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A Theology of Worship, University Church of Christ, Malibu, California

N. LINCOLN HANKS AND CAROLYN HUNTER, WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY RICH LITTLE

The Christian faith represents a global community of believers whose views of doxology have been shaped by multiple influences. John Wesley's "quadrilateral" is a helpful tool for understanding these multi-dimensional sources of theological and doxological discovery. The quadrilateral is bordered by the authoritative role of Holy Scripture, the span of Christian tradition, the exercise of informed reason and the formative nature of personal experience—each contributes to the creation of one's doxology. Given the dynamic nature of these influential factors, the community of faith represents a very diverse milieu of doxological beliefs and assumptions, creating praxeological challenges for church leaders who seek to unify their communities around a common doxological response through worship.

The University Church of Christ in Malibu, California, has responded to these challenges by articulating a theology of worship designed to provide a doxological apologetic for our public and private worship, and guiding principles for consistent worship praxis. Church leaders, ministers and members identified key sources of inspiration for this document. The Holy Scriptures served as the precedent source for inspiration and guidance, ensuring that the inquiry started with the meta-narrative doxological truths of scripture, limiting the likelihood of descending too quickly to praxeological outcomes. Leading New Testament scholar and former Bishop of Durham N. T. Wright provided scholarly insight into the process through his work, *For All God's Worth: True Worship and the Calling of the Church*, while Calvin College professor, author and Director of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship John Witvliet supplied a personal consultation to the conversation and process. Additionally, University Church of Christ Elder and Pepperdine University Professor of Religion Ron Highfield furnished insight through his work entitled *Great is the Lord: Theology for the Praise of God*. A series of conversations were structured for church leaders and members to consider the overarching doxological truths of scripture informed by these resources. These truths are both transcultural and transgenerational in their relevance and importance, finding their very origin in the eternal nature of God himself. Having identified these truths, the conversation turned to the practical implications of these truths on ecclesiological praxis. Attempts were made to ensure that such praxis was also transcultural and transgenerational in order to reflect the nature of doxological truth. Additionally, attempts were also made to consider the implications of this theology of the missional responsibility of the church to both members and non-members. Two members were then identified to draft a theology of worshiping, resulting in the document that follows. ~RICH LITTLE SERVES AS THE PREACHING MINISTER FOR THE UNIVERSITY CHURCH OF CHRIST IN MALIBU, CALIFORNIA.

A WORSHIP THEOLOGY

"We respond to God's grace by offering our lives to God as living sacrifices . . . and by coming together as the body of Christ to offer our worship to Him in spirit and in truth." (*Congregational Vision Statement*)

I.

The triune nature of God points to the essence of our Creator: the supreme loving being. We accept by faith that we are made in the likeness of God; therefore, we are creatures destined to love God and to love each other. As a community we seek oneness with each other in the presence of Christ and through the Holy Spirit. When we acknowledge the image of God in each of us, we start to overcome barriers that keep us from knowing and loving each other. Our worship together should be designed so that nothing obstructs our view of the *Imago Dei*. Instead, it should illuminate the Divine in all of us, strengthening our relationships with our Lord and with each other.

In our acts of worship, we recognize and we express our respect for the true worth of the Deity. So that we may learn how to appreciate God's worth, we look to scripture to identify and enumerate the manifestations of the Lord's essence and glory. When we are able to assign the proper value to the wholeness of God, we, a worshipping community, become more complete and more fulfilled. Because of *Imago Dei*, we are formed and transformed by that which we worship.

Because God is Creator of the Ends of the Earth, our Maker, and Fountain of Living Waters . . .

. . . we create responses of gratitude to express our joy and exuberance for the gifts of life.

Therefore, when we meet together we ought to listen to the Word read to us and witnessed to us in order to reach for a clearer understanding of YHWH, the Spirit of Truth, the Son of Man; and we ought to lift our hearts in praise as we acknowledge and affirm our faith to our Shepherd, our Sun, our Shield.

Because God is YHWH, Alpha and Omega, Ancient of Days, a Diadem of Beauty, a Consuming Fire, and the Just One . . .

. . . we become conscious of our own inadequacy. We are dismayed, and we demonstrate our penitence before God.

Therefore, in our assembly we ought to confess our own failings to the Just One and to each other, knowing that we have an Advocate.

Because God is the Potter, the Husbandman, our Captain and our Shepherd . . .

. . . we express our submission as we seek to conform to the wholeness that God wills for us.

Therefore, we ought to voice our acceptance of the sacrifice made for us at the crucifixion of the Lamb of God, and to receive forgiveness from the Father of Mercies; to listen in silence for the Spirit's promptings within us.

Because God is the Word, Immanuel, Redeemer, Bread of Life, Man of Sorrows, and Lamb That Was Slain . . .

. . . we receive the gifts that come to us by grace.

Therefore, we ought to taste our salvation as we commune with our Lord and the saints, reverencing the body and blood of our Savior.

Because God is Faithful and True, Sun and Shield, the Rock, and a House of Defense . . .

. . . we affirm our faithfulness, striving to live righteously and to be a light to the world.

Therefore, we ought to petition our Maker, our Redeemer, our Comforter to heal us and our fallen, broken world; to give us humility and strength to do the work we have been commissioned to do.

Because God is Love, Abba Father, Father of Mercies, Strength to the Poor, and Refuge for

the Oppressed . . .

. . . we bring our own offerings to God and to each other; we open our hearts and our community to all who are in need.

Therefore, we ought to give of our wealth and offer our best selves to the service of the one who came to us as a Servant. We ought to bind each other's wounds, wash each other's feet and take our places as bearers of Grace to all God's children on earth.

II.

God has blessed the University Church with an abundance of musical, literary, rhetorical and dramatic talents, and we will seek out those members who can lead us to worship with profundity and excellence in a diversity of ways, reflecting the many and marvelous natures of the Godhead.

We will identify and commission those willing members who possess the distinctive talents and experiences needed to effectively lead the congregation into transformative worship. Once commissioned as members of our worship ministry, these leaders will assume the following responsibilities:

Develop worship for each occasion with an order that reflects a consistent purpose and tone, and they will lead the congregation through the traditional acts of worship (singing, praying, teaching/preaching, giving, and celebrating the Lord's Supper) as well as other appropriate worshipful activities consistent with our understanding of the nature of God

Welcome opportunities for spontaneous participation in worship through the sincere engagement of our bodies and voices

Explore new ways in which the arts and other areas of knowledge may be utilized in worship

Prepare their offerings of scholarship, musicianship, rhetoric and other contributions to corporate worship well in advance of the congregation's time together

Bring to the Lord only the best of what we can say, sing and do together

Find those within the congregation with the requisite gifts who are willing to subject themselves to a discipline in order to assist in a particular area of worship

Provide learning opportunities outside the larger assembly for members of the body who wish to enhance and strengthen specific acts of worship

Invite all segments of the congregation to participate meaningfully in worship, including our children, who have the potential to worship our Lord with distinction and innocence, free of sentimentality

Nurture a balanced canon of high quality songs, deliberately broadening the repertoire with advice from our skilled musicians and knowledgeable literary interpreters, ensuring that the music and its arrangements are appropriate for corporate worship and that the texts we sing are biblical and transformational expressions of petition, praise or confession

Allow for safe, loving opportunities for acts of confession either through general prayer, through opportunities to pray with elders, or through invitation for public requests during times of meditation
Frame special moments within the worship for members of the body to open their hearts in silence and reflect on what they have heard and experienced

Identify and gracefully welcome visitors to our worship hour, being especially mindful of their needs; examine and question often what we do together, whether it be tradition or trend; and be willing to consider and sensitively implement better ways to approach the Deity in worship

N. LINCOLN HANKS AND **CAROLYN HUNTER** ARE MEMBERS OF THE WORSHIP COMMITTEE OF THE UNIVERSITY CHURCH OF CHRIST IN MALIBU, CALIFORNIA.