

WORSHIP MATTERS

Also by Cornelis Van Dam

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CORNELIS VAN DAM
WITH A CONTRIBUTION BY ARJAN DE VISSER

WORSHIP MATTERS

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for Joanne



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*Oh come, let us worship and bow down;
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!
For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand. (Ps 95:6).*

How God's people can rejoice to hear this biblical exhortation! What a privilege to be able to worship the One who made us and claimed us as redeemed in Christ to be sheep of his pasture! Worship matters! Corporate worship is critically important as an opportunity to praise, adore, and thank our God. Proper worship on the first day of the week sets the tone for the days that follow. Having experienced the COVID-19 pandemic when public worship in person was curtailed, we are all the more appreciative of the privilege of corporate worship. Although the Lord God in his providence provided the technology to have virtual worship to tide us over, it is not the same as in-person worship.

This book deals with an assortment of public worship matters of interest for Reformed and Presbyterian believers. It is for the most part a reprinting of speeches, special studies, and articles of varying lengths that have appeared over the years with some additional new material. Due to the nature of this collection, a similar topic is sometimes approached from a different angle in another chapter. The original published material sometimes lacked footnotes and these have now been included to facilitate further study for those interested in doing so.

The opening section of this collection deals with the more general aspects of worship. The subsequent chapters

address more specific areas and the book concludes with some new challenges which we face as well as a look at worship in heaven. Although this book is not meant to be a comprehensive treatment of Reformed corporate worship, its focus on some general principles and particular aspects of worship should make it beneficial for reflection in order to engender a greater appreciation of what happens during Sunday worship. This collection therefore does not compete with but rather can serve as a supplement to recent Reformed treatments of the topic, for example, the brief overview of the essentials of Reformed worship by Peter G. Feenstra, *Come, Let Us Worship the Lord* (2017) and the more detailed treatment by Wes Bredenhof, *Aiming to Please: A Guide to Reformed Worship* (2020).

* * *

It is my hope and prayer that this publication may promote a greater awareness of the enormous privilege, importance, and awesomeness of worshipping our triune God who is in heaven. I am deeply grateful to the Lord that he has enabled me to do this project.

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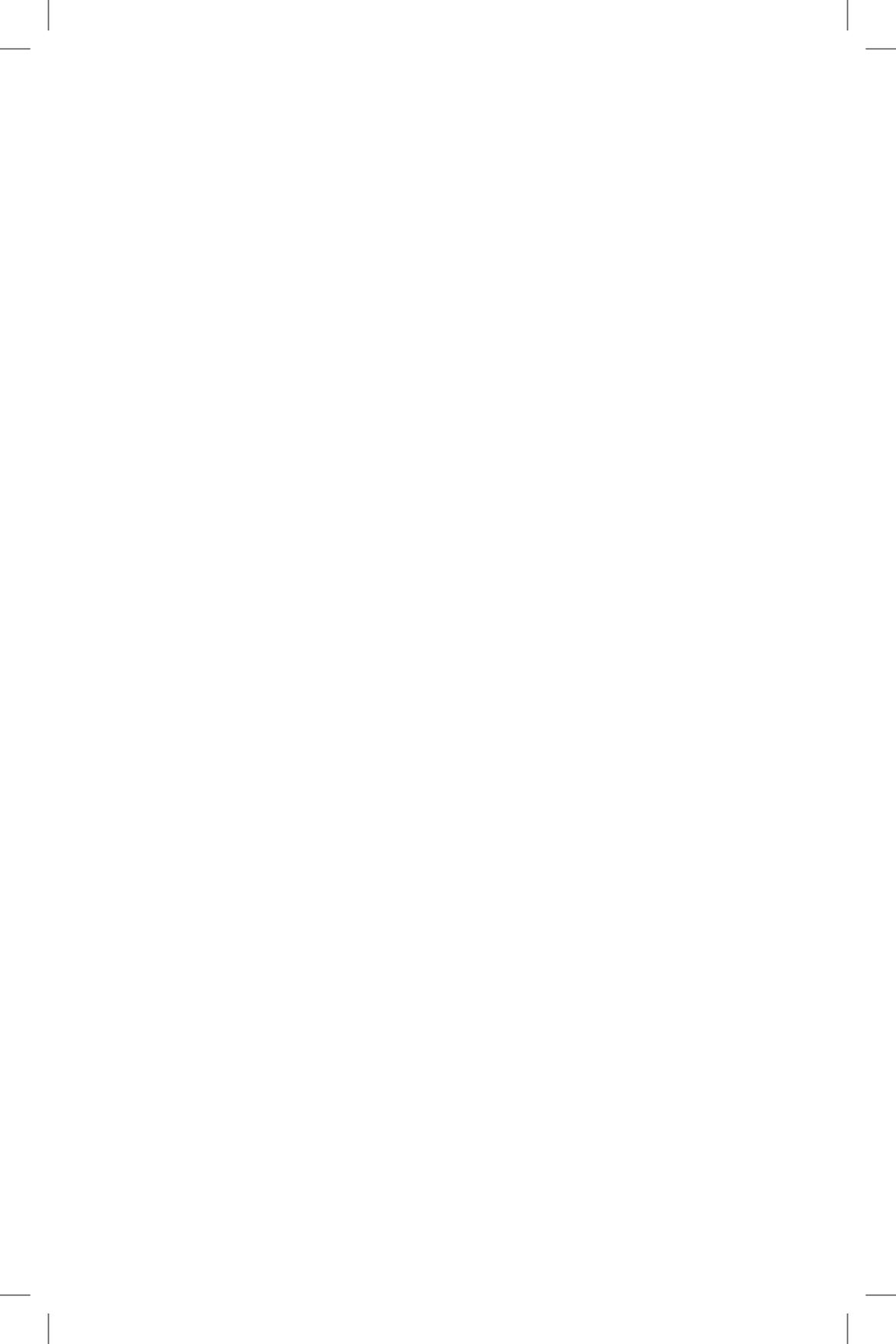
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Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Scripture are in the ESV (English Standard Version). On occasion, other translations are used. NASB refers to the New American Standard Bible (1995); the abbreviation NIV (The New International Version) represents the 1984 edition. NET stands for the NET Bible (New English Translation).



PART A

A General Survey Of Key Elements



CHAPTER 1

Worship: An Introductory Overview

Every Lord's Day, millions of Christians defy their civil authorities and gather together to worship in obedience to the King of kings. Why is it that those in repressive Communist and Islamic regimes risk all to gather together to praise God and listen to his Word?

Why do fewer and fewer people go to church in the free Western world with its rich Christian heritage? Why does there appear to be a developing trend in Reformed churches to attend fewer services and to forget about a second worship service on the Lord's Day? What is going on?

An important part of the answer seems to be that people in anti-Christian regimes may have a greater appreciation for the awesome privilege that gathering with God's people to worship entails. It is therefore good to remind ourselves of the beauty and glory of worship.

To come to grips with some of the basic issues, we need to answer the question of whom we worship and why, first of all. Next, we will consider the place of worship, the time, and

the manner of worship. Following this introductory chapter, these areas will receive a more detailed consideration.

WHOM DO WE WORSHIP?

The One True God Who Has Revealed Himself

From the dawn of recorded history, humans have worshipped. Did you know that much worship that has transpired and is now taking place on planet earth is, to put it bluntly, an exercise in self-deception? Although the evidence for the true God is overwhelming so that all people are without excuse, yet “although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things” (Rom 1:21–23).

Take, for example, the ancient Egyptians. They made fancy images of their gods, which could take the form of a bull or a human. These ancients would take such an image and wash it, dress it, and take it out for boat rides along the Nile. Indeed, some took their beloved deity, its image, with them when hunting. But, when push came to shove, they would have had to admit that these gods were indeed only figments of their imagination. After all, after they placed a meal before their gods, there was always lots of food left over after the gods had supposedly taken their share, and so the priests never went hungry! Another example of the self-deception is that when they sought the guidance of the gods, it was always human beings that provided the answer, either through ventriloquism or by manipulating the statue to nod “yes” or “no” depending on what the desired answer was to be. Now what happened in

Egypt also happened in slightly different ways in all the pagan cultures of the ancient Near East.¹

Of course, what happened in ancient pagan cultures is still, in principle, taking place today with modern pagan religions of whatever stripe or color. The basic characteristic of false worship is that man creates a god after his own image, models him or her according to the human needs present, and then proceeds to manipulate that god as the worshiper sees fit. That manipulation can take many forms. To move closer to home, not all that is called Christianity is necessarily *really* Christianity. To worship truly we have to know *whom* we worship. A striking example from the Old Testament underlines this truth.

Old Testament Israel, the people of God, newly led out of Egyptian bondage, thought they knew whom they worshipped, but they were at this point more influenced by the pagan culture which they had just left behind than they realized. This truth is illustrated by what happened at Mount Sinai shortly after their exodus from Egypt. At a certain point, Israel had felt forsaken by Moses who had gone up the mountain to commune with God. The Israelites really wanted the security of having God close by. They therefore made an image of him, just as the pagans did with their gods. But how did they picture God? The best they could come up with was a golden calf, because according to

¹ T. G. H. James, *An Introduction to Ancient Egypt*, rev. ed., reprint, 1964 (London: British Museum Publications, 1979), 139–45 and Cornelis Van Dam, *The Urim and Thummim: A Means of Revelation in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 118–26. It should be noted that the bread of the Presence which was placed in the tabernacle and temple is never pictured as a sacrifice to God. This bread was a reminder that Israel's life depended on God's sustaining presence. He would provide their bread (cf. Exod 25:30; Lev 24:5–9); W. H. Gispen, *Exodus*, trans. E. van der Maas, Bible Student's Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 249; John E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, Texas: Word, 1992), 402.

Egyptian and other pagan cultures that was a flattering form in which to be pictured.² How they partied for joy to have God so close to them! In their self-deception they imagined that they were worshipping the LORD (Exod 32:4–5). However, a moment’s reflection on how God had revealed himself only days earlier on Mount Sinai would have exposed their action not as worship, but simply as meeting, in a sinful way, their need for a tangible presence of God.³

Such delusionary image substitutions for the true God are also possible today. For example, some people think they worship God whose name, in essence, is Santa Claus. Their God never gets angry, never punishes, and is always ready to hand out presents. They manipulate this god whom they have made, according to the image that suits them, to soothe their conscience and need for worship. Such people also do not realize that they are more influenced by their culture than by Scripture. But when push comes to shove, they will have to admit that they are involved in self-deception. They simply do not want to hear of a God who will condemn the ungodly.

So we need to be clear about whom we worship. He is the one true God who has come to us in saving grace in Jesus Christ. We have not discovered him or come up with him, but he has revealed himself to us in the Scriptures and worked faith in our hearts by his Word and Spirit. This is the same God who

² Cf. The Egyptian bull-god Apis, the Ugaritic calling their god El, “the bull” and Baal being pictured as a bull. For these and others in the ancient Near East outside Egypt and further references, see, e.g., John N. Oswalt, “Golden Calves and the ‘Bull of Jacob’: The Impact on Israel of Its Religious Environment,” in *Israel’s Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of Roland K. Harrison*, ed. Avraham Gileadi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 9–18; Cornelis Van Dam, “Golden Calf,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, ILL: InterVarsity, 2003), 368–71.

³ Cf. Deut 4:15–24 where God emphasized that they had seen no form of him on the mountain and were strictly forbidden the making of idols.

revealed himself to Adam and Eve, to Abraham, to Israel. There is only one true God. The God we worship must be the One who has revealed himself and who continues to speak to us in the Word and in the Word preached. Our object of worship is not to be the product of our imagination. We may only worship the God of Scripture who has come to us in saving grace.

God is Sovereign and Holy

There are two characteristics of God that need to be mentioned with respect to our topic. First, God is sovereign. He is king and supreme ruler of heaven and earth. He determines what is right and wrong. His Word is law, and he is not answerable to anyone. In the words of 1 Timothy 6:15, he is the “only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords” (cf. Ps 104:19; Rev 19:16).⁴ His is the kingdom and the power and the glory (cf. Matt 6:13). Clearly, this God, who is in full control as Lord and King and thus knows all things (cf. Ps 139; Heb 4:13), cannot be manipulated or fooled. To him obedience, worship, and praise must be given (cf. 1 Chron 29:10–13)!⁵ He is God, the only one!

The other attribute of God that needs to be mentioned is that God is holy. This sets God apart from all creation. He cannot be compared with anyone or anything else. He is “the Holy One” (Isa 40:25; cf. Hab 3:3), the transcendent one.⁶ God’s holiness thus testifies to the distinction between the Creator and creation, but it also speaks of his being separate from sin. God is absolutely free of all blemish of any kind (cf. Ps 89:35;

⁴ Cf. also the titles: “God Most High” (Gen 14:18–20); “God Almighty” (Gen 17:1; Exod 6:2) and “Lord God Almighty” (Rev 1:8).

⁵ For a useful brief description of God’s sovereignty, see F.H. Klooster, “Sovereignty of God,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 1038–39.

⁶ He who is exalted above all nations is holy (Ps 99:2–3); he who is high and exalted and lives in a high and holy place, he is holy! (Isa 57:15).

Isa 30:1).⁷ Both of these features of God's holiness come out clearly when God comes to his people at Sinai to renew the covenant with them. When God came down, then indeed *God* came down, the holy one, the transcendent one! God's coming down was accompanied with thunder, lightning, and a very loud trumpet blast (Exod 19:16; cf. 1 Thess 4:16). God's people, who had been warned to consecrate themselves to God and not to touch the mountain, came forward to meet with God by going to the foot of the mountain. Then we read that "Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently. As the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him" (Exod 19:18–19). Awesome is God in his holy majesty! The people were warned again to respect God's holiness lest God "break out against them" (Exod 19:24). Israel witnessed the holiness of God in a very obvious and physical way. This God is for real! He cannot be manipulated!

Another good example of God's holiness is the occasion of Isaiah's being commissioned by God. Isaiah saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted.

Above him were seraphs: each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory."

⁷ For God's holiness, see, e.g., Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003–8), 2:216–21 and Jackie A. Naudé, "qdš holy," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:877–87.

At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. “Woe to me” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty (Isa 6:2–5 NIV).

Isaiah was assured that his guilt was taken away, but his response to God’s holiness is telling! It is no small thing to be in the presence of God!

What is Worship?

If we know whom we are to worship, then we can also understand why those who worship him must be consecrated and holy, separated from a world of sin and iniquity. Think again of the smoking Sinai with God’s warnings, and remember Isaiah’s call. God has revealed himself to us and claimed us. In response, we worship. He wants us to be holy. Therefore, in order for us to worship God, we prepare ourselves. We must cleanse ourselves, consecrate ourselves. It is no small thing to come into God’s presence. It is an enormous privilege.

As a result, to worship is to come before God with thanksgiving and praise. “Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise . . . Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker! For he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand” (Ps 95:2, 6–7). If this was true of the old dispensation, how much more today when God has come to his people in the Spirit on the basis of Christ’s work of redemption. Small wonder that God’s Word enjoins us not to neglect meeting together in worship, “as is the habit of some” (Heb 10:25). With worship we enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus (v. 19). We are to “draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith” to God! (v. 22).

Keeping the above in mind, a working definition of public worship could be the communal attitude and activity of God's people gathered together in holy assembly to pay homage to God, to serve him, and to praise him who has revealed himself to us in saving grace in Christ Jesus, and who still continues to speak to us in his Word and in the Word preached. In this way he works in us by his Holy Spirit.

That is a mouthful. Put more briefly, one can say that public worship is an attitude and activity of reverence, service, and praise directed to God in response to his revelation of himself in Christ and his ongoing work in our lives by his Word and Spirit.⁸

Notice that public worship is only possible because God has revealed himself to us and still speaks to us through the Word. His Word must, therefore, set the content, tone, and direction of our worship.⁹ God is the reason for our worship, and we need to reflect on what that implies.

⁸ The vocabulary of worship includes especially the Hebrew *'bd qal* "to serve" (= Greek *latreuō*); cf. Hebrew *'ābōdā* n.f. "labor, service, service of worship" (= Greek *latreia*; Hebrew *hwh* estafal "do obeisance, bow down" Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann Jakob Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. and ed. M. E. J. Richardson [Leiden: Brill, 2001], 295–96; (also *šhh* hitpael - Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, 1457 (= Greek *proskuneō*). Notice how these terms are general and encompass all of life. It is also telling that these terms can be used of special worship and service of God. Our worship should entail all of life.

⁹ A helpful brief stipulation of key elements in worship is P.D. Manson, "Worship," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, eds Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1988), 730–32. Also see R.P. Martin, "Worship," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, fully revised, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979–88), 1117–33. For the element of service in worship, see C. Trimp, *De gemeente en haar liturgie: een leesboek voor kerkgangers* (Kampen: Van den Berg, 1983), 58–59. On the "regulative principle" see, e.g., John Allen Delivuk, "Biblical Authority and the Proof of the Regulative Principle of Worship in *The Westminster Confession*," *Westminster Theological Journal* 58 (1996): 237–56; Kenneth J. Campbell, et al., "Report of the Committee on the Involvement of Unordained Persons in the Regular Worship

WHY DO WE WORSHIP?

The obvious reason for our worship is that God demands it of us. The LORD gave his Old Testament people clear instruction in the many laws and ordinances that are found in the books of Moses. God also expects the New Testament church to be diligent in worshipping. The inspired author of Hebrews urged us not to neglect “to meet together, as is the habit some” (Heb 10:25). These meetings are worship services.¹⁰ But why does God demand corporate worship, worship as an assembled congregation?

In the first place, we do not worship for ourselves, because it is good for us. It is of course profitable for us, but that is not the reason for worship. *The* reason for worship is to bring praise, thanksgiving, and honor to God. He is the focal point and object of our worship. He is at the center. After all, we are not on earth for ourselves, but to glorify God. As the Westminster Larger Catechism puts it: Man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever.”¹¹ This means that in worship our needs and wishes are not the focus and in the foreground, but God is. He is the object and reason for worship!¹²

Services of the Church,” in *Minutes of the Fifty-Eighth General Assembly... and Yearbook of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Horsham, PA: The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1991), 266–71.

¹⁰ For a defense that this passage refers to worship services, see Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 31–35; also see on the distinction between Christians meeting together and coming together for worship, chapter 18.

¹¹ First answer as found in *The Confession of Faith and Catechisms: The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms Adopted by The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, with Proof Texts* (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2005), 153; also cf. 1 Cor 10:31.

¹² Also cf. the structure and setup of the Lord’s Prayer with the first petitions dealing with God’s name, kingdom, and will.

This priority of God has two immediate consequences in our thinking of worship. First, ultimately the question to ask respecting worship is not what do I get out of it, but what do I give to God in praise and thanksgiving, in listening and learning, in presenting our sacrifices and offering our prayers? Not what do I get out of it, but what do I give to God, is the critical point. And it is in giving to God that we receive! But God first! And then we benefit. For example, if we give God our adoration and praise we will also confess our sins and uncleanness because our fallen state diminished the glory we are able to give to God. But in being sensitive to the need for God's untarnished holiness to be reflected in his children, we certainly benefit from the forgiveness of confessed sins. But our need for confession is subordinate to giving glory to God. This priority is also reflected in the Lord's Prayer. God comes first and only after that do we pray for forgiveness.¹³

Secondly, if *God* is the primary reason for worship, we do well to realize that we do not worship in order to evangelize. To avoid misunderstanding, the point is that we are asking the wrong question if we *begin* with the problem of making the worship services more attractive for unbelievers. If we seek to give to God our utmost in worship, in giving, in listening, and show clearly and unambiguously that we worship *God*, the Holy One, then we will convey the necessary message to any unbelieving visitor. In a public worship service, there must be the clear realization of the holiness of God, who is deeply offended by our sins, but who in undeserving grace has provided the solution for our transgressions in Christ. Public worship must never cater to the needs of the unregenerate to make them feel as comfortable as possible because their greatest need is to be

¹³ On the paramount importance of the glory of God and his name, cf., e.g. Ezek 20:9, 14, 22, 39, 44.

confronted with the awesome holiness and greatness of God, their lost condition, and God's mercy in forgiving sin. The need for clarity in conveying the message of God's holiness and forgiving grace is ultimately the point of the apostle Paul's writing to the Corinthians when he tells them to keep their worship service understandable. Then, the apostle noted, the unbeliever "will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you!' (1 Cor 14:25).¹⁴

The second major reason for worship is closely related to the first. Public worship takes us from the hustle and bustle and the sinfulness and strife of a fallen world, and places us in the holy presence of God who gives his blessing and speaks his gospel of cleansing and reconciliation to us! What a joy to go to church on the first day of the week! While we worship, we close the door, so to speak, to the blatant degeneration, curse, and propaganda of the unbelieving world, to enjoy and savor the blessed presence of the LORD and to marvel at his holiness and grace as he addresses us in his Word! It is like an oasis at which to rest and be refreshed, encouraged, exhorted, and admonished regarding God's will and ways and to be confirmed in the message of the Word by the use of the sacraments.¹⁵

In summary, the two main reasons for worship are:

1. to bring praise, thanksgiving and honor to God
2. to place ourselves in God's presence as congregation, to listen to his Word, and to use the sacraments.

Now, if we go to church for the right reasons, we will be able to reorientate our lives constantly to God and his cause and

¹⁴ See further chapter 19 on the issue of seeker-friendly services.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Arie C. Leder, "Christian Worship in Consecrated Space and Time," *Calvin Theological Journal* 32 (1997): 265–66. We should never underestimate the importance of the benediction in the worship service (Num 6:22–27; Rom 1:17; 2 Cor 13:14). See further chapter 6.

kingdom, and so be equipped to be pure and holy in a world lost in sin. The point is that true worship should enable us to live in the presence of God all the days of our life so that the oasis of his presence in church also fills our homes and goes with us on the job.¹⁶ Then we demonstrate God's holiness and power in our lives. Although we live in the world, we are not of it.

WHERE DO WE WORSHIP?

If someone asks you, "Where do you worship?" you give him the address of your church. Right? The question I am raising is however somewhat different and lies behind the answer we generally give when we say: "we worship in church". It is good to go back to the Old Testament to get some perspective on this.

The Old Testament Tabernacle and Temple

When people in the Old Testament worshipped, it was before God, in his presence. *The* normative and preeminent place of worship was the tabernacle and later the temple.¹⁷ It will be helpful to consider some of the principles and implications of the tabernacle and temple for us today.

The tabernacle, and later the temple, was to be the focal point of Israel's worship because that is where God chose to dwell in the midst of his people. The next chapter of this book

¹⁶ Think also of the fact that Christians individually are temple of God (1 Cor 6:19; cf. 3:16–17 where the collective identity as temple is in view). On being in God's presence all the days of our life, cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Q.A. 103b.

¹⁷ For worship prior to the tabernacle, see, e.g., Andrew E. Hill, *Enter His Courts with Praise: Old Testament Worship for the New Testament Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 30–36. For places of theophany and worship before the tabernacle, one can think, e.g., of Jacob sleeping at Bethel where God appeared to him in a dream. Jacob responded the next morning with worship. He said "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven" (Gen 28:17). See further, e.g., Hill, *Enter His Courts*, 64–72.

will go into more detail on God's dwelling with his people. But here the following can be noted. It was in the tabernacle or temple where God was enthroned on the cherubim. The tabernacle spoke of the miracle of God with humanity, a miracle not to be underestimated. The sovereign holy God wanted to come down from his glorious habitation in heaven to live in the midst of his people—a people that had nothing loveable about them. He came to them and redeemed them by grace alone.

It was only because of his great love for them (cf. Deut 7:7–9) that he made a place for himself where there normally would not be a place for the Holy One of Israel. So God made plans for a tabernacle and passed them on to Moses, and eventually the tabernacle was built. Then the sovereign holy One, God, came down from heaven's glory, to live in the midst of his people (Exod 40). Now public worship before the face of God was possible in an official and regulated way. God with his people!

There are several things we need to note here. The desire of God to be with his people and to “walk with them”, so to speak, through the desert and through life, calls to mind the marvel of paradise. How perfect and full of bliss that paradisaical communion of God must have been! How perfect and beautiful must worship have been there! Sin destroyed that, but God did not give up on his creation. Indeed, in a sense, God created a piece of paradise there inside that tabernacle. Like paradise, God was there, and this was holy ground. No sin or uncleanness was to be found here. This was the Most Holy Place. And like paradise (Gen 3:24) it was guarded with the cherubim—the cherubim embroidered on the curtains forming the tabernacle walls, and especially the cherubim on the curtain separating the Most Holy Place from the Holy Place. God is holy, holy, holy!¹⁸

¹⁸ Exod 26:1, 31; 36:8, 35–38; cf. 2 Chron 3:14. Also the temple had paradise

This brings us to another point. It appears to be human to consistently underestimate God's holiness. Israel had been at Mount Sinai and they had heard God speaking to them with his own voice and yet, they had disobeyed that voice by making a golden calf and calling it their God (Exod 32). Israel had seen the LORD come down in glory to the tabernacle and officially occupy his dwelling place in their midst and yet, they so easily underestimated his holiness. Think of how Nadab and Abihu were struck down with death because they used strange fire to bring the incense offering (Lev 10:1–3). Or think of how much later King Uzziah was struck with leprosy for attempting to bring the incense offering against God's command (2 Chron 26:16–20). God does not allow people to tamper with his holiness. *Holy* is he! This is also reflected in the stringent demands of how the priests were to dress in his presence.¹⁹ It is awesome to be in God's presence.

We come to a third point. God needed to protect his people from his holiness otherwise he could not dwell in their midst. God provided that protection by instituting the sacrificial service of atonement so that the Holy One of Israel could be in the midst of his sinful people. Blood had to be shed for atonement, pointing to the blood of *the* lamb, Jesus Christ. Blood had to be shed so that the fellowship of God with his people could rest on a good and just basis (cf. Lev 17:11).

The sacrifice of atonement however brought obligations to God's people. They needed to cleanse themselves. The camp

motifs like palm tree, pomegranate and flowers. Cf. 1 Kgs 6:18, 29, 35; 2 Chron 3:5–17; 4:21.

¹⁹ Cf. how God insisted on the priests wearing a linen undergarment when appearing in God's presence on pain of death (Exod 28:42). Also cf. Exod 28 as a whole for the meticulous directions regarding priestly garments. Even the duty of taking away the ashes of the burnt offering had a dress code (Lev 6:10–11).

had to be clean and holy for God was in their midst!²⁰ Awesome is God! But, when the people did not obey or did not appreciate God's holiness and sinned willfully, then the Lord broke out against his people and punished them with death.²¹ God's presence demanded holiness. The warning is appropriate: "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God" (Eccl 5:1). Worship brings one into the presence of God and he is holy!

The Present Dwelling Place of God

As we will see more fully in the next chapter, God's present dwelling place on earth is no longer a physical tabernacle or temple, but the church is now the temple and dwelling place of the Most High (1 Cor 3:16–17; Eph 2:22) and each member is also a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19). This is a staggering truth and has enormous implications for our communal worship.

For one thing, it means that when the church of Christ comes together in public worship, it is in a most intimate way in the very presence of God! When we go to worship, we do not go "to the house of God" as is sometimes said. No, we are the house of God! The congregation is that consecrated and holy place where public worship takes place. And therefore, a congregation saving up for a new building has nothing to be ashamed of if it worships in a gym or community center. The critical ingredient for coming into God's presence is not the physical building but the assembled people of God in whose midst God himself is.²²

²⁰ It was the task of the Levites to teach the people how to distinguish between the holy and the common, the clean and unclean (Lev 10:10) and to see to it that the camp was kept clean (cf. Num 5:3; 35:34).

²¹ Cf. Exod 19:22, 24 (Mount Sinai); Num 11:1–3 (Taberah); 14:10–11 (rebellion and threat of plague); 21:4–9 (snakes and the bronze serpent).

²² The church is like living stones that forms the building of God, his temple

This reality makes worship a very joyous experience. God is with us! We can sing his praises and rejoice in his presence. But it also means that there is the need for respect with the realization that God is holy. And therefore “let us offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:28–29).

Generally speaking, our culture and society could use more sensitivity to God’s holiness. Christians should be at the forefront of showing respect for God’s presence also when attending church. Although experiencing the fellowship of believers is certainly part of the joy of the Lord’s Day experience, the greater joy is that we come together to have fellowship with God. We go to church to meet our God! It is therefore important to take time in church before the service begins to reflect on that momentous fact, to meditate on the wonder of the occasion, and to mentally continue to prepare ourselves for worship. We occupy holy ground when we are assembled for worship in church. Oh the grace of God in coming near to us in the Spirit! But we need to remember: “Guard your steps when you go to church!” to paraphrase Ecclesiastes 5:1. In other words, “Be careful.”

When you enter a large medieval cathedral in Europe, you are spellbound. You cannot help but to be so. The stone arches soar upward, to heaven as it were, and the enormous dimensions of the building cannot but evoke awe and wonder. In this way the architects from the Middle Ages forced the human spirit to look up to heaven and to remember: you are coming into God’s presence. He is here, and how great he is! One becomes quiet and subdued and even tourists going through speak softly.

(1 Pet 2:5). See also on the nature of God’s presence in worship services John M. Frame, *Worship in Spirit and in Truth* (Phillipsburg NJ: P & R, 1996), 33–35.

Well, how much more must we be in awe in our home church when gathered for worship. Then we are indeed in God's very presence. We must never lose our respect and sense of wonder when being in God's presence for worship.

WHEN DO WE WORSHIP?

We worship on the Lord's Day, Sunday, the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2; Rev 1:10). But what is involved in that one day of every week being set apart? What is the message from God in this? We need to go back to the Old Testament to get this issue in perspective.

The Meaning of the Sabbath

Shortly after the LORD gave the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai, he summarized his covenant will in the so-called Book of the Covenant (Exod 20:22–23:33) which Moses passed on to Israel. It is striking that when God summarized his teaching on the Sabbath days and years, then the key element was that these were to be times of refreshing and rest for his people and even for the land. It is this point of rest that is also emphasized when a shortened form of the fourth commandment is given. "Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; that your ox and your donkey may have rest and the son of your servant woman, and the alien, may be refreshed." (Exod 23:12).

More will be said about the Sabbath day in chapter 3, but by way of an introductory overview, the following can be mentioned here. The main point of the fourth commandment is clear: rest! Seen within the context of the ancient Near East, this is a most remarkable command. No other civilization had such a privilege—to stop work for a day every week in order to

be refreshed.²³ And not just humans were to rest, but also the animals. God did not want an overworked people. His people have been redeemed and freed from all bondage, also from the slavery of constant uninterrupted work.

The Sabbath, established at creation, became part of God's preliminary redemptive answer to the curse of Genesis 3:17–19 where man's labor was toil and sweat which ultimately led to man's returning to the dust! God provides rest. At no time must man work seven consecutive days. There must be time for a weekly celebration. This principle of rest is strikingly shown, for example, in the sabbatical year. Israel could live by grace, without having to work the land for that year.

There is a second, related point. This time of repose afforded by the Sabbaths and feasts points to the future rest from all sin and misery. For Israel, the first stage in that future hope was the redemption and rest that would be found on entering the Promised Land. Once they had settled there, they were to experience rest and relief from their enemies and live in peace given by God (Deut 12:9–10). We, in turn, may look forward to *the* Promised Land. As the author of Hebrews put it: "therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it... There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his" (Heb 4:1, 9–10).

²³ In Babylon there was some cessation of work on the 7th, 14th, 19th, 21st, and 28th day of each month, but these were not Sabbaths, days of refreshing. These were considered evil days, days of tension. Because these were "bad luck" days, it was better to stop work. There was no sense in laboring if no blessing could be expected. And so there was no joy and no real rest on those days. See further Anthony Phillips, *Ancient Israel's Criminal Law: A New Approach to the Decalogue* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970), 65.

The gift of rest given to Christians on Sunday is full of redemptive overtones and, therefore, joy. As those living in the last days, the final period before Christ's return, Christians have so much more reason to rejoice in the Lord for the gift of the day of rest. After all, Christ has, in principle, led us out of all bondage and dominion that enslaves and he has set us in the freedom and joy in the Lord. Sunday is a day to celebrate this reality!

Celebrating Sunday Today

It is clear that Sunday is not just a day off. It is a holy day, a sacred time, a sign of the LORD's work of renewal in our lives (cf. Ezek 20:12, 20). The Sunday is a day set aside by God himself so that we may savor the rest and redemption that he brings to this broken world and to our stressed lives. It is a day in which to delight in the renewal of life in Christ who renews us as a new creation and helps us to anticipate the perfect rest that comes in the renewal of all things. It is for all these reasons that the fourth commandment says, "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy."

"To remember" is not just an intellectual recall of information. In this context it is an act of worship in which we are mindful of and savor God's redemption and love. Worship in Scripture, therefore, involves recalling the great deeds of God's salvation and judgment.²⁴ The beauty of singing the Psalms in worship is that it gives one a sense of continuity with the people of God who preceded us.²⁵ It involves us, so to speak, in

²⁴ See, e.g., Exod 15:1–21; Judges 5; Ps 47, 89, 96.

²⁵ Note how psalms alternate between the singular and the plural; e.g., Ps 25:22; 44:6–8; 65; 108. We belong to the same people of God that crossed the Red Sea and entered Canaan. Amos 3:1; 1 Cor 5:7. See further for the solidarity of God's people with earlier generations Frans van Deursen, *Psalms II*, gen. ed. Jordan J. Ballor and Stephen J. Grabill, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman, *Opening the Scriptures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian's Library Press, 2015), 175–210.

the great deeds of God's deliverance which has been fulfilled in Christ, and in God's ongoing work until the final perfection of his kingdom arrives.

Sundays can therefore be characterized with joy and rejoicing in the LORD, that he has set us free from being dominated by our sins and misery. It is not by accident that Christ often healed on the Sabbath. In this way he showed the true intent of the Sabbath, the renewal of life (cf. John 5:1–17) and that true rest and wholeness are to be found in him alone (cf. e.g., Mark 2:1–3:6). The Sunday rest also reminds us that Christ has set us free from the rat race that can characterize life. We are not to be slaves to our work. We can step out of it once every week. More positively, the Sunday is to be a day unabashedly focused on the LORD our God who has had mercy on us in Christ and who has set us free from all that entangles and enslaves, especially our sinful flesh, the world, and Satan. It is a day to savor the triumph of Christ on Easter morning. A day to worship—in church and in our homes. A day not just for recreation but for the re-creation of all things, starting with ourselves.

This brings us to the question how should we worship?

HOW DO WE WORSHIP?

For the purpose of this introductory chapter, we need to be brief. We have seen that God is holy and that he must be approached humbly, with reverence and awe (Eccl 5:1; Heb 12:28–29). It is an enormous privilege that we can approach God to worship, praise, and adore him because of the work of our Savior. We will now focus on two areas: preparing for worship and the elements of worship.

Preparing for Worship

Approaching holy God who is our Father in Christ requires preparation. If we realize our creatureliness and natural

depravity, and recognize that God is the Creator who has had mercy on us in Christ, then we will do everything possible to prepare ourselves so that we worship him with the right attitude. We can only go to church with great humbleness and contrite heart in full recognition of our unworthiness. “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God you will not despise” (Ps 51:17).

The One we worship and seek to serve is the One who said that we must be holy because he is holy (1 Pet 1:16). In this connection, we are reminded of the fact that before the Old Testament priest could enter the tabernacle and so come into God’s immediate presence, he had to wash with water lest he die (Exod 30:20–21). If we take our identity as believers and priests seriously (1 Pet 2:5), we must be no less conscientious in making sure we are clean, body and soul. As the Psalmist said:

Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?

And who shall stand in his holy place?

He who has clean hands and a pure heart (Ps 24:3–4)²⁶

Or in the words of Hebrews 10:22 “Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”

Such preparation requires conscious effort to be holy and separate from a world of sin. Specifically, to give an example, that can mean that God’s people will spend the Saturday evening differently than an unbeliever does. Church members should reflect on the coming Sunday and prepare to meet their God. It is horrible, in the eyes of the LORD, if a child of God comes to church with a head full of worldly entertainment from the night before so that the Word preached falls on barren ground.

²⁶ Cf. Ps 26:6–7; Heb 9:14.

Such a person is not ready to meet holy God. Preparation is necessary for God-fearing worship. It starts with practicing holiness and godliness all week long and certainly involves getting into a proper frame of mind on Saturday evening.

In preparing for worship, we do well to count our undeserved God-given blessings. We must worship with an incredible sense of gratitude because God in high heaven has come down to us here on earth (cf. Isa 57:15) and has had mercy on us in Christ. The Heidelberg Catechism is absolutely right in summarizing Scripture by saying that to know the joy of the only comfort in life and death we must know how great our sins and misery are (QA 2). This presupposes a life of close communion with God. We can only see our sins when we stand in his holy presence. Spirit-generated gratitude for salvation then impels us to worship!

And we are to do so “in spirit and truth” (John 4:23, 24). This requires that we are totally committed to this worship with our whole being, and that our communion with the Spirit of Pentecost be in harmony with the truth of God. Worship is never just going through gestures or forms! Our entire being must be involved in it. It must come from the heart (cf. Matt 15:8)! But it must also be in truth. We cannot just invent an entertaining liturgy. It must be in harmony with the Word of God. The classic Reformed liturgy is something to be very thankful for because it stresses that worship takes place within a covenant context—listening to our covenant God and responding to him. But, as just mentioned, we must realize that worship can never be reduced to the outward parts of the worship service. Also, our going to church must never be a drag and forced routine. It must be in spirit and in truth!

We need to go in faith, in great expectation (cf. Heb 11:6; Rom 14:23)! John Frame has rightly said: “Genuine faith

generates an emotion of expectancy in worship: we trust God to keep his promises, to meet with us, to bless us in accordance with the gospel, to change our lives by the power of his word. A faithful worshiper will not go to church saying, ‘Oh, it’s just going to be the same old thing again.’ And faithful worshipers will have their expectations fulfilled.”²⁷

Elements of Worship

Coming now to more specific elements of worship in answering the question of how we worship, we note the following.²⁸

Reformed worship appropriately begins with the congregation expressing their trust and dependency on God by reciting: “Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth” (Ps 124:8). God himself then greets those gathering in his presence through the mouth of his servant, the minister of the gospel. “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:3) or a similar passage of greeting (such as 1 Tim 1:2; Rev 1:4–5a). The morning worship service typically ends by God sending his people on their way with that wonderful blessing of Numbers 6:24–26: “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.” So God puts his Name on his people and blesses them! (Num 6:27). The second service ends just as spectacularly: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor 13:14). With the worship service bookended

²⁷ Frame, *Worship in Spirit and in Truth*, 81.

²⁸ For a description and justification of the elements of Reformed worship, see, e.g., Peter G. Feenstra, *Come, Let Us Worship the Lord* (2017); Wes Bredenhof, *Aiming to Please: A Guide to Reformed Worship* (Fergus, ON: The Study, 2020), 51–119; G. van Rongen, *Liturgy of God’s Covenant: Outlines on the Reformed Liturgy* (London ON: ILPB, 1966); Abraham Kuyper, *Our Worship*, ed. and trans. Harry Boonstra and et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 107–68.

with God's greeting and blessing, it is obvious that worship is conducted in God's presence. So obvious should it be that God is the center of everything and that he is present in worship that, if an unbeliever should walk in, he "falling on his face, will worship God and declare that God is really among you" (1 Cor 14:25).

In covenantal liturgy, the preaching is a very important and central element. God speaks through the mouth of the minister, his servant. The preacher proclaims the gospel on behalf of his majestic Sender. He is not just the nice guy with a soft message molded according to the latest congregational opinion polls. The man in the pulpit is not there to entertain and be humorous. No, he is a steward of the Word of God and he is to preach the whole counsel of God, whether that be popular or not. We go to church to hear God! The minister must, therefore, be very careful to bring only the Word of God and not his own opinions. Insofar as the one preaching is in agreement with God's Word, he proclaims God's Word. And therefore, how we react is also important. We listen to the Word read and preached, and let the Word bear fruit in our lives.

The Lord has graciously given us two sacraments, signs and seals of God's promises, which confirm the preaching of the Word. With the water of baptism, the Lord God signifies and seals to us the washing away of our sins through Jesus Christ. The signs and seals of the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper proclaim Christ's death and assure us that the Savior gave his body and blood for our salvation and that he nourishes our hungry and thirsty souls to life eternal.

We respond to the preaching of the Word and its confirmation by the sacraments with singing, prayer, and offerings. Let us briefly touch on these three responses one by one.

Singing, one could argue, is an intensive form of speaking. Singing enhances the word, makes it easier to memorize, and so brings it closer to our hearts and lives. Singing Scripture parts, like Psalms and hymns, is therefore a great gift of God.²⁹

Singing and music making was a big part of the liturgy of the temple as predominantly organized by David. It was professionally and lavishly done. Four thousand Levites played instruments and a choir of 288 sang (1 Chron 23:5; 25:7). A wide variety of instruments was involved. Scripture mentions fifteen, the rabbis speak of thirty-six.³⁰ It appears that the role of the congregation was somewhat limited given the massive choir and instrumentation involved. This changes in the New Testament church. The official temple service is given to the congregation, the temple of God. It is striking that in the New Testament the emphasis is on the congregation participating in singing and praise in worship, as well as elsewhere.³¹ Musical instruments are not mentioned in the New Testament church.³² This fact does not prove that instruments were not present in worship services, but it does underline the old Reformed principle that the organ or whatever instrument is used in the worship service is in the service of the singing of the congregation and not an end in itself. The congregation produces the music in singing.³³

²⁹ See chapter 13 in this book

³⁰ Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services as They Were at the Time of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 78; on David's liturgical work, G. van Rongen, "The Commandment of David," *Clarion* 24, no. 25 (1975): 14–17.

³¹ Col 3:16; Eph 5:19; Heb 13:15; cf. van Rongen, "The Commandment of David," 16–17.

³² This is all the more striking since the prevailing culture of (pagan) worship made wide use of instruments. See H. Hasper, *Calvijns beginsel voor de zang in de eredienst*, ed. W. de Graaf ('S-Gravenhage: Stichting Geestelijke Liederen uit den schat van de kerk der eeuwen, 1955–76), 1:50–51.

³³ See further chapters 13 and 15.

It is obvious that psalms and hymns taken directly from Scripture have a place in public worship. As part of God's revelation, they are in a class by themselves and should be utilized in praising God. At the same time the Psalms point beyond themselves and exhort us to sing a new song to the LORD (cf. Ps 33:3; 96:1; 98:1; 149:1). These new songs include the hymns found in the New Testament, but the need to sing new songs also gives the church freedom for the making of new hymns to praise the Lord (cf. 1 Cor 14:26; Rev 5:9; 14:3; 15:3).

Prayer and offerings can be taken together for, in the context of worship, both are sacrifices. What really is a sacrifice? It is a gift. Thus, the motivation for sacrifice is to give a gift to God. When we sincerely give to God, we recognize God's pre-eminent place and show our dependence on him. In the sacrificial gift is the expressed wish to be a child of Father. Have you ever noticed how often children give and that they give so freely? That is inherent in being a child. You recognize your dependence. Christians easily give gifts and acknowledge God's right to receive the best. By giving gifts and by sacrificing for God, one also shows sorrow for sin done in rebellion against God. So our gifts can be a "fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God" (Phil 4:18; cf. Heb 13:16). Indeed, our whole life must be characterized as a thank offering to God (cf. Rom 12:1–2).

Giving and offering is also part of our worship—in giving monetary gifts and in giving our prayers. According to Scripture, prayer is the sacrifice of our lips, a sacrifice of praise (Heb 13:15; cf. Hos 14:2). Asaph said: "The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me" (Ps 50:23, cf. v. 14; cf. Isa 60:6). Prayer is also the sacrifice of the broken-hearted in sorrow for sin (Ps 51:17). Prayer is the giving of ourselves to God in gratitude as we seek communion with the living God

(Ps 42:5–8). Do we not pray in thankfulness for his redemption, recognizing God’s pre-eminent place and our dependence on him? Prayer is like an incense offering. David sang:

Let my prayer be counted as incense before you,
and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!
(Ps 141:2).³⁴

Since prayer is “the most important part of thankfulness,” as the Heidelberg Catechism puts it (QA 116), prayer is integral to worship.

A final comment regarding how we worship: worship demands the participation of the entire congregation. It cannot be left to just the minister who “does his thing”. One cannot simply “be there” and let the rest happen—a one man show. No. All Christians are priests to God (cf. Rev 1:6) and must participate in worship and not be onlookers only. How should the entire congregation participate? By all having a turn at being at the front of the church and “doing a number”? No. To involve as many in the worship means that all are ready to participate with an open Bible, an open ear, and if necessary to take notes of the sermon, with a pen and paper. Congregational participation can also involve responsive “amens”, singing or reciting the Apostles’ Creed and other appropriate forms. However, there is no need to have congregational participation by having as many people as possible on the podium to make their contribution. After all, the purpose of being in church is to worship. A church service must always be God-centered! A church service is not about being entertained, but to worship God.

³⁴ As is common in Hebrew poetry, there is parallelism here. Prayer is parallel to the lifting up of the hands (which is a posture for prayer), and the incense is parallel to the evening sacrifice.

A Typical Reformed Liturgy

Call to Worship

Votum: Psalm 124:8

Salutation: Romans 1:7 in a.m.; Revelation 1:4–5a in p.m.

Singing in response

Reading of God's Law (Exod 20:2–17 or Deut 5:6–21) in
a.m.; Apostles' Creed in p.m.

Prayer for forgiveness, renewal, and for the opening of
God's Word

Scripture reading, often followed by singing

Sermon

Singing in response

Administration of the sacrament of baptism or Lord's
Supper if applicable

Prayer of thanksgiving and for the needs of the
congregation and all Christians

Singing

Benediction: Numbers 6:24–26 in a.m.; 2 Corinthians
13:14 in p.m.

THE PERSPECTIVES OF WORSHIP

Earlier in this chapter we defined worship as “an attitude and activity of homage, service and praise directed to God in response to his revelation of himself in Christ and his ongoing work in our lives by his Word and Spirit.” It is obvious that with such a definition, worship covers all of life and our Sunday worship must spill over into a week of service, adoration, and praise to God. The life of a Christian is really all about worship (cf. Rom 12:1–2; 1 Pet 2:9).

With worship to be integrated in all of life, it is helpful to know “where we are at” in terms of God's plan for our worship. What characterizes our place in the history of God's deeds and

the church's service of worship? In corporate worship we come into the very presence of God. What perspective does that give us when we worship? Hebrew 12 speaks of that in a beautiful summary. It says to the church that when you draw near to God in worship then "you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven" (Heb 12:22–23).

More will be said about this and the verses that follow in chapter 11. Let this suffice for now: the Old Testament people of God had at the center of their worship the earthly Jerusalem or Zion (Heb 12:21), but we may have the heavenly Jerusalem in view as our focal point! Every time we worship, we are in Christ (Heb 10:19) in faith entering heaven as it were. In true worship we get a taste of heaven's glory! All worship is in anticipation of that perfect glorious worship that is awaiting the children of God. What an awesome assembly of thousands of angels! What a tremendous open space of worship and praise that must be! The song "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty!" fills the air (cf. Rev 4:8). And there to see God, the Judge, the Holy One, and the Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior! Our praise and worship of God now, in spirit and in truth, will then find its climax. But already in this life, we can have a foretaste of that joy. May our Sunday worship indeed be experienced that way!