



THE BEREA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

About the Article →

The article at right is an excerpt from the introduction to my digital book of sermon outlines on worship, *The Glory Due His Name*. [Click](#) to learn more, read sample pages, and/or order. Berea Page subscribers who did not do so in 2020 may request a free copy through June 30. Complete the form, enter the coupon code “BP2021,” and click “Submit.”

Worship Reflections

“Only a foolish person would describe a meeting with God as ‘fun.’” - Cornelius Plantinga, Jr, in Michael R. Weed, “Consecrated Pragmatism: Trends in Modern Worship,” *Christian Studies* 19 (2003): 5

“In Isaiah’s day the human crowds were still present for worship; it was God who had opted out. The problem for religious leaders then was not how to get people to come back to attending worship; it was how to get God to attend. It might be wise even in the present to look at worship from that perspective.” - J. J. M. Roberts, “Contemporary Worship in the Light of Isaiah’s Ancient Critique,” in M. Patrick Graham, Rick R. Marrs, & Steven L. McKenzie, eds., *Worship and the Hebrew Bible: Essays in Honor of John T. Willis* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 269

Thinking About Worship

David Anguish

“All human wisdom consists in this alone, the knowledge and worship of God.”¹

That concise, yet comprehensive, comment is from *The Divine Institutes*, by Lactantius, a Christian whose life spanned the late third and early fourth centuries (ca. 250-325). It is exemplary of the depth of thought about worship found in multiple Christian writings that have survived from the time before Christianity became the official religion of Rome.

Everett Ferguson collected excerpts from several of those writings in his anthology, *Inheriting Wisdom: Readings for Today from Ancient Christian Writers*. In brief comments about them, he highlights the fact that Christians had to defend the worship of only one God in a society that demanded its peoples “worship the civil gods of paganism and the Roman emperor.” The Christians not only resisted that demand, they also prepared thoughtful materials defending and explaining the importance, nature, and elements of their worship of the true and living God. Especially significant was their affirmation “that worship is not confined to special days and places but that the whole of life rightly lived is worship.”²

In another passage in the *Divine Institutes* Lactantius called attention to the connection between the object of one’s worship and his conduct and then proceeded to show how the pagans’ devotion to their different gods led them to mimic the behaviors associated with those gods, including bloodshed, patricide, infanticide, promiscuity, debauchery, and theft. He then emphasized that it could not have been otherwise:

For in order to placate a deity whom you worship one must do those things that please and delight the deity. So it comes about that a god shapes the life of the worshiper according to the quality of its own divine nature, because the most religious form of worship is imitation.³

Lactantius believed the same connection existed

“The hymns of praise of Moses and Miriam (Exod. 15), Deborah (Judg. 5:3ff.), and Hannah (I Sam. 2:1-10) ... are in their spirit and character spontaneous, real, and enthusiastic. Like the psalms of praise ... they are also joyous in tone. If one cannot understand the laments of the Old Testament without a sense of the real anguish and despair of heart they convey, it is also the case that one cannot fully comprehend what took place and what takes place in praise without feeling the emotions of exultation and delight, shouting and dancing. Praise may even approach ecstasy at times. It is never irrational, however. On the contrary, praise is a making glad that makes sense.” - Patrick D. Miller, Jr., “Enthroned on the Praises of Israel’—The Praise of God in Old Testament Theology,” *Interpretation* 39/1 (1985): 11

“On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return - Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (Harper Perennial, 1982), 52-53

between the worship of the true God and righteous behavior. He also thought that the God worshiped by the Christians was uniquely worthy of their adoration and service. He explained more fully in a chapter that was devoted specifically to worship, beginning as follows:

I now come to the highest and greatest part of this work, which is to teach the religious observances and sacrifice by which God is to be worshiped. For this is the duty of human beings, and this alone constitutes the highest activity and the basis of a happy life for everyone, since we were created and received the breath of life from him . . . for the purpose of worshipping God the Creator of the sun and the sky with a pure and unblemished mind . . . For the holy and unique Majesty desires only innocence from human beings. If a person offers this to God, he makes a sufficiently pious and religious sacrifice. . . .⁴

The ancient reflections on worship like Lactantius’s are both informative and inspirational. They inform us about how the early churches worshiped, but also that they believed it was important to think deeply about their preoccupied adoration.⁵ Thus, they inspire us to think more about our worship, not merely its forms and what may or may not be appropriate in its performance, but about what worship should *be*. Thinking about the nature of worship is a necessary first step to understanding its forms and speaking knowledgeably about them.

At a time when worship remains the subject of what are often passionate conversations in the church, we need this information and inspiration. Given the fact that the Bible says—and assumes—so much about worship, if we intend to be faithful to the revelation we have received, we must commit ourselves to think more deeply about worship’s importance, nature, and elements.

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Notes

¹ Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 3.30. Quotations from Lactantius are as translated by Everett Ferguson in *Inheriting Wisdom: Readings for Today from Ancient Christian Writers* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 232, 235-237. A translation of the complete work appears in volume 7 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Dates for the life of Lactantius, whom he designates a “literary champion of Christianity from North Africa,” are from Ferguson, 295.

² Ferguson, 233-235.

³ *Divine Institutes* 5.10.15-18.

⁴ *Divine Institutes* 6.1.

⁵ I have long appreciated this definition of worship by Everett F. Harrison: “In its purest and most exalted sense it refers to the soul’s preoccupation with the Almighty in the attitude of adoration” (*The Apostolic Church* [Eerdmans, 1985], 131).

All Scripture quotations not otherwise designated are from the ESV.

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