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Renewing *our* Worship

Paul Watson

This past October I enjoyed one of those rare but wonderful “Aha!” moments of life. You have had such moments too, I’m sure—times when thoughts, feelings, and experiences hovering around a significant issue somehow sort themselves out and arrange themselves into a harmonious, satisfying whole. They are moments of clarity and closure, but not finality—for even as they allow us to make sense of the past and embrace the present, they enable us to imagine the future in new and exciting ways.

My “Aha!” moment had to do with worship. It followed a one-day workshop on worship renewal conducted by Robert Webber.¹ The workshop was worthwhile on many levels. Of greatest value to me was its help in sorting out my thoughts about worship, my experiences of worship, and my own ideas for worship renewal. In what follows, I want to share some of those thoughts, experiences, and ideas. My hope is that this discussion will stimulate and encourage you and your congregation toward renewal, that in all things God will be glorified and his people edified.

Definitions

One thing that has become obvious to me is our need for clearly defined terms when we talk about worship, starting with the word *worship* itself. In its broadest sense, *worship* encompasses the whole of Christian life. Rom 12:1–2 is often cited in this regard, as is the fact that one

of the two main words for *worship* in the New Testament literally means *to serve*. Most narrowly conceived, *worship* identifies the portion of the assembly during which God is directly addressed and magnified, usually in song or prayer. Rev 5:13–14 conveys this more limited notion. In the context of this essay, *worship* will represent something more than “praise” but less than “all life is worship.” *Worship* here will refer to the entire service of the assembly on the Lord’s Day—that event into which we enter corporately and from which we emerge to serve God throughout the following week.

Essence

What, then, is the definition of *worship*? What is the essential nature of this special, corporate Lord’s Day event? I suggest that our worship is fundamentally *communion*—a focused, intentional communion that has a dual aspect: communion with God (through Christ, in the Spirit) and communion with one another (the fellowship of the saints). We commune with God, individually and jointly, by receiving and experiencing his presence and by directing our thoughts, feelings, and actions to him. And we commune with each other by edifying (instructing, enlightening, uplifting) one another. Worship thus proclaims and embodies the core of our faith, as articulated by Christ himself: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength,” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Purpose

The purpose of worship, directly linked to its nature, is to *establish, enrich, and extend* our relationships with God and one another. As we commune with God—by praising him, hearing him through his Word, celebrating his son’s victory over death on our behalf, petitioning him—we are drawn into a deeper, richer relationship with him. As we commune with one another—by singing, reading, teaching, listening, praying, sharing the Table—we are likewise drawn into expanded, enhanced relationships with each other. This comprehensive purpose of worship is reflected in the rich, multifaceted picture of the assembly that we find in the New Testament (see Acts 2:42–47; 1 Cor 12–14).

Means

The various *modes, or forms*, of worship—singing, Scripture reading, preaching, praying, sharing the Table, giving—are the means by which the purpose of worship is realized. Given the breadth of that purpose, such a diversity of modes is needed. But given the unity of that purpose, such diverse modes should be understood and engaged in not as separate, discrete “acts,” but as related parts of a unified whole.

Historical Perspectives

Understanding the essence, purpose, and means of worship should help us overcome our tendency to narrow our focus to some limited purpose or particular mode. The tendency is not ours alone; it has, in fact, characterized the Church throughout the centuries. But worship thus reduced is theologically incomplete.

By the post-apostolic era, worship had come to focus on the sermon. Two prominent figures of that time were John Chrysostom (“John the Golden Mouth”) in the East and Augustine (who wrote the first homiletics textbook, *On Christian Doctrine*) in the West. By the Medieval period, the emphasis had shifted from the Word to the Table—specifically, the celebration of the Mass. Then, with the Protestant Reformation, the emphasis shifted once again to the Word; preaching became the hallmark of Protestant worship.

Within Protestantism, shifts continued. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the emphasis was on edification and formation of the congregation, evidenced by two-hour sermons followed by congregational discussion and application. Edification and formation gave way in the nineteenth century to revivalism with its goal of indi-

vidual response. Then, in the twentieth century, mainline Protestant churches moved toward formalized, liturgical worship, performed by clergy (“high church”). Meanwhile, in other Protestant churches, informal, charismatic, praise-centered worship became the norm, with the entire congregation fully involved (“low church”).

Where do we of the Restoration tradition fit in? Our worship has been shaped by two things: our nineteenth-century revivalistic heritage, hence our emphasis on evangelism and conversion; and our desire for obedience, hence our emphasis on correct performance of the “five acts of worship” (although we differ among ourselves as to what “correct” is). More recently, in many congregations a strong emphasis on praise has begun to emerge.

The divergent threads of historical worship have begun to come back together in the current “worship renewal” movement. Churches across the liturgical and theological spectrum are “converging” (Webber) in their worship. Rather than arguing with or ignoring each other regarding worship, churches are more and more sharing ideas and forms that can be faithfully incorporated into their respective services. Catholics and mainline Protestants have incorporated less formal modes (e.g., praise songs and lay participation), while Evangelical groups have been recovering more traditional forms (e.g., the passing of the peace). The “renewal” of worship being experienced in so many communions is not “new” in the sense that nothing like it has ever happened before. As the above historical review reveals, the worship of the Church has always been dynamic, never static. What is being “renewed”—and this is what I find truly exciting—is the full richness of worship in its original nature and purpose.

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The Focus of Worship

As we seek to renew and enrich our own worship, on what should we concentrate? What part of our corporate assembly needs the most attention? Hopefully, not the *content* of our services: the gospel upon which our worship—our communion with God and with each other—is based. We should always search for better understanding and better representation of that gospel, to be sure. But the gospel itself is not negotiable, not subject to “renewal.”

Nor should we concentrate on the *style* of our worship services. *Style* refers to the specific expressions or manifestations of the worship modes: for example, the kinds of songs sung (Scripture-songs, praise choruses, hymns) and how they are led (song leader or praise team; songbooks or projection); the type of elements used in the Lord’s Supper (crackers or bread; grape juice or wine) and how those elements are distributed (e.g., with the congregation seated in pews or literally gathered around the Table). Style is significantly influenced by the historical and cultural contexts of the worshippers. In the area of style, diversity is not only acceptable, it is inevitable. Unfortunately, most discussions of worship renewal have been limited almost exclusively to matters of style—an approach that has generated more heat than light.

The place to concentrate our efforts in worship renewal is the *structure*, or *shape*, of our services. *Structure* refers to the interrelatedness of all of the parts of the service: the narrative flow. The integrated structure is not for dramatic reasons, not for “effect” (although the effect on

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the worshippers is dramatic), but because worship with a narrative flow mirrors the *event*-centered nature of both Old and New Testament faith. What is the heart of the Old Testament, as remembered in the Passover? God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt. What is the heart of the New Testament, as proclaimed in the earliest Christian sermons and as celebrated in the Lord’s Supper? The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So also our worship needs to remember, proclaim, and celebrate those events, not to focus on logical propositions or the performance of disconnected “acts of worship.” Worship should be a meaningful sequence of actions, not simply a series of unrelated acts.

Webber identifies a pattern present in Christian worship from the very beginning, implicitly in the New Testament and explicitly in the writings of Justin Martyr.² Webber calls that pattern “the fourfold shape of worship”: the Gathering of the congregation, the Service of the Word, the Service of the Table, and the Dismissal of the assembly. Through that pattern, we reenact the narrative flow of the gospel itself: We are called by the gospel to become God’s people. We respond to him in praise. We encounter God by hearing his Word and by celebrating the Supper of his son. Inspired and empowered, we go out into the world to do his will. Truly, worship is “the gospel in motion” (Webber).

The Fourfold Shape of Worship

The Gathering. The Gathering “brings the people into the presence of God; it readies them to hear the Word of the Lord” (Webber). Among elements that can be included in the Gathering are invocation, praise, confession and petition, and reflection. Those elements can be embodied in hymn and song, Scripture reading, prayer, and even procession. Whatever elements and modes are chosen, the Gathering should not be disjointed, with a hodgepodge of unrelated acts; it should be narrative. One way to facilitate the narrative flow is through song selection. Thus, the opening songs might include an exhortation to worship, then a hymn of confession or petition, followed by songs of praise.

The Service of the Word. The Service of the Word naturally centers on the sermon; however, it should not be *all* sermon. The congregation can actively participate in this part of the service through multiple Scripture readings (including unison and responsive readings), prayer, and singing. Two other forms not commonly known or practiced

among us are the “prayers of the people,” in which the leader begins a petitionary prayer (for individuals, for the church, for the world) and invites all who wish to add their own petitions, and the “passing of the peace,” in which minister and congregation (or members one with another) exchange the words, “The peace of the Lord be with you.” “And with your spirit.”³

The Service of the Table. Concerning the Service of the Table, Webber said: “Our goal is to celebrate the Table each week. That is what the early church did.” Very helpful theologically is the understanding that, in the New Testament, the Table has four diamond-like facets: celebration of the Lord’s resurrection in the breaking of the bread (Luke 24:30–35; Acts 2:42); remembrance of the Lord’s death, and thus anticipation of his return (1 Cor 11:23–26); communion with the body (1 Cor 10:16–17); and thanksgiving (“Eucharist”) to God for what he has done in Christ (Luke 24:17, 19; 1 Cor 11:24). A rotating emphasis from week to week on the four facets can help us keep our own observance of the Supper both fresh and complete.

The Dismissal. The Dismissal sends the congregation, with the gospel it has received and celebrated, out into the world to serve. Regularly included in the Dismissal are a closing song or songs, a closing prayer,⁴ and a benediction.⁵ Also appropriate to the Dismissal are Scripture reading and pastoral admonition.

Conclusion

It is exciting to see such openness to renewal today, an openness that transcends institutional boundaries. What causes me to be particularly hopeful is that the renewal

does *not* represent a repudiation of the past; indeed, many ancient practices are being recovered and restored.⁶ Nor is the renewal a mindless embrace of novelty, but rather a selective inclusion of new forms and styles (storytelling, songs, etc.) based on theological relevance and not simply popular appeal. Worship that is “renewed” informs, inspires, and challenges us, allowing us to reclaim the full richness of worship experienced by the earliest Christian communities.

PAUL WATSON serves the Cole Mill Road Church of Christ in Durham, North Carolina, as pulpit minister and elder.

Notes

¹Unless otherwise noted, all references to Webber will be to his workbook or his spoken comments from his *Renew Your Worship!* workshop.

²Our earliest extended description of worship comes from Justin’s *Apology*, I: 61, 65–67, written about A.D. 150.

³The origins of this are often traced back to Jesus’ words to his disciples after his resurrection: John 20:19, 21, 26; and Luke 24:36 (in some manuscripts).

⁴The closing prayer should neither repeat earlier prayers nor rehash the sermon, but should prepare the congregation for the challenges that lie ahead.

⁵The benediction, common in both Old and New Testaments, is a blessing, not a prayer. See Num 6:22–27; Luke 24:50–51; and Heb 13:20–21; compare Phil 1:3–11 with Phil 4:23.

⁶Note that chapter 3 of Webber’s most recent book is “Back to the Biblical and Historical Tradition of Worship.” Robert Webber, *Blended Worship: Achieving Substance and Relevance in Worship* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 34–50.