

For Children, On a Lord's Day Evening

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

Lord, how delightful 'tis to see
A whole assembly worship thee!
At once they sing, at once they pray;
They hear of heaven, and learn the way.

I have been there, and still would go
'Tis like a little heaven below!
Not all my pleasure and my play
Should tempt me to forget this day.

O write upon my memory, Lord,
The text and doctrines of thy Word,
That I may break thy laws no more,
But love thee better than before!

With thoughts of Christ and things divine
Fill up this foolish heart of mine:
That, hoping pardon through his blood,
I may lie down, and wake with God.

November 17, 2023

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Radical Monotheism: What Is Worship?

Kevin T. Bauder

[This essay was originally published In the Nick of Time on August 12, 2005.]

The doctrinal core of all biblical religion—the most fundamental of all fundamentals—is the *shema*. It affirms the existence of one and only one true and living God, Yahweh. Since any object of worship becomes a god, to say that there is only one true God is to say that only one being is worthy of being worshipped. To worship anything other than the true God is to become an idolater.

Monotheism revolves around worship. If the *shema* is at the center of true, biblical religion, then worship is also the center of true, biblical religion. The two are inseparable. Therefore, for the monotheist, worship is a matter of the highest importance. Those who wish to be monotheists need to know what worship is. The temptation is to seek out lexical definitions of the various Greek and Hebrew terms for worship. Those who yield to this temptation will find that most of the words translated *worship* have something to do with bowing. They will also find that this knowledge furnishes them with little understanding.

The problem is that the Bible assumes that we already know what worship is. It never defines the activity, though it does give some descriptions of and regulations for true worship. Scripture seems to take for granted that anybody would know what it means to worship Baal or Dagon.

The Bible expects us to carry at least a rough-and-ready definition of worship into its pages. Such a definition does not rely upon the technicalities of biblical languages, but upon a general knowledge of the concept of worship. In the biblical civilizations, the idea of “bowing” predominated because bowing was thought to be the appropriate posture in worship. While most worship involved bowing (at least of an inward sort), however, not all bowing constituted worship. Abraham bowed himself before the people of the land (Gen. 23:7); Jacob bowed before Esau (Gen. 33:3); David bowed to Saul (1 Sam. 24:8). These bows did not constitute worship and therefore did not implicate the bowing person in idolatry. To understand worship, we must somehow distinguish between bows.



In the Nick of Time is published by Central Baptist Theological Seminary.

Permission is granted to duplicate for personal and church use.

www.centalseminary.edu | info@centralseminary.edu
900 Forestview Lane N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 800.827.1043

The English word *worship* confronts us with a similar problem. The term is from two Saxon roots: *weorð* (value, price, worth) and *scipe* (to say or to impute). Essentially, to worship a thing is to impute value to it. The problem with this understanding is that not all imputations of value are equal and not all are directed toward deities. For example, the lower gentry in the United Kingdom are addressed as “worship.” This form of address does not mean that they are gods, but that they are respected and valued members of society.

Some bows constitute worship and some do not. Some ascriptions of value constitute worship (in the technical sense) and some do not. How can we tell the difference?

Let us imagine an inanimate object, say, a broom. Why would we value a broom? Because it sweeps cleanly, of course. We value the broom, not for what it is, but for what it does. Its value derives from the fact that we value a clean floor. Why do we value the clean floor? Perhaps for hygienic reasons. In that case, the value of the clean floor is not in itself, but in the thing to which it contributes, namely, health. Why do we value health? Because it contributes to yet another thing, and that to another, and so forth. None of these things are valued as ends in themselves, but as means to something else. Or imagine a pen. We value the pen because it writes—its value derives from its ability to write. If it stops writing we throw it away because it has no more value. The value of the pen lies in the writing. The value of the writing lies in the ability to communicate. The value of the communication lies in the ideas that are communicated. At no point does the value lie in the thing itself, but rather in its ability to serve some greater good.

At some point, however, this chain of values must come to an end. We reach that point when we encounter something that has value, not because it is instrumental to some other good, but simply because it exists. Such a thing has its value in itself. It becomes a center from which other things derive their value. It is an end rather than a means.

The value of the broom or of the pen is instrumental. Everything that helps to achieve some other good is valuable as an instrument. To ascribe instrumental value to a thing is not to worship it except in a very loose and relative sense.

A thing that is valued as an end, however, possesses absolute value. It is valuable in and of itself. It is to be valued, not because it serves something else, but because of what it is. It becomes a point of definition, a center of value. To impute this kind of value to anything is precisely to worship it in the proper and technical sense.

Anything that we value as an end rather than a means is a thing that we worship. Therefore, anything to which we impute absolute value becomes a god to us. Such a thing defines and determines whole chains of values in our

lives. In fact, the things that we value absolutely are the things according to which we construct our own identity. We can properly say that they are the things in which we delight ourselves.

The *shema* affirms that there is one and only one true God, and that He is Yahweh. What this means is that Yahweh alone is worthy of worship. Only Yahweh deserves to be valued as an end rather than a means. For the monotheist, Yahweh must become the absolute value, the center from which absolutely everything else derives value. He must become the point of definition according to which we understand our own identity. He must be the only thing in which we delight ourselves. He alone must be our God.

This is why a true monotheism is always a radical monotheism, for it goes straight to the root of the matter. Everything—*everything*—exists to serve the LORD our God. Our time, health, possessions, power, leisure, spouse, children, and absolutely anything else we can think of are merely means to an end. The end is God Himself, what He enjoys, and what magnifies Him. The radical monotheist (the only monotheist worthy of the name) lives all of life to bring pleasure to God and to glorify Him.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
