

‘Worship’ in the New Covenant

In order to get to grips with what the new covenant regards as ‘worship’, we need to remind ourselves of the old covenant, and then, as I have shown, give close attention to the way Scripture sets out the radical changes introduced by the new superseding the old.

Having done that – and this is even more important – we must be determined to give those changes full practical effect.

As we have seen, a major part of ‘worship’ in the days of the old covenant involved the Israelites going three times a year to Jerusalem to attend the temple, to keep the feasts, and so on, and watch as much as they were allowed to observe (Ex. 26:33; Lev. 16; Heb. 9:1-3) of the priests performing their sacrificial religion on their behalf – place, building, dates and sacerdotal priestcraft were vital in the old covenant. None of this comes over into the new covenant un-nuanced, none of it.¹ All is made new, radically so. How can we be so sure?

John 4

Christ’s words to the woman of Samaria in John 4 are explicit:

The hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you ‘worship’ the Father. You ‘worship’ what you do not know; we ‘worship’ what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true ‘worshippers’ will ‘worship’ the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to ‘worship’ him. God is spirit, and those who ‘worship’ him must ‘worship’ in spirit and truth (John 4:21-24).

This statement is absolutely fundamental to the issue in hand; it is the paramount scriptural statement on the subject. There can

¹ See my *Relationship; Performance*; and my ‘The Place of “Place” in the New Covenant’ and ‘The Temple and the New Covenant’ on my sermonaudio.com page.

be no doubt that ‘worship’ is the great topic under consideration. Yes, John records the glorious fact that the Samaritan woman – and many other Samaritans – were converted, but this was for the glory of God. The glory of God? As I will argue, the new covenant sees conversion as the way God brings sinners to ‘worship’ him. ‘Worship’ is the great end of evangelism.² Sinners are converted in order to enable them to ‘worship’ God, which is precisely the outcome of this episode at the well. Indeed, this was why Jesus ‘had to pass through Samaria’ (John 4:2): it was the next step in his fulfilment of God’s eternal decree (Heb. 10:7), that which Christ had come into the world to accomplish (John 4:34; 17:4; 19:30)³ – which was the salvation of all the sinners given to him by the Father (Matt. 1:21; John 6:37-40; 10:11,15-18,28,37; 17:4,8,12; 1 Tim. 1:15; 2 Tim. 1:8-9, and so on). And the great end of it? The ‘worship’ or glorifying of God!

Thus ‘worship’ is the great theme of John 4, especially verses 20-24, where the word for ‘worship’ (in one form or another) appears ten times in the translation of John’s Greek – a remarkable number in such short compass.

Not only are Christ’s words fundamental; they are, as I said, radical. Think how utterly revolutionary they must have sounded to the Samaritan woman (and to all who heard them that day, whether Jews or pagans); utterly ground-breaking they remain. Conditioned as we are, by 1800 years of Christendom – which, by the work of the Fathers, has, in effect, imposed Judaism (and paganism) on the *ekklēsia*, we can hardly credit the full import of what Christ said; the fact is, we have institutionalised his words to such an extent that it is almost impossible for us to appreciate

² Although I quoted Edmund Clowney earlier with disapproval, he rightly said this: ‘The gospel call is a call to “worship” [the true God; all unconverted sinners “worship” a god! – DG], to turn from sin and call upon the name of the Lord’ (quoted by Wayne Grudem: *Systematic Theology: An Introduction To Biblical Doctrine*, IVP, 1994, p1004).

³ I am convinced that it was not simply a question of the shortest route. As he told his disciples: ‘My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work’ (John 4:34; see also 5:30; 6:38).

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just how new they were – *and are*.⁴ Indeed, an alternative title for my book might well have been *Worship: Christendom or New-Covenant?*

'Worship' will not be tied to Gerizim or Jerusalem. So announced Christ. This must not be diluted by saying that 'worship services' will, of course, be held at these places, but 'not exclusively' so – let us say, 'merely' at these places – a common gloss which not only undermines Christ's words but actually blows them out of the water. Christ was destroying the notion of 'place' altogether; the 'merely' (or its equivalent) not only allows 'place' a place (pun intended) in the argument, but actually lays a ridiculous stress upon 'place'; in this case, Gerizim and Jerusalem.

Let me illustrate. Spot the stupidity in this statement: 'You can go to a superb, moving performance of Handel's *Israel in Egypt*, not merely at a concert put on by your local amateur choral society and scratch orchestra, but at the Albert Hall put on by (such and such) top choir and orchestra under the baton of (such and such) maestro-conductor'. The insertion of the 'merely' gives the local performance a huge boost – the local performance becomes the touchstone of perfection! Likewise, the insertion of 'merely' in John 4 does not merely (pun intended) reduce Christ's words, it destroys them by making a nonsense of them.

Most believers take that line, however, or something very like it. In his *Commentary*, Albert Barnes, for instance:

Hitherto the public solemn 'worship' of God has been confined to one place. It has been a matter of dispute whether that place should be Jerusalem or Mount Gerizim. That controversy is to be of much less importance than you have supposed. [Barnes has missed the point. Actually, the controversy is now irrelevant, having been so for 2000 years – DG]. The old dispensation is about to pass away. The special rites of the Jews are to cease.

⁴ I have to plead guilty. How often I have opened 'a service' by quoting John 4, when I should rather experience it every day, living it 24/7.

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Barnes continued by showing how he was failing to grasp how utterly radical Christ's words are:

The 'worship' of God, so long confined to a single place, is soon to be celebrated everywhere, and with as much acceptance in one place as in another. [Christ] does not say that there would be no 'worship' of God in that place or in Jerusalem, but that the 'worship' of God would not be confined there. He would be 'worshipped' in other places as well as there.

Clearly, Barnes was thinking of 'worship' in terms of 'a service', even in old-covenant terms, not seeming to appreciate how far-reaching was the discontinuity that Christ was signalling.

As for Calvin, although, in his *Commentary*, he got very close to the fundamental point, his theological template⁵ prevented him hitting the bull's eye:

In the first part of his reply, [Jesus] briefly sets aside the...⁶ 'worship' which had been appointed under the law; for when he says that the hour is at hand when there shall be no peculiar and fixed place for 'worship', he means that what Moses delivered was only for a time, and that the time was now approaching when the partition wall (Eph. 2:1) should be thrown down... [Jesus] uses the present tense instead of the future; but the meaning is, that the repeal of the law is already at hand...⁷

Matthew Henry:

The case itself that she [the woman] propounded [was] concerning the place of religious 'worship' in public... [In his reply, Jesus made it clear that] it shall be a thing perfectly indifferent whether in either of these places or any other men 'worship' God, for they shall not be tied to any place; neither here nor there, but both, and anywhere, and everywhere. Note,

⁵ Although Calvin had died before covenant theology was invented, he mistakenly held to the essential unity of the old and new covenants, with disastrous consequences for millions. See my *Christ*.

⁶ Calvin ruined this by 'ceremonial'; he was using the invented notion of the threefold division of the law to force Christ's doctrine into his theological template. See my *Christ*.

⁷ Calvin ruined this by 'so far as relates to the temple, and priesthood, and other outward ceremonies'. See previous notes.

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the 'worship' of God is not now, under the gospel, appropriated to any place, as it was under the law, but it is God's will that men pray everywhere (1 Tim. 2:8; Mal. 1:11). Our reason teaches us to consult decency and convenience in the places of our 'worship': but our religion gives no preference to one place above another, in respect to holiness and acceptableness to God. Those who prefer any 'worship' merely for the sake of the house or building in which it is performed (though it were as magnificent and as solemnly consecrated as ever Solomon's temple was) forget that the hour is come when there shall be no difference put in God's account: no, not between Jerusalem, which had been so famous for sanctity, and the mountain of Samaria, which had been so infamous for impiety.

This misses the point. It is not a question of this or that place – it is 'place' altogether that Christ rules out. 'Place' is irrelevant. Worse, to lay any stress on it, ruins the new-covenant concept of 'worship'

The same with 'time'. To imagine that until 11:00am on Sunday and then after 12:30 we are not 'worshipping', that we begin 'worship' at 11:00, or that some part of our 'service' may be called 'worship', is derisory; words fail.

The same also covers the observation of 'days'; yet while evangelicals overwhelmingly understand that believers no longer keep the Day of Atonement, for example, they don't seem to see that talk about 'going to church' to 'worship' on Christmas Day and Easter comes into the same category.⁸

All this is ruled out by Christ's words to the woman.

So much for the negative. What about the positive?

We must not forget that when John wrote the words recorded in John 4, he had already taken his readers through three preceding chapters.⁹ The apostle was not jotting down a series of random 'thoughts' on 'incidents', not even simply recording a history of the life of Christ. He was not merely a reporter, a journalist. Far

⁸ Gal. 4:10 seems conclusive to me.

⁹ Not that he wrote in chapters (or verses), of course.

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from it. He was arguing a case, and building that case right from his opening remarks – a case that would lead to:

Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (John 20:30-31).

And the basis of that case was what? John, from the outset, was showing how Christ was the fulfilment of the old covenant which led to its end; more, John was setting out the profound consequences of this on the way the new covenant uses the old-covenant shadows. Remember his vital statement very near the start of his record:

The law was given through Moses; [but]¹⁰ grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17).

And John made this assertion, not as some isolated statement or proof text, but as an integral part of a thoroughly worked-out argument:

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own [that is, the Jews], and his own people [that is, the Jews in general] did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only begotten Son from the Father, full of grace and truth... For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; [but]¹¹ grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known (John 1:9-18).

¹⁰ See my *Christ*.

¹¹ See previous note.

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The Jewish tabernacle and temple are no more; they have been superseded: Christ is the true, spiritual tabernacle or temple, the true meeting place between God and men (John 2:18-22) – indeed, the *only* place where men can meet God (John 4:20-24; 14:6; Acts 4:12; Heb. 4:16; 7:19,25; 10:1,19-22). So much for the *place* of 'worship'.

Before we move on, we must let the significance of that paragraph sink in; it is impossible to overstate the effect it has on new-covenant 'worship'. It is not just 'place'. If I may illustrate. All illustrations fail, of course, but this might help to make the point I want to stress. If the root of a tree – however ancient and venerable that tree might be – is removed, the branches and foliage of necessity must follow. The same applies here. The root, the heart, the core of old-covenant 'worship' was the temple. If the temple has been superseded – as it has – all the rest *must* follow. It is precisely as the writer to the Hebrews expressed it when talking about the priesthood:

When there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well (Heb. 7:12).

If I may accommodate:

Where there is a change in the temple, there is necessarily a change in 'worship' as well.

As Joseph Benson in his *Commentary* put it:

As if [the writer] had said: 'Since there is such a near relation between the priesthood and the law, and since the whole administration of the law, as the rule of "worship", depended absolutely on the Aaronical priesthood, therefore the one being changed, the other must be changed also'.

Calvin in his *Commentary* declared:

The [writer] concludes that the old covenant was abrogated by the coming of Christ... [He speaks of] the office and person of the priest... a priesthood... [and] the law, the former being abolished, the latter necessarily ceases.

And Matthew Poole in his *Commentary* said:

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The mutation of the priesthood indispensably requires the change of the law.

In short, the massive change to the whole concept of the temple – let alone the physical structure itself; ‘there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down’ (Matt. 24:2) – in the supersession of the old covenant by the new absolutely requires – and gets in and through Christ – the corresponding radical alteration in ‘worship’.

As I say, this must be constantly borne in mind and acted on.

Then comes the crux: the *manner* of ‘worship’ (John 4:21), which must be ‘in spirit and truth’. Intimately bound up with this, of course, is the *who* of ‘worship’: since ‘worship’ must be ‘in spirit and truth’,¹² it can only be offered by those who have the Spirit; that is, the regenerate.

Indeed, before the apostle got to Christ’s conversation with the woman at the well (in John 4), he had already raised this cardinal issue. Do not miss John’s heavy stress on the absolute necessity of regeneration, a stress which he made sure came right at the start of his Gospel:

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people [that is, the Jews] did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:9-13).

What do we find in his first letter? In short compass, John spoke of regeneration – ‘born of God’ – six times (1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1,4,18). He left no stone unturned to make sure his readers got the point.

¹² Whether it should be ‘Spirit’ or ‘spirit’, in the end it amounts to the same thing: the believer’s ‘worship’ must be spiritual, and this is possible only for regenerate men and women who have the Spirit enabling them to offer *spiritual* ‘worship’.

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In this, of course, he was following Christ:

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again [regenerated] he cannot see the kingdom of God... Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water¹³ and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.¹⁴ Do not marvel that I said to you: 'You must be born again' (John 3:3-7).

This is crystal clear: regeneration is essential for conversion, and a sinner must be converted to enable him to 'worship'. Moreover, as I have said, the 'worship' of himself is God's great aim in converting sinners. God does not redeem sinners to make them feel good about themselves;¹⁵ he converts them so that they might glorify or 'worship' him. A sinner, having been taken out of Adam and brought into Christ (Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:22,45-49), transferred from the domain of darkness into Christ's kingdom (Col. 1:13), has been given a new heart so that he no longer 'worships' self but 'worships' God. Christ was explicit on the need of it:

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? (Mark 8:34-37).

To 'follow Christ' does not mean to 'carry out religious exercises', 'be regular in attendance in "public worship"'. No! Christ demands 100% commitment and life-long 'service'. This is why he came into the world to save sinners; this is why the Spirit regenerates sinners and applies the work of Christ to them.

How powerful, how all-embracing, a transformation is conversion! 'If anyone is in Christ, he [really] is a new creation' (2 Cor. 5:17)! As a natural man, he gratified himself; he now

¹³ 'Water' and 'washing' do not refer to baptism. See my *Infant; Baptist*.

¹⁴ 'Flesh' and 'spirit': I will return to this vital point.

¹⁵ See my *Mistaken*.

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seeks to live to God's glory, to 'worship' him. This essential change is only accomplished by the Spirit, regenerating the sinner and bringing him to Christ. It is only in and through Christ that any man can approach God, let alone 'worship' him (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). Christ must be known (John 17:3), honoured (John 5:22-24; 8:49) and 'worshipped' (John 12:32) by faith (John 9:38). That is why the Samaritan woman (and others) had to be converted. Do not miss the repeated 'must' in John 3 and 4: sinners 'must' be born again of God's Spirit. and, having been converted, they 'must' 'worship' God. Speaking as a man, God desires it: 'The Father is seeking such people to "worship him"' (John 4:23); that is, God wants, God desires, those who are spiritual to 'worship' him and do so 'in spirit and truth'.

And since 'God is spirit', everything about this new-covenant 'worship' has to be spiritual, none of it material. Rome made everything material, the Reformers left us with a mixed bag (Luther's collection being more material than Calvin's), but Christ demands all to be spiritual; that is, new-covenant.

But the love of the material or external is innate. As is the love of the traditional. Look how the Samaritan woman reminds us that the pressure is always on to return to the tradition of 'our fathers': 'Our fathers "worshipped" on this mountain' (John 4:20), she said. Tradition rules, OK? Keep up the material! Keep religion going!

Paul warned the Colossians against the observance of physical shadows. Although he had in mind old-covenant shadows in particular, his words rule out everything of the same ilk, any human tradition¹⁶ or rule:

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits [or elementary principles] of the world, and not according to Christ... Let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come,

¹⁶ Other words could be used: custom, institution, ritual, habit, convention, *etc.*

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but the substance belongs to Christ... If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits [or elementary principles] of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations – ‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’ [referring to things that perish as they are used] – according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh (Col. 2:8,16-23).

The writer to the Hebrews said much the same:

Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them (Heb. 13:9).

Christ’s words again:

Those who ‘worship’ [the Father] must ‘worship’ in spirit and truth (John 4:24).

As I have noted, whether it should be ‘Spirit’ or ‘spirit’, in the end it amounts to the same thing: the believer’s ‘worship’ must be spiritual, and this is possible only for regenerate men and women who have the Spirit enabling them to offer spiritual ‘worship’.

To reduce Christ’s epoch-changing statement to tinkering with what might be called ‘congregational activities’ or forms of ‘services’ is to miss the wonder of the new-covenant glories brought in by Christ; namely, that God’s people should be able to truly ‘worship’ the Father through the Son in the power of the Spirit.¹⁷ How radically different is this to what God required of Israel in the old covenant! In the old covenant, worshippers were taught to seek Jehovah (Deut. 4:29; 12:5; 1 Chron. 16:10-11; 22:19; 2 Chron. 7:14; 14:4; Ps. 14:2; 27:8, and so on); in the new, the Father seeks true spiritual worshippers (John. 4:23).¹⁸

¹⁷ See Peterson pp97-101.

¹⁸ Nothing better illustrates the contrast between the covenants than Mark 7:1-23. In the old, defilement is external, cleansing comes by the washing of hands and pots; the new makes clear that a sinner sins because he is a sinner in heart, and no amount of water can deal with

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In the power of the Spirit? Yes, indeed. And Christ has told us that one of the great tasks of the Spirit is: 'He will glorify me' (John 16:14). Who, in their right mind, would think that this means the Spirit will glorify Christ in a certain building, at a certain time? Surely the Spirit glorifies Christ everywhere and at all times! And believers must 'worship' 'in spirit – by the Spirit' 24/7.¹⁹

So much for John 4. I now turn to Stephen's address in Acts 7.

The importance of Stephen's speech in Acts 7

Acts 7 must not be thought of merely as a local or passing episode – the defence offered by a threatened believer. It is far more than that. Note the amount of space Luke devoted to Stephen's speech; clearly, he saw it as carrying great weight. What is more, Acts 7 bears a remarkable similarity to John 4. It is no exaggeration to say that both passages represent the watershed between the two covenants – the old and the new – in the matter of 'worship'. Let us look at Stephen's address in a little more detail.

Having traced the history of Israel from Abraham through Moses to Solomon, especially with regard to the erection of the tabernacle and then the temple, Stephen declared that though God ordained both, even so:

...the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet [Isa. 66:1-2] says: 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?' (Acts 7:48-50).

Given the occasion, given his audience, Stephen's words were explosive. Nothing else explains the violent outburst of the crowd, culminating in his summary execution. While this speech proved momentous for Stephen personally, its bearing on the way the new covenant was going to play out in the rest of Acts

that! But Christ can and does for all who trust him: 'The blood of Jesus...cleanses us from all sin' (1 John 1:7).

¹⁹ See my *The Priesthood*.

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and beyond remains of far greater and lasting consequence. This is why Luke set out such a detailed record of the speech and what followed.²⁰

Here are the salient points. Stephen declared that God's promise to Abraham is fulfilled in Christ: not in the old covenant, not in the law, not in the temple, not in the levitical priesthood, but in Christ. More, since the day of Pentecost, all notion of 'place' or 'sacred space' has been abolished. As I say, Luke recorded this in detail because he was preparing the ground for Acts 8 and on – where he sets out the stupendous advance and spread of the gospel in accordance with Christ's command and promise:

Repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in [my] name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high (Luke 24:47-49).

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8).

And Acts 8 and on, running straight on from Acts 7, records the start of that advance, brought about by the outbreak of persecution following hard upon Stephen's brutal death at the hands of the mob:

Saul approved of [Stephen's] execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles... Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word (Acts 8:1-4).

And that's just the start of it.

For all these reasons, we must follow Luke and give Stephen's discourse its full weight. Stephen was not only signalling the breakout of the gospel from Jerusalem, but he was underlining Christ's doctrine in John 4 with regard to 'worship' in the days of the new covenant; namely, repeating the new-covenant

²⁰ See Peterson p141.

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principle that evangelism is intended to see sinners regenerated and thus converted so that they might 'worship' God 'in spirit and truth'. This is the point Luke was driving home for us. New-covenant 'worship' is spiritual – in contrast to old-covenant 'worship' which, for the overwhelming (unregenerated) majority of Jews, was external, material, inextricably linked to the temple, all of which has been abolished and has no place in the new covenant. So declared Stephen, and so recorded Luke. And that is why the crowd were angry enough to stone Stephen on the spot, and stone him until he died.

All the teaching on 'worship' set out in their letters by the apostles is firmly rooted in the principles laid down in John 4:20-24 and Acts 7.

* * *

In light of John 4 and Acts 7 we know that the 'worship' of God must be 'in spirit and truth' – spiritual, in accordance with truth (Scripture), and by the power of the Spirit.

Easy? Like falling off a log? Not at all! Institutional, Christendom 'worship' is a doddle, but the 'worship' that God seeks and demands is anything but. What am I talking about? I am talking about the great conflict that all spiritual men and women inevitably experience because they have the Spirit and thus desire to 'worship' God – that is, to glorify him in everything (1 Cor. 10:31); namely, the conflict between flesh and spirit. We have already seen how it raised its head in the way that the Samaritan woman so easily dropped into tradition-speak.

John Newton certainly knew and felt that the believer lives in a constant battle:

*Strange and mysterious is my life.
What opposites I feel within!
A stable peace, a constant strife;
The rule of grace, the power of sin:
Too often I am captive led,
Yet daily triumph in my Head.*

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*I prize the privilege of prayer,
But O what backwardness to pray!
Though on the Lord I cast my care,
I feel its burden every day;
I'd seek his will in all I do,
Yet find my own is working too.*

*I call the promises my own,
And prize them more than mines of gold;
Yet though their sweetness I have known,
They leave me unimpressed and cold
One hour upon the truth I feed,
The next I know not what I read.*

*I love the holy day of rest,
When Jesus meets his gathered saints;
Sweet day, of all the week the best!
For its return my spirit pants:
Yet often, through my unbelief,
It proves a day of guilt and grief.*

*While on my Saviour I rely,
I know my foes shall lose their aim,
And therefore dare their power defy,
Assured of conquest through his name,
But soon my confidence is slain,
And all my fears return again.*

*Thus different powers within me strive,
And grace and sin by turns prevail;
I grieve, rejoice, decline, revive,
And victory hangs in doubtful scale:
But Jesus has his promise passed,
That grace shall overcome at last.*

Ah, but that was Newton. Was he right? What of Scripture?

Flesh and spirit

The conflict between flesh and spirit is a cardinal aspect of new-covenant teaching, and is experienced by every saint. The flesh is always trying to reassert itself in the experience of the regenerate. Here is the classic scriptural statement of that

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conflict.²¹ I do not apologise for the length of the extract; it is essential to give it its full weight. Paul, writing to the believers at Rome declared:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry: 'Abba! Father!' The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and fellow-heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him (Rom. 8:1-17).

As the apostle wrote to the Galatians:

²¹ I do not take Rom. 7:14-25 to be that passage: there is no mention of the Spirit. See my *Christ*.

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Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit (Gal. 5:16-25).

'Worship' – in the biblical sense – is where this conflict is at its fiercest. Remember how Satan tempted Christ:

The devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him: 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and "worship" me'. Then Jesus said to him: 'Be gone, Satan! For it is written: "You shall 'worship' the Lord your God and him only shall you serve"' (Matt. 4:8-10).

There is an unbreakable connection between 'flesh' and/or 'spirit' on the one hand, and 'worship' on the other: those 'in the flesh' 'worship' an idol – self above all; those 'in the spirit' 'worship' God. As Paul explained to the Philippians:

We are the circumcision [that is, we believers are the true Israel], who 'worship' by the Spirit of God [or, in the spirit]²² and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh (Phil. 3:3).

²² Comparing John 4:24 and Phil. 3:3, should we be thinking of the Spirit – the Holy Spirit – or spirit? As before, we do not have to come down one way or the other: 'worship' is a spiritual matter, possible only for those who are regenerate and so have the Spirit of God, those who have been given a heart to 'worship' God.

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The obvious emphasis here, both in the words themselves and in their context, is on 'spirit' as opposed to 'flesh'. Here is the context:

Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision, who 'worship' by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh – though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith – that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead (Phil. 3:2-10).

What of those who are still fleshly (unregenerate, in Adam) and not spiritual (regenerate, in Christ)? Just this:

Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:19-20).

As for Philippians 3:3 itself, do not miss the radical transformation – the newness – implicit in Paul's statement. Take 'Israel' – 'the circumcision'. Writing to believers, talking of believers, including himself, he says: 'We are the circumcision'; that is, in the new covenant we believers are the true Israel, the new Israel. When the apostle wants to talk about national Israel, he uses phrases such as 'my kinsmen according to the flesh' (Rom. 9:1-5; see also Rom. 1:3; 11:14). Here he is speaking of the spiritual Israel. Clearly this signals a radical transformation: we are no longer to think in terms of physical, national Israel, but in terms of the spiritual Israel, believers;

these are the children of Abraham (Rom. 2:28-29; 4:11,16; 9:6; Gal. 3:7-9,29; 6:16; Phil. 3:3; Col. 2:11).²³ The same transformation applies to ‘worship’. It is believers – and only believers – who ‘worship’ God.

As for ‘the Israel of God’, not the least aspect of the phrase’s fascination lies in the fact that it is virtually impossible to express it in Hebrew. It is entirely a New Testament phrase and concept. All this indicates that Paul had a special purpose in coining²⁴ ‘the Israel of God’, every bit as much as when he coined ‘the law of Christ’ (Gal. 6:2; see also 1 Cor. 9:21). As with ‘law’, so with ‘Israel’; the significance of both lies in the eschatological period we are talking about.²⁵ Which Testament are we in? Which covenant are we talking about? ‘The law of Moses’ was for ‘Israel after the flesh’ (1 Cor. 10:18; Heb. 7:11) in the old covenant;²⁶ it was temporary (Gal. 3:23-25).²⁷ ‘The law of Christ’ is for ‘the Israel of God’ in the new; it is permanent. Both ‘law’ and ‘Israel’ have been taken over and

²³ See my *Christ*.

²⁴ I am using ‘to coin’ strictly – ‘to invent’. Today it nearly always serves as an apology for using an overworked phrase.

²⁵ By ‘eschatological’, I do not mean some supposed restoration of national Israel in the millennium, which is utterly foreign to Galatians (and everywhere else, as far as I can see). Paul has been speaking about the eschatological ‘but now’. ‘Once at the end of the ages, [Christ] has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself’ (Heb. 9:26). ‘The ends of the ages have come’ upon us (1 Cor. 10:11). ‘Now’, ‘but now’ (Rom. 3:21; 5:9,11; 6:22; 7:6; 8:1; 11:30; 11:31 (second ‘now’ in NIV, NASB); 16:26; see also John 15:22,24; Acts 17:30; 1 Cor. 15:20; Gal. 4:9; Eph. 2:12-13; 5:8; Col. 1:26; Heb. 8:6; 9:26; 12:26; 1 Pet. 2:10). I cannot stress too much the ‘but now’.

²⁶ ‘Under [the levitical priesthood] the people received the law’ (Heb. 7:11). James Macknight commented: ‘[The law] was prior to the priesthood, being given for the purpose of forming and establishing the priesthood; and that the Jewish people themselves were separated from the rest of mankind, and made a people by the law, merely that they might, as a nation, “worship” the only true God according to the levitical ritual, in settling which most of the precepts of the law were employed’.

²⁷ See my *Three*.

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transformed in the change of covenants.²⁸ Paul, in the same context, using the two weighty Jewish words, pregnant with meaning, ‘law’ and ‘Israel’, coined two new-covenant phrases, ‘the law of Christ’ and ‘the Israel of God’. It is a classic demonstration of how the New Testament writers use the language, rites and titles of the old-covenant people of God, Israel, and apply them to the new-covenant people, the *ekklēsia*. ‘Passover’, ‘circumcision’, ‘sabbath’, ‘altar’, ‘sacrifice’, ‘priest’, ‘temple’, *etc.* have all come over and been transformed.

The same goes for ‘worship’. ‘Worship’ is now ‘spiritual’, not external. And this is only possible by the Spirit – but, since the believer is in Christ, he has the Spirit, and can ‘worship’ the Father in spirit and truth.²⁹

Even so – as every believer knows by experience – the flesh constantly strives for mastery over the spiritual. But since the believer has the Spirit, and knows, as John declared, that ‘he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world [that is, antichrist]’ (1 John 4:4; see also Rom. 8:31; 1 John 3:20), the believer’s ultimate victory over the flesh is assured. Even so, the conflict remains throughout the believer’s earthly pilgrimage.

* * *

And so to Romans 12:1-2 and on

Romans 12:1-2 – *and on to the end of the letter* – must be at the heart of all understanding of new-covenant ‘worship’:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual ‘worship’ [your rational ‘service’]. Do not be conformed to this world [that is, this present age], but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God (Rom. 12:1-2).

²⁸ See my *Psalm 119*.

²⁹ See Peterson pp186-187.

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In saying this, Paul could not possibly have meant: 'Make sure you "attend church" for "a service" and participate in a "time of worship"'. Nor could he have been thinking of a believer 'presenting his/her body in a "house of God" to sing songs and/or listen to a preacher'. As the context (to the end of the letter) shows, Paul was speaking of a lifetime of 'service' to God, a surrendered, total devotion which involves every aspect of the believer's life, including (of course) his time in the company of other believers. To show this, I would need to quote the last five chapters of Romans in full. Please read them!

Note the apostle's vital preamble; it must not be glossed over: 'I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God...'. That is, 'in light of all the glorious truth I have set before you (in the first eleven chapters of Romans), in light of all that God the Father decreed in eternity, in light of all that God the Son accomplished, and in light of all that God the Spirit has applied to you – *and continues to apply to you* – I appeal to you, I urge you, I beg you, I plead with you... brothers and sisters... present your bodies...'.

Let me stress this. Paul was not beseeching the Romans simply in light of the doctrine he had set before them – as a matter of head knowledge, a list of facts. Oh no! His appeal for obedience was in light of their felt experience – their experiential knowledge – of that doctrine, of the argument he had set before them. The apostle was appealing to the believers at Rome to devote themselves to life-long 'service' and 'worship' of God, not out of fear of punishment, nor simply as a matter of duty, nor in blind copying of a template which they were told they must conform to, certainly not in order to try to earn their salvation, but because they had been saved, saved by God's grace through their experience of the truth and power of the doctrine, the argument he had set out in the previous eleven chapters.

One parallel place, without comment, must suffice. Paul, writing to the Philippians, declared:

I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ... It is my

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prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God... Only let your manner of life be worthy of [that is, as becomes] the gospel of Christ (Phil. 1:9,10-11,27).

Now for Romans 12:1-2. As with John 4:23-24, we must not read Romans 12:1-2 merely as a proof text; as we have just seen, Paul came to these words as a nodal point of the book: a culmination of his extended argument – which he had begun right from the start of the letter – and as an introduction for the rest of what he has to say to bring the work to a close. And that is the way we must read them – as a cardinal part of an argument.

Why did Paul write Romans? What argument was he determined to make? Was it to set out justification by faith through Christ alone by grace alone? Not really. The apostle did that, of course, in Romans 3 – 5, but that was not his purpose in writing the letter. Was it to set out the biblical doctrine of sanctification? – which he did in Romans 6 – 8. Was it to set out the invincibility of God's will? – which he did in Romans 8 – 11. While it is true that the apostle did set out the definitive biblical doctrine on all these issues, that was not his main purpose in writing the letter. Was it to set out the gospel? After all, as he said:

I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (Rom. 1:15-16).

The answer must be both yes and no.

The apostle's great aim in writing Romans was to show that God the Father, through his Son, by his Spirit, takes ruined sinners and transforms them into 'worshipping' saints, 'worshippers' of God. In other words, God takes sinners who by nature do not glorify him, but rather who glory in created things – not least self – and, by converting those sinners, turns them into saints who

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live for his glory; that is, who 'worship' him. As Paul made clear, sinners by their fall in Adam:

...although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking... 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... they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and 'worshipped' and 'served' the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen (Rom. 1:21-25).

None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God (Rom. 3:10-11).

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23).

We need to grasp what Paul is saying here. Let me express it in the present tense. Unconverted sinners fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). True, they fail to obtain God's praise; in fact, they do not even want it, it is of no consequence to them – 'for they love the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God' (John 12:43 in the present tense). But there is more to it than that. As the old covenant showed, to glorify God is to 'worship' him (Ps. 22:23; 50:15; 86:9,12; Isa. 24:15). Sinners fail to glorify God as God; that is, to 'worship' him. This is what the apostle is saying: unconverted sinners fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23) in that they utterly fail to glorify him as they ought.

And this is why Paul wrote this treatise to the Romans; his purpose was to show how God converts sinners, making them into saints who live to glorify – that is, 'worship' – the triune God, and him alone. Look how the apostle opened his letter – by speaking of:

...Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ: To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints... (Rom. 1:4-7).

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And this is how he closed:

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith – to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen (Rom. 16:25-27).

Do not miss the point: 'the obedience of faith for the sake of his name... to bring about the obedience of faith' means ruined, rebellious sinners are turned into saints who live (not just attend 'church', but live 24/7) 'to the only wise God' that they might bring him 'glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen'.

That God might be glorified was Paul's burning desire – both in his life and ministry, and, in particular, in writing this letter:

For from [God] and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen (Rom. 11:36).

As he wrote to the Corinthians:

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body...Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God (1 Cor. 6:19-20;10:31).

And what does this mean? What is the acme of Christian aspiration? This:

[To be] anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit (1 Cor. 7:34).

For Paul, all life was 'worship'. Take his apostolic ministry of the gospel: his aim was to see sinners brought to a lifetime of obedience to Christ (Rom. 1:5,9,11-15; 12:1-2; 15:9,16,18; 16:19).³⁰ Paul himself was 'worshipping' God in his 'service',

³⁰ Peterson pp179-182,187-188. See also my *Pastor; The Priesthood; Baptist*.

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and, by God's grace, sinners converted under his ministry were 'worshipping'. A believer who 'serves' man for Christ's sake 'serves' God (See Matt. 6:24; 25:31-46; Acts 20:19; Rom. 6:16-23; 7:6,25; 12:11; 14:18; 16:18; Eph. 6:5-8; Col. 3:18-25; 1 Thess. 1:9, for instance). Take Matthew 25:3-46. Could anything be clearer than Christ's words: 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me' (Matt. 25:40)?

Let me take another passage to show what 24/7 'worship' means. I highlight the spiritual emphasis. Writing to believers, Paul was adamant:

Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything *in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

Wives, submit to your husbands, *as is fitting in the Lord.*

Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.

Children, obey your parents in everything, *for this pleases the Lord.*

Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, *fearing the Lord.* Whatever you do, work heartily, *as for the Lord and not for men,* knowing that *from the Lord* you will receive the inheritance as your reward. *You are serving the Lord Christ.* For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, *knowing that you also have a Master in heaven* (Col. 3:17 – 4:1).³¹

³¹ Take the high spiritual tone in the parallel passage: '...submitting to one another *out of reverence for Christ.* Wives, submit to your own husbands, *as to the Lord.* For the husband is the head of the wife *even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour.* Now *as the church submits to Christ, so also* wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, *as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her... In the same way* husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, *just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body...* I am saying that it refers to *Christ and the*

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Nothing about ‘being regular in your church attendance engaging in “public worship”’, but a world of instruction on practical godliness for believers often in what must have been very testing circumstances, all done from the heart, fully conscious of the presence of God, and with an eye to his glory in it all.

That is the lifestyle involved in 24/7 ‘worship’.³² When ‘public worship’ elbows that to one side, the loss is incalculable. For many however, despite paying lip service to the biblical position, Christendom is far more real. Tony Payne:

Of course, everyone acknowledges that ‘worship’ is more than what we do on Sunday, that it is about all of one’s life lived in obedience to God. Romans 12 is given due deference. But in our language and practice, ‘worship-central’ is still church.³³ ‘Worship’ remains the over-arching category by which the activities that take place on Sunday are described, throughout the Christian world.³⁴

What a loss!

But ‘worship’ is not to be thought of simply as activity, even activity for Christ.³⁵ The believer should be consciously³⁶

church... Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right... Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord’ (Eph. 5:21 – 6:4).

³² As before, see my *The Priesthood*.

³³ That is, for the majority, ‘worship’ is what one does ‘in church’ at ‘a worship service’.

³⁴ Tony Payne: ‘Why do we worship as we do?’, *The Briefing*, 2003.

³⁵ If I may accommodate Luke 12:15: ‘A believer’s life does not consist in the amount of activity he engages in’, certainly not the number of ‘services’ he attends or sermons he hears (or preaches). An ounce of obedience is worth a ton of mere preaching or hearing. See my comment on Clarkson’s argument for ‘public worship’ over private in the ‘Introduction’. As for quality over quantity, and application over absorption, I am reminded of Spurgeon’s extract from the *Quarterly Review*: ‘Give us the one dear book, cheaply picked from the stall by the price of the dinner, thumbed and dog-eared, cracked in the back and broken in the corner, noted on the fly-leaf and scrawled on the margin, sullied and scorched, torn and worn, smoothed in the pocket and grimed on the hearth, damped by the grass and dusted among the cinders, over

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resting, permanently resting, in Christ (Matt. 11:8-30), abiding in Christ (John 6:56; 15:1-16; 1 John 2:6,24; 3:24; 4:15). William Gadsby well-expressed the believer's aspiration:

*O what a rest is Christ to me!
How precious and how true!
From guilt and sin he sets me free,
And gives me glory too.*

*I have, I want no rest beside;
Here's all my God can give;
Here would I constantly abide,
And every moment live.*

This is 'worship'.

'Every moment live'. When Paul told Felix: 'This I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I "worship" the God of our fathers' (Acts 24:14), and when he spoke of 'the God to whom I belong and whom I "worship"' (Acts 27:23) to his terrified fellow-passengers and the crew of the doomed ship, he did not intend his hearers to understand that he was saying: 'Every Sunday I go to church'. He was talking of his entire way of life, what made him tick, his attitude, his practice, his heart; in short, his 'worship'. The notion that Paul had in mind believers, on a Sunday morning, for an hour or so attending the 'house of God' for 'public worship', mostly singing and/or listening to 'worship' songs, and listening to a sermon, even taking detailed notes, is too demeaning for words. Believers are to live in the spiritual realm, not the material, doing

which you have dreamed in the grove and dozed before the embers, but read again, again, and again, from cover to cover. It is by this one book, and its three or four single successors, that more real cultivation has been imparted than by all the myriads which bear down the mile-long, bulging, bending shelves of the Bodleian' (C.H.Spurgeon: *Sword and Trowel*, Dec. 1873).

³⁶ Compare: 'Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom. 5:1). This may be rendered: 'Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, let us have [let us enjoy a sense of.. – DG] peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ'.

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so in a personal relationship with God. To reduce this to a religious performance of a prescribed procedure for a specified time beggars belief. Believers belong to an active priesthood that is always engaged in its 'service' and 'worship' of God.³⁷

Paul's description of the believer's experience as following 'the Way' merits further thought. The old covenant was no stranger to the concept:

The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day. The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what they stumble (Prov. 4:18-19).

The path of the righteous is level; you make level the way of the righteous (Isa. 26:7).

It was not long into the days of the new covenant before believers began to conceive of their life in Christ – specifically, their 'worship' – not as something occasional, but as walking a permanent, continuous path, leading to a glorious destination. They described themselves as people of 'the Way', and were known as such:

[Saul went to] Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem (Acts 9:2).

[Apollos] had been instructed in the way of the Lord... Priscilla and Aquila... took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately (Acts 18:25-26).

It does not take a genius to deduce from whom they learned this talk of 'the way'. Christ declared:

You know the way to where I am going.

Thomas replied:

Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?

³⁷ In contrast to the old covenant where the priests were divided into groups with prescribed hours of duty (2 Kings 11:4-12; 1 Chron. 24).

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Jesus responded:

I am the way (John 14:4-6).

The testimony of the pagan demon-possessed slave girl bears witness to the idea:

These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation (Acts 16:17).

Paul could describe unbelievers as those who had no saving experience of 'the way':

The way of peace they have not known (Rom. 3:17).

Oh, they could have some intellectual understanding of it:

Felix, having a rather accurate knowledge of the Way... (Acts 24:22).

...but that knowledge, though accurate, was not a saving knowledge.³⁸ Indeed, if men have some light concerning Christ, but close their hearts against him, their 'knowledge' of 'the way' will not save them. Far from it! Not only that: more light, more responsibility! And when men leave 'the way', the faith (Acts 20:29-30; Heb. 6:4-8; 10:26-31; 12:15-16; 1 John 2:19), they not only hurt themselves; they cause immense harm to others. As Peter put it:

The way of truth will be blasphemed... Forsaking the right way, they [that is, false teachers] have gone astray. They have followed the way of Balaam... It would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them (2 Pet. 2:2,15,21).

And Jude:

³⁸ Here is yet another warning against the increasing Sandemanianism inherent in the growing tendency to evangelise by indoctrination; I am talking about study courses on Christianity. This is also a danger to those who are catechised. See my *Secret; To Confront; Dilemma; Relationship; Attracting*; and so on.

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They [that is, false teachers] walked in the way of Cain (Jude 11).

Yes, the godly live their life for God, walking in 'the way', not a life of attending 'services'.

And so back to Romans; it is not just what *follows* Romans 12:1-2 which establishes that it is a life of 'worship' that God requires, not merely regular attendance at (or participation in, or observance of the performance of) 'a service'. At strategic points throughout the book, long before he got to Romans 12, Paul had argued – insisted – that the believer must live a life of godliness to the glory of God, telling his readers that since they are in Christ (Rom. 6:1-11) they are spiritually 'dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus'. As such – as he told the Colossian believers – they have been transferred out of the domain of Satan into the kingdom of Christ (Col. 1:13) and become slaves of God – a permanent condition, 24/7.³⁹ As God delivered the children of Israel from Egyptian slavery so that they might become his slaves, and thus 'serve' him all their days, so, in a spiritual sense, this is what happens in conversion under the gospel. Hence Paul was able to say to the believers in Rome (and, of course, all believers everywhere throughout this age):

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law [that is, Moses' law] but under grace. What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law [that is, Moses' law] but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of

³⁹ Employees are bound to their employers for specified hours; slaves are owned by their masters 24/7.

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righteousness. I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 6:12-23).

My brothers, you... have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God (Rom. 7:4).

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh (Rom. 8:12).

See also:

He who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ (1 Cor. 7:22).

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eyeservice, as people-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or is free (Eph. 6:5-8).

Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as slaves of God (1 Pet. 2:16).

Peterson:

The 'service' [Paul] calls for is the obedience of faith expressed by those whose minds are being transformed and renewed by God, so that they may no longer be conformed in lifestyle to the values, attitudes and behaviour of 'this age' (Rom. 12:2; cf. Col. 3:9-10; Eph. 4:22-24). Consequently... this means 'the worship which is consonant with the truth of the gospel', or the 'service'

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rendered by those who truly understand the gospel and its implications.⁴⁰

I would put it more strongly: ‘worship’ can only be offered by those who have experienced the redeeming power of the gospel – that is, been regenerated and converted. And this is precisely where evangelism fits into the picture. When writing to the Romans, Paul made this as clear as noonday.

Evangelism and ‘worship’

Let me take up the point I made a moment ago. God delivered the children of Israel from Egyptian slavery so that they might become his slaves, and thus ‘serve’ him all their days. In a spiritual sense, this is what happens in conversion under the gospel. The exodus is a wonderful illustration of the gospel; *deliverance is precisely the point with evangelism*, the aim of which is to see slaves of sin – which all men, by nature, are (John 8:34; Rom. 6:20-23; Gal. 4:21 – 5:1,13-16,25; 2 Pet. 2:19) – converted to become slaves of God, turned from idolatry into ‘worshippers’ of God.

Thus, evangelism and ‘worship’ are intimately linked. *But not in the way most contemporary churches think*. Certainly not! In his letter to the Romans, Paul set out the biblical connection between the two – once and for all!

We must begin at the beginning; that is, with the condition of the natural man – precisely where Paul started. If we get this wrong, all will be wrong.

The apostle opened his declaration of the gospel with the sinner’s dreadful plight by nature under the wrath of God:

The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth (Rom. 1:18).

The natural man ‘suppresses the truth’. What truth? Paul spelled it out:

⁴⁰ Peterson pp171-176.

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The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honour 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. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and 'worshipped' and 'served' the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen...

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them (Rom. 1:18-32).

Let me take the liberty of putting the apostle's words into the present tense:

By their unrighteousness, the unregenerate suppress the truth... They do not honour God as God or give thanks to him, but they become futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts are darkened. Claiming to be wise, they become fools, and exchange the glory of the immortal God for images... They exchange the truth about God for a lie and 'worship' and 'serve' the creature rather than the Creator... They do not see fit to acknowledge God... [They have] a debased mind... They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness.

This is the condition of every natural man or woman – every unconverted human being. How can such a person 'worship'

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God? Unconverted sinners “worship” and “serve” the creature rather than the Creator! Yet God justly requires every man and woman to ‘worship’ him, and him alone; at the last day, he will ensure this in a judicial sense (Isa. 45:23; John 5:22-23; Rom. 14:11; Phil. 2:9-11; Rev. 14:6-7; 15:4; 16:9; 19:7). Consequently, their present idolatry in place of the ‘worship’ of God is the essence of the sin of the unconverted. As Paul went on to show, both Jew and Gentile stand guilty and condemned before God on this count (Rom. 2:1 – 3:20).

But the apostle did not leave it there – after all, he was setting out the gospel! Having painted in the background, trenchantly setting out the sinner’s plight, the sinner’s guilt – in order to highlight the wonder of God’s remedy – the apostle, with a staggering, thrilling and dramatic change of pace and tone, thundered:

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it – the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:21-26).

And he continued in this vein until he reached his climax:

God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!... For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen (Rom. 11:32-36).

I say ‘climax’, but for my purpose in this book, all the above has been preparing the ground for the apostle’s call for ‘spiritual worship’. The natural man or woman, the unconverted sinner,

does not 'worship' God, cannot 'worship' God. Being by nature unregenerate, the sinner must be born again and brought to saving repentance and trust in Christ, so that his idolatry might be dealt with, so that he might 'worship' God. This is what evangelism is about. When the sinner has been converted, then – and only then – can the 'worship' of God come into the frame. But it must! After all, this has been God's purpose right from the start, even from eternity. This is the inevitable outworking of God's purpose in sending his Son into the world for his elect.⁴¹

This is precisely how Paul argued. Following hard upon Romans 11:36, he declared:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual 'worship' [your rational 'service']. Do not be conformed to this world [that is, this present age], but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God (Rom. 12:1-2).

This is the apostle's overall purpose in writing to the Romans. All unconverted sinners fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23); that is, they fail to 'worship' him. It is only after regeneration leading to conversion that sinners are able to glorify ('worship') God (Rom. 15:6,9; 1 Cor. 6:20; 1 Pet. 4:16). And what is that 'worship'? God does not engage in the momentous task of the redemption of his elect in order to produce faithful attenders at 'services'; what he requires is that converted sinners live to his glory, 'worshipping' him 'in spirit and truth', day in, day out. This 'spiritual worship' is what God desires (John 4:23-24), and this is what evangelism is designed to produce.

Clearly, the biblical method of evangelism cannot possibly involve attracting pagans to church to engage in 'public worship'; at the very least, it puts the cart before the horse. Unless and until sinners are converted, they cannot possibly

⁴¹ See Peterson pp169-174.

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'worship' God.⁴² Any encouragement offered to pagans to 'worship' God – making them welcome at 'services', encouraging them to participate in spiritual activity – runs directly counter to God's eternal purpose revealed in his word. Indeed, it almost certainly confirms them in their natural but mistaken view that religion will be enough. Consequently, rather than encourage unbelievers to join in 'worship', we should confront them with their natural idolatry, the impossibility of any acceptable 'worship' of God while they remain unconverted, making it clear to them that 'attendance at church' comes nowhere close; indeed, it surely adds to their condemnation while they remain unconverted. Nor must believers forget *their* responsibility in all this: they will have to answer for any encouragement of pagans in their wrong-headed notions.

Nowhere does this warning apply more forcibly than to churches which turn a blind eye to unbelievers being allowed to participate in the Lord's supper.

How desperately – urgently – all this needs sorting out before any more damage is done! That responsibility rests securely at the believers' door. The fact is, since Paul felt it necessary to give instruction to believers about the biblical nature of 'worship', then it is obvious what he would have thought of believers engaging in 'public worship' with unbelievers, and actually encouraging unbelievers in it. Peterson drew attention to Paul's purpose in spelling out the ramifications of Roman 12:1-2 to believers:

Rightly understood, evangelism will involve a challenge to the unconverted to respond to God's grace in this way [that is, 'to present your bodies as a living sacrifice'], [certainly not 'attend church' for 'public worship' – DG]. Yet the fact that Paul addresses this letter to those already committed to Christ⁴³

⁴² See Peterson pp101-102. See my *To Confront: Dilemma; Relationship; Attracting*.

⁴³ In order to remove ambiguity, I have changed the order of this sentence – which was: 'Yet the fact that Paul addresses those already committed to Christ in this letter...'

shows that this is...⁴⁴ the response that is always to be regarded as the essence of Christian 'worship'. The initial presentation of ourselves to God in Christ... needs to be renewed on a regular basis.

The sacrifice that pleases God is our 'bodies', meaning ourselves as a totality, not just skin and bones! Christ's obedience makes it possible for a new obedience for the people of God. The apostle is not simply considering some form of inner consecration here, but the consecration of ourselves as a whole, able to express our obedience to God in concrete relationships within this world (*cf.* 1 Cor. 6:20). As those who have been brought from death to life by means of Jesus' death and resurrection (*cf.* Rom. 6:4-11), we belong to God as a 'living sacrifice' (*cf.* Rom. 6:12-14). As those called to be saints (*cf.* Rom. 1:7), we are to develop that consecrated relationship in terms of practical holiness (Rom. 12:1) and so prove to be acceptable or pleasing to God. Thus, Paul has transposed the notion of sacrifice across a double line – [Peterson went on, quoting J.D.G.Dunn] 'from cultic⁴⁵ ritual [that is, 'worship' in the old covenant – DG] to everyday life, from a previous epoch [that is, in the old covenant – DG] characterised by daily offering of animals to one characterised by a whole-person commitment lived out in daily existence'... The first two verses of Romans 12 place [all the contents of] the concluding chapters of the letter under the umbrella of 'worship'.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Original '...letter suggests that the command should be taken in a summary way, as defining the response...'. This is too weak.

⁴⁵ The word 'cultic' can be used by way of criticism – for instance, when referring to a (probably) extreme religious group. *That is not the way it is used here.* Rather, it speaks of: '...the way religious experience is expressed in a service performed by a congregation, almost certainly conducted by one or more appointed officials, in set forms, and usually in a special place' (see Peterson p30). So, for example, a typical church 'service' with the usual hymns or songs, prayers, sermon *etc.*, led by a minister, pastor, elder or whatever, is, in the terms of this book, a cultic performance.

⁴⁶ Peterson pp177-179. The first three chapters of Ephesians (broadly doctrinal) lead without a break into the final three chapters (broadly practical, 24/7 behaviour).

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And, please note, this includes the exercise of the priesthood of all believers – each and every one of them – in mutual edification:

For as we have many members in one body, but all members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives...

The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever thus ‘serves’ Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual up-building...

I... am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another (Rom. 12:3-8; 14:17-19; 15:14).

In saying this to the believers in his letter to the Romans, Paul shows us that we today need to be constantly reminded of it through the ministry of the gospel – not only in stated discourses, but more especially by mutual edification among fellow-believers. The context of Romans 12 makes the point, and makes it forcibly, as does Hebrews 10:24-25. I will return to all this.

* * *

Although we have travelled some distance, we are still far from exhausting the apostolic doctrine of ‘worship’ in the new covenant. Although the next section may seem an irrelevant diversion from the theme of ‘public worship’, please read on.

The ekklēsia as a body

In order to illustrate his teaching on the *ekklēsia*, Paul draws heavily on the physical body:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptised into one body... The body does not consist of one member but of many... God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he

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chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it... (1 Cor. 12:12-31).

[God] put all things under [Christ's] feet and gave him as Head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all (Eph. 1:22-23).

And linking converted Gentiles with converted Jews:

The Gentiles are fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel (Eph. 3:6).

So:

There is one body and one Spirit (Eph. 4:4).

Just as the physical body has to be nourished, so does the spiritual. And 'nourishing the body' is precisely what Christ does, using all his people as he will to bring about that nurture:

He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...

Consequently, addressing believers, the apostle is explicit that every one of them has a vital part to play in this edification:

Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the Head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love (Eph. 4:11-16).

As he had said to the Romans:

For as we have many members in one body, but all members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives... (Rom. 12:4-8).

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In short:

Christ is the Head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour... Christ [nourishes and cherishes] the church, because we are members of his body... (Eph. 5:23-33).

[Christ] is the Head of the body, the church.. Christ’s... body, that is, the church... the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God... You were called in one body (Col. 1:18,24; 2:19; 3:15).

But Paul does not leave it there; the illustration of the *ekklēsia* as a body does not exhaust his doctrine; it leads into the concept of the *ekklēsia* as a temple:

Through [Christ] we... have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow-citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit (Eph. 2:18-22).

This connection is vital in the matter of ‘worship’.

The temple in the new covenant

In the days of the old covenant, God ‘dwelt’ among his people; first, in the tabernacle, then in the temple.⁴⁷ I put ‘dwelt’ in inverted commas because, of course, no building, not even one ordained by God for Israel in the days of the old covenant, could ever contain God! As Solomon confessed in his prayer of dedication, however splendid – ‘magnificent’ – his building might be:

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built! (1 Kings 8:27).

⁴⁷ For more on this section, see my ‘The Temple in the New Covenant’ in my *New-Covenant Articles Volume 7*.

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God said the same through Isaiah, and, as we have noted, Stephen took it up in his discourse:

The Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet [Isa. 66:1-2] says: 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?' (Acts 7:48-50).

Even so, God was prepared to accommodate himself to Israel and, as one of the 'shadows' of the old covenant, did 'dwell' among his people, both in the tabernacle and then the temple:

Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst... The tent of meeting before the LORD, where I will meet with you, to speak to you there. There I will meet with the people of Israel, and it shall be sanctified by my glory. I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar. Aaron also and his sons I will consecrate to 'serve' me as priests. I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God (Ex. 25:8; 29:42-45).

I will make my dwelling (tabernacle) among you (Lev. 26:12).

And when promising the new covenant, God was prepared to use the same image:

I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore (Ezek. 37:26-28).

Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the LORD of hosts (Hag. 2:6-7).

And so to the fulfilment in the new covenant:

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 [*ekklesiā*] of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator

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of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised: 'Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens'. This phrase: 'Yet once more', indicates the removal of things that are shaken – that is, things that have been made – in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable 'worship', with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire (Heb. 12:22-29).

But, it goes without saying, since – even in the days of the old covenant – no material building or kingdom could fulfil such a promise, clearly the same must apply even more strongly in the days of the new. The fulfilment of the prophecies is found in the gift of God's Spirit dwelling in or among his people, and blessing them in a new way (Isa. 44:3-5; Ezek. 36:27; 37:14; Joel 2:28-32).

The *ekklesia* is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16); it is the 'house of God'. This is the only building that counts in the new covenant – the temple which God is erecting on the foundation of the person and work of Christ as set out by the apostles: that community which is made up of individual believers each indwelt by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:9-11,16-17; 6:19-20; 12:12-13; 2 Cor. 6:14-18; Eph. 2:18-22; 1 Pet. 2:4-10). This is where God dwells today, dwelling in a spiritual sense in and among his people. Thus the old-covenant shadow – that God was specially present in the midst of his people in the tabernacle and then the temple (Ex. 29:44-46; 33:14-16; Ps. 114:2) – is fulfilled in Christ by his Spirit in his *ekklesia* (Luke 10:23-24; 24:44; Acts 3:18; 1 Pet. 1:10-12).

As Peter put it:

As you come to [Christ], a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God

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through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture: 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone, chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame'... You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light (1 Pet. 2:4-6,9).

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul returns to this shadow of the temple (2 Cor. 6:14-18) to argue that with the change of covenant the *ekklēsia* is now God's temple (tabernacle) where he dwells in and among his people both individually and corporately. Consequently, the *ekklēsia*, as God's 'dwelling', must be 'set apart for its sacred purpose' – such obedience bringing the glorious promise that God will be the Father of his people (Isa. 52:11; Ezek. 20:33-41):

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers.⁴⁸ For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said: 'I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty'. Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God (2 Cor. 6:14 – 7:1).

It cannot be said too often: to speak against the 'house of God' as a material building, and to challenge talk of 'going to church' for 'a worship service', is not to make a fuss about nothing. Getting this wrong has consequences, serious consequences. It is doing nothing less than to forsake the new covenant and go back to the old. It is, in essence, a return to the same error that plagued the first believers and was – and is – so strenuously refuted in the

⁴⁸ See my 'No Mixture' on my sermonaudio.com page.

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post-Pentecost Scriptures (Paul’s work and Hebrews, in particular); namely, a reversion to Judaism.

There are six New Testament references to the ‘house of God’, three of which refer to the tabernacle in the days of Abiathar the priest; that is, to the old covenant. The remaining three (1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 10:21; 1 Pet. 4:17) refer to the *ekklēsia*, the children of God united in assembly. And, when alluding to the believer or the *ekklēsia* in terms of a temple or a building, the New Testament always speaks in spiritual terms. Always! This temple is heavenly, not earthly; spiritual, not material (Eph. 1:3; 2:6 Col. 3:1-4; Heb. 12:22-24). In Christ, believers themselves are the temple where Christ meets with them by his Spirit and receives their ‘worship’. This is the real place of assembly – the people of God, not any earthly, material ‘house of God’ or ‘sanctuary’. ‘Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them’ (Matt. 18:20), said Christ.⁴⁹ We must learn to think like this, talk like this, cultivate the sense of it. Our citizenship, our dwelling, our kingdom is spiritual. We must take on board what we mean when we use William Cowper’s words:

*Jesus, where ’er thy people meet,
There they behold thy mercy-seat;
Where ’er they seek thee, thou art found,
And every place is hallowed ground.*

*For thou, within no walls confined,
Inhabitest the humble mind;
Such ever bring thee where they come,
And going, take thee to their home.*

‘Church’ cannot be restricted to assemblies of the *ekklēsia* – *even assemblies as specified in Scripture*. Let that sink in! The people of God are always and at all times to be the Spirit-filled community in everyday life, not only when they assemble. In light of the ubiquitous contemporary failure among evangelicals on this point, how pertinent are Peterson’s comments:

⁴⁹ Not that Matt. 18:20 is to be limited to assemblies of the *ekklēsia*, as so often it is; wherever God’s people meet (and ‘meet’ must not institutionalised, as it so often is) Christ is present.

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God's special presence amongst his people is to be acknowledged, not by ritual or ceremony, but by the preservation of the integrity and vitality of the *ekklēsia* [as set out in Scripture].⁵⁰ This takes place as the believers⁵¹ do whatever they can to strengthen and maintain its life.⁵²

'Whatever they can', and whenever and wherever they can. And that takes us back to where we came in. Paul uses the image of the *ekklēsia* as the new-covenant temple – the place where believers have access to God by the Spirit (Eph. 2:18-22) – to speak of the people of God as a spiritual building *and body* for the purpose of mutual edification of believers. This is so important, I repeat the relevant passages:

For as we have many members in one body, but all members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives...(Rom. 12:4-8).

[Christ] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ... Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the Head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love (Eph. 4:11-16).

[Christ] is the Head of the body, the church.. Christ's... body, that is, the church... the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God... You were called in one body (Col. 1:18,24; 2:19; 3:15).

This, of course, is precisely the point of Hebrews 10:24-25, as we shall see. The *ekklēsia* is a spiritual building and body

⁵⁰ Original 'congregation'.

⁵¹ Original 'members'.

⁵² Peterson pp202-203,221.

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designed for the edification of itself – ‘for building up the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ’ (Eph. 4:12-13). It is not a material place where we ‘worship’ (1 Cor. 14:3-26; Eph. 4:11-16; 1 Thess. 5:11).

Exploring the meaning of ‘edification’ brings this out even more clearly. ‘Edification’ does not mean ‘personally helpful, cheering, or boosting of one’s self-image, with a heavy emphasis upon the individual, the self’. Not at all! *First*, ‘edification’, in new-covenant terms, speaks of ‘the building of a house’ (*oikodomē*), the spiritual growth, the spiritual development of believers into Christ-likeness, by the mutual stimulus of all the believers under the direction of the elders – by teaching and example – over the long haul. New-covenant ministry is designed to produce a growing Christ-likeness by mutual ‘encouragement’. *Secondly*, the New Testament, while it does not minimise personal edification, really speaks of it in terms of a whole body or whole house. Moreover, in Romans 15:20 Paul speaks of his work of evangelism (*euaggelizesthai*) in terms of edification (*oikodomō*) – building up the house. But the use of *oikodomē* in passages like 2 Corinthians 10:8; 12:19; 13:10, shows that edification is far more than preaching the gospel to persuade sinners: it also involves teaching and encouraging believers. Consequently, as the members of the physical body are intimately related to each other, each member depending for its well-being on all the rest, so with the *ekklēsia* – as the members of Christ:

God has so composed the body... that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together (1 Cor. 12:24-26).

Mutual edification, therefore, is why believers meet – all are to be involved in the task and privilege of edifying one another. But

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this, too, is 24/7 – not just during meetings (Rom. 14:19 and its context; 1 Cor. 8:1-13; 10:23-33).⁵³

All preaching and teaching – whether for evangelism or edification – should be centred on Christ. As Peterson put it:

Preaching about Christ must be at the heart of the Christian theology of 'worship'. As in the Old Testament, the word of the Lord is central to a genuine encounter with God. Those who are concerned about God-honouring 'worship' will be concerned about the proclamation of the gospel in the world and in the church, in public teaching and private dialogue. If 'worship' is an engagement with God on the terms that he proposes, and in the way that he alone makes possible, preaching Christ is key⁵⁴ to that engagement. Acts points to the proclamation of the heavenly rule of Christ, with all its implications, as the means chosen by God to draw people into relationship with himself, through Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. God's great act of redemption in Christ is the basis of the call to enter into and enjoy the blessings of the new covenant. 'Worship' in New Testament terms means responding with one's whole life and being to the divine kingship of Jesus.⁵⁵

Again:

The purpose of Christian gatherings is the edification or building up of the body of Christ. We minister to one another as we teach and exhort one another on the basis of his word, using the gifts that the Spirit has given us, in the way that Scripture directs. Edification is to be our concern even when we sing or pray to God in the congregation. All this is not a purely human activity, however, for God is at work in the midst of his people as they minister in this way. Edification is first and foremost the responsibility of Christ as the 'Head', but he achieves his purpose as the various members of the body are nurtured and equipped by him to play their part. We meet together to draw on the resources of Christ and to take our part in the edification of his church.⁵⁶

⁵³ See Peterson pp206-210.

⁵⁴ Original 'is a key'. Preaching Christ must be key.

⁵⁵ Peterson p144.

⁵⁶ Peterson p287. See also p198. Peterson pp213-215.

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As we edify one another, so we please God; that is, we ‘worship’ him. Even in the old covenant, such a thing was going on among the saints:

Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD and esteemed his name. ‘They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who “serves” him. Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who “serves” God and one who does not “serve” him’ (Mal. 3:16-18).

‘Worship’ in Revelation

‘Worship’ is one of the great themes of the book of Revelation – whether true, heavenly ‘worship’, or false (*passim*). Believers must expect to be confronted with demands to engage in false ‘worship’, but as priests of the Most High (Rev. 1:5-6; 20:6), they ‘worship’ God alone,⁵⁷ knowing that ‘worship’ is to be offered to none but God (Rev. 19:10; 22:8-9; see also Acts 10:25-26; 14:11-18).

Nevertheless – and this is of great significance – the language of ‘worship’ is not used in Revelation to set out what is commonly thought of as ‘public worship’. The ‘worship’ of God is a heavenly, spiritual matter; this is what God desires (John 4:23-24). So much so, God converts sinners in order to enable them to ‘serve’ or ‘worship’ him as royal priests:

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen (Rev. 1:5-6).

And their assembly for ‘worship’ is heavenly:

After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven!... At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood

⁵⁷ See Peterson pp261-282.

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in heaven, with one seated on the throne... Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads... And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind... and day and night they never cease to say: 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!' And whenever the living creatures give glory and honour and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and 'worship' him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying: 'Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created' (Rev. 4:1-11).

When [Christ] had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying: 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth'. Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice: 'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!' And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying: 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever!' And the four living creatures said: 'Amen!' and the elders fell down and 'worshipped' (Rev. 5:8-14).

Behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!' And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and 'worshipped' God,

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saying: ‘Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen’. Then one of the elders addressed me, saying: ‘Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?... These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and “serve” him day and night in his temple...’ (Rev. 7:9-17).

The temple of God and the altar and those who ‘worship’ there... The twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and ‘worshipped’ God, saying: ‘We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign...’. Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple... (Rev. 11:1,16-19).

Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and ‘worship’ him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water (Rev. 14:7).

All nations will come and ‘worship’ you (Rev. 15:4).

The twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and ‘worshipped’ God who was seated on the throne, saying: ‘Amen. Hallelujah!’ And from the throne came a voice saying: ‘Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, small and great’ (Rev. 19:4-5).

* * *

In this chapter I have tried to set out what I see the New Testament teaches us about ‘worship’ in the new covenant, and as such it forms the heart of my book. If the arguments I have presented stand up, it follows that many evangelicals need to make serious changes; not least, the common view of Hebrews 10:24-25 needs immediate attention, and to that passage, I now turn.

But it is also possible that some might object on the basis of Hebrews 9:1. If so, for a detailed look at that verse, see the Appendix.