

On Earth as It Is in Heaven: Seeking a Biblical Pattern for Worship

July 19, 2019

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If Scripture stands against our natural and cultural bent towards innovative worship, it also provides a biblical pattern for the kind of worship God requires. Last week I considered the first problem—namely, [the problem\(s\) with man-made worship](#). This week, I want to show how a pattern of worship repeats throughout the Bible.

Actually, Jonathan Gibson has provided this biblical-theological survey already. In his chapter “Worship On Earth as It Is in Heaven,” in [Reformation Worship](#), he traces a basic pattern of worship from Genesis to Revelation. In what follows, I’ll employ some of his findings to help us see what “biblical” worship looks like.

Worship in Eden: The Basic Pattern

The basic pattern of worship begins even before the Fall. In Genesis 2:15–17 Adam is commanded to “serve” and “guard” in the garden-temple of Eden. These verbs are used later to speak of the priestly service of Levites. From the light of later revelation, we can see worship is not something that emerged after redemption. It was the reason why God made humanity in the first place.

And thus, Jonathan Gibson lists the basic elements of worship like this:

- Call to Worship (through God’s Word)
- Response (by faith and obedience, love and devotion)
- Fellowship meal (union and communion with God)

Reflecting on this prelapsarian (i.e., before the Fall) worship, he states,

Adam was commanded to fast from one tree in order that he might feast at another tree, and thus enjoy consummate union and communion with God—everlasting life. And so, for Adam and all his descendants, a liturgy was fixed, stitched into the very order and fabric of human life on earth: call–response–meal. (4)

Worship at Sinai

If a general outline for worship (i.e., a liturgy) can be gathered from Eden, Sinai is the place God’s pattern for worship is set in stone, in the covenant God made with Israel through Moses. As Gibson observes, “*The liturgy [at Sinai] reflected the structure of worship in Eden, of call–response–meal; only now it included cleansing through sacrifice and mediated access through*

a prophet-priest as essential elements" (7). From Exodus 19–24, Gibson outlines Sinai's pattern for worship (7):

- Gathering (at Mount Sinai) (19:1–3a)
- Calling (by God's Word) (19:3b–9)
- Cleansing (through sacrifice) (19:10–15)
- Mediated access (through an appointed prophet-priest) (19:16–25)
- Divine communication (Ten Commandments and Book of Covenant) (20:1–24:2)
- Consecration (promise of obedience) (24:3) Sacrifice (burnt offerings and peace offerings) (24:4–5)
- Divine communication (Book of Covenant) (24:7)
- Cleansing (blood of burnt offerings and peace offerings sprinkled) (24:6, 8)
- Mediated access to God's presence (24:9–10)
- Fellowship meal (with God) (24:11)

As Exodus 25:9, 40 states, Moses received a "pattern" of heavenly worship. From what he saw of heaven, he recorded the worship for Israel at the tabernacle. Thus, from Sinai we learn how the place (tabernacle), people (priests), and actions (prayers and sacrifices) all function in Israel's worship.

Worship in Jerusalem

Next, when David received the plan/pattern for the temple (1 Chron 28:11, 12, 18, 19) and established the priests and Levites in Jerusalem (see 1 Chronicles 22–26), the pattern for worship is repeated but to a larger degree. As Gibson outlines it from 2 Chronicles 5–7 (7–8), the form of worship includes many of the same elements as before.

- Gathering (at Mount Zion) (5:2–3)
- Cleansing (through sacrifice) (5:4–6)
- Mediated access (through priests) (5:7–10) Praise (with singing and music) (5:11–13)
- Glory of God fills the temple (5:14)
- Divine communication (Word of God through Solomon) (6:1–11)
- Prayer of intercession (by Solomon) (6:12–42)
- Fire and glory (from heaven) (7:1–2)
- Praise (bowing and thanking) (7:3)
- Cleansing/consecration (through sacrifice) (7:4–7)
- Meal (feast) (7:8–10)
- Blessing and dismissal (7:9–10)

Put concisely, this liturgy takes up the threefold pattern of call-response-fellowship meal. It stands in "organic" relationship to all that precedes it and continues the theme of God's blessing being found in the gathering God's people in God's presence (8).

Worship on Earth as It Is in Heaven

Tragically, these Old Testament forms eventually collapsed. But in their wake came the substance of their shadow (Col 2:17). Namely, Jesus Christ came as the true Adam, a greater Moses, and a better Solomon. All the previous worship leaders (who all failed) were surpassed by the greater leadership and sinless sacrifice of this worship leader. Incredibly, Jesus not only received worship as God (see Matt 28:16–17), but as Hebrews 2:10–13 indicates, he has led his brothers and sisters in congregation to worship God.

As a result, the people of God have been brought near to God, called to worship, empowered to respond in faith and praise, and invited to eat a covenant meal with God. In sum, when Paul says we have been seated in heavenly places (Eph 2:4–6) and Hebrews says we have access to approach the throne of grace (Heb 4:14–16), we see how the saints worship in God’s temple today. Hebrews 12:22–24 even says we have come to Mount Zion, to the place where Jesus has been enthroned and is currently receiving heaven’s praise.

Every time believers assemble in his name, we participate in this worship, and for that reason we do well to order our assemblies by the divine pattern God has given. So where do we see the pattern of worship in the New Testament?

One way to answer that question is to look throughout the New Testament. In many ways, we see new covenant worship as churches are gathered in many places (not just Jerusalem), as the gospel is preached, and as covenant meal is taken. But perhaps the place where worship is most evident is in the book of Revelation. This book that takes us into God’s throne room and “reveals” the worship that Moses saw on Mount Sinai.

From a unified reading of this book, in fact, we can even see how all the elements previously listed are found again. As Gibson outlines it, we can see the worship signified in the Old Testament is reflective of the worship found in heaven—as confirmed by John (18).

- Gathering around Christ (the church on earth) (Rev. 1-3)
- Call to worship (on earth and in heaven) (2-4)
- Confession/Repentance (sin in Christ’s churches exposed) (2-3; 5:3-4)
- Cleansing (the Lamb who was slain) (5:5-7)
- Mediated access (the Lamb opens the scroll before God) (5:8)
- Praise (by angels and the whole creation) (5:9-14)
- Divine communication (God’s Word opened and proclaimed in all the earth) (6:1-19:5)
- Response:
 - prayer (by the saints) (7:9-8:4; 11:15-18)
 - fire/glory (fills the temple) (8:5; 11:19; 15:58; 16:17-18)
 - praise (by the saints) (7:9-8:4; 19:1-5)
- Meal (19:6-10)
- Benediction (21-22)

From this outline, we discover that the worship of heaven is what believers are called to reproduce on earth. As pastor-theologians like Kevin Vanhoozer have demonstrated, the church is a dramatic performance. And when we gather to worship, believers experience today what we will enjoy forever—namely, gathered worship around God’s throne. Moreover, when ordered according to God’s own pattern, gathered worship signals the realities of heaven, for Jesus Christ is not merely enthroned in heaven. Revelation 1:12-13 says he also walks among his lampstands Rev 1:12-13.

For these reasons, the church is wise to learn from Scripture what God’s order for worship is and to worship God on earth as it is in heaven. Truly, this is our calling as it prepares us for an eternity of worship and work, praise and service in the new creation. To that end let us fix our eyes on Christ, and live for him as true worshipers.

Soli Deo Gloria, ds