

Is Jesus God Because He Was Worshipped?

by Servetus the Evangelical

Christian worship has been very important to the question of whether Jesus is God. The New Testament (NT) records certain instances in which Jesus was “worshipped.” Christians generally have regarded these as evidence that those practitioners believed that Jesus was God, since only God should be worshipped. But what does “worship” mean?

The word in the Greek NT that usually is translated “worship” is *proskuneo*. It and its cognates occur sixty-one times in the Greek NT. Most of these occurrences are in the Gospel of Matthew and the book of Revelation. The etymology of *proskuneo* is that *pros* means “motion,” either “from” or “towards” some object, and *kuneo* means “to kiss.” Lexical authority Walter Bauer informs that *proskuneo* was “used to designate the custom of prostrating oneself before a person and kissing his feet, the hem of his garment, the ground, etc.” He adds that *proskuneo* can be translated “(fall down and) worship, do obeisance to, prostrate oneself before, do reverence to, welcome respectfully.”

Therefore, during antiquity the Greek word *proskuneo* merely signified a physical act. It indicated the oriental custom of either genuflection, i.e., bowing down by bending the knee(s), or prostration. Practitioners, however, adopted either of these two postures toward a superior in order to convey their humble attitude of respect, honor, and perhaps submission in the sense of readiness to defer to the will of that superior. They frequently performed *proskuneo* towards those possessing imperial authority, especially kings. Such physical acts usually indicated no more than a humble attitude of submission.

In contrast, our English word “worship,” whether used as a noun or a verb, does not designate a physical act. Thus, it does not serve as a suitable translation of *proskuneo*. Furthermore, the definition of our word “worship” has a very wide range of meanings. So, to translate *proskuneo* in the NT with “worship” can be ambiguous if not misleading.

When the gospel Evangelists report that someone performed *proskuneo* toward Jesus, Bible translators invariably show their bias by rendering it “worship,” suggesting that that person thought of Jesus as either “divine” or “God.” But when the Evangelists relate that a person performed *proskuneo* toward someone other than Jesus, these same translators render it “bowed down,” “bend the knee,” or “prostrate.” So, they translate it “worship” when done to Jesus, but a physical act when done to someone else.

Matthew makes it clear that Jesus’ authority to heal was not intrinsic to his nature but derived from God (the Father). For example, when Jesus healed the paralytic let down through the roof, Matthew adds, “when the multitudes saw this, they were filled with awe, and glorified God, who had given such authority to men” (Matthew 9.8). Thus, Matthew’s account indicates that these people did not think Jesus was God because of this healing but that God had given Jesus the authority and ability to heal the man. They glorified God because they rightly perceived that he ultimately caused it to happen.

The author of Hebrews lists seven Old Testament (OT) quotations in an effort to prove that Jesus is superior to angels (Hebrews 1.5-13). Many Christians have cited one of these as an indication that Jesus is God. It is a quotation from Deuteronomy 32.43 in the Septuagint (Greek OT). It reads, “LET ALL THE ANGELS OF GOD WORSHIP HIM” (v. 6). The author of Hebrews likely meant that the angels of heaven honor Jesus in the same way Paul describes in Philippians 2.10, in which he says of the exalted Jesus, “at the

name of Jesus EVERY KNEE SHOULD BOW, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth.” That is, in the consummated kingdom all will perform genuflection at the public announcement of Jesus’ name, which does not necessarily indicate he is God.

The book of Revelation presents vivid and striking accounts of angels doing homage to both God and Jesus in heaven. But in each case they perform *pipto* followed by *proskuneo*, it is not clear if they worshipped Jesus in the sense of his being God. Maurice Casey insists that in this book Jesus Christ “is not actually hailed as divine even in the pictures of him being praised in heaven.”

Twice John, the author of Revelation, says of the angel who related these prophecies to him that he fell down at his feet to “worship” (*proskuneo*) him. But both times the angel forbade John’s act and said, “worship God,” that is, the Father (Revelation 19.20; 22.9). The angel must have regarded these as more than acts of honor. This arouses the question of whether only God, and not also Jesus, should be worshipped in this sense.

Sir Isaac Newton was a devout Christian who wrote more on theology than science. The main precept of his faith was, “whenever it is said in the Scriptures that there is one God, it means the Father.” He cited mostly 1 Corinthians 8.6 for support. It says “there is but one God, the Father, . . . and one Lord, Jesus Christ.” He explains, “We are forbidden to worship two Gods, but we are not forbidden to worship one God and one Lord.”

Anti-Trinitarian Newton also distinguished degrees of worship. He assigned ultimate worship to God as Creator and a lesser worship to Jesus as God’s agent in creation and redemption. He argued that worshipping two or more beings equally, as in the doctrine of the Trinity, is an infraction against the First of the Ten Commandments and thus idolatry.

In conclusion, an increasing number of conservative NT scholars now acknowledge that *proskuneo* directed toward Jesus in the NT gospels does not necessarily indicate that those practitioners believed that he was God. Trinitarian D.A. Carson cautions regarding the Gospel of Matthew, “it is very doubtful if *proskuneo* by itself or in connection with *pipto* [falling down] suggests anything more than obeisance, homage.” And J. Lionel North asserts that there is “nothing” in the NT “that requires us to conclude that Jesus is regarded as divine because he is worshipped.” Wendy North and Loren T. Stuckenbruck conclude that what should be “gained from the New Testament” is “that ‘worship’ is too imprecise a word to point necessarily to the conclusion that Jesus is divine.”