards which flow from His immutable character (1 Cor. 10:6, 11). We should not reject or minimize the Old Testament’s teaching on worship, as some evidently do.^{[9](#)} Instead, using Block’s dimensions of worship, we need to look to the Old Testament first to understand the proper attitudes of worship, and second, what a life of worship looks like. Block’s third category of cultic service is where there will be the most dissimilarity, but categories of worship (such as prayer, preaching and singing) and principles of worship still are valid.

So what changed in God’s redemptive plan that called for a change in worship? After the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God’s program shifted from the nation of Israel to establishing a spiritual people gathered from every nation—the church (Eph. 2:11–23; Rom. 11:11–36). The key hermeneutical difference is that New Testament believers are not living under the Law (i.e., the Mosaic Covenant) but under grace (Rom. 6:14, 15). Christ brought the Law of Moses to its intended goal at the cross and instituted the Law of Christ (Rom. 10:4). God had planned all along to bring the Law of Moses to an end and institute a New Covenant, what the author of Hebrews calls a “better covenant” (Jer. 31:31–34; Heb. 7:22, 8:6; Eph. 2:14–16). In the church, believers now live “under the law of Christ” and are obligated to obey God’s expectations for this dispensation (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2; 1 John 3:23–24, 4:21).

These hermeneutical and theological distinctions are critical to developing a Biblical approach to worship. Their understanding and application separate Protestant worship from Catholics and Orthodox worship. They separate dispensational and covenant approaches to worship. They separate traditional and progressive approaches to worship as well.

The Practice of Worship

So how did Israel's practice of worship differ from that of the church? In this section I would like to explore a few key comparisons and contrasts. First, let's consider the place of worship. For Israel, the temple was the center of worship. But Jesus declared in His exchange with the Samaritan woman that an hour was coming when true worship would not be centered in Jerusalem (John 4:21). This became reality in Acts as the church spread from Jerusalem to "the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Today, the universal church spans the entire globe and manifests itself not in church buildings, but in the local assemblies of the redeemed.

Second, consider the day of worship. God gave the Sabbath observance to Israel as a sign of the Mosaic Covenant and encoded it as the fourth commandment in the Decalogue (Exodus 20:8–11, 31:12–17). Israel was to keep the last day of the week holy, cease from all nonessential work, and worship their God (Leviticus 23:2; Isaiah 58:13–14; Psalm 92). Are Christians expected to keep the Sabbath? This is a complex issue. Some traditions, such as Reformed Christians, answer affirmatively and see Sunday as the Christian Sabbath. Sabbatarians generally argue that all Ten Commandments are binding today since the moral aspect of the Mosaic Law is eternal.^{[10](#)} I would argue, along with most dispensationalists, that the Sabbath is not for Christians. Since the Mosaic Law has been abrogated, New Testament believers are not bound to Israel's covenant in its entirety, including its seal. Paul makes this clear about the Sabbath in Colossians 2:16, 17 and infers it in Romans 14:1–12 and Galatians 4:9–11. Instead, most Christians worship on Sunday, the Lord's Day, as seen in the early church (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2; cf. Rev. 1:10) and ultimately established in church history by the time of Constantine.

Third, God gave different leaders to Israel and the church to lead God's people in worship. In Israel, there is a national dimension to their worship leaders. Judges, kings, prophets, and priests were called by God to lead the nation in both spiritual and civil matters. For the church, God calls leaders primarily to lead in spiritual matters. Paul lists five offices God gave to the church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers (Eph. 4:11). Apostles and prophets were foundational for the church and appear to have ceased (Eph. 2:20); evangelists (i.e., missionaries) and pastors/teachers continue. To this list we should add deacons (Acts 6:1–6). Baptists have historically held that there are two Biblical offices for the local church: pastor and deacon (1 Timothy 3). Pastors, also identified as elders and bishops, are the primary worship leaders in the church.

In comparing the leadership of Israel and the church, there are many similarities. God designed the offices and called individuals to serve as leaders in the Old and New Testaments. God expected godly character and righteous living from all Biblical leaders. Just as the Lord is the Great Shepherd, all Biblical leaders were called to shepherd God's flock. There are also some interesting differences. One difference rests in the fact that since the church is not a nation, church leaders have no civil responsibilities. This may seem like an obvious point, but some church traditions that confuse church and state mix civil and religious duties. Another difference is the priesthood. Hebrews makes it clear that the Levitical priesthood was inadequate (Hebrews 7). Now every Christian is a priest who can serve, offer gifts, and have direct access to God through Jesus, our great High Priest (Hebrews 13:15, 16). In a similar way, all of Israel's prophets, priests, and kings anticipate God's ultimate leader—Jesus Christ. He is *the King*, *the Prophet*, and *the Priest* which the New Testament makes clear.

Finally, let's consider service. Israel's religious service, or "cultic rituals," centered around worship at the tabernacle and temple: sacrifices, feast days, new moons, circumcisions, prayers, singing, and homilies. All of these religious practices are outlined in the Mosaic Law. The New Testament summarizes that all of the rituals in the Mosaic covenant were a "shadow of things to come" (Col. 2:17; Heb. 10:1). They point to the person and work of Christ. Scripture does not provide as many details about corporate worship for the church as it does for Israel. It does, however, prescribe several aspects of worship: public reading of Scripture (1 Tim. 4:13), the preaching of Scripture (2 Tim. 4:2), public prayer (1 Tim. 2:1–8), corporate singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), giving (1 Cor. 16:1, 2) and the practice of the ordinances, baptism (Rom. 6:3–6) and communion (1 Cor. 11:23–34).¹¹ While most of these aspects of public worship have parallels with Israel's worship, the ordinances are uniquely Christian. Some church traditions hold that infant baptism is the Christian replacement for circumcision. But these attempts simply fail to convince.¹² The Biblical model is believers' baptism by immersion (Acts 2:38–41). It is a one-time, initiatory rite for a believer to identify with Christ and His church that pictures the death and resurrection of Christ (Matt. 28:19, 20; Rom. 6:3–6). The roots of communion are in the Passover, as Jesus instituted the ordinance at the Passover meal during the Passion Week. The elements of the Lord's Table commemorate the body and blood of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross. Communion is one of the key distinctives and sacred aspects of Christian worship.

Conclusion

In this article I have drawn several comparisons and contrasts between Israel's worship and the church's worship in the hopes that we might better understand how to worship our great God. We need to study both Testaments more to worship Biblically and to ensure that we are approaching God in a manner that pleases Him. Biblical worship not only pleases God, but it should also unite the church. One day all the redeemed will stand before Christ and offer devout praise and honor in unison. I look

forward to that day.

Works Cited

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5. Block, *For the Glory of God*, 13.
6. Kelly M. Kopic and Wesley Vander Lugt, *Pocket Dictionary of the Reformed Tradition*, The IVP Pocket Reference Series (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 101.
7. See the helpful discussion in J. Ligon Duncan, “Traditional Evangelical Worship” in *Perspectives on Christian Worship: Five Views*. Edited by J. Matthew Pinson (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2009), 113–114.
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10. See for example, Michael P. V. Barrett, *The Beauty of Holiness: A Guide to Biblical Worship* (Greenville, SC: Ambassador International, 2006), 104–16.
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Dr. Douglas Brown

Seminary Dean at [Faith Baptist Bible College & Theological Seminary](#) | brownd@faith.edu | [Other Articles](#)

Dr. Douglas Brown is the Academic Dean of Faith Baptist Theological Seminary and a senior professor within the seminary. Dr. Brown received his Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts from Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary, his Master of Divinity from Central Baptist Seminary, and Ph.D. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Dr. Brown has many years of experience as a youth pastor and assistant pastor in Iowa, Minnesota, and Illinois. He is an avid golfer and enjoys traveling. He and his wife, Tricia, live in Ankeny and have four children, two of whom attend Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary.