

A Theology of Prayer Book Worship

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1. A theology of worship

David Petersen writes, “Worship of the living and true God is essentially an engagement with him on the terms that he proposes and in the way that he alone makes possible.”¹ Michael Jensen makes a similar observation. “...the English word worship names what the people of God do in response to the divine initiative.”²

While the bible never actually defines the term, worship, Peterson argues that three biblical concepts are key to understanding its meaning - homage, reverence, and service.

a. Homage

Homage conveys the idea of grateful submission to God (Genesis 18:2; Exodus 18:7; 2 Samuel 14:4) in acknowledgment of his sovereignty, grace and power. Homage can be “a spontaneous expression of an individual’s gratitude to God” (Genesis 24:26–27; Job 1:20–21). It can be “a corporate expression of awe and submission to God’s will” (Exodus 4:31; Judges 7:15). It can be “a corporate acknowledgment of God as creator and saviour of his people” (Psalm 95:6–7; 96:9; 100:2).

In the New Testament, homage involves responding with repentance and faith to the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, acknowledging that he is Lord and calling upon his name (Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Philippians 2:9–11), praying to him (Acts 7:59–60; 1 Corinthians 16:22; 1 Thessalonians 3:11) and praising him (Colossians 1:15–20; 1 Timothy 3:16; Revelation 5:9–14).

b. Reverence

Reverence, fear, or respect for God, in the Old Testament, involved keeping his commandments (Deuteronomy 5:29; 6:2, 24; Ecclesiastes 12:13), obeying his voice (1 Samuel 12:14; Haggai 1:12), walking in his ways (Deuteronomy 8:6; 10:12; 2 Chronicles 6:31), turning away from evil (Job 1:1, 8; 2:3; 28:28; Proverbs 3:7) and serving him (Deuteronomy 6:13; 10:20; Joshua 24:14; Jonah 1:9). Sacrifices and other religious rituals were one way of expressing reverence for God. The terms ‘reverence’ and ‘homage’ are sometimes used

¹ Petersen, David G., 2013, *Encountering God Together*, IVP

² Jensen, Michael, P. 2021, *Reformation Anglican Worship*, Crossway

synonymously, however, paying homage to God suggests specific expressions of worship, whereas reverence or fear imply a whole life expression of devotion and respect for God.

In the New Testament, Paul described the foolishness of idolatry as exchanging the truth about God for a lie, so that people ‘worshipped [literally ‘reverenced’] and served created things rather than the Creator’ (Romans 1:25). Peter encouraged his readers to live out their lives in this world ‘in reverent fear’ (1 Peter 1:17). Hebrews calls on us to serve God ‘with reverence and awe, for our “God is a consuming fire”’ (Hebrews 12:28–29).

c. Service

The purpose of Israel’s redemption from slavery in Egypt was to serve the Lord (Exodus 3:12; 4:23; 8:1). Parallel expressions include ‘to offer sacrifices to the Lord our God’ (Exodus 3:18; 5:3, 8, 17; 8:8, 25–29) and to ‘hold a festival’ (Exodus 5:1). Both alternatives imply some form of ritual service. The priests and Levites were appointed to lead the people in their ritual service. However, service cannot be separated from reverence or homage. A total lifestyle of service to God was clearly expected of God’s people (Deuteronomy 10:12–13; Joshua 22:5; 24:14–24).

The New Testament adapts the terminology of service in two significant ways. First, it describes Jesus in his death, resurrection and ascension as the high priest who has offered a perfect sacrifice to fulfil and replace all the ritual of the tabernacle and temple (Hebrews 8:1–6; 9:11–14; 10:5–14). This act of service enables us to approach God with confidence, as those who have been purified, sanctified and perfected by him, and to live in God’s presence for ever (Hebrews 4:14–16; 10:19–22; 12:22–24).

The New Testament also uses service to describe the response we make to Jesus and the gospel. Paul says, ‘offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship’ (Romans 12:1). Our ‘bodies’ means the totality of ourselves. As those who have been brought from death to life through Jesus’ death and resurrection, we belong to God as a ‘living sacrifice’. Those whose minds are being transformed and renewed by God will no longer be conformed to the values, attitudes and behaviour of ‘this world’ (Romans 12:2). Acceptable worship is the devoted service of those who truly understand the gospel and want to live out its implications in every sphere of life. While this is a whole of life action, there is a special realization or expression of worship when we gather together as Christ’s people.

Acceptable worship is the expression of a genuine relationship with God. Throughout the bible, worship is seen as both an individual and a corporate response to God, as he reveals himself to us, expressed through acts of homage, reverence, and service. The Old Testament pattern of corporate worship through priesthood, sacrifice, and temple has been fulfilled and replaced in the New Testament by Jesus, who became our great high priest, our one true sacrifice, and the temple where God and humanity meet. We can only gather as the redeemed people of God because of Jesus and, as we gather, we respond to him by listening to his word, responding in repentance and faith, prayer and praise, and by edifying one another in the power of God's Spirit for the glory of his Son.

2. Principles of Prayer Book worship

How is this theology translated into our Anglican forms of worship? James Packer has identified five principles of application³ which found expression in the 1549 and 1552 Prayer Books drafted by Thomas Cranmer and the later 1662 Book of Common Prayer. Each of Cranmer's services were:

1. Congregational. Unlike pre-reformation worship, where attendees were non-participatory observers of the Mass said in Latin rather than active participants in something they could understand, these services were in common English and had congregational involvement.
2. Simple. Ceremonial was reduced and the flow of services simplified to the minimum that the substance and thrust of the biblical truth being expressed would allow. Clear communication became paramount.
3. Edifying. Recognising that edification comes through the teaching and application of biblical truth, Cranmer gave a central place in his services to Scripture readings and prescribed a sermon at each Holy Communion service. He wrote many of these sermons himself to ensure their theological correctness.
4. Unifying. Cranmer's goal was to unite the local congregations of England in common worship. This had three benefits. First, it kept the church's standards of worship at the highest level. Second, it brought worshippers face to face with the gospel and kept them there. Third, it maintained a sense of oneness and solidarity within the church as a whole.
5. Gospel centred. A good service is not a set of unconnected elements and ideas, but an integrated whole built around a unifying theme. Cranmer's

³ Packer, J. I., 1999, The Prayer Book Path, <https://prayerbook.ca/j-i-packer-the-prayer-book-path/>

unifying theme was the gospel, which give his services an evangelical shape and feel.

These five principles allowed Cranmer to apply his theology of worship to the needs of his time - educating both a theologically illiterate clergy and a laity who were deeply ignorant of basic biblical Christianity and dealing with the political realities of England's break with Rome.

3. The gospel in worship - sin, grace, faith

The unifying theme in Cranmer's services is the gospel. Each is structured around a repeating cycle of sin, grace, and faith.

“...first, facing our utter need of Christ; second, acknowledging God's merciful provision of Christ; third, expressing our trustful, thankful response to Christ. Thus Cranmer's services first make us face our present badness; then they tell us of the new life of grace; finally they lead us into the right response, which is multiple – prayer and praise for pardon; joyful trust in God's promises of mercy; learning of God from his Word; asking for help both for ourselves and for others, professing our own faith, and giving ourselves directly to God out of gratitude for all he has given to us.”⁴

This cycle can also be found in our modern Prayer Book services. In the 2nd Order Communion Service (APBA), for example, the first cycle consists of:

1. The acknowledgment of personal sin (the Prayer of Preparation, the recital of the Commandments, and the Prayer of Confession),
2. The proclamation of grace (the Absolution), and
3. A series of responsive exercises of faith – praise (the Gloria), learning (the Bible Readings and sermon), testifying (the Nicene Creed), giving (the collection), and intercession (praying for the needs of the world and the church).

The second cycle comprises:

1. The acknowledgment of personal sin (the Prayer of Approach),
2. The proclamation of grace (the Great Thanksgiving), and
3. Actively participating in that grace by faith (the Communion).

⁴ Packer, J. I., 1999, The Prayer Book Path, <https://prayerbook.ca/j-i-packer-the-prayer-book-path/>

4. Conclusion

We are a liturgical denomination and are blessed to have the Prayer Book. That being said, it is the creation of imperfect human beings and is not without flaws. Moreover, our social and political realities are very different from those faced by Thomas Cranmer in the 16th century and so our priorities in applying our theology to the structure of our services are somewhat different.

Our reformed Anglican theology should permeate every part of our services, and we must work hard to ensure that it does. However, Cranmer's principles of application require that we thoughtfully adapt those services to suit our context and ensure that the gospel cycle of sin, grace, and faith clearly shines through.