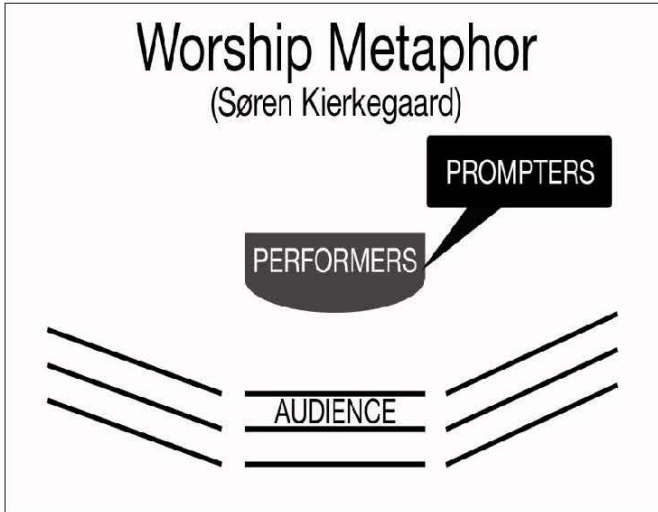




Pastor Michael O'Neill  
February 26, 2017

**Part Four**  
Hebrews 12:28-29



\* **Shachah**: to prostrate one's self, bowing, stooping  
- Nehemiah 8:5-6

\* **Proskuneo**: to prostrate one's self, to do reverence, to kiss toward  
- Matthew 2:11; Revelation 7:11-12

\* **Leiturgia**: combination of ergon (work) and laos (people)  
- 1 Peter 2:9; Hebrews 12:28-29; Romans 12:1

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2/26/17  
West Valley Church  
Michael O'Neill

## **The Heart of Worship, Pt. Four<sup>1</sup>** **(Hebrews 12:28-29)**

I started out my career in ministry back in 1984, right out of college as a full-time youth pastor at a church in Southern California. I quickly began to realize that my youth ministry experiences as a high school student attending youth group and as a college intern in youth ministry, did not prepare me for ministry in Southern California. We were only 20-30 minutes from Ventura beach. We were in a town about an hour and a half or so from Disneyland (on a good traffic day). An hour and a quarter away was Universal Studios. Two hours away was Magic Mountain Amusement Park with some of the best rollercoasters and thrill rides in the world. Two and a half hours away was Venice Beach, and four hours away was Tijuana.

With all that entertainment in our own backyard, I found it hard to figure out how to entertain teenagers enough to keep them interested in attending youth group and church.

I learned from that experience quite a bit, but one thing was for sure: as a youth group or as a church, we do not need to compete with Disneyland. That is not what we are here to do. Granted, church is, can, and should be fun and enjoyable. But I'm afraid too many churches have bought into the idea that we have to "out-entertain" the world in order to reach people, so we give away cars and drive motorcycles into church and we have fog machines and flying worship pastors who enter the sanctuary from suspended cables (all those and even more theatrical things have been done in churches – some right here in our town). Now, hear me: churches *should* be creative, we should incorporate the arts into worship, and we should schedule and plan fun things together. I remember when I was a youth pastor, we were preparing our group to go on a mission trip and we were seeking support from the church. I had an older woman come up to me and say, "I can support mission work. But I can't support 'fun'." In my mind I thought, "You are right – Church should never be fun. Every teenager I know wants to come to a church that forbids 'fun.'" That's the other problem: churches react against the idea of competing against Disneyland so instead they make it as solemn and as somber as a funeral service for someone nobody liked. I mean you can hardly sing in worship because it's buried under centuries of dust. Some churches are like vampires at midnight: you walk in and it sucks the life out of you.

Neither of those reactions reflects genuine Christian worship. What we have to offer as Christians is unlike anything the world has to offer: we have the opportunity to gather together to encounter the risen Lord Jesus Christ, the God of the universe,

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the basis of this message is inspired by and used from a message by Dr. Constance Cherry, NNU Wesley Theological Conference, in a lecture given on 2/3/17

*actually, literally* present among us, supernaturally and naturally interacting with us, speaking to us, and transforming our lives into abundant lives in and for him through his resurrection power and the presence of the Holy Spirit. That, my friends, neither Disneyland nor anything else in the world can offer; nothing outside of the Christian Church. So church should never be boring, dusty or dry, nor should it compete with Disneyland. In this sermon series called “Back to the heart of worship,” we are exploring what worship really is. Today we will conclude our series, and next week will be anything but boring when we have a baptism celebration service.

In this series we’ve been attempting to get past what worship seems to be about these days – song styles, light shows, fog machines, video technology, concerts, and on and on – and we are trying to get at what the heart of worship is. Not that those things are bad, when they are used appropriately in order to facilitate worship. But those are the *means* to worship, not worship itself. I’m afraid that in church culture today, many of us worship “worship” itself, instead of using those things as a *means* to worship Christ. We’ve turned worship into something that we seek for our own experience, rather than to seek to worship the One to whom whose grace we are responding.

We’ve spent time in Hebrews 12:28-29 seeing that our God is a consuming fire, so we ought to worship him appropriately, and then in Romans 12:1-2 where we saw that worship is our response to the incredible love of God in Christ; that Christ gave his life for us, and that true worship is giving our lives to Christ and living our lives completely for him. Last week we looked at the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus and how they encountered Christ without even realizing it at first. That became our challenge to realize that when we come together to worship, the very presence of the resurrected Jesus Christ is here with us, in the very real presence of the Holy Spirit, worshipping God the Father with us and actually leading us in worship. These things are the heart of worship, and they are often absent from what passes as worship in many Christian churches today. We’ve become so accustomed to either the empty habitual ritual of church, or being entertained so much that we’ve made church about ourselves.

Both of those situations were something that the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard spoke against. Kierkegaard lived during the 1800s in Denmark. Denmark was considered a “Christian Nation,” and Kierkegaard became disgusted with what passed for Christianity. Everyone was comfortable in their wealth and ease and state-sanctioned churches. The focus of their worship became themselves; they would go to the churches that would most cater to their entertainment desires, or to their desired social status. Their relationship with Christ had little or no bearing on their lives of discipleship outside the church; it was enough for them to go to church and then go about their lives the rest of the time living for themselves, all the while calling themselves “Christian.” Much of Kierkegaard’s writings were an attempt to wake people up to the reality of the present Christ and to begin to live for Christ rather than for themselves. You can imagine that this didn’t go over well with those

in power at the time, so his writings weren't particularly popular and were banned in his own country.

But one of the things Kierkegaard talked about was our approach to life and to worship. He wrote about the principal parties involved in a production or a theater play or musical, or in our day when we go to the movie theater or a concert. In essence, Kierkegaard said this: When we go to a play, there are the performers on the stage. There are the "*prompters*," which were the directors and producers. They may not be visible, but they've done their work in preparing the *performers*, and they are just off stage whispering corrections or prompts or forgotten lines. The *performers* had rehearsed and memorized and practiced. And then of course, there was the *audience*; the people who came to settle in, relax, and be entertained by the performance. We'd all agree to that, correct?

Kierkegaard said, "Church is starting to look like that."

What he was trying to say is that we approach church from that same attitude or perspective – as if worship was a program or a concert *for us*. So in his diagram, he is saying that the performers are the worship leaders. They are the people who have done all the hard work to practice and polish their performance. They've planned and rehearsed and memorized so that the program will go well. And the congregation is acting like the audience, and God is acting like a prompter. God has directed the performers in planning and practice. God is whispering in the ear of the preacher: "Preach a little longer; they're into this!" Or he's whispering to the musicians, "Sing that chorus one more time; it's good." Or, "Use that pedal with your guitar; it will stir up some emotion." Or "Have them close their eyes in prayer so that no one is looking around when they pray to me." And Kierkegaard says that this is as far removed from biblical worship as we can imagine. Unlike many philosophers who only want to tell people what's wrong and don't offer solutions, Kierkegaard suggests what the arrangement of biblical worship should really be like, and it is this:

The performers are the congregation. Our singing, our Scripture reading, our public declaration of the Word in sermon, our prayers, our giving, and anything else we do together in worship, all of that is performed by the congregation together. The prompters are the worship leaders and pastors. They are the ones prompting us on what to sing, what to pray, what to give, what to say, and when to do all that in ways that will be most pleasing to the audience, which is....God. What we do together here in worship, we are doing to please God, giving him our best praise, our best songs, our best declarations, our best offerings. It's our job as pastors and leaders to help you do that in ways that are consistent with the biblical guidelines and the leading of the Holy Spirit. That's important because remember, Christ is present with us, and he is also our worship leader. He is prompting the prompters and the performers. God is both prompter and audience, right? But do you see how radically it will change the heart of our worship? Because it means that worship is no longer about US, it is about GOD. It means we won't come to church to be entertained, to judge the quality of the singing or the sermon, but solely to please God. That, my friends, is the heart of worship.

Now this analogy, like all analogies, eventually breaks down, but this comes pretty close to describing the problem we face in worship today. Because somewhere along the line we have gotten the idea the congregants need to be the satisfied audience; that they get to decide when worship is adequate or inadequate; when it is good or not. And the congregation gets to decide whatever level of participation they want to offer – whatever makes them feel comfortable. So how much you sing or don't, how much you pray or don't, how much you give or don't – it's all up to *you*; whatever *you* want is just fine. If the music is not to your liking, or too loud, or too soft, or you'd rather read the lyrics on a screen instead of book, then you don't have to participate if you don't want. In fact, you now have the right to criticize it.

One of the most successful reality shows was American Idol. It has had 8 spin-offs, and similar versions are shown in 48 different countries and six multi-national world areas. It has become a cultural phenomenon. Viewers cringed as terrible singers auditioned who really thought they were good singers (or were told so by a parent who was apparently deafened by love). Viewers shared the joy of discovering incredibly gifted people. But one of the downsides (and there are many!), was that it turned all of us into self-proclaimed judges and critics. We think we know enough now so that when we hear someone singing we can say, "That was a little pitchy." Or, "That's not in their wheelhouse." I've watched that show, and I still don't know what a wheelhouse is. But I'm afraid we've brought that attitude into church, and since we are the audience, after all, we can sit back and judge how well our musicians or singers or preachers perform. And so even in worship, we've usurped God's rightful position and we become the judges of good or bad worship according to our own tastes. How dare we! *God is the audience, not us!* Worship is *not* about coming here and passively having something done to us, or for us; the heart of worship is that we would come together, participating together to offer to God our best worship.

Even as we've been talking about worship, part of the problem is our own language. We have a very limited resource of words and synonyms for worship. So with that in mind, I want to give you a small sample of the words for worship that we find in the Bible and what they mean so that you can get an idea of how full and rich the idea of worship is, and what God expects from you and me when we worship. I'm only sharing a few of the many different words for worship in the Bible.

Now one of the things you are going to see is that there is not a single word in the Bible that is used for worship that is not an action word – worship is a *verb*, not a noun. One of those words is the Hebrew word...

- ***Shachah***: *to prostrate one's self, bowing, stooping.*

In other words, it means to lie down as flat as you can, face down with your stomach on the ground, arms and legs outstretched – as in bowing before your master. We've talked about how worship is submission and surrender to God; there is no more humiliating – and I mean that in the good way, as in being humbled – there is no more humiliating posture before God than this. Now, that word prostrate is a

term we don't use much. Don't be confused. There is a hymn called "Crown Him with Many Crowns," and it has a line in it that says, "Let angels prostrate fall." I knew a pastor once who was leading that song and said, "Let angels prostates fall." *NOT* the same thing! I'm not sure if angels even have prostates. We may not be familiar with the word prostrate, but it is an important part of the heart of worship. There are many examples of this word, and this is just one. It's also found in one of my favorite books of the Bible, Nehemiah. The Jews have finished building the wall around Jerusalem, and Ezra comes to the gathered people and opens the Scriptures to read aloud to all the people gathered. And when they hear the Words of God again, after they've been away for so long, their response is an almost involuntary humbling of themselves:

"Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, 'Amen! Amen!' Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground." (Nehemiah 8:5-6, niv)

The word "worship" there is the word "shachah," meaning they lay flat on the ground with their arms and legs flat out. There is nothing in this worship that is a passive incident, with people just sitting back deciding if they like the way Ezra reads, or if they like the tone of his voice. They actively respond by physically bowing down, stooping down, prostrating themselves before God, their audience.

In the New Testament, the Greek counterpart to this word is...

- ***Proskuneo***: to prostrate oneself, to do reverence, to kiss toward.

It means the same as the Old Testament word, but it has more intimacy in it; it means to kiss toward or literally "to blow a kiss." So it's even more than the action of bowing or stooping but includes the affection that comes with the act. This word, too, is used many times in the New Testament, but one of them is from Matthew 2 when the wise men entered Jesus' house. It says:

"On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him." (Matthew 2:11, niv)

There's the word *proskuneo*. Here's something amazing about that: it gives us the picture that the kings of the east, wealthy and wise as they are, are prostrating themselves before the *real* king. Scholars tell us that at the time of this event, Jesus was likely around two years old (it was in a house, not in the cave). This isn't, as your nativity scenes would have you believe, with the Kings in their fancy bathrobes with their Burger King hats on just looking nicely at a baby in a manger. So when you set up your manger scene next Christmas, put your porcelain priests prostrate on the ground in front of Jesus - at least you'll be a little more like what the real scene was. They were enamored, in love with this King and they completely humbled themselves before him.

Do you see how these words are action: do, speak, bring, bow – not just passively sit back?

In Revelation we see this picture:

“All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying:

‘Amen!

Praise and glory

and wisdom and thanks and honor

and power and strength

be to our God for ever and ever.

Amen!’” (Revelation 7:11-12, niv)

There is that word “worshiped” again – *proskuneo*. If you think heaven is going to be people passively sitting back watching worship, you’ve got the wrong heaven. Heaven is going to be filled with people *doing* worship. Worship is to be *done*. And we are to practice it here, on earth, just as we pray for it to happen – “Your Kingdom come, your will be done, *on earth, as it is in heaven.*” If that doesn’t apply to worship, I don’t know what does.

Worship is organized and directed action to God. We take our response to his love and grace and mercy, demonstrated in Christ’s death on the cross and resurrection, and through singing and reading and praying and declaring and giving and sharing we offer it to God, together, through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, in partnership together. Christian worship is an opportunity to get busy, it is active, it is holy, it is sacred, it is participative, it is corporate. It is anything but passive or individual. And it means that if I don’t like a particular song, I don’t have the option of waiting it out. I must sing. And I must sing with all of the energy the Spirit gives me. Or if I am annoyed by the prayers – that they are too long or too short or whatever, I am obligated to partner in prayer with everyone and even to pray for the pray-er! Or if I am annoyed by the preacher because of the sound of his or her voice, or he or she preaches too long and has made sixteen points out of what should only be one, I am obligated to pray for the preacher, doing whatever I can to help the community fulfill their holy work of worship before God.

You might have noticed that I said that worship is work. In fact, that is a very biblical statement of fact. Worship is work. That’s a far cry from our contemporary viewpoint that worship is easy and should be entertaining to us. Heartfelt worship calls us to invest ourselves and expend ourselves in a service to God (that is where we get the term “worship *service*” from). We don’t come to watch these people worship; we come before the audience of God to offer him our best worship. There is another New Testament word for worship:

- ***Leiturgia***: combination of *ergon* (work) and *laos* (people).

It recalls the Old Testament words for worship that described the hard work of the priests in the Temple who had to constantly be preparing and arranging things in the Temple so that the people could worship. Of course, who are the priests, now? *We are*, according to **1 Peter 2:9**. *Leitourgia* is the word that is used in Hebrews 12:28-29 –

“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so *worship* God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire.’” (Hebrews 12:28-29, niv)

It’s also the same word that the Apostle Paul uses in Romans 12:1 –

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper *worship*.” (Romans 12:1, niv)

Your bodies – that means physical engagement. I’m not suggesting you should start running around this room or flopping yourself down on the ground, but I am suggesting that you can no longer sit there passively. You need to get engaged in worship and get your body involved. I’m saying you should quit worrying about what the person next to you thinks and start thinking about what God thinks of your worship.

The word *worship* is an action word, describing the work that we are to offer, together, to God – I remind you, it’s a combination of two words: work, and people. It’s where we get the word “liturgy.” Worship is a service, a ministry, a liturgy, and a work that we together perform for God, who is our audience.

And so we’ve come full circle, because you will recognize that those last two verses are what we started out this series with.

Scripture tells us that the heart of worship is our corporate, grateful response to a loving God. It means this: roll up your sleeves, get ready folks. Here we go. Give your all, regardless of what you get out of it. Do your duty. And our leaders are here to help us.

*Worship team, come lead us. As they do, prepare yourself, recognize the presence of Christ, and let’s please God, our audience.*