

Introduction

“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 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,

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.

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.

Series Origins

The sermons collected in this volume represent an effort to help one church do that. I developed them as the second phase of an effort to review some of Scripture's fundamental teachings. I had begun that project because I realized I was hearing with more frequency statements that indicated either a lack of understanding or misunderstanding of things that were once seen as basic. While these comments came from people who had been part of the church for many years, their occurrence also reminded me that there were several in our congregation—our youth, younger families, and more recent converts—who had not been systematically taught about those basic themes. So, in 2009, I preached a succession of series on (1) the importance of Scripture as the source for all teaching; (2) the existence of God; (3) the New Testament's presentation of Jesus; (4) the importance and nature of covenant; (5) baptism; and (6) the church. I didn't try to be exhaustive on any subject, but aimed to include enough so my listeners would sufficiently understand all of them.

In phase two I turned to the subject of worship. Because I had read and thought about it off and on since my first years in ministry in the late 1970s, I brought to the preparation process the conviction that, to do it justice, I needed to talk about more than "the five acts of worship." Indeed, my previous study had convinced me that one reason some struggle with aspects of the acts of worship is because we have not talked enough about them in the context of Scripture's view of the nature of worship generally.

The study done for this series strengthened that conviction. Its result was another succession of series in which I aimed to lead the church to think about (1) the importance of worship; (2) the attitude and approach we bring to worship; and then (3) the actions we perform when we come together to worship. As the series progressed, it occurred to me that Psalm 96 contains wording that fits both the collection's overall theme ("The Glory Due His Name" — Ps 96:8) and each of its topics:

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)

- Importance: “Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised” (v. 4a)
- Attitude and approach: “he is to be feared above all gods” (v. 4b)
- Actions: “bring an offering . . . into his courts!” (v. 8b)

Series Content and Development

With one exception, the outlines included in this collection were completed in 2010.⁶ I have done some editing to improve clarity and style and (hopefully!) remove mistakes, though no doubt there were some that slipped through. I also added a footnote here and there to flesh out an idea or add an insight discovered in the ensuing years. While it is virtually impossible—not to mention unwise!—to be completely original about any biblical subject, the approach and organization in these sermons are my own. In cases where part of a sermon more closely followed and adapted a direction discovered in my reading, I have made every effort to acknowledge my debt to the original source.

In light of how much Scripture has to say about worship, decisions about what to include were necessarily selective. Most of the sermons were developed from specific texts. This not only reflects my preference for expository preaching, it also helped me manage what I discussed in each sermon. By making the effort to let a single text determine a sermon's direction, I dealt with ideas that I probably would not have mentioned otherwise. More importantly, I was more conscious of illuminating the entirety of each text's teaching, as opposed to cherry-picking or shoe-horning isolated verses to fit a previously determined agenda.

In addition, by selecting several different texts, many of which overlap with regard to theme, I was able to utilize a strategy I've found helpful in teaching about other subjects. This method involves coming at an idea from one direction and then circling back to approach it again from other angles. This helps learners develop an understanding of a concept and its nuances over time and gives them a chance to chew on it, internalize it, and hopefully make it their own.

Not all the sermons are expositions of specific passages, however. The nature of this subject required that some would be developed topically from a group of related passages on a theme. But even then, I was conscious of the need to correctly represent the different passages within their contexts. Some may conclude that I was not as successful in doing that as I intended, but please know that I made the effort to do so.

Finally, I should call attention to the *occasional* nature of these sermons, by which I mean what students of the epistles mean when they say those writings are occasional documents: they were written to respond to a particular set of circumstances and concerns. I preached these sermons to a particular group of people at a certain time in our lives as a church. Since, like any church, we faced challenges that were specific to us, I called attention to things in talking to them that I might not have emphasized if preaching to a different church. That said, I hope the principles upon which I based my comments will prove useful in other settings.

⁶ Chapter 6, “United in Praise,” was prepared in late 2015 when a church invited me as a guest preacher to present a sermon with that title (and the text, Acts 2:41-47). Since I utilized ideas from selected sermons in the 2010 series in my preparation, I decided to include it in this collection.

I also hope these sermons will provoke thought about the nature and practice of worship. I'm convinced that in order to grow, God's people must think and that sometimes a preacher has to shine a light on a matter before some will think about it. Accordingly, these sermons include observations designed to stimulate thought and, if needed, encourage changed behavior.

Some Miscellaneous Details

Sources and documentation. My completed outlines are typically study notes, not de facto manuscripts to be recited verbatim. I often include quotations from my reading. I quote some of them directly in the presentations, but merely summarize others. To give appropriate credit, refresh my memory about the source of an idea when I return to the notes later, and "show my work" as my math teachers used to say, I include source citations, a practice that also proved useful to some who regularly read the notes when I posted them on the congregation's web page. As originally completed, I included only the names of authors, titles of publications, and page numbers in the citations. When I began the process of editing, I decided to leave them in that form. Given the fact that so many internet listings of books are now accessible, I trust that the omission of the additional publication information typically included will not prove to be a hindrance for anyone who wants to consult a particular source.

Supplemental Sermons. Supplements 1-3 are tangentially connected, but are not strictly part of the worship series. In preaching sermon series—whether paragraph-by-paragraph expositions of biblical texts or topical studies—I wrestled with what to do with the national holidays and special days that impact the modern church calendar. My dilemma arose mainly from the fact that a larger percentage of our members traveled on those days and would therefore miss the next installment in a series if I pressed on. While I periodically prepared a sermon designed to connect to a specific holiday or event, I more often tried to develop one that would not be out of place on the day but would stay as close as possible to the series theme. As it happened, in this series, the sermon I preached on the Passover ("Free At Last"—Chapter 14) coincided with the United States observance of Independence Day. Things didn't line up as well for the Labor Day weekend, but since I had recently referred to "Celebrating the Victory Event" (Supplement 1) (see Chapter 22, note 5), I decided to preach a more general sermon with that title that day. As you will probably guess, Supplements 2 and 3 were presented in conjunction with the Thanksgiving holiday.

As its introduction explains, "The Best Case for Singing" (Supplement 4) was the title for the fourth sermon in the series on singing (see Chapters 23-25). Since I decided to rework the material for this publication (see page 147), I thought it best to move it to the supplement section. As explained on page 151, Supplement 5 ("Some Reflections on Giving") was added to "complete" the section on the acts of community worship.

To See God More Clearly

One of my favorite texts to preach is Isaiah 6, the record of Isaiah's call. Among several versions of sermons I've prepared from that passage are three I designed for a one-day event I entitled, "Motivated for Ministry," the gist of which can be summarized as follows.

After Isaiah answered the call, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" with his enthusiastic, "Here am I. Send me!" (v. 8 NIV), the Lord revealed that his service would be quite difficult.

In fact, according to the standards for ministry success many use, Isaiah fell short; only a small remnant—"a tenth" (v. 13)—would accept his teaching (vv. 9-13). Steadfast commitment was required.

Verses 5-7 show what must have motivated him to persevere. Having seen his uncleanness and how far it separated him from God ("Woe is me! For I am lost"—v. 5), Isaiah received cleansing directly from the heavenly altar (vv. 6-7). He was saved by grace, a reality that doubtless sustained him during his difficult service.

But it was the vision of God he saw before he was cleansed that ultimately motivated him.

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (vv. 1-5).

When we consider the impact that vision must have had on Isaiah's service, we begin to see the truth of Lactantius's affirmation that human wisdom ultimately consists in knowing and worshiping God. We also begin to understand how important it is for us to think more deeply about worship than we often do, even as we talk about its forms and what is and is not permissible for its practice. Properly experienced, worship enables us to *see God*. In giving us the clarity we need about life and our purpose, that vision can help us endure our own times of difficult service.

It is in the interest of improving our vision of God that these sermons were prepared and are presented here for others to consider. May we all see God more clearly.