

## THEOLOGY AND THE FUTURE OF WORSHIP

### *Outlining Two Ways to Worship*

I didn't grow up going to church at all, so the Anglican Book of Common Prayer of 1662 had no particular magical qualities for me. The first time I led a service of Holy Communion from its pages, I stumbled over the phrasing, and grew tired of the sound of my own voice. However I couldn't ignore the ways in which parishioners on that day enjoyed the resonances of the prayers, engaged with the emotional and spiritual journey on which we were led, and felt secure in their worship. There were distinct liturgical features flagging the beginning, middle and end of the service, after which we were inevitably sent on our way into the world, confident in the God who had led us purposefully that morning. We were connected powerfully with the story of Christ's career as it was played out that day in the church's calendar. I could see how a generation raised to value predictable progress was at home here.

My first experiences of Christian worship as a teenage convert some years earlier had been very different. When I first started attending church, I was impressed by the youth's enthusiasm for the regular Sunday evening gospel service. The message preached each week was clear, powerful, and convicting, and the patience of the elders for our youthful, exuberant ways was itself a testimony to Christian love. Friends from university came to celebrate my baptism with me, which became an important marker of my ownership of the faith. My first sermon was preached at that Brethren Assembly, as I expounded the dynamic providence which led from the union of Ruth and Boaz to the Messiah's birth. Apart from song choice or perhaps a testimony, services had a similar structure each week, with the sermon, right at the

end of our time together, calling on those not yet saved to place their trust in Christ. Many did.

These two ways to worship have powerfully impacted my expectations of church life, and have now created a tension in my own experience of how best to conceive theologically our weekly gathering as Christians to worship.<sup>1</sup> Such a personal tension is reflected in a larger conversation amongst Australian Christians about the future of worship. In one sense, its future is secure. We know that we shall one day gather around the throne, with a glassy sea between us and the Lamb, with multitudes proclaiming the mighty deeds of God in myriads of languages and tongues. On that day, we shall also worship God with daily lives of service, reflecting in our behaviour the worth we ascribe to the Lord (Rev 4:11 and Rev 5:10 together help us define the nature of worship). In another sense, the challenge today is to create weekly church services which have as their goal preparation for that coming age in which our praise and priestly service together constitute our worship. Liturgy must *both* confront the world with the claims of Christ *and* nurture Christians in sanctified living. This article asks how those responsible for constructing the weekly worship service might best reach this goal.

Indeed, in a world of aggressive marketing, how we conceive worship is increasingly critical. At best, we have ninety minutes in which to instruct and form members of the congregation. If they only turn up three weeks out of four, our task is rendered that much more difficult. I figure that the average church attender spends more time watching ads on television each week than engaging in corporate worship. We must think hard about *how best to undo* the things unconsciously learnt in the week and throughout our life, as well as *what we ought to do* for edification when we

gather. The ministry of the Word must be the primary occasion for edification and motivation, but additionally we must make sure that the design of the whole pedagogical package is at the service of corporate praise and growth in godliness and maturity. Of the two types of service which have been part of my journey, both had a shape, though the question is raised whether those actively creating the structure, or those receiving more passively the structure which was presented, knew the strengths and weaknesses of the design adopted. We need theological criteria to evaluate these models.

### ***Theology Helps us to Navigate: The Tension between Tradition and Populism***

Worship is too important to reduce to what once worked or alternatively what is now drawing the crowds. Worship is generated by a theological vision of God, and so it is to theology that we must turn to set the agenda, to constrain our expectations, and to help us as pilgrims arrive at our heavenly destination. It is reflection on the Scriptures and Christian history which gives us the map to survey the path and correct the course, and makes available to us the criteria by which to adopt or reject features of both more formal liturgical worship or more contemporary pragmatic styles. Authoritative texts like the Anglican Prayer Book encapsulate the worship aspirations of English-speaking Christians in the sixteenth century, from which we have much to learn, but surely their structure which shapes our Gospel assurance can be reappropriated today in missiologically appropriate ways?

Contemporaries demand that due attention is given to our responsibility, through church services, to reach out to unbelievers and to connect with local needs and concerns, with little thought given to forms which have stood the test of time, or to acknowledge our communion with saints past, but it is often overlooked that many

in our world hunger for an experience of the transcendent which elements of traditional liturgy provide. Just as the American constitution draws upon the political insights of an elite of eighteenth century men, and defends the democratic insights of all voters to elect their representatives, so we must find a model which honours the formulations of a particular age, *and* encourages contemporary contributions and insights and experience.

Our weekly experience of worship is a profoundly theological exercise. In describing church, Vanhoozer reminds us that ‘we come together to do theology, though in a form that is more informal, participatory, and musical than it is systematic’.<sup>ii</sup> Our theology teaches us how to select songs, how to intercede for the world, how to approach the Lord’s Supper, or how to listen to a preacher, and these in turn reinforce how we should believe: the old principle *lex orandi lex credendi* (the law of praying is the law of believing) still rings true. We need to bear in mind as well that church, when theologically understood, will separate us from our community, which does not apply theological categories for its self-understanding. If the gospel doesn’t just convert individuals but also creates churches, then our churches and their shop-front worship will stand in a relationship of tension with prevailing cultural norms. As a friend recently pointed out, evangelicals are more comfortable in building a Sunday service around Mother’s Day than Pentecost – not to say that mothers ought not to be celebrated annually, but the same can surely be said of the Holy Spirit! Theological moorings are easily lost.

***Theology helps us to Evaluate: Does the work of the Trinity figure in our liturgy?***

There is a future for worship, when there is a future for the discipline of deep theological reflection about the nature of the church: ‘The purpose of theology and

worship alike is to cultivate the vision of who God is and what God has done'.<sup>iii</sup> At its heart, we gather weekly in worship to celebrate our union with God. Sadly, the most overlooked feature of our common life is our participation in the life of the Triune God. The most fundamental truth in Christian spirituality is that we are *in Christ*. As members of his body, we are together joined to the head. Incorporation into Christ describes who we are, and profoundly shapes what we do. We can pray at home, download sermons on the move, or sing songs of praise in the car. What we cannot do alone is experience the unity of our diversity *when* we pray, listen or sing. I have recently heard it said on a number of occasions that church doesn't seem to have a point any more when downloaded sermons are of a higher quality than my local pastor can provide. In this, the most basic lesson has gone missing: church, even its preaching, is not about *me*, but about *us with God*. Celebrating meeting together in the name of the Lord Jesus, by the power of the Spirit, and for the glory of the Father, has communion with God as its deep foundational truth. Finishing a service with the words of the grace, whether we have celebrated the Lord's Supper or not, reflects and anchors this fundamental liturgical insight.

Oneness underscores the practice of praying the Lord's Prayer ("Our Father") or reciting the Creed ("We believe"). Hearing corporate prayer or praise articulated *in unison* speaks to me of discipline, organisation and strength. The added advantage of praise supported by music is that not only can we lift our voices as one, but through harmonies and the contribution of a selection of instruments, we reinforce our oneness despite our variety (Psalm 150). Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), during the First Great Awakening, became a musical innovator by allowing the singing of hymns by Isaac Watts in Sunday services alongside metrical psalms. He recognised that poorly executed psalmody was detrimental to the experience of oneness, whereas excellently

executed hymnody contributed movingly to the experience of unity which he prayed that the Spirit would bring. Let this be a warning to churches where the tempo of hymn-singing today is a war between organist and congregation, or to contemporary worship leaders, who choose songs that are easily performed as solos but are ill-suited to congregational singing, or who put bands together which contain no melody instruments to guide our voices. Music is deeply woven into postmodern culture, as it gives us an aesthetic connection to transcendence, but more the pity when we fail to recognise the value not just of the words we sing, but of the theological function which corporate praise contributes to our experience of unity.

And what we cannot do when we are at home or by ourselves is to participate in baptism or the Lord's Supper. These are essentially corporate events. Physically, it takes one person to perform and another to receive. But beyond the basic mechanics, their meaning is fundamentally communal. Through the waters of baptism, we identify with the death and resurrection of Christ, and own our union with him (Romans 6), and with other members of the body. We enter the church. Through the elements of communion, we declare our allegiance to Christ, yet more significantly we receive reassurance of the truth of our union with him by taking into our body in physical ways food and drink. In the language of Paul, we participate, or *fellowship with God* and not with demons (1 Corinthians 10:14-22). Such is the seriousness of the encounter, that we have to pay special attention to the believers around us before we take the bread and the wine (1 Corinthians 11:17-34).

As evangelicals, we have become much too squeamish about the great gift that the sacraments are to those who believe. The Spirit subjectively testifies to our assurance within, but God has been super-generous in granting to us as well external

and objective means, namely ministers and sacraments, to assure us further of our union with him. Of course, we want to provide welcome to non-Christians in our services. In the end, however, church is for Christians, and baptism and the Lord's Supper, the two ordinances commanded by the Lord Jesus himself, ought not to be neglected, or framed merely as opportunities to spend some time thinking about Christ's death. They are moments to celebrate union with our living head. Of all the things we do in worship, these two most powerfully demonstrate one essential *theological* rationale for our worship: Just as we are one body...

Furthermore, our oneness comes as a result of the Trinity's initiatives of friendship, when God extends his hand of fellowship to the world and offers us access to his *promises, presence* and *purpose*. The *objective promises* of God to the church highlight his covenant with us, that he wants to be our God, as we gather at his behest and in his name. We hear the Scriptures read and the sermon preached, or participate in the sacraments, as signs that God is making to us an offer, which is real and generous and free. We believe as well that the promise of God secures the *presence of God* as he comes to dwell with us, and does all that is needed to make that closeness possible for sinners in the face of his holiness, through the atoning death of Christ and the regenerating power of the Spirit. Confession of sin is vital, experiential faith is valid, and growth in holiness is to be cultivated, when Christians continue to meet and to spur each other on to love and good deeds.

We must finally ensure that our regular gatherings give due prominence to the *purposes of God*. A sense of being part of a variegated worldwide movement, bringing concerns about the community or our work into church and being sent out to engage with the world as we find it, teach that the church is the pilot project for the

world to come (Eph 1:22-23), and a precious gift to the world even now. We are distinct from the world, yet delegated to build a bridge. The Christian church and its worship ‘can transmit a vision of reality which helps decisively in the interpretation of life and the world,’<sup>iv</sup> and provides insights for believers into the divine mission. We may use set forms, at least from time to time, but the dynamism of God’s work in the world must not thereby be lost. Perhaps today we are rediscovering not just the great riches that worship services embody, but the multifaceted glories of the church itself, in which Christ is to be found (Eph 3:21). Our worship points us to the meaning of the church.

### ***The Future of Worship: More Erosion than Pick-Axes***

While evangelical Christians in Australia debate the nature of weekly worship and how to create services of theological integrity and missiological openness, the fact that any kind of church expects regular attendance at worship suggests a significant liturgical bias, namely lifelong learning. The model of formal liturgy inherited from the *sixteenth century* valorises gradual nurture, patient growth, and deep connections with Christians from ages past. Calvin expected a service to begin with the Ten Commandments and end with Lord’s Supper to demonstrate how God progressively works in history to move from the old covenant to the new. Puritan worship involved many lay people, sometimes several ministers, and did not expect that preaching would be at the expense of learning for example the discipline of interceding. John Wesley expected that those miners joining his parachurch small group programme known as Methodism would still attend services on Sunday in an Anglican parish church and take Communion there. This model assumes that human beings learn and grow through repetition of forms and recitation of stories handed



down from wiser minds in the Christian past – as if we were rocks being smoothed by erosive forces.

More recently, weekly liturgy in the revivalist model has prized efforts to gather the unconverted, bold expression of emotion, challenges to a sluggish will through preaching, work for deep and instantaneous transformation, and adventurous responses to contemporary culture, giving a higher profile to the work of the clergy which has marginalised both lay participation and worship as a work of the people (the literal meaning of *liturgy*<sup>v</sup>). Revivalists like Charles Finney (1792-1875) during the Second Great Awakening in the *nineteenth century* created a brave new world of theological reductionism, which expected God’s immediate confrontation with individuals, and grew impatient with material means like water, bread or wine, defended in liturgical formulation.<sup>vi</sup> In this evangelical model, stubborn rebellion had to be confronted by God’s dramatic and perceptible intervention now – suggesting that we are more like rocks being hewn with the aid of a pick-axe. Erosive liturgical forces are not sufficient to meet the challenges of a nominal Christian world. There was some push-back: Charles Hodge at Princeton (1797-1878), a conservative Presbyterian, took umbrage at the revivalist strain. Nevertheless, the urgent need of evangelisation brought out the pragmatic strain in many leaders of liturgy.

Both pedagogies do have merit. The fastest growing Christian movement in the world today is Pentecostalism, which draws on Methodist and Baptist expressions of minimalist liturgy, and is increasingly seen as the champion of the future of worship. Indeed, the informality of such services in the pursuit of evangelistic winsomeness is laudable. However, our guests might still fall down and cry out, ‘Surely God is amongst you,’ even when they don’t instantly value our liturgical

traditions. Patient instruction can be an effective means of winning men and women to Christ even if it appears less instantly powerful. There is also a reaction to the theological superficiality of many evangelical traditions with a return to ancient forms of worship<sup>vii</sup> or to a more nurturing vision of church as our mother, as Calvin (appealing to Cyprian) would suggest.<sup>viii</sup>

In the end, I want to ask for some caution in giving in too quickly or without adequate theological reflection to the revivalist end of the spectrum. The more traditional forms might yet serve us well, even if experimentation and adaptation are required. The fruit that they can bear might be harvested in a later season, but better that than picking the fruit before it is ripe. Weekly worship ought to be a whole body workout, toning all my spiritual muscles and training me for the sometimes arduous journey home. With increasing Biblical and theological ignorance, now is not the time to lose our nerve, and to sacrifice serious theological commitments for the sake of knee-jerk evangelistic desperation. Our theological body image is at stake.

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<sup>i</sup> These liturgical options are funded by two kinds of piety: see William B. Evans, 'A Tale of Two Pieties: Nurture and Conversion in American Christianity'. *Reformation and Revival Journal* 13/1 (2004), pp61-75.

<sup>ii</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'Worship at the Well: From Dogmatics to Doxology (and Back Again)'. *Trinity Journal* 23 (2002), 4.

<sup>iii</sup> Vanhoozer, *op. cit.*, p10.

<sup>iv</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life* (London: Epworth Press, 1980), p2.

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<sup>v</sup> See Doug Adams, *Meeting House to Camp Meeting: Toward a History of American Free Church Worship from 1620 to 1835* (Saratoga: Modern Liturgy Resource Publications, 1981) for discussion of the impact of Finney's New Measures, and William T. Cavanaugh, 'The Church as God's Body Language'. *Zakok Perspectives: Zadok Papers*, S149 (2006), p12, for explanation of the etymology of liturgy.

<sup>vi</sup> Bryan D. Spinks, *The Worship Mall: Contemporary Responses to Contemporary Culture* (New York: Church Publishing, 2010), 66-69.

<sup>vii</sup> Robert E. Webber, *Worship Old and New: A Biblical, Historical and Practical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

<sup>viii</sup> See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. F. L. Battles (The Library of Christian Classics; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), IV/1/i-iv.