

1-1-1990

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Recommended Citation

McNicol, Alan (1990) "Contemporary Developments in the Church of Christ: Reflections on Worship," *Leaven*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol1/iss1/8>

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Contemporary Developments in the Church of Christ:

REFLECTIONS ON WORSHIP

By Alan McNicol

Something definitely is stirring in thinking about worship in churches of Christ. A visit to several of the major urban congregations will quickly reveal that there is far more to our contemporary liturgies than the traditional "three songs and a prayer." Still, it is not clear whether there is any understandable way of determining accurately current trends and developments. We can say fairly confidently that the tone of our worship services is moving toward greater emphasis on expressions of earnestness and emotion in the various activities that take place in worship. Clearly this is being done in an environment of resistance toward those activities that are perceived as cold, lifeless, boring, and ritualistic. Particularly among many there are frequent calls for a more informal style of worship. It is widely assumed that this emphasis on internal spiritual sincerity will be the vehicle to carry us along the road to a more committed discipleship and deeper dedication to Christ.

Probably we have already given the impression we perceive that there is a cosmetic quality to many of the contemporary

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calls for change in our time honored worship practices. This would be a correct assessment. Unfortunately, one of our greatest problems is to get leaders to take the time to reflect on what is happening in the worship experience of the church. One may be pardoned for thinking that in the minds of these leaders the ideal member is one who is present regularly on Sunday morning, who makes substantial financial contributions, and never complains. But this may be shortsighted. Just as any voluntary organization or civic club will not last long unless it is responsive to the particular reason that brought it into existence, so the church that does not hold at the center of its life the nourishing of a sense of transcendent purpose will not survive. People go to church with the expectation that they will encounter mystery and be challenged by a word from the eternal.

Now, who we are and what we consider important works itself out in our worship. If the central focus of the church is communal adoration and an encounter with the transcendent One who is our Creator, Judge, and Redeemer, the order of worship, or liturgy, would highlight that theological conception. However, if what matters most in the services of the local church is meeting perceived psychological and social needs, such as relief of stress, then the form and style of worship may be quite different. With respect to the former perspective, periods of informal socializing (which are characteristic of many of our assem-

blies today), public recognition of outstanding accomplishments of individuals, and frequent re-arrangement of the liturgy, make little sense. But if the latter perspective is dominant, they are quite understandable.

This leads to a brief comment on a related factor in current developments in worship among the churches of Christ: the rise of what has been called the Edification Thesis (Weed, 50). Essentially, the proponents of this view argue that the purpose for Christians meeting together ("the assembly") is not primarily to give corporate praise and adoration to God but to edify or mutually build up one another in the faith. Advocates of the Edification Thesis have attempted to argue this view on biblical grounds (Bishop, 219-228 and the response of McNicol, 20-45). The attractiveness of the Thesis for many church leaders is that it appears to provide a rationale, all in a good cause, for importing into our assemblies a multitude of techniques and practices that have worked well in communications or business and are considered valuable for building up institutionally the local congregation.

For example, based on the all-pervasive role of television in our society today, the form, function, and even furnishings for our assemblies are often heavily influenced by the medium. The contemporary sermon has changed massively in time, form, and substance in the last generation. In many urban centers it is painfully evident that the function of the sermon, especially in style and tone, owes far more to the format of the television entertainer and talk show hosts than the classic pulpit oratory of historic Restorationist Christianity. The question remains, however, whether this subordination of worship to a functional role of accomplishing a greater overall good (i.e. the development of a vibrant institution that meets social needs) is neither congruent with historic Christian faith nor, in the long haul, well serves the church.

The only way we can make valid judgments in this area is to come to some common understanding as to what we are intending to do in our contemporary assemblies. Then, a model may be set forth to help determine how well our worship practices conform to this understanding. In this essay I wish to put forward briefly a suggestion which I hope will be a contribution toward the development of a common understanding among us on this fundamental matter. Although what takes place on Sunday evening

and Wednesday night is of great importance to the corporate life of the church, my remarks pertain only to the Sunday morning assembly.

My thesis is that the liturgy in the assembly on Sunday morning should not be construed as a series of isolated acts which have to be made more attractive to modern people by adding social interludes and various other "packaging devices," or which have to be performed in and of themselves to fulfill our duty to God. Rather, the service should be viewed as a totally connected activity whereby the salvific events of God's redemptive act in Christ are dramatically re-presented, and, by means of active participation, the worshiper responds to the Christ-event both in praising of God and by receiving grace to continue to live the Christian life.

Procedurally, the argument will develop in three stages. First, I plan to discuss in some detail our present difficulties that have resulted from construing worship as a series of isolated acts. Second, I wish to give a brief overview, biblically based, as to what I consider a defensible view of Christian worship. Finally, I will be as practical as possible and sketch a model order of worship for a Sunday morning service in keeping with the thesis of the essay.

The Fragmentation of the Worship Experience

Toward the end of a lengthy discussion on the Lord's Supper in **The Christian System**, Alexander Campbell used some notes taken from his memorandum book made during several visits to a Restorationist church where the worship services made a favorable impression upon him. He turned to these notes for a suggestion for the conduct of a worship service. His suggestion is a precursor of some of the best and the worst that would emerge in the worship experience within our movement.

Campbell noted that the assemblies lasted from eleven o'clock until two in the afternoon. They opened with a hymn such as "Christ the Lord is Risen Today," followed by a scripture reading from the Gospels and prayers of thanksgiving and intercession, concluding with a congregational amen! Subsequently, there was a reading from an epistle, another prayer, a brief invitation to the Lord's Table, and the celebration of the Supper concluded with another hymn. Then, after a prayer for the poor and reception of the contribution, this

particular congregation, since it was without a capable teacher, had several brethren read scripture and gave sundry remarks. After several more songs the service concluded with a benediction and dismissal.

At the end of his observations Campbell emphasized that the service was carried out with a tone of quiet unceremonious dignity. As Campbell said, "Every thing exhibited the power of godliness as well as the form." Clearly Campbell intended to express approval for a service that neither highlighted ceremony or ritual on the one hand, nor was informal and disorderly on the other. As a quiet, unpreten-

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tious people throughout our history we have maintained a simple unadorned liturgy. It reflects who we are. Campbell recognized this, as should we. But, on many occasions — perhaps due to a lack of careful planning — our services have fragmented into a series of isolated, unconnected activities which fail to reflect the dignity and godliness Campbell described.

It was in this context that there gradually evolved in our worship the emphasis on five separate acts of worship (prayer, praise in song, reading and exposition of scripture, the Lord's Supper, and the contribution). The point of this lesson in history is to provide a context for much of our present ferment over worship. If the service is viewed as a series of special sacred acts that must be performed, then, logically, a special sacred space and time is created separate and apart from the actions of ordinary daily life.

The challenge to this thinking has come from two quarters. Some have seen in our preoccupation with the "five acts" evidence of a certain enfeebling form of legalism. A friend

who had spent a lifetime in the worship experience of churches of Christ recently said to me, "I believe among us that observance of the Lord's Supper is mainly viewed as satisfying a requirement; at least that is what I have always perceived it to be." Needless to say that if this is the basic theology that informs the worship experience of the local church, this can not be viewed forever as spiritually satisfying. The evidence is that, on these grounds, many have left churches of Christ in the last decades. Frankly, they believe there is something more to worship than that! Elders helplessly ask, "What can we do to respond to this situation? After all, we are only doing what the Lord requires!" We must and can give a more appropriate theological response as to the meaning of worship.

Others, of course, eagerly adopt the Edification Thesis. For, at the heart of this argument is their absolute — all of life lived under Christ's lordship is worship (Rom. 12:1-2). Under the new covenant there is no sacred time or space. Therefore, the distinction made between the specific acts carried on at "the worship service" and those things we do elsewhere is not just an anomaly; it is a colossal theological mistake. Here, as well, the basis of the old model for worship is shaken to its very foundations. The attempt to define worship as a certain number of separate acts has failed.

Clearly, in light of this analysis, it is time to state in plain terms what we perceive worship to be and give some practical suggestions as to what we think should take place in our assemblies.

A Doctrine of Worship for the Church Today

A fundamental starting point for any Christian doctrine of worship is the recognition that God has elicited human acknowledgment of his absolute worthiness because of what he has done for us. Our story indicates that in such events as Creation and Exodus, the gracious and free entrance into covenant, and, above all, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has shown himself as loving and just and truly worthy of being acknowledged as Sovereign. Moreover, throughout the Bible, there is continual testimony that God freely chose to manifest himself personally in such situations as the ark and mercy seat (Exodus 25:22), the temple (1 Kings 8:10-11), and in the life of Jesus (John 1:14-18). Furthermore, in

the eucharistic fellowship at the Lord's Table there is the perpetual promise that, in Christ, God will draw near to us (1 Cor. 10:14-22). To the Christian community God has shown that he is worthy of absolute adoration by what he has done in history and by his gracious promise to abide with his people.

In past discussions about worship in churches of Christ too much attention has been given to the issue of what we are to do in worship. This issue is important. But not enough attention has been directed to the more basic point of God's prevenient action in history and his promise to draw near as the basis for worship. As in an ellipse, both aspects of worship are important, but the latter is prior and is most significant.

At the heart of the Christian story, is the remembrance that Christ our high priest has brought the once-and-for-all offering of himself to God when on Golgotha he passed through the curtain that veils us from the heavenly sanctuary (Heb. 8:1-6; 9:11-14; 10:19-21). What priests with their sacrifices had been unable to do for centuries prior to the time of Jesus was accomplished by the worship (sacrifice) of Christ on the cross. As one whose work was initiated by God himself (Heb. 1:1-4) the sacrifice of his life was the act of service, par excellence, that totally redefined how the early Christians looked at worship. After Christ, the focus of worship shifted to what happened in the Christ-event. It is the basic paradigm for all we do and say. With this in mind, we can now view in proper perspective the other end of the ellipse - the human response to the great act of Christ's service.

Since it has been argued that the central act of worship, par excellence, was the service of Christ, a central question for the believer is how one can share both in the act of Christ's service and the benefits that have been derived from it. In short, how do we share in salvation? It is clearly the view of the early Christian community that this can be done by submission to Christ's Lordship and by continuing to commune with him (sacrament). Thus, at the heart of early Christian preaching was the announcement of the death of Jesus for our sins and his resurrection for our justification (1 Cor. 15:3-5; Rom. 4:25; 10:9; Acts 2:29-42; 3:17-26). Moreover, in the action of baptism the believer shared in the paradigmatic event of Christ's death and resurrection by dying to sin and rising to a new life

(Rom. 6:3-5). And in the regular communion of the Lord's Supper the believer maintained that relationship with the risen Lord (1 Cor. 10:16). As Bo Reicke has said, "The Word and Sacraments, as holy gifts of God...are a prolongation of what God has done for the world long ago through Jesus Christ." (Reicke, 198-199).

In recent years the function of baptism and the Lord's Supper has, in some quarters, not played the central role they once did among us. Baptisms are done by private appointment (apart from the body) and observance of the Lord's Supper is overshadowed by a plethora of other things that take place in the assembly. In a similar way, I think it would be fair to say, the sermon is not considered as important to the life of the community as it once was. This diminution of Word and Sacrament (or ordinance as Restorationists prefer) is a disappointing development. Any true Christian preaching worthy of the name must center in the death and resurrection of Jesus. What better way is there to highlight the truth of the gospel than by having baptisms regularly before the assembly wherein the center of our story is vividly re-presented and by placing the Lord's Supper as the crucial climax of the liturgy with its dramatic setting forth of the Lord's death?

Indeed, by the recognition of the centrality of the Word and the Ordinances, we may come to a deeper understanding of what it

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means to be a member of the body of Christ as a visible institution. The purpose of our assembling together is not analogous to a civic club or voluntary organization which exists to promote human collegiality. Through centering

its life around Word and Ordinance the assembly is where the church shows forth the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in Christ (Eph. 1:4). Thus worship is at the heart of the life of the church. It is not to be subordinated in the interest of some vague

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functional goal such as collegiality or meeting social needs. It is here that the church is "the church," as it renews itself through transcendence.

When the early Christians assembled for worship they carried on their activities in light of the familiar precedents of what took place in the synagogue. Worship was characterized by praise to God, various types of prayers and benedictions, and the reading and exposition of Scripture. This legacy was welded into the eucharistic fellowship of the early Christians at table in their house church settings.

Quite appropriately the tradition of Christian worship today still anchors the Word and the Supper in the context of praise (in word and song) and prayers of thankfulness to the graciousness of our loving Father. Certainly, without question, we would not endorse many of the later liturgical developments — especially those which sought to turn the ordinances into another cult (Ferguson, 1189). Major distortions in Christian worship have taken place. But, nevertheless, we can learn that the focus of the liturgy should always place the cross and resurrection at its center. All true worship celebrates the giving back to God of that which came from him and is rightfully his. Today, when Word and Ordinance are rightfully celebrated we are brought both before the cross and are called to examine our lives in light of that event. Thus it follows that our liturgy today should facilitate the drawing of our hearts and minds to Golgotha and the impact that event has had upon the world.

A Model for Today

Having set forth the argument that the corporate worship in our assemblies is based on the one perfect act of Christ, and that it is the role of Word and Ordinance to mediate these acts to the believing community, we will now put forward a model liturgy that reflects this particular theological preunderstanding. In doing this we express our indebtedness to the English Restorationist William Robinson for his suggestion that the function of liturgical action in the worship service is to re-present vividly the critical act of salvation centering on the Christ-event and to elicit our freely given worshipful response to it (Robinson 406-407).

It is suggested that the service open with a hymn of praise that centers in some way on the work of the Creator and his free entrance into covenant with a special people. Ideally, it would be appropriate for the congregation to stand for this hymn and remain standing as the people are led in a prayer of adoration and penitence. In this activity the idea is that we express solidarity with Israel as it waited for the coming of Messiah. In this mood of expectation a hymn of thankfulness or the incarnation may follow. After that the Word of God in promise (Old Testament) and fulfillment (Gospel and Epistle) could be read. This will highlight not only the coming of the Messiah in history but also symbolize the fact that the Word of life continues to be among us. The readings from Scripture (perhaps interspersed with a hymn on the working of the Holy Spirit) should be followed by the exhortation, based on the Word, but which has its ultimate origin in the teaching ministry of Jesus when he was with us. Just as Jesus' mission called for response, the exhortation will conclude with a call to discipleship which will also be reflected in the ensuing hymn.

The congregation will then be prepared for the climax of the service: the liturgical representation of the death of Jesus in the Lord's Supper. The observance of the Supper may be preceded by the offering where we attempt to identify in our giving with the commitment of Jesus as he set his face toward Jerusalem. The Supper should be presided over by one who is conscious that the death of Jesus, liturgically speaking, is being re-presented before the congregation. Thus the president, at the table, should break the bread and pour out the cup. With the observance of the Supper the

service has come to its climax. It would then conclude with a hymn of triumph celebrating the resurrection life that the congregation has as it goes forth. Finally, the people are dismissed with an appropriate benediction.

Today, the lives of believers are so compartmentalized and fragmented that it is important for us to be reminded each week in worship where the living center of our existence is found. More than ever before we need to see that it is in the Christ-event that we focus most appropriately on the work of God our Creator and Redeemer. Our worship should not be just another social experience. Neither should it be rote obedience to commands — even it is perceived that they come from God. Rather, our worship is the extension of grateful response to what our Father has done for the world in our Lord and even continues to do through the power of his Spirit (Philippians 2:12-13) in the life of the Christian community today.

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*Praise ye the Lord! 'Tis good to raise
Your hearts and voices in his praise:
His nature and his works invite
To make this duty our delight.*

Issac Watts
