



Preparing Souls To Serve The Lord

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True Worship: A Word Study

By
Brian Kenyon



To the Samaritan woman Jesus said, "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). Both in and out of the church of Christ many people do not understand the meaning of New Testament worship. Some misunderstand worship to be a purely internal disposition, while others suppose it to be a mere ritualistic performance of external activities. These misunderstandings lead to a confusion over the issue of worship, prevent people from acceptably worshipping God, and ultimately result in souls being lost. Everyone must realize that if God has not authorized worship then there is no basis for it. However, if God has authorized worship, then it must be regulated by His word. Since God has authorized worship (John 4:24), it is necessary that people understand what is true worship. A first step in understanding true worship is to examine the words the Holy Spirit chose to use in teaching

about the subject. This article will focus on the meaning of particular words translated "worship" and the implications of those words.

An Examination of "Worship" Vocabulary In the New Testament

In the KJV New Testament there are thirteen Greek words that are translated by a form of the English word "worship." Due to the limited space in this article and for the consideration of this study, attention will be given to the three most common words. By studying these words great insight can be gained into the meaning of New Testament worship.

The most common Greek word translated "worship" is "proskyneō" (προσκυνέω). In classical Greek literature the basic meaning of "proskyneō" meant "to kiss." The prefix of this word indicates a "connection with cultic practices going back beyond Greek history."¹ Pre-Christian

G r e e k s considered this verb a technical term for "the adoration of the gods, meaning to fall down, prostrate oneself, adore on one's knees."² The idea of prostration and adoration on one's knees likely developed because in order to kiss the earth or the image of a god, "one had to cast oneself on the ground."³

In the New Testament "proskyneō" is also used to "designate the custom of prostrating oneself before a person and kissing his feet, the hem of his garment, the ground, etc."⁴ In some of its New

International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, vol. 2, Colin Brown ed. (1976; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 875-876.

² Schönweiss and Brown 876.

³ Schönweiss and Brown 876.

⁴ Walter Bauer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 2nd ed. revised by William

¹ Hans Schönweiss and Colin Brown, "προσκυνέω," The New

Testament occurrences this gesture is explicitly mentioned (Acts 10:25; 1 Cor. 14:25; Rev. 4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:4). When the New Testament uses "proskyneō," the object is "always something--truly or supposedly--divine" (Matt. 2:2; 4:10; Acts 7:43; 10:25; Rev. 22:8 et al.).⁵ The rebellious and presumptuous nature of the devil is seen by his coveting the worship that belongs to God alone (Matt. 4:9; Luke 4:7). Although "proskyneō" has for the most part "lost the designation of the external act of prostration, it continues to denote the inward prostration of the heart in humility."⁶

The second most common word translated by a form of "worship" is "sebomai" (σέβομαι). The root "seb-" originally meant "to step back from someone or something, to maintain a distance."⁷ The

reasons for maintaining this distance ranged "from shame, through wonder, to something approaching fear."⁸ The attitude that resulted in keeping this distance was evoked by that which was perceived to be "sublime and majestic" in the object, or by a "risk of failure" in the presence of the object.⁹ From this original meaning, "sebomai" came to be used to denote an attitude of respect which was given to gods, people, or things. By New Testament times, "sebomai" moved from the idea of respect to "denote religious veneration, including acts of worship."¹⁰ In the New Testament, "sebomai" is always associated with deity (Matt. 15:9; Mark 7:7; Acts 13:43, 50; 16:14; 17:4, 17; 18:7, 13; 19:27; Acts 13:43, 50; 17:4, 17).

The third most common word translated by a form of "worship" in the New Testament is "latreuō" (λατρεύω). This word occurs more in the Greek text than "sebomai," but is usually translated by a form of the verb "serve" (Matt. 4:10; Luke 1:74; Acts 7:7 et al.). "Latreuō" is derived from a word which literally meant "wages," and then came to mean "work for wages."¹¹

Theology, vol. 2, Colin Brown ed. (1976; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 91.

⁸ Günther 91.

⁹ Günther 91-92.

¹⁰ Chadwell 23.

¹¹ Klaus Hess, "λατρεύω," The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, vol. 3,

By New Testament times the word was used to denote service in general, including that done in the name of religion. Therefore, "latreuō" in the New Testament means to "serve" and is used "only of the carrying out of religious duties, esp. of a cultic [religious] nature, by human beings."¹² This "religious" service may include that rendered to false gods (Acts 7:42 ASV; Rom. 1:25) or that rendered to the true and living God (Matt. 4:10; 2 Tim. 1:3; Rev. 22:3 et al.). Because worship is a part of religious service, "latreuō" also carries the idea of "worship" in some contexts (Acts 7:42; 24:14; Phil. 3:3; Heb. 10:2). However, because in some contexts "latreuō" may be translated "worship" does not mean that all service is worship. While one must avoid the extreme that says worship includes everything a Christian does, one must also avoid the extreme that says

F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 716.

⁵ Heinrich Greeven, "προσκυνέω," Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, vol. 6, Gerhard Friedrich ed., G. W. Bromiley trans. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 763.

⁶ Kenneth M. Chadwell, "New Testament Word Studies in Worship," Worship in Spirit and Truth: Freed-Hardeman University Lectures, David Lipe ed. (Henderson, TN: Freed-Hardeman University, 1994) 18.

⁷ Walther Günther, "σέβομαι," The New International Dictionary of New Testament

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Colin Brown ed. (1978; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 549.

¹² Bauer 467.

worship is only that which takes place in the church building. "Every act of Christian service is not necessarily an act of worship, and those things which occur during a period of formal worship are not entirely inclusive of one's religious service and worship."¹³

Implications Of "Worship"

Vocabulary

In the New Testament

Although these three Greek words must always be considered in their context, there are some general characteristics of worship that can be ascertained from their definitions. First, "proskyneō" reveals that worship involves humility on the part of the worshiper (cf. Jas. 4:10). To prostrate oneself before another and to kiss another's feet requires humility (Matt. 2:11; 28:9). Second, "sebomai" reveals that worship involves an attitude of reverence and respect. God, and God alone, is the only true "sublime and majestic" One, and He must be worshiped reverently (cf. Ps. 114:7; Hab. 2:20). Third, "latreuō" reveals that worship involves service rendered to God. Worship is not merely an attitude, but involves specific acts "acc[ording] to the requirements [of God]" (cf. John 4:24; Col. 3:17).¹⁴

In addition to the individual characteristics

ascertained from these words, the three words taken collectively indicate that worship is something done intentionally. Unless one's intention is to worship, any act or series of actions cannot be worship. One can be engaged in similar actions as those done in worship and not be worshipping because the intent to worship is not present. For example, a person can eat unleavened bread and drink "fruit of the vine" for breakfast without violating God's pattern for worship. The difference between eating breakfast and partaking of the Lord's Supper is not found in the items consumed, but in the intent and manner in which the items are consumed. For breakfast the intent is nourishment, but for worship the intent is to "shew the Lord's death till he come" (1 Cor. 11:26).

The same can be said of teaching, giving, and singing. Because one teaches the Bible does not automatically mean that he or she is engaged in worship, unless the intent to worship is present. Because one gives of one's means does not necessarily mean that he or she is worshipping, unless worship is the intent. Because one is singing, humming, or whistling a song that is found in a church songbook does not necessarily mean that one is worshipping, unless one's intent is to worship. This does not mean that one is free to invent a system of worship based upon one's intentions (all are still regulated by "in spirit and in truth"!), but it does mean that for one to worship, he or she must intend to worship (cf. Gen. 22:5; John 4:23-

24; Acts 24:11). Prayer is not considered in the same light because prayer by definition involves intent. With this in mind, acceptable worship may be defined as "an act or series of religious acts characterized by a feeling of reverence and love. These acts are addressed to God (thus they involve purpose and intent to worship God)."¹⁵

Conclusion

The subject of true worship must be taken seriously. One can learn much information about true worship from the vocabulary used by the Holy Spirit. Hopefully, the reader has a better understanding of true worship based upon this word study. Subsequent articles will address some of the more practical matters of true worship based upon the meaning and implications of the vocabulary as studied in this article.

Board of Directors News

At the March 16, 1999 Board of Directors meeting for the Florida School of Preaching some changes were made. The following was received from **Robert McAnally**:

Dear brethren,

It is with regret that I resign my position as Treasurer of the Board and Editor of the Lectureship Book. Family and

¹³ Chadwell 21.

¹⁴ Joseph Henry Thayer, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (1885; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975) 372.

¹⁵ Jackie M. Stearsman, Topical Bible Studies: Interpretation Principles Applied (Lakeland, FL: Florida School of Preaching, 1994) 18.

personal considerations necessitate that I withdraw from much of my extra activities at least for the immediate future. I do wish however to remain on the Board of Directors. . . .

*Yours In Christ,
/s/ Robert McAnally*

The Board expressed appreciation to brother McAnally for his contributions made to the board and to the school. Brother **Alan Gardner**, current member of the Board, was appointed as Treasurer to the Board.

Brother **John Denny Smitherman** was added as a new member of the Board of Directors. Brother Smitherman currently serves as one of the elders of the Wesconnett Church of Christ, Jacksonville, Florida. Brother Smitherman has taught Adult Bible Classes for years and preached. He helped start a new congregation in Elkin, North Carolina in 1972. From 1983-1993 he served as an elder for the North Main congregation in Mount Airy, North Carolina. He is married with two children. He has a number of academic degrees including an MA in social sciences, school

administration from Appalachian State University, and from the same institution he received an Education Specialist degree in School Administration. In conjunction with this training he has served as Principal of Mountain Park School—grades K-8 of Elkin, North Carolina, and Principal of Copeland Elementary School—K-8 before retiring in July of 1993 and moving to Jacksonville. The School is fortunate to have dedicated men to serve on the Board of Directors.

2000

Lectureship

In the March 16, 1999 Board meeting decisions were made relative to next year's lectureship. The dates are January 17-20, 2000.

Theme:

"Do You

Understand Preaching?"

Due to the success of last year's format, the published volume will have an extensive Appendix with articles relating to preaching. This section will contain materials that will not be covered in oral presentation, thus will not be available on tape. Securing the Book will be the

only way to obtain this rich source of information. Some of these articles will be written by wives of our faculty members who assist their husbands in various capacities. Sister Carr will have a chapter that will relate her work with preachers' wives before she and brother Carr retired and now spend much of their time in Mississippi.

With brother McAnally resigning as editor of the Lectureship Book, the Board asked **Brian Kenyon** to become the editor and he has agreed to assume this responsibility.

With competent speakers and writers, and with all assuming their assigned responsibilities, this should make for another great Lectureship.

Extension Classes

Plans are being made to have two extension classes for the full school year, 1999-2000. One class will be taught by Gene Burgett in High Springs, Florida and J.H. Blackman, Jr. will teach a class in Bushnell.

The exact time and topics for these classes will be provided in the forthcoming issues of the *Harvesters*. If you are in the area, why not make plans to attend?

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