

Worship and Theology

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The word worship is used in at least three ways. First, it may refer to that part of the service consisting of singing and praying before and after preaching. In many contemporary services worship is a component quite distinct from preaching. It is usually understood as a preparation for preaching, or a follow-up after the preaching. Second, worship may refer to the entire service, as when we use the expression “Sunday worship service”. Third, worship refers to all that we are and do everyday which gives glory and honour to God. Paul tells us that we are to “eat and drink to the glory of God”. All three are valid ways of understanding worship as long as we do not exclude any one of them.

The aim of this paper is to help us appreciate how worship affects belief and vice versa. Let us first look at how sound theology conditions our worship.

The modern church faces a problem when it comes to correlating its belief and its worship. Some define worship too narrowly. They tend to view worship only in terms of singing praises (worship in the first sense). Then they conclude that worship in that narrow sense has nothing to do with belief. Beliefs or doctrines belong to the preaching component not to the worship component. Preaching, of course, has to be biblical. But they don't seem to think that worship too must be sound and biblical. There is little consideration given to the theological soundness of the songs they sing. In the minds of many modern Christians, songs are meant to help the congregation “enter into worship” not to teach us anything. By “entering into worship” they mean something like setting the right atmosphere, creating the right mood and preparing people to hear the word. I'm not saying that having the right atmosphere or mood is unimportant, but it is not what we *aim* at in worship.

Worship as Beholding the Glory of God

Marva Dawn described worship as “a royal ‘waste’ of time”, an immersion in God's splendour. In other words, worship is not meant to be an activity we do with the *aim* of getting some kind of benefit, material, psychological or even spiritual. The aim of worship is the glory of God or the worship of God himself, that is, simply acknowledging God for who he is and all that he is worth.¹ We worship because God is intrinsically worthy of worship.

Thus, we can define worship as *beholding the glory of God*. But what is the glory of God? Here is where sound teaching needs to come in. There are many contemporary songs that refer to beholding the glory of God, entering God's presence, seeing God's beauty, etc. But glory and beauty are almost always understood as some kind of numinous, mystical experience, inducing some kind of sentimental feelings. What is the glory of God? It is God's total character, both his goodness *and* severity or holiness (cf. Romans 11:22: Consider the kindness and sternness of God...). We see an example of the revelation of God's glory in Ex. 33:18-23 and 34:5-7. Moses asked God to reveal his glory to him.

Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the Lord. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.

Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation (34:5-7).

Worship is something we do. This is why worship is traditionally called the liturgy. The word liturgy means the work of the people. But it is what we do in response to God's first move towards us. We don't initiate worship; we respond to God's revelation. Without God's taking the initiative to reveal himself to us, we cannot truly worship. We would be groping in idolatry, worshipping a god of our own imagining. I don't mean to say that we have to wait passively for something happen in our assembly before we can truly respond in worship (this was the mistake of the early Quakers). Rather, it means that our worship must start with, and be based on, what God reveals about himself. *This means that worship can only be true if it is based on sound theology. Truth precedes worship.* Worship must be in Spirit and in truth. The Spirit directs us to worship the God who is Truth himself.

In summary, worship is simply the spontaneous response of the creature in the presence of his/her Creator. When we have "seen" or "heard" God, we cannot help but worship. When we know who God really is, the One who is both good *and* holy, then we can respond in the right way. This is why we begin our service usually with a song of adoration. A good adoration song should inform us or make us deeply aware of who God is. We need to be informed of the truth about God first; only then can we respond. Nowadays, however, most songs don't actually tell us concerning who God is; they mostly remind us of how good it *feels* to be in God's presence. A number of popular songs come readily to mind, such as:

In thy presence there is fullness of joy
There is nothing there is no one to compare with you
I take pleasure in worshipping you, O Lord!

You are beautiful beyond description
Too marvellous for words
Too wonderful for comprehension...

I love your Lord and I lift my voice
To worship you, O my soul, rejoice
Take joy my King in what you hear
Let me be a sweet, sweet sound in your ear.

I'm not saying that such songs are bad in themselves. They may have their proper place in another part of the service. But when we say that we are adoring or praising God, do we actually focus on who God really is? If we don't begin with truth, I doubt that we can end in true worship.

If our true worship must *begin with* sound theology, it is also true to say that true worship will *result in* sound theology. We must now look at how this is so.

Worship as doing primary theology

Gordon W. Lathrop describes worship as the “primary liturgical theology”.² When we are actually involved in worship we are doing theology in the most primary sense: we are involved in acts which lead to direct encounter with God. Worship is putting our beliefs into practice. Therefore changes in worship are bound to affect our theology, that is, the way God is understood and experienced. We cannot say that we can change our worship without changing our theology. The way in which changes are made in the “contemporary” worship will have serious implications in the long term. When our worship implicitly undermines our explicit belief about who God is, it won’t be long before we shift our belief to suit our worship. Worship is a powerful source of change in our communal life and thinking, either for good or evil. Bad worship will lead to bad theology and eventually bad practice in other areas of life as well. Conversely, good worship leads to good theology or rather will reinforce sound belief and confirm that belief in experience. Worship is habit-forming. The question is, what kind of habits is our worship forming in people? Once bad habits are formed, it is extremely difficult to remove them.

Worship is the most vital link to spirituality. We are re-enacting the Christian Story, reliving its reality, imbibing its truth. In worship, we are *doing* something. In this doing, as Lathrop tells us, we are in touch with the Reality itself. Our actions are joined with God’s action in worship. E.g., at the Lord’s Supper, we do the eating and drinking, yet it is the *Lord’s* Supper, the *Heavenly* Banquet, the *Marriage Supper of the Lamb*, not ours. It is this fact that we are *actually* eating and drinking that which belongs to the Lord, that makes the sacraments powerful transforming symbols. In the case of baptism, we are being baptised, that is, we go into the water, but it is also the action of the Lord: he is the baptiser. It is not just the sacraments but all liturgical words and actions are transforming events. They are capable of transforming precisely by being acted out or spoken forth. There is a certain newness or freshness in the speaking and acting. We are not merely repeating some ideas from the past but representing them in the here and now. It is a “rubric” that we *do*.³

For example, consider the sacrament of baptism. The general Protestant teaching is that it is a “seal” of our faith; that is, it confirms us in our faith-relationship with God. To understand the nature of baptism as seal, we may compare it to the wedding ceremony. We cannot just say that the wedding is just a ritual. What difference does it make as long as two persons are in love anyway? We as Christians recognise this kind of reasoning as secular and unchristian. For Christians, there is a difference in a wedding. Before the wedding the couple are not married; afterwards they *are*. The wedding confirms, seals the relationship with the one to whom one vows life-long commitment. Baptism is a seal in the same sense. It is not a mere ceremony. It is even more serious than a wedding. One is released from one’s wedding vows at death, but one’s baptismal vow is for eternity. If we truly understand the nature of our baptismal vow of following Jesus, it would make a great difference to the way it is practiced.

Worship as transmission of the faith or Traditioning

This performing of the liturgy constitutes the traditioning process; that is to say, it is a process of actively handing down the faith as a living, saving heritage. Traditioning is the work of the Spirit. According to Vladimir Lossky, tradition is “the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church, communicating to each member of the Body of Christ the faculty of hearing, of receiving, of knowing the truth in the light that belongs to it, and not according to the natural light of human reason”.⁴

The invocation of the Holy Spirit is made especially during the communion, at the consecration of the bread and wine. The Spirit is also invoked at baptism and ordination. It is in the context of worship that we call on the Spirit. This implies that it is the Spirit who gives life and power. The gift of life is not inherent in the bread and wine or water or ordaining hands. These are only *means* of grace; the grace comes from the Spirit who communicates God’s very own life to us. The acts, rites, symbols and words in the worship provide the occasion for the Spirit to communicate the life of God to us.

Notice that in worship, we are re-telling, re-enacting, etc. We are engaged in something repetitive and yet on-going or progressive. This repetition is not just a going back to old things. It is a reminding ourselves of something that happened, but this happening also points to something yet to come. We engage in something we already know and yet something new: “the same and yet not the same”. This is the structure of biblical eschatology. The future is like the past, yet it is something new (cf. the *New Heavens* and *New Earth*).

The repetition is not mere repetition. In worship, something new also unfolds in the process of reminding, re-telling and re-enacting. What makes worship “the same yet not the same”? The key is the presence of the Spirit. He is the one who comes from beyond history and transfigures the old. He is the “power of the future” who reveals the future, the eschatological hope in our present existence. It is the Spirit who takes the old, familiar things and transfigures them into windows which open to the future, new creation. This is why it is so vital to be open to what the Spirit is doing and saying in the church.

The transmission of the faith, therefore, is not merely handing a static deposit of truth from generation to generation, like a piece of heirloom. Tradition is rather a living and growing thing because energised by the Spirit of Truth. In handing down, we are making history, enabling the community to grow as it moves towards the consummation.

Worship enables this kind of traditioning to take place. That is to say, if we keep our worship alive we will enable the next generation of Christians to realize that they are part of a living stream that is moving down history towards the final consummation. Our children should not be made to feel that they are merely given the task of preserving a white elephant, but that they are given the proven spiritual resources to enable them to face the challenges in their own place and time. But here we encounter two enemies to such traditioning.

One is *traditionalism*, which insists on “canonizing” one particular period of history and making it definitive for all times, whether it be the church fathers, the Reformation, Martin Luther or John Calvin. Traditionalism deadens worship because it sees worship as merely repeating what was given in the past. There is no place for the Spirit to lead the church forward into new situations.

The other great enemy is *novelty*. We live in a world where novelty itself has become a virtue. The advertising world has sold us the idea that we are heading nowhere, unless we possess something new: the latest fashion, the newest gadget, the next promotion, etc. But the truth is that modern man is terribly bored and the only way to overcome boredom is through novelty.

Novelty in the church is sometimes cleverly disguised as “God is doing a new thing”. But whatever “new” thing that God is doing, if it is indeed God’s doing, it must be derived from the Gospel, the old, old story. This is why true worship must always be one in which the Bible occupies a central place.

Worship as telling the gospel story (Bible centred worship)

According to Lathrop, “the whole history of worship among Christians might be regarded as a history of the way the [Bible] was understood and alive among the churches”.⁵ If we examine most of the traditional liturgies, including even Quaker silence, we find the Bible playing a central role in the whole worship procedure. Readings and exposition are the most obvious. But there is also the singing of the Psalms, liturgical texts which allude to the biblical Story (especially in the communion ritual).

Christian worship focuses on the Gospel Story, as seen in our church calendar. This is because it is the gospel that helps us to find our identity as part of the meta-narrative of God.⁶ Only the gospel story can give transcendent shape and meaning to our own life stories. Without the gospel meta-narrative our own life stories are reduced to snippets of disjointed episodes. Here and there we get pieces of experiences that stir us up, awaken us spiritually, give us a temporary “kick”. But they quickly fade, leaving us wondering, what do they all mean? So we go on longing for a repeat performance, but the second time round isn’t as interesting as the first. Our tolerance level keeps going up. We need another dose of experience more exciting than the previous one, in order to get the same religious “high”. Thus novelty is the hallmark of the modern religious gathering. It’s the only way to keep away boredom. In some contemporary worship services, the aim appears to be to do just that: to create another worship experience. In such a situation the gospel does not provide the unifying theme (it has to be some *new* ideas!). But each Sunday worship is experienced as a disjointed episode. In short, if we are not deeply ingrained with a sense that my life is undergirded by an overarching meaning and purpose which is given by God himself when he gave us his Son, we will end up like the rest of mankind, looking for the ephemeral joy of the moment.

Worship links the ancient book to the present people of God. This link is not just through the Bible supplying us with a store of images for us to identify our present situation, much less to justify our belligerence towards others (we are the elect; those

who are not with us are damned). Rather, the biblical images are living symbols which genuinely communicate the grace of God. To quote Lathrop again,

The liturgical intention has been that these texts speak to us now not just of ourselves and our history, but of grace, of God's action, of a new thing not yet imagined. The liturgical purpose is for something to happen in the use of the texts, not for them to function simply as archaic imagery for our current situation.⁷

"Canaan" is not just about ancient Israel, nor a projection of our own hopes. Rather, in worship we believe that we can taste those grapes: such a taste "is grace and the presence of God in the midst of our history and our projected hopes".⁸

In short, worship brings us into direct contact with the biblical reality itself. It keeps us in touch with the text which embodies the Truth: Christ the Truth, the First Tradition (the One sent by the Father). *Through the biblical texts we encounter God's grace and God's presence through the work of the life-giving Spirit.* The text serves as the medium for an encounter with the Living Word. As the Second Helvetic Confession puts it, "the preaching of the Word is the Word of God".

The biblical images are not only living symbols but also open symbols pointing us to the new thing, the new creation, the future fulfillment. In using and "indwelling" the Scripture, we are not simply reliving the past. In worship we get an actual foretaste of the new creation. We use the old text to point to a new reality. The Bible points forward to the future. In the acts of reading, hearing the texts, we participate in the future. We experience something which is "the same" (i.e. having continuity with the past) yet "not the same": the *new* Exodus, *new* covenant, etc.

There are of course other ways of using the text in worship. E.g., the biblical narrative may be applied to our contemporary situation and provide the means of creating our own identity. This is what narrative theology seeks to do. Narrative theology makes us aware that we are part of the biblical story. The biblical story gives shape to our own narrative, even when our own life's story appears to be meandering meaninglessly.

The Problem of worship

Worship is encounter with God, ascribing worth to God, immersion in divine splendor.⁹ It ought to be an exhilarating experience when we encounter the Beauty of Holiness. Yet, why is worship so difficult?

One reason is that worship is a discipline and that is what is lacking in many modern Christians. Marva Dawn compares true worship to the range, depth and variety of a gourmet meal. For people fed on a diet of McDonald's and Burger King, such a meal proves too difficult to digest.

We fail to realise that worship is not just an occasional foray into God's presence. The prerequisite of worship is the cultivation of a relationship with God we call prayer. And prayer, like any other personal relationship, needs to grow. It requires

disciplined effort. We don't expect relationship to fall into place naturally. We live in a world where everything left on its own will rot.

Worship requires discipline. It takes effort to listen *attentively*, to participate *intentionally*, during a worship service. We grow in our worship by doing it regularly, just as we become proficient in our language by speaking it and living in the community that speaks the language. It is the lack of discipline that has caused many churches today to find alternative ways to attract the crowd.

A second difficulty in worship is the confusion in many modern churches between the aim of worship and its benefits. Many churches have turned worship into a purpose-driven activity. They want people to come to church because of some practical benefits to be gained. Such clichés are frequently heard in contemporary services: “Praise will bring down the power of God”; “Worship will make us better people”. A good worship is one that can help the church attract the crowd, whether by good music or good sermon. So, worship has increasingly become a form of entertainment.

I'm not saying that worship will have no beneficial effect. When we are truly in God's awesome presence, we might fall flat on our faces (like John the Evangelist). We might feel terribly wretched and undone (like Isaiah and Job). But we don't worship God *in order to* experience these things. We don't create a “worship atmosphere” in order to induce such experiences. True encounter with God is often a life-changing experience as we discover the truth about ourselves, our world and others in the light of the encounter with God. Worship of God's people may result in non-Christians in our midst saying, “Surely God is among you!” But these are not the *reasons* why we worship. Maybe God has his own reasons why he calls us to worship him. But the reasons are not known to us, although we might speculate about them. The Jewish writer and Nobel laureate Isaac Singer once asked, Why do we praise God?, and proceeded to give this answer: God knows that if we don't praise him we will end up praising the superheroes and charismatic dictators of this world—and we might add, the pop stars and money makers.

Meeting God, or perhaps more accurately, God meeting us, will produce its own answer to the mystery of our existence. *The key issue in worship is, Do we so plan our worship with the aim that worshippers will encounter the Lord of glory? Or is our worship only to provide people with a good worship experience? The ultimate reason why we worship is that God is inherently worthy. In our pragmatic world, worship will seem like a waste of time. But it is time wasted in God's presence; and anything “wasted” for God is not a waste—just like Mary's pouring out an expensive perfume at Jesus' feet is not a waste.*

If worship is driven by some pragmatic reasons, then the tendency is to stage-manage the worship to ensure that it fulfils our expectations. So, we have “warm up” sessions before the service to get everyone into just the “right mood”, so that at the end of the service, people could go away feeling good about it.

Conclusion

If we could only understand the true nature of worship, it will give us confidence to do it, and to do it well. It will draw people into the true life of the living Body of Christ. We will not be tempted to look for ways to make worship “relevant” which actually means reducing worship to the level that will suit the modern consumer. Worship is not a consumer item; rather, it should lift true worshippers up and out of the clutches of our narcissistic and consumerist culture. True worship is always the Other-centered. This is why it will challenge and invert our individualism and self-centeredness: me, myself or even “my” God. We see how this mentality is reflected in the predominantly “I” songs in contemporary singing. Such songs have subtly helped to legitimise the consumer culture within the church. God becomes *my* possession; he is obligated to meet *my* needs. True worship trains us to turn away from self and to become truly free for others.

Worship, therefore, is a *discipline*. We know that even in physical exercises, if they don’t push us to reach beyond ourselves, we will not make progress. If worship only panders to our sensate cravings, we are not worshipping God in spirit and in truth; rather we are only making worship into another consumer item, another idol.

¹ N. T. Wright, *For all God’s Worth*, SPCK, 1997.

² Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Press, 1993), p. 5.

³ Geoffrey Wainwright, *Worship With One Accord* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 46

⁴ Wainwright, *Worship*, p. 59.

⁵ Lathrop, *Holy Things*, p. 16.

⁶ Marva J. Dawn, *A Royal ‘Waste’ of Time* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 24-27.

⁷ Lathrop, *Holy Things*, p. 18.

⁸ Lathrop, *Holy Things*, p. 18.

⁹ Marva J. Dawn, *A Royal ‘Waste’ of Time*, pp. 7-8.