

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

Streater S. Stuart

A New Testament Perspective on Worship

Dt Stuart is an Old Testament scholar who has taught at the United Wesleyan College, Allentown, PA. His lexical examination of the ambiguous term 'worship' will help to bring clarity to an area which is often befogged by a failure to offer careful definitions.

Contemporary fascination with worship in both academic and practical contexts has produced an intensity of inquiry which sometimes belies an important New Testament perspective on the subject. Several recent studies have attempted to correct popular notions of worship and help to make that perspective more accessible. Thus Marshall concludes his study of the 'worship' language of the New Testament by observing that 'this vocabulary is not applied in any specific way to Christian meetings.' He notes 'the remarkable fact . . . that Christian meetings are not said to take place specifically in order to worship God and the language of worship is not used as a means of referring to them or describing them.' He concludes that 'to sum up what goes on in a Christian meeting as being specifically for the purpose of "worship" is without New Testament precedent. "Worship" is not an umbrella-term for what goes on when Christians gather together.'¹

Peterson finds a biblical understanding of worship in terms of 'homage' or 'grateful submission.' He writes:

Although some of Scripture's terms for worship may refer to specific gestures of homage, rituals or priestly ministrations, worship is more fundamentally faith expressing itself in obedience and adoration. Consequently, in both Testaments it is often shown to be a personal and moral fellowship with God relevant to every sphere of life.²

Anyone who is extensively involved with the practical life of the church will recognize that such conclusions about the church and

¹ I. Howard Marshall, 'How far did the early Christians worship God?', *Churchman* 99, 1985, 220.

² David Peterson, *Engaging with God* (Grand Rapids, 1992), 283.

worship are not widely recognized or else are just ignored. There is still a rather universal Christian passion for going to church to worship'. Thus our purpose here is to support the efforts that have been made to correct this misunderstanding and to suggest that the New Testament presents a perspective on worship which speaks meaningfully to contemporary concepts or misconceptions of worship. Such a perspective is shown poignantly by a survey of *proskuneo*, the most frequent Greek word for 'worship' in the New Testament, particularly as it is given emphasis in John 4, and as it is used in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers.

Old Testament Considerations

Before approaching the New Testament directly, it is fitting to recognize that the Old Testament evidences varied approaches to the matter of worship, some of which involve the specific language of 'worship,' while others involve attitude or disposition as much or more so than specific language. There are several Hebrew words which suggest activities associated with worship or which may be translated by 'worship,' although they may and do carry different connotations. Among these are *'abad* and *sāgad*. The most common is *hishtaḥāwā* which has been derived variously from either *shāhā* or *hāwā*, both words meaning 'to bow down' or 'prostrate oneself,' 'to fall down,' or 'stoop,' etc., with these actions often taking place before a monarch or superior, or before God as in worship.³

'Worship' (*s-h*) thus becomes a word for individual or corporate acts, such acts often done in response to the presence of the divine or holy in a sacred or holy place. In other words, *hishtaḥāwā* (*s-h*) is often used exactly as *we* would expect of a word translated by 'worship.' We might call this a 'traditional' or 'normative' use of 'worship,' meaning especially that this is the way *we* tend to characterize worship. With such a mental image of falling down or kneeling, especially when we are concerned about what we think of as 'worship,' it is little wonder that we have come to a traditional perspective on worship which places great emphasis on specific acts or practices at specific sacred or revered locations.

Some contexts in which 'worship' (*s-h*) is found in the OT clearly demonstrate a connection between worship and specific formal acts

³ *hishtaḥāwā* has been regarded as either a Hithpael form of *shāhā* or a rare Eshtaphal form of *hāwā*, but this is not crucial to our presentation. We shall identify the Hebrew origin by the first transliterated letters of each. Thus: (*s-h*). For a basic discussion of *hishtaḥāwā*, its derivation from *hāwā*, and its function as a word for 'worship,' see E. Yamauchi, 'hāwā', *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, I (Chicago, 1980), 267-269.

or responses to the presence of the divine or holy in a sacred or holy place. We note here just a few examples. 2 Sa. 12:20 (RSV) says: 'Then David arose from the earth, and washed, and anointed himself, and changed his clothes; and he went into the house of the Lord, and worshiped [*s-h*]. . . .' In 2 Ch. 20:18-19 we read of Jehoshaphat at worship in the temple:

Then Jehoshaphat bowed his head with his face to the ground, and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem fell down before the Lord, worshipping [*s-h*] the Lord. And the Levites, of the Kohathites and the Korahites, stood up to praise the Lord, the God of Israel, with a very loud voice.

The Chronicler's account of the rededication of the temple under King Hezekiah is a particularly graphic record of the formalities of temple worship, with 2 Ch. 29:28-29 using the language of 'worship' accordingly:

The whole assembly worshiped [*s-h*], and the singers sang, and the trumpeters sounded; all this continued until the burnt offering was finished. When the offering was finished, the king and all who were present with him bowed themselves and worshiped [*s-h*]. And Hezekiah the king and the princes commanded the Levites to sing praises to the Lord with the words of David and of Asaph the seer. And they sang praises with gladness, and they bowed down and worshiped [*s-h*].

Thus 'worship' is used in a traditional or normative sense to speak of acts done formally in a sacred or holy place.

On the other hand there are occurrences of 'worship' which do not reflect such formal acts or contexts. Gn. 24:26 describes the response of Abraham's servant upon meeting Rebekah at the well of Nahor: 'The man bowed his head and worshiped [*s-h*] the Lord. . . .' Notable too is the response of Job (1:20) to the loss of his family and possessions: 'Then Job arose, and rent his robe, and shaved his head, and fell upon the ground, and worshiped [*s-h*].' 'Worship' in these instances does not refer to specific or traditional acts or practices done at specific sacred or holy places.⁴

⁴ The exact meaning or implication of *hishtahāvā* (*s-h*) is not clear in some passages. There are instances in which much more than a physical act such as kneeling or bowing seems intended. This is especially true when other words are used with *hishtahāvā* and result in what seems to be either a redundant or idiomatic expression of worship. In the previously cited passage, 2 Ch. 20:18-19, both 'bow' (*qādad*) and 'fell down' (*niaphal*) are used with *hishtahāvā*. In such cases an internalizing of worship may be intended as much as a physical act itself. Cf. the discussion of the 'spiritualization' of cultic ideas in Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, I (New York, 1962), 395-397, and the chapter on 'The Forms and the Spirit,' in H. H. Rowley, *Worship in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia, 1967), 246-271. Our concern in this paper is not to fathom the nuances of the language but to deal with the contemporary misunderstanding of worship which

Such a difference in the use of the most frequent Hebrew word for 'worship' is significant. From an OT perspective, while worship may be defined in terms of certain formal or expected acts performed in certain places (such as the temple), worship is not limited to such acts and places. Worship may have a very private or personal and spontaneous character, with individual responses to God described in terms of 'worship,' and without reference to typical or traditional places. Such a response to God leads us to an important NT perspective on worship and to the necessity of re-examining our contemporary understanding of worship.

New Testament Considerations

When we turn to the NT we also find several words including *latreuo* and *sebomai* which are sometimes translated by 'worship.' The most frequent NT word translated as 'worship' however is *proskuneō* which implies 'kissing the hand toward' someone as an act of devotion or reverence, and comes to mean 'the act of bowing' or 'falling to the ground to pay homage' or 'to do reverence to someone [or] to God.' As the common translation for *hishtahāwā* in the LXX, it carries the OT suggestion of falling down or kneeling in the presence of one who is revered, such as God. A combination of kneeling and kissing, even kissing the ground, may be implied.⁵

proskuneō occurs 60 times in the NT: 24 times in Rev., 13 times in Mt., 2 times in Mk., 3 times in Lk., 11 times in Jn. (with 9 of these occurrences in Jn. 4), 4 times in Acts, once in 1 Cor., and twice in Heb. The noun form *proskunētēs* is also found in Jn. 4:23. Because it is the NT Greek word most commonly used as the basis for the English 'worship,' we have opted here to concentrate on *proskuneō* in our attempt to clarify the meaning of worship.

Discounting the Apocalypse, we find that *proskuneō* in the traditional or normative sense occurs in just three passages: Jn. 12:20, 'Now among those who went up to worship [*proskuneō*] at the feast were some Greeks'; Acts 8:27, which speaks of the Ethiopian

seems to stem from the mention, implicit or otherwise, of acts which are clearly associated with 'worship' in passages such as we cite and which have led to a popular understanding of worship which greatly emphasizes acts and places. It is doubtful that prevailing contemporary notions of worship would be inclined to describe the actions of either Abraham's servant or Job as 'worship.'

⁵ As with *hishtahāwā*, the exact meaning or intent of *proskuneō* as it is used in some NT passages is not clear. A possible internalizing of worship is suggested in a number of passages, in particular Matt. 28:17, 1 Cor. 14:25 and *Mart. Pol.* 17:3 which are addressed in this article. For a basic introduction to *proskuneō* see H. Greeven, 'proskuneō,' *TDNT* 6 (1968), 758-766.

eunuch who 'had come to Jerusalem to worship [*proskuneō*] and was returning'; and Acts 24:11, in which Paul says to Felix 'that it is not more than twelve days since I went up to worship [*proskuneō*] at Jerusalem . . .' The latter verse stems directly from Acts 21:17–26 where Paul complies with the urging of James about purification and attendance at the temple. While these passages reflect a traditional or normative casting of 'worship' (i.e. implying that certain acts were performed at a certain place, in this case the temple) it is important to note that each refers to practices which occurred according to the prevailing Jewish custom of the day. They do not describe individual Christians or numbers of Christian believers gathering for uniquely Christian purposes.

Special note should be taken of 1 Cor. 14:24–25, in a context which, for the sake of Paul's argument, represents the gathering of Christian believers, and which says, 'But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so, falling on his face, he will worship [*proskuneō*] God and declare that God is really among you.' This passage does not apply *proskuneō* to the gathering of Christian believers but indicates instead that an unbeliever may be prompted to spontaneous worship by the believing and prophesying congregation.⁶

The remaining occurrences of *proskuneō* in the NT (apart from the Apocalypse, and John 4 which we shall consider later) tend to suggest spontaneity, usually as someone responds to Jesus, and without special concern for place or location. The occurrences of *proskuneō* in Matthew (2:2,8,11; 4:9,10; 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25; 18:26; 20:20; 28:9,17) are of this kind. Thus from 2:11 which speaks of the magi who found the house where Jesus was and 'fell down and worshiped [*proskuneō*] him,' to 28:9 which records the encounter of the resurrected Jesus with his disciples who 'came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped [*proskuneō*] him,' there is hardly a suggestion of the traditional notion of worship. Even 28:17 which says that the eleven disciples went to the mountain in Galilee as directed by Christ and 'when they saw him they worshiped [*proskuneō*] him; but some doubted,' provides no compelling reason to read specific acts into the language. The fact that 'some doubted'

⁶ The use of 'worship' (*proskuneō*) here in no way demands that we understand the unbeliever's response in the normative or traditional sense. Given the perspective on worship which we are examining in this paper, and especially in light of John 4, the unbeliever's response of 'worship' may be regarded as a response of faith which recognizes divine authority and produces a willingness to participate in spiritual life and truth. Cf. our note on Mt. 28:17. Cf. also the use of 'worship' in *Mart. Pol.* 17:3 noted later.

follows immediately the language of 'worship', suggests that *proskuneō* here is to be understood more as faith in Christ or acknowledgment of his divine role than as specific acts.

Matthew, then, which has often been described as the most Jewish of the four Gospels, never uses *proskuneō* in relation to traditional places or practices of worship. Wherever *proskuneō* does occur in Matthew, it is almost always (except in the account of the temptation in 4:9,10) found in circumstances that depict an immediate and rather informal response to Jesus, informal in the sense that rituals and rites of the temple are not and perhaps cannot be followed.

What is true for Matthew is true for the rest of the NT, with the notable difference that *proskuneō* is found so infrequently elsewhere. Mk. 5:6 speaks of the Gerasene demoniac who 'when he saw Jesus from afar . . . ran and worshiped [*proskuneō*] him,' while Mk. 15:19 describes the soldiers at the crucifixion who in jest 'knelt down in homage [*proskuneō*] to him.' Lk. 24:52 varies in the manuscripts, with some texts indicating that after the parting or Ascension, the disciples 'worshiped [*proskuneō*] him' before returning to Jerusalem. Jn. 9:38, in the context of the healing of the blind man and his subsequent encounter with Jesus, indicates that after Jesus' self-disclosure as the Son of man, the man believed Jesus and 'worshiped' (*proskuneō*) him. Acts 7:43, in the context of Stephen's defense, refers to Israel's 'worship' (*proskuneō*) of the pagan deities Moloch and Rephan, while Acts 10:25 describes the action of Cornelius who, upon meeting Peter, 'fell down at his feet and worshiped [*proskuneō*] him.' Heb. 1:6, following the LXX version of Dt. 32:43, refers to God's praise of His Son: 'Let all God's angels worship [*proskuneō*] him.' And Heb. 11:21 remembers Isaac who 'blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship [*proskuneō*] over the head of his staff.'

None of these occurrences of *proskuneō* can be said to assume a normative or traditional character. They do not infer that certain formal or expected acts were done at a particular sacred or holy place. If anything, they infer or assert that such was not the case.⁷

⁷ We have limited our study to *proskuneō*. There are 21 occurrences of *latreuō*, 5 of *latreia*, 10 of *sebamai*, 1 of *sebazomai*, 2 of *sebasma*, and 3 of *sebastos* in the NT. Although these words are variously translated in terms of 'worship,' 'serve,' etc., none of the occurrences is found to convey what we have called a traditional or normative view of Christian worship. The use of *latreia* in Rom. 12:1 and especially of *latreuo* in Phil. 3:3 ('For we are the true circumcision, who worship God in spirit, and glory in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh') points significantly to the perspective on worship presented in this paper.

John 4

The most explicit NT statement of 'worship' occurs in Jn. 4:19–24 in the context of Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well.⁸ The Fourth Gospel has been viewed variously as the work of John the Apostle, as the work of a disciple or follower of the Apostle, and as the product of a community of believers who were significantly influenced by the Apostle or attached to his teachings. To the degree that this Gospel reflects a Johannine or other community perspective, the passage about worship affords us an opportunity to study the community's teaching about places of worship and about the nature of worship itself. It is even possible to suggest that what we have here is a definition of worship, a definition which seems to be reflected by the manner in which *proskuneō* is used elsewhere in the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers.

Jesus' conversation with the woman addresses two aspects of the community's perspective on worship. First, the matter of place in regard to worship is addressed. In 4:20–21, the woman says to Jesus, 'Our fathers worshiped [*proskuneō*] on this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship [*proskuneō*].' Jesus replies, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship [*proskuneō*] the Father.' In clarifying the relationship of place or location to worship, Jesus is not simply restricting or redefining the nature of worship at two specific locations, Mt. Gerizim and Jerusalem. But he is saying that worship is not to be limited to any particular places no matter how sacred and holy they may be for any people.

Scholarly opinion is rather unanimous at this point. Thus Brown⁹ indicates that Jesus is speaking of the eschatological replacement of temporal institutions like the temple since Jesus himself replaces the temple. Carson¹⁰ says that true worshippers cannot be identified by attachment to a particular shrine, while Schnackenburg¹¹ indicates that there is a call here for a new type of worship with the place for offering such worship being unimportant. And Bruce¹² notes that the

⁸ For a brief summary of this passage as well as reference to some particularly pertinent scholarship see Gary M. Burge, *The Anointed Community* (Grand Rapids, 1987), 190–197.

⁹ Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, I (New York, 1966), 180.

¹⁰ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, 1991), 225.

¹¹ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, I (New York, 1980), 435.

¹² F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, 1983), 109.

important question is not where people worship but *how* they worship.

'Worship' then is not defined by reference to any particular place or location. One does not need to go to Mt. Gerizim to worship, and one does not need to go to Jerusalem to worship. Worship means something else than going to a particular place for whatever purpose, even for the purpose of carrying out specific acts or practices which are long part of a worshipping tradition. Worship is not about places, no matter how sacred or respected those places may be. The fact that the NT consistently avoids connecting 'worship' with a particular place, other than the place where Jesus happens to be, strongly supports this conclusion.

The second crucial item in Jn. 4 is the spiritualizing of worship. Jesus speaks of an hour 'when the true worshipers [*proskunētēs*] will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship [*proskuneō*] him. God is spirit, and those who worship [*proskuneō*] him must worship [*proskuneō*] in spirit and truth.' If there is an understanding of worship which permeates the New Testament community and writings, it seems to be most directly and adequately expressed here. But there is not universal agreement about what these words suggest.

Some commentators opt for an interpretation directed to the human side of this statement and particularly the word 'spirit,' suggesting that worship is to be internalized, as something carried out in the human spirit. Thus Meyer¹³ divorces worship from outward acts or anything pertaining to the sphere of the senses. Accordingly *en pneumatī* does not refer to the Divine Spirit but has to do with the higher spiritual nature in man. Westcott¹⁴ also holds that 'spirit' refers to that part of man's nature where the divine and human meet. And Morris¹⁵ says that it is not likely that 'spirit' refers to the Holy Spirit, but that it is the human spirit which is intended. Thus the worship that is brought to God must be characterized by sincerity and reality as the Spirit of God leads the way.

Most commentators however identify the 'spirit' in these verses with the Holy Spirit, and are cautious about a strict internalizing of worship. It is not so much internalizing as orientation which is addressed here. Schnackenburg¹⁶ argues that since *pneuma* in the Johannine writings means the Spirit of God, there must be a transformation by the Spirit for one to worship adequately. But this

¹³ Heinrich A. W. Meyer, *The Gospel of John* (New York, 1895), 158.

¹⁴ B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John*, I (London, 1908), 159.

¹⁵ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, (Grand Rapids, 1971), 270-72.

¹⁶ R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, I, 437-38.

does not mean a strict internalizing of worship or a mystical worship as in Gnosticism. Barrett¹⁷ also argues for an identification of *pneuma* with the Holy Spirit and notes that one characteristic Johannine title of the Holy Spirit is 'the spirit of truth.' Thus true worshippers worship God because Jesus himself is truth. Brown¹⁸ also warns against a purely internal worship but says that only those who possess the Spirit that makes them God's children can be said to worship God as Father. It is not just a matter of worshipping God in the inner resources of one's own spirit. Jesus Himself replaces the temple, and it is the Spirit given by Jesus that animates the worship which replaces worship at the temple. Hoskyns and Davey¹⁹ also hold that since believers cannot be freed from all ties to the flesh, no purely inward spiritual worship is intended.

The intent here then is not just that traditional practices of worship be performed with some new emphasis upon or awareness of Spirit and truth, no matter how desirable or worthy such practices might be. It is not that the old things are to be done in a new way.

We believe that the intent is to *redefine* 'worship' in terms of Spirit and truth, and that this understanding of worship is the key to understanding the early Christian use of *proskuneō*. The key is the preposition 'in' (Greek *en*), which we suggest must be understood not as signifying agency, but as indicating close personal relationship. It is the kind of relationship and use of 'en' which shows up so often in Paul when he refers to the union between the believer and Christ by use of the *en Christō* construction. The Fourth Gospel makes use of this same kind of construction in 14:20, 'In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you,' and in 15:4–11 in the often repeated phrase 'in me' (cf. also the 'in the Father'/'in me' relationship in John 10:38 and 14:10).²⁰

It is this emphasis on relationship, on being 'in' Spirit and 'in' truth, which now defines 'worship' according to John. Worship happens when one participates in the life of the Spirit and accepts the truth found in Christ. This is consistent with the Gospel's emphasis

¹⁷ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London, 1962), 199.

¹⁸ Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, I, 180.

¹⁹ E. C. Hoskyns and F. N. Davey, *The Fourth Gospel* (London, 1947), 294.

²⁰ J. Horst, *Proskynein* (Gütersloh, 1932), 293–307, makes the same connection between John's *en pneumatī/en aletheiā* formula and Paul's use of *en Christō*, and also ties this to Paul's statement that 'The Lord is the Spirit' in 2 Cor. 3:17. Thus Horst maintains that worship takes on the quality of a very practical relationship to Christ in which one does not devise or make worship, but lives by an internal compulsion to be driven or controlled by God Himself. Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (Oxford, 1971), 190, n. 4, notes approvingly of Horst's work at this point, particularly the *en pneumatī/en Christō* connection.

on entrance into the life of the Spirit (chap. 3) through a new birth, such life providing access to or leading to truth (14:17; 15:26; 16:13). For the Fourth Gospel worship is a spiritual transformation. One worships God by entering into his presence, by establishing a spiritual relationship with him. It is not physical acts done in physical places which define worship. We worship God by participating in the life that is spiritually defined and by living in the truth. It is life on a new spiritual level and life that acknowledges truth which is worship.²¹

The Apostolic Fathers

This relative infrequency of *proskuneō* together with the non-traditional approach to 'worship' that characterizes the New Testament writings is also a mark of the Apostolic Fathers, suggesting that this perspective on worship is broadly based in the early Christian community. In the Apostolic Fathers *proskuneō* occurs only six times,²² with five of these occurrences referring to pagan or idolatrous practice. So 2 Clement 1:6 says, 'We were maimed in our understanding, worshipping [*proskuneō*] stone, and wood, and gold, and silver, and copper, the works of men, and our whole life was nothing else than death. . .,' and 3:1 asks:

Seeing, then, that he has shewn such mercy towards us, first that we who are living do not sacrifice to the dead gods, and do not worship [*proskuneō*] them, but through him know the father of truth, what is the true knowledge concerning him except that we should not deny him through whom we knew him?

It is important to observe that the contrast which 2 Clement makes is not between sacrifices or acts which pagans perform as opposed to those which Christians perform, but rather the contrast is between pagan sacrifice and the true knowledge of God.

Diognetus 2:4, while deriding the making of idols or gods out of physical substances, asks, 'Again, would it not be possible, for these,

²¹ Burge emphasizes the Christocentric nature of John's understanding of worship. This accords well with the frequent use of *proskuneō* (in the instances we have cited) to describe responses to the presence of Jesus. But we question the emphasis by Burge and others on the sacramental nature of *proskuneō*. While we agree that there is a sacramental current in the Gospel, it is precisely the connection of sacrament or act to worship which we question. That relationship is not present in John, and it is not present elsewhere in the New Testament.

²² This frequency is dependent upon Heinrich Kraft, *Clavis Patrum Apostolicorum* (Darmstadt, 1963), and Edgar Goodspeed, *Index Patristicus* (Leipzig, 1907). Translations are from the *The Apostolic Fathers* 1 and 2, LCL (Cambridge, 1959).

which are now worshipped [*proskuneō*] by you, to be made by men into vessels like any others? Are they not all dumb? Are they not blind? . . .’ And 2:5 continues, ‘Do you call these things gods? Are these what you serve? Are these what you worship [*proskuneō*] and in the end become like them?’

Martyrdom of Polycarp 12:2 refers to the ‘heathen and Jews living in Smyrna’ who charge Polycarp as being ‘the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our Gods, who teaches many neither to offer sacrifice nor to worship [*proskuneō*].’ 17:3, on the other hand, in contrasting the devotion of Christians to Christ with their devotion to martyrs like Polycarp, says, ‘For him we worship [*proskuneō*] as the Son of God, but the martyrs we love as disciples and imitators of the Lord. . . .’ This latter use of *proskuneō* suggests acknowledgment of the authority or divinity of Jesus Christ, and not a particular ritual in a sacred place. In this way it is similar to the perspective on worship which is found in John 4.

Two conclusions must be drawn from the use of *proskuneō* in the Apostolic Fathers. First, as in the case of the New Testament, the word occurs quite infrequently, perhaps indicating that it is not important as a word that describes Christian activity. Second, and following logically from the first, when *proskuneō* is used to speak of worship in any kind of traditional or normative sense, it is only used to speak of pagan acts or practices.

We must conclude on the basis of this evidence that what has become for us a normative and traditional understanding of ‘worship’ is far removed from the ordinary use of ‘worship’ in the NT and other early Christian literature. In fact, when *proskuneō* is used to convey the notion of specific acts done at specific locations, it refers only to Jewish customs and practices or pagan customs and practices.

Conclusion

Much of the concern for worship today obscures the Fourth Gospel’s emphasis on spirit and truth, being centered instead on physical accoutrements that facilitate the acts we term ‘worship.’ We build church buildings to provide the proper setting for worship. We worry about pews or seats, about electric organs and pipe organs, about whether pianos should be used with organs. Orchestras, choirs, soloists, litanies and liturgies help to define worship in many cases. Even physical sound waves become a standard of worship, because if the sound produced by the choirs or the soloists or instrumentalists is not pleasing to our ears, we do not regard it as conducive to worship. Chancels, pulpits, altars, candelabra, rugs,

etc. become our passion. But this does not accord with the NT perspective on worship.

What we have said should not be misconstrued as suggesting that the NT does not refer to acts or practices which *we* associate with worship. It is clear from Acts that believers during the NT period met together for various purposes. Heb. 10:25 urges its readers 'to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together [*episunagōgē*], as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another. . . .' In 1 Cor. 11:2, Paul directs believers to 'maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you.' In 11:17 he gives the 'following instructions' for 'when you come together [*sunerchomai*],' and in 11:18 laments the fact that 'when you assemble [*sunerchomai*] as a church' there are divisions. In 11:20, he says that 'when you meet together [*sunerchomai*], it is not the Lord's supper that you eat,' and in 11:33 he urges his readers, 'when you come together [*sunerchomai*] to eat,' to first eat at home, 'lest you come together [*sunerchomai*] to be condemned.' When addressing the problem of spiritual gifts, Paul says in 14:26, 'When you come together [*sunerchomai*], each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation.' Thus a variety of acts is recognized in the assembling of the church, but this is not termed 'worship.'

Other passages in the NT, which also reflect the church in acts that we might call 'worship,' likewise do not use the language of 'worship' for such acts. Eph. 5:19–20 urges readers to be filled with the Spirit, 'addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, always and for everything giving thanks. . . .' Col. 3:16 says, 'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. . . .' And 1 Tim. 4:13 says, 'Till I come, attend to the public reading of scripture, to preaching, to teaching.' The fact that these and other NT passages do not refer to gatherings and acts of Christian believers as 'worship' gives strong support to our contention that 'worship' was not associated with particular acts or practices done at particular locations as we are accustomed to think of 'worship.'

Although we find and extricate rituals and sermons and hymns and creeds from its pages, the NT does not promote these in terms of 'worship' (*proskuneō*) as we are inclined to do. It never describes the gathering of believers in uniquely Christian assemblies as 'worship' (*proskuneō*), nor does it describe individual acts of Christian believers in those terms, the possible exceptions being Mt. 28:17 and 1 Cor. 14:24–25. Such findings pose a stark contrast to the common popularity of and approach to 'worship' in our day.

The silence of much of the NT about 'worship' lends tacit support to the Johannine perspective. If the Johannine perspective is a community perspective, then certainly the rest of the NT community at large either shared the Johannine perspective or mysteriously refrained from identifying individual or corporate Christian acts in terms of 'worship.' The very common use of 'worship' today blunts and even obscures the NT perspective.

Perhaps we can never be freed from the traditional identification of worship in terms of acts or practices and locations, but the NT perspective should lead us to be cautious or hesitant about such an identification. The implications of such an identification are clear. When specific acts at specific locations are identified with or confused with worship, then those who participate in such acts at such places may assume that they are worshipping, an assumption which may be no more than that.

While it is clear that believers during the NT period assembled, prayed, sang, preached, taught, observed the Lord's Supper, baptized, etc., NT writers are markedly reticent about describing such activity as 'worship.' With the OT setting the precedent for using 'worship' in significantly different ways, the early Christians apparently opted for an understanding of worship not characterized by specific acts or locations. The most important NT statement about worship, found in John 4, suggests that worship is tantamount to participation in spiritual life and the truth that is found in such life. Worship is a matter of relationship to God and His Son rather than a matter of acts or places.

Abstract

'Worship' in the contemporary Christian setting is often applied to the specific acts or rituals of believers in a particular place of worship, usually a church building. Recent attempts to clarify the meaning of 'worship' as it is found in the NT suggest that the contemporary usage is in error and/or misleading. There is infrequent use of *proskuneō* in the NT and it is never applied to the gathering of Christians in the sense that 'worship' is used today. John 4 defines worship as a relationship to the Spirit and truth of Christ in the sense of Paul's *en Christō* formula. *proskuneō* occurs six times in the Apostolic Fathers, usually in reference to pagan practices, and in this setting supports the perspective of John 4 and the NT.