

WORSHIP: A BIBLICAL DEFINITION

By Ron Man

The Apostle Paul, certainly history's greatest example of "a thoroughly converted man" (C.S. Lewis notwithstanding, about whom the phrase was originally penned), authored some of the most sublime doxologies to be found in Scripture; these normally arise as a visceral response to the overwhelming nature of the truths which he is led by the Holy Spirit to write about in his epistles:

- Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! . . . For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen! (Romans 11:33,36)
- Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ. . . (Ephesians 1:3)
- Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:20-21)

Another kind of doxology pokes its head out of the black mire of Paul's description of sinful man's downward spiral in Romans 1:18-32. There, in his explication of humanity's idolatrous reversal of the created order so that people "worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator," Paul cannot help appending, at the mention of their (and his) Creator: "who is blessed forever. Amen." (v. 25)

Paul is demonstrating forcefully J.I. Packer's dictum that "the purpose of theology is doxology. We study in order to praise." It is interesting that Paul's brief exclamation of praise arises out of his treatment of the doctrine of *sin*; in it we see Paul's passion for God's glory and his abhorrence of what sinners (of which he considered himself to be chief, 1 Tim. 1:15) had perpetrated in defiance of God's rightful rule. Paul's response of worship arises out of his conviction that the Creator is alone worthy of worship and adoration (certainly not "the creature," 1:25; indeed he calls men fools in 1:22-23 for substituting images of created beings for "the glory of the incorruptible God"). Indeed this context suggests that at the root of the Fall of man was an issue of *worship*.

Worship, in its most basic understanding, presupposes a *fundamental distinction* between the *worshiper* and the *object of worship*. Even in the most banal use of the term, e.g. where famous athletes or musicians are said to be worshiped by their fans, there is still the idea that those persons' abilities or appeal are far superior to those of normal people. When it comes to God, of course, the chasm is infinite: God is totally unique in all of the universe. In fact, He *made* the universe, everything which exists besides Him owe Him its existence; only He has no beginning, no cause, no limits or limitations. In spite of man's exalted stature of being created in the image of God, there is still an infinite chasm which separates him as creature from the one Creator. Yet sin foolishly seeks to mar that distinction, to bridge that chasm. This was the fundamental issue in the serpent's temptation of Eve in the garden: "you will be like God." (Genesis 3:5) The attack was on God's total uniqueness as the Creator and Lord of all, of the fundamental distinction between Him and all of His creatures, including Eve (and Adam, and Satan). Of course, Satan also accused God of lying to Eve (Gen. 3:4) and of motives which impugned the perfection of God, when in reality the fallen creature Satan was the one who was capable of such deeds and thoughts.

So there was in the garden (has been ever since) a presumptuous attempt to lower God to a more creaturely level, and to raise man to a more God-like level. Needless to say, the former is an affront (not to mention an impossibility) to God; and the latter is a denial of man's proper place in the created order and a refusal to acknowledge God's unique place and to respond appropriately. This is exactly what we see in Romans 1. In verse 21 Paul states that sinful mankind "did not honor Him as God or give thanks." And this is spite of being able to observe His power and greatness in the works of nature (v. 20). Paul's phrase in v. 21, though used in the negative of what natural man steadfastly refuses to do, suggests what the appropriate response of human creatures *should* be to their Maker: they should "honor Him as God" (i.e., accord to Him the unique place which He has the Creator God rightly holds, "ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name" Ps. 96:8) and to "give thanks" for all of His good gifts. This fits the familiar paradigm of praising God for *who He is* ("honor Him as God") and for *what He has done* ("give thanks").

Adam and Eve turned from honoring their Creator as uniquely God, and instead of giving thanks for all the "very good" (Gen. 1:31) things which God had made and placed into their care (Gen. 1:28), they desired more, even though it meant disobeying Him and attempting to usurp His unique position. Thus in Romans 1 Paul is really describing the situation surrounding the Fall, as well as the ensuing consequences in all following generations. At the root of the problem of sin was (and is) an issue of *worship*, a failure to honor God as God and to give Him thanks.

But now we must pull back and expand our gaze to take in the totality of Paul's argument in the book of Romans. From that perspective, we see that in fact Paul is painting this dark picture of fallen man's state in Romans 1 so that the light of the gospel will shine all the more brilliantly as he develops it in the chapters to come. And indeed we see already in Romans 1 a clear indication that that is where Paul is heading; for in the verses immediately preceding those we have looked at, he speaks of the "gospel" being "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes," and that as a result one can indeed become a "righteous man." (1:16-17) Paul is promising nothing less than the restoration of *worship* through Christ, the reversal of man's downward spiral of sin (1:18-32) through the power of God's redeeming love displayed in the gospel. By God's gracious saving work (which Paul will expound beginning in chapter 3), it will indeed be possible for men and women to "honor Him as God" and to "give thanks." Because of these "mercies of God" (as Paul will summarize the preceding chapters in 12:1), believers will be urged to present their entire selves to God as a fitting and appropriate "spiritual service of worship."

And so, in one of the darkest chapters in the Scriptures, we find embedded a gleaming jewel, a precious and beautiful description of what worship truly is and should be. Let us then be about the "sweet work" (as Isaac Watts called worship) whereby we *honor Him as God* and *give thanks*.