

WORSHIP

ḥwh and 'ābad

How do we live once the Truth has set us free? What is life as a redeemed person supposed to feel like or look like? Driving up to Idaho to visit my husband's family one summer vacation, we stopped for a delicious lunch at a drive-in near Brigham City. We listened to the radio as we ate. A caller expressed his relief in leaving the Church. Now, he declared, nobody would tell him what to do with his money, what to do with his time, and what to wear. He was free. For me, this highlighted the life of worship that we are invited into as disciples in Christ's Church. We are told what we should do with 10 percent of our increase, what we should do with our time on the Sabbath, and what we should wear to keep our temple covenants. We are bound.

Freedom has modern connotations that bring to mind self-rule and self-will. The ideal is doing what we want, how we want, when we want. Any constraints or limits to our autonomy are seen as putting us in bondage. But when we look at the redemption that Jehovah offered Israel, we



In this new relationship, we leave the world behind and worship as we bow down and serve him.

see that it was not to be freed from serving the Egyptians in order to run free in a modern sense. Because of our redemption, we belong to Christ and publicly acknowledge our submission to our Lord and Redeemer and his living prophets through a life of obedience. It may seem counterintuitive that the freedom God offers us can be described in the same terms as the bondage we're being freed from. Unlike slavery in human history, which debases the value of human life, becoming the servants of the Lord is being like Christ, who did the will of the Father in all things. Our submission is what makes us Saints. Our willingness to live his way is how we worship.

OUR LORD

From the Old Testament we learn of the relationship between the redemption of the children of Israel and their responsibility to serve and worship their true Lord. This connection is repeated in what Moses is told: "And thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, Thus saith the Lord, Israel is my son, even my firstborn: and I say unto thee, Let my son go, *that he may serve me*" (Exodus 4:22–23; emphasis added). We are brought from the captivity of serving sin to the freedom of serving the Lord.

The Old Testament helps us understand why we should want to see ourselves as God’s servants, those who are grateful to bow down and serve only him. In the Ten Commandments, part of the covenant with the house of Israel, the Lord told the Israelites, “I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2–3). The Lord’s position as *our* Lord derives from his having brought us out from the bondage of another lord, from being the servants of sin (see John 8:34). Because of the redemption, the Israelites became God’s *‘abadim*, his servants or slaves.

This type of service, or slavery, is markedly different from human bondage. In Leviticus 25, in a discussion of slavery under the law of Moses, the Lord explains that Israelites who become slaves have a different status than foreign slaves. “For they are my servants, which I brought forth out of the land of Egypt: they shall not be sold as bondmen” (Leviticus 25:42). This chapter explains that fellow Israelites cannot be human property, as can a foreign slave, because of the redemption. This sense of belonging to the Lord as his servants or slaves because of the redemption from bondage in Egypt is a foreshadowing of the spiritual principle taught by Paul: “ye are not your own[;] for ye are bought with a price” (1 Corinthians 6:19–20).

The language of being servants or slaves of God is widespread in both the Old and New Testaments, but these texts also originate from cultures in which slavery was widespread. This is another ancient concept that pushes us to dig deep into ancient language and thought to see what we can understand and experience in our present world. Let’s start with some key words to work ourselves into this way of seeing ourselves and our relationship with God.

In the vocabulary of the Old Testament, the Hebrew verbs meaning “bow down” (*hwh* or *hwy*) and “serve” (*‘abad*) are both often translated as “worship.” These verbs describe the physical expression of a relationship of submission to authority—to bow down and to serve. We acknowledge another as our lord by bowing down and serving. The way we behave is

an embodiment of this relationship. The respect and obedience embodied in bowing down and serving shows our relationship to the one who has authority to command, the one to whom we owe worship.

We can see this elaborated in the Ten Commandments. An explanation given after the first commandment to worship only the Lord clarifies, “Thou shalt not *bow* thyself to them, nor *serve* them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God” (Exodus 20:5; emphasis added). Because of their covenant relationship, the Israelites were to worship only Jehovah. He was their master and they were to serve only him. Likewise, the physical prostration of bowing down was due only to him. The act of bowing down was an expression of humility that recognized one’s dependence on and submission to another.

Now, of course, dependence and submission are also words that can make us flinch in a modern context, but let’s keep thinking about how bowing down and serving in the biblical world were ways of worshipping. One thing that can help us navigate this ancient culture is to see serving God in terms of our own redemption. Being God’s servant can become more understandable when we think of the immensity of the ransom that was paid for our souls. When we feel a gratitude so deep that we would do anything for the One who paid the price for our escape from bondage, we can start to understand worship as bowing down and serving. Paul again brings out the spiritual dimension of this relationship: “But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness” (Romans 6:17–18).

The need to keep our obedience rooted in a recognition of our debt to Christ is likely why we promise to “always remember him” in the sacrament prayer on the bread before we promise to “keep his commandments which he has given [us]” (Doctrine and Covenants 20:77). When we always remember Christ and what he has done for us, keeping his commandments becomes an expression of our gratitude and love. Our obedience is an outward sign of our redemption from the bondage of sin.

The serious obligations of obedience that we take upon ourselves in our covenant relationship acknowledge that we have committed to do his will in all things. We are not our own. We have been bought with a price. Our choice to obey his will in all things is a choice to bow down before his authority. Our choice to obey is a choice to worship with our lives.

BOWING DOWN

Again, in the modern world freedom and autonomy are elevated to almost unquestionable status. Bowing down just seems wrong. The idea of owing obedience or homage to anyone, let alone belonging to anyone, can make us extremely nervous. The endless abuse of power throughout history makes us grateful to live in a time and part of the world in which power is limited by law. We don't have to do things because others tell us to unless they are legally authorized to do so. Kings and nobles once had the right to rule and command simply by birth. The idea that others have the right to our obedience flies in the face of a Western, post-Enlightenment worldview.

The democratic urge to feel that we are our own boss can make it difficult to be in any relationships in which others tell us what to do. Even employers and parents struggle to set guidelines and expectations. Assumptions that no one has the right to command us will not help us navigate a divine relationship that precedes and transcends time and history. We must go back to ancient concepts, but we must also recognize that we are agents in this relationship: we chose Christ as our Lord and our King. We are not born as subjects to a sovereign whose will is law merely because of geography.

When we choose to be part of the kingdom of God by making covenants, we choose Christ as our King. We choose a relationship in which we promise to do his will. In this, Christ is our exemplar. With his baptism, Christ also covenanted to obey the Father: "He humbleth himself before the Father, and witnesseth unto the Father that he would be obedient unto him in keeping his commandments" (2 Nephi 31:7). Nephi

asks, “Can we follow Jesus save we shall be willing to keep the commandments of the Father?” (2 Nephi 31:10). Our covenants bind us into a relationship in which we covenant to “keep his commandments which he has given [us].” It may not be so hard to obey when we’re asked to do things that we can see the point of. We are commanded not to kill, commit adultery, steal, take substances that can harm us, and so on. Some things seem obvious, and it hardly takes any humility, any bowing down, to submit ourselves to his will.

The real submission and humility involved in bowing down to God’s will comes when we don’t understand, when it doesn’t make sense. And it’s even harder because of the fact that knowledge of God’s will often comes through other fallible human beings. Christ delegates his authority. He explained to the apostles: “He that receiveth you receiveth me, and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me” (Matthew 10:40).

I was a teenager in northern Virginia in the 1980s. This area had recently known controversies over doctrines and policies of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that had led to very public excommunications. I remember going to an area conference in a large sports arena as a child in the 1970s. A plane flew by with a banner behind it that said, “Heavenly Mother loves the ERA” (the Equal Rights Amendment was a proposed constitutional amendment that Church leaders spoke out against in 1976). In my youth, along with stacks of missionary pamphlets and copies of the Book of Mormon, we had years’ worth of issues of both *Dialogue* and *Sunstone* in our basement that my father felt confident enough to let me read through. I had the chance to think about many of the issues and challenges that still bother people to this day.

One lesson taught in Young Women when I was sixteen or seventeen was a powerful help. Our Young Women president was a wise and inspired woman. She didn’t shy away from controversies about women and the priesthood. Instead, she read section 84 of the Doctrine and Covenants with us. I learned about receiving the Lord’s servants and receiving all that he hath. And as we read and discussed together, my heart found peace in the Lord’s covenant promises even if I didn’t have the explana-

tion of why he had organized his Church in this particular way. I knew that I was promised all that the Father hath, and I knew I didn't need to be ordained to an office in the priesthood to receive the promise of his fullness.

Trusting the Lord when we don't understand is bowing down. Trusting that the Lord Jesus Christ spoke through the Prophet Joseph Smith and continues to speak to his living prophet, the President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is bowing down. My submission to Christ's authority is shown when I accept the authority of his servants. We know that they are not perfect. They know that they are not perfect. But part of trusting Christ and having a witness of the restoration of his Church and kingdom in the latter days is knowing that he has chosen his servants. He trusts them. And so, just as we trust him, we can trust them. When we listen to and follow their voice, we are listening to and following his voice. "He that receiveth you receiveth me." Our loyalty to Christ is manifest in our loyalty to his servants.

Exercising faith in Christ to receive his servants takes just that: faith. We choose to receive their word as though from his own mouth (Doctrine and Covenants 1:38; 21:5). And as we do, we qualify ourselves for the greatest blessings that God has. "For he that receiveth my servants receiveth me; and he that receiveth me receiveth my Father; and he that receiveth my Father receiveth my Father's kingdom; therefore all that my Father hath shall be given unto him" (Doctrine and Covenants 84:36–38). I still don't know why men need to be ordained to the priesthood before they can enter into the temple and receive the further covenants and blessings. The apostles have said they don't know either. I just know that I have received those covenants and temple blessings without being ordained, and that is all I need. I am grateful for the privilege of serving in the temple both as a patron and as an ordinance worker. I am confident that all we do in Church service, however we are asked to do it, shows our love and gratitude for our redemption. All service in the Church is worship and none more so than in the temple.

TEMPLE WORSHIP

In addition to the daily choices that reflect our loyalty and grateful submission to our Lord and Redeemer, one dimension of worship that we have in common with the ancient Israelites is temple worship. The verbs *bow down* (*hwh*) and *serve* (*‘abad*) were also used to describe how the Israelites responded to God’s presence in the temple. When Moses was in the tabernacle, speaking with the Lord, we learn that “all the people saw the cloudy pillar stand at the tabernacle door: and all the people rose up and worshipped [*hwh*], every man in his tent door” (Exodus 33:10; emphasis added). Here the verb *hwh* expresses how the people showed their awe and reverence for the presence of the Lord in the tabernacle: they bowed down and prostrated themselves. As is expressed in Psalm 95:6, “O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the Lord our maker.”

Seeing how worship functioned in the world of the Old Testament can help us see the spiritual truths to which the law of Moses pointed and also more fully appreciate living in the dispensation of the fullness of times with the new and everlasting covenant. A certain group of the Israelites, members of the tribe of Levi, were set apart as priests and Levites, those who had priesthood authority for temple service (see Numbers 3:5–10). The verb *‘abad*, which can be translated as “worship,” also means “to work” and “to serve.” Those of the tribe of Levi who were descended from Aaron could serve as priests and officiate in the sacrifices and ordinances of the temple. The priests and Levites were literally temple workers who had the priesthood authority to be in the temple for this service. They worshipped by serving the Lord in the temple. Other Israelites were commanded to come to the temple and to bring their offerings, but under the law of Moses their access to the temple was limited because of their lineage.

Ultimately, the Lord’s invitation to serve and worship him is universal: “Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands. Serve the Lord with gladness: come before his presence with singing” (Psalm 100:1–2). In our day we see a fulfillment of that psalm. All lands and all people are invited to covenant, be redeemed, and become the Lord’s servants. In our day,

we can all come and worship as his servants in temples throughout the world. Today all can enjoy this privilege that was once reserved for Levites and priests and come before his presence to worship and praise both as patrons and as ordinance workers.

Bowing down and serving the Lord in the context of temple worship is a commandment, but it is also a way we can express love and gratitude for our redemption. In the ritual action of obedience in temple service, we express and enact our relationship with God. As we ritually enact this relationship of obedience and service, we are better able to go forward to live it out more fully in the rest of our lives. Just as in the sacrament, in the ritual action of temple service we remember the redeeming power and sacrifice of Christ that brings us into the presence of God. We partake of his redemption as we commit to do his will and serve him.

Temple worship is as critical for us as it was for ancient Israel to ritually bow down and serve in the Old Testament temples. In the ritual process of submitting our will to God through temple service, we can let our spirits and minds be changed. Christ was the perfect example of obedience to the Father. He wants us to experience the oneness that he has with the Father in the only way that we can—submitting our will to his. Through ordinances we can learn what it means to worship not only in a ritual context but also in a life of obedience and covenant faithfulness. Through participation in the ordinances, our hope grows that our covenant faithfulness will allow the Lord to bring us back into his presence.

LIFE AS WORSHIP

When we live out a covenant relationship with God, it requires a whole-souled and embodied acceptance of our relationship as his servants to live our lives for him—spirit and body. Embracing the covenant relationship of being the Lord's servant is a full reshaping of ourselves—our minds and bodies oriented to his worship and his service. "And now, Israel, what doth the Lord thy God require of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God, to

walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul” (Deuteronomy 10:12).

Living a life of service and obedience means perpetually being on the Lord’s errand. As we live out our covenants we find satisfaction in being the Lord’s servants. It is a blessing to be available for the Lord to call on us. We learn to listen with young Samuel, “Speak, Lord; for thy servant heareth” (1 Samuel 3:9). As we seek to serve, we can be a means by which others’ prayers are answered. As we serve the Lord we come to know him more fully, “for how knoweth a man the master whom he has not served” (Mosiah 5:13). When we do so with an eye single to God, it is liberating. We are free from seeking others’ recognition and can be content, knowing that we “are only in the service of [our] God” (Mosiah 2:17).

But, with our service and obedience, our busyness, we can still sometimes feel stretched and strained. In our hustle and bustle to go and do, we may find our well is running dry. It is easy to slip into simply being active in the Church and feel a hollowness or emptiness inside. Conversely, we may encounter serious challenges that limit our ability to reach out beyond our own survival or the survival of family members. In these times, we may feel that we are failing in our service and our worship. Prolonged health challenges, physical disabilities, and mental illness all can produce a fatigue and desperation that we will never be able to do enough. Worship often is expressed in the outward performances of our lives, the bowing down and serving, and so when our limitations weigh us down, it is time to look again to our Redeemer for a deeper level of our relationship.