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Q&A#148 What Makes Gathered Worship Different?

September 13, 2019



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Today's question: "A brother challenged me after reading my book, where I talk about how sacred space and time are transformed through the Lord Jesus from being temple- and sabbath-oriented, to being person- and whole-life-oriented. He suggested that I am inconsistent to simultaneously hold that attending church is worship per se, and that we enter the heavenly court during this time (a view I briefly argue for here: <https://itsgoodtobeaman.com/attending-church-is-entering-the-heavenly-court/>).

He linked me to the work of a brother of yours, Tony Payne of the Sidney Anglicans, who argues for a view in which attending church is not any more worship than any other part of life, but merely an embodiment and acting-out of the communion we have at all times in the Lord Jesus—a view he dubs the "gathered in heaven" model of church: <https://matthiasmedia.com/briefing/2003/11/worship-iii-the-gathering-thinking-afresh-about-church/>.

I'm sympathetic to Tony's view, but I equally find it hard to abandon the idea that meeting on the Lord's Day is especially worship in some sense (perhaps something like ritual worship as opposed to mundane worship). Similarly, although I agree that we are, at all times, in the presence of God through his Spirit, there does nonetheless seem something significant about the symbolic representation of drawing near to his throne, which actually does draw heaven and earth together in a way that isn't true during the ordinary course of life. One possible avenue of relieving this tension that has occurred to me is in the threefold intensification of sacred space in the temple itself; can we perhaps correlate the "mundane" worship of Rom. 12:1 to service in the courtyard, while the "ritual" worship I see hinted at in Acts 13:2; 1 Cor. 14:25 is service in the Holy Place, with Jesus' everlasting service being in the Holy of Holies?"

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, a brother challenged me after reading my book where I talk about how sacred space and time are transformed through the Lord Jesus, from being temple and Sabbath oriented to being person and whole life oriented. He suggested that I'm inconsistent to simultaneously hold that attending church is worship per se, and that we enter the heavenly court during this time.

He linked me to the work of Tony Payne of the Sydney Anglicans, who argues for a view in which attending church is not any more worship than any other part of life, but merely an embodiment and acting out of the communion we have at all times in the Lord Jesus, a view he dubs the gathered in heaven model of the church. I'm sympathetic to Tony's view, but I equally find it hard to abandon the idea that meeting on the Lord's day is especially worship in some sense. Perhaps something like ritual worship as opposed to mundane worship.

Similarly, although I agree that we are at all times in the presence of God through his spirit, there does nonetheless seem something significant about the symbolic representation of drawing near to his throne, which actually does draw heaven and earth together in a way that isn't true during the ordinary course of life. One possible avenue of relieving this tension that has occurred to me is in the threefold intensification of sacred space in the temple itself. Can we perhaps correlate the mundane worship of Romans 12 1 to service in the courtyard where the ritual worship I see hinted at in Acts 13 to 1 Corinthians 14 25 is service in the holy place with Jesus everlasting service being in the holy of holies.

It's an interesting question. I think, first of all, we must recognize that there is something different about our worship together. There's something has been called heterotopic about the site of worship is something set apart from day to day activity, but yet it's confirmed and validated through that day to day activity.

So we find that in Old and in New Covenant that when we gather together we engage in acts of sacrifice and acts of presenting ourselves etc but that that action must be

confirmed in lives lived and so there's a connection between the act of worship and the act of living out our lives during the week. We are also presenting the fruits of our labors. Those fruits of our labors are an expression of the way that our work is always oriented towards God but it's a particular orientation of that work and the fruits of that work towards God within the act of worship itself.

There's an intentionality and a focus within the act of worship that you do not find within our daily quotidian labors. Now the danger is that if we lose a distinction between some concept of Sabbath and the rest of the week and between the special assembly and our regular service during the week we are losing something that will tend to collapse our time more generally and our activity more generally into a mush rather than raising it up to a level where it is addressed towards our heavenly service where it is directed towards our communion with God. It can end up collapsing into just the immanentization of our labors and activities within the structures of this age and so there should be a recognition for instance that when we're talking about principles of Sabbath that we cannot extend the principle of rest to the entirety of our lives in this age.

There is a sense in which our work will be characterized by toil, by labor and so for that reason there is a need for a special time set apart for rest, a sort of heterotopic and heterochronic realm, a realm that's different in time and different in space that's set apart that will help us to orient the rest of our time towards rest and help the rest of our time to participate in the structure and the meaning of that rest without actually having to bear the weight of fully realizing what that stands for. In all of this there's a recognition that we can't immanentize the eschaton, we cannot collapse what is coming at the end of history into the middle of history. There is a not yet and that not yet if we lose sight of that I think that's one of the things that leads to the collapse of worship into day-to-day mundane activities.

So first of all I think we need that in place. The other thing is recognizing the importance of the corporate activity and intentionality of gathering together. When Jesus talks about the church he says where two or three are gathered together in my name there I am in the midst of them.

Now note what he doesn't say this is not just a statement of general presence to his people. Christ is present in a particular way in the assembly of his people and in the intentional assembly of his people. So this is not just where two or three of my people are together I am in the midst of them.

It's where two or three are gathered together in my name I am in the midst of them. So it's not just an individual nor is it just the being together of the people of God. There is an intentionality to this assembly and Christ is present in a peculiar and particular way within that context.

Moving on from there I would add that within the concept that we see expressed in

Matthew 18 with the two or three gathered together there's the context of binding and loosing that what is bound and loose on earth will be bound and loosed in heaven and that correspondence between heaven and earth which is at issue within this debate about the relationship between the heavenly assembly and the earthly assembly there is a correspondence there but that correspondence is not just expressed in the individual it's expressed within the corporate structure of the church with the church as a ruling entity as a polity and the leaders of the church and the church expressed in its ruling function within their operation. Now that's focused upon the Apostles at this point but it has more general application to the church I think and its authority exercised through its ministers particularly. Now if we lose sight of the gathering of the church in an intentional and an authorised way I think we'll lose sight of the exact nature of that correspondence between heaven and earth.

The entrance into the heavenly places is not just something that's about the more general state of our communion with Christ there is an intentionality and there is a corporate character to that and it is also something that is focused upon particular ministries and members of the body of the church. That image of the body of the church is also a corporate image. It's an image that involves a number of different members.

It's also a number of different members in operation. It's not just members of this static body. A body is knit together through its operations through people doing their various performing their various gifts and as such becoming part of this larger body that is acting in unison and under the direction of its head.

Now if we're not meeting together in the name of Jesus Christ as a gathered group of people and exercising particular ministries that galvanise the body together as a unity then there is something missing and I think there is where this sort of model starts to exhibit its cracks. At this point we're seeing a loss of the importance of the corporate gathering together, of particular operations and the intentionality of the assembly. So I think there's that.

I think there's also when we think about intentionality and corporate action formality comes in at that point because intentionality and corporate action tends to involve a need for coordination, set times of gathering together, processes and liturgies and structures where there is an intentionality and a directionality to what we're doing and there is a scripted character to what we're doing such that we're able to participate within it in some sort of unison. When that is lost sight of again I think we have problems and that is where the loss of a corporate and formal concept of worship loses to a diminishment of the corporate and the intentional character of worship. Worship becomes a bit less organised and as it becomes a bit less organised it becomes a bit less corporate, it becomes more about an individual experience and it becomes a bit less intentional.

There's a bit less directionality to it. Now when we think about liturgy part of what we're trying to protect through that are these other things. It's not just liturgy as such, it's about maintaining the corporate character of the church and the intentionality of what we are doing when we're gathering together.

When God talks about his presence with his people he talks about in the Old Testament where he places his name. Now in the New Testament we talk about the name of Jesus Christ and the name of Jesus Christ is focused upon the gathered assembly and the temple is not just wherever an individual Christian is. There is a sense in which all of us, each one of us as individuals are temples of the Holy Spirit but yet that temple language focuses primarily upon the church and the church which will be experienced as a gathered assembly of God's people.

Another thing to notice is the way that Paul will talk about the church for instance in places like 1st Corinthians 5 he says when you are assembled in the name of Jesus Christ of our Lord Jesus you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. Now there's a few concepts playing there that we need to attend to. First of all gathered together in the name of Jesus Christ there is this assembly, intentional assembly and the presence of Christ is particularly known at that time.

There's a feast that's taking place here. He'll talk about the Passover like feast of the Passover lamb of Christ that was sacrificed for us and we keep the feast as we join together or we eat together and that is something special that's something distinct from our day-to-day meals and interactions as a group. There's an intentionality and a focus and there's a particular practice that is taking place.

Again what you see being lost in this informal model of the church is the place of the sacraments as the sacraments preaching the word etc as galvanizing and unifying practices that constitute the church as what it is. The church is built up through these practices. Another thing to notice is the way that within that context Paul uses the expression the day of the Lord Jesus Christ, the day of the Lord.

The day of the Lord is this eschatological day that's awaited in the future but it's also one that within every single gathering of the people of God is anticipated. That special time, that sort of Sabbath time that is set apart that's anticipating that day to come and being in the spirit in the day of the Lord as John talks about in the book of Revelation. I think there's a particular day in view here.

There's a particular practice that's involved as well as we celebrate the Lord's Supper which is an anticipation of the wedding feast. It's an anticipation of the coming and judgment of the Lord. It's a calling upon God to act within our situation.

There's a memorial sacrifice background there as well. Christ is coming to inspect his

bride. It's the test of jealousy but the expectation is the church will be blessed.

It's a cup of blessing not a cup of cursing as we find in Numbers 5 where the expectation is that there will be judgment. Now what we're looking at here I think then are intentional practices and this eschatological orientation. The heaven that we come together in is an anticipated heaven.

It's not just an immanentized heaven. Rather there's not yet to this and the gathering together on the day of the Lord is a gathering together in a Sabbath time that's set apart from the rest of our week that anticipates the great Sabbath to come. The day of the Lord that's anticipated in the future and so that's another element where this model falls down.

I think the other thing is that when we're talking about the sacraments Christ has promised to be particularly present in these things. The breaking of bread in baptism, in the preaching of the word, in the hearing of the word in the assembly of the saints and in the meeting together we are experiencing the gifts of the Spirit by which the one gift of the Spirit to the church as a whole is represented through the numerous different gifts and operations of the church. Now what this model is getting at is the importance of the more general informal life of the church within which its special worship is conformed, is confirmed and expressed and that is something that has been lost particularly as church communities have become more spread out and we're not actually living our day-to-day lives together in actual strong communities.

We don't live in the same places often in the same neighborhoods. We're traveling from some distance. We're not interacting together much on a day-to-day basis and so that informal dimension of the life of the church gets lost and there I think there is a genuine problem that the intentionality and the special corporate character of our gathering together on the day of the Lord that anticipates that greater day of the Lord that's to come, if that's not confirmed through a more informal, less intentional, less corporate, more general interactions within the life of the people of God.

Where that is lost, something about that intentional worship becomes detached from the fabric of day-to-day life and as that detachment takes place it starts to become a bit more arbitrary. It starts to make slightly less sense. Now relating this to other concepts I think when we're talking in places like Romans 12 verse 1, present your bodies as a living sacrifice, there is a sacrificial dimension to that.

There's also a corporate dimension to that. Your bodies, plural, as a living sacrifice, singular. It's also related to previous concepts that have been explored within the book of Romans where baptism is associated with the presenting of your bodies, presenting of your members as servants to Christ, not as servants to sin.

That we are giving our bodies and our bodies are presented within corporate worship

where we are physically present with one another as different members not just of our individual bodies but of a larger corporate body and there's a sacrificial dimension to that. Sacrifice again has a directionality and intentionality to it that gives some sort of, it captures within its directionality and intentionality the more general work that we do day to day and so when the prophets talk about sacrifice they talk about how sacrifice can be nullified by the way that we live in our day-to-day lives. If there's injustice, if there's oppression, if there's all these other problems within our day-to-day lives and sin that's being tolerated then we are not actually able to present these more intentional and directed sacrifices in the temple context.

Now within our gathering together in worship there is an intentionality and directionality that must confirm and validate and be confirmed and validated by what's taking place in the rest of our lives and so the rest of our lives have an orientation towards worship, it is a form of worship but it's a form of worship that cannot be detached from the heterochronic, heterotopic activities of worship that we have on the day of the Lord. Putting those things together I think we can see that the presenting your bodies as a living sacrifice is connected with the special practice of baptism and the practice of the Lord's Supper, the practice of assembling together as we're presenting a unified body as a singular living sacrifice, as we're presenting the various parts of our physical bodies as a sacrifice there's a directionality to that but that is something that then must be validated in the way that we use those bodies during the week, in the way that we bring the tokens of the work of the rest of the week to God in our gathered worship. Hopefully this has been helpful in answering the question, if you have any further questions please leave them on my Curious Cat account or leave them in the comments on videos elsewhere but they're most likely to be attended to if they are given in my Curious Cat account.

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