

## Can You Worship Anyplace? Reflections on how the New Testament Answers the Question



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Of course, one can think about the issue of worship in the New Testament (NT) from many different perspectives. What options might lie before us? We could focus on definitions: what, truly, *is* worship—especially with the range of expressions that claim to be worship? Many contemporary discussions of worship center, rightly, on the “nature” of the worship we creatures owe to the omnipotent, triune, Creator God. *How* should we do it?<sup>1</sup> Or, I suppose, we could ask the temporal question: “when” ought God’s creatures worship? Is worship time-bound or timeless? “Why worship?” is another crucial question certainly worthy of careful thought and exegesis. What should prompt people to worship? “Who” is another central object of inquiry. In a world where there are so many competing deities, who is worthy of worship? Jesus said that people cannot serve God and mammon. So, whom should they serve and why?

But in this article I wish to reflect on the “where” question—location. Where is it appropriate to worship? In what *places*, if you will, should God’s people engage in worship? I hope you will come to agree that I am not simply forcing the NT texts into an alien straightjacket. In

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<sup>1</sup> I think many discussions about worship get bogged down here. The words “worship styles” engender endless conferences and debates. Then enter terms such as “traditional,” “contemporary,” or “emerging.” It may be that some of *these concerns are beside the main point.*

fact I think the NT writers, following the lead of their Lord Jesus himself, put the “place” category at the forefront in their discussions of worship. If we will see *where* Jesus and the NT writers intended God’s people to worship, it is my hope that we will be better motivated to worship well and in a full-orbed fashion, and in the process find some likely avenues through which to answer some of those other important questions.

## I. IN CHRIST

First, we worship in the *place* that Christ secured for us in the past and in which we now live. We worship “in Christ.” In the letter called Ephesians, the author<sup>2</sup> affirms that Christ has secured his people’s salvation as the result of his redemptive work on the cross (Eph 1:7). This is a past event. But because of their faith in him, believers are now “included in Christ” (1:13)<sup>3</sup> and marked with a seal as God’s possession (1:14). They possess this in the present. Consequently, the variegated blessings that accrue as a result of God’s pleasurable will (Eph 1:5, 9, 11) come to those “in Christ” (1: 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13), all to the praise of God’s glory (1:6, 12, 14). Their existence or location in Christ elicits praise to the God and Father of Jesus Christ the Lord. That they are in Christ precipitates worship and God receives glory. Those whom God has brought into salvation participate in the worship of the redeemer God simply because of where they are: in Christ.

Thanksgiving also accrues to God “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph 5:20). This may well be an expansion of the prevalent “in Christ” formula in Ephesians and, if so, draws special attention to the two words “name” and “Lord.” The *name* of Jesus surely signifies his authority (e.g., Matt 7:22; Mark 9:39) or his person (e.g., Matt 10:22; 18:5, 20). Prayer offered *in* Jesus’ name will be effective (cf., John 15:16; 16:23). *Lord* affirms Jesus’ sovereignty. Believers give thanks to God, for they have access to all these “blessings” only in (and through)

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<sup>2</sup> I happen to believe that the traditional view that Paul is the author is correct, but I will not defend that position here. It is not crucial to the larger purposes of the article.

<sup>3</sup> Lincoln puts it succinctly: “. . . believers experience the blessings of the heavenly realms not only through Christ’s agency but also because they are incorporated into the exalted Christ as their representative, who is himself in the heavenly realms” (A. T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* [WBC 42; Dallas, TX: Word, 1990], 22. H. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002], 173-174, catalogs all the occurrences of “in Christ” and its parallels in the letter).

Christ. God has given us all things “in Christ” (Eph 1:22), for which God’s people are profoundly grateful. They give thanks as servants of the Lord and as those dependent upon him for all spiritual blessings *in him*.

Of course scholars have long debated whether “in Christ” is strictly locative, as I am mostly taking it, or also instrumental. That is, do we have all these blessings *in* Christ, or *through* Christ, i.e., by means of what he has accomplished? I do not wish to deny any instrumental significance but would simply insist that it is not a case of either/or but of both/and. *Through* what Christ has done, believers possess their new position *in* Christ. Now in corporate solidarity with Christ they worship God.

Assuming they are “in Christ,” where do Christians worship? We will find several “locations” for worship in the present.

## II. IN YOUR HEART

The *heart* is the present location where Christians must engage in worship that pleases God. In Hebrews 3:10, in a quotation from Psalm 95, Yahweh says, “Therefore I was angry with that generation, and I said, ‘They always go astray in their hearts, and they have not known my ways.’ ” Jesus criticized some Pharisees for their hypocrisy citing Isaiah’s words: “This people honors me with their lips, but their *hearts* are far from me” (Matt 15:8; cf. Isa 29:13).<sup>4</sup> If our hearts are not in the right place, then the other elements that are often considered part of worship—whether music, incense, or ritual—turn out to be meaningless and useless as far as God is concerned.

The “heart” (καρδία) in biblical usage refers to the seat of the physical, spiritual, or mental life.<sup>5</sup> It represents the hub of a person’s being, the foundation of understanding and will, the center of personality. In Ephesians 1:18 Paul prays for his readers that the eyes of their heart would be enlightened. Paul prays that God might shine a light into the command center of their lives so they would have true spiritual understanding. Later he prays “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love” (Eph 3:17). Jesus assured his disciples that the pure in heart will see God (Matt 5:8); that where your treasure is, there will be your heart (Matt 6:21); and that as his followers they were to love God with all [their] heart (Matt 22:37).

This sets the stage for our reading of a crucial text from Ephesians—one that we will come back to later. In Ephesians 5:18 Paul urges his readers to allow the Spirit to fill them with Christ, God’s love—indeed,

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<sup>4</sup> Unless identified otherwise, all Biblical citations are taken from the NRSV.

<sup>5</sup> BDAG: 508.

all God's fullness.<sup>6</sup> True worship occurs when believers open their hearts to the Spirit's work so that the Spirit can produce in them worship that brings God praise. As the hub of a person's existence, the heart's focus or bent, if you will, will reflect what occupies that central place. If Christ is there, worship will emerge.

Paul in fact describes some of the outcomes of this filling work of the Spirit. As he puts it, "as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord *in your hearts*" (emphasis added; Eph 5:19). When the Spirit fills the church and its members, singing and melody-making fill the hearts and then the mouths of the worshipers. And unless Spirit-inspired singing occurs "in your hearts," such activities like music, as technically excellent as they may be, risk being only that—excellent music—not worship.

The crucial point here seems irrefutable: genuine worship must occur in the heart; this worship alone is acceptable to God.

### III. IN THE SPIRIT AND TRUTH

If we were to cast about in our minds for another phrase that connects worship with the preposition "in," most would readily identify John 4:24. Jesus asserts that God's true worshipers (ἀληθίνοι προσκυνῆται) "must worship *in spirit and in truth*."<sup>7</sup> John 4:4-26 is a central text in the NT on the topic of worship—John's record of a conversation between Jesus and a Samaritan woman. When she referred to the debate between the Samaritans and the Jews about the proper location for worship, Jesus made this crucial assertion. First, he made a chronological point (4:23): the *time* is coming. What time? In John's Gospel the Greek word ὥρα (translated "hour" or "time") pinpoints the salvific events Jesus' arrival will bring (cf. 16:32; cf. 2:4). Here is Jesus'

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<sup>6</sup> For this interpretation see W. W. Klein, "Ephesians," in *Expositor's Bible Commentary 12* (rev. ed.; eds. T. Longman III & D. E. Garland; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 142-44. See also H. Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 702-05; T. G. Gombis, "Being the Fullness of God in Christ by the Spirit: Ephesians 5:18 in Its Epistolary Setting," *TynBul* 53 (2002): 259-271.

<sup>7</sup> Emphasis added. The word for "worship" here (proskune,w) occurs in other texts where Jesus receives the homage usually reserved for Yahweh (e.g., Matt 14:33; 28:9, 17; Luke 24:52; John 9:38; Heb 1:6; Rev 5:14; cf. LXX: Gen 22:5; 24:26, 48, 52; 27:29; Exod 4:31; 12:27; 24:1; 34:8, 14; Deut 32:43; 1 Sam 1:3; et al.). For a superb explication of how this devotion to Jesus emerged within a few decades of Jesus' life see Larry W. Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), or his more exhaustive treatment: *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

bold point: the results of his death, resurrection, and exaltation, though events still in the future while he and the woman were conversing, were available already. Carson put it this way: "... this period of true worship is already proleptically present in the person and ministry of Jesus before the cross."<sup>8</sup> Now this hour has arrived, so all the old religious debates between the Jews and Samaritans about places to worship are obsolete. Jerusalem may have been the center of worship as far as the Jews were concerned and Mt. Gerizim for the Samaritans, but now the Great High Priest has come directing people to worship God in a new *place*. Because of Jesus' coming now worshipers are able worship God in the true place. What is that place?

So, second, Jesus explains the significance of the arrival of this time: there is a new location for worship: "in spirit and truth." This place of worship is predicated on the reality, Jesus insists, that God is spirit, perhaps meaning non-corporeal, invisible, and certainly nonhuman. The designation "God is spirit" also defines how God works in this world—in a spiritual way, or through the realm of the Spirit, parallel to statements "God is light" (1 John 1:5) and "God is love" (1 John 4:8).<sup>9</sup> Worshipers must no longer think of worship in terms of *physical* places. Jesus, the incarnate Word baptizes his people in the Holy Spirit (John 1:33), for without the new birth in water and Spirit, people cannot see the kingdom of God (3:5) and so worship God correctly. So, what does "in Spirit and truth" mean? To grasp Jesus' point we must employ a capital 'S' for Spirit.

God is, of course, the object of worship, but the place in which his people come to worship is the Spirit of truth who testifies to Jesus as Messiah and Lord. R. E. Brown suggested, and he may have a point here, that the phrase "Spirit and truth" functions as a kind of hendiadys equivalent to the "Spirit of truth."<sup>10</sup> But surely "truth" also points to Jesus himself, the one who is truth. True worship of which God approved was neither on Mt. Gerizim nor in Jerusalem but in the place that the Spirit has provided in and through Jesus. Jesus is "the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6). John's gospel repeatedly highlights the role of the Spirit

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<sup>8</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (PNTC; Leicester, UK: InterVarsity/Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 224.

<sup>9</sup> See G. R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC 36; 2nd ed.; Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1999), 62.

<sup>10</sup> R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (AB 29A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 180. Carson, *The Gospel*, unpacks "in spirit and truth" as, "... essentially God-centered, made possible by the gift of the Holy Spirit, and in personal knowledge of and conformity to God's Word-made-flesh, the one who is God's 'truth' ..." (225).

in pointing to Jesus as the object of God's redemptive activity. For example:

- And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God" (1:32-34).
- Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (3:5-8).
- "It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (6:63).
- "This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you" (14:17).
- "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf" (15:26).
- "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (16:13-15).

So we see that for John, in the Spirit's identification of Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life, God's true worshipers will be able to worship the Father. Now people can worship God in the only location that worship can be true worship. Bricks-and-mortar places of worship lose their significance once the eschatological new age has dawned—the age of the Spirit. Mt. Gerizim, Jerusalem, the Vatican, First Baptist, or some

storefront on Colfax Avenue in Denver, all lose their focus as the *places* of worship. True worship is constituted by and located in the Spirit, and in the worship that the Spirit engenders. The Spirit points to Jesus, the only one in whom God's redemptive truth becomes available to people. To worship in truth is to be set free (John 8:32) to know the only true God who reveals himself alone in Jesus (John 17:3). Thus those who worship *in the Spirit and truth* have arrived at that place; they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks (John 4:23).

Paul also alludes to this when he writes to the Philippians. Among his concerns in the middle of the letter are those who put their confidence in σάρξ, often translated "the flesh"—in this instance, their own accomplishments—to curry favor with God. These Judaizers brought to their worship of God all the restrictions of the laws, rites, and performance of the Jewish cultus. Not us, Paul insists. Our worship is different, for it finds its location in a different arena. He speaks of Christians in this way: "For it is we who are the circumcision, *who worship in the Spirit of God* and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh" (emphasis added; Phil 3:3). Worship *in the Spirit*<sup>11</sup> relegates all other means of coming to God as misguided and futile. As we will unpack in more detail below, Paul's word for "worship" here (λατρεύω) could also be translated "service." He makes clear that worship is not an internal versus an external matter: it is both. When one worships in the Spirit, the Spirit accomplishes nothing less than a total renovation and produces the kinds of actions that please God. Another present-time place for worship is:

#### IV. IN THE GATHERED ASSEMBLY

While the earliest adherents to the Messianic movement continued to consider themselves Jews and so maintained their faithful worship in the Temple precincts, from the very beginning they also joined together for their own fellowship (that eventually included Gentiles). While true worship was a matter of the individual's heart, their new relationship with the risen Lord required that they celebrate together. Initially, the apostles' teachings were of central concern; they also met together in the Temple courts; they broke bread in their homes; they met for fellowship; they prayed; and with glad and sincere *hearts* they praised God (Acts 2:42-47). Certainly a new locale for worship for these new Christians was **the gathered assembly**. Of course, this does not mean that they met

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<sup>11</sup> The NRSV has rendered the dative πνεύματι with the preposition "in." Other versions use "by" to show instrumentality. As observed above, this may also be an instance of both/and.

in church buildings; there were none. Often their own homes served as the location for their gatherings as the following texts show:

- “The churches of Asia send greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, greet you warmly in the Lord” (1 Cor 16:19).
- “Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, ... Greet also the church in their house” (Rom 16:3, 5).
- “Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house” (Col 4:15).
- “Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2:46).

Granting that most early Christian worship was conducted in homes or apartments, what was appropriate for worship in this location? What did worship in the gathered assembly look like? In what activities did worshippers engage when they assembled together?

Here we will mine the NT epistles for communal worship activities. While we cannot be certain that what occurred in one or several places characterized all communal worship, we can get a general sense of the kinds of activities in which these early believers engaged while joined in community together. And while we will list these practices, we must resist imposing what we currently know about them—for their modern practice may differ greatly from the earliest instances. If Corinth was at all typical, though we can't say it was, whatever fixed forms existed, worship was also relatively free and unstructured several decades into the church's history.

First we encounter two rituals that express the essential *identity* of the gathered community. Who or what is this new worshipping community? Baptism and the Eucharist graphically portray its identity. If being “in Christ” is the spiritual location of God's true worshipers, then *in* baptism and *in* the Eucharist believers portray concretely and physically that fundamental identity.

**1. Baptism.** Transliterated from the Greek term βάπτισμα that means dipping or immersion, baptism was the central initiatory rite that portrayed who these Christians were. Growing out of Jewish *mikvah* washings during the Hellenistic period, John the Baptist and then Jesus brought the practice to Jesus' followers. At his departure Jesus insisted

that baptism be a central element of what constituted disciple-making, along with teaching all else that Jesus commanded (Matt 28:19-20). On the day of Pentecost Peter insisted that new followers of Messiah Jesus repent and be baptized (Acts 2:38), and about 3,000 followed on that very day (2:41)! Subsequent chapters in the Acts show that the expanding church took Jesus' instructions seriously.

Paul theologized a bit about baptism's significance for the assembly. Two texts must suffice here.

- “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many” (1 Cor 12:13-14).

Baptism was a rite of the community that initiated the members into one organism that fused each individual member into the totality that comprised the body.

- “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:3-4).

Paul goes on to base his appeals that Christians live transformed lives on the fact that they were joined to Christ via baptism to the complex of events of Easter weekend—Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. If Christ is raised, then those who were baptized into Christ have also been raised to a new kind of life. Baptism joins all believers to Christ so that the church is the corporate Christ. They join the worshipping community of those who are *in Christ*.

**2. Eucharist.** The other ritual central to the church's identity was the Lord's Supper or Communion. It portrays the church's unity; though consisting of many members, the church is one body. While each of the synoptic gospels record parallel accounts of the institution of the ritual during Jesus' final Passover meal with his disciples (Mark 14:22-25; Matt 26:16-29; Luke 22:15-20), Paul again provides his theological perspective in 1 Corinthians.

- “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:16-17).

To eat and drink of the Eucharist is to eat and drink Christ. Since all the bits of bread are broken from one loaf, all the individual believers constitute one organism. Again, the church is the corporate Christ. In this event it celebrates its existence; it worships.

In a second text from this letter Paul preserves what is the earliest account of the institution of the Lord's Supper (ca. AD 54):

- “For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me” (1 Cor 11:23-25).

The central elements of the ritual portray Christ's body and the new covenant God enacted with his people, the church. Again, in this event the church celebrates what Christ has done in securing its salvation. It worships.

In both these rituals we see the focus on the gathered assembly. To my thinking, it would be rather incongruous for an individual believer to engage in either of these alone or in the company of only one or two others—unless, of course, those two or three constituted the entirety of the local church at that place, or the circumstances were unusual and necessitated an unusual celebration. They are corporate rites; they picture that faith in Jesus establishes an organism.

Beyond these two central identity rituals the NT evidences other worship activities within the gathered community of believers that help us understand what practices are appropriate in worship.

**3. Bowing down.** This expresses a posture of prostration or obeisance. In 1 Corinthians 14:25 Paul writes, “After the secrets of the unbeliever's heart are disclosed, that person will *bow down* before God and worship him, declaring, “God is really among you.’ ” The word Paul employs here, προσκυνέω, is translated in various ways: to worship; fall down and worship, kneel, bow low, fall at another's feet. In the physical posture (this space or place) of bowing down, we worship—acknowledging God's lordship over his people.

**4. Holy Kiss.** Paul concludes four of his letters by urging his readers to greet each other with a holy kiss (Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Thess 5:26). Peter ends his first letter with a similar instruction (1 Pet 5:14). Certainly a familial and intimate gesture, it portrays the close bonds that members of the Christian body share with

one another and ought to express to one another. Unless you're a Judas, you can't attack someone you have kissed! The holy kiss identifies others as members of Christ's worshipping body. Christians worship *in* this family.

**5. Laying on of Hands.** This corporate rite grows out of the practices of Israel (e.g., Lev 8:14, 18, 22; Num 27:23; Deut 34:9). A ceremonial gesture, it expresses a kind of solidarity between the recipient and those who lay their hands on her or him. Jesus made a special point of touching or putting his hands on people, especially during his ministries of healing (e.g., Matt 19:13; Mark 5:23; 6:5; 7:32). The early church continued this practice (Heb 6:2). Laying on hands (sometimes along with anointing with oil; James 5:14) put the sick person into contact with the risen Lord through the direct mediation of his body on earth—his disciples (Acts 9:12). But beyond healing, laying on hands was regularly practiced to express connections between members to convey special authority (akin to ordination: Acts 6:6; 13:3), other extraordinary powers or gifts (1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6), or the reception of the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17; 19:6). It stresses connectivity. Like the holy kiss, in the laying on of hands we celebrate our joint membership *in* that body Christ has saved.

**6. Prayers.** How natural that the assembled community would engage in corporate prayers. Daily and communal prayers characterized Jewish worship. Jesus set the example for his disciples by his personal praying as well as giving the “Lord’s Prayer” (Luke 11:2-4; Matt 6:9-13). In this prayer Jesus employed corporate language (“Our Father”) to set the pattern for his followers’ communal praying. The Acts chronology shows that prayer became a central group activity for the fledgling church (emphasis added):

- “All these were *constantly devoting* themselves to *prayer*, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers” (Acts 1:14).
- “They *devoted* themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the *prayers*” (Acts 2:42).

See also Acts 4:23-31 for an example of their prayers. The epistles also give ample evidence that prayer was a central and important component of the early churches’ corporate experiences.<sup>12</sup> In prayer the

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<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Rom 8:26; 1 Cor 11:13; 2 Cor 9:14; Eph 6:18-20; Col 4:3; 1 Thess 5:17, 25; 2 Thess 3:1; 1 Tim 2:8; Heb 13:18; Jas 5:13f, 16; 1 John 5:16; Jude 1:20.

body expressed its vital connection with God to whom they were dependent for life and salvation. *In* praying they worshiped.

7. **Hymns.** Several epistles show that singing or chanting psalms or hymns was a normal part of early Christian corporate worship. Again it would be natural for the Jewish Christians since music in worship was an important element in the worship of ancient Israel and the synagogue. Several texts will suffice to make the points:

- “What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up” (1 Cor 14:26).

Evidently, individuals were encouraged to come to the church services expecting to contribute to the corporate worship, and that included hymns. Other parallel texts confirm this judgment (emphases added):

- “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing *psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs* to God” (Col 3:16).
- “... as you sing *psalms and hymns and spiritual songs* among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts” (Eph 5:19).

As we know from Ephesians 5:18, Paul insisted that rather than being inebriated, Christians should allow the Spirit to fill them. Among the results of the Spirit-filled body would be psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, and to repeat, singing and making melody to the Lord.

If prayer represents a vertical dimension to worship, here is a *horizontal* dimension: speaking “to one another,” affirming in the congregation God’s mighty acts and his presence. Can we distinguish among the three types of “singing” in Colossians and Ephesians?

(1) The designation “psalms” in the NT refers to both OT book of Psalms (Luke 24:44; 20:42; Acts 1:20; 13:33) and Christian songs of praise (1 Cor 14:26—often translated “hymns” in English versions).

(2) “Hymns” refer to religious songs or songs of praise (only in Eph 5:19; Col 3:16).

(3) “Songs,” described here as spiritual, denote sacred songs (also see Rev 5:9; 14:3; 15:3). More pointedly, “spiritual” songs are ones energized by the Holy Spirit.

Overall, the three terms are roughly synonymous for Christian songs of praise to God, incorporating, as seems natural, appropriate entries

from the OT Psalter. We have no warrant to limit this singing *either* to preexisting songs *or* to spontaneous ones composed on the spot under the inspiration of the Spirit. Probably both are in view. Many scholars are convinced that Paul incorporated a hymn in his letter to the Philippians 2:6-11.<sup>13</sup> An attempt to versify this so that it looks to us more like a hymn, at least in English, might be:

“Who, though he was in the form of God,  
 did not regard equality with God  
 as something to be exploited,  
 but emptied himself,  
 taking form of a slave,  
 being born in human likeness.  
 And being found in human form,  
 he humbled himself  
 and became obedient to the point of death—  
 even death on a cross.  
 Therefore God also exalted him  
 and gave him the name that is above every name,  
 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,  
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
 and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
 to the glory of God the Father.”

Another example is Colossians 1:15-20.<sup>14</sup>

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;  
 for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created,  
 –things now visible and invisible,  
 whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers–

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<sup>13</sup> Peter O’Brien rightly reminds us, “In describing the passage as a ‘hymn’ it should be noted that the term is not being employed in the modern sense of what we understand by congregational hymns with metrical verses.” For discussion of the literary form of this “hymn” see P. T. O’Brien, *Epistle to the Philippians* (NIGNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 188-93; I. H. Marshall, “The Christ-Hymn in Philippians 2:5–11,” *TynBul* 19 (1968): 104-27; R. P. Martin, *Carmen Christi* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1967; rev. ed. 1983; 3d ed. published as *A Hymn of Christ*, [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 1997]); and R. P. Martin and G. F. Hawthorne, *Philippians* (WBC 43; rev. ed.; Dallas: Word, 2004), 99-104.

<sup>14</sup> For further discussion of the hymnic nature of this passage see, J. D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (NIGNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans/Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), 83-87; and P. T. O’Brien, *Colossians-Philemon* (WBC 44; Dallas, TX: Word, 2002), 32-37.

all things have been created through him and for him.  
 He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.  
 He is the head of the body, the church;  
 He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead,  
     so that he might come to have first place in everything.  
 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,  
 and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things,  
     whether on earth or in heaven,  
 by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Such “singing” and “praising” must be performed “in your heart to the Lord.” First, the “heart” must be engaged, as we saw above. That is, singing that results from the filling of the Spirit will engage the core of the singers’ beings, their essential inner selves. Singing will involve the worshipers’ minds, they will be fully engaged, and they will sing with conviction.

Yet such worship singing is not without a *vertical* dimension as well. Spirit-filled music is done “to the Lord,” for Christ is the object of the singers’ devotion. Spiritual music involves the congregation’s attribution of Christ as Lord; its goal is not to entertain the saints. If church music does not meet these qualifications—edifying each other and honoring the Lord—it is not spiritual music and risks being harmful when it replaces a counterfeit for the genuine.

**8. Creeds and Confessions.** Though we don’t find an abundance of examples, most scholars agree that there are in the epistles evidences of some early Christian confessions or creeds that were, presumably, uttered in the churches at some points. Certainly, after they appear in epistles, they would find regular expression in the churches’ worship. Again, the OT shows that ancient Israel employed some fixed expressions of their devotion and beliefs (e.g., Deut 6:4-5; 1 Kgs 18:39). Two examples of possible such fixed formulas in the NT include:

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received:

    that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,  
     and that he was buried,  
     and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures,  
     and that he appeared to Cephas,  
     then to the twelve.

    Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died.

Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles (1 Cor 15:3-7).

And then as well:

Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great:  
 He was revealed in flesh,  
 vindicated in spirit,  
 seen by angels,  
 proclaimed among Gentiles,  
 believed in throughout the world,  
 taken up in glory” (1 Tim. 3:16).

Such relatively fixed kinds of statements express in compressed formulas the content of early Christian belief and became the precursors of later so-called ecumenical creeds such as the Apostles’ or Nicene Creeds. Of course we cannot know with certainty whether or how often congregations recited the creeds. Clearly they served catechetical purposes and were perhaps deployed in the liturgy of the churches. Is the repetition of creeds necessarily worship? The answer must be No. Creeds, like prayers, can be repeated by rote, with little value. But when the recitation of creeds engages the hearts of the worshipers, like songs, they can help them put into words the most magnificent truths which they affirm and hold dear.

**9. Spiritual Gifts.** From 1 Corinthians 12-14 we discover that in the assembled body there were manifestations of what Paul calls *pneumatikoi*, usually translated as “spiritual gifts” or “spiritualities.”<sup>15</sup> When we investigate further into what items were included under this category, we can list what appear both natural and supernatural capacities.

- In 1 Corinthians 12:7-10 we find this list: “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy,

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<sup>15</sup> BDAG: 387. Other texts mentioning these include: Rom 1:11; 15:27; 1 Cor 9:11; 12:1; 14:1; 1 Pet 2:5 (note the connection to sacrifices here). While a few commentators translate this as “spiritual persons” here, this is highly unlikely and no versions take that position. See P. Ellingworth and H. Hatton, *A Handbook on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians* (New York: UBS, 1995), 272-73.

to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.”

Clearly this is not the place for an explication of the uses of spiritual gifts in the early church, but we do get further insight about their uses in the assembly in 1 Corinthians 14. First we note what Paul says in these verses:

- “If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if all prophesy, an unbeliever or outsider who enters is reproved by all and called to account by all” (1 Cor 14:23-24).
- “What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let them be silent in church and speak to themselves and to God. Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to someone else sitting nearby, let the first person be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged” (1 Cor 14:26-31).

We may conclude, at least with respect to the churches in Corinth, that many members of the assembled community (no hints that such practices were limited to the elders or overseers) contributed significantly to their common experience as a corporate body. In this horizontal dimension of worship the believers served one another through these “spiritualities.” People came expecting to contribute to their common experience so that through their expression of these spiritual gifts the entire body would be built up or edified, since, as 1 Cor 12:7 made clear: “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

**10. Scripture Reading.** Jesus’ so-called “Sermon at Nazareth,” recorded in Luke 4:16-27, points out the place of the public reading of the Bible in the synagogues of his day.<sup>16</sup> Other sources confirm this synagogue practice (Luke mentions it in passing when Paul visits a

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<sup>16</sup> See W. W. Klein, “The Sermon at Nazareth (Luke 4:14-22),” in *Christian Freedom: Essays in Honor of Vernon C. Grounds* (ed. K. W. M. Wozniak & S. J. Grenz; Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986), 153-72.

synagogue in Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13:15). The church continued this practice. As with some of the previous elements, we might question whether the mere reading of Scripture is always worship, or whether it supplies the theological framework in which true worship can occur. If Scripture is viewed as divine revelation, then to read with the heart and to listen so attentively as to hear from God is true worship. In this vein Paul urges his protégé Timothy: “Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting, to teaching” (1 Tim 4:13). Paul thought it imperative that the reading of Scripture have a prominent place in the corporate experience of the church.

**11. Preaching/teaching.** Also based in synagogue practice (again see Luke 4 and Acts 13:15), the church incorporated sermons or homilies to explain God’s will and to instruct God’s people. By the way, often epistles themselves served the same exhortatory function—as written sermons: Acts 15:31; Heb 13:22. Paul also urged Timothy to keep up this practice (1 Tim 4:13). Appropriate response to such exhortation is an act of worship. The explication of this comes in our next major section.

We next come to the fifth place where Christians are to worship. This new covenant community goes out from its gathered worship to become the scattered community that worships *in the world*. How does that occur?

## V. WORSHIP IN LIFE AND SERVICE

We take as our point of departure the extended homily found in the book of Hebrews. We go first to the final verses of chapter 12:

- “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, *by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe*; for indeed our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:28-29; emphasis added).

What follows immediately in chapter 13 are acts of worship. True worship is not restricted to the gathered community and the elements listed in the previous section; it takes in all of life. As if to underscore the point, in the middle of Hebrews 13 the author adds:

- “Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the *fruit* of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God” (Heb 13:15-16; emphasis added).

Rooted in the Hebrew view of worship as embodied in life, the Greek version of Psalm 96:9 (95:9 LXX) employs the verb λατρεύω (to

serve) to point to worship: “Worship the LORD in holy splendor; tremble before him, all the earth.” The use of this Greek word translates a common Hebrew word for worship that grows out of the root *’ebed*, meaning “servant.”<sup>17</sup> Such service occurs in a great many ways, from mundane duties to great acts of devotion (Exod. 3:12; 20:5; Deut. 6:13; 10:12; Josh. 24:15; 2 Kgs 21:3; Psa. 2:11). The NT writers follow the lead of the LXX in often using *λατρεύω* (to serve) or its cognate noun *λατρεία* (service) to denote worship. Another related word used for worship is *λειτουργία* (from which we get the English word “liturgy”) used again for common tasks or for acts of devotion or worship (see Luke 1:23; 2 Cor 9:12; Phil 2:17; Heb 8:6; 9:21). An important implication is that Christian worship and service are closely linked.<sup>18</sup>

The OT was clear that God alone is worthy of worship and service (Exod 20:2-5). God deserves his creatures’ wholehearted devotion (Deut 6:5; cf. Luke 10:27). The final book in the Bible pictures God’s people as serving God in perpetuity: “and [Jesus] made us to be a kingdom, priests *servi*ng his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen” (Rev 1:6).

How Christians live their lives with each other and in service to the world constitutes an important expression of (or location for) their sacrificial devotion to God—of worship. We worship *in* our service. Strathmann states that worship boils down to, “A manner of life which is pleasing to God, and which is sustained both by gratitude and by a serious sense of responsibility—this is Christian τῷ θεῷ λατρεύειν” [service to God].<sup>19</sup>

The writer of Hebrews exhorts his readers to “worship,” connecting it to the sacrificial system under the old covenant (Heb 8:5; 9:9; 10:2; 13:10). Let us trace how that works.

As is well known, the writer of Hebrews interprets the OT “... according to a creative exegetical principle,”<sup>20</sup> with some recent

<sup>17</sup> See E. Jenni and C. Westermann. *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 829-31; and, R. Laird Harris, et al., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999), 639-41.

<sup>18</sup> The Greek NT employs other words that are translated into various English versions as “worship” including: *προσκυνέω* (worship; to prostrate); *σέβω* (worship); *σέβασμα* (object of worship); *προσκυνητής* (worshiper); *θεοσεβής* (god-fearing, devout); *εὐσεβέω* (show deep respect for); *σεβάζομαι* (worship); and *θρησκεία* (worship).

<sup>19</sup> H. Strathmann, “*λατρεύω* and *λατρεία* in the New Testament,” *TDNT* 4:64.

<sup>20</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT; London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott/Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), xlii.

commentators using words such as midrash, homiletical midrash, or typology to characterize the method the author employs.<sup>21</sup> Primarily, he mines the OT for ways of understanding the significance of Jesus' sacrifice in the new covenant. So, if we look to Hebrews 10:19-25, we see the call to persevere in the way of Christ based on a typological reading of effects of the OT sacrificial system. He urges his readers: "let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, *with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water*" (Heb 10:22; emphasis added). What shortly follows is this appeal: "And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another" (10:24-25). The typological reading of the Day of Atonement and the sin offering—central elements in the worship of Israel—provides the imperative for Christians to live lives occupied with doing good. Thus when we come to Hebrews 13 we find a similar pattern unpacked in more detail. The sin offering of the Day of Atonement (Heb 13:11-12; cf. Lev 4:12, 21; 16:27) that Jesus has accomplished in his death "outside the camp" leads to the offering of the sacrifice of praise (13:15), which in turn leads to service to others (13:16). Observe the progression in these texts:

- "For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood" (Heb 13:11-12).
- "Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the *fruit* of lips that confess his name" (Heb 13:15).
- "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God" (Heb 13:16).

Doing good and serving others describe the worship of those under the new covenant. The sacrifices of the OT cultus find their equivalents

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<sup>21</sup> On these various interpretive methods and a discussion of how the writer of Hebrews uses and interprets the OT text see, e.g., W. L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (WBC 47A; Dallas, TX: Word, 2002), cxii-cxxiv; P. Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans/Carlisle, England: Paternoster, 1993), 37-42. D. A. DeSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude. A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle "to the Hebrews"* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 32-35; and L. T. Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 21-28.

in doing good and sharing with others. These are the “fruit of lips” that confess Jesus’ name. Hebrews 13 catalogs examples of what doing good means. Some examples occur within the community of believers; most occur in the daily routines of life. It is instructive to ponder the types of activities that the writer lists:

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|--|------------|
| 1. Mutual love                             | (13:1)     |
| 2. Hospitality to strangers                | (13:2)     |
| 3. Empathy to prisoners, sufferers         | (13:3)     |
| 4. Sex only within marriage; no immorality | (13:4)     |
| 5. Contentment not greed                   | (13:5-6)   |
| 6. Imitate Godly church leaders            | (13:7-8)   |
| 7. Avoid false teaching                    | (13:9-10)  |
| 8. Accept persecution as did Jesus         | (13:11-14) |
| 9. Praise God                              | (13:15)    |
| 10. Do good and be generous                | (13:16)    |
| 11. Obey church leaders                    | (13:17)    |
| 12. Pray                                   | (13:18-19) |

In other words, these activities constitute worship. In these acts and attitudes we discover *where* Christians worship. Worship is conducted in faithful living according to the commands of righteousness that characterize Jesus’ followers.

Worship portrayed as service to others is not limited to the culmination of the letter to the Hebrews. A survey of the uses of the verb *λατρεύω* in the Gospels, Acts, and several epistles also witnesses to the connection (e.g., Matt 4:10; Luke 1:74; 2:37; 4:8; Acts 24:14; 27:23; Rom 1:9; 2 Tim. 1:3). A corresponding search on uses of the noun *λατρεία* in the NT reveal a similar close connection (e.g., John 16:2; Rom 9:4; 12:1; Heb 9:1, 6). We can consider only a few representative uses. In a well-known text in Romans 12:1-2 Paul writes:

- “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* [latreia; service]. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Paul defines appropriate worship as using our bodies to honor God, to so allow God to renew our minds that we accomplish his will rather than what the world dictates.

- In 2 Corinthians 9:12 Paul writes, “for the rendering of this *ministry* not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.”

The same word the NRSV translates as “worship” in Rom 12:1 it renders “ministry” here.<sup>22</sup> When brothers or sisters give of their resources to meet the needs of fellow church members, they engage in worship. Such ministry is worship. God receives praise for putting it into the hearts of his people to be so generous. Service or ministry that meets the needs of the saints is what worship entails.

The same phenomenon occurs in Philippians 2:30 where speaking of Epaphroditus Paul says, “because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for those *services* [λειτουργίας] that you could not give me.” Again, worship is service.

And while not employing either of these central terms Peter emphasizes the same point: “Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen” (1 Pet 4:11).

The impact of what Peter implies here is telling. Whether inside or outside the gathered assembly, the very *speech* of the Christians is to convey the very words of God. *Service* to others is energized by God who alone supplies the necessary strength. All such speaking and doing—and whatever else these bookends encompass—are acts of worship that bring glory to God through Jesus Christ.

Worship surely ought to occur in the gathered community when, for example, the church body celebrates the Eucharist or meditates on the reading of Scripture. But worship in the NT occurs every bit as significantly in their homes and out in the world when God’s people serve each other and do good to those in the world. Where do Christians worship? These texts answer the question very pointedly: in their serving.

For our final entry, we find what I think is a realized eschatological “already/not yet” *place* in which Christians worship, I will combine two very graphic images in the NT, for I think they both get at similar ideas—and are sufficiently related for our purposes. These images conjure up “heavenly places” and “Mount Zion.” We focus attention primarily on two epistles: Hebrews and Ephesians.

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<sup>22</sup> Another translation puts it this way: “ministry of this service” (ESV). Worship is serving others.

**VI. IN MOUNT ZION OR THE HEAVENLIES**

We must start with some background from the OT prophet Isaiah. In an early section of his prophecy he points to a place of worship that Christians understand will be fulfilled by Jesus.

Listen to Isaiah's words (2:2-4):<sup>23</sup>

“In days to come  
 the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest  
 of the mountains,  
 and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.  
 Many peoples shall come and say,  
 ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,  
 to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways  
 and that we may walk in his paths.’  
 For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord  
 from Jerusalem.  
 He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many  
 peoples;  
 they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into  
 pruning hooks;  
 nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn  
 war any more.”

What is clear from Isaiah's words here? Though the kingdoms of the earth will be defeated, the city of Jerusalem, Zion, will be redeemed and will flourish. As John Watts says, “The important thing about Zion is her reputation as Yahweh's dwelling. It is *Yahweh's house*, the temple, which stands out. And that is important because he is present and active

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<sup>23</sup> This poem appears in essentially the same form in Micah 4:1-4. The question of who borrowed from whom—or whether they both employed some other source—need not detain us as it has no impact on our discussion here. In Isaiah's context, Isaiah witnessed the fulfillment of his prophecy that Zion would not fall to Assyria. Perhaps that resulted in the confidence expressed in this poem that the promises concerning Zion would also find fulfillment.

there.”<sup>24</sup> Justice, righteousness, and peace will prevail. It points to the end when God will make all things right.<sup>25</sup>

Now when we turn to the epistle of Hebrews we discover a writer who picks up this image of Zion, the city of God and gives it a significant standing for his readers. But instead of relegating it solely to the eschatological future, he suggests that the eschaton has already arrived; it has overlapped the present. He says,

- “But 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 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 of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (Heb 12:22-24).

Christians *already* experience the blessings of the age to come in the present. In Hebrews 11:16 the writer speaks of a “better country—a heavenly one” and a city that God has prepared for his people. We are receiving a “kingdom that cannot be shaken” (12:28). These seem to be objective realities that, while awaiting their full realization in the age to come as Isaiah prophesied, are already experienced by those who follow the way of *faith* outlined in Hebrews.

This is not to diminish or discount the perpetual worship in heaven; in fact it complements it. In the vision of Revelation 14:1 John depicts Jesus’ presence on *Mount Zion*. He writes, “Then I looked, and there was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion! And with him were one hundred forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads.” Harps play and the 144,000 sing a new song before the throne on which God sits. Earlier chapters (viz., Rev 4:6-11; 5:6-14; 7:9-12) provide more insight into the nature of the ongoing worship in heaven. Surely these are the redeemed with Jesus. There will be endless worship in the Mount Zion to come. The writer of Hebrews suggests that this eternal worship that will engage the people of God in the eschaton *has already begun by faith now*. We have come to Mount Zion to worship. This is the *place* in which Christians worship now.

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<sup>24</sup> John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33* (WBC 24; Dallas: Word, 2002), 31.

<sup>25</sup> The future reality is elaborated in more detail at the end of the book—Isa 65:17-25.

Perhaps somewhat parallel to this is Paul's use of the location "heavenly places," also translated "heavenlies" or "heavenly realms" in various English versions. We can cite only a few of Paul's uses of this heavenly image:

- "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" (Eph 1:3).
- "God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places" (Eph 1:20).
- "and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2:6).
- "As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven" (1 Cor 15:48-49).

Paul asserted that Christians are *now* seated in the heavens where Christ is seated. That heavenly session occurred at Jesus' resurrection. In other words, when we entered into Christ, recall our earlier point, we entered this heavenly place where he is. While space precludes a thorough analysis of all the options for understanding this image, whatever Paul meant it can't be understood physically. The Christians to whom he wrote were very physically in various towns in Asia Minor. Yet, evil forces were also in the heavenly places (Eph 6:12), and the church required God's armor to fight against them.

So rather than presenting some arcane cosmology or topography of the heavenly spheres, Paul's reference is more likely soteriological and eschatological. Though believers are not literally yet resurrected and seated with Christ (1:20; 2:6), the spiritual transaction that will eventuate in those realities has occurred. Through what Christ has accomplished in his resurrection and exaltation, the 'age to come' has overlapped the present so that those 'in Christ' in this age experience the spiritual benefits that will be consummated in the next age. And

because believers are still in ‘this age,’ they continue to contend with their and God’s enemies until the end. We referred to this earlier as realized eschatology.<sup>26</sup>

And what do they do “in these heavenly realms?” Among other things, and no doubt most importantly, they worship. Because of the certainty of their standing “in Christ,” they engage in thanks and praise for what they experience. Such worshipers share in the grand doxology that begins this profound epistle. Here are the words of worship:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph 1:3-10).

Because of the overlap of the ages the redeemed worship *now* in the heavenly realms. They have obtained in the present their true identity as worshipers of God—a task and privilege they will continue to pursue through endless ages. Paul insists that this fulfills God’s eternal plan, namely, “so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (Eph 3:10). The church will display to all the powers that God is wise. If this is where Christians now reside, no wonder Paul concludes this section of Ephesians with this prayer:

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<sup>26</sup> W. Klein, “Ephesians,” 48.

- “I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (Eph 3:18-21).

## VII. CONCLUSION

So, according to the NT writers, where should Christians worship? They worship “in Christ”; they worship in their hearts. But not merely as isolated individuals, they worship in community and in service to others—both inside and outside the church body. In so doing, they worship in the Spirit and truth. And their worship takes on an eternal and supernatural character, for they worship on Mt. Zion, in the heavenly realms with Christ who sits at the right hand of God.