



into the Melting Pot

the question is more important than the answer

Sunday 20 May 2018

The Theology Of Worship – Robin Hamon

This session develops some of the ideas that we started talking about last time, when we explored the topic 'Why do we go to church?'. It seemed from what lots of us were saying that 'worship' was a central reason for us to go to church. But each of us had very different understandings and experiences of worship and so we thought it would be good to devote more space to discussing worship tonight. By way of recapping what we talked about last time then, let's look at the following questions together:

- *What is Worship? What does worship mean to you?*
- *Why do you worship?*
- *What happens when you worship?*
- *Where do you worship?*

One of the interesting points to come out of our last meeting was the universal nature of worship; it is a practice that is evident within *all* human cultures and throughout history. As such, worship is a very diverse practice; it can be expressed inwardly and personally, but more commonly worship is undertaken communally and a vast array of material artefacts are used in worship in religious practice around the globe; rosaries, orders of service, icons, wine, organs of animals, hallucinogenic drugs (not used at Christchurch to my knowledge). Furthermore, in the Hebrew Bible, there are all manner of different expressions of worship – small handheld icons of local deities (the 'household gods' of Genesis 31), people fashioning idols out of precious metals (the golden calf, Exodus 32), animal sacrifice (Exodus 20:24), human sacrifice (Genesis 22). It is healthy, then, to acknowledge that the Christian faith has a heritage of diverse worship practices, some of which are neither readily understandable nor morally acceptable to us today. I'm not making this observation to be deliberately provocative, but rather to underscore that the Bible itself depicts a range of different types of worship. And most importantly for our topic, there are few guidelines in the Bible about how Christians should participate in worship. When exploring a topic like the theology of worship in a Christian context, it is very easy to get caught up in comparing the worship practices of different denominations; liturgy, sacraments, structure of services, hymns/songs. I don't want to dwell on this in the session this evening as all this information can easily be found elsewhere. I thought a more interesting way of exploring the theology of worship is to look at the depiction of the early church worshipping in the New Testament, and starting discussions from this.

According to the gospel of Luke, Jesus worshiped and taught in the temple at Jerusalem and in synagogues (Luke 4:16-21), and in Acts 14:1 Paul and Barnabas attended synagogues to evangelise, converting both Jewish and Greek attendees. So did early Christians regularly attend Jewish places of worship? It's not clear to what extent either of these instances are typical depictions of early Christians worshipping or whether these are accounts of exceptional happenings. Indeed, on both occasions the point of the story is not that Jesus or Paul and Barnabas went to a Jewish place of worship, but what they did when they were there.

Based on New Testament writings, it seems to me that there are four elements to worship in the early church. (This is based on my own reading, both of the New Testament, and of some engagement with scholarship in this area.)

Song/Music

Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 encourage the reader to 'sing psalms, hymns, spiritual songs'. The phrasing is identical in both verses and given that both of these letters seem to be addressed to specific congregations, they are likely to relate to the practice of singing/playing music in a worship context. So psalms were sung in the early church – even though psalms had earlier origins in the culture of ancient Israel, they were applied, or rather reapplied, in Christian contexts. The purpose of singing in a worship setting is therefore ambiguous if you consider the range of materials in the Psalms – some declare the greatness of God (Psalm 138), some reflect on the beauty of nature (Psalm 19), others are cries of despair (Psalm 69).

- *What is your own experience of worshipping with music?*
- *To what extent does it matter if you don't agree with the words in worship music?*

Reading 'scripture'

Hebrew scripture, particularly the Psalms and prophets were read in the meetings of the early church. The Messianic prophecies of Hebrew scripture would have held particular importance in this context, as Jesus was acknowledged as the fulfilment of these writings. Emerging Christian writings, also referred to as 'scripture' (2 Timothy 3:16), were also shared in early church meetings. Colossians 4:16 illustrates this; the letter was addressed to the congregation of the Colossian church and includes a request for it to be circulated to the church in Laodicea. Remember there would have been numerous gospels and letters in circulation, beyond those in our New Testaments. However, the definitive collection of writings known as the Bible did not take shape immediately; scholars tend to date the writings of the New Testament from around 50 CE to 90 CE and even to 120 CE. Worship in the church was informed by writings then, but not always by the New Testament writings or Hebrew scriptures that are used today. And again, the use of these materials is ambiguous when you consider the differences between the gospel genre (gospels were a specific writing style), a predominantly theological letter such as Romans, and a more practical letter such as 3 John.

- *Do you like the way scripture is used in contemporary worship?*
- *Is there a difference between biblical texts and other texts?*

Prayer

Acts 1 depicts members of the early church meeting in an upstairs room; there are around 120 people present and prayer is a central element of their meeting (Acts 1:14). The kind of prayer taking place here is not clear. Were people praying silently? Were people taking turns to pray out loud? Were they reading out scripture? What was the purpose of their prayer? Were they worshipping in the sense of declaring praise? Were they praying to God for help/direction? None of this is clear, but it illustrates the range of different kinds of prayer. Furthermore, these kinds of questions illustrate the fluid boundary between what we might define as 'worship' and 'prayer'; I don't think that it is always possible to distinguish between the two.

- *To what extent do you think prayer is a useful element of worship?*

Speech

In Acts 1:15–22, Peter addresses the early church gathering. Crucially, I don't think that what he says could be classified as either teaching or preaching – he declares the fulfilment of scripture through the betrayal of Jesus. In the verses that follow, other members of the congregation contribute to the discussion. If this account is at all representative of the early church, it seems that early church meetings weren't as structured as contemporary church meetings and allowed space for all members to

contribute rather than having organised and appointed participants as is common today. Indeed, Acts makes it clear the Holy Spirit was present in the meetings of the early church, guiding, facilitating and empowering Christian worshippers.

- *How does this compare to your experience of worship in Church today?*
- *Is it important to leave space for spontaneous and unstructured worship?*

Crucially, whilst teaching and preaching are specific modes of communication found in contemporary church services, I don't think that the New Testament is clear about the extent to which these featured in early church meetings. The New Testament is full of accounts of teaching (Acts 2) and evangelism (Acts 14:1). However, these seem to take place in public contexts that may not be the same as dedicated worship meetings, where singing, music, reading of scripture, prayer, and apparently spontaneous speech take place. Of course, we don't know the extent to which these accounts reflect actual practice in the early church. And in practice the boundaries between these expressions of spirituality are not clearly defined; a song of worship may also serve as a prayer, a word of scripture may bring healing in some form, or a prophetic word may serve an evangelistic purpose. (Healing and prophecy might be controversial topics in progressive Christian settings that question a literal understanding and outworking of these 'spiritual gifts' (1 Corinthians 12:8–10), but they are an important component of charismatic Christian meetings).

In summary, songs and music, reading 'scripture', prayer, and speech formed the basis of the worship meetings depicted in the New Testament. One may question the extent to which these accounts reflect the actual worship practices undertaken historically across the emerging Christian church as a whole; perhaps they represent ideals? Either way, the prioritisation of these elements of worship in the early Christian church reveals something of their theological significance and, as such, it is important to consider your own thoughts, feelings, and experiences of these elements.