

John E. Burkhardt

# WORSHIP

*A Searching Examination  
of the Liturgical Experience*

WORSHIP



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by

John E. Burkhardt

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*To those with whom I have broken bread,  
since they are companions for life*



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## PREFACE

Christians gather for worship. Their assemblies may be small or large, and growing or shrinking from what they once were. The surroundings may be splendid or rude, the pace leisurely or busy, and the atmosphere boisterous or solemn. Worship takes many forms; and people may worship for a variety of reasons. They may come together out of some deep and durable devotion to the reality and worth of God, or out of some lingering sense of duty or guilt, or for mutual support in what they take to be an unfriendly world, or from the almost spent force of unquestioned and unreasoned habit and routine, or for unacknowledged and unspecifiable reasons unknown. Nevertheless, they do gather, and continue to gather, often without benefit of clergy or theologians.

The clergy, to be sure, sometimes worry about worship, and the theologians have not been totally silent. Many pastors have shelves filled with books about worship, books of services and rites, books on how to lead worship, how to improve worship, and even how—in the sacred lingo of the century—to make worship more relevant. The academics have been busy too. There are stacks of scholarly journals and more or less weighty volumes dedicated to precise understanding of how worship once happened. Much of this is interesting to avid liturgical hobbyists, and some of it, surely, is quite valuable in the shaping and reshaping of

authentic liturgies. Note, for example, the impact of research into the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus upon the liturgical renewal imprinted in the more recent worship-books of the Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Roman Catholic churches. Nonetheless, for all their intrinsic worth, up-to-dateness, and general usefulness, such books do not appear to have solved all of the fundamental problems people have with worship.

In our time, as Paul Tillich so cogently recognized, the human questions are not basically those of practice but of meaning. Meaning is now the human question. No matter how busy humans become, or how practiced in their several occupations or diversions, an undertow of meaninglessness seems to unsteady all of their efforts. If such a reading of the situation is accurate, then the basic liturgical problem may be the unvoiced question of the real meaning of worship. What meaning does and can worship have now? Does it make sense, or is it ultimately a nonsensical enterprise? And if worship is a sensible activity, not simply touching the senses but intelligible and capable of making good sense, why and how does it make sense? And what sense does it make? Or have those who do worship simply taken leave of their senses? In a word, is there any discoverable theo-logic to worship?

The essays that follow are attempts to sketch a theology of worship. They are theological essays, efforts at some coherence about worship, written not so much to persuade people to worship as to help those who do worship to understand what they are doing. They are explorations in the logic of worship, arising in part from a conviction that much mischief is done by thoughtlessness. They are written simply to help those who do worship understand more clearly what they are about, and to this end are occasionally tendentious

and provocative. Not all understanding arises from agreement. Nevertheless, insofar as worship may be described as a grateful recognition of reality, these thoughts are presented in an endeavor to expose a more than verbal kinship between thinking and thanking. Concern with the theology of worship draws upon material from many sources, and thinking responsibly about worship necessitates foraging in many fields. Hence, although these essays are theological in character, they incorporate evidence and insights from several anthropological, biblical, historical, and theological disciplines, as well as from a variety of liturgical experiences. Taken together, they explore ways in which Christian gatherings for worship may be understood as events wherein such ordinary human activities as assembling, observing times, eating and drinking together, conversing, and welcoming newcomers are occasions for the public celebration of God.

My personal acknowledgments to others are perforce brief, though those who are familiar with the resources upon which we all draw will recognize, perhaps better than I, the measure of my indebtedness and the limits of my understanding. The sheer weight of material with which a theologian of worship should be familiar is intimidating, even to the brash; and, like a seer surprised and overcome, I must confess that I have already glimpsed more than I can assimilate or tell. Indeed, were I to list all my grounds for gratitude, this modest book would become a bibliography, a map of communities of faith, and an autobiography.

Aside from thankful apologies to diverse scholars upon whose turf I have transgressed, my personal appreciations reach in many directions. I am grateful to those with whom I have lived and worked and worshiped for many years.

Beyond my immediate loved ones, special thanks go to my colleagues (students and faculty) at McCormick Theological Seminary. President Jack L. Stotts, Dean Lewis S. Mudge, Professors Edward F. Campbell, Jr., Robert C. Worley, and others have given more encouragement and wise counsel than I can repay. My thanks go to G. Fay Dickerson, who prepared the indexes. Various congregations of the faithful have helped shape my understanding of worship and have truly been means of grace to me. My thanks go to them, as well as to those students and teachers of social anthropology at the University College, London, who in 1972 coaxed me into the shared delight and recognition that humans must celebrate or die. My thanks go also to Rev. Thomas Smith, C.S.C., and that eucharistic community which is Moreau Seminary in Notre Dame, Indiana. They welcomed me into their home while most of these pages were being written, and I shall always be grateful to them for occasions noticed gladly. For them, and for others who are also remembered and cherished, thanks be to God.

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*Chicago, Illinois*  
*After Pentecost 1981*

Chapter  
I

WHY WORSHIP?

*“Serve Yahweh gladly”*

Acclaim Yahweh, all the earth,  
serve Yahweh gladly,  
come into his presence with songs of joy!  
—Psalm 100:1–2, JB

Accordingly all our life is a festival: being persuaded that God is everywhere present on all sides, we praise him as we till the ground, we sing hymns as we sail the sea, we feel his inspiration in all that we do.

—Clement of Alexandria,  
*Miscellanies*

make bonfires  
And feast and banquet in the open streets  
To celebrate the joy that God hath given us.  
—Shakespeare, *Henry VI*,  
Part I

Only in rites  
can we renounce our oddities  
and be truly entired.  
—W. H. Auden,  
“Archaeology”

## *“Serve Yahweh gladly”*

We live in a society where the value of almost everything seems to be estimated in terms of what it is good for. Nothing appears to deserve esteem simply for its own sake; nothing seems to have intrinsic value; and, for many of us, the world can be divided between the useful and the useless. In such a world, those who want to “get ahead” choose their friends, their goods, and their activities on the basis of what these can do for them. Under such circumstances, much of mutuality is simply a kind of shared selfishness; and in such a world, much of religious behavior can be understood as getting what one can out of God. It is scarce wonder, no wonder at all, that in a society dedicated to consumerism, people ask “What can I get out of worship?” As if getting something out of everything expresses an appropriate response to life! The question of worship, when so stated, does not take God seriously. It does not ponder the true worth of God, for to treat God as if God were a means to our ends is to imagine that we ourselves are gods. God is not humanity’s servant.

I. What is worship? From time immemorial it has been suggested that humanity is God’s servant. For example, in



the ancient Mesopotamian creation epic, Marduk resolves to create “man,” saying:

He shall be charged with the service of the gods  
That they might be at ease!<sup>1</sup>

According to this view, the gods really become gods only when they are freed from the tasks and pressures of worldly necessities. Servants make them gods. Gods are masters with their lives enhanced by servants, and the more servants the better. Even the Hebrew Scriptures continue with this master-servant imagery, though God’s needs are muted. Worship is an act of service to God, even though God does not really need what humans offer. For the Hebrews, God is God, whether served or not; and God deserves to be served, not for any reward to God’s servants but for God’s own worth. God does not require praise to be God; but as God, God demands it by right of being God. Among the ancient Greeks, Plato, in *Euthyphro*, suggested that the gods could not, by their very nature, be affected by our worship. Since they did not change, they could not be changed. They were beyond change and flattery. What, after all, do you give to someone who has everything? It was left to Thomas Aquinas, among medieval theologians, to take this argument so seriously that he argued that worship is not for God’s sake, but for ours. To this, in the sixteenth century, Calvin responded that the proper adoration of God is the prime purpose of Christianity (“*Le premier point de la Chrestiente est dadorer Dieu droictement*”).<sup>2</sup> And, in the twentieth century, picking up the theme of adoration, Evelyn Underhill speaks of a “disinterested delight” and a “total adoring response.”<sup>3</sup> By such lights, worship is truly a matter of worth-ship. It is the adoring response to God as the center of value, to God understood as intrinsic worth.