

Annotated Extracts from Others

I begin with Howard Marshall's 'How far did the early Christians worship God?'.¹ He wrote.

Two words are in common use for describing what Christians do when they meet together in church. They assemble for 'worship' or 'service'... The question which arises is whether these accepted terms are the best or the most appropriate ones to describe what Christians do, *or what they ought to be doing* [emphasis mine – DG], when they gather together.

Quite! But Marshall should have approached 'in church' in the same way. What does 'in church' mean? For most it means going to a building, a sacred space, a sanctuary, whereas in this context in the New Testament – the new covenant – it means assembling with fellow-believers in spiritual fellowship in order to participate in *ekklēsia* life.

Marshall continued:

The character of anything [everything? – DG] we do is determined to some extent by the name which we give to it, and, if the name is misleading, the action itself may well not be what it ought to be. Despite their vagueness, both the terms 'worship' and 'service' strongly suggest that the central thing that takes place when Christians gather together is that they do something which is addressed in some way to God. They meet primarily to worship God and to offer him service.

So most believers think. But is this scriptural? Marshall:

It is my thesis that this use [ubiquitous *misuse* – DG] of language incorporates a fundamental misunderstanding of what ought to be at the centre of Christian meetings, and that it leads to a serious shift in practice from what ought to be happening when we gather together.

¹ Howard Marshall: 'How far did the early Christians worship God?', *Churchman*, issue 99.3, 1985.

Just so! It is wrong thinking which, in turn, inevitably leads to wrong practice with very serious consequences.

Marshall went on:

When we compare the understanding of what Christians do when they meet together... with the account of the beliefs and practices of the first Christians recorded in the New Testament, then we become aware of a decisive difference. If we regard the New Testament pattern for Christian meetings as a normative one [as, allowing for the extraordinary, we surely must and do – DG], then clearly we need to explore this difference with care and consider whether our understanding of Christian practice needs to be reformed in the light of the word of God in Scripture.

Quite!

After a close examination of the vocabulary of the New Testament, Marshall declared:

Although the whole activity of Christians can be described as the service of God, and they are engaged throughout their lives in worshipping him, yet this vocabulary is not applied in any specific way to Christian meetings.

Let me break in to underline this. Believers worship God, serve God, are in his ‘service’, 24/7 The New Testament never gives any hint of describing this as ‘going to church to worship God’. The loss in so defining ‘service’ is obvious.

Marshall:

It is true that Christian meetings [recorded in the New Testament – DG] can be described from the outside as occasions for worshipping God, and also that elements of service to God took place in them, but the remarkable fact is that Christian meetings are not said [in the New Testament – DG] to take place specifically in order to worship God, and the language of worship is not used as a means of referring to them or describing them. To sum up what goes on in a Christian meeting as being specifically for the purpose of ‘worship’ is without New Testament

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precedent. ‘Worship’ is not an umbrella-term for what goes on when Christians gather together.

As the New Testament shows beyond a shadow of a doubt, meetings of the *ekklēsia* were local gatherings of believers in union with each other, mutually committed to obedience to Christ’s law. Marshall demonstrated from the New Testament that in these *ekklēsia* meetings the believers addressed God, praised God, thanked God, prayed to God. He went on:

In all these cases the divine activity took place through the mediation of members of the church. When the Holy Spirit was at work, it was through specific individuals who acted as his spokesmen and agents. In the early days, this activity was charismatic in the sense that individuals acted in virtue of the spiritual gifts which they possessed. Later, however, the emphasis shifted to persons who were appointed to specific offices, such as the eldership, but their activity was still carried on in virtue of the gifts of the Spirit with which they were endowed. It is significant that the descriptions of the church offices in the [letters to Timothy and Titus] lay most stress on the capacity to teach. Evidently teaching of the believers gathered² was the primary function of these teachers, and special honour or remuneration was given to those who laboured in teaching (1 Tim. 5:17). Thus, when the New Testament describes the character of church leaders and their functions, it is their ability to speak to men on behalf of God that is central; nothing³ is said about their ability to represent men before God and to lead worship.

So far, so good, but here we reach a critical juncture. Was this activity confined to just a few? Marshall:

The main emphasis in church meetings lay upon what the members did for one another in virtue of their charismatic endowment from God.

² Original ‘congregation’.

³ I have altered the original ‘little if anything’. There is no sacerdotalism whatsoever in the *ekklēsia*. The notion is abhorrent. Christ, and Christ alone, is the believer’s priest. See my *Priesthood*.

Note Marshall's 'the main emphasis'. Contrary to common practice today, the main purpose of the gatherings of the *ekklēsia* – according to the New Testament – is for the mutual building up or edification of the believers, with the emphasis coming down heavily equally upon 'mutual' and 'edification'. Saints do not gather to watch or merely listen to one man perform. Far from it. Marshall:

The term *diakonos* is not used in the New Testament for the person whom we nowadays call 'the minister' as being usually the one ordained person in a congregation carrying out most, if not all, of the ministerial tasks. It is used generally of any and all kinds of service in the church, and also more specifically for a specific group of church functionaries who are mentioned alongside the... elders.

Not so! The word applies to all the saints without a single exception. Marshall himself, as he continued, made this very point:

The objects of ministry, the causes of persons who are served, are various. Persons who work in the church are of course regarded as serving God or Christ, and can be spoken of as God's servants (2 Cor. 6:4) or as Christ's servants (2 Cor. 11:23; Col. 1:7). They are engaged in the service of the gospel (Eph. 3:7; Col. 1:23), or of the new covenant (2 Cor. 3:6), but frequently it is people who are the actual objects of their service. Their service of God is expressed in serving one another. This rests on the principle enunciated by Jesus that disciples must not act as leaders, expecting to be served by others, but must act as servants (Mk. 9:35; 10:43).

There is all the difference between participation in mutual edification and watching a performance – a delivery of a monologue. Meetings of the *ekklēsia* are not for spectators but sharers. Marshall:

The important point is that the service of the gospel was rendered by members of the congregation [believers gathered] to other members (*cf.* Acts 19:22; Rom. 15:25; 2 Cor. 8:19f.; 2 Tim. 1:18; Philem. 13; Heb. 6:10; 1 Pet. 1:12;

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and Rom. 15:31; 2 Cor. 8:4; 9:1; 11:8; 2 Tim. 4:11; Rom. 16:1).

Just so!

Marshall:

The church is basically... the assembly of the people of God. The importance of the coming together of God's people is shown by the frequency with which words expressing coming together... are used to describe the meetings of Christians; it is their actual coming together which is significant. This point is further substantiated by the use of the word 'church' itself. The thought of assembly is explicitly present, as in 1 Corinthians 11:18; 14:19,28,35, where the expression is quite literally 'in church'... Only once is the corresponding Jewish word 'synagogue' used for the church (Jas. 2:2), and here the idea of a meeting or assembly is uppermost. It may well be that the early Christians adopted the term 'church' as the nearest synonym to 'synagogue' that did not contain the strongly Jewish undertones of the latter. It follows that the nearest contemporary analogy to the church meeting was provided by the synagogue and not by the temple [whether Jewish or pagan]. This is a more significant fact than is often recognised. The environment of Christianity in the Hellenistic world was that of pagan worship conducted in temples and shrines, but there is no evidence that the Christians modelled their gatherings on temple worship. It appears rather that their inspiration was, as might have been expected, thoroughly and basically Jewish, and that the inspiration came from the synagogue... What, then, was the purpose of the synagogue? It was 'primarily the place of the Torah, which is to be read and taught, heard and learned here'... Among the Jews,⁴ the synagogue was a place of instruction and of prayer which bore testimony to the one God and glorified him by these activities. To a certain extent the church might be regarded as 'the Christian synagogue', but this description does not fully account for all the features of the church, such as its common meals.

⁴ Original 'In the formative years of the church'. This, at best, is ambiguous. See my *Gospel Church*.

I break in. Food plays a very important part in evangelical church life today, but this is nearly always a ploy – a bait – used for evangelism – often defined as the effort to attract ‘the unchurched’ into attendance at church or take part in a course of instruction on the elements of Christianity. In the New Testament – except when they were being disorderly (1 Cor. 11) – the church used food entirely in-house, among themselves, not only for necessary sustenance (Acts 6:1-4; see also 1 Tim. 5:1-16), but as an opportunity for fellowship (particularly sharing in spiritual conversation) and the Lord’s supper.

In the old covenant, the temple spoke of the presence of God among his people. As for the *ekklēsia*, as Marshall put it:

The church is more than a company of human beings. God himself is present when it meets, a thought which can be expressed in terms of the Father (1 Cor. 14:25), the Son (Matt. 18:20) [see also 1 Cor. 5:4; 2 Cor. 2:10] and the Spirit (Gal. 3:5). The second thought is that the church is to praise God.

As for the Lord’s supper:

The presence of God is known in the gathering of his people. They experience his power and love both in their individual experience and in their corporate experience, and they respond with prayer and praise. According to Paul this fellowship is mediated in the Lord’s supper, and by the Spirit, but his stress is more on the fellowship between believers as they share together in the one loaf and in the service of God. The concept is perhaps more characteristic of John. He writes explicitly of the fellowship which believers have with one another and with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3), and the teaching in the fourth Gospel about the unity of the disciples in love for one another and as part of the true vine [John 15:1-11], implicitly makes the same point. Although the word ‘fellowship’ is not used all that commonly, the concept perhaps brings out best the relationship between God and his church. It expresses the way in which the church is the place where God’s presence is known and experienced. He is present to serve and up-build his people through his

spiritual gifts, and his people respond to him in prayer and praise.

Marshall again:

No understanding of the church would be complete which did not include Paul's description of it as a body. In his earlier letters (1 Cor. 12; Rom. 12) the accent is undoubtedly on the mutual help of the members, which enables each member to function properly and the whole body to act harmoniously. Paul's point is that the individual members must each use their spiritual gifts, of whatever kind they may be, for the good of one another and of the whole. At the same time, the body is there to serve God, and it does this as the members carry out their divinely-intended functions.

What an important observation! It is as believers edify one another, each using his/her Spirit-given gift, that God is worshipped or served. And this occurs – not merely in meetings – but 24/7. As Marshall want on to say:

In Paul's later writings, the thought is more of the organic growth and strengthening of the body as a whole from the divine life which streams through it from the head. The concept of the body is not used to portray the church meeting as a means of worshipping God; the thought is of the parts of the body receiving strength from God and serving one another in an organic whole.

Again:

Finally, we need to take account of the way in which the church is sometimes described as a building – a thought linked with that of its being a temple – and as a household or family. This idea is obviously closely linked to that of the church as an assembly for fellowship.⁵ It brings out the thought of the brotherhood of the members who share together in a common life as the children of God. As Paul uses the terminology, it stresses particularly the loving relations which should exist between the members. It can

⁵ Original 'a fellowship'. I do not know of any such use of the word in the New Testament.

also allow for the development of the idea of persons appointed by God to fulfil functions within the family structure. One gains the impression that in a sense the creation of this family is an end in itself. God's purpose is to develop a people whose loving relationships both vertical and horizontal are their own justification.

Excellent!

And that takes me on to what Robert Banks said:

One of the most puzzling features of Paul's understanding of *ekklēsia* for his contemporaries, whether Jews or Gentiles, must have been his failure to say that a person went to church primarily to 'worship'. Not once in all his writings does he suggest that this is the case. Indeed it could not be, for he held a view of 'worship' that prevented him from doing so... Since all places and times have now become the venue for worship [and all experiences have now become the vehicle for worship – DG,] Paul cannot speak of Christians assembling in church *distinctively* for this purpose. They are already worshipping God, acceptably or unacceptably, in whatever they are doing [or should be – DG]. While this means that when they are 'in church' they are worshipping as well, it is not worship but something else that marks off their coming together from everything else that they are doing.⁶

Allowing his mistaken acceptance of Christendom's concept of 'going to church', Banks was getting to the heart of the issue in hand when he went on:

Consequently, it is a mistake to regard the main or indeed the only purpose of Christian meetings as being the worship of God, a view which leads to their structure being determined in terms of what we offer to God in and through Christ. This view appears to rest on the continuing influence of the sacrificial ritual in Old Testament times on our understanding of the New Testament church. But the language used in the New Testament indicates that this was not the primary or the only understanding of what church

⁶ Robert Banks: *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in their Historical Setting*, Exeter 1980, p91f.

meetings were for. In fact, it has been apparent that there was a three-way movement in the early church's meetings, from God to man, from man to God, and from man to man. The primary element is the God-man movement, downward rather than upward, in which God comes to his people and uses his human servants to convey his salvation to them, to strengthen and up-build them. He bestows his charismata in order to equip the members of the church to serve one another. Of course the effect of such service by God to his people will be to move them to praise, thanksgiving and prayer, but the point is that this response is secondary to what is primary; namely the flow of divine grace. When a specific function or purpose is ascribed to a church meeting, it is not the glorification of God, but the building up of the church and the ministry to its members. Church meetings are for the benefit of the believers gathered,⁷ and so indirectly for the glory of God. Worship in the sense of giving praise to God is thus logically secondary to ministry in the sense of God's ministry to us. At the same time, since this ministry is exercised between persons, the church meeting has the character of fellowship in which the keynote is mutual love. The symbol of the church, therefore, is not simply an upward arrow from man to God, nor simply a downward arrow from God to man, but rather a triangle representing the lines of grace coming down from God to his people, the flow of grace from person to person, and the response of thanks and petition to God.

Yes, indeed. And it was so, not only in the days of the charismatic gifts, but remains scriptural teaching on the *ekklēsia* today.

Banks went on:

Some practical points follow:

1. It is misleading to continue to call our meetings 'services' or 'worship' if the effect of this phrase is to concentrate attention on what we offer to God, whether to the exclusion of any other constitutive motif, or by making it the primary motif. Worship is obviously an element in Christian meetings, but it is not the principal one. Of course worship is involved in all that we do in church [assemblies

⁷ Original 'congregation'.

– DG], just as it is involved in all our activity as Christians, but it is misleading to take the fact that in all that we do we serve God and then make this the direct and particular description of what we should do in church [assemblies – DG]. The New Testament shows that the early Christians did not do this.

2. We need an alternative name that will express better what we are doing. ‘Service’ would be a possibility, provided that it could be understood that it is primarily a case of God serving us and not *vice versa*; unfortunately the traditional associations of the word are probably ineradicable [see my *epigraph*]. Yet in a real sense the church is ‘a service station’ where Christians are ‘serviced’ so that they may serve God better. Perhaps ‘church meeting’ or ‘assembly’ is the most appropriate term, bringing out the fact that what is happening is that God’s people are meeting together with him.

This takes us to the heart of what I have been trying to say – both in this book and earlier; namely, that ‘church’ is for believers, and believers only. Of course, the dependants of believers and occasional unconverted visitors may be present as observers, but ‘church’ – the *ekklēsia* – is, in the proper sense of the word, ‘exclusive’ – for believers only.⁸ The gatherings of the *ekklēsia* are not designed for open ‘attendance’ by the world; the early believers did not think of them in that way.⁹ This, it goes without saying, is utterly at variance with the view of the overwhelming majority today. ‘Church’ is for everyone! How else can we evangelise them? And so on.

Banks now made some major observations:

3. We need a fresh look at the structure of what we do in church [assemblies – DG]. The example of the early church may suggest that their meetings were relatively flexible and unstructured. Nevertheless, there may be a structure in terms of various essential constitutive elements in a church

⁸ See Appendix 5: ‘Gospel Preaching in Church: Eight Reasons’ in my *Relationship*.

⁹ See my *Relationship; Gadfly*.

meeting. Teaching and up-building are primary, and this suggests that the broad structure of proclamation of the word leading to response to the word is the right one, although this does not necessarily mean that these two elements must always be present in rigid chronological order. Rather proclamation and response should be the guiding principle. [The] suggestion that celebration of God in his supreme worth is the essence of what we are doing has its place here, if we take it that ministry [in the fullest New Testament meaning of the word – DG] is the means by which God presents his grace and worth to us and we celebrate the experience¹⁰ by our response in praise and thanksgiving.

It is vital to keep reminding ourselves that ‘ministry’, contrary to widespread usage, must not be limited to a monologue by a stated ‘minister’. All God’s children are ministers, all are new-covenant priests, and all exercise a ministry.

Banks continued:

4. Finally, the elements of fellowship and mutual up-building in love need to be brought to the fore. Here we are greatly hampered by the one-man ministry which is still so common. Somehow we need to give the individual members of the congregation the opportunity to exercise the gifts of the Spirit, to receive from one another and to show love to one another. It is not ‘leaders of worship’ that we need, but people who have gifts to share with one another. This clearly does not mean that we do not want people who are able to teach¹¹ to function in the church, or that there is no place for something corresponding to the present-day ministry. It is rather to suggest that we need to encourage all believers to exercise their spiritual gift,¹² and we need a far wider concept of ministry than is possible so long as we cling to the idea of the ‘one-man’ ministry. In

¹⁰ Original ‘revelation’. This word carries massive overtones, and should be used with great care.

¹¹ Original ‘are trained in theology’. Quite wrong!

¹² Original ‘we need far more people with some theological training’. Quite wrong!

this way we shall come to a fuller appreciation of the nature and activity of the church instead of distorting it by forcing it all into the unnatural mould that we know as ‘worship’.¹³

Streeter S.Stuart:

There is still a rather universal Christian passion for ‘going to church to worship’. Thus our purpose in this article¹⁴ is to support the efforts that have been made to correct this misunderstanding and to suggest that the New Testament presents a perspective on worship which speaks meaningfully to contemporary concepts or misconceptions of worship. Such a perspective is shown poignantly by a survey of *proskuneō*, the most frequent Greek word for ‘worship’ in the New Testament, particularly as it is given emphasis in John 4.

He made many points, including this:

When *proskuneō* is used to convey the notion of specific acts done at specific locations, it refers only to Jewish customs and practices or pagan customs and practices.¹⁵

What a conclusion! What a sad heritage from the Fathers! All talk of place, clergy, vestments, titles, sacraments, sacerdotalism, and so on, is either Jewish (taken from the old covenant which Christ fulfilled and rendered obsolete – Hebrews 7:19,22; 8:13) or pagan.¹⁶ These very serious charges mean that what most believers experience in the matter of ‘church’, what most believers are used to and want in this regard, is pagan – Christianised paganism, it is true, but paganism all the same.

Stuart Murray spoke of the ‘drawbacks’ of Christendom church-life, including:

The ineffectiveness of monologues as modes of instruction, and their tendency to de-skill audiences.

¹³ Banks.

¹⁴ Original ‘here’.

¹⁵ Streeter S.Stuart: ‘A New Testament Perspective on Worship’, *The Evangelical Quarterly*, 68:3 (1996), pp209-221.

¹⁶ See my *Infant; Pastor*.

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The limited impact on personal and community development of listening passively even to excellent monologues.

He then noted the response of Christendom advocates:

Beleaguered preachers rebut these challenges by proclaiming the long and honourable history of preaching; they refuse to capitulate to cultural shifts, and argue that sermons are spiritual encounters rather than lectures. Many will also, if they are honest, admit their fear of straying from a known format into the insecurity of practices for which neither they nor the congregation has been trained. So preaching remains dominant, enhanced now by audiovisual technology, and deeper concerns are sidestepped... The dominance of preaching is a Christendom vestige, related to clericalism, massive buildings, unchallengeable proclamation and nominal congregations..

Murray suggested some possible improvements, including:

We might... regard sermons as invitations to conversation – exploring issues, clarifying questions, and identifying biblical and historical resources – not final [unquestionable – DG] statements. Ironically, *sermo* originally meant ‘conversation’.¹⁷

¹⁷ Stuart Murray: *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World*, Paternoster, Carlisle, 2004, pp264-266.