

The Language of Worship

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<http://kinneer.rpts.edu/home/liturgy/RootsofReformedWorship%2CNo3.pdf?attredirects=0&d=1>

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Ask an evangelical Christian what he did on Sunday, and he will tell you that he went to church. Ask him what took place at church and he will tell you that a worship service was held (or if he is a Pentecostal, a praise and worship service). Such phraseology is typical for evangelicals including Reformed Christians. Evangelicals use an idiomatic form of English that we may call "church-speak." We share this church-speak to some extent with all other practicing Protestants. Church-speak is so much a part of being an evangelical that we are rarely aware of our dialect. However, when evangelicals converse on religious matters with non-evangelicals, we can become conscious of our church-speak due to the uncomprehending stares we are given. During studies at St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, this writer became much more self-aware of his church-speak because of the very different church-speak of the Orthodox. The idioms of the Orthodox revealed by contrast the idioms of Reformed and evangelical Christians.

Perhaps you are wondering, why this excursion into semantics? The reason is that we tend to assume that our native language as evangelicals is also the language of the Bible. Our church-speak to a considerable extent establishes the categories and even the questions that we ask on theological topics. Evangelicals attend "worship services." The Orthodox attend the "divine liturgy." Each phrase sounds strange in the ears of the other group. Both are "sort of" biblical, yet in fact are not the idiom of the Scripture. The Orthodox use the term "liturgy" (Greek: λειτουργια) and we use the term "worship" (Greek: προσκυνεω, λατρευω) in ways that are significantly different than how those terms function in the Bible. In both cases, liturgy and worship are used as category terms to describe a kind of meeting whose essential activities are cultic. The cultic assembly for the Orthodox is the divine liturgy and for us it is a worship service. Since the Bible does not use these terms in this way, one cannot discover the biblical theology of worship by studying the usage of such words. Liturgy and worship are not category terms in the language of the Bible. There are no assemblies in the Bible whose purpose is stated as "to do the liturgy." There are no gatherings that are called "worship" gatherings. Worship service and divine liturgy are church-speak not Bible-speak. And as we shall see, this is not narrowly a matter of semantics, but rather a question of the way in which we understand reality. But let us begin with a brief review of the terms used in the Bible that could be translated by such English words as worship and liturgy.

In the Hebrew and Aramaic of the Old Testament, in the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), and in the Greek of the New Testament we find

two basic classes of words. There are words that have as their basic meaning to bow down or kneel and have as their derived meaning to do homage, to reverence. Most of the occurrences of the word "worship" in English translations are a rendering of one of these words. The second class of words means to serve and are used both of service in the sense of ethical or civil duties as well as service in the sense of cultic duties. Even in cultic contexts these words are seldom translated by the narrow English "worship," but are commonly rendered as to serve, to minister. The one exception is *latreuō* (λατρευω) which is used only in a cultic context in the New Testament. Yet even in this case the word is never used as a way to define a gathering as in our church-speak phrase "worship service." The closest we come to this sort of church-speak is in the episode of the Samaritan woman at the well where *proskuneō* (προσκυνεω) is used of the cultic activities of Samaritans and the Jews.

If the Bible does not speak of "worship services" or "divine liturgy," what sort of terminology is used? In First Corinthians Paul writes at some length about problems in the Corinthians' assembly. In particular he instructs the Corinthians about the correct conduct of the Lord's supper, and about prophesying, praying, and teaching (11:17-34; 14:1-25). A meeting whose activities were of such a character would be called a "worship service" by evangelicals, and a "divine liturgy" by the Orthodox. How does Paul refer to such a meeting? He describes it as a "coming together" (*συνερχομαι*). Twice he uses the verb without any qualifier (11:17, 14:26). However, in three other places he adds a defining phrase to the nondescript verb "come together." These phrases are "in assembly" (*εν εκκλησια*) in 11:18, "in one place" (*επι το αυτο*) in 11:20, and "the whole assembly in one place" (*η εκκλησια ολη επι το αυτο*) in 14:23. Let us consider more closely each of these descriptions of a meeting. First Paul calls the Corinthian gathering where the Lord's supper was celebrated as a "coming together in assembly." We could also render this as "coming together in church." But it is clear from the grammatical construction that Paul is using the term *εκκλησια* in its common meaning of an assembly or gathering. The contrast is between being in assembly and being dispersed. In other words, Paul's basic category is not "worship" but "assembly" and in particular, the assembly of the saints. Second, Paul calls the gathering "a coming together in one place." The phrase *επι το αυτο* is idiomatic for "in one place." Translated literally it makes no sense in English (*viz.*, on it). Here again the emphasis is on the assembly, not the activities of the assembly. Finally, Paul calls the gathering "the whole church coming together in one place." In this last instance *εκκλησια* has the specialized meaning of the Christian community which exists even when dispersed. But Paul's reference is to the gathering in one place of that Christian community.

Each of these phrases shows that Paul is thinking in the categories of the Old Testament where the Israelites assembled at the place God appointed in order to meet with him and to perform for him the cultic functions he appointed. This crucial connection exists at a verbal as well as a conceptual level. Though the Hebrew terms for assembly or congregation are usually rendered in the Septuagint by *συναγωγη* (*synagogue*), there

are a number of texts where the Septuagint uses *ἐκκλησία* (church). In Deuteronomy 9:10 Moses recalls the archetypal assembly of the Old Covenant, the meeting at Mt. Sinai. "Then the LORD delivered to me two tablets of stone written with the finger of God, and on them were all the words which the LORD had spoken to you on the mountain from the midst of the fire in the day of the assembly." The phrase "in the day of the assembly" is *ἡμερὰ ἐκκλησία* in the Septuagint. A similar reference can be found in 18:16. In chapter 23 of Deuteronomy we find a number of places where the assembly of the Lord is rendered as *ἐκκλησίαν κυρίου* (vss. 1-3, 8; see also 31:30). All of these usages refer to a cultic assembly (a worship service), not to the people considered as an organized community even when dispersed. The basic language of the Bible is neither "worship service" nor "divine liturgy" but instead "assembly." So then, by a theology of worship we mean a theology of the assembly of the saints in the presence of God. This is a significant paradigmatic shift from the way in which worship is usually discussed in evangelical circles. We will be no longer thinking in the church-speak categories of worship services versus other sorts of assemblies. Nor will we divide the matter between public worship versus private worship. Instead, we will be concerned to discover what it means for God's people to assemble in his presence. What sorts of activities belong to such a coming together in assembly and what do not? What is required in the assembly and what is appropriate to the assembly of the Lord? These are the theological questions that will lead us to a biblical theology of worship.

Such a biblical theology of worship is possible only within a Reformed context where the relationship of the Old and New Covenants are understood in their complexity as both continuity and discontinuity, fulfillment and abrogation. In other words, since the assembly of the saints in the New Covenant (what we call a worship service) is the fulfillment and completion of the assembly of Israel in the Old Covenant, we can legitimately work out a biblical theology of worship in the form of a biblical theology of the assembly. As we investigate the continuities and discontinuities between the assembly of the Old Covenant and the assembly of the New Covenant, we will begin to discern a theology of worship. Such a change of paradigm should help us avoid the rather abusive way Reformed Christians sometimes use Scripture in the discussion of worship. Often the efforts to justify certain elements in worship lead to a tearing of verses out of their larger context. Many discussions of worship have this proof-text character. We find a verse here about prayer, and verse there about preaching and so forth. Hermeneutically, this is more like Dispensational exegesis than the careful literary interpretation of Scripture that produced the Reformation. It is the product of holding to the regulative principle of worship as if such a simple premise were a full-fledged theology of worship. The regulative principle only tells us that we are to be governed by Scripture in our worship, it does not, in and of itself, instruct us on what the Scripture requires. All too often, the issue of what the Scripture requires becomes nothing more than the tossing about of a bunch of unrelated proof texts. Here a verse, there a verse, who knows where another verse. God's worship, the assembling of the saints in his presence, requires a greater profundity of reflection and consideration. It

requires the development of a theology of worship, not just a principle of regulation. Those who adhere to the regulative principle of worship ought to do no less! In our next edition we will begin to explore the nature of the assembly of the saints.