

Further Reflections on Worship

Donald Goertz

I. Worship and the Church

One of the big struggles we always face in worship is that worship is trying to shape a community of the kingdom, to form virtues, but it is housed in the church, a very human institution. Yet, the practice of formation and the institution of the church need each other.¹ Institutions are formed by practices and practices are sustained by institutions. But, the institutions can often threaten the integrity of the practices. Here is our tension. Wilson summarizes it well. “practices have integrity through their pursuit of internal goods; institutions characteristically seek external goods in order to sustain their existence.”² This is the dilemma every leader faces again and again.

Worship and church communities vary greatly both from culture to culture and within any existing grouping. Yet, the church always has one central purpose. It exists “to sustain the practices of faithful Christian witness, among them the practice of worship.”³ This central purpose is always under pressure and threat because as an institution the church is always tempted to focus on external goods, such as success or status. As leaders we are called to lead the church in worship as a means of developing the practices which allow the church to remain faithful to its call. But, this task is never easy because most churches instinctively evaluate success in external measures.

II. Place of the Church Year

The place of the church year is something which, when engaged in a disciplined manner can powerfully enrich worship. It provides a structure to the year and allows for a developing sense of drama and re-enactment which roots us in eschatological hope. It also ensures that the heart of the story is covered every year.

- **Advent:** These four weeks give us a chance to think about what it is that the Messiah came to accomplish. It pushes us to wrestle with the good news of the Kingdom of God and to put new content into a very sentimental season. Done well, it will cut against the materialism and consumerism of this time by focussing us on what God set out to accomplish in the Incarnation.
- **Christmas:** This is one of the most dramatic moments in history. It is a vital part of our church life. But, recognize it for what it is. Be careful not to overly

¹ This section is built on Jonathan Wilson’s discussion of Alasdair MacIntyre’s outline of the characteristics of practice found in, Wilson, 120.

² Wilson, 121.

³ Wilson, 121.

sentimentalize the time. There are a couple of things to remember. First Christmas begins on the 25th and runs through to Epiphany, hence the song of the days of Christmas. We tend to see it as ending on the 25th. Learn to really celebrate the season well. Much of this is easier after the 25th. Also, bear in mind that the key symbol around the time has to do with the fact that it is not a Christian version of solstice celebrations. It is rather clearly after the solstice period. The emphasis on light is to remind us that at the point when all seemed dark, the light broke in.

- **Epiphany:** The Wise Men come bringing gifts. They symbolize and anticipate the good news to the gentiles. There is also a reminder that the Messiah was a refugee (a theme which can also be developed in Advent).
- **Lent:** Preparation for Easter. Jesus set his face to go up to Jerusalem. During this season we reflect on discipleship, its cost and the various implications of the cross on our lives. It is the 40 days (excluding Sunday) prior to Easter. During this time Christians have historically fasted. This might entail giving up food, TV, coffee, chocolate, or any one of those things which sooth us in order that we might more fully face ourselves.
- **Easter:** For the Church, historically, this is the high point of the church year. Everything leads to this event. It is the fulcrum of history. Remember, Easter is the week; “**Holy Week**”. Be creative. Look at how we might use this week to engage the cross and resurrection more fully. This can include Passover or Seder meals, rethinking Good Friday to focus on meditation on the cross and suffering of Christ (remember that the last supper was on Thursday, not on Good Friday), prayer vigils from Good Friday to Easter morning, focussing baptisms on Easter morning to maximize the symbolism, etc. As well, if the resurrection is what we say it is, does it not deserve a greater celebration?
- **Pentecost:** Here we celebrate the birth of the Church. It is a wonderful festival for the Church in Canada. We are a multicultural nation. The breaking in of the Spirit reminds us of the new reality “in Christ.” Following Pentecost there are no ancient festivals. It is a time to work out what it means to be the people of the resurrection who live in the power of the Spirit.
- **Christ the King** (later addition): This festival is a good one to celebrate. It is a focus on the Christ who brings history to an end. This is our time to remind the people of the place of eschatology. How we see the end does shape how we live today.

III. Communion of the Saints

This is a theological foundation going back to the earliest days of the Church. It reminds us that we part of a bigger body. At one level, it turns us out to our brothers and sisters in Christ who are part of other traditions and to Christians who are a part of the Church in other nations. But it is more than that. The early church was also very clear that the cross has broken the horizon between heaven and earth. So, in a mystery, we are one with the “great cloud of witnesses.” As well, as John Calvin so eloquently reminds us in his writing on the Lord’s Supper, we are also a part of what is to come.

We can remind ourselves of this in a number of ways. Some global south churches very intentionally sing either an old European hymn or a new western song as a part of their worship, to remind them of the larger body of which they are a part. We too can learn music from other cultures. We can also engage music, drama, readings, etc. from our own story. All of these activities contribute to keeping us from becoming to insular, or self-absorbed.

IV. Theological Approach to Worship

We are going to focus our worship on learning to think about worship as an unfolding drama with a theological movement.

Our purpose is not to encourage any particular style, but rather to facilitate your creativity. A liturgical structure makes sure that the worship stays rooted in the gospel and regularly moves through the story. If done well, it will free people up to engage aspects of worship which they may not initially understand. This becomes possible because the worshipper, while not necessarily understanding a specific aspect of the service, is aware that it is, for example, about confession and fits into a larger, carefully thought out movement. This provides a safe context for engagement.

A goal of this paper is that you learn to think about the theology of worship and then translate this into the context of your community. No two worshipping communities should look exactly alike. Worship is very much God’s story engaging our story. As worship leaders our task is to make sure that this happens. As the community changes so should its worship. If each person brings their gifts to God, that will mean that our worship, by definition, is always dynamic.

Robert Webber identifies a fourfold movement in worship⁴ which is designed to give shape to this narrative. It is a shape that has been a part of the church since its inception.

First, the people gather. This is a theological act in which the church is actually brought into being. Second, the church hears the story of God in Scripture readings, the Psalms, and the

⁴ Robert Webber, *Ancient- Future Faith*, has a chapter on worship that develops this in a precise form. This is one of those books that I recommend for all those looking at the future of the Church.

sermon. Third, the church responds in praise and thanksgiving at the table, enacting God's redeeming story with bread and wine. Finally, the community of God goes forth, empowered by the Spirit to be a living member of God's community in the world.⁵

Webber also identifies a growing dissatisfaction with the often-formless worship of the late modern era. In response to this need, he encourages reflection on liturgy and a sense of enacting or dramatic movement.⁶ Liturgy has developed many negative connotations in much of evangelicalism, but it literally means, "the work of the people." It is what we do together, as a community. As such, it moves us away from the individualism of our era.

The other basic movement, with which probably most of you are familiar, is the acrostic ACTS. This stands for adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication. Along with the hearing of the Word, these are foundational components of worship. What we are going to do is to focus our thinking around a blend of the ACTS acrostic and Webber's model.

Our expectation around this paper is that you will learn to think about worship within a theological framework. In order to facilitate this, there is a discipline that will be required of you. You will need to think about worship within the following categories:

V. Role of the Worship Leader

A worship leader is vital to a good worship service. The best worship leaders are the ones who are able to lead in such a manner that they become invisible. Their role is to turn our focus toward God and to keep it there. Our natural tendency is toward distraction. So, the leader comes up with ways to continually refocus us. This is their key function. It means being *gentle and unobtrusive*. We usually know we have a problem when people continually tell us how good a particular worship leader is. When that happens, it usually reflects their ability to attract and hold attention, rather than shifting it from them to God.

The most important and effective way in which the worship leader functions is through the *use of transitions*. These are the sentence or two interjections that one makes between songs, prayers, readings, drama, etc. which keep bringing the people back. These words also open us up to a new experience of God. When done well, these words will help the people to understand the reason for the order, flow and content of the worship.

An effective worship leader has also learned how to hear the voices of the congregation. So, in preparing the service they then gather up and carry these stories of the community and give them voice in the shape and content of the worship. What does this mean? How

⁵ Robert Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals Facing the challenges of the New World*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 200.

⁶ Robert Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, develops this idea.

might it be given shape? The stories which those planning the service carry are the things which will ultimately shape the spiritual life of the community. So, it is vital that the service be prepared from a location which is in the midst of the people.

The worship leader also works to *remove barriers to worship*. This can be very simple things. It is making sure that language is gender inclusive. It means making people feel comfortable and free to engage the worship from the place in which they find themselves. So, we often ask people to stand for music. But, some are elderly. Others may be young but are not feeling well or have some disability which makes standing for any length of time a painful experience. Still others may be very reflective and feel a need to sit or kneel. Recognize this. Give permission to the people by inviting a posture, but explicitly freeing people to move in their own response.

Finally, an effective worship leader is aware that *language shapes reality*. This means that there is care taken in the use of words. Language is inclusive and open. But, more than that, there needs to be a theological precision. An example would be the way we use the word “church.” It is important that we never speak of coming to church. That institutionalizes the word and locates the church as a building. Rather, as we gather we speak of “the church coming together”, or “the church which meets at...” Our words model for us the basic theological principle that the church is the people. It is a simple thing, but will have a huge impact. Another example would be the words we use to describe our meetings. If we use the language of business meetings we set up a certain set of expectations, relationships and power dynamics. What would the language look like if we use family as a controlling metaphor? How would we describe our gatherings to make decisions regarding our future and mission if we couched it in the context of family?

VI. Additional Thoughts

- It is important to remember that as human beings we all come to God in different spaces and with different needs. This requires that worship provide opportunity to express these. So, creativity is vital. Symbols and the arts become so important because of this. They allow us to re-enact the mighty acts of God’s salvation. As we perform this re-enactment in a variety of ways, we create spaces for each person to engage God in the manner most appropriate.
- While symbols, especially as expressed by the arts, can sometimes be ambiguous, if they are placed within a carefully thought out theological flow the people will come to understand the artistic component because they understand the flow as it gives an hermeneutical framework. If the people have a sense that there is a movement, they can understand the place where the ambiguous act sits, and so relax and enjoy it.
- Each church community is unique. Each has its own story. These must be honoured. Become familiar with the story of the local church and the story of its larger church family. Then, use these. Build on them. As the people of God we

have been worshipping for thousands of years. There are many insights there for us. As leaders we do not bring these in directly. Rather, our task is to discern the key truth, reflect on how that might build up our church and then contextualize it.

- Always know God. Your task is to lead the people into a deeper relationship with God.
- Always know your people. Always know God. You lead the people into a deeper relationship.

VII. Silence:

This is a component which can be very powerful in our response time. Give people a place to reflect and integrate, but give it focus, otherwise we naturally shift to our worries or plans.

Silence is wonderful when used creatively, and it can readily fit any of the movements in worship. But, do not over use it. Remember, worship is corporate. Always keep the silence from becoming totally introspective. Give it a turn outward.

It is also very difficult for worship leaders to allow this to happen. They typically become very uncomfortable after about 15 seconds. You may find it a helpful exercise to have them deliberately count out 60 seconds during the silence before they speak. It will seem like an eternity for them, but it helps them become aware of how long what is actually a short time can feel when all is quiet.