

To whom is worship addressed? Exploring the vertical and horizontal dimensions of worship, using the Gospel According to John as a resource

Julian Templeton

Abstract

To whom is worship addressed? The obvious answer is: God. And yet leaders of worship also address the congregation. Leaders of public worship attempt to do two rather challenging things: lead a congregation to direct its praise and prayer to God (the vertical or transcendent dimension), but also address the congregation on behalf of God (arguably combining both vertical and horizontal, both transcendent and immanent). It is understandable, then, that leaders of worship may sometimes confuse these two dimensions, for example, by referring to God in the third person in prayers. However, when the congregation becomes the main ‘audience’ rather than God, who is it we are worshipping? The Gospel According to John, with a narrative that operates on more than one level, will be used as a resource to explore the multi-dimensionality of worship.

To whom is worship addressed? Who is the audience of worship? The obvious answer is: God. Our prayers are directed to God. Our praise is directed to God. And yet, leaders of worship also address the congregation on behalf of God in the assurance of pardon, in the sermon, in the invitation to the Lord’s Supper, and in the blessing. This suggests that there are two audiences—God and humans—and two dimensions—transcendent¹ and immanent²—that overlap in an act of worship. If we were to construe these two dimensions spatially, we could say that the transcendent dimension is vertical and the immanent dimension is horizontal. In thinking about these dimensions spatially we do not mean that one is literally ‘up-and-down’ and the other ‘side-to-side’; these are spatial metaphors that may help us to think about two different directions of communication that occur in worship: God-to-human and human-to-God. In asserting that there is God-to-human communication in worship, the assumption made is that humans may *mediate* God’s communication. For the Reformed, this assumption is based on our understanding of the Scriptures. The Scriptures are the written attestation to the Word of God by humans inspired by the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures become God’s Word to readers and hearers by the action of the Holy Spirit. Thus, whenever the Scriptures are read and preached by humans, the Reformed believe that God speaks to us through them. The water of Baptism and the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper are also ‘bearers of the Word’ when, by the

¹ Not subject to the limitations of the created universe but surpassing it.

² That which operates within the created universe.

action of the Holy Spirit, God presents “high and holy mysteries to us by means of perceptible realities.”³

The impression I have gained from some United Reformed Church worship services is that God is regarded as a benevolent but distant being who is not expected to mediate his Word and is not attentive to prayer and praise. Examples I cite for this impression are: 1. Prayers that refer to God in the third person (“We pray that God will . . .”). 2. Prayers and hymns that are mainly about the worshippers and are seldom addressed to God. Such examples suggest that the main audience of such worship is the *congregation* and that worship is understood primarily as a horizontal happening. Another way of describing such worship is *Deist*.⁴ This prompts the question: who is being worshipped?

The Gospel According to John is in some ways an unusual resource to consult with reference to worship. It has only one obvious reference to worship in the fourth chapter, where Jesus conducts a conversation with a Samaritan woman at a well about the location and nature of worship. The culmination of this discussion is the affirmation “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.”⁵ Although there is only one overt reference to worship in this Gospel, I believe that worship underlies and supports much of its narrative and theology. This is not a theory that can be proved but may be deduced from the content of the Gospel itself. The Fourth Gospel shows a more developed Christology and theology than the three synoptic Gospels, strongly suggesting a comparatively later dating.⁶ If this Gospel is one of the last documents to be written that was included in the New Testament canon, we should not be surprised if the author of the Fourth Gospel (anonymous but traditionally known as ‘John’) as he reflected on the identity and significance of Jesus Christ was influenced by the worship of the Church. To the practised eye of the preacher, the very free way that John interprets and organizes the traditions he has received about Jesus—the “I am” sayings being a case in point—could be called ‘sermonic’. To the experienced president at the sacrament, the comments following the miraculous feeding of the large crowd about Jesus as the “bread of life” in chapter six seem to be a commentary on the mystery of the Lord’s Supper. One of John’s key emphases is that in the person of Jesus we have the divine Word become human

³ John Calvin, *Truth for all Time. A Brief Outline of the Christian Faith*, pp. 111-2, Edinburgh and Carlisle PA: Banner of Truth, 2008. A translation of *Brève Instruction chrétienne*, 1537, by Stuart Olyott.

⁴ Deism is the belief that God created the world and then withdrew, having no further interaction with the world. It is a belief attractive to those with a religiously rationalist worldview, such as Unitarians and some liberal Protestants.

⁵ John 4:24

⁶ Scholarly consensus conjectures a date between 80 – 100 AD

flesh. John believes that in Jesus the divine has intersected the human; the transcendent has visited the immanent; the vertical dimension has overlapped with the horizontal dimension. But what is even more astounding is the claim made throughout the Gospel that the overlapping of these two dimensions occurs not only in Jesus *but can also occur in those followers of Jesus who trust him*.

As an example of interplay of vertical and horizontal dimensions, let us consider first the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. Jesus says to Nicodemus “...unless a person is born *anōthen*, he or she will not be able to see the Kingdom of God.”⁷ The word *anōthen* means ‘again’ and ‘from above’. Nicodemus’s misunderstanding is due to his supposition that *anōthen* must mean a second biological birth. In fact, what Jesus means is a second birth from above. To be born from above is to be washed by the water of baptism and indwelt by the Holy Spirit.⁸ We are born biologically of our parents: we are “flesh given birth by flesh...”⁹; but to be part of God’s Kingdom we need to be “...born of God...”¹⁰ And since “God is Spirit,”¹¹ we can experience this divine birth only by the action of the Holy Spirit operating from above. The ‘you’ who must be born from above is plural, it is ‘all of you’; it is us, the hearers and readers of the Gospel who must be born *anōthen* if we wish to see the Kingdom of God. Jesus explains that the nature of the Spirit is like the wind that “...blows where it wills...you do not know where it comes from or where it is going.”¹² In other words: the Spirit is beyond human control. Those born of the Spirit have to *relinquish* control. Charles Taylor argues that a sense of control and self-direction typifies the modern (Taylor calls it a “buffered”) understanding of the self.¹³ A great deal of human energy is expended in the effort to be ‘in control’ and to have things ‘under control’. This is understandable, since to be ‘controlled by someone else’ or to be ‘out of control’ is generally considered to be undesirable. And yet there is a form of controlling human behaviour that misses the Spirit’s leading because the God’s Spirit is sovereign and free. By contrast, the Fourth Evangelist challenges all those whose existence is dominated by the need to be ‘in control’ to trust their very existence to the uncontrollable wind of God. This wind of the Spirit invigorates and transforms those willing to be blown the way of Christ the Son and

⁷ John 3:3

⁸ See John 3:5

⁹ John 3:6

¹⁰ John 1:13

¹¹ John 4:24a

¹² John 3:8

¹³ See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 38-9, Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007

God the Father. This suggests that if we would be indwelled by the Holy Spirit, we must be willing to stand with Nicodemus and face the wind. We must be willing to take the risk of being open to, and directed by, a power and influence beyond our control. This latter insight of being open to and directed by a power and influence beyond our control could be one of John's main contributions to our understanding of what worship is. Some choose to express this openness to God's influence in emotional and spontaneous worship (Pentecostal and Charismatic); others choose to express this openness to God's influence in structured worship that intentionally calls upon God's help in the Call to Worship, Prayer for Illumination, and Epiclesis¹⁴ (Reformed and Orthodox).

The whole of the Gospel According to John may be compared to a drama on two levels. Imagine a theatre stage with a lower and an upper level. On the lower level the actors play the human characters in the drama of Jesus' life and ministry: John the Baptist, the Pharisees, the disciples, Jesus' mother, Nicodemus, the Woman at the well, and all the other human characters that appear in John's narrative. But on the upper level we have other actors playing another set of characters. They are the Word/Son of God, God the Father, the Paraclete/Spirit of Truth, the angels, and Satan. But the essential thing to grasp is that the characters on the upper level do not remain there but move freely between this and the lower level, descending and ascending as they wish. The problem with some of our worship is that we misunderstand it as consisting of the leader of worship doing his or her thing on the stage, addressing the congregation as audience seated in the auditorium, with God referred to only occasionally and indirectly. It is, in other words, a mainly horizontal happening. By contrast, the Fourth Gospel maintains that in addition to a horizontal human drama there is simultaneously a vertical divine drama taking place, and the two dimensions overlap. The point of overlap is Jesus, who is the ladder between earth and heaven. For the author of the Fourth Gospel, this realisation may have been inspired by his experience of communion with God in worship.

You will see heaven wide open and God's angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.¹⁵

¹⁴ Epiclesis is literally a 'calling upon'. In the context of the Lord's Supper, the prayer of epiclesis calls upon God to send the Holy Spirit upon the sacramental elements and the communicants in order to enable communion with Christ.

¹⁵ John 1:51 REB

With clear echoes of Jacob's dream at Bethel, in which Jacob sees a ladder stretching up to heaven with angels ascending and descending upon it,¹⁶ John believes that Jesus is *himself* the ladder connecting earth to heaven, connecting humanity to God. Jesus is the way to God the Father. He is the self-designated 'Son of Man' who has come down from heaven. But he has come down from heaven in order that, when he is lifted up on the cross, he will become the way to eternal life.¹⁷ Just as a cross is comprised of a horizontal and a vertical span, so for John the cross of Jesus is the intersection between the horizontal and vertical, the crucified Jesus is where human sinfulness and divine holiness meet. For John, Jesus on the cross exhibits God's glory. This is foreshadowed when Jesus predicts his betrayal by Judas, Judas departs, and Jesus says, "Now the Son of Man is glorified, and in him God is glorified."¹⁸ We might ask why the identification of Judas as betrayer and the setting-in-motion of Jesus's arrest and crucifixion should be the point at which Jesus' glory begins to be manifest? It is because glory is the outward manifestation of the true inner nature of someone. Judas, in his decision to betray Jesus had, without fully realising what he was doing, recognised the glory of divine holiness in Jesus and had chosen to reject it. This reaction, too, may be part of the experience of worship. The rejection of holiness by the hardening of our hearts is, sometimes, our response to God in worship. Like Judas, we sometimes venture into the 'night' of disobedience and betrayal.¹⁹ Yet in the Gospel the actual moment of betrayal is a further manifestation of holiness, for when Judas brings the soldiers and the temple police to arrest Jesus, he asks them:

'Who is it you want?' 'Jesus of Nazareth,' they answered, Jesus said 'I am he.' And Judas the traitor was standing there with them. When Jesus said, 'I am he,' they drew back and fell to the ground.'²⁰

John believes that even the enemies of Jesus draw back and fall down before the true manifestation of his divine nature. When this narrative detail is applied to worship, it suggests that worship is the prostration of the human spirit before manifestation of divine glory and holiness.

¹⁶ See Genesis 28:10-19

¹⁷ "No one has gone up into heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up so that all who trust in him may have eternal life." John 3:13-15 REB

¹⁸ John 13:31 REB

¹⁹ "As soon as Judas had received the bread he went out. It was night." John 13:30 REB

²⁰ John 18:4-6 REB

The final example of the meeting-point of the horizontal and the vertical to which I wish to refer is the remarkable theology of *indwelling* found throughout John's Gospel, but especially concentrated in chapters 14-16. Sometimes called the 'farewell discourses', they are crafted in the form of Jesus explaining to the disciples how, when he leaves them and returns to be with God, they will yet know his presence with them. Jesus promises the disciples that the Spirit of Truth will come and dwell in them: "you will know him because he will dwell with you and be in you."²¹ This Spirit, who will come to indwell them, will bring not only his presence but will also mediate the presence of Jesus and of God the Father. It is for good reason that this evocation of Jesus, the Spirit, and God the Father has been one of the wellsprings of the Church's confession of God as Trinity. What is remarkable about John's theology of indwelling is that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not distant and removed from human experience (as in Deism) but, through the exercise of trust in Jesus, indwell human experience. The Johannine Jesus says to his disciples, to whom he has promised the gift of the indwelling Spirit of truth, " . . . you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me and I in you."²² This rich theology of mutual indwelling dares to claim that personhood—both human and divine—finds its highest expression not in isolation but *with and through* other persons. Indeed, the triune persons together constitute the one being of God in such a way that the persons cannot be divided but always act with and through one another. In John's Gospel, the Word has 'pitched his tent among us'²³; that is, made a dwelling in the human flesh of Jesus of Nazareth. In so doing, the Word has prepared humanity to be fit dwelling place for the Spirit. Yet the Spirit in Johannine theology seems not to be automatically given to all but is given to those who trust Jesus and obey his commission from God the Father: "Jesus said again, 'Peace be with you! As the Father sent me, so I send you.' Then he breathed on them, saying 'Receive the Holy Spirit!'"²⁴ Thus in the Fourth Gospel there is an order of activity 'from the Father through the Son in the Spirit'. The implications of this theology for worship are as follows: leaders and preachers and presidents communicate God's Word as they proclaim the Son by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. If this is so, then the reverse also has implications for worshippers: we praise and pray 'in the Spirit through the Son to the Father'.

²¹ John 14:17 REB

²² John 14:20 REB

²³ A possible translation of *eskenosen*, see John 1:14

²⁴ John 20:21-22 REB

In conclusion, the answer to the questions: ‘To whom is worship addressed? Who is the audience of worship?’ is not as obvious as it might first have seemed. This is because the theology of mutual indwelling in the Fourth Gospel does not adhere to an absolute distinction between a person who offers worship to God and God who is worshipped. Instead, we are offered an interwoven texture of persons—divine and human—whose actions and love and rejection and prayer are communicated to *and through and in* one another. Jesus and the Spirit are mediators between God and human persons, enabling a *to and through and in* movement. The Fourth Gospel teaches us that the human worship of God is possible only when the horizontal way of Jesus, intersected by the vertical truth of the Spirit, enables such movement. This movement to and through and in persons—human and divine—is *communion*, and communion is the essence of worship.