

ENGLISH WORD “WORSHIP” IS ACTUALLY A BAD WORD

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Greetings in the Name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

“Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker! For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand.” (Psalm 95:6-7)

Our English word “worship” comes from the Old English word *weorthscipe*, which means “to ascribe worth, or respect, to someone.” For many Christians, especially here in America, this definition would suffice as long as we changed the word “someone” to “God.” Of course, some Christians would chime in and indicate the need to add the word “praise” to the definition. Putting these things together, the definition of worship would become “to ascribe praise and worth, or respect, to God.” For most Christians, this definition would suffice, for it is exactly what they believe worship is – our act of ascribing praise and worth, or respect, to God.

For this reason, the English word “worship” is actually a bad word to describe what happens when Christians gather together in church. The problem is that the main thrust of the word is from the worshiper to the one being worshipped. It gives the impression that we are the primary actors in church; that we go to church, primarily, to do something for God, to give Him our praise and adoration, our love and appreciation.

I can hear many of you Christians saying to yourselves, “Well, what’s wrong with that, pastor?” Good, I’m glad you asked.

What’s wrong with that is that we are not the primary actors in church, God is! He is the Host, we are His guests. He invites us into His Holy House to come into His Holy Presence so that He can serve us with His Holy Gifts. He speaks to us through His Holy Word and we listen. He serves and we receive. He is the primary actor, not us. We are in His House, not ours. For this reason, a much better word to describe what happens when Christians gather together in church is Service. Or, better yet, Divine Service, for God serves us in church.

Our Lord, Jesus Christ, made a promise to His Church before He ascended into heaven. He said, “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). When we gather together in church for Divine Service, He keeps that promise, for He comes to be in our presence to serve us with His immeasurable gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation through His Holy Word and Sacraments. In response to receiving these blessed gifts, we certainly give Him our praise and adoration, our love and appreciation. But, our action is secondary, not primary. We act in response to His actions toward us.

Sadly, because many Christians fail to understand what true “worship” is, namely God’s Divine Service to us and our response to His gifts, they end up putting the cart before the horse. They get it backwards. They go to church with the idea that if they worship God with all their might, then He will bless them. They believe it is up to them to act so that God will respond. And, judging by the current trend among Christians to employ “praise bands” to lead them in the singing of contemporary “Christian” pop songs, they believe that the louder and more enthusiastic they are the better the chances are that God will respond. In doing so, they turn God’s Holy House into their concert house. What should be Christ-centered Divine Service becomes man-centered, people-

pleasing worship.

You will find not find this idea of “worship” in Scripture. In fact, the Hebrew and Greek words in Scripture which we translate with our English “worship” mean “to fall prostrate in reverence.” A literal translation of Psalm 95:6 above is, “Oh come, let us fall prostrate in reverence and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!” Thus, to “worship” the Lord in the Biblical sense is to realize that you are in His presence and to bow down accordingly. Being in His Holy presence demands your reverence and awe, a fact that many Christians today fail to comprehend.

My friends, true, Biblical “worship” happens when Christians enter God’s Holy House in reverence and awe to receive His gracious Divine Gifts through His Holy Word and Sacraments. If this Divine Service is what we mean by “worship,” then it is a fantastic and praiseworthy word. But, if we mean that “worship” is all about what we do for God in the hope that He will respond, then it is, indeed, a bad word. Remember, it is God’s House, not ours. He is the Host, we are His guests. May our “worship” always reflect this awesome truth! In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

In Christ,

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