

Unholy rites: What's wrong with worship

God says no to supposedly right worship, and yes to genuinely right living.

by [Matthew Myer Boulton](#) in the [Jan 27, 2009](#) issue

As Luke tells it, the Last Supper ends in an argument. For all the table talk of gifts and remembrance and the kingdom of God, the dinner descends into a dispute among the disciples over “which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest” (22:24). The meal of covenant and community turns into a banquet of boasting and contempt.

The story points to an ambiguity that extends to contemporary celebrations of the Last Supper, and indeed to all forms of Christian worship. Those who gather around communion tables rightly describe themselves as “communities of faith.” But as the Gospel narratives suggest, those gatherings are made up of betrayers, deserters, and pretenders preoccupied with their own pecking order. Communion is frequently celebrated as a reconciling supper of Christian unity. But the meal has also been a prime venue for Christian conflict and schism, and for more disputes among disciples over who should be “regarded as the greatest.”

The ambiguities of Christian worship are not simply a matter of empirical reality—of Christians failing to live up to what they proclaim. The ambiguity of worship is a theme in scripture itself.

Consider the creation stories in Genesis. If the worship of God is, as Christians often say, one of the chief purposes for which human beings were created, then the two creation stories display a glaring omission. Where is the temple in Eden? And where is any sign of worship? If humanity was and is created to offer God thanks and prayer and praise, then why do the first human beings receive no such instruction and offer no such thing?

The first creation story instructs humans with regard to stewardship and flourishing

(1:26-31), and the second, with regard to cultivating, protecting and enjoying creation (2:5, 15-17). Neither account includes a divine call to carry out anything like conventional liturgical works of praise, prayer or offering to God. For Christians who devote significant time to such works (or think that they ought to), this absence is striking.

According to the creation narratives, human beings are neither invited nor commanded to undertake any practice, liturgical or otherwise, that would take God as its object or end. Humanity is created and instructed to steward and tend creation, not to tend or otherwise confront God.

This does not mean, of course, that human beings were originally to have nothing to do with God; on the contrary, the creation narratives brim with references to the intimate relation between creator and creature. And according to the second story, a human being is just a handful of earth in continuous, vital communion with the divine “breath of life” (2:7; 6:3).

These stories suggest that God and humanity were originally on radically intimate terms and that the true human vocation is to care for and to enjoy the world—not to care for God apart from the world. Put briefly, originally human beings were radically *with* God in creation, but never *set over against* God in their work.

On this view, then, God is never the object of human action, but rather is always the principal subject of it, working with and in and through human subjects. We are created to be God’s intimate companions in all we do. Allegedly unilateral human action—works that we attempt to carry out beside or before or over against God—can take place only by way of a self-defeating departure from this original intimacy, friendship and collaborative life.

Such a departure is exactly what Genesis goes on to describe. Indeed, just as we should be struck by the conspicuous absence of worship in Eden, we should be sobered by the realization that human exile begins with none other than the world’s first worship service.

Though God has not mentioned it (much less required it), Cain and Abel approach their divine benefactor with precious “offerings” of their own. The key Hebrew term *minchah* (“offering” or “present”) appears twice more in Genesis, and each time it

refers to a strategic gift given by way of appeasement to atone for an apparent theft (32:13; 43:11). Appropriately enough, both acts are engineered by Jacob, that most cunning, resourceful patriarch: a *minchah* of livestock to appease his brother Esau, and later a *minchah* of fruit to placate the Pharaoh's governor (Joseph).

But the original *minchah* is invented by Cain. On the surface, his present of fruit is not obviously strategic (that is part of the strategy), but its true status comes clear by way of an elegant divine exposé. By having "regard" for Abel's offering and then "no regard" for Cain's, God provokes the elder brother to involuntarily confess—to God and perhaps to himself—the self-interested, economic character of his offering.

After all, if Cain's presentation of fruit was truly an expression of gratitude or generosity, then no matter what God's reaction was, Cain would have cause for neither arrogance nor anger. But Cain does get angry. His gift is actually the first half of an imagined exchange, a commodity he gave in order to get something in return: namely, to be "accepted" (Hebrew *se'et*, "to uplift," "to forgive," "to accept"), as God goes on to call the driving motive (4:7).

Thus Cain's offering is unveiled as a bid for divine acceptance and favor, a *quid pro pro*. And when he comes to believe that God has not held up the divine side of this supposed bargain, liturgical ingenuity ignites into human rage.

Cain resolves to kill Abel. In what may be the most terrifying verse in all of scripture, a cold-eyed Cain, still standing in his makeshift sanctuary, turns to his brother and says, "Let us go out to the field" (4:8). Violence and murder are born in creation—and the place of birth is none other than humankind's original act of worship.

In recent years, the idea that violence and religion are deeply connected has been widely discussed, and in some quarters presumed, but rarely has it been noted that key texts in the Bible make the same point. Genesis 4 is an example: the story of the first murder and the story of the first worship service turn out to be the same story. If ever there was a cautionary tale for liturgists, this is it—and it is a tale set squarely in the opening pages of the Bible.

At first, this might seem surprising. Why would the Bible include texts so critical of worship in the first place? But precisely because the Bible is the consummate

Christian liturgical book, it repeatedly features texts that call attention to worship's profound ambiguities, the better to guard against the chief hazards of Christian life: works righteousness, religious triumphalism (in both aggressive and passive forms) and spiritual pride, to name a few.

In this way, from the stories of creation to the vision of the New Jerusalem—where, John of Patmos declares, there shall be “no temple” (Rev. 21:22)—the Bible offers a stream of liturgical self-criticism. Again and again texts point out where our most celebrated practices can and do go wrong, leading even (and at times especially) the most devoted participants into confusion and disaster.

In this sense, the story of Cain provides an indispensable object lesson. As his actions and anger make clear, Cain presupposes that his vocation is to win divine favor by way of apparently generous, reverent acts of worship. But God, neither approving this vocation nor allowing it to go uncorrected, exposes Cain's offering as an attempt at acquisition and then poses a provocative question: “If you do well, will you not be accepted?” (Gen. 4:7).

In other words, God calls on Cain to repent, to reorient himself, and to return to his true, original vocation—that is, to do well by stewarding and enjoying creation. Insofar as Cain lives out this call, God assures him that he is accepted already, and so there is no need for his ingenious, desperate attempts at liturgical negotiation.

Nor is there any need for ours. And so for us, these opening stories in Genesis help us guard against the permanent temptation to carry out our worship as an exercise in bargaining for divine favor—including the fundamental favor of being divinely accepted. These narratives portray all divine favor as beyond human manipulation (that is, as truly gracious), and cast humanity's genuine vocation in terms of right livelihood: doing well in and through lives of intimate companionship with God.

The biblical prophets—including Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, Micah and Jesus of Nazareth—pick up this theological theme. When many Americans hear the line, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream,” they may picture the preaching of Martin Luther King Jr., or indeed any number of historic struggles for justice and equality. But for Amos himself, the line is the culmination of a divine polemic against Israel's worship: “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings

and grain offerings, I will not accept them” (Amos 5:21-22).

The echoes here of Genesis are unmistakable: God is not interested in offerings of fruit and fat, but rather in justice and righteousness, in doing well and right by living out the true human work of caring for creation.

Similarly, the well-known sentence in Micah 6:8—“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”—concludes another antiworship tirade, this one rife with prophetic sarcasm: “Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil?” (Mic. 6:7). Parallel ideas appear in Isaiah (1:11ff) and Hosea (6:6), among other texts.

When they encounter them at all, Christians typically interpret these polemics as intended for somebody else (after all, we don’t sacrifice rams!) or as hyperbolic ethical exhortations. But the texts themselves are uncompromising: they do not characterize God’s rejection of worship as contingent on, say, the existence of particular injustices, as if the moment we get back to caring for the widow and the orphan, God will then welcome our offerings and anthems and endorsements of social justice.

Instead, the prophetic attack poses a clear, sharp disjunction: God says no to supposedly right worship, and yes to genuinely right living. Jesus puts it this way, quoting Hosea, quoting God: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Matt. 9:13; Hos. 6:6).

Nor will it do to insist that Christian offerings, as sacrifices of thanksgiving (Ps. 50:14) or living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1), are exempt from such critique. As Martin Luther once put it, the best way to read the Bible is always to assume *de te loquitur*, “it’s talking about you,” not only about your neighbors or ancestors. And sure enough, when it comes to thanksgiving and living offerings to God, the ambiguities are as profound as they are anywhere else.

Take thanksgiving, for example. It is at least theoretically possible to give thanks out of pure gratitude and generosity, expecting nothing in return. But as our personal lives readily and regularly show, it is also possible to give thanks as a discharge of obligation, or as a method of maneuvering into (or staying in) someone’s good graces, or as an act of sheer manipulation—or indeed, as all three at once.

In other words, a *minchah* need not be made of fruit or fat; it may also be made of thanks. The liturgy of Cain, we might say, or worship that functions as a clear or camouflaged quid pro quo, lurks behind every sanctuary door. And so the prophetic critique of Israel's worship applies no less to the Christian church, to our own festivals and solemn assemblies.

What rescues worship is that in the midst of our self-interested actions, God continues to love and delight in humankind. Though we may do our best to act and live as if we were alone, God joins us in our very departure, transforming the work of us-without-God (*leitourgia*, the "work of people") into the work of God-with-us, *Immanuel*. The liturgy of Cain is graciously remade into the liturgy of Jesus Christ, and genuine confession, doxology and celebration may graciously resound.

In other words, God joins us in worship. Jesus Christ, Christians confess, is not merely a founder and teacher recalled from time to time in Christian liturgy. Rather, he participates in it, worshiping in solidarity with the gathered assembly—the "body of Christ," as we say—and so lends it an entirely new, simultaneous standing. We no longer pray only in our own names; we also pray in the name of Jesus Christ.

Likewise, the Holy Spirit, Christians confess, is not merely a topic mentioned from time to time in Christian worship. Rather, the Spirit participates in worship, conspires with it, and so lends it an entirely new, simultaneous voice. Paul puts it this way: "We do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26).

In a kind of divine judo, God undertakes the liturgy of Cain in order to overcome it. God joins it, and thus subverts it. Thus God occupies Christian worship, the very locus of the fatal divide, and so carries out the work of reconciliation, remaking the sword into a plowshare.

In the past century, a few theologians have begun to explore versions of this more critical, ambivalent view of Christian worship, and their work deserves a fresh reading. In the wake of World War I, for example, the Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth launched a notorious critique of religion that included, at its heart, a trenchant critique of worship.

More recently, in *For the Life of the World*, Orthodox theologian Alexander

Schmemmann argues that it is Christianity that has most disastrously drawn the spurious line between sacred and profane, in effect desecrating creation by setting apart allegedly holy spaces and holy days. The line is spurious because in truth the whole world is holy, and at last “God may be all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28). There is no temple in Eden, no enclosure in the garden marked off as sacred ground, because creation itself is a temple—an idea evoked in the Bible’s first creation story by way of its rhythmic, cosmic, likely liturgical poetry.

And if all creation is a temple, then all of life is worship. The key question is whether ours will be the liturgy of Cain, that anxious bargaining for divine favor, that giving-in-order-to-receive that leads to violence and death, or whether, by the grace of God, it will also become the liturgy of Jesus Christ, that tender transformation of our anxious work into its beautiful, fully human reversal: the receiving-in-order-to-give that leads to restoration and new life.

It is up to God, of course, to accomplish this transformation. If we claim it as our right or possession or achievement (say, as an extension of our superb liturgical technique, or our dutiful faith, or what have you), then we fall back into works righteousness and spiritual pride. Salvation is divine work, not ours, and so we can set neither its conditions nor its limits.

But the good news Christians proclaim is that God will not abandon humankind to our “work of people” as if we were alone, our self-defeating attempts at self-justification. Instead, God joins us there, and with a magnificent gentleness, lifts up our hearts into God’s own life.

Like those disciples in Luke preparing for the Last Supper, at the rabbi’s instruction we go ahead into Jerusalem, find that furnished room and prepare the meal. Then we wait and pray and call for him to arrive, so he might again transform our supper of boasting and betrayal into a banquet of mercy, reunion and joy. We cannot guarantee that he will come. But he has come before, and he has promised that “where two or three are gathered in my name” (Matt. 18:20), he will come again and make all things new.