

PAUL AND CHRISTIAN WORSHIP IN LIGHT OF ROMANS 12:1

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This article explores the thorny issue of the nature of worship through an exegesis of Romans 12:1 and an exploration of Paul's wider thinking. It argues that the worship of which God is worthy is not adequately expressed in symbols, rites, rituals, and token offerings, but rather in practical daily ministry to human need in the context of routine life and mundane activities, a life-ethos that serves the interests of God in the world.

Traditional Concepts of Worship

Hugh Bowden, writing about the pre-Christian mystery cults, says that a sense of the transactional, the need to do something to win the favour of the gods, represents one of the earliest motives for religion.¹ Humans have long held two correlated beliefs. On the one hand, bad things happen if the gods are angry. On the other hand, good things, such as health, abundant food, peace, and prosperity, are also under the control of the gods whose favour and providence can be gained by means of appropriate acts of worship.

The global human tendency to ritualise religious beliefs is commonly observed, and without a doubt religious rituals are among the most complex elements of human culture. Israel Abrahams writes that from earliest recorded history there has been a certain duality in the conscious worship of the divine, which in turn forms the basic framework of all expressions of worship. First, he says, there is the avoidance of uncleanness and whatever else may offend or anger God, or the gods. In ancient Israel, this dimension of worship was rooted in the Ten Commandments, and developed into a complex system of rules and prohibitions intended to help maintain personal cleanliness and ceremonial purity. Second, Abrahams says, worship is expressed by a variety of ritual gestures.² In Israel, this included a cult led by the priesthood, with holy days, prayers, feasts, offerings, sacrifices, and cleansing rites. Among the most

¹ Hugh Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 11.

² Israel Abrahams, "Worship," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 17 (Jerusalem: Keter, 1981), 621–624.

significant observances were the weekly Sabbath and the annual Passover. In diaspora Judaism, synagogue meetings centred on prayer and readings from scripture. And of course, until the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, temple sacrifices were a significant form of worship.

Abrahams states further that, apart from purity and offerings, there is a second duality which must be noted in ancient Hebrew culture. He describes this duality in the contrast of cultic ritual with “a higher level of spiritual and ethical conduct.” Worship of God, he says, “is not solely or even primarily a matter of ritual, but noble living.” In this regard, he refers to Martin Buber’s “I-Thou” relationship, expressed succinctly by the prophet Micah as the fundamentals of sound religion: “to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” This, according to the prophet, is what Yahweh “requires of you,” rather than to devote yourselves to rituals and rites that accomplish very little of value and cannot compensate for evil deeds.³

It is commonly assumed that certain elements of the earliest Christian rituals grew out of synagogue practices, since the earliest Christians were simply Jews who accepted Jesus as Messiah. However, there is considerable evidence that the “house church” concept was adopted from Roman family cult practices. Nevertheless, from simple beginnings, Christian worship evolved over time to highly complex liturgical traditions with many variations, and no doubt each generation of Christians has considered their own practices to be the appropriate way to honour God. That applies equally to all varieties of modern and post-modern Christians, for whom “worship” means the sharing of the Eucharist (Communion, or Lord’s Supper), prayer, music, singing, reading scripture, preaching, and giving material offerings during a special assembly. This format of “worship” is typically accentuated by certain gestures that display adoration of God, such as bowing heads, closing eyes, raising eyes heavenward, lifting hands, and so on. For most Christians, a “worship service” is very distinct from other rituals and celebrations, both religious and secular, and is also distinct from the many mundane activities in daily life. Worship consists of special activities, at a special time, and usually at a special place. And because of its perceived importance, modern church leaders typically devote a great deal of time and energy to planning and directing such “worship services.”

Speaking broadly, Delling defines worship as the self-portrayal of religion. “In worship,” he says, “the sources by which religion lives are made visible; its expectations and hopes are expressed, and the forces

³ Mic 6:6–8.

which sustain it are made known.”⁴ Ray says: “Worship is the ritualised response of the Christian community to God’s love with the praises of their hearts, the yearnings of their souls, and the ponderings of their minds.”⁵ He also suggests that there is a certain genius in Christian worship in that “in the space of an hour or so a room full of needy people can have their essential need met.”⁶ Some would even argue, as does Campbell, that “corporate worship is the most important work of the Christian community; that worship is where the community places itself before God and is reminded of its role as God’s people in the world.”⁷ Thus also, Gonzalez declares that over the centuries the church has seen in Communion “the highest act of worship.”⁸

In recent years many churches have changed worship format, moving away from traditional models toward more contemporary music and a casual atmosphere, with the use of electronic media for experiential enhancement. While many “seekers” find these changes appealing, “traditional Christians” are often repulsed and offended. Some assert that what is called “praise music” is not worship at all, but mere entertainment. Some say they cannot “worship” with all the noise and clamour, suggesting that they do not view “worship” as joyful celebration but rather quiet meditation. The result is that church leaders are continually challenged to provide a “worship experience” that appeals to everyone and fits the individual notions of what worship is about. Many churches, in fact, hold multiple services in different formats to cater to different preferences. This trend underscores the significance that an hour or two of “worship” holds for many Christians.

Paul’s Challenge

The definition of worship that emerges from Romans 12:1 is very different from any of the concepts and forms of worship that Paul observed in his time, as well as those that developed in the church after his time and continue in various traditions today. In fact, it is evident that here Paul

⁴ Gerhard Delling, *Worship in the New Testament*, trans. Percy Scott (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), xi.

⁵ David R. Ray, *The Indispensable Guide for Smaller Churches* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 107.

⁶ Ray, *Indispensable Guide*, 106.

⁷ Dennis M. Campbell, *Who Will Go for Us?: An Invitation to Ordained Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 33.

⁸ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Harper, 1984), 94.

challenges these notions of worship, in favour of worship that in his view more appropriately serves God, accomplishes the will of God, and of which God is truly worthy. Paul's expression "living sacrifice" contrasts his view of worship with the religious practices of his day, including the temple rituals in which the priests led their people in the sacrifice of animals and the offering of blood. This mode of worship, although common in most ancient cultures, in Paul's judgment accomplished nothing of value to God or man.⁹ Rather, he says that the Christian offers his or her body as a living sacrifice in the service of God.

Keck notes that Paul does not here draw from the Greek notion that a human "self" is a spark of divine essence living within a person.¹⁰ Rather, the self of which he speaks is the person, the body, mind, and spirit, "the whole living self." And Nygren stresses that Paul's assertion in no way spiritualises Christian service to God, but rather makes it practical and broadens its relevance to the entire sphere of life.¹¹

The importance of this contrast is underscored by the union of the term *λογικὴ λατρεία*, commonly translated "spiritual worship" but carrying also the suggestion of "logical (or rational) servitude (or ministry)."¹² Galadza examines the use of the term in connection with Hellenistic religions, as well as its understanding by various patristic commentaries on Romans 12:1. He concludes that in the context of the whole epistle, the term can mean "rational" in the sense that is performed by humans with an intellect, and "spiritual" in the sense that it finds its impetus in the Holy Spirit, and even "Logos-like" because those performing this kind of *λατρεία* do so as people re-born in Jesus Christ. However, Galadza notes that most patristic writers see in this text "moral actions as a result of the death of the body to sin and its new life," and despite the cultic language they were not inclined to connect Paul's *λογικὴ λατρεία* to ceremonial

⁹ Compare Heb 9:12–13; 10:11.

¹⁰ Leander Keck, *Paul and His Letters* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 103. See also John Knox (Exegesis) and Gerald R. Cragg (Exposition), "Romans," in *IB*, 9:580–581.

¹¹ Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1949), 418.

¹² The precise meaning of the term *λογικὴ* is elusive, occurring only one other time in the New Testament (1 Peter 2:2) and never in the Septuagint. It is derived from *λογος*, which might suggest reason and the rational mind, although some scholars favour a spiritual connection with the concept of divine *λογος*. See David Brown, "Romans," in *Commentary on the Old and New Testaments*, ed. Robert Jamieson, A.R. Fausset, and David Brown (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 4:264. See also *TDNT*, 4:142. Contrast Knox, "Romans," 581.

liturgy.¹³ Thus, Paul's message in Romans 12:1 seems to be that in Christ all cultic forms and rituals are overshadowed by a life-ethos, the living sacrifice of the believer on the altar of daily service to God. In this way the mundane becomes marvellously spiritual.

Strathmann is confident that in the New Testament the verb *λατρεύω* and the noun *λατρεία* carry the sense of religious service and ministry. However, he argues convincingly that in certain places both are employed metaphorically, with no connection to cultic practices. Concerning the noun specifically, he cites Luke 1:74 and Acts 24:14 as examples of its generalised figurative sense, representing the whole conduct of righteous people, rather than service performed through cultic ritual. In Romans 1:9 *λατρεία* describes Paul's consummate endeavour to preach the gospel of Christ, and in Philippians 3:3 it has a "broad metaphorical sense in which it comprises the whole of Christian existence." For Paul, Strathmann says, "the Christian life fashioned by the Spirit is true *λατρεία*." Further, the biblical history of the term *λατρεία* reaches a climax in Romans 12:1, where Paul describes both an "interiorisation" and an "exteriorisation" of Christian worship. Believers offer a service to God, Strathmann states poignantly, which is "the fashioning of their inner lives and their outward physical conduct in a way that plainly distinguishes them from the world, and which corresponds to the will of God. This is the living sacrifice which they have to offer."¹⁴

Ernst Käsemann, eminent Lutheran theologian whose work spanned the middle and late twentieth century, saw in Romans 12:1 an unequivocal summary of Paul's view of worship as a follower of Christ. For Paul, he writes, "Christian worship does not consist of what is practiced at sacred sites, at sacred times, and with sacred acts It is the offering of bodily existence in the otherwise profane sphere. As something constantly demanded this takes place in daily life, whereby every Christian is simultaneously sacrifice and priest."¹⁵ In other words, Paul does not define worship in terms of rituals or ceremonies performed by Christians when assembled together. On the contrary, true worship is offered through the believer's daily life, by means of a noble ethos practiced openly in the world through that which is seemingly profane.

¹³ Daniel Galadza, "Logikē latreia (Romans 12:1) as a Definition of Liturgy," *Logos: A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 52:1–2 (2011): 109–124.

¹⁴ Hermann Strathmann, "λατρεύω, λατρεία," in *TDNT*, 4:58–65.

¹⁵ Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 329.

This means that while ceremonies and liturgical observances may support and invigorate the believer's worshipful life, they are not in themselves what Paul considered to be worship. Rather, these practices merely symbolise individual and corporate service to God. And if the symbols are offered without practical application, they are rendered meaningless. In this vein, Käsemann says:

Either the whole Christian life is worship, and the gatherings and sacramental acts of the community provide equipment and instruction for this, or these gatherings and acts lead in fact to absurdity.... At issue is a fundamentally different understanding of true worship.¹⁶

Cragg interprets Paul in a similar fashion: "That holiness which is the mark of the life devoted to God is not expressed in esoteric ritual observances, but in the disciplines of ordinary experience." Therefore, the true worship of God is "a service appropriate to beings in whom intellectual and moral qualities unite."¹⁷ Bruce is among many scholars who recognise that in his letters Paul tends to "follow up his exposition of the gospel with practical exhortations," an example of which is obedience to civic laws and payment of taxes. Citing Romans 12:1, Bruce says that this is all part of the "spiritual worship" of God that Christians offer.¹⁸

Bornkamm speaks traditionally when he claims that "the ecclesia is in fact the church assembled for worship,"¹⁹ but in contrast he notes that in Romans 12:1 Paul's view of worship is not "an arrangement for the discharge of certain cultic obligations," but rather bears upon every aspect of the Christian's life in a practical application of the theology of the cross. He adds that the words "living sacrifice" appear frequently in post-classical mystic-religious texts, and he contends that Paul applies this motif in a different way—"you yourselves, body and soul, in your everyday lives are the only sacrifice pleasing to God."²⁰

¹⁶ Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, 327–328.

¹⁷ Cragg, "Romans," 581.

¹⁸ F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000 [1977]), 336–337.

¹⁹ Gunther Bornkamm, *Paul*, trans. M.G. Stalker (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1971), 186.

²⁰ Bornkamm, *Paul*, 188.

Problems with Paul's Identity

Historically, Christians have perceived Paul as a convert from Judaism to Christianity, and that his version of the gospel is opposed to Judaism and the Torah. Many of his statements have been interpreted as blatantly anti-semitic, and the source of the common belief among Christians that God rejected Israel and replaced the law with the gospel. In recent decades the identity of Paul and the nature of his message have become a topic of significant debate, with a number of conflicting opinions and a variety of theories as to how to remove the apparent anti-semitism from Pauline texts. Krister Stendahl, writing from the 1960s, was among the first to re-define Paul, suggesting that he never argues against the Torah nor does he espouse the "rejection-replacement" doctrine.²¹ James Dunn argues that Paul was not against the Torah but rather opposed interpretations of it that limited the grace of God and prevented Gentiles full access to it.²²

There is a pertinent text in 2 Peter 3:16 in which the writer recognises that some of Paul's writings are difficult to understand. That assertion might include numerous contradictions, which in the past have been essentially ignored or explained away. For example, in Romans 3:20 Paul writes "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin." But in Romans 7:12 he says "So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good." John Gager offers a list of such conflicting statements to illustrate the significance of the dilemma.²³ For some recent scholars the explanation of Paul's apparent duplicity is that negative statements concerning the Torah were only directed at Gentiles, who did not need to embrace the norms and rituals of Judaism, while the positive statements pertained only to the Jews whose relationship with God was secure through the Torah.

Some have suggested that the contradictions are the result of Paul's emotional attachment to Judaism, and perhaps frequent bouts of confusion in his own theology. Others have explained all the negative statements about the Torah as the work of later editors of Paul's works.

²¹ Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976); See also his *Final Account: Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

²² James D.G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), originally published as "The New Perspective on Paul," *BJRL* 65 (1983): 95-122.

²³ John G. Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5-7.

And still others, such as E.P. Sanders, essentially hold onto old school views with some new insights. Sanders argues that the problem is not that Paul has been misunderstood, but that the picture of Judaism that Christians have painted from Paul's writings is historically false.²⁴

Gager provides a very solid assessment of the shifts in thinking over recent decades concerning Paul's real position on the law and Judaism, and says that only recently have scholars taken seriously the position of John Chrysostom that any conflict comes from the reader rather than Paul.²⁵ Gager's view, in summary, is that Paul did not reject the Torah or Judaism, nor does he envision some eschatological conversion of all Israel to Jesus Christ. His concern, and his passion, was for a pathway for Gentiles without the encumbrance of Torah.

All that said, for the present thesis it is important to note that Paul's view of worship does not challenge Judaism specifically, nor the cultic practices associated with the Jerusalem temple, since similar cultic rituals were found in other cultures as well. Therefore, it is more accurate to say that Paul challenged the common notion among contemporary cultures that rituals, animal sacrifices, and token offerings are the appropriate way to worship God.

It is difficult to know precisely when, where, and why Paul's beliefs shifted. One unlikely possibility is that his entire theology changed dramatically and instantly upon his experience on the road to Damascus, commonly thought of as his conversion.²⁶ It is more plausible that he rethought his beliefs during a period of solitude in Arabia, and that the core sayings and works of Jesus were related to him by disciples such as Ananias and Barnabas.²⁷ However, Paul claims that he did not receive the gospel from any man, but by revelation from Jesus Christ himself (Gal 1:12).

Whatever the case may be, there can be no doubt that he came to embrace a new theology, and a new sense of purpose and ministry. He remained a Jew, but one who had accepted Jesus as Messiah (Christ) and one who was called to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul clearly loved Israel and had great respect for the law of Moses as he understood its meaning and purpose. However, he was opposed to Judaizers who insisted that Gentiles who wanted to be Christian also had to follow certain Jewish practices, such as circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, and

²⁴ E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM, 1977).

²⁵ Gager, *Reinventing Paul*, 9.

²⁶ Acts 9:1-19; 22:6-21; 26:1-23.

²⁷ Gal 1:17.

various purity ordinances, which by their nature particularised Jews as God's people. Paul was committed to a theology of universal gospel, and to facilitating unity among different nations and cultures through Jesus Christ, while not imposing the religious laws of one upon the other.

Paul's education clearly extended beyond the Torah and rabbinic literature, and in his effort to explain Jesus, he compared and contrasted ideas from many sources. Socrates, as the founder of ethical science, had an enormous impact on the Greek speaking world in the quest for moral truth, and Paul was no doubt aware of his teaching. In fact, some have argued that New Testament theology as a whole reflects an affinity with philosophers like Plato and Aristotle.²⁸ Therefore, it should not be surprising to find certain elements of Paul's doctrine that resemble ideas already considered by the Greek philosophers.²⁹ Perhaps the most obvious connection of Paul with the Greek mind is found in his frequent instructions concerning bearing fruit and ethical living, often presented as exhortations to conclude his epistles.³⁰ Betz notes that this ethical focus resembles the convictions of Menander and Xenophon.³¹ Barnhart argues that Paul was also influenced by other Greek literature, like Plato's Symposium. Here, the divine *ἔπος* offers a model for the link between the Christ-Lord of Philippians 2:6–8 and the Jesus of the Gospels. 1 Corinthians 13, Barnhart says, "reads like a redaction of passages from the Symposium,"³² although Paul elevates *ἔπος* to the more noble level of *ἀγάπη*.

Paul's disdain for cultic worship aligned somewhat with the Stoics. They characteristically condemned the worship of images and the use of temples, regarding them as mere works of art.³³ In this regard, the Lukan account of Paul's discourse on the "unknown god," delivered on the Areopagus in Athens, is significant.³⁴ Here Paul drew from the Cretan poet Epimenides with the statement "by him we live and move and have

²⁸ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 224–225.

²⁹ W.J. Conybeare and J.S. Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 282–283.

³⁰ Rom 12–15; Gal 5–6; 1 Thess 5; 1 Cor 5–10.

³¹ Hans Dieter Betz, *Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 291, 299.

³² Joe E. Barnhart, "Plato's Symposium and Early Christianity," *The Journal of Higher Criticism* II, no. 2 (2005): 12–18.

³³ Conybeare and Howson, *Life and Epistles*, 283.

³⁴ Acts 17:22–31.

our very being,”³⁵ and he quoted the Cilician poet Aretas, who said that men are the offspring of God.³⁶ He added that the true God “made the world and all things therein.” In this he conflicted with the Stoics, whose pantheism placed Zeus within the cosmos as the organiser, but not at the beginning as creator. Relevant to Romans 12:1, Paul further argued that the true God “does not dwell in temples made with hands nor is he worshipped with human hands as if he needs anything, seeing that he is the source of life and breath in all living things.” Of course, Beker and others have noted Luke’s rather free adaptation of Paul, and it is difficult to know how reliable the report in Acts may be.³⁷ But it is part of our earliest picture of Paul, and therefore cannot be ignored.

Prophetic Backgrounds

It is of great significance in this discussion that numerous Hebrew prophets before Paul had suggested that true worship of Yahweh God is found in noble living, rather than in cultic rites and rituals. Paul’s changed perspective was a matter of accepting a concept of worship that had already been taught by other Hebrews, including Jesus of Nazareth.

Other Hebrew prophets also viewed the cultic ritual of their day as a sad and pathetic substitute for genuine service to God, which was a mode of life that demonstrated the goodness of God in the world. Especially significant is Micah 6:6–8, mentioned above, who outlined sound religion in simple practical terms: “to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” Also, Isaiah declares that in his day Israel’s worship rituals were repulsive to Yahweh because their hands were covered with blood. They brought offerings, they burnt incense, they honoured new moons and Sabbaths, and they lifted hands in prayer. But they failed to seek justice and defend the weak.³⁸ Their rituals were not appropriate worship, because what God wanted of them was virtuous lives. The words attributed to Paul in Acts 17:24–25 are significant in this regard: “The Lord of heaven and earth does not dwell in temples made with hands neither is he served by human hands as though he needed anything.” These words are derived from Isaiah 66:1–2, also quoted by Stephen just before he was put to death with the approval of the young

³⁵ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Philosophers* 1:112.

³⁶ Acts 17:28. The same words appear in the hymn of Cleanthes, a Stoic from Assos.

³⁷ J. Christiaan Beker, *Heirs of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 48–63.

³⁸ Isa 1:10–17; see also Amos 5:21ff.

devout Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus, who would become the Apostle Paul (Acts 7:48–50).

The gospel accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus present similar challenges of traditional concepts of worship. Jesus was highly critical of the religious practices among many of his Jewish contemporaries. On various occasions, even sitting in the gallery of the temple, he observed the pious as they prayed, gave alms, paid temple taxes, and offered sacrifices. Broadly speaking, he warned his followers not to be like them.³⁹ He called them hypocrites, “blind leaders of the blind,” “the offspring of vipers,” and “white washed tombs full of dead men’s bones;” they tithed in intricate detail, but neglected “the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy, and faith.”⁴⁰ Above all, it is striking that when asked what he considered to be the most important commandments, Jesus drew from Deuteronomy 6:5 “love the Lord God with all your heart, soul and mind,” and Leviticus 19:18 “love your neighbour as yourself.”⁴¹ There is no suggestion in any of the Gospels that Jesus promoted cultic ritual as the principal means of honouring or expressing love toward God.

Concerning true worship, the Fourth Gospel also offers a very relevant pericope. The Johannine tradition preserves the unique story of Jesus’ encounter with a Samaritan woman of Sychar, who comments that her own people worship on Gerazim, whereas the Jews say that Jerusalem is the right place to worship. Jesus responds:

The time is near when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the father... But the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshippers. God is Spirit and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth.⁴²

The phrase “worship in spirit and truth” might be described as one of the great mysteries of Johannine literature, since scholars have long debated its precise meaning and implications. Yet, many have interpreted these words to mean conducting a “worship service” with the appropriate reverent attitude and according to biblical models, although both appropriate attitude and method remain part of the debate. Consequently, some Christians presumptuously assert that their own practices are

³⁹ Matt 6:1–8.

⁴⁰ Matt 23:1–36, Luke 11:42.

⁴¹ Matt 22:37–40; 19:19.

⁴² John 4:19–24.

indeed done “in spirit and truth” while those of others are not. But it is noteworthy that this unique dialogue displays a strong affinity with other prophetic voices that decry symbolic ritual in favour of pragmatic ministry as the true means of worshipping and serving God. At the very least, it suggests that Jesus considered the worship of which God is truly worthy as something different from the temple rites and ceremonies practiced by his contemporaries.

Another very early witness to this concept is the writer of a short epistle called James, who says that “pure and undefiled religion in the sight of God the Father is to minister to widows and orphans in their suffering, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”⁴³ This writer uses the word *θρησκεία*, a very broad term that embraces the whole of one’s religious beliefs and practices. However, it is clear that to James the core of “pure religion” is not ritual and ceremony, but mode of life emphasising benevolent deeds and moral uprightness. Thus for James, “doing good and being good” are the essence of devotion to God.

So, it is quite obvious that this concept was not new, nor unique to Paul, but rather was extolled by various prophetic voices that Paul’s contemporaries and their predecessors had already heard. And in the earliest Christian community, Paul was not the only one to offer this challenging perspective.

Reason for the Radical Position

We have ample reason to conclude, as does Bornkamm, that the strong eschatological consciousness in Paul, and within segments of the early Christian community, led them to reject cultic devotions and live each day as people awaiting the coming of the Lord. This priority, he says, left no room for “holy places, holy times, and the cultic boundaries between the privileged people of God and pagans, or between priest and people.”⁴⁴ However, Romans 12:1 indicates an inclination, beyond eschatological urgency, to decentralise expressions of faith by removing the holy presence from a stone temple and placing it within each believer and within all believers as a community of faith and the true temple of God.⁴⁵ Dunn

⁴³ James 1:27.

⁴⁴ Gunther Bornkamm, *Early Christian Experience*, trans. Paul L. Hammer (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1969), 161–162. See also J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 414; N.T. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 165.

⁴⁵ 1 Cor 3:16; 6:19.

speaks at length about the Christian “community without cult.” He notes particularly that for Paul, the Christian’s own body is offered to God as a sacrifice, thereby “secularising” the holy place into the market place of everyday life. Although Dunn uses conventional terminology in saying that the Roman Christians “met regularly for worship,” he is abundantly clear that the mark of their assembly was its casual simplicity, void of cult, priests, temple and sacrifices, and therefore more like “the clubs or *collegia* of the time.” For Dunn, it is no accident that Paul’s language in Romans 12:1 demonstrates a break with the typical understanding of religion and worship in his day.⁴⁶

The likelihood that the New Testament includes deutero-Pauline works, as well as certain adaptations of Paul, complicates our attempt to understand him and contributes to an apparent tension in his theology.⁴⁷ Paul was no stranger to controversy, and his ministry and doctrine were constantly challenged by various factions in the early Christian community. A prime example is Luke’s account of the Jerusalem Council, where Paul is reported to be part of a delegation sent from Antioch to discuss the acceptance of Gentiles into the church.⁴⁸ The debate is clearly presented as centred on the attempted imposition of circumcision and other elements of Torah on the new converts. We know from Josephus the historian, and from Philo of Alexandria, that the imposed circumcision of Gentile proselytes was a matter of debate among Paul’s Jewish contemporaries.⁴⁹ While we cannot be certain that Paul refers specifically to the Jerusalem Council in his rather stern, perhaps angry, letter to the Galatians, he does strongly oppose this notion and specifically mentions James and Peter.⁵⁰ For Paul, no part of the Torah could be imposed on Gentiles as a measure of faith in Christ.

Paul’s radical shift in theology brought him to conclude that the only meaningful worship and service to God was a manner of life that demonstrates faith, enlightenment, and redemptive love for humanity. True worship, therefore, amounts to an approach to mundane activities that gives evidence of an inner conversion and transformation by the

⁴⁶ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 543–8.

⁴⁷ Beker, *Heirs of Paul*, 9, 104–115.

⁴⁸ Acts 15:1–35.

⁴⁹ Josephus, *Antiquities* XX:II: 3–4. See also his *Life*, 23; Philo of Alexandria, *Questions On Exodus* 2:2.

⁵⁰ Gal 2:1–14. Fresh studies of the structure and purpose of Galatians are drawn together in Mark D. Nanos, ed., *The Galatians Debate* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002).

living presence of Christ. This to Paul was the appropriate response to divine grace, and the only sensible, beneficial, and proper means of honouring God. In order to “worship” God one must offer a “service to God.” The interests of God, and the will of God, are not “served” by rituals, symbols, gestures, ceremonies, or platitudes. Paul was convinced, from his understanding of the teaching of Jesus, that God cannot be patronised by human lip-service.⁵¹ Rather, God is served by noble and exemplary living, and by attitudes, perspectives, motives, choices, and actions that demonstrate divine love and goodness in the world. Delling says that the term “living sacrifice” is deliberately chosen by Paul to show to what extent worship in the Apostle’s mind was been stripped of its sacral associations, and to stress that a Christian’s life of service is the only meaningful offering to God.⁵²

This also explains why Paul’s commitment to the service of God was not expressed in the form of asceticism, a movement in the second century that soon led to monasticism. Nor did he attach such a meaning to his chosen life of celibacy. Paul did not withdraw from the world, from free association with people, or from the practice of his trade as a tent-maker. Nor did he teach withdrawal from the world as the appropriate avenue to serve God. On the contrary, he encouraged Christians to live normal lives, to marry and have children,⁵³ to earn an honest living, to obey civic law,⁵⁴ and to interact with people in a spirit of kindness and good-will.⁵⁵ For Paul, worship is pragmatic rather than symbolic, and active rather than contemplative.

More Evidence in Silence

Further evidence of Paul’s radical view of worship can be found in the conspicuous absence in his writings of any association of the common terms for worship with the activities of Christians when they assemble. For a start, we are hard pressed to find support for the notion that a church building, chapel, or cathedral would have been considered by Paul “the house of God,” or that God’s presence must be invoked by prayer, or somehow enhanced by an assembly of believers for “corporate

⁵¹ Mark 7:6–7.

⁵² Delling, *Worship in the New Testament*, 11.

⁵³ With certain qualifications; see 1 Cor 7:6, 25–35.

⁵⁴ Rom 13:1–7.

⁵⁵ Rom 12:13–21.

worship.”⁵⁶ Paul’s education would have provided him with ample vocabulary for such associations as “worship in the Lord’s house” (Jer. 26:2), or “enter the gates to worship” (Jer. 7:2), which were certainly common among Jews in connection with the Temple. But such does not appear in his writings. Nor does he ever say “when you come together to worship,” or “come to the Table to worship the Lord,” or “worship God in song and reading Holy Scripture,” or “lift your voices in worship,” or “bow your heads as we worship in prayer,” or “give to the Lord an offering of praise and worship.”

Paul saw value in an assembly of believers, with practices that nurture personal faith and boldness to face the many challenges of daily life in an often hostile world. The question is whether Paul thought of the assembly as a “worship service,” and beyond that whether Paul’s views carry any weight for modern Christians. To Paul, the Eucharist is a time of remembrance and self-examination, but nowhere does he call it worship.⁵⁷ Prophecy serves to edify the church, but Paul does not speak of either receiving or delivering prophecy as “worship.” In 1 Corinthians 14:25, Paul says that the proper use of spiritual gifts by Christians will prompt an unbeliever to “fall down and worship God, declaring that God is truly among you.” In Paul’s day, falling on the knees, or falling prostrate, face to the ground, was a common expression of humility, especially so upon a sudden epiphany. But in this context it does not define or associate a particular posture with the Christian assembly.

There are a few other texts that merit mention here. In Romans 15:16, Paul uses cultic language with regard to preaching the gospel among the Gentiles. And in Philippians 2:17, the writer, whether Paul or a paulinist, speaks of his experience of hardship for the benefit of others as “a libation poured over your sacrifice,” also clearly priestly language. While such texts are colourful portrayals of a life of divine servitude, they do not describe a ceremonial act in a Christian assembly. As mentioned earlier, in Philippians 3:3 the writer uses *λατρεία* to contrast the Christian’s life of worship with fleshly rites like circumcision. In 4:18 he speaks of the gifts he received from Christian friends as “a fragrant offering.” This is cultic terminology, but here it is used to describe acts of kindness and generosity, rather than some form of worship ritual. The claim here is that these gifts, whatever they were, were given by devoted disciples and were brought

⁵⁶ The frequently quoted words of Jesus (Matt 18:20) “where two or three are gathered together there am I in the midst” do not suggest that the Spirit of God is any less present when a believer is alone.

⁵⁷ 1 Cor 11:23–34.

to Paul by Epaphroditus, but this cannot be equated with the traditional “tithes and offerings” given as an act of worship by Christians on Sunday morning. Even the verb δουλεύω found in 1 Thessalonians 1:9, which is commonly translated “to serve” the living God, also lacks connection to cultic rituals or ceremonies.⁵⁸ Rather, it conveys the sense of duty common to bond servants, the noun form employed by Paul and other writers in reference to their submissive and servile relationship to God and to Jesus Christ.⁵⁹

Besides these, some might appeal to 1 Timothy 2:8 concerning “lifting up holy hands,” and also to 2 Timothy 1:3–4 concerning “worship in prayer,” as evidence of Paul’s association of prayer with corporate “worship.” We must keep in mind that the Pastoral Epistles likely represent the next generation of Christians and their effort to approve liturgical developments by association with the Apostle Paul. Their church includes a structured hierarchy, with qualifications and duties for elders and deacons, and with a formal order of widows supported by the church to serve in a variety of ways. But their views on worship and prayer are not precisely Paul’s. While Paul was devoted to prayer, and frequently mentioned it in his letters, he says nothing to suggest that he considered prayer a form of “worship” or an element of a “worship assembly.” It seems rather that for Paul, prayer was a constant state of mind, a relational communion with God through Jesus Christ, and certainly a valuable meditation, but not an “act of worship” in the sense that many Christians today view it.

Efforts to trace modern worship practices to the New Testament are in reality eisegesis, perhaps not by intention but by presumption. For example, Gonzalez describes various activities of the early church as “corporate worship” because he assumes that what has come to be called “worship” in Christian tradition must have been thought of as “worship” by the early church.⁶⁰ Similarly, Guthrie discusses singing, prayer, and the Eucharist as examples of both corporate and private “worship.” He refers to Paul’s approach to the “worship service,” and “Christian worship

⁵⁸ The same is true of other terms used by Paul, such as προσκυνέω “kiss the hand toward” (1 Cor 14:25) and σεβασμα “object of devotion” (2 Thess 2:4, and Luke’s account in Acts 17:23).

⁵⁹ Rom 1:1; Phil 1:1; James 1:1; Jude 1:1.

⁶⁰ Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 93–94. See also Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 543–8.

meetings,” thus assuming that when Paul and his converts assembled they did so with a conscious purpose of “worshipping.”⁶¹

As a matter of course, the same presumptions have been globalised and beatified by the leadership of virtually all churches, and by some scholars as well. Watkins, drawing upon the earlier work of Gregory Dix, says that in the early church two forms of “worship” (the service of the Word and the Eucharist) were united, and this way of “worshipping” God came to fulfil “every need of every church in every age.”⁶² Thus, looking back in time through lenses coated with culture and tradition, the church of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has inserted into Paul’s theology notions about worship, even at the simplest level, that in fact he resisted and rejected. The same assumptions have been “retro-fitted” into the teachings of Jesus, and the New Testament as a whole.

This kind of eisegesis can be illustrated quite simply. Jogging is a common athletic activity today, both for fun and fitness. Joggers can be seen on city streets, in parks, and on open roadways in many countries every day. If someone from the twenty-first century were transported back in time to ancient Greece, he or she might happen upon a courier (or hemeradrome) like the legendary Pheidippides. The observer might think “there goes a jogger,” and assume that he is training for a race, or even working off a few calories from a banquet the night before. But these assumptions would be incorrect. The man is working, not playing. Staying fit may be a result of his activity, but it is not his conscious objective. He is carrying a message from one official to another and is under great pressure to complete his mission. He is motivated both by duty and fear of punishment for failure. To assume that his actions have the same meaning and purpose as they do in many modern cultures would be erroneous, if not absurd.

Thus also is the insertion into the New Testament notions of worship that in reality emerge from human nature and from a global religious tendency, but were opposed by Paul and others. In the same text under critical discussion, Paul urges: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom. 12:2, NIV). Marshall concludes that Romans 12:1 more or less summarises the view of worship that Paul promoted in the earliest Christian community— that the appropriate way to worship God is by

⁶¹ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 751–60.

⁶² Keith Watkins, *The Great Thanksgiving* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1955), 17.

daily service and manner of life, not in ceremonial activities performed in an assembly. Addressing the topic of vocabulary of worship in the New Testament, Marshall takes note of the absence of any association of terms for worship with the earliest Christian assembly. He says that to describe the activities of a Christian meeting “as being specifically for the purpose of ‘worship’ is without New Testament precedent.”⁶³

Reformation Views

It is quite significant that what has been discussed thus far was also part of the agenda of the Protestant Reformation five centuries ago. Both Martin Luther and John Calvin viewed the worship of the Roman Catholic Church as an abomination, and a complete departure from the concept of worship reflected in the New Testament. Their agenda, therefore, included a reconstruction of worship they thought would conform to Jesus’ assertions about worship “in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). As is still true today, there was some disagreement among reformers as to the precise meaning of those terms, and how such worship might be expressed. Nevertheless, they were quite certain that what had become worship was not, and that the church had followed pagan rituals into an abyss of heresy. Some of the reformers may have assumed the simple practices of first century Christians to be a prescription for “true worship” in successive generations. Others tended to look to a broader concept of worship similar to that of Paul in Romans 12:1. Ultimately, the changes they introduced were quite extensive and represented an effort to get back to what they perceived as the basics of serving God. Their efforts also represented the belief that the church’s authority for faith and practice is *sola scriptura*, and not tradition. In the words of church historian, Philip Schaff:

They abolished the sale of indulgences, the worship of saints, images, and relics, processions, and pilgrimages, the private masses, and masses for the dead in purgatory. They rejected five of the seven sacraments (retaining only baptism and eucharist), the doctrine of transubstantiation, the priestly sacrifice, the adoration of the host, the withdrawal of the cup from the laity, and the use of a dead language in public worship.

⁶³ I. Howard Marshall, “How Far Did the Early Christians Worship God?,” *Churchman* 99, no. 3 (1985), section II: 5.

They also reduced excessive ceremonialism and ritualistic display which obscured the spiritual service.⁶⁴

Citing Romans 12:1, Schaff contrasts the objectives of the reformers with Roman tradition in these words: “Protestantism aims at rational or spiritual service, as distinct from a mechanical service of mere forms. It acts on the heart through the intellect, rather than through the senses, and through instruction rather than through ceremonies.” It was for this reason that Luther gave the sermon the most prominent place in the assembly, and offered lectures and discourses often during the week without any connection to the concept of worship. He believed it essential to re-educate Christians and prepare them for a life of true worship outside the walls of the church.

Luther, who likely derived impetus from Romans 12:1, understood “true worship” to be essentially the Christian’s life dedicated to God. In 1522, he delivered a sermon in which he expounded on the components of Christian worship. His homily amounted to a reinterpretation of the Ten Commandments in terms of a Christian code of moral and social ethics. He included loving God with the whole heart, bearing testimony of faith before tyrants, dutifully supporting family, doing good at every opportunity, acting kindly towards all, visiting the sick, displaying love toward enemies, being faithful to marriage vows, and refraining from harming others, speaking no lies, not coveting the property of others, nor doing evil in any form. In short, he described a mode of life completely apart from and unrelated to the trappings of traditional worship. Admittedly, Luther included in that list “rightly keeping and hallowing the Sabbath,” by which he undoubtedly referred to the Sunday assembly. But he offered no elaboration or discussion of specific forms, ceremonies, or liturgy. Then, before moving on to an extensive denunciation of the practices of the Roman Catholic Church, Luther said: “See, these are the parts of truly good worship. This and nothing else God requires of you; if you do anything more, he does not value it.”⁶⁵

John Calvin also approached the topic of “true worship” with strong criticism of the practices of the Roman Catholic Church, and a conviction that worship must be what God wants, rather than what people like to

⁶⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 7:485.

⁶⁵ Martin Luther, Epiphany Sermon, “The True and False Worship of God,” in *The Precious and Sacred Writings of Martin Luther*, vol. 10 (Minneapolis: Lutherans in All Lands, 1905).

offer God. He thought that much of what was performed in the Roman Catholic tradition was a mere mockery of God, impious rites adapted from pagan rituals, and more of a theatrical show than an expression of devotion to God. True worship begins with acknowledgement of all God is and a desire to do as God wills. That leads to reliance, adoration, reverence, prayer, and praise. But when a heart is constantly attuned to God, then and only then is there place for ceremonies, and these, Calvin believed, are subservient to genuine worship. They are but instructive tools that assist in uniting the body and soul in the service of God.⁶⁶

The churches that followed the influence of Luther, Melancthon, Calvin, Zwingli, and other significant reformation leaders, continued to meet on Sundays, and they conducted what today are commonly called “worship services,” although much simpler and with less rigid structure than before. But it is difficult to find the term “worship” used in reference to those assemblies, or terms like “act of worship” ascribed to any component of the assembly. They also made radical changes in church music, emphasising preaching followed by a congregational response of praise. Fromm, like most modern clerics and scholars, presumes a conscious connection of “worship” with reformation era assemblies when he writes:

By re-introducing public worship, the reformers displaced virtually overnight a thousand years of high church ritual. The Reformation fathers condemned the Gregorian chant for some very telling reasons, revealing along the way their own evolving concepts of music. They objected to the distractions of elaborate vocal and instrumental music, the dangers of overly theatrical performances, the unwarranted expense of elaborate ceremonies and enormous pipe organs, and the uselessness of text unintelligible to the common man.⁶⁷

We must take note of the fact that Luther, Melancthon, and other leaders maintained certain Christian rituals and ceremonies to accommodate the needs of their followers who might flounder without them. But they did not see in those ceremonies “true worship.” Rather, they viewed them as teaching methods and support mechanisms to motivate people to go out and worship God in their daily lives. Luther

⁶⁶ John Calvin, “The Necessity of Reforming the Church,” in *Selected Works of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 127–8.

⁶⁷ Chuck Fromm, “New Song: The Sound of Spiritual Awakening.” (paper presented to the Oxford Reading and Research Conference, July 1983).

himself believed that those who were truly pious and enlightened did not need ceremonies. Melancthon said in the Augsburg Confession of 1530, that among them the mass was still celebrated with great reverence, despite accusations to the contrary, and that certain things were inserted in the service to help instruct the people: “for therefore alone we have need of ceremonies, that they may teach the unlearned.”⁶⁸ Schaff summarises those views succinctly:

Luther held that church festivals, and even the weekly Sabbath, were abolished in principle, and observed only on account of the requirements of public worship and the weakness of the laity. The righteous need no laws and ceremonies. To them all time is holy, every day a day of rest, and every day a day of good work.⁶⁹

While the liturgy of reformation churches differed significantly from catholic tradition, and various new doctrines and theological concepts emerged from the beliefs of the Reformation leaders, there prevailed a conscious need for a “worship service” with the essence of worship to God concentrated in liturgy and ritual. So, most Protestant denominations today are heirs of those resilient concepts of worship that the reformers opposed, but were resuscitated and embraced by the leaders of successive generations.

Conundrum for Modern Christian Leadership

It is possible that Christians at large are drawn to the notion that their liturgy, rites, and rituals are the essential mode of worshipping God, and that the preservation of Christianity and the gospel message is dependent upon them. If so, it is no surprise that Romans 12:1 poses a serious conundrum for Christian scholars and church leaders alike, and subsequently Paul’s words in this passage become somewhat apocryphal, even untenable. That is to say that an ethos interpretation of Romans 12:1 might be protested because it robs the traditional “acts of worship” of their sacerdotal meaning in the church’s life. Delling, commenting on James 1:26, is clearly anxious that a pragmatic definition of religion might easily result in traditional worship being replaced by a mere ethic.⁷⁰ In other words, many church leaders might fear that if worship is defined

⁶⁸ Philipp Melancthon, *Augsburg Confession*, Part II, article III.

⁶⁹ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 7:493.

⁷⁰ Delling, *Worship in the New Testament*, 13.

and promoted as Paul presents it in Romans 12:1, people might stop coming to church and the church will cease to exist. Without the organised church, then, there could be no Christianity.

If Romans 12:1 actually summarises Paul's theology of worship as a life-ethos, above, apart from, and even without rituals and liturgical symbols, a question remains for church leaders as to how best to respond. The implications are challenging, to say the very least. Starkey suggests that there is something mind bending and life-altering in the gospel message as a whole, and this text in particular, that has not been taken seriously by most Christians. To state it succinctly, the church is not called to worship God with platitudes, symbolic gestures, and patronising promises of devotion. Paul challenges believers to give themselves to God in living service "offered constantly in the temples of industry and commerce, in the sanctuaries of daily decision—the home, the school, the gym, the courthouse."⁷¹ Amidst the accelerating waves of change and innovation that characterise our time, Paul's ethos definition of worship might indeed be the key to the future of the church and Christianity. Besides its connection with an ancient prophetic call for justice and human compassion, it has a ring of earthy pragmatism and real-world mission that are essential to invigorating a dying church.

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⁷¹Lycurgus M. Starkey, *Romans: A Revolutionary Manifesto* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973), 68.