

Province of Southern Appalachia

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The Nature and History of Christian Worship: A Reductionism from Our Ancient Foundations of Worship

Introduction

In the postmodern world, the question “*What is worship?*” has become increasingly urgent. Contemporary culture has fragmented the meaning of worship, reducing it to personal preference, emotional experience, or individualized spiritual expression. Worship is now interpreted through a wide array of subjective lenses — psychological, cultural, aesthetic, or therapeutic — each detached from the historic Christian understanding. Yet within the Christian tradition, worship possesses a distinct and ancient identity: it is the Church’s divinely ordered response to God, an act of reverence, obedience, and participation in His majesty and mercy. Much of modern Christianity has drifted from this foundation, resulting in practices that are shallow, disordered, and disconnected from the apostolic faith.

This crisis has deep historical roots. The Long Road to Zwingli’s reductionism did not arise in isolation. His symbolic reductionism was the culmination of:

- Gnostic spiritualism
- Marcionite discontinuity
- Montanist individualism
- Iconoclastic anti-materialism
- Berengarian Eucharistic symbolism
- Cathar anti-sacramentalism
- Nominalist metaphysical collapse

Each movement chipped away at the sacramental worldview that defined the early Church.

The Reformation introduced a decisive rupture in the Christian imagination. Zwingli’s systematic rejection of sacramental realism — replacing sixteen centuries of unified doctrine with a symbolic interpretation — reshaped Western Christianity.

The historic understanding of the Eucharist, the priesthood, and the communal nature of worship was displaced by a radical individualism. The doctrine of the “priesthood of all believers,” severed from its ancient ecclesial context, became a theological justification for privatized Christianity in which each believer could determine their own worship,

their own sacrament, and ultimately their own truth. The result is a landscape of more than 20,000 Protestant denominations, each functioning as an autonomous authority.

This fragmentation stands in stark contrast to the early Church. The apostolic community, guided by the Holy Spirit, preserved a unified pattern of worship articulated in the *Didache* and practiced as “One Faith, One Baptism.” Worship was not invented by individuals; it was received, guarded, and transmitted. It was sacramental, communal, and rooted in apostolic continuity. The early Church understood worship as an act of divine order, not personal innovation.

Today, America — along with many other nations — faces a profound crisis of worship, Scriptural truth, and faithful obedience. The erosion of sacramental life, the rise of consumer-driven religion, and the dominance of subjective spirituality have produced a form of Christianity that is often thin, unstable, and disconnected from its historic roots. The central question is no longer merely *What is worship?* but *How can authentic Christian worship be restored?*

The American Orthodox Catholic Church (AOCC) offers a necessary and faithful pathway toward this restoration. The AOCC stands uniquely positioned to recover the ancient Christian faith in its fullness — sacramental, conciliar, apostolic, and rooted in the worship practices of the undivided Church. In an era marked by doctrinal confusion and liturgical experimentation, the AOCC provides a stable, historic, and theologically coherent alternative. It calls the Church in America back to the depth, beauty, and integrity of ancient Christianity, offering a corrective to postmodern fragmentation and a renewed vision of worship grounded in Scripture, Tradition, and the apostolic witness.

This paper argues that the AOCC is not merely one option among many, but a vital pathway for restoring authentic Christian worship in a culture that has lost its theological and liturgical bearings. By recovering the ancient patterns of prayer, sacrament, doctrine, and communal life, the AOCC offers a way forward — a return to worship that is not shallow, individualized, or culturally driven, but holy, historic, and rooted in the unbroken tradition of the Church.

1. What Is Worship?

Christian worship is the **response of the human person to the revelation, majesty, and mercy of God**. It is not primarily an emotional experience, nor is it defined by personal preference. Worship is the **act of ascribing worth** (from Old English *weorthscipe*) to God—declaring His holiness, submitting to His authority, and participating in His life.

Core Elements of Worship

- **Adoration** — acknowledging God's holiness and glory.
- **Thanksgiving** — expressing gratitude for His works and salvation.
- **Confession** — recognizing our sin and need for grace.
- **Supplication** — bringing our needs before Him.
- **Communion** — entering into fellowship with God through Word and Sacrament.

Is Worship About Feelings or emotions?

Worship may involve feelings or emotions, but **feelings are not the measure or essence of worship**. In Scripture and Christian tradition, worship is:

- **Objective** — directed toward God's character and commands.
- **Covenantal** — rooted in God's initiative, not human emotion.
- **Obedient** — offered because God is worthy, not because we feel inspired.

Feelings may accompany worship, but they are the fruit, not the foundation. Worship is fundamentally what God expects and what the Church offers, regardless of emotional state.

2. Worship in the Early Church (1st–3rd Centuries)

The earliest Christians inherited patterns from Jewish synagogue and Temple worship, reshaped by the resurrection of Christ.

Key Characteristics

- **Gathering on the Lord's Day (Sunday)** to celebrate the resurrection.
- **Reading of Scripture** (Old Testament, apostolic writings).
- **Preaching/Teaching** by bishops or presbyters.
- **Prayers and Psalms** often chanted responsively.
- **The Eucharist** as the central act of worship.
- **Baptism** as the entry into the worshipping community.

The Shape of Early Worship

By the late 1st century, worship followed a recognizable pattern:

1. **Liturgy of the Word** — readings, homily, prayers.
2. **Liturgy of the Table** — offering, thanksgiving, consecration, communion.

The Eucharist was not an occasional ritual but the **weekly—and often daily—center of Christian worship**. In the 16th century Huldrych Zwingli argued that the eucharist was purely a symbolic gesture denying chapter six of the Book of John in the bible. Martin Luther maintained the real presence of Christ in the eucharists. Zwingli, a roman catholic priest, broke away to start his own church, the Swiss Reformed Church, pioneering core protestant doctrines. In short, all protestant churches then became man-made inventions of their own imaginations. (See history of Reformation and how Zwingli rebelled against Early Christian doctrine).

Atmosphere of Early Worship

- Reverent and ordered.
- Deeply communal.
- Rooted in Scripture.
- Focused on Christ's presence in Word and Sacrament.

Emotion was present, but **the emphasis was on participation in divine life**, not personal inspiration.

3. Worship in the Church of the First 15 Centuries

From the apostolic age through the medieval period, worship developed organically but retained its essential structure: Liturgy of the Word (Mind & Soul) Inner man, Liturgy of the Eucharist/Lord's Supper involving **devotional practices** of partaking of the bread & Wine, kneeling in prayer, incense reflecting our prayers to God, sacred art, the visual elevating the Hosts towards heaven honoring our union the God

A. 4th–6th Centuries: The Age of Liturgical Formation

After Christianity's legalization, worship became more public and structured.

- Development of **fixed liturgies** (St. Basil, St. John Chrysostom, Roman Rite).
- Use of **chant** (Byzantine, Gregorian).
- Architectural development of basilicas.
- Increased ceremonial: incense, vestments, processions.
- Daily structured prayer to shape the inner soul of man. (1 Thess. 5:23; Hebs. 4:12)

Worship became a **cosmic drama**, reflecting heaven on earth.

B. 7th–10th Centuries: Monastic Influence

Monasteries shaped worship profoundly.

- Daily cycle of **Hours** (Matins, Vespers, etc.).
- Expansion of psalmody.
- Heightened emphasis on silence, contemplation, and asceticism.

C. 11th–15th Centuries: High Medieval or Middle Ages Worship

Worship became more heavenly oriented and richly symbolic and sacramental.

- Development of **feast days** and liturgical seasons.
- Growth of **processions, pilgrimages, and devotional practices**.
- Increased theological reflection on the Eucharist.

Despite regional differences, worship remained:

- **Sacramental**
- **Liturgical**
- **Communal**
- **Rooted in Scripture and tradition**

The Church understood worship as **the participation of the faithful in the heavenly liturgy**, *not a human-centered event*.

4. Does Worship Involve How We Feel?

The Role of Emotion

Emotion is a natural part of human experience, and worship can stir the heart. Yet Christian worship is not defined by:

- personal inspiration,
- emotional uplift,
- subjective experience.
- Feelings and emotions can be very misleading, deceiving and reflect one's current subjective state of mind, not objective reality. One's cognitive, past trauma, or physiological factors, mood or stress can distort one's view of God and are not reliable. Many people stop attending church or use the fact that they are mad at God as a way Satan could use our human feelings and emotions against us. This is why we must attend church. No Christian is an island unto themselves.

- Life Transitions can cause one to not attend church. Like moving changing schedules, etc.
- Loss of Faith or Hypocrisy-unanswered questions about the faith
- Church hurts or wounds cause alienation
- Alternative Community- Finding belonging, purpose, or spiritual connection. Many people are finding their way into the American Orthodox Church because of its all-round biblical connection to early church and present-day worship styles. It contains all of the Liturgical, sacramental, evangelical spiritual connections most churches have lost.

The Biblical and Historical View

This view centers on one's total-life response to God's self-revelation, evolving from physical sacrificial rites to spiritual, whole person devotion. Saved people Gather, Give and Worship Together.

Worship is:

- **We Gather-** God's people assemble for vertical worship, it's not about us, it is about honoring God. Everyone God called, He called them publicly. Hebs. 10:25
- **We hear God's Word-** with action and obedience and spiritual nourishment. Roms. 10:17
- **We Give** – Proverbs says to honor the Lord with what he has given you, your wealth. Provbs. 3:9; 2Cor.9:7; Phil.4:18
- **An act of obedience** — “Give unto the Lord the glory due His name.” 1 Sam.15:22; Jn 14:15
- **An offering** — “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice.” Roms. 12:1
- **A participation** — “Let us draw near with a true heart to encourage one another.” Hebs. 10:24-25

Emotion may accompany worship, but it is **never the standard** by which worship is judged.

Theological Summary

Worship is:

- **God-centered**, not self-centered.
- **Objective**, not emotional.
- **Covenantal**, not spontaneous.
- **Formational**, shaping the believer over time.

- **Scripture Centered** – Focuses on the heart, truth, and obedience, not emotions.
- **Rooted in Spirit and Truth, not music-** bible says our worship is in God's Word. Col 3:16. Music, if used correctly can be a tool in our worship but not the driving force of why we worship.

The Church worships because **God commands it, deserves it, and meets His people through it.**

5. Conclusion: The Heart of Christian Worship

Across 2,000 years, Christian worship has remained anchored in:

- **Word**
- **Sacrament**
- **Prayer**
- **Communal participation**
- **Reverence and awe**

Worship is not primarily about how we feel—it is about **who God is** and **what He has done**. Feelings may rise and fall, but worship remains the Church's faithful response to the Triune God.

APPENDIX

Biblical Reasons to Attend Church

As a pastor for over 45 years, I continue to hear people say I am a Christian but no where in the bible says I have to attend church to be saved.

Attending church is not about earning salvation, but about living out the life of a believer in community with other Christians. The Bible calls believers to gather regularly for worship, teaching, and fellowship, so we can grow in faith, encourage one another, and reflect Christ's love to the world.

1. Jesus Christ died for the church

Ephesians 5:25 says Christ "gave himself up for her" — the church — showing His sacrificial love. As members of His body, we are called to participate in His work

2. Be imitators of Christ and His apostles

Luke 4:16, Mark 1:21, and Acts 11:26 show Jesus and His followers meeting together regularly to teach and encourage. We are to follow their example

3. Hear and be taught God's Word

Colossians 3:16, 2 Timothy 2:15, and 2 Timothy 3:16 emphasize that Scripture is "God-breathed" and vital for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness. Church is where we hear it preached and apply it

4. Encourage and spur one another

Hebrews 10:24–25 commands us "not to give up meeting together" but to "encourage one another" as the day of the Lord approaches. Fellowship provides mutual encouragement and accountability

5. Avoid being hardened by sin

Hebrews 3:12–13 warns against an "evil, unbelieving heart" that leads to falling away. Regular church attendance helps keep us spiritually alert and resistant to sin

6. Sharpen one another spiritually

Proverbs 27:17 says "iron sharpens iron." In the body of Christ, we challenge, teach, and grow each other in faith

7. Exercise spiritual gifts for the common good

Romans 12:6–7 and 1 Corinthians 12:7–11 show that God gives gifts to serve others and build up the body. Church is the place where these gifts are used

8. Live in community with other believers

1 Corinthians 12:27 calls us "members of one body." Fellowship fosters love, unity, and mutual support (1 John 4:12; Galatians 5:13)

9. Be part of God's mission

Matthew 5:14–16 says we are the “light of the world.” Church is where we live out this mission through worship, service, and witness

10. Find comfort and encouragement

In times of sorrow or uncertainty, the church offers prayer, fellowship, and hope (Hebrews 10:23–25; 1 John 4:12)

In summary: Church attendance is a biblical “holy habit” — a place where we worship God, hear His Word, encourage one another, grow in grace, and serve the body of Christ. It is not a spectator sport; we are called to be active participants in the life of the church

Why Attending Church is so Important

Attending church services is vital for spiritual growth, community building, and personal well-being, offering numerous benefits that enhance both individual lives and the collective faith experience.

Spiritual Growth and Worship

- **Glorifying God:** Regular church attendance allows believers to worship collectively, which is a fundamental aspect of Christian life. It helps focus attention on God and fosters a deeper relationship with Him
- **Teaching and Learning:** Church services provide opportunities to learn from Scripture and teachings that encourage spiritual growth. Engaging with the Word of God in a communal setting enhances understanding and application in daily life

Community and Fellowship

- **Building Relationships:** Attending church fosters connections with other believers, creating a supportive community. This fellowship is essential for encouragement, accountability, and mutual growth in faith
- **Practicing Spiritual Gifts:** The church is a place where individuals can use their God-given spiritual gifts to serve others, contributing to the church's mission and enhancing personal fulfillment .

Mental and Emotional Well-being

- **Reducing Stress and Anxiety:** Regular participation in church services has been linked to lower levels of stress and anxiety. The communal worship experience provides hope and a sense of belonging, which can significantly improve mental health.
- **Promoting Happiness:** Studies suggest that individuals who attend church regularly report higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction, as the community and worship environment foster positive emotions.

Family and Generational Impact

- **Introducing Children to Faith:** Church attendance is an excellent way to introduce children to the teachings of Christianity and the love of God. It provides a foundation for their spiritual development and encourages them to build their own faith hebrews12endurance.com.
- **Creating Family Traditions:** Regular church attendance can strengthen family bonds and create lasting traditions centered around faith and community involvement Christianity.

Conclusion

In summary, attending church services is not just a routine; it is a vital practice that enriches the spiritual lives of individuals and families. It fosters community, supports mental health, and encourages personal growth, making it an essential aspect of a fulfilling Christian life. Regular participation in church activities helps believers to live out their faith actively and meaningfully.

1. It's a place of Spiritual Growth
2. Revival
3. Restoration
4. Worship
5. Fellowship
6. Giving
7. Prayer
8. Encouragement
9. Healing
10. Holiness
11. Ministry
12. Service
13. Peace and Comfort
14. Psalms 122:1