

Peterson, David. *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993. 317 pp. \$16.99.

*Engaging with God* is not a "how-to-book" on the preparation and conduct of a Christian order of worship. It is, as the subtitle indicates, a biblical theology of worship. The author is not at all pleased with the common understanding of the word "worship." Too often it refers simply to what is done in church on Sunday morning—singing hymns, saying prayers, listening to sermons, or celebrating the Lord's Supper. Nor is he pleased with the more contemporary concern that in a worship service the worshiper should be "stirred and challenged, or comforted and consoled, at an individual level" (16). While genuine worship will have a private and public dimension, he holds that "something is seriously wrong when people equate spiritual self-gratification with worship" (17).

Peterson's thesis, which he supports by a quite comprehensive analysis of the biblical text, is: "that the worship of the living and true God is essentially an engagement with him on the terms that he proposes and in the way that he alone makes possible" (20). "It involves honoring, serving and respecting him, abandoning any loyalty or devotion that hinders an exclusive relationship with him. Although some of Scripture's terms for worship may refer to specific gestures of homage, rituals or priestly ministrations, worship is more fundamentally faith expressing itself in obedience and adoration. Consequently, in both Testaments it is often shown to be a personal and moral fellowship with God relevant to every sphere of life" (283).

After considering the cult, the sacrificial system, the Jerusalem temple, and God's design for the future of Israel, he finds that the OT theology of worship includes God's self-revelation and the redemption of his people so that they can engage with him. "Obedience to God in cultic observances was to go hand in hand with obedience in matters of everyday life" (49).

His study of the words for worship in the OT focuses on the LXX. He justifies this by the contention that the New Testament writers were strongly influenced by the Greek translation of the OT. *Proskunein* signifies homage or grateful submission, *latreuein* and *doulos* signify service, and *sebornai* signifies reverence. These terms represent a crucial attitude of heart. Acceptable worship in the OT is not simply a matter of gesturing or posture but an orientation to God in the whole of life.

While Peterson sees a continuity between OT and NT with respect to engagement, he sees a radical discontinuity in traditional categories and patterns of worship. In chapters 3 and 4, "Jesus and the New Temple," and "Jesus and the New Covenant," Peterson examines passages in Matthew and John which stress that "God's presence and God's glory, so intimately connected with the . . . temple under the Mosaic covenant," are "fully and finally experienced in Jesus Christ," who replaced the temple as the worship center (101), inaugurated a new covenant (108), and established his own life of obedience as "the perfect pattern or model of acceptable worship" (110). While he accepted the sacrificial

system and the cult associated with it, his teaching is more concerned with the ethical than the cultic.

Peterson's denial of a prescribed cult in the NT includes the institution of the Lord's supper. He does not believe that Jesus intended it to be a new cult even though the writings of Paul show that the supper was part of an early tradition in the church. Peterson sees it as an expression of unity which is appropriate to worship, but not required. "The New Testament shows the emergence of a 'religion' without any earthly cult in the traditional Jewish or Greco-Roman sense" (129).

He does not mean that corporate worship is of no importance in the New Testament or that it is always void of cultic elements. What he does argue is that such elements are not formally prescribed and that corporate worship is always to be located in the larger context of engagement with God in everyday life.

For instance, in the Book of Acts, God removed cultic regulations so that people of all nations could unite in his service. The irreducible minimum is the preached word. "Preaching about Christ must be at the heart of a Christian theology of worship," because "the word of the Lord is central to a genuine encounter with God" (144). But Peterson denies that the worship practices of the earliest churches are automatically a norm for today.

In the Pauline epistles, the basis for a worship theology is found in the death of Jesus as the means of reconciliation with God. Peterson translates Romans 12:1: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercies, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, which is your understanding worship" (p. 174).

In the NT, God's temple on earth is the people of God—Christians in fellowship with Christ. Paul speaks of upbuilding or edification as the purpose of Christians gathered together. This is an "important criterion for assessing the helpfulness of testimonies, choruses, and various other elements that might go to make up a congregational meeting today" (212). "Edification and worship are different sides of the same coin" (215).

The book of Hebrews presents "the most complete and fully integrated theology of worship in the NT. All the important categories of OT thinking on the subject—sanctuary, sacrifice, altar, priesthood and covenant—are taken up and related to the person and work of Jesus Christ" (228). Hebrews shows what Christian worship means in the context of life—entertaining strangers, visiting prisoners, faithfulness in marriage, and trusting God to provide for spiritual needs.

A major theme in John's Revelation is the distinction between the true worship of God and idolatry. The great controversy between God and Satan is historical as it relates to the conflict of allegiances revealed in worship. In the worship of the beast there is a life-orientation as well as participation in the cult. The hymnic material in Revelation suggests criteria for evaluating modern singing. "Do our hymns and songs concentrate on praising God for his character and his mighty acts in history in our behalf? Do they focus sufficiently on the great truths of the gospel? . . . Do they challenge us to take a firm stand against

every manifestation of Satan's power and to bear faithful witness to the truth of the gospel in our society? It is not good enough to sing certain items merely because they make the congregation feel good" (278).

Through a responsible exposition of the OT and NT, David Peterson has, indeed, produced a biblical theology of worship. Because of the many texts of Scripture examined in each chapter, *Engaging with God* reads like a research thesis (which it is). The many conclusions along the way, the conclusions at the end of each chapter, and the summary chapter at the end of the book give the message clarity and coherence.

The book does raise some interesting questions, however. To say on the same page that "Formality and informality are not theological categories," but "There are certain theological considerations, however, that must challenge and inform our thinking on this issue" (160), seems paradoxical if not contradictory. Quite obviously the answer to the question, "What shall Christians do when they meet together for worship?" is not "Whatever pleases them." No doubt that is why, in spite of the author's denial of a prescribed cult in Christian worship, he offers an "imaginary" service of worship in the epilogue (289-292). Theology does inform practice.

In rejecting a prescribed cult, does the author also reject sacrament? If so, is there nothing sacramental in Christian worship? Over and beyond the issue of the frequency of its celebration, and the Protestant rejection of "merit" and the "real presence," isn't there something sacramental in the Lord's Supper? And didn't the early church do it because Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19, RSV)? Regarding baptism, the author mentions it only in passing, but isn't it both cultic and sacramental in nature? And isn't there something prescriptive about it when Jesus said, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16, RSV)? And when baptism occurs, is it not a part of Christian worship? Some would raise a question about the washing of feet since Jesus said, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should also do as I have done to you. . . . If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them" (John 13:14,15,17, RSV).

While the author has made a solid case for flexibility and against an orthodox "formalism," not everything is negotiable. His thesis that worship "in church" must be part and parcel of worship in the whole of everyday living is informed by good biblical theology. Wholehearted obedience is the homage, adoration, and praise worshipers offer to God.

The book, *Engaging with God* is unique. It is a *must* read for all pastors and leaders of worship.