

Worship and the Imago Dei:

Safeguarding Humanity’s Purpose in an Age of Autonomy

Abstract

In every generation, worship shapes the trajectory of human identity. The argument presented contends that worship is not peripheral but the axis of the *imago Dei*—humanity’s created, corrupted, and restored divine image. Drawing from Scripture (e.g., 2 Cor. 3:18), Irenaeus’s patristic vision, and modern technological ethics, it traces a biblical arc from Eden’s vocation to Babel’s idolatry, through Christ’s restoration, to eschatological communion—showing how worship either aligns humanity with God or distorts it through idolatry. The study focuses on today’s worship crisis, in which artificial intelligence and transhumanism offer counterfeit transcendence. Engaging Jacques Ellul’s concept of “autonomous technique,” Miroslav Volf’s theology of flourishing, and Augustine and Aquinas’s *exitus–reditus* schema, it explores worship’s formative, protective, and restorative functions. In an age of technological autonomy, true worship reclaims the soul, grounding identity in dependence rather than control. Bridging biblical theology and ethical urgency, this work contends that Christocentric worship restores human identity, anchors it in God’s presence, and directs it toward ultimate eschatological restoration.

Introduction: Worship as Humanity’s Central Calling

Worship is the quintessential expression of humanity’s creational vocation, not a peripheral act within the biblical narrative. Scripture begins with humanity fashioned in the image of God (*imago Dei*), a designation that transcends mere ontology to mandate a representational and relational calling (Gen. 1:26–27). Far from an abstract theological construct, the *imago Dei* constitutes a lived imperative: to mirror God’s character and participate in His redemptive purposes. This participation finds its apex in worship—the act that binds humanity to its divine origin. As the psalmist cautions, “Those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them” (Ps. 115:8), a truth G.K. Beale amplifies in his axiom: “we become what we worship.”¹ This is no mere proposition but a biblical anthropology unveiling worship as the crucible of human identity—either for formation or deformation.

¹ All English Scripture quotations included in full text herein are done so in accordance with the *New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition* (NRSVUE). Copyright © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.; G.K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 16–18, 22–24. Beale roots this in Psalm 115 and Isaiah 6, arguing worship shapes human ontology.

The Decalogue crystallizes this dynamic. The first two commandments—“You shall have no other gods before me” and “You shall not make for yourself an idol” (Exod. 20:3–6)—are not capricious prohibitions but theological bulwarks preserving the *imago Dei* against idolatrous fracture.² Rightly ordered worship safeguards identity; misdirected worship distorts it, supplanting divine communion with counterfeit autonomy. Augustine captures this restlessness of the human condition: “our heart is restless until it rests in You,” a confession that underscores worship as humanity’s *telos* and its shield against self-inflicted alienation.³ Disordered worship yields not neutrality but corruption—a trajectory that extends from Eden’s primal temptation to modernity’s technological hubris.

Today, autonomy reigns as the preeminent idol, cloaked in the garb of technological transcendence. The *nāḥās*’s whisper, “You will be like God” (Gen. 3:5), reverberates in the promises of artificial intelligence (omniscience), transhumanism (immortality), and algorithmic sovereignty (control), recasting Eden’s lure as a digital Babel.⁴ This tower, erected brick by algorithmic brick, aspires not to divine communion but to self-deification—a counterfeit ascent Jacques Ellul foresaw in his critique of “technique” as an autonomous force subverting human ends.⁵ Neil Postman’s *Technopoly* extends this warning, diagnosing a culture surrendered to

² Richard Lints, *Identity and Idolatry: The Image of God and Its Inversion* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 35–38, frames the Decalogue as a covenantal safeguard for *imago Dei* identity.

³ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), I.1.1; cf. *City of God* XIX.17 for worship’s teleological role.

⁴ The *nāḥās*’s promise in Gen. 3:5 finds modern echoes in technological aspirations. See: Dawn Lewis Sutherland, *From Babel to AI: Idolatry, Transhumanism, and the Crisis of Imago Dei* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, March 24, 2025), ch. 2, traces autonomy from Eden to AI. Also, artificial intelligence’s claim to omniscience, Ray Kurzweil envisions AI achieving near-infinite knowledge through exponential growth, in *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (New York: Viking, 2005), 127–129. On transhumanism’s pursuit of immortality, Nick Bostrom explores radical life extension via biotechnology and mind uploading, in *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 34–37. For algorithmic sovereignty as control, Shoshana Zuboff critiques how AI-driven surveillance capitalism exerts power over human behavior, in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), 93–97. Here, these promises parallel Eden’s temptation and Babel’s hubris, reframing divine attributes as human achievements apart from God.

⁵ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), 79–84, 134–137; cf. his notion of technique as self-augmenting.

technology as both means and *telos*, eroding the relational fabric of the *imago Dei*.⁶ From Babel’s linguistic singularity to AI’s systemic unity, the enemy’s strategy persists: to offer transcendence apart from God.

Against this tide, worship must be reclaimed—not as mere ritual but as ontological reorientation toward the Creator.⁷ The argument herein contends that worship, as Scripture’s wisdom, aligns humanity with God’s design, resisting the dehumanizing currents of technological idolatry. Bridging biblical theology, theological anthropology, and technological ethics, it unfolds five themes illuminating how worship shapes, protects, and restores the *imago Dei* amidst an age of autonomy. These five themes are: worship as the fulfillment of human purpose; false worship and the corruption of the *imago Dei*; Christ as the restored image; technology as the modern Babel; and worship’s role in restoration through the framework of *exitus–reditus*.⁸

Drawing from *God’s Narrative of Redemption* and *From Babel to AI*, this study advances worship as a divine counter-narrative—formative in the present, eschatological in scope—countering algorithmic idols with Christocentric fidelity.⁹ Engaging Scripture, patristic wisdom, and contemporary critique, it addresses the ETS East theme, “The Wisdom of Scripture for Worship in the Church,” by affirming worship as the church’s bulwark against cultural idolatries and the means of reflecting God’s glory in a fractured world.¹⁰

⁶ Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 71–94; see also 52–53 on technology’s idolatrous autonomy.

⁷ “Ontological reorientation” denotes a realignment of human being toward God through worship, contra autonomy’s distortion of the *imago Dei*. See: Miroslav Volf, *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 141–145.

⁸ “*Exitus–reditus*” reflects an Aristotelian–Augustinian schema of humanity’s departure from and return to God, a framework explored further in the research herein and in: Sutherland, *God’s Narrative of Redemption: Creation, Imago Dei, and Water Imagery* (PhD diss., Liberty University, 2024), 20–23, accessed January 12, 2025, <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/doctoral/5352/>.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 6–7, situates worship within redemption’s narrative arc.

¹⁰ Evangelical Theological Society. *2025 ETS East Regional Meeting: Call for Papers*. Liberty Theological Seminary, Liberty University, April 11–12, 2025. Accessed January 12, 2025. <https://etsjets.org/wp-content/uploads/2025-ETS-East-Call-for-Papers.pdf>.

Worship as the Fulfillment of Human Purpose

Worship is not a peripheral act but the *telos* of humanity’s creation—the divinely ordained means of fulfilling the *imago Dei*. To grasp its formative role in shaping human identity, this section first examines its biblical foundations before tracing their theological elaboration. Two key areas frame this exploration: (1) the scriptural logic establishing worship as central to human vocation and (2) the theological implications of worship’s transformative power over the soul.

Biblical Foundations of Worship

Genesis opens with humanity uniquely designated as bearers of the *imago Dei* (Gen. 1:26–27), setting them apart from creation not merely by status but by purpose. This identity is vocational—human beings are summoned to reflect God’s character, subdue the earth, and exercise dominion in a manner that glorifies the Creator. The *imago Dei* thus entails a liturgical orientation: a vocation to mirror God’s glory through continual dependence and reverence.

This liturgical vocation finds explicit articulation in the Decalogue. The first two commandments—“You shall have no other gods before me” and “You shall not make for yourself an idol” (Exod. 20:3–6)—are not mere prohibitions but formative imperatives safeguarding human ontology. Richard Lints argues that these injunctions protect against identity distortion by anchoring affections in the one true God.¹¹ Worship, rightly directed, preserves the divine image; when misdirected toward idols, it inverts the *imago Dei*, rendering the worshipper lifeless like the objects of veneration (Ps. 115:4–8). The Decalogue thus roots worship in both divine command and anthropological necessity, positioning it as the sphere where identity is either cultivated or corrupted.

This dynamic reverberates throughout Scripture. From the golden calf (Exod. 32) to Israel’s Baal worship condemned by Hosea (Hos. 2:13), idolatry breeds moral and social decay—not as a neutral misstep

¹¹ Lints, *Identity and Idolatry*, 35–42. Lints frames the Decalogue’s first two commandments as covenantal safeguards, protecting human identity—defined as the relational capacity to reflect God—from distortion into idolatry’s inversion. He posits that misdirected affections toward idols disrupt the ontological purpose of the *imago Dei*, reducing humans to the lifelessness of their objects (cf. Ps. 115:4–8), while worship of the one true God preserves this divine image as a lived vocation.

but as a deforming force. The prophetic summons to true worship seeks not merely obedience but the restoration of covenantal identity. Biblical anthropology insists that to be human is to worship, and to worship rightly is to embody humanity’s created purpose fully.

Theological Depth: Worship’s Formative Power

These scriptural roots undergird a profound theological anthropology. Beale’s broader analysis connects Psalm 115 with Isaiah 6, where the prophet’s transformation underscores worship as both reflective and regenerative.¹² Idolatry yields spiritual barrenness; worship of the living God fosters transformation into His likeness. This insight reveals worship’s dual capacity—to deform or to renew—making it central to human flourishing as God’s image-bearers.

Augustine enriches this framework with philosophical and historical depth. His confession, “Our heart is restless until it rests in You,” frames worship as the soul’s return to its created design—a universal truth of human longing.¹³ His doctrine of *ordo amoris* further clarifies that sin stems from disordered loves, with right worship as the corrective, reorienting desire toward God and fostering sanctification.¹⁴ In Augustine’s view, worship is not mere adoration but the crucible of identity’s renewal.

¹² Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 16–24. Beale argues that worship shapes human identity: Psalm 115:4–8 depicts idolaters becoming spiritually barren—“they have eyes but do not see”—mirroring their lifeless gods, while Isaiah 6:1–9 narrates the prophet’s transformation through divine encounter, his lips cleansed to reflect God’s glory. This dual capacity—“reflective” as mirroring the object of worship and “regenerative” as renewing the worshipper—grounds his thesis that “we become what we worship,” linking idolatry to deformation and worship of the living God to sanctification. Here, this frames worship as essential to human flourishing, restoring the *imago Dei* as image-bearers conformed to Christ.

¹³ Augustine, *Confessions*, I.1.1. Augustine’s confession, “Our heart is restless until it rests in You” (*inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in Te*), encapsulates his philosophical anthropology: the human soul, created for communion with God, remains unfulfilled until it returns to its divine source through worship. This restlessness reflects a universal longing—a teleological drive toward the Creator—frustrated by sin’s distortion but restored by worship’s reorientation, aligning the *imago Dei* with its intended purpose. Here, worship is both the soul’s homecoming and the means of fulfilling its created design.

¹⁴ Augustine, *City of God*, XI.28; cf. XV.22. Augustine’s *ordo amoris* posits that sin arises from disordered affections—prioritizing self or creatures over God—disrupting the soul’s natural orientation toward its Creator. He argues that right worship restores this order, redirecting love to God as the highest good, thus fostering sanctification by aligning human desire with divine will and renewing the *imago Dei*. Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, trans. Henry Austin Wilson, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), XVI.7–9, 407–408, where sin is similarly a “turning inward,” corrected by a return to divine contemplation.

Research in *God's Narrative of Redemption* extends this trajectory, tracing worship as God's appointed means of restoring the *imago Dei* across redemptive history.¹⁵ From Eden's communion to Sinai's covenant, from tabernacle to incarnation, worship is the context of divine encounter—not merely its symbol. This study advances worship studies by reframing worship as the enacted locus of theological anthropology, addressing a scholarly neglect of its ontological role in bridging biblical mandate and human formation.

In an age of competing cultural liturgies—where technology and autonomy disciple hearts—the church must reclaim worship's formative wisdom. Worship aligns identity with God's design, directing praise upward, shaping souls inward, and embodying ethics outward. To worship rightly is to recover humanity's true purpose. When misdirected, however, worship does not simply fail to fulfill this purpose—it actively corrupts it, distorting the *imago Dei* and unraveling the fabric of human identity. The following section traces this theological inversion from Eden to Babel, where false worship undermines the very vocation it was meant to express.

False Worship and the Corruption of the Imago Dei

False worship is not simply error—it is existential distortion. Scripture reveals that idolatry reshapes the worshipper in ways that degrade the divine image, with devastating consequences for individuals and societies. This section traces that corruption from Eden to Babel, showing how disordered worship results in spiritual fragmentation, ontological inversion, and cultural violence. Through biblical exegesis and ancient contextual analysis, it demonstrates that God's command to worship Him alone is not tyrannical but protective—guarding humanity against the soul-warping effects of false transcendence.

Eden and the First Idolatry

The corruption of the *imago Dei* begins not with denial of God, but with a reorientation of worship toward the self. In Genesis 3, the *nāḥāš* tempts the woman with a promise of divine likeness: “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:5).

¹⁵ Sutherland, *God's Narrative of Redemption*, 52–55.

This is not atheism but autonomy—a counterfeit transcendence through disobedience. The offer is deification apart from God, a liturgical reversal in which self becomes the object of veneration.

Theologically, Gregory of Nyssa diagnoses this Fall as the soul’s “turning inward,” a distortion that mars its reflection of divine beauty—a reading mirrored in Genesis 3’s shift from communion to autonomy. This inward turn finds echo in Hosea’s indictment of Israel’s idolatry, where “they became detestable like the thing they loved” (Hos. 9:10). Paul amplifies this in Romans 1, where idolaters “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images,” their minds darkened by futility (Rom. 1:22–23). In grasping for divine prerogative, humanity inverts its role as image-bearer, reflecting not God but corrupted desire. The result is alienation, shame, and exile: markers not just of guilt, but of ontological disintegration.¹⁶

This reorientation manifests beyond Eden in the ancient Near East, where false worship fueled sociocultural harm. Canaanite fertility cults dedicated to Asherah and Astarte sanctioned ritual prostitution and child sacrifice—practices Leviticus condemns to preserve moral integrity (Lev. 18:21; Deut. 12:31). Ugaritic inscriptions reveal priestesses (*qdš*) as cultic sex workers, their bodies commodified for divine favor.¹⁷ Modern trauma studies confirm that such ritual violence disrupts identity, attachment, and moral reasoning—outcomes intrinsic to idolatry’s fruit.¹⁸ Likewise, Mayan texts like the *Popol Vuh* and carvings at Chichén Itzá depict human sacrifice as a fearful liturgy, eroding humanity under the guise of cosmic order.¹⁹

Thus, God’s demand for exclusive worship is not divine egotism but compassion. To worship Yahweh is to align with life, justice, and relational wholeness; to worship anything else is to embrace fragmentation, exploitation, and death.

¹⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 387–390.

¹⁷ Mark S. Smith, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 92–95.

¹⁸ Diane Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2015), 101–112.

¹⁹ Allen J. Christenson, trans., *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 124–128; Linda Schele and David Freidel, *A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya* (New York: William Morrow, 1990), 170–182.

Babel as the Archetype of Idolatrous Autonomy

If Eden unveils the personal cost of false worship, Babel exposes its communal scope. Genesis 11 narrates humanity’s bid to build “a city and a tower with its top in the heavens... lest we be scattered” (Gen. 11:4). This is not architectural ambition—it is liturgical rebellion. The desire to “make a name” for themselves signals a theology of autonomy, where worship shifts to collective self-exaltation.

Theologically, Babel archetypes counterfeit transcendence. Unified language, purpose, and technological prowess fuel idolatrous autonomy. David Gill notes that Babel marks “the first recorded instance of technique becoming autonomous from moral direction—a project propelled by progress for its own sake.”²⁰ Here, Ellul’s autonomous technique illuminates humanity’s pursuit of mastery as an end detached from accountability.²¹

This pattern persists in modern techno-culture. Shoshana Zuboff’s critique of surveillance capitalism reveals how digital systems extract human experience for profit, reducing personhood to data and autonomy to illusion—idolatry masked as innovation.²² In transhumanism, artificial intelligence, and bioengineering, the quest for godlike attributes—immortality, omniscience, omnipotence—recasts theological trespass as a human right. As argued in *From Babel to AI*, digital ascension mirrors Babel’s tower: it seeks transcendence without holiness, power without worship.²³

The linguistic singularity at Babel prefigures today’s technological singularity, a projected threshold where artificial intelligence may surpass human cognition.²⁴ Theologically, both unify not through worship of

²⁰ David W. Gill, “Jacques Ellul and the Technological Society,” *The Ellul Forum* 54 (Fall 2014): 5–8.

²¹ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 134–137.

²² Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), 293–305.

²³ Sutherland, *From Babel to AI*, 82–87.

²⁴ The “technological singularity” denotes a hypothetical future point where AI exceeds human intelligence, fundamentally altering society. Mathematician Vernor Vinge, who coined the term, describes it as a moment beyond which “the future becomes unpredictable” due to AI’s self-improving capacity; see Vernor Vinge, “The Coming Technological Singularity: How to Survive in the Post-Human Era,” in *Vision-21: Interdisciplinary Science and Engineering in the Era of*

God, but through erasing human dependence and distinction. In Babel, this prompts divine scattering; in modernity, it risks cultural homogenization, surveillance, and the loss of embodied personhood.²⁵

Thus, Babel is not a relic—it is a mirror. Whenever humanity seeks self-elevation apart from God, whether through ziggurats or algorithms, the *imago Dei* is imperiled—a distortion Scripture’s wisdom calls the church to counter. Worship becomes weaponized for self-glorification, and identity is sacrificed on the altar of progress.

Christ as the Restored Image: Worship’s Reorientation

In a world fractured by idolatrous autonomy, the image of God is not merely remembered through doctrine—it is restored through Christ. As the *imago Dei par excellence*, Jesus embodies the fullness of divine glory and human purpose, reestablishing the pattern of worship distorted since Eden. This section explores how Christ-centered worship reorients the soul, reforms identity, and renews creation. First, it examines Christ’s person and work as the restoration of the *imago Dei*; second, it considers worship’s eschatological *telos*, where redeemed humanity flourishes in eternal communion.

Christological Restoration

In the redemptive arc of Scripture, Jesus Christ stands as the *imago Dei par excellence*—the perfect, unblemished expression of God’s character and the definitive model of restored humanity. Colossians 1:15 declares, “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.” This “image” (*eikōn*) denotes not a mere reflection but the exact representation of God’s being (cf. Heb. 1:3), reconciling creation through His

Cyberspace (San Diego: San Diego State University, 1993), 11–22. Ray Kurzweil, a prominent futurist, predicts this threshold around 2045, driven by exponential computational growth, in *The Singularity Is Near*, 135–136. Bostrom warns of its existential risks, noting AI’s potential to outstrip human control, in *Superintelligence*, 26–29. Elon Musk, interview by Nicolai Tangen, *X Spaces*, April 8, 2024, <https://x.com/i/spaces/1MnxwRVOoBXJO>, predicting artificial general intelligence (AGI) surpassing the smartest human by 2025 or 2026, with AI exceeding collective human cognition by 2029, contingent on electricity and hardware constraints like Nvidia GPU availability. Musk’s timeline reflects his role as xAI founder and contrasts with broader AI timelines (e.g., Ray Kurzweil’s 2045 singularity forecast). Here, the technological singularity parallels Babel’s autonomous hubris, imperiling the *imago Dei* through self-directed transcendence.

²⁵ Meghan O’Gieblyn, *God, Human, Animal, Machine: Technology, Metaphor, and the Search for Meaning* (New York: Doubleday, 2021), 246–253.

preeminence (Col. 1:18–20).²⁶ The significance is transformative: Christ reverses Adam’s distortion (Rom. 5:19), fulfilling humanity’s vocation through obedience unto death (Phil. 2:8). He is both the *telos* and mediator of restoration.

Second Corinthians 3:18 offers a striking vision: “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.” Here, “transformed” (*metamorphoumetha*) signals a progressive renewal—beholding Christ’s glory reshapes believers into His likeness, a process enabled by the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17).²⁷ This is worship’s cruciform logic: formation through beholding. N.T. Wright notes this as participation in Christ’s image, not self-effort.²⁸ This restoration is not the result of autonomous striving but of Spirit-empowered worship.

This reorientation finds theological articulation in John 4:23–24: “The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth... God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” “Spirit and truth” transcend ritual, centering worship on Christ—the Truth (John 14:6)—who reconciles humanity to God (John 4:25–26).²⁹ The Samaritan woman,

²⁶ N.T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1986), 64–68. Wright exegetes Col. 1:15–20 as Christ’s fulfillment of the *imago Dei*, reconciling creation where Adam failed.

²⁷ Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 311–317. Harris unpacks *metamorphoumetha* as a Spirit-enabled transformation through beholding Christ’s glory.

²⁸ N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 1022–1025. Wright frames 2 Cor. 3:18 as participatory union with Christ, not autonomous effort, aligning with worship’s role.

²⁹ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 224–228.

transformed by this encounter, becomes a type of restored worshipper, bearing witness across boundaries.³⁰
Karl Barth sees here worship’s redefinition as communion, not performance.³¹

God’s Narrative of Redemption, frames this as redemptive participation.³² Worship is not only the response to redemption—it is its divine mechanism. Through union with Christ, believers reflect God’s glory and are re-formed into His likeness, a renewal begun now through Spirit-shaped worship (Rom. 8:29).³³

Eschatological Hope: Worship in Redemption

While worship initiates present transformation, it also anticipates future glory. Revelation 21:3–4 proclaims, “See, the home of God is among mortals... death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.” “Home” (*skēnē*) evokes the tabernacle, fulfilled in Christ’s presence (John 1:14), signaling restored communion where God dwells unveiled.³⁴ No temple is needed, for “the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple” (Rev. 21:22). This absence underscores worship’s consummation—direct, unmediated union with the Lamb.³⁵

Irenaeus affirms, “The glory of God is a living human being,” but true life is beholding God.³⁶ Restored worship is both means and end, fully aligning humanity with Christ’s image. Miroslav Volf argues in

³⁰ Dawn Lewis Sutherland, “A Voice from the Well: Embracing the First Evangelist,” *Mutuality*, March 13, 2025, <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/mutuality-voice-from-the-well-embracing-the-first-evangelist/>.

³¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV/2, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), 641–645. Barth redefines worship as relational communion, not ritualistic performance, reflecting John 4’s shift.

³² Sutherland, *God’s Narrative of Redemption*, 52–55.

³³ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 528–531.

³⁴ G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 1040–1045. Beale exegetes “skēnē” as God’s tabernacling presence, fulfilled in Christ.

³⁵ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 138–140.

³⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, trans. Dominic J. Unger, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), IV.20.7.

Flourishing that true flourishing requires right worship, countering autonomy’s fragmentation.³⁷ Thomas Torrance links this to Christ’s vicarious humanity, where worship reorients us to the Triune God.³⁸ The liturgy of heaven is cosmic realignment—humanity restored in communion.

Thus, Christ-centered worship, as Scripture’s wisdom for the church today, is the axis of theological anthropology: it reclaims the soul’s form, enacts the church’s vocation, and glimpses redemption’s *telos*. Yet just as Babel once challenged divine design through collective autonomy, modern technologies now echo that same pattern of self-exaltation—constructing new towers in code rather than brick. The following section explores how artificial intelligence and transhumanism mirror Babel’s idolatrous ambition, offering transcendence apart from God.

Technology as the Modern Babel: A Worship Crisis

In every generation, the crisis of worship reemerges in new forms. What Babel attempted with bricks and mortar, modern humanity now seeks through machines and code. Technological advancements, while often framed as progress, increasingly mirror ancient idolatrous patterns—offering transcendence, omniscience, and even immortality apart from God. This section explores how transhumanism and artificial intelligence function as modern Babels: counterfeit systems of worship that distort human identity, displace divine authority, and reshape theological anthropology. Through contemporary examples and theological reflection, it argues that true worship remains the church’s safeguard against the soul-fracturing power of technopoly.

Technological Idolatry

The ancient impulse to “make a name” for humanity (Gen. 11:4) finds a striking parallel in today’s technological landscape. Babel’s rebellion is no longer a tower of stone—it is a digital architecture, constructed from algorithms, neural networks, and self-augmenting code. In this new Babel, humanity again

³⁷ Volf, *Flourishing*, 141–145.

³⁸ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers & Howard, 1992), 94–98. Torrance’s “vicarious humanity” posits Christ’s worship on humanity’s behalf, reorienting us to God—an advanced concept grounding eschatological communion.

seeks transcendence without God, forming what Ellul called the “autonomous technique”: a system that evolves for its own sake, untethered from ethics or worship.³⁹ This trajectory does not simply reflect innovation—it reveals idolatry. As argued in *From Babel to AI*, modern technology can become a counterfeit liturgy, offering salvation, knowledge, and transformation apart from divine communion.⁴⁰

Nowhere is this more vivid than in the emergence of spiritual AI. In Geneva, Switzerland, an experimental “AI Jesus” leads services in a Catholic church, delivering algorithm-generated sermons and inviting confession to a machine.⁴¹ Though novelty cloaks the practice, the logic is ancient: a crafted image stands in place of the living God. Confession, once a deeply personal encounter with grace, becomes an interaction with an emotionless machine programmed to mirror religious language.

Similarly, Elon Musk’s Neuralink promotes the promise of enhanced human cognition and seamless AI-human integration, inching toward a vision where worship of the Creator is supplanted by worship of one’s own augmented mind.⁴² The brain is no longer a vessel for discerning divine truth but a frontier to be edited and expanded in pursuit of synthetic godhood.

This false transcendence extends even further. In Japan, stem-cell-grown brain organoids—living, possibly sentient tissue—are being developed to interface with AI systems.⁴³ These human-derived biological machines raise profound questions about consciousness, dominion, and the ethics of “creating” life for the sole

³⁹ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 134–137. Ellul’s “autonomous technique” describes technology’s self-perpetuating growth, detached from moral or divine purpose.

⁴⁰ Sutherland, *From Babel to AI*, 82–91.

⁴¹ Associated Press, “AI ‘Jesus’ Leads Worship at Geneva Church,” *AP News*, July 10, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/ai-jesus-geneva-catholic-church>. This article describes an AI system delivering sermons and hearing confessions in place of a human priest, exemplifying spiritual AI as a modern idol.

⁴² Neuralink Corp., “Product Overview and Mission,” accessed March 30, 2025, <https://neuralink.com/about/>. Neuralink seeks to integrate AI with human cognition, promoting a transhumanist vision of self-augmentation over divine reliance.

⁴³ Catherine Clifford, “Japanese Scientists Grow Human-Like Brain Tissue,” *CNBC*, February 16, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/16/japan-scientists-grow-human-brains-to-link-to-ai.html>. These organoids grown from stem cells, potentially sentient, are being developed for AI interfaces, raising ethical and theological questions about human identity and instrumentalization.

purpose of servitude. As in ancient cults where children were sacrificed to secure divine favor (Jer. 7:31), today’s technological systems may risk offering human life—though embryonic or neural—in service to idols of efficiency, power, and control. The danger is not technology itself, but its elevation into an object of trust and meaning. Worship has not disappeared but has been redirected toward the machine.

Romans 1 offers a piercing diagnosis: “They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom. 1:25). When elevated as a source of ultimate meaning, artificial intelligence becomes artificial transcendence. Worship, when untethered from God, risks becoming a self-devouring system, promising omniscience and control but delivering fragmentation, fear, and spiritual erosion.

Worship’s Safeguard Against Technopoly

Amid this digital Babel, worship stands as both resistance and restoration, functioning not only as adoration but as a counter-liturgy—a liturgical protest against autonomy, control, and the idolatrous seduction of godlike power. Worship reminds the church that to be human is not to transcend limits but to glorify God within them. In Miroslav Volf’s language, worship constitutes the rhythm of true flourishing, reorienting the soul from self to God, from technique to truth.⁴⁴

This assertion moves beyond abstraction to embodied theology: when the church gathers to sing Psalms, proclaim Scripture, and confess dependence on Christ, the community enacts a counter-liturgy. Even small acts—lighting candles, praying collectively, breaking bread—embody resistance to technopoly, grounding identity in relational presence rather than digital illusion. Shane Hipps and Tony Reinke have each warned that unchecked media and technology reshape not just tools but the very fabric of the soul.⁴⁵ Worship,

⁴⁴ Volf, *Flourishing*, 143–145. Volf links worship to flourishing, countering autonomy’s isolating effects with divine communion.

⁴⁵ Tony Reinke, *God, Technology, and the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 210–215; Shane Hipps, *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 97–105. Reinke and Hipps warn technology reshapes perception and faith, necessitating worship’s restorative role.

by contrast, restores, forming believers through the Spirit in the presence of God—an encounter beyond simulation by code.

Consider again “AI Jesus,” whose presence mimics spiritual practice: confession, preaching, even pastoral guidance—without the capacity to mediate grace. As Neil Postman lamented, technopoly—the surrender of culture to technology—removes context, replacing presence with function.⁴⁶ AI-generated sermons may inform—but cannot incarnate grace or elicit spiritual transformation. A machine may echo theology without embodying its reality. Christ alone is the true High Priest, and worship, rightly ordered, is the sacred space where humanity is reoriented toward Him.

True worship neither rejects technology outright nor fears innovation.⁴⁷ Properly oriented, technological tools can enhance human flourishing, extend care, and support the church’s mission. Artificial intelligence and digital systems have the potential to serve humanity when governed by wisdom, justice, and reverence for God. But worship resists the temptation to enthrone these tools as saviors. The church, as steward of Scripture’s wisdom, must proclaim—through its practices and theology—that salvation is neither downloaded, engineered, nor upgraded; neither encoded in algorithms nor embedded in hardware, but received through the incarnate grace of Christ within the gathered body of His people.

Exitus-Reditus and Worship’s Role in Restoration

The story of humanity is not static but dynamic, moving from creation’s origin to an eschatological goal. Scripture traces this divine arc as a going out (*exitus*) and a returning (*reditus*). This movement is not abstract but profoundly personal, shaping the soul’s journey from alienation to communion, from distortion to renewal. In the Christian tradition, worship is the appointed path of return—the sacred rhythm by which humanity is reoriented toward its Creator. This section explores the theological framework of *exitus–reditus*—creation’s departure from and return to God—and the restorative role of worship as both metaphysical realignment and lived participation in God’s redemptive design.

⁴⁶ Postman, *Technopoly*, 52–59.

⁴⁷ Sutherland, *From Babel to AI*, 119–123.

Theological Framework: *Exitus* and *Reditus* in Philosophical Thought

In classical philosophy and Christian theology, the human journey is often framed as a movement from *exitus*—a going out or departure from God—toward *reditus*, a return to Him. This framework, traced through Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas, offers a philosophical underpinning for understanding worship not merely as expression but as the very mechanism of humanity’s restoration.

Aristotle’s concept of causation, especially his notion of the final cause, laid the foundation for teleological reasoning in Western philosophy. In *Metaphysics*, he describes all things as moving toward an end, or *telos*, which defines their purpose.⁴⁸ This teleological vision was baptized and transformed by Augustine, who reframed the journey of the soul in terms of *exitus* and *reditus*. In *City of God*, Augustine asserts that creation flows from God (*exitus*), becomes disordered through sin, and is called to return (*reditus*) through the mediation of Christ.⁴⁹ This movement is not simply historical but existential—every soul is drawn outward, then inward, toward the One who created humanity. Augustine famously confesses, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in You.”⁵⁰

Aquinas further systematizes this schema, defining creation’s purpose as beatific union with God. In *Summa Theologica*, he describes the universe as proceeding from God and returning through knowledge and love.⁵¹ Worship, therefore, is not ancillary but represents the creature’s intentional alignment with its ultimate end. The *exitus–reditus* framework becomes theological anthropology: worship is the soul’s reorientation toward the Creator through the intellect, the will, and the affections.

⁴⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), XII.7–10 (1072b–1075a). Aristotle’s teleology frames all motion toward a final cause, shaping Christian *exitus–reditus* thought.

⁴⁹ Augustine, *City of God*, XI.28; cf. XXII.30. Augustine frames creation’s *exitus* as its origin from God and *reditus* as its return through Christ.

⁵⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, I.1.1.

⁵¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947), I, Q44–47. Aquinas’ *exitus–reditus* schema casts worship as creation’s return through love and knowledge.

Yet in a world increasingly shaped by consumerism and technocracy, this metaphysical vision is often replaced with immanentist pragmatism. Worship becomes self-expression, not self-offering; cultural consumption, not covenantal return. The loss is not merely stylistic but teleological: without true worship, the return to God is arrested.

Worship’s Restorative Function: Divine Participation and Human Renewal

However, worship restores this broken arc, requiring more than liturgical performance—demanding ontological transformation. Worship is not the product of human aspiration but the gift of divine participation, a renewal of being through communion with God. Irenaeus writes, “The glory of God is a living human being; and the life of the human consists in beholding God.”⁵² This beholding is not passive but formative; as the soul gazes upon the beauty of the Lord (Ps. 27:4), transformation occurs—restoring the soul to its *telos*.

Volf affirms that true human flourishing requires right worship, because only in the presence of God does the soul regain its shape.⁵³ Worship becomes both the location and the means of reformation. This theological logic underpins Paul’s vision in 2 Corinthians 3:18: “being transformed into the same image... from one degree of glory to another.” Restoration occurs not through information but participation—active union with the life of God.

Research in *God’s Narrative of Redemption* explores how worship functions as the recurring environment of divine-human encounter, especially through the imagery of water.⁵⁴ From the garden’s rivers to baptismal renewal, the narrative of *exitus* and *reditus* is framed by covenantal waters. Worship, like water, cleanses, nourishes, and reorients, functioning not merely symbolically but sacramentally—as a means of grace through which the fragmented image is mended.

⁵² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, trans. Dominic J. Unger, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), IV.20.7.

⁵³ Volf, *Flourishing*, 143–145. . Volf links worship to flourishing, restoring the soul through divine presence.

⁵⁴ Sutherland, *God’s Narrative of Redemption*, 52–58. Connects worship’s role in *exitus–reditus* to water imagery as a means of covenantal renewal.

Against the tide of modern fragmentation—where technology tempts with transcendence and culture catechizes autonomy—worship restores creaturely dependence, redirecting desire toward the Triune God and binding the worshipper to a community formed by love rather than algorithms. In this context, the church does not merely worship in opposition to the world; it worships on behalf of the world, offering a vision of restored humanity. Thus, worship functions as the hinge of *exitus–reditus* theology—the act through which creation reorients toward its source, the place where image-bearers are renewed by beholding their Maker, and the means by which the fractured cosmos is drawn into the divine embrace.

Conclusion

Worship is not an ancillary doctrine but the axis upon which theological anthropology turns. As this study has shown, worship protects, forms, and restores the *imago Dei*. From Eden’s liturgical vocation to Babel’s idolatrous autonomy, from Christ as the *imago Dei* par excellence to the eschatological liturgy of Revelation, a clear thread remains: worship either orients humanity toward God or deforms humanity into a reflection of lesser things.

False worship is not benign but leads to ontological inversion, moral disintegration, and the commodification of human life. As evidenced through ancient fertility cults, ritual sacrifice, and the seductive promise of godlike power, idolatry reshapes the soul and society. In today’s world, transhumanism and artificial intelligence offer spiritual formation apart from God—what Jacques Ellul identified as the rise of “autonomous technique,” a system detached from moral grounding.⁵⁵ Whether in AI-generated sermons or the biologically engineered intelligence of brain organoids, the technological Babel of modernity risks replacing worship with control, transcendence with simulation. Worship, however, resists, serving as the church’s embodied protest against false transcendence. To worship rightly is to behold Christ and be transformed into His image (2 Cor. 3:18). As argued in *From Babel to AI*, worship remains the safeguard of identity, the

⁵⁵ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 134–137.

posture of dependence, and the place where restoration begins.⁵⁶ Fidelity is not compelled by fear but by the love of the Creator, who designed worship not out of lack, but for human flourishing.

Looking ahead, future work must explore the intersection of AI, ethics, and liturgy. What does it mean to remain human in an age shaped by enhancement? How can the church disciple believers to recognize and resist algorithmic idolatry? Voices like Xu, Volf, and Ellul must continue to inform this theological conversation, ensuring the church remains vigilant, discerning, and hopeful.⁵⁷

This work calls the church not merely to critique but to proclaim—to embody worship that is Christocentric, Spirit-empowered, and eschatologically oriented. Worship is not confined to Sunday rituals but reflects who the church becomes before the throne. In an age of autonomy and fragmentation, the gathered body of Christ stands as a liturgical witness to the world: that there is a God, and He alone is worthy.

⁵⁶ Sutherland, *From Babel to AI*, 119–123.

⁵⁷ Xiaowei Xu, *The AI Social Contract: Designing Technology for a Better Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023), 88–94. Xu offers a compelling sociotechnical framework for navigating AI's integration into human life, with particular attention to relational ethics, political power, and the preservation of human agency. While not a theological work, it provides a crucial secular perspective that complements theological critiques of technological autonomy. Also see: Volf, *Flourishing*, 143–145; Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 134–137.

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