



The Revd Dave Clancey

Book Review • True Worship

"It may be laid down as a rule," wrote Bishop Ryle, "with tolerable confidence, that the absence of accurate definitions is the very life of religious controversy." This statement, from the beginning of Ryle's *Knots Untied* came to mind as I picked up Vaughan Roberts' *True Worship*. I was expecting a book that would set forth the Bible's understanding of what worship is, and what it is not. A book that would, essentially, provide an accurate definition in the face of much contemporary talk of 'worship'.

That is what this book is, and very much more. Roberts, rector of St Ebbe's Anglican Church in Oxford, England, is a deceptively simple writer. His work is peppered with illustrations and anecdotes and reads clearly. *True Worship* is not a long book (106 pages) and yet in its six chapters it not only defines and clarifies what worship is, and what it is not, it sets forth the theological basis and implications of this right thinking.

Robert's aim is simple—in the face of confused and sometimes unbiblical thinking about worship he seeks to set forth what the bible teaches about the subject and what this means for us personally and in our churches. The opening two chapters focus on two key texts—John 4 and Romans 12:1–3 respectively. Our attention is drawn back to our Lord's words where he transfers the worship of God from a place (Gerizim or Jerusalem) to a person (himself) and who gives the ground for that worship—spirit and truth, both of which are found in Christ himself. From Romans 12 Roberts reminds us of both the responsive and the all-encompassing nature of worship. Because of God's mercy to us in Christ our lives (body and mind) are now living sacrifices. Pastorally and practically we are encouraged as readers to assess ourselves in light of Scripture in our thinking about ourselves, others, our churches etc.

If we have lived in an ecclesial world that speaks of worship as what we do when we gather together as church (be that in music or in sacrament) the third and fourth chapters may be the point where we start to feel a little uncomfortable. Chapter 3 makes the clear point 'we do not meet specifically to worship God'. Given such a claim, Roberts devotes considerable time to show why this is the

case, marshalling evidence from the biblical texts themselves showing that the four words translated 'worship' in our Bibles are infrequently used to describe what happens when Christians meet, and are never used to describe why Christians gather. A careful examination of the letter to the Hebrews in light of the Old Testament sacrificial system provides the theological basis for not using 'worship' to refer to what we are doing as we gather. Along the way, the language of 'priest' and 'sacrifice' are held up to a fair amount of biblical criticism.

Having cleared the ground, and on a far more positive note, chapter 4 considers what we are doing as we gather for church. Building on his work in Hebrews, Roberts rightly focuses on the key exhortation of 10:24–25 (encouragement) and the Pauline concept of corporate edification. Church is where Christians gather to be encouraged and built up in their faith by the Word of God and sacraments, through the ministration of gifts given to God's people. The primary idea, touched on earlier in the book, is that of 'direction of movement'. Church is not primarily about a movement from us to God, but God to us, by his Word and Spirit, through his people. The movement from us to God is in response to this primary movement and encompasses prayer and praise.

Two final chapters address the issues of music and the Lord's Supper. Both address theological and practical issues that arise out of too much, or too little emphasis on either area. These are clearly significant issues and Roberts' intention is to set forth how the Bible speaks about them and what this means for those who seek to live according to God's word.

True worship pulls no punches. And yet it does so not to prove a point or to be antagonistic but rather to see Christians and churches living and thinking and talking in accordance with God's Word. The book could have benefitted from more work on the theological nature of church, and how this informs her practice. And while there's no doubt that some will find the conclusions Roberts states difficult to hear, he has done us a great service by taking us back to Scripture and forcing us to assess our language and practice in the light of God's holy Word.

Dave Clancy