

Toward A Missional Theology of Worship

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Within our North American Evangelical Churches, one of the forgotten components of spiritual formation is the role of the community. Our focus is still, almost exclusively, on the individual before God. While there is a growing recognition of the place of small groups as a formational element, it is still considered a very optional part of our growth in Christ. Our primary corporate activity, worship, is receiving a growing amount of attention, but when it comes to its place in the actual spiritual formation of the Christian, it plays a very insignificant role for most traditions. Yet, for the thousands of years of the people of God, worship has been the very lifeblood of spiritual formation. It has been seen as the primary place in which we are nourished and nurtured in our spiritual growth. It is with this as our backdrop that we focus on the foundations of worship.

Our goal in preparing this paper is not to teach people how to worship, in terms of style. Contemporary, traditional, blended, emergent, liturgical and a host of other words give shape to arguments which are now a predictable feature of church life. The goal of this paper is to stimulate a conversation around a theology of worship. It is the hope that as we develop this side of our thinking and experience that we will be able to free up church communities to creatively give voice to the heart language of their people.

Defining What We Mean

One of the most important things we need to do as we begin to reflect on worship is to work through our definitions. There are many currently active in our churches. While not wanting to negate or minimize other definitions, I would like to suggest that worship means something very simple; *it is our proclamation, celebration and re-enactment of the mighty acts of God in history*. This is something that is done with all of our being. It is not merely didactic, but involves mystery and imagination, in short, all that we are.

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Robert Webber, one of our eras leading evangelical writers on this topic, defines worship as “a rehearsal of the saving deeds of God in history.”¹ By this he means that worship is continually looking at God and what God has done. It is the *Missio Dei*, the story of God creating, engaging and entering the world. God was present in Israel and in Jesus in saving ways. One day all of history will come to a dramatic completion in the *eschaton*. Webber goes on to develop this. “In worship we proclaim and enact God’s mighty deeds in history and offer our prayer of praise and thanksgiving to the Creator and Redeemer of the world.”² The implication of this is very important. It suggests that there is a movement to worship that is always first of all a turn upward toward God. Then, as with everything in scripture, it has an outreach as we accept the *Missio Dei* and move out to live as salt and light in our world.

Jonathan Wilson takes a similar approach, placing the weight on our eschatological hope. He writes,

...in worship we are in “the most real world.’ Worship is the practice of the church that enacts the reality established and revealed by the gospel of Jesus Christ. In the midst of lives that are continually shaped by other visions of reality, worship corrects our vision and enables us to live in hope in every part of our lives.³

We see this re-orientation continually at play in the Psalms. The writer is usually caught in some issue where perspective is lost. It is as the community worships that there is a refocusing and turning again to God. Psalm 73 is a very good example of this movement.

As we begin to see worship as this breaking in of the past and the future into our present we are able to rethink the point of our worship. It is not to provide us with the means of coping with life, or a heightened experience of reality, or a larger social engagement. That is not to say that these things do not happen as a result of worship. Rather, it becomes the place where we are formed, both individually and corporately.⁴ It is the virtue of hope, primarily, which is birthed and grows as we are being conformed to God’s *eschaton*.⁵ From this perspective we begin to understand that in worship we step out of our natural reality and begin to participate in another reality; “it becomes the enactment of God’s eschatological redemption of the disciple community.”⁶ So,

¹ Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith, Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 93.

² Webber., 94.

³ Jonathan Wilson, *Gospel Virtues*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 122.

⁴ Very few evangelical churches view worship as the central place of formation. We usually shift that to some type of small group or one on one mentoring. Yet, in scripture and throughout the story of the church, worship is that place where the most profound and regular spiritual and character formation occurs. This requires think seriously about what we mean by spiritual formation and how we use the term. To see the definition this paper works with read “Toward a Definition of Spiritual Formation,” found at; http://www.tyndale.ca/sites/default/files/Toward_a_Definition_of_Spiritual_Formation.pdf

⁵ Wilson, 125.

⁶ Wilson, 126.

entertainment ceases to be a part of the conversation. It is not about keeping people engaged and interested, but rather, learning how to be a disciple community, which is in the process of being formed by the Holy Spirit. It is a work of God. It also has tremendous social and political implications because we are enacting an alternative to the world.

Worship in a Missional Framework

A. Worship as Kingdom Immersion

As we begin to build on these definitions of worship, we see that they are naturally missional. All of them have at their very centre the discerning of God's activity not just among the people of God, but in every corner of creation. All of them are shaped by a picture of the future Kingdom breaking in now. In this context the church serves as sign, foretaste and instrument of the Kingdom, but it is never mistaken for that Kingdom. So, how do worship and God's Kingdom activity come together? Our Canadian context provides us with a very good model for rethinking the function and practice of worship in this light. It is French immersion.

Our public school system tries valiantly to help us master the language, but often with limited success. In order to gain a real proficiency in French, it is necessary for a person to move into a French speaking community. It is only in this place where the language, but more importantly, the supporting culture and ways of thinking and acting are practiced by all, that we are able to grasp the nuances of the language. Worship functions in a similar manner.

When we come together in worship, we come as a Kingdom people, the Body and the Bride of Christ, to be together in the presence of our King. It is not that we do not live in the presence of God when we are out in our neighbourhoods and workplaces. But, in these places there are always the values, language and cadences of another kingdom. It is very easy to be caught by its way of thinking. If nothing else, in that context the values of the world make perfect sense. So, we are caught in ambiguity, failure, hostility, perplexity and a host of other tensions. How do we make sense of our experiences in the world? How do we process our failure and wounds? How do we understand what seems to be success in one context turning into failure in another? It is with our joys, celebration and our questions and pain that we enter worship.

In worship we as we gather together, we come as people of the King to worship our King. We come as people committed to and wanting to have a deeper understanding of the Kingdom of our King. Together, with this common life, we begin to see again the Kingdom values lived out. The community helps us understand the inner logic of a set of values which seems to be so counter-intuitive outside of the community. It is in this context that we are able to be restored, renewed, and refocused. We learn what it

means to live as a colony of heaven. In a very real way, worship serves as an immersion into the Kingdom, by serving as a foretaste. If worship is to form us in the image of the King and instil in us the heart passions of our King, then there needs to be a clear focus on God.

B. Aspect of God's Character

All that we do is meant to *focus on God*. While this is our stated purpose, lack of clarity often means that we do not realize the possibilities. Yet, it is this which should give shape to the content of the whole worship service. That means that the first question that will need to be asked in worship planning is around what, of the character of God, do you want to be the focal point of the particular worship service? This is what will hold everything together. The sermon, the music, the scriptures, the prayers, the confession, should all relate in some way to this key. This clarity of focus allows for a deeper understanding and experience of God and so for real formation.

The task of the worship leader, then, is to very clearly, but gently, introduce this focus at the beginning of the service. "We come today to worship a God who is" Throughout the rest of the service the leader will then weave in this theme so that it is always visible. The key is to never let it slip from sight.⁷

Transitions are the most important part of keeping this unifying theme present. It does not take much. A transition should never be more than three or four sentences, but it will help the worshippers understand why a song is being sung, why the drama is happening, how the dance fits the flow. One sentence of introduction will carefully move us in a focussed engagement of God. The flow then comes apparent.

What this does is to continually keep us focussed on God and God's actions. God is always the first actor, and all that we do in worship is intentionally set up as a response to that which God has already done. While this may seem self-evident or redundant to you as the planner, remember that for the congregation it is seldom clear. Most people do not catch the goal emerging out of worship planning discussions and are not aware of why something is occurring. As a result, their only concern comes at an emotive level, whether they like it or whether it touches them.

When the service concludes, everyone one should have a clear sense of having been in the presence of God. They should also have learned intellectually and experientially more about who this God is and what it means to be in relationship with this God.

Always brainstorm around appropriate images and metaphors. A key way in which to begin to access a theological concept is to approach it from a number of directions. Look at the theological content of the ideas. This is what forms our baseline. But, then we

⁷ For a fuller discussion of the role of a worship leader see Appendix V.

also begin to look at the images and metaphors that can be used to help us understand the concept. Most of the passages in scripture are not purely conceptual, but rather are expressed in very visual terms. Meditate on the passage. Carry it with you. Allow it to touch you as a whole person.

What we want to be able to do is to help the Body and Bride of Christ come to understand first of all the character of God. Then secondly, it is the goal of worship to engage the Body in a deeper engagement of the implications of this relationship for daily life. So, in our worship we will begin to focus carefully and so distinguish, for example, between “steadfast love” and “faithful.” This gives depth and richness to our understanding of God’s character. It also calls us to move away from superficial understandings of what it means to live as the Church which reflects this to the world.

C. Resurrection Imagination

Worship should free us. It should allow us to move beyond what we know of God and call us into new places of service of the Kingdom. This will only happen if we are able to nurture a resurrection imagination. This is done through the engagement of symbols and artistic gifts. But, it is also accomplished through a careful preparation in which we work on what we will say. Use word pictures, metaphors, anything which will help to stimulate people to engage with heart soul, mind and strength.

The Shape of a Worship Service

What follows is not meant to move us to some sort of rigid step-by-step structure of worship. Rather, it is to help us think about how we might move to an understanding of worship which is dynamic, which moves conceptually and which is theologically reflective. If we are able to accomplish this we can make our worship rich and the heart of our formation in Christlikeness.

A. The Foundational Components

1. Role of Symbol

Christian worship is built around two great symbols. We also refer to them as sacraments or ordinances. They are baptism and Eucharist or the Lord’s Supper. These two actions capture the essence of the story and give shape to all worship. The place of symbol, then, is very important in Christian worship because at the heart of the use of symbol is the intentional re-enactment of the great mystery.

Symbols, however, have a very limited role in modern evangelical worship. That is because today we usually see these symbols as not being necessarily connected to that which they symbolize. The result is that in any liturgical action we naturally place the

weight on our actions in this liturgical re-enactment. It is, then, our preparation and purity which will determine the efficacy of the event.

Historically that has not always been the case. Rather, there has been a shift as a result of rationalism with its absolute priority on the individual and their choice. Prior to the Enlightenment a symbol was seen as being necessarily connected to that which it symbolized. In our primary symbols, this perspective will then shift the weight, placing it squarely on God's action. Our actions are always a response. Sacraments then become a dynamic movement played out in re-enactment through the use of symbol, beginning with God, moving to our response and back again to God.

2. Scripture

Evangelicalism has very rightly placed a high emphasis on scripture, while ironically, seldom reflecting this in worship. Often Evangelical worship restricts the public reading of scripture to the immediate context of the sermon. Yet, scripture, hearing the word of God, lies at the centre of biblical worship.

This priority has, unfortunately been mediated to us today in a rationalist guise and so has come at the expense of mystery. We have attempted to place an inordinate weight on the mind. Webber reminds us that worship contains mystery. "Historic worship is an experience of the mystery of salvation and thus the doorway through which a person may approach the complexities of life to rest satisfied in the mystery of God's transcendent presence experienced in worship."⁸ Then, he adds, "In worship we engage in the mystery of God at work in the world."⁹ This has significant implication for our worship. As evangelicals we typically ask the congregation to take out their bibles and follow the reading. This has its place, but unless handled carefully it will keep us in the posture of study, a posture deeply embedded in us by our school systems. There we sit over the text. The public reading of scripture in worship, however, stands this on its head. We want people to learn how to sit under the text, to hear it and allow it to judge and transform them.

The handling of scripture in worship can be done in a variety of ways. Someone might read a passage out loud with the congregation listening or following along. Or, it could take the form of responsive, antiphonal or unison reading, all of which have the added benefit of involving the people.

The Bible is also rich with language calling on us to simply hear. This is an engagement of the word which moves us beyond listening. We listen to a lot of people. Most of us have some form of noise constantly in the background. Yet we seldom actually hear what is being said. Hearing connects us to something beyond the mere words themselves. So

⁸ Webber, *op. cit.*, 94.

⁹ Webber, 95.

the *Shema*, the great summation of the faith of Israel, begins with this, “Hear, O Israel...”

The problem for most of us with an approach like this to scripture is that it seems to make us passive. If there is one thing the western person dislikes, it is to allow oneself to be what we consider too passive. It is this psychological hurdle which needs to be overcome before we can really allow worship to be a place of significant spiritual formation in our lives. So, as leaders, are there ways we can help people to learn how to listen? Scripture is also creatively handled through other mediums, such as music or drama. Think about the music you use. Some of it is simply a bible passage set to music. Let people engage it that way. Music is the easiest way for people to memorize.

Try to very intentionally handle scripture in every movement of the worship service. While this exercise may initially seem forced, it is a discipline which will allow us to give power to the central role of scripture in evangelical theology. It also makes it possible for our formation to take place as we become submissive to the Word.

3. Prayer

Like scripture, prayer has a very high place in our theology and usually a minor place in our worship. This needs to change. Use prayer liberally. We are talking to God. See these public prayers as helping to model for the congregation the role of specific prayer. Keep the prayers short and tightly focussed. Martin Luther once said that if given a choice between ten short prayers and one long prayer, take the ten short ones. The advantage of these short prayers is that they turn us to God, give credit where credit is due, and allow us to increasingly learn how to express clear, concise thoughts to God. In principle, each element of the worship service should involve prayer. Many of these can be two or three sentences. They are not complex. It is all about God.

As a congregation moves through an encounter with God in worship there should be a constant interplay between various forms of engaging scripture, prayer and creative and symbolic actions.

B. Gathering

Learning to understand worship within a missional framework requires that we rethink how we begin and end.

Gathering is a part of the service which is seldom ever thought about, yet is vital if we want to move to seeing worship within the larger framework of the *Missio Dei*. Here is where the context is set. Here is where the leader positions what is about to happen and helps prepare the situation for visitors.

One of our cultural imperatives is that of inclusion. We are a society in Canada which values openness and acceptance above all else. These are profoundly important values and come out of our past Christian context. They need to be celebrated. But, here we run into a deep tension with this cultural value. We are inviting people to experience a foretaste of the Kingdom. The Kingdom of God is a realm in which the logic is very counter-intuitive. Power is in weakness. Victory is won by suffering and death. Wealth is found in giving. The list goes on. People will not be able to make sense of this. So, the leader needs to intentionally invite the visitor into a community which is friendly, which models Jesus' challenge to the body in John 17 to love one another in such a rich and multi-faceted manner that it opens the visitor's eyes to another possibility. But, people will not be able to make sense of this without the Spirit at work in them. It is something revealed. In the time of gathering the leader needs to put this tension out there. What are the expectations that are realistic for a visitor?

Why is gathering so important? First, we must understand its role. The centrality of this aspect of our worship is captured in the Psalms of Ascent (Psalm 120-134) as well as a host of other psalms. We can readily imagine the worshippers on their journey up to Jerusalem, singing these songs of anticipation as they walked. They capture us and turn our focus to God.

A missional church understands that living life out in the location in which God has placed us does affect us in different ways. As a result, we recognize that each person comes to worship from some place. Each of these places is different. So, we move away from generic gatherings. There needs to be a recognition that we come with a wide range of emotions and experiences.¹⁰ Gathering needs to provide us with some context for acknowledging and dealing with these. It is not that we set them aside. Rather, we

¹⁰ Marty Haugen wrote a beautiful song. It was called "Gather Us In" (GIA Publications, Inc. Chicago. 1982) and captured for a generation the themes of this theological principle. It includes these words:

Here in this place a new light is streaming, Now is the darkness vanished away.
See in this space our fears and our dreamings, Brought here to you in the light of this day.
Gather us in the lost and the forsaken, Gather us in the blind and the lame.
Call to us now and we shall awaken, We shall arise at the sound of our name.

We are the young our lives are a mystery, We are the old who yearn for your face.
We have been sung throughout all of hist'ry, called to be light to the whole human race.
Gather us in the rich and the haughty, Gather us in the proud and the strong.
Give us a heart so meek and so lowly, give us the courage to enter the song.

Here we will take the wine and the water, Here we will take the bread of new birth.
Here you shall call your sons and your daughters, Call us anew to be salt for the earth.
Give us to drink the wine of compassion, Give us to eat the bread that is you.
Nourish us well and teach us to fashion, Lives that are holy and hearts that are true.

Not in the dark of buildings confining, Not in some heaven light years away.
But here in this space a new light is shining, Now is the Kingdom, now is the Day.
Gather us in and hold us forever, Gather us in and make us your own.
Gather in all peoples together, Fire of love in our flesh and our bone.

are allowed to own what it is we are bringing with us, often very painfully. Psalm 120, the first psalm of ascent, is a good example of this. It describes the struggle of the writer who wants to be a person of peace and a peacemaker, but is continually met with violence. In this context the kingdom community needs to become a safe place for us to enter because we know that we will be able to try to make sense of the last week. Each community in each generation needs to wrestle with how best to express this. The ambiguity of this experience is a large part of why the Body is continually being called to sing new songs.

Gathering is a vital time in the life of the community. It is a time when we are able to welcome the people, as we would friends to our home. We greet, catch up and enter the house of God together.

Announcements are most naturally a part of this time. They can then function as a type of family news. Make sure that your language and actions here are true to the central metaphors that you are using to describe the church.

Gathering is an important time because the people are coming together having spent time out in the world. As a result, they come with wounds, broken and hurting. They also come with joys and celebrations. There is excitement and despair; broken relationships and new relationships. Each person comes from a different place. Gathering needs to focus the people and bring them together recognizing these different starting points. Intentionally draw in and engage the congregation. As the leader, never assume that your emotional or spiritual place is normative. Do not impose it on the others. Be gentle. You are a shepherd gathering in. In a real sense, it is a time when we experience the remaking of the Body afresh as we experience again the victory of Christ over the powers of evil.

People need to feel that they are a part of a family. A church I previously pastored built two fireplaces, one on each side of the platform. They did this because fireplaces were central to living rooms in the late 19th century and they wanted to remind people that they were a family. While this served as a nice aesthetic touch, it was also a powerful example of the intentional use of architecture to teach theology.

As we gather, we naturally turn to our approach to God. It is at this point that we move the people from a focus outward toward the rest of the community to a focus upward. Variety is both important and useful. Avoid gimmicks. A call to worship can be both simple and powerful. Often these are a psalm or passage that explicitly calls the people together to worship. The most popular of these are the Psalms of Ascent. A call should also be strong, focussed and tight. It can be done by a leader, or be responsive. Unison is seldom effective as it presupposes us already having gathered and so is not designed to draw.

Another ancient way is to use what is called an invocation. This is an invitation to God to come and be in our midst and to do whatever God would like to do. It is a formal recognition of our place and God's. Processions can also be used in wonderfully creative and dramatic ways to visualize our coming into the presence of God.¹¹ Children in particular love to participate in things like this.

This formal piece of the service is the time when we are introduced to that aspect of God's character that will be the focus of our worship. We come into the presence of a God who is

Both the call to worship and the invocation carry the same central theological message. They are a confession that it is only by the coming of God that we are fit for worship. We do not worship in our own power, but by the power of the Spirit of God. It is first by God's gracious acts of redemption that we are able to enter God's presence, and then, only by the power of the Spirit that we can engage God and each other as a kingdom people.

As a worship leader, always be sensitive to people. We frequently ask people to stand and then keep them standing for long periods of time. Provide options regarding posture. Remember, there are always people in any gathering for whom standing for long periods is painful. Others might be in a reflective mood, while still others are older. Inviting people to stand, while also giving permission for other postures, will free people up to worship.

Role of Baptism

Baptism is the quintessential act of gathering. Historically baptismal tanks (older churches have the tank behind the platform actually on the other side of the wall opening into the worship space) or fonts stand outside of the actual space in which the community worships. Baptism is the entrance into the Body. It is the doorway, a resurrection into a new life. Both baptism and the baptismal pool are visible reminders that we have been baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus (Romans 6, Colossians 2).

Today we have weighted the emphasis in baptism onto the human side of the baptism; it is our act of obedience as candidate, parent or sponsor. By doing this we have stripped it of much of its power. But, the text reminds us that there is a relationship between the symbol and that reality which it symbolizes.¹² Water is a central element of the story of God's mighty acts from the beginning of the narrative in Genesis 1 through to the end of Revelation. Paul reminds us that when we enter the water something happens which goes far beyond getting wet. We enter into the suffering, death and

¹¹ Many older Baptist churches lack a centre aisle in order to prevent clergy from taking on airs and processing as a sign of importance.

¹² See Romans 6 and Colossians 2: 11-15.

resurrection of Jesus. It also reminds us of our commitment to a new style of life, a life of discipleship in which the power of sin has been broken. A new life has begun, a life of freedom in Christ; freedom to follow; freedom that is never separated from the cross and the empty tomb.

The early church loaded this act with symbols. It was at this time that they laid hands on people, anointed them with oil and prayed for the receiving of the Holy Spirit. It reminded them that it was the coming of the Spirit who birthed the church. Also, that Christ received the Spirit at his baptism. They also gave the newly baptized new white robes, and a glass of milk and honey (the sign of the promise).

As we can see from this, there is, in baptism, the making of a people. The church in the New Testament is a new community. It is a place of re-socialization into the values and life of the Kingdom of God. It is only metaphors such as being born again which can begin to capture the power and depth of the experience. A whole new culture is meant to emerge as a result of this entrance into the Kingdom community. II Corinthians 5:17 speaks of conversion and baptism creating both a whole new person and a new creation. This new community is meant to be more significant and constitutive than either the biological family or the state, the two foundations of the Roman Empire. As a result, there was a natural point of conflict around ultimate allegiance between this new community and the Empire. So, baptism became a political act. Certainly the Roman Empire saw it this way. Rodney Clapp writes that Christendom changed everything. "In the Constantinian setting, however, baptism was stripped of its political significance and subversive potential, because in that setting the church was no longer seen as a distinctive and challenging culture."¹³

The subversive nature of baptism has been readily understood by political leaders over the centuries. Whenever baptism is seen within the context of the Kingdom of God it invariably takes on strong political overtones. It can not be any other way. There can only be one Lord. Baptism reminds us that all other claimants to this title are shams.

In this context the act of baptism is also highly sacramental. It draws the one being baptized into participation in two powerful things. First, it is a participation in Christ's commissioning of disciples. Secondly, as the gospels reiterate over and over, it is participation in Christ's baptism of suffering.

C. Adoration

When we come into the presence of God, we do so with hearts of praise and adoration. This is not a random act, but rather one focussed on the nature and character of God, praising a God who is (here we fill in that aspect of God's character which will focus

¹³ Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People, the church as culture in a post-Christian society*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 101.

the praise). It is our acts of praise which are beautifully captured in the simple heartfelt phrase, "Our Father," which is the summation of all worship.

Praise is crucial in that it sets our face in God's direction. There is no more effective way to approach God because praise takes our eyes which are naturally turned toward ourselves and very deliberately turns them upward. In so doing it frees us up from the things that hold us. Rather than holding on to our troubles, we turn to remembering and celebrating what God has done. When we do this, we are able to regain perspective and to give credit where credit is due. Eugene Peterson expresses this beautifully;

Existence is vastly beautiful, wonderfully good, majestically true. We can only get off on the right foot by beginning with adoration. All authentic anything has its beginning in a sense of wonder If we do not begin with adoration, we begin too small.¹⁴

Praise and adoration are not things we naturally do well. Our instinct is to confuse praise and thanksgiving. This is not to say that they are unrelated. Certainly much of what we know of God is rooted in God's actions in our lives. We see God's character revealed in God's actions. Nowhere is this more sharply in focus than in the two great redemptive acts, the Exodus and the Cross. In the choosing and redeeming of Israel and the Church God's character and counter-intuitive actions are presented in absolute clarity. So, our praise and thanksgiving do overlap in many areas. But, praise focuses us on who God is; on character. Thanksgiving reminds us of what God has done in our lives individually and as a Church. It is vital for our growth as believers that we make sure that we are doing both.

Music, scripture, short prayer (spontaneous at times), drama, dance, and other creative expressions can all work very effectively in our time of praise. The use of scripture and short prayers forms the heart of adoration. The rest of the pieces used fill and deepen the engagement.

Because of this natural turn on our part, transitions are vital as we move through praise. One or two sentences that continually refocus the theme and draw on a phrase in a song, etc. to keep people turned toward God. These weave the time into a seamless, focussed unit.

D. Confession

As we began to worship we acknowledged our total dependence on God and that our hope is in God alone. Yet, this is not always our story. We continually try to base our hope in our own worth or being. "Through confession we not only acknowledge our sin,

¹⁴ Eugene Peterson, *Subversive Spirituality*, (Jim Lyster, John Sharon, Peter Santucci, eds.) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 166-67.

we expose the illusions that lead us astray and cause us to rebel.”¹⁵ One of the easiest things for us to do is to be caught by these illusions.

Unfortunately, while we affirm the reality and power of sin, and so proclaim confession as an essential action of the Christian life, in evangelical worship it has become almost non-existent. It is important that we create a space for people to respond to the presence of God breaking into their lives. To enter into God’s presence is to be confronted with our true self, something we may have worked very hard to hide. It is similar to standing in front of a mirror. We are exposed. Faced with God’s unlimited love and mercy I am cognizant of my tendency to offer selfishness for love. This dynamic movement is continually seen in scripture, whether it is Isaiah’s “woe is me ... for my eyes have seen the Lord” in chapter 6, or Peter saying “leave me Lord for I am a sinner” after having suddenly caught a new sense of the greatness of Jesus in the miraculous catch of fish. Our natural response to this is, as with Isaiah and Peter, a need to confess. So, if we have done the adoration component effectively, there will be people who will want to deal with issues. If there is no space for this to happen we create serious dissonance within the individual.

Confession can be brief, and it can be creative. Like every aspect of worship, it can involve the whole of our being. So, this may be a time of physical movement, such as kneeling or lying prostrate. Dance is a particularly effective action to give voice to confession.

At certain points in the life of the community it is also appropriate for confession to serve as the focal point of a whole service. In a service of this nature it is important that it be done from the communion table.

On Sundays when there is going to be communion/Eucharist, it is vital that confession be included. Only if it is present can the healing possibilities of communion be truly known.

E. Forgiveness

Forgiveness is extremely important. In this act we both receive and enact the forgiveness that is our hope. In a very individualistic culture we tend to see confession as a very personal and private affair between us and God. Confession in worship reminds us that this is not the case. Sin is the root of division and violence. Only in confession are we set free and is unity possible.

Bonhoeffer argues in *No Rusty Swords* that one of the greatest gifts which the church can give to the world is the enacting of confession and forgiveness. The belief that it is

¹⁵ Wilson, 132.

impossible to overcome patterns of violence and division is so deeply ingrained in our culture that hope is lost. It is through the forgiveness of sin in worship that we have our hope restored and are able to then live in hope ourselves. It is this enactment of the gospel which is the source of hope for the world.

In John 20, when the risen Saviour encounters the fearful disciples in their locked room, he tells them that they are going to receive the Holy Spirit, be sent out and that they will forgive sins. Lesslie Newbigin writes that in this the,

... disciples are now taken up into that saving mission for which Jesus was anointed and sent in the power of the Spirit. And therefore, also, they are entrusted with that authority which lies at the heart of Jesus' mission – the authority to forgive sins.¹⁶

As Protestants this passage is troubling. Its history has left us uneasy about too literal an interpretation, in spite of how the early Church understood it. But, we can not simply pretend that it does not exist. It is deeply embedded in our commissioning. As such, it needs a place in our worship. In doing this we truly become the agents of God's gift of peace, we are the bearers of it in our life together.

Prayers of confession must always move to an acceptance of God's pardon. God's desire is that we be able to set aside our sins and move into newness in Christ. For our part, we desperately need to hear the words "you are forgiven." It is not a matter of the person taking on the role of forgiving sins. Rather, what we are doing is, in a very unambiguous manner telling the people of God that if they have confessed, then they are forgiven.¹⁷

Our tendency has been to say that it is God who forgives sin and to stop there. As a result, we never actually tell anyone that they are forgiven. Unfortunately, for us as human beings, one of our great struggles is to believe and accept this fact. We need to hear the words spoken. Christians pay therapists small fortunes to finally hear that they are forgiven. We can, however, speak these words confidently, knowing that if one has confessed and repented, they are forgiven. That is a promise. It can never be said too often. The power in the proclamation within the context of the Kingdom community lies in the fact that it is spoken in the midst of a community which is in the process of being reconciled. While not yet perfect, this is the ongoing commitment of the Body in its life together. As a result, it is not simply spoken, but observed.

Posture is also a part of this element of worship. Whether we do it literally or symbolically, we are called to rise from our posture of kneeling or prostration and to accept God's pardon. Then, we move on in freedom. If possible, try to nurture the

¹⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret. An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1995), p. 48.

¹⁷ John 20:23 is a passage specifically dealing with this issue and reminds us that as the community of Christ we have been given the keys to the Kingdom and these keys are significant beyond our imagination.

person's resolve to walk in newness, in the Spirit. Well chosen songs at this point can both challenge and give voice to our acts of resolution.

F. Thanksgiving

The most natural response to the forgiveness of sin is thanksgiving. Here we can turn the focus to what God has just done in us and celebrate. This can be in reflective wonder, or it can take the shape of joyful dance.

Thanksgiving is also vital because it turns our memories to what God has done in our lives individually and corporately; past and present. At its core, it is a grateful acceptance of God's gifts. As people who live out of an eschatological hope we are able to celebrate, not just that all that we have and are is from God, but even beyond that, the breaking in of that eschaton in which God has already given us all things. We recognize in wonder the reality of which we are, by hope, a part. God has already given us everything in Jesus Christ, but we easily lose sight of this. During the week our lives are shaped too frequently by the world around us and so we need to see the world afresh, as God works in it.

The great affluence of our culture makes it very easy for us as Canadian Christians to begin to think that we are somehow in control. Wealth tends to make us believe that it is we who have made things happen, that we have taken care of or provided for our needs. Thanksgiving, when done well, reminds us that all things come from God. In this way, it nurtures in us an awareness that all of life is gift. This is an insight that keeps us counter-cultural because it cuts against materialism and the striving toward self-sufficiency.

G. The place of lament in the context of praise and thanksgiving

In scripture these elements always walk hand in hand. Lament is a vital part of the worship of the people of God throughout history. But, we must be clear on what we mean by it. Lament is not despair, it is not whining, it is not a cry into a void.

Lament is directed toward God. Katongole and Rice write that, "It is the cry of those who see the truth of the world's deep wounds and the cost of seeking peace. It is the prayer of those who are deeply disturbed by the way things are."¹⁸ We are invited by scripture to see and feel what the psalmists did. Lament teaches us what must be learned and also unlearned.

While lament is a vital component of our worship, we do not stay with lament. Rather, lament moves us from plea to praise. This is a key point that Claus Westermann has

¹⁸ Emmanuel Katongole & Chris Rice, *Reconciling All Things*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008), p. 78.

brought back to the forefront.¹⁹ Walter Brueggemann moves this point even further, arguing that in the psalms, “Israel moves from *articulation* of hurt and anger to *submission* of them to God and finally to *relinquishment*.”²⁰ Lament is resolved by and corresponds to the song of thanksgiving. The two are interconnected. In the Psalms, Brueggemann says, “the song of thanksgiving is in fact the lament restated after the crisis has been dealt with.”²¹ Even more, Westermann says, lament characteristically ends in praise which is full and unfettered. These are important points and we lose them at our peril.

Somehow lament, while it shifts things, seems to offend our sensibilities in our current worship styles. But, in spite of this, it does remain essential and we need to learn to find places for it in our worship. It gives a voice to the one with the least power. Not only that, the lament psalms tell us that this challenging and questioning of God is legitimate. God is challenged and questioned and in this is also made available to the one praying. God takes the one lamenting very seriously. It is precisely this engagement which reframes the relationship at a much deeper level. This is then a genuine covenant relationship because the second party, the one who was voiceless, is permitted to speak.

Too often in our churches we spend all of our time on praise. While praise is of inestimable value, if there is no lament, we create a community, Brueggemann says, of “yes men and women from whom never is heard a discouraging word.”²² The types of celebrations that so often characterize our worship do not reflect the reality of life. In that we perform a cover-up. But, when we notice that things are not as they should be and begin to give voice to this unease, we open up a dangerous moment. We have seen this moment over and over in the history of the Church. It is the moment when Oscar Romero stands before the body of his friend, Father Rutillio Grande, gunned down with an old man and a 15 year old boy, by death squads, in a small forgotten mountain parish church in El Salvador. In that lament, this man, who was appointed bishop because it was believed he would support the rich, was transformed.²³

If we, as a community of faith omit to lament, we will soon quit speaking and engaging the hard issues of justice with God, because we come to believe that only praise and thanksgiving are appropriate. We reduce faith and Christian life to platitudes about loving each other, but they lack steel in the spine.

¹⁹ Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981)

²⁰ Brueggemann, “The Costly Loss Of Lament”, *JSOT* 36 (1986), p. 58.

²¹ Walter Brueggemann, “The Costly Loss Of Lament”, *JSOT* 36 (1986), p. 57.

²² Brueggemann, p. 60.

²³ Ashley Beck, *Oscar Romero*, (Catholic Truth Society, 2008), p. 19.

H. Hearing the Word

This section is where the sermon would fit. But, the more formal model of a sermon is not the only way to handle this. There is room to be creative.

The sermon itself can be located in different parts of the service. So, for example, if it is on confession, the sermon may best fit as a part of that unit of the liturgy.

The hearing of the word is vital to the integrity of worship. It serves a number of different functions. Foundationally, it is about helping the body of Christ understand in deeper ways what it means to be in relationship with God, each other and the world. Only in this context are we able to corporately wrestle with what all of this means. This means that it helps the community in understanding the inner logic of the Kingdom. This logic and Kingdom are counter intuitive to the way in which the kingdom of this world works. As a result, the role of the sermon is vital if we are to learn to live as a transformational and incarnational community.

There is another aspect to the sermon which is often over looked, but is vital to the health of the Body. Preaching helps us understand how to read and interpret scripture. This is the only place where many Christians will be exposed to wise and disciplined exegetical work. Our normal approach is to read scripture in a very undisciplined manner. We interpret by intuition. Our assumption is that the text meant the same thing to the author as the words mean today. We expect that the people of biblical times understood and experienced life in the same way as we do. While there is definitely continuity, good sermons help the hearer to deepen their understanding of the biblical world and to understand how to apply principles of interpretation to their own reading.

I. Responding

Everything which follows in some way needs to be seen as a response, not to the sermon, but rather to the whole experience of the worship of God up to this point.

At the heart of response is this idea of the Church as sign and instrument of the Kingdom. This requires a re-orientation of our thinking. It is necessary to guide the people through a process in order that they might see the link between the worship to this point and themselves being sent out to live as a sign and instruments of the Kingdom.

Since the assumption is that once one has heard the words, or has the information, that this is sufficient, leaving the service at this point does not entail missing anything of value. There is no need to integrate the teaching and make it one's own and thereby be transformed because possession of knowledge is the desired end.

Immense creativity is called for in shaping a space for response. This is true because our response involves a new understanding of God, our own transformation and a fresh engagement of the world. Also, our church culture has conditioned people to believe that the sermon is the most important part of the service so, once it has been delivered, it really is appropriate to leave. Everything that follows is seen as of marginal relevance. So, in many of our churches there is this wonderful sight of people immediately rising and trying to discretely rush out as soon as the preacher concludes. Plans have been made. There are things scheduled for the day which are the things of real significance.

Let me suggest that there are a number of areas that form the heart of our response to God's word.

1. Eucharist

Communion is the heart of our response. As with baptism, our rationalist culture has shifted the focus totally onto the human action. "I remember." "I do this." But, there is more. Our action is only one side of the equation.

In Eucharist we make real those words of Christ, "feed on me." We allow him to become for us the Bread of Life and Living Water. These are more than metaphors. Passages such as John 6 become our experience and as a result, the Table becomes a foundation for our spiritual formation individually and collectively.

Here we give our thanks for the victory that Christ won. Here we enter into the heart of the great mystery. Here we recall that Christ has won the victory over sin, death and all the powers of evil. Here the community experiences healing, restoration and renewal because of that victory. Here we are empowered to go out and live this life of victory because of the cross.

The great victory was won at the cross and because of this it is at the communion table that we experience its healing power. Relationships are restored. Emotional and physical damage is healed. For the Anabaptist tradition, it was often referred to as the "Table of unity". It was that place where the body was healed, remade and restored. Since Christ won the victory over the powers of evil, sin and death, there is healing in the Eucharist. That is why this is also the traditional place for prayer ministry teams to work, and where prayers for healing occurred.

One of the central metaphors for worship through history and at the heart of the Reformation was the idea that Eucharist was an anticipation or foretaste of the marriage feast of the Lamb. When the Body gathered around the table, they were also gathering around a heavenly table.

2. Footwashing

My tradition has another very important act, which for many was seen as a sacramental act along with baptism and communion. That is the act of footwashing. It is a particularly important act for leaders as it is enacting an absence of self-regard. Jesus reminds us of this as the central symbol of leadership and sets it in the context of giving oneself away in service to others.²⁴

3. Prayers of People

The prayers of the people are important and should never be minimized. They remind us not only that we are a community, but also that we are a part of the larger Body of Christ and of the Kingdom of God. These prayers turn us outward. As such, they begin the process of sending.

Work with those whom you ask to pray. Do not assume that because one is godly or is able to pray in private that they can lead corporate prayers. Teaching is necessary. These prayers should be concise and focussed. Organize topics together. There is immense symbolic value in these prayers. This symbolic character is more important than offering detailed prayers for everyone. Also, look for creative ways to collect the prayers of the people. Frequently there is a large group in the congregation who are not heard and have no ready access to the prayer list.

In order to remind us of our place in Kingdom and in the Church universal, it is important that we pray for global issues. These may be related to the church or to a situation where there is a specific need for divine intervention. The point is to always see the larger world. Also, we want to model Jesus injunction to pray for those in authority over us. Do not be exhaustive. Again, think symbol: one key request for each area. But, neither do you make this a hard and fast rule. Rather see it as a guiding principle.

Remember that it is here that we also pray our laments. We live in a world of suffering and violence. Our laments acknowledge this and bring the suffering of the world to God. God is the only hope of redeeming suffering. So, for the Christian, lament is an expression of hope, not despair.²⁵

Let me also suggest that it is in this context that we might want to use some of those extremely marginal prayers, the imprecatory prayers. Imprecatory prayers are the ones which embarrass us when religious sceptics point them out. They generally are very angry and call for God to totally destroy our enemies, usually in extremely brutal ways. But, these prayers do give place to that anger and call for justice which is within

²⁴ See John 13: 1-20. Luke 2: 14-30 carries similar themes.

²⁵ Wilson, 135.

everyone who seriously looks at their world. How can one not feel deep anger and a desire to see people have done to them what they have been doing to others when, for example, we see what has happened in the eastern Congo in the first decade of the 21st century? The key to an imprecatory prayer, however, is that while it gives voice to the anger and cry for justice, it turns it over and puts it into the hands of God. These are prayers we use with discretion, but they remind us that God expects us to care deeply about injustice and to desire justice.

This belief that God is involved generates hope and means that lament is paired with intercession. While we live in this in-between place, we see the suffering, but recognize God as the redeemer who is now at work. Jonathan Wilson argues,

“Through intercession we pray in particular ways for the coming of God....in our own lives, in the lives of those around us and, indeed, for the whole world. Through intercession we embody the hope that is communal and cosmic.”²⁶

In this way our prayers always turn us toward a larger reality.

Prayers of the people need to be tight and focused. Too often these can go on way too long. In very few situations should they ever go over five minutes. Do not let these prayers run away on you. Make sure the detailed requests are dealt with, but do this by making sure that they get to other venues of prayer within the community, such as the small groups and prayer meetings.

In principle, then, the prayers should cover a range of topics. Scripture gives us instructions to pray widely and it is public prayer which teaches people how to pray in their private life. Cover topics such as the following.

- a. World: Work on a balance here. There are ongoing issues around justice, epidemic, natural disaster, political crisis, etc. There is also the persecuted church. Help to turn people’s eyes outward.
- b. Nation: Teach people how to pray for our nation. This is also a balance of larger national issues that may be around such things as morality, justice, poverty, or those in authority.
- c. Province/City/Community: We are now coming progressively closer to home. Again, help people to turn outward. Think mission. Where are we beginning to see God at work? How do we support it in prayer?
- d. Church: This is where we usually spend most of the time in our corporate prayer. Work toward a balance. It is important to pray for the needs of the congregation while not becoming insular.

²⁶ Wilson, 135.

Prayers of intercession always make us aware that we are central to the solution. So, the prayer then generates creativity around actions we might take. But, it is important not to fall into the trap of activism. The key to going out as people of the kingdom is our ability to listen. Where is God at work in these areas we have made the focus of our prayer? We encourage people to listen. Some of this can happen corporately. It is especially helpful to set apart times to listen where we can teach people how to recognize the voice of God.

Always be sure to note the answers to prayer!

4. Offering

Our culture holds a hermeneutic of suspicion regarding the Church. Nowhere is this more apparent than around money. It is widely assumed that churches are only after our cash. As a result, there is a tendency to be both embarrassed and apologetic around the offering.

Never minimize the potential of this time. If creatively done, it is probably our most important response component. In many Global South churches this is the heart of the worship service and can run well over an hour. But, always be creative. Find ways that people can offer not just money, but themselves, their talents and their relationships.

In a very materialistic culture such as Canada, offerings are vital to the enacting of our hope in God. If done well, it helps to expose our captivity to an idol. It is something we do in hope, recognizing that all things come from God.

Here, we must remind ourselves that we are also part of the church as institution and as such we need to be constantly on watch. It is easy to forget that the disciple community is sustained by hope, not by money. Too frequently we see ourselves as giving our money to sustain the church. Our offerings have nothing to do with a payment for services rendered to us by God or church. All is gift. Offerings as an act of hope nurture that belief.

J. Sending

The whole of the time of response helps us understand the connections between the heart of God, the incarnation and our being sent out. Worship naturally concludes with a formal act of sending. If we want to wrestle with our place in the *Missio Dei* then this part of the service is central. This is not a simple benediction. Rather, we are called to rethink how it is that we help our community begin to reflect on what it is that they are called to go out into and how the worship helps them live in this place. We are sending

people out in mission.²⁷ So, we are commissioning missionary disciples every time we worship. This is a live act, never static. It is one which calls from us creativity as the commissioning needs to connect with the world we are sending people out into, while reminding them that they are empowered as they go and so there is always hope. Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, so send I you.” We are always sent out. A central purpose of worship is to prepare us for the move out into the world to live as salt and light, to be the presence of the kingdom in our places of work, our neighbourhoods, and our families. This needs to be made explicit. We go forth with a purpose.²⁸

²⁷ John Michael Talbot wrote a simple sending song (Birdwing Music, 1984) for his community which captures for them many of these themes. It can be heard on his CD *Come, Worship The Lord*. Vol. I, 1990. While it is dated, it is an example of an explicit sending song.

Chorus:

Send us out to proclaim the reign of your Kingdom, send us out to proclaim and to heal.
Send us out with your power and your authority, To overcome and to heal the world.

Taking nothing for your journey, for God will give you your bread.
And for every house that you enter, pray the peace of God descend.

I send you out before me into every town I intend; the harvest is
Rich but few are the workers; to the fields of harvest, you I send.

Baptize in the name of the Father, in the name of the Spirit, and of the Son;
Go making disciples of many. I will be with you until the work is done.

²⁸ An example of a recent highly localized sending out song is “In this Torontonion Life” by Greg Kay of the TILT Toronto community.

Walkin’ down Yonge Street again, Meet a stranger, see a friend.
Drop a quarter in a cup, Unseen thousands out of luck.
I want Your light to shine through me. Lord shine Your light.

From Jane Finch to King and John. On the PATH to suburb lawns
Parks of Regent and of Queens. City Hall is goin’ green.
I want your light to shine through me. Lord shine Your light.

Chorus:

We don’t want to sing the same old song
If it doesn’t mean a thing to You in this life.
We don’t want to sing a brand new song
If it won’t proclaim that Jesus reigns in our lives.
Jesus teach us how to listen to
The Spirit’s voice, to live the Father’s love through sacrifice.
Let Your kingdom come in this Torontonion life.

410 speeds to a crawl, bumping shoulders in a mall.
On the rush hour Rocket ride, Ebb and flow taken in stride.
I want Your light to shine through me, Lord shine Your light.
Rising condos paint the sky.
Brilliant colours advertise all the things money can buy.
Idly promise fuller life.
I want Your life to shine through me, Lord shine Your light.

Chorus

Our Father God who is in heav’n, let Your kingdom reign come in
Let Your will be done on earth as is in heav’n.

This might entail some combination of benediction, blessing, sending, music or recessional. It is here that writing new material, from liturgical pieces to music which is specific and explicit to the context, is vital. They help us to think about where we are going and to give it purpose.

Conclusion

Worship is a very powerful event. As the Body of Christ gathers in worship it participates afresh in an alternative reality. It is remade and restored. Relationships which fractured and broke during the week are renewed at the Table. The Kingdom which is so easily rationalized away because it seemed to make no sense is brought back into clear focus. The God who stands under, behind, above and within all things, yet who is inexplicably lost sight of, is once again clearly in sight. The activities of God in our lives and in the world around us are recognized and celebrated. God's kingship over the whole cosmos has once again been proclaimed, and a commitment to participate in the completion of what God began in creation has been reaffirmed.

Once again, in worship, the Church has encountered its King, its Lord and its Bridegroom. Out of this encounter it has gone out to live as the presence of this God in the world.

As the Church goes out into the world, it goes out knowing that this kingship is present in the Church, but it is not the property of the Church. The Church serves as an instrument of this kingship, equipped and empowered by the Holy Spirit. But, always knowing that the Spirit is a free and sovereign God, moving and acting as He wills.

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