

1-1-1990

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### Recommended Citation

Mitchell, Lynn (1990) "What Language Shall I Borrow: The High and Low of It," *Leaven*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol1/iss1/9>

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# What Language

## The High And

# Low Of It

## Shall I Borrow:

By Lynn Mitchell

God created us to be worshippers. Everything he has done for us since Creation has only increased our obligation to him in this regard. But there is a major problem. No language or forms are adequate vehicles to worship God—to express to him what we should express. The reason for this is simple. All languages and worship forms are human languages and human forms. They participate in all the deficiencies and inadequacies that characterize anything devised by or under the partial control of human beings. Even if God commanded animal sacrifice, for instance, it is still inadequate (Heb. 10:4-6). Even if he commanded prayer, it is still inadequate (Rom. 8:26,27). Worship occurs when human beings bring human language, human forms, human hearts, and human lips to offer sacrifices of praise.

This means, among other things, that all human acts of praise are cultural. When God takes for himself a people, he takes for himself, at the same time, a language, a psychology, and a culture through which to reveal himself. For this reason, serious Bible students must spend a great deal of time looking into the nuances of thought and practice found in the Sacred Writings of God's chosen people. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we should know that God's revelation is not abstract or impersonal; it is particular, personal, incarnational; it comes through human life, human history, human language and culture.

Webster defines culture as "the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes

thought, speech, action, and artifacts and depends upon man's capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations" (Webster's *New Collegiate Dictionary*).

If one accepts this commonly held definition of what "culture" is, then there is nothing in the Bible or in the history of the church that is not culturally related — from religious meals to baptismal rituals. Human beings can never completely escape their culture any more than they can escape their biology. Culture is an integral part of what makes us human. There is always a dialectical relationship among God's revelatory activity, human imagination, and human tradition.

God created the human capacity for learning and transmitting, but human beings do the learning and transmitting. Some of the things we have learned, we learned from discovering things about God's world — like music, language, machine making. Some of the things we have learned, we learned from the revelation of God in history, particularly the history of his chosen people. We learned to use music and language and machinery in the service of God. This learning was transmitted to succeeding generations. Thus, the special revelation of God entered culture. The people of God learned to sing to the Lord, pray to the Lord, eat to the Lord, give to the Lord and work for the Lord. Every act of worship to the Lord is cultural because it is human. It is our gift to God as an entirely appropriate, though always inadequate, act of praise for his unspeakable gift.

### Nature, Form, and Content

The basic nature of worship depends, of course, on the nature of what or whom we worship. The response one makes to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ will be essentially different from the response a worshipper may give to Moloch (gratitude and love versus dread and horror). Even the forms of worship adopted

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will be determined to some extent by the nature of the deity honored (e.g., self-giving versus human sacrifice, prayer versus magic or appeasement). Some forms are appropriate responses to what God reveals about himself, and some forms express meanings contrary to what we know about him.

On the other hand, many worship forms are almost universal in their nature and are already at hand for adaptation and use. Baptismal rituals, for example, already had meanings outside of the context of Christian or even Jewish faith (i.e., cleansing, initiation, etc.). The very nature of washing in water makes it one of the few options available in human culture for use in signifying cleansing, resurrection, and so forth. The Jews, John the Baptist, Jesus, and the early church seemed to have recognized its natural appropriateness to signify these spiritual realities, and they seemed to have no hesitancy in adopting this form and giving it content appropriate to the faith being embodied. Christian baptism could not, of course, have exactly the same content as pagan or even Jewish washings, but it had to maintain contact with its essential physical, psychological and cultural form in order to be of any use at all as a symbol.

The same things can be said of prayer, sacrificial systems, sacred music, even tongue speaking. All of these were around in some form prior to and independent of both the Mosaic system and the Christian system. As might be expected, then, there are similarities, even dependencies, as well as conscious contrasts to be found when comparing worship practices of Jews and Christians with their predecessors and neighbors. The similarities and dependences testify to the commonalities of human nature and culture; the contrasts testify to the consciousness of the vast gulf between the nature and character of Yahweh (and his Son) and the characters of the idolatrous pretenders to deity.

The New Testament recognizes the allure of spurious baptisms, Lord's Suppers, even ecstatic utterances (I Cor. 10: 14-22; 12:1-3, etc.). The difference is not in form, but in content. The use of baptism as a sign of cleansing and initiation was widespread. The difference is "for what" and "into whom" one is being baptized. The difference in the Christian eucharist is not that bread and wine are eaten with religious significance. The difference is the One with whom one is eating and communing.

The basic difference in any Christian worship is not the form but the content. Whether it is singing, prayer, ecstatic utterances, "who is the Lord to whom these acts of worship are addressed?" and "who is the Spirit who has inspired them?"

One thing scholars seem almost unanimous about is the difficulty of being confident about the forms of New Testament worship except in very general terms. Writers of Bible dictionary articles seem to state the problem in the most precise and stark terms: "Neither the form or content of New Testament worship can be reconstructed from available sources" (Walter J. Harrelson, "Worship," **Hastings Bible Dictionary**, p. 1044). "The normal worship and praise which (the Christian life) inspired is not explicitly described or prescribed" (R.S. Wallace, "Praise," **New Bible Dictionary**, J. D. Douglas, ed. p. 957). "So far as the New Testament is concerned our notions of Christian worship are very vague" (J.G.S.S. Thornton, "Worship," **New Bible Dictionary**, p. 1262).

After the time of the New Testament,

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worship in the church continued to develop and to be expressed through forms which had complex derivations. They were dependent on the apostolic tradition (e.g., baptism into Christ, the Eucharist), on cultural influences (e.g., language, style, musical forms), on cultural aversions (e.g., instrumental music), or common sense, practical considerations (e.g., pouring as a substitute for baptism where water is scarce).

Differences in worship forms among Christians do sometimes reflect differences in theology — differing understandings of how the Gospel is to be understood and celebrated in community worship. Sacramentalism versus non-sacramentalism is one of these differences. Pentecostalism versus non-Pentecostalism is another.

Many differences, however, are the result merely of nationalistic or regional idiosyncracies, cultural adaptations, or preferences of style or taste. All of these contribute to a worship



tradition — not just theology or biblical precedent.

In this light, “what language shall I borrow?” is obviously an exceedingly complex question. It continues to be more than an exclamation of inadequacy. It is also a source of interminable conflict among Christians as to

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what forms true worship should take.

Among churches of Christ much blood (some literal) has been let over worship forms even within our rather confined parameters. Now that those parameters are being seriously challenged by biblical scholarship, historical understanding, and common sense, the possibilities for conflict are even greater.

We now have “charismatics” struggling with “traditionalists” struggling with so-called “high churchers.” We can no longer take the form or the content of our worship tradition for granted. We need to consciously and seriously struggle with the problem — hopefully among ourselves but not against one another. One priority should be to clarify the problems we actually face.

### Excursus on “High Church”-“Low Church”

One of the ways our problem is sometimes phrased is in terms of a supposed “high church”-“low church” conflict. We need to dispense with the language of “high church” versus “low church” in our discussions, because it creates a red herring.

It is always somewhat misleading and sometimes even dangerous to speak of the concerns arising out of one tradition in the language of another tradition. “High church” and “low church” are Anglican terms which

simply have little meaning outside that tradition or one much closer to it historically and theologically than ours. The expression “high church” and “low church” come out of a fight among Anglicans over the influence of “Protestantism” on worship style. It was a fight over the importance of the episcopate, the apostolic succession, the priesthood and the sacraments (in the catholic sense of that word).

Churches of Christ are not in that ballgame. Furthermore, the addition of responsive readings, eucharistic prayers, lectionaries, and such do not move us any closer to the ball park.

It is not likely that anything I have ever seen happen in worship in a church of Christ (or a Presbyterian or Methodist church, for that matter) would be described as “high church” by either a “high churchman” or “low churchman” of the Anglican Catholic tradition. The question of whether churches of Christ should practice more “high church” is like the question of whether churches of Christ should allow their women to be ordained to the priesthood. That simply is not our question.

I believe that most folks in our churches who use the expression “high church” must be using the expression whimsically, idiosyncratically, or inappropriately to refer simply to somewhat more formal and structured worship. A very high degree of structuring and formalizing of our worship services would still not make them “high church.” We would still fall within the narrow compass of what historically would be called “low church.”

### Worship Forms and the “Restoration” Tradition

Those of us who wish to explore possibilities for worship renewal within churches of Christ need to look intelligently at and start sensibly from our own tradition. We also need to take heed to the lessons being learned from those who have not taken our tradition seriously and have tried to create foreign pockets of other traditions in our midst.

I wish very much to learn from the Catholic-Episcopal worship tradition and to incorporate some of those riches into our worship. But I do not wish to be a Roman Catholic or an Anglican. I wish very much to learn from the Charismatic-Pentecostal movement and to appropriate some of what they have to offer in



worship renewal. But I do not wish to be a member of a Pentecostal Church. Even less do I wish to participate in a monstrosity which appropriates a sacramentalist or a pentecostalist theology and imposes them on a congregation which does not understand or participate in those theological traditions.

We are free to learn about, appreciate,

*We are free to learn about, appreciate, and even appropriate worship styles along an immense spectrum. But the worship style that results should be biblically and theologically sound according to our best lights.*

and even appropriate worship styles along an immense spectrum. But the worship style that results should be biblically and theologically sound according to our best lights. In addition, in order to interface at all with our own tradition, it should be characterized by a certain simplicity and rationality. Reason and common sense are not, after all, unscriptural, though they are certainly not the primary authority for faith and practice.

It is important for us to know that we do nothing today in the worship of churches of Christ which is exactly like it was done in a church of the first century. I do not have to know all about those churches to make such a statement. An exact duplication is historically, sociologically, and psychologically impossible. Such an admission is not easy to make for a "restorationist," because some well meaning restorationists have assumed that such duplication was not only possible, but required.

There are several problems with the latter position. First, it is unbiblical since no apostle or inspired writer seems to have felt such duplication of worship styles to be necessary or desirable even in the church of the first century. Second, it is theologically problematic, since one assumes that God does not damn his children for not doing what is impossible, especially when accomplishing such a task seems irrelevant and even foreign to the Gospel. Third, it appears that even attempting to conform the worship of our churches to what we know about the first

century churches is very problematic. We know, for instance, that the Lord's Supper was customarily celebrated within the context of a full meal in New Testament times, and that the decline in the amount of bread and wine found on the Lord's Table coincided more or less with the decline of the amount of water used in baptism. Anyone who has attempted to alter the more modern practice in one of our churches in the light of New Testament practice usually confronts resistance motivated by everything from bemusement to irrational fear of damnation. Sometimes "restorationist" churches are the least likely to restore anything after a few generations of tradition making. Again, this attitude is sociologically and psychologically understandable, but it nonetheless has a tragically benumbing effect on biblical worship renewal and crushes the spirits of people who are still interested in exploring and restoring biblical spirituality and freedom. Students and advocates of thoughtful renewal need continual encouragement from those who understand the necessity of their work.

Our legitimate freedom should not, however, be used in an adolescent way. As we explore the liturgical riches of the "historic church," we should keep in mind that these forms are also culturally derived and many are post-biblical to boot. Some even have pagan or magical connotations. We need to be careful and prize considered judgment. We need also to avoid a kind of reverse sectarianism which comes from excitement about the newly discovered. Reverse sectarianism considers everybody's tradition to be exciting, profound, spiritual, or reverent — every tradition except our own. The Puritan-Restorationist worship tradition is a great treasure for the church. Its rationality, its simplicity, its seriousness about Scripture, its circumspection about individualistic and emotional excess — these fit just fine as a basic orientation for thinking about worship renewal. These elements should not be considered as exclusive of complementary elements, but they also should not be excluded or depreciated in a reactionary fashion.

### Formalism and Emotionalism

The real threat to authentic worship among churches of Christ is the same as the chief threat to authentic worship throughout history. That threat is the loss of content to form. If the content of authentic worship is the



glorification of the true God, then the fatal distortion of authentic worship may come from either of two extremes: formalism or emotionalism. Authentic worship contains both form and emotion. If worship is too closely identified with the efficacy or correct performance of rituals, even if those rituals are "scriptural," the focus on God has been lost to concern about the adequacy and correctness of human performance or to a superstitious dependence on the salvific power of ritual action. The danger of this distortion is not confined to the "hocus pocus" of older ritualistic churches, but is just as dangerous in its restorationist forms. "Five scriptural acts of worship" do not an authentic worship service make, unless these five acts are vehicles for focus upon God and not signs of exclusive religious correctness.

Restorationism, if it is to survive as a vehicle of God's work in the world, must once again aim for the restoration of the glorification of God in life and worship. The fault of legalism and formalism is not that they take obedience and worship too seriously. On the contrary, they do not take authentic worship seriously at all. Rituals and forms become idols clothed in "scriptural" or traditional language.

The other major threat to authentic worship is emotionalism. Again, the focus is robbed from God. This time the focus is on good feelings and emotional catharsis. The emotion of authentic worship is a "moving out" (*ex movere*) of oneself in a response stimulated by the character and acts of the One whom we worship. It is a spiritual "disturbance" evoked by and directed toward God. Contemplation of or nurturing of the feelings themselves, however, is not authentic worship, no matter how pleasant or self-satisfying. Furthermore, religious emotionalism appears to be addictive, resulting in problems accompanying all addictions; i.e., development of tolerance levels and escalations of the need for more advanced thrills. Some examples of religious emotionalism now presenting themselves to the public seem to be almost pornographic in their lust for supernatural thrills and extraordinary emotional highs. Not only is God not glorified, but he must often be saddened at the embarrassment to less "spiritual" worshippers.

With a serious eye on these destructive extremes, there remains an incredible amount of space for movement. If we can manage to restore the propensity toward diversity of worship styles which characterized the church of the

first century, if we can avoid the tendency to identify specific historical forms and styles with "scriptural" or authentic worship, and if we can refrain more from confusing personal preferences with what is really "spiritual" worship, then we will have a better chance of coming out of our struggle over worship renewal without developing new sectarianism and provincialisms.

### Vertical and Horizontal in Worship

It seems to me, for instance, that we should be able to agree that an assembly of the saints has two important foci — the worship of God and the fellowship and edification of the saints. In a properly functioning Christian community, both of these foci are indispensable,

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but not equal. There is, of course, no doubt as to which is the essential focus. This must be the worship of God. There is no authentic edification of the body if it is not based on authentic worship of God.

It is understandable that those of us who have felt cheated by the lack of a transcendent focus in our worship, would seek resolutely to remedy such an intolerable situation. Worship which is primarily focused on "felt needs" or "what this can do for us" is not worship of the God of Abraham or Jesus. It is a Christianized version of the paganism which presents itself in many modern forms, religious and secular. Nobody who has the slightest inkling of this danger should downplay that danger in the least. Pagan spiritualities of the "felt need," "human potential," and "health and wealth" varieties have become among the potent modern alternatives to Christian spirituality. Their subversive impact even within the Church is a blight to be determinedly protested.

On the other hand, we "need" authentic worship; we "need" fellowship and edification. The Bible says so. Any scriptural, rational, orderly way in which the filling of these needs



can take place during the time of our assemblies together cannot, surely, be considered inimical to the glorification of God. If we can glorify God in our work or in our love for our fellow human beings, surely we can do so through the horizontal encouragement that comes from ordinary warmth and pleasantries of fellowship, a sharing with one another even on Sunday morning. Such

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“ordinary” activities may be thoughtfully limited and circumscribed so that they do not interfere with the primary focus, but to severely limit them as though they were intrusions seems to paganize in another direction; i. e., toward liturgies which are highly religious, but very impersonal — highly formal, but not really communal.

In the light of the diversity of practices among churches in the New Testament period, and the vast spectrum of possibilities exhibited in the history of the church, it is hard to say that any single activity does not make sense in worship unless it is inimical to or detracts from the glorification of God. That is, of course, a serious question of judgment which each community must find a way to decide.

As to the other side of the coin, there has to be some kind of theological error involved in any assertion that the primary purpose of the Christian assembly is to fellowship one another or to edify one another. The “vertical” aspect of a Christian service (*leitourgia*) cannot possibly be understood as logically or essentially subservient to the horizontal. As is the case with “weightier matters of the law” and “the other” (Matt. 23:23), the horizontal should not be left undone, but the vertical is the weightier matter when it comes to worship. The horizontal (fellowship, sharing, giving honor to whom honor is due, weeping with those who weep, etc.) cannot be the primary focus of a Christian community without ironically losing its power and its reason

for being. But a Christian community which downplays the importance of expressing the horizontal in some way, has lost whatever reason there might be for a communal assembly of the people of God. The nation of priests must somehow provide for the priestly ministry to each other as well as the offering of sacrifices in a holy of holies. “I desire mercy and not sacrifice,” is, after all, a prophetic comment on the practical relationship between the vertical and the horizontal, as is John’s comment about loving God whom you have not seen without a corresponding love for the brother or sister whom you have seen.

A serious problem of balance arises, however, when advocates of informal styles imply that a planned, liturgically structured, traditional type of worship service is “unscriptural” or “not Spirit-led” (depending on the predilections of the objector). I Corinthians 14: 26ff certainly cannot be considered an unscriptural model for a worship service (as the less spontaneous would prefer), but neither can it be considered the only one. The Synagogue obviously provided an important model for the earliest church. And the simple, rationalistic worship of our Puritanical pioneers, though different from either of the above, was surely still the context of authentic worship.

## Conclusion: Refocusing Our Discussions

The most liturgical of traditions are now finding more ways of making their “sanctuaries” congenial to the worshippers as well as to the Worshipped One. Catholic and Episcopal churches are finding more opportunities for sharing, for some “family style” informality, and even charismatic-like emotion, while seeking to avoid the dangers of chaos, maudlin sentimentality, or emotional (what Alexander Campbell used to call “Methodistical”) excesses.

Second and third generations of Pentecostals and Charismatics, on the other hand, are beginning to learn that being Spirit-led is not to be equated with emotional excesses and disorderly conduct. The Spirit, they are beginning to see, may well work through the beauties of the thoughtful and fitly spoken word and the riches of traditional forms. The Spirit may work in mysterious ways, but he need not be irrational or embarrassingly crass.

With such ecumenical convergence

beginning to emerge over a wide spectrum of thoughtful Christian worshippers, it would be a shame if we allowed worship renewal within our churches to become sectarianized. Our so-called "high churchers" and "low churchers," after all, are generally struggling over style and cultural forms rather than substance and content. We ought to strive for a biblical-theological consensus about the content, while grappling about the forms, when we must, with the patience and tolerance owed to cultural inclinations and personal preferences.

The essential elements of the worship forms bequeathed to us by the apostolic church through the Scriptures need, I believe, to be preserved by all means. These include water baptism, the Lord's Supper, the offering of prayer and praise, the reading and proclamation of the Scripture, and the fellowship of giving. Our own restorationist traditions in regard to

worship form and style need to be understood and respected by our younger generation. In so far as these traditions are judged to be worthy of continuance and enhancement, that should be an important priority so that wholesome continuity may be preserved.

In this whole process of reflection and renewal, individuals need to learn more about the subordination of personal preferences to the welfare of a whole congregation. Individual congregations also need to learn more about congregational autonomy and about the responsibility leaders in sister churches have to determine what is best for their own flock in such matters of judgment. We need to do the best we can in terms of forms, but we need not lose our Christianity over them. They are, after all, not the soul of worship; they are its borrowed language.

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*We have a resilient hunger to move beyond self, to return our energy and worth to the One from whom it has been granted. In our return to that One, we find our deepest joy. That is what it means to "glorify God and enjoy God forever."*

*Walter Brueggemann*

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