

Christology, Worship, and the Eucharist

Introduction

In my experience, one of the first few questions that comes up in dialogue between Trinitarians and Unitarians is the question of the worship of Jesus. I would guess that most of you here have been asked questions like “If you don’t believe Jesus is God, how can you worship him?” or “Wouldn’t it be idolatry to worship Jesus if he isn’t God?”. Unlike other questions that often come up in early conversations with a Trinitarian, this is a good question that deserves a good answer. The focus of my presentation today will be trying to give what I think is the best Biblical answer.

Three Answers

I have heard three different responses to whether one should worship Jesus: “Yes,” “No,” and “Kind of yes, kind of no.” For Unitarians answering “yes,” the explanation is that God has appointed Jesus to a position in which he is worthy of worship. Just as God commanded that no one should be worshiped in the Old Testament except himself, God can also command that his son is to be worshiped in the New Testament. For those who answer “no,” there is a distinction between veneration and worship. If you have ever argued with a Catholic or an Orthodox about their treatment of Mary, you probably heard a response that made a distinction between the worship given to God, that is, members of the Trinity, and the veneration given to the saints and Mary. Biblical Unitarians of this position apply this same distinction except to Jesus and God. The last position tries to split the difference; Jesus is seen as the means or conduit of worshiping God the Father. So, while the action of worship can be given to Jesus, the ultimate recipient of this action is not Jesus himself, but God. Often Philippians 2:11 is cited as support for this view: “every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Scholars that argue that Jesus was worshiped

This question is also relevant as a growing body of scholarship makes the case that early Christian worship of Jesus is evidence of their “deity of Christ” beliefs. Larry Hurtado writes:

“To demonstrate that Christ was given the sorts of devotion that we can properly understand as full cultic worship, and that we can rightly describe Christian worship of the earliest observable decades as genuinely ‘binitarian.’ That is, I contend that at this surprisingly early stage Christian worship has two recipients, God and Christ, yet the early Christians understand themselves as monotheists and see their inclusion of Christ in their devotional life as in no way compromising the uniqueness of the one God to whom they had been converted through the Gospel.”¹

Similarly, Richard Bauckham says:

¹ Hurtado, “Origins,” 5.

“The prevalence and centrality of the worship of Jesus in early Christianity from an early date has frequently been underestimated, as has its importance for understanding christological development.”²

Both Hurtado and Bauckham classify actions toward Jesus as full-fledged cultic worship in the context of monotheism. Their point is that even if the propositions of trinitarianism and incarnational theology came later, they were already baked into the worship procedures and practices of Christianity at the earliest recognizable phase.

Scholars that argue that Jesus was not worshiped

James Dunn argued that Jesus was not worshiped, or at least not directly or primarily:

“The most consistent answer to the question ‘Did the first Christians worship Jesus?’ was that Jesus was not usually worshipped as such... There was no thought of sacrifice being offered to Jesus, only of Jesus as the decisive sacrifice making right the relationship between God and believers.”³

Dunn here is writing to directly refute some of the claims of Hurtado and Bauckham, and he also draws our attention to the importance of worship as sacrifice.

Scholars that argue God is worshiped through Jesus

Not all trinitarians agree that Jesus is to be worshiped as an end in himself. While “monarchical trinitarians” are certainly a minority, Dr. Beau Branson⁴ and Dr. Joshua Sijuwade argue that worship to the Son is ultimately given to the Father. Sijuwade nuances Hurtado’s point:

“This cultic veneration of the Jesus, this dyadic devotional pattern, which was there from the beginning, allowed there to be a high Christology, but I think the only way that if Hurtado is correct on these points, the only way that Paul and the other first century Christians could have affirmed their view as monotheism and be worshipping the Son, is because they had they had this idea that ... it was always directed to the one God through the Son.”⁵

Scholarly opinion is still divided on this question and the stakes for Christology are high.

Purpose and Position Statement of my Presentation

I believe that much of the confusion on this topic is related to the definition of “worship.” My proposal is that the proper Biblical definition of worship is centered around the offering of sacrifices to a deity. In Second Temple Judaism, worship was conducted in the Jerusalem temple, with regular animal sacrifices and other related offerings given to Yahweh, the one true God of Israel, through the rituals performed by the Levitical Priesthood with the nation of Israel participating by eating the food from that sacrifice. Christianity certainly redefined the worship practices of Second Temple Judaism, but it did not redefine the recipient of that worship. In early Christianity, worship was conducted in dispersed small assemblies with the Eucharist taking central place as the sacrificial meal. This meal celebrated the sacrifice of Jesus

² Bauckham, “Jesus,” 127.

³ Dunn, “Did the First,” 91.

⁴ Tideman, “Beau Branson,” 01:00:01.

⁵ Tideman, “Dr Joshua Sijuwade,” 00:43:10.

to God the Father, with Jesus playing the role of heavenly high priest - present in a spiritual sense after being invoked by leaders of the Christian community with their fellow Christians as participants. Jesus comes to play a central role in Christian worship, but he is not the recipient of the worship. Instead, he is a heavenly participant, along with the gathered Christian community, in that worship. In earliest Christianity, Jesus was the recipient of veneration, honor, glory, praise, and cultic invocation, but these actions and attitudes do not count as worship. Rather, they are the fitting actions and attitudes appropriate to the resurrected, exalted, and heavenly enthroned Messiah and Son of God. This strongly refutes the claims of scholars who wish to argue for an early high Christology and even a multipersonalited monotheism at the beginnings of Christianity based on worship of Jesus. Instead, we can make a strong counterclaim that Jesus was not worshiped, and this points to a Unitarian Christology, or what Dustin Smith has called a “high human Christology,”⁶ in earliest Christianity. I know this idea will be somewhat new and even perhaps controversial among Unitarian Christians. To defend this claim, I will first look at the Biblical evidence for this definition of worship, then the New Testament evidence of this definition in practice, followed by evidence from outside the New Testament about early Christian worship practices. Finally, I will discuss what I think are some of the practical ramifications of this idea for Unitarian Christians now.

Distinction between Worship and Veneration

For many contemporary Christians, worship is associated with music and emotions from passionate singing. While singing and music certainly play a role in the Biblical expression of worship, the majority of the words and verses related to “worship” are about rituals, incense, physical gestures of reverence, and most importantly, sacrifice. I think the central text for beginning to understand the Biblical definition of worship is during the temptation of Jesus:

And he [Satan] said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.’”⁷

The Greek word for “worship” here is from the root *proskuneó* and the word for “serve” from the root *latreuó*. I think most English translations do us a disservice here. *Proskuneó* is not principally a word about religious worship; its root is derived from the word meaning “to kiss.” If that sounds strange, consider the opening scene from the Godfather. On the day of his daughter’s wedding, guests come to the Godfather and kiss his hand, making a physical gesture of submission to the Godfather’s authority. *Proskuneó* is a physical gesture of submission to someone above you in the social hierarchy. It is true that physical gestures are an important part of religious worship, but they are not exclusive to religious worship.

Latreuó, on the other hand, is a word exclusively reserved for religious worship. It is often translated with the English word “serve,” which for us is not an exclusively religious activity. A waiter at a restaurant serves his customers, a member of the army serves his country. *Latreuó* exclusively denotes the religious activity of offering a sacrifice to a deity. It does come from a root related to acts of service, but that is

⁶ Smith “Mark’s High Human” 39:30

⁷ Matthew 4:9-10 (ESV)

because during a religious sacrifice you serve the deity offerings. This verse introduces an important distinction. There are some actions that are veneration and some actions that are worship. The easiest way to remember this distinction is that veneration is properly due to persons who are above you in the hierarchy, while worship is due to God, who is at the top of the hierarchy.

Worship in the Old Testament

A full coverage of worship practices in the Old Testament has already filled many books. This passage from Deuteronomy 12 is a nice summary; God is giving instructions to the Hebrews pertaining to worship practices as they enter the promised land.

These are the statutes and rules that you shall be careful to do in the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess, all the days that you live on the earth. You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. You shall tear down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and burn their Asherim with fire. You shall chop down the carved images of their gods and destroy their name out of that place. You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way. But you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there. There you shall go, and there you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, your vow offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herd and of your flock. And there you shall eat before the Lord your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your households, in all that you undertake, in which the Lord your God has blessed you.⁸

We can see a clear list of the worship practices of the Pagan Canaanites that are to be destroyed. These include polytheistic worship, idolatry, and worshiping in multiple locations. By contrast, Israelite worship is to be monolatrous, aniconic, and centralized in one place. There are no less than seven kinds of sacrifice commanded in one sentence. Our modern world seems to associate sacrifice with weird blood rituals, and while the Old Testament certainly has some of that, the meaning of sacrifice is often misunderstood. Biblical sacrifice is offering back to God the best of the gifts that God has given you for His own service. While animals are part of that, this also includes money, land, clothing, precious metals, music, and work. Even whole people's lives are dedicated to God as a sacrifice (e.g., Samuel and Samson). Within that larger definition of sacrifice, there is the specific practice of sacrificial meals, which is briefly mentioned as "eating before the Lord." You can see a more detailed example when God gives instructions for the sacrificial meal at the ordination of a Priest.

Now this is what you shall do to them to consecrate them, that they may serve me as priests. Take one bull of the herd and two rams without blemish, and unleavened bread, unleavened cakes mixed with oil, and unleavened wafers smeared with oil. You shall make them of fine wheat flour. You shall put them in one basket and bring them in the basket and bring the bull and the two rams.⁹

After the food is brought in, the Priests put on the sacred vestments and are anointed with oil. Then the bull and two rams are killed. The blood is used to purify the altar and the Priests being ordained.

⁸ Deuteronomy 12:1-7 (ESV)

⁹ Exodus 29:1-3 (ESV)

You shall also take the fat from the ram and the fat tail and the fat that covers the entrails, and the long lobe of the liver and the two kidneys with the fat that is on them, and the right thigh (for it is a ram of ordination), and one loaf of bread and one cake of bread made with oil, and one wafer out of the basket of unleavened bread that is before the Lord. You shall put all these on the palms of Aaron and on the palms of his sons, and wave them for a wave offering before the Lord. Then you shall take them from their hands and burn them on the altar on top of the burnt offering, as a pleasing aroma before the Lord. It is a food offering to the Lord.¹⁰

In a sacrificial meal, often some amount of the animal is burned to be sent up to God in heaven. The symbolism is of a dinner party with the worshipers playing the role of gracious hosts. As good hosts, the best goes to God and the rest is shared as a group meal. The fat on the kidneys might not sound appetizing to us, but to them it was a delicacy. After God has been served first, the Priests share together in the meal.

You shall take the ram of ordination and boil its flesh in a holy place. And Aaron and his sons shall eat the flesh of the ram and the bread that is in the basket in the entrance of the tent of meeting. They shall eat those things with which atonement was made at their ordination and consecration, but an outsider shall not eat of them, because they are holy.¹¹

Specifically notice how the sacrificial meal was reserved for the sanctified. This passage is just one particularly detailed passage among many others that connect worship with sacrificial meals that are shared between God and the worshippers.

Veneration in the Old Testament

Since we have looked at which actions count as worship, let's look at which actions do not exclusively count as worship in the Old Testament. At the end of 1 Chronicles, there is a scene depicting the transfer of power from King David to his son Solomon.

Then David said to all the assembly, "Bless the Lord your God." And all the assembly blessed the Lord, the God of their fathers, and bowed their heads and paid homage to the Lord and to the king. And they offered sacrifices to the Lord, and on the next day offered burnt offerings to the Lord, 1,000 bulls, 1,000 rams, and 1,000 lambs, with their drink offerings, and sacrifices in abundance for all Israel. And they ate and drank before the Lord on that day with great gladness.¹²

In some older translations instead of "paid homage" it says "worship." In English, "worship" used to have the additional meaning of bowing to a superior. That meaning is almost completely gone from contemporary English, but the linguistic confusion remains. Here the people of Israel are bowing simultaneously to the unseen God and King Solomon on the throne. This is not an act of idolatry or worship of the King. This is rather a fitting act of respect, submission, and veneration due to God and the

¹⁰ Exodus 29:22-25 (ESV)

¹¹ Exodus 29:31-33 (ESV)

¹² 1 Chronicles 29:20-22 (ESV)

King. You will notice however, that the sacrifices are not offered to the King but to God. The coronation of Solomon is an occasion for venerating the king and worshiping God in a celebratory sacrificial feast. In Psalm 45 we can see that not only is bowing a form of veneration but so is singing a song of praise.

*My heart overflows with a pleasing theme; I address my verses to the king; my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe. You are the most handsome of the sons of men; grace is poured upon your lips; therefore God has blessed you forever. Gird your sword on your thigh, O mighty one, in your splendor and majesty!*¹³

While many of us today associate singing songs of praise to someone as the action most closely associated with worship, Psalm 45 is unabashedly a song of praise to the King of Israel, likely written for the historical King Hezekiah. This shows that singing songs of praise is a form of veneration. That doesn't mean songs can't be sung as part of worship; certainly most Psalms in the Bible are, but they aren't exclusively limited to God in the same way sacrificial worship is. Singing happy birthday to someone is not worship; nor is singing "My Country 'Tis of Thee" on July 4th worshiping our country. In the same way it is appropriate to sing songs of praise to the eternal King Jesus.

Summary of OT Worship with view to NT

The worship that we see in the Old Testament sets the context for the New Testament. When defining worship in the Jewish context of the New Testament, we can ask the simple questions who, what, where, and when. Worship was led by Priests and especially the High Priest. The participants were the people that were "clean" depending on the specific ritual. Sometimes this was all the Jewish people, sometimes just Priests, or sometimes just the High Priest, depending on the particular occasion. The participants had to be made clean for the worship either with washing or by blood. The recipient was only ever Yahweh, the one true God of Israel. The "what" of the worship was a sacrifice or offering. This could be an animal, food, drink, land, money, songs, praise, or other material gifts depending on the occasion. In terms of "where," Jews emphasized one location for worship, which served to geographically unify the community. In Second Temple Judaism this was of course the Temple on the Mount in Jerusalem. The Samaritans worshiped on Mount Gerizim, but Jesus and his followers participated in the worship at Jerusalem. Finally, there were daily rituals, weekly rituals, monthly rituals associated with new moons, and annual festivals such as Passover. Each of these occasions had their own specific rites.

Correspondingly, bowing down to important figures, singing of songs, and reading of Torah were all important aspects of Jewish religious life, but these were not the specific actions that delineated the unique act of worship. Christianity would transform the answers to each of these questions except for one: the question of who should be worshiped remained Yahweh or God the Father.

Jesus Worshiped God during his Life

Before I transition to early Christian worship, there is another question that scholars like Hurtado and Bauckham seemingly fail to see as important: "Did Jesus himself worship God?". The simple answer is yes. Jesus's worship of God began as an infant.

¹³ Psalm 45:1-5

And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”) and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.”¹⁴

This passage might be easy to overlook, but here Jesus, along with Joseph and Mary, is worshiping God by participating in a traditional Jewish ritual involving a sacrificial offering of birds to God in Jerusalem in an expression of gratitude for a newborn son that opens the womb. The gospels go on to record numerous occasions where Jesus participates in the temple worship of God. No word is given about Jesus not participating or in any way altering the worship to direct it to himself. Throughout his earthly life, Jesus was a faithful Jew who worshiped the God of Israel according to the customs of his time. The New Testament simply takes this for granted and never feels the need to offer any qualification or explanation. However, Jesus does hint about a transformation of worship that is about to take place.

The woman said to him, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.” Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.”¹⁵

Here Jesus affirms Jerusalem as the only location of proper worship. He includes himself among the Jews who worship God, but hints that the Jerusalem-centric nature of worship is about to change. What does he mean by “worship in spirit and in truth”? It should also be noted that the Greek word for worship used here is from the word *proskeneó* which I previously mentioned as a word that could mean either veneration or worship. It is clear in this passage that it means religious worship. This demonstrates that the vocabulary is somewhat flexible, and that proper interpretation of the words doesn’t always follow hard and fast rules but depends on context.

The Last Supper and the Transformation of Worship

While Jesus participated in Jewish worship of God during his life, at the end of his life he begins the transformation of that worship.

And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”¹⁶

Just as the covenant that was initiated at Mount Sinai had started a regimen of worship, Jesus begins a new covenant with a new regimen of worship. However, the food at the new sacrificial meal is now

¹⁴ Luke 2:22-24 (ESV)

¹⁵ John 4:19-23 (ESV)

¹⁶ Luke 22:19-20 (ESV)

somehow Jesus's own body and blood. The Book of Hebrews is almost entirely focused on this phenomenon of the change in worship from the old covenant to the new covenant.

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.¹⁷

The old covenant had an Aaronic Priesthood; the new covenant has a messianic priesthood with Jesus as the eternal high priest in the order of Melchizedek. The old covenant worship took place in a tabernacle on earth; the new covenant worship takes place in the tabernacle not built by humans but in heaven. The worshipers of the old covenant were made clean by the blood of animals; the worshipers of the new covenant are made clean with the blood of Christ. This passage also makes abundantly clear that despite all these changes initiated by the work of Christ, the recipient of worship has not changed. Yahweh the God of Israel is still the recipient of the offering and worship. Christ is the lead participant in worship, not its recipient. The people who worship are no longer the people of the Old Covenant, but the people of the New Covenant. But if our High Priest is in heaven, and his sacrifice is presented in heaven, and the eternal tabernacle is in heaven, how do we participate in this worship? The two-pronged answer to this question is that we participate in this worship through the Holy Spirit and the Eucharist.

Christian Worship in First Corinthians

Paul deals with these questions and topics repeatedly in First Corinthians. In the context of addressing instances of sexual immorality, Paul tells the Corinthian Church:

For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus.¹⁸

Jesus is spiritually present with the gathered assembly of Christian worshipers in Corinth. Even Paul can be spiritually present among them in this way. The assembled Christians would call on the name of Jesus as an invocation at the beginning of the Christian assembly to invite Jesus into their presence spiritually. This established a connection between the earthly gathering of people and the worship led by Christ our high priest in the heavenly tabernacle. Just as the people participated in the Old Covenant sacrifices by eating the food that was part of the offering, the worshipers in the New Covenant eat bread that is the body of Christ and drink wine that is the blood of Christ. The connection between the bread and wine and the body and blood likewise is a spiritual connection. Paul calls it "spiritual food" and "spiritual drink" in 1 Corinthians 10:3-4. One of the topics that Paul deals with repeatedly in First Corinthians is the eating of food sacrificed to idols. The council of Jerusalem had decided that Gentile Christians didn't

¹⁷ Hebrews 9:11-14 (ESV)

¹⁸ 1 Corinthians 5:3-4

need to follow Torah but still needed to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols. This might seem like a weird thing to include on the list, but this was to ensure that the new Gentile Christians ceased to participate in idolatry for the same reasons that Daniel abstained from the meat and wine in Babylon.¹⁹ The Corinthian Church seems to have struggled with this command and Paul uses multiple lines of persuasion to convince the Gentile Christians in Corinth to comply.

Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.²⁰

Here, Paul states that Jews who eat the meat from offerings in the temple participate in that worship. Similarly, pagans who eat meat sacrificed to idols participate in the worship of demons. In the same way, Christians who eat the bread and wine in the Eucharist participate in the body of Christ and the worship of God. Just as drinking the cup of demons is idolatry, in the same way, drinking the cup of Jesus's blood is worshiping God in the new covenant. The Corinthian Church was clearly having difficulties with celebrating the Eucharist properly. These difficulties seemed related perhaps to social inequalities and maybe also drunkenness and gluttony. After repeating the familiar words of institution that Paul says he received directly from the Lord, Paul then issues some warnings relating to improper participation in the Eucharist:

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.²¹

This suggests that participating in the Eucharist is something more than symbolic or merely memorial. Improper participation can cause physical harm and even death. There is a connection between the physical elements and the spiritual realities. I would also suggest that the general context of these warnings about improper eucharistic participation suggest that this ceremony was done weekly. This is not explicit in the text but strongly suggested by the context. In the very next paragraph, Paul deals with improper usage of the manifestations of the spirit in the weekly gatherings and the middle section of 1 Corinthians seems to be addressing problems with their weekly gatherings from proper attire for women, to the Eucharist, to speaking in tongues.

The Eucharist in the Didache

¹⁹ Daniel 1:8 (ESV)

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 10:14-21 (ESV)

²¹ 1 Corinthians 11:27-30 (ESV)

While the Eucharist is not explicitly called a sacrifice in the New Testament, it is paralleled with meals that were a sacrifice, which strongly implies that Paul viewed it as such. Also, while it is not explicitly commanded to be performed weekly, the context again strongly implies as much. With some ambiguities left lingering around eucharistic practice in early Christianity, I want to turn next to the Didache. The Didache is widely believed to be from the first century and shows very strong connections with the Gospel of Matthew in terms of language and content. It was likely used as a church manual perhaps even before the New Testament was finished being written. Let me be clear, the Didache does not have the authority of scripture, but it is useful for providing a fuller look at the historical context of the New Testament. When laying out the proper procedure for taking the Eucharist it says:

But every Lord's day gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure. But let no one that is at variance with his fellow come together with you, until they be reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be profaned.²²

Here you can see the Eucharist is part of every Lord's Day gathering. It is explicitly called a sacrifice and talked about with the language of worship. There is also a command to confess your sins before participating, which is similar to Paul's warning about not participating in an unworthy manner. Chapter 10 of the Didache has a prayer to God the Father at the beginning of the Eucharist, which clearly indicates that it is not Jesus that is the recipient. It calls the bread and the wine "spiritual food and drink," again echoing Paul. Chapter 10 also forbids anyone who isn't baptized from participating in the Eucharist, citing "Give not that which is holy to the dogs." This parallels the Old Testament prohibition on any unclean person participating in the relevant sacrificial meal.

Works-Based Righteousness?

A possible objection that I want to address before question-and-answer time is the question of works-based righteousness or earning our salvation through works and rituals. Sacrifice is fundamentally about gratitude towards God for what he has given us and wanting to give back to God the best of what we have received from him. But what gift we could ever give that would be good enough to give to God? God provides us the perfect offering in the form of his son Jesus who lived a perfect life and voluntarily offered himself to be crucified on our behalf. As the book of Hebrews describes:

For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.²³

In the Eucharist we have the opportunity to participate in this ultimate worship of God by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. If that isn't grace, I don't know what is.

Something About Mary

²² Riddle, "Didache," Ch 14

²³ Hebrews 9:13-14

Another objection I want to address is the topic of Mary. I have been defending an idea mostly heard from Catholic or Orthodox apologists: there is a distinction between worship and veneration (and therefore their treatment of Mary is appropriate). While I do agree that this distinction is Biblical, I don't think it defends the Catholic treatment of Mary. The Old Testament forbids the making of graven images. Irenaeus, the early church father, associates the veneration of icons with Gnosticism. Richard Rubenstein says, "To the extent that Latin Christians felt the need for a heavenly mediator between man and God, that role was played by the cults of the saints and especially the cult of the Virgin Mary, which was greatly strengthened by the triumph of Nicene orthodoxy."²⁴ I think Dr. Rubenstein is right that when Christ was elevated into the godhead, Mary took on many of his former roles. Even if Catholics still only venerate Mary, they may be doing so improperly by using icons, burning incense, and offering her gifts. Perhaps worst of all they give her the attention that is properly due to her son. While we Biblical Unitarians can make use of their distinction between worship and veneration, that does not mean we have to condone their veneration of Mary and the saints.

Conclusion and Applications

While the early Christians elevated Jesus to an unprecedented level of attention and veneration, they did not worship him in the full sense of the word. Jesus himself worshiped God and continues to worship God in heaven. Early Christian worship is defined centrally by the Eucharist meal, in which God the Father is the recipient and the Christian community led by Christ is the participant. Jesus is never portrayed as the recipient of sacrificial worship in the New Testament nor are any of the words that are exclusive to worship used directly toward him. This is a strong argument against Jesus being viewed as God by the early Christians and strong clear evidence that Jesus was distinct from the identity of the God whom the Christians worshiped. This offers a strong apologetic for a Biblical Unitarian Christology at the foundation of earliest Christianity.

I also want to suggest to my fellow Biblical Unitarians that we should take the Eucharist as seriously as the early church. The goal of a restorationist is to be as authentic to early Christianity as possible and this includes our worship practices. Let us not just believe like early Christians, let us worship like them too.

²⁴ Rubenstein, "When Jesus", 228.

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